

Better Understanding Chinese Culture



Chunyan LI, TELECOM ParisTech, 05 Dec. 2011

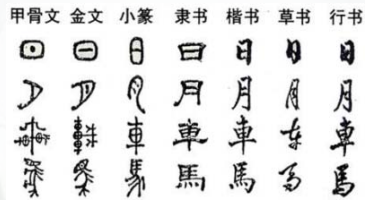
Sometimes, we hear Westerners say...

- *“It’s difficult to know what the Chinese really think”*
- *“They seem to always say YES, never NO”*
- *“The Chinese spend days, months negotiating a contract that they might not respect”*
- *“The Chinese don’t take enough initiatives and hide problems sometimes ”*
- *“The Chinese don’t often express their sentiment on their country, but once they do, they seem to be very nationalist, even emotional”*
- ...



“C’est du chinois!” – as the French would say

To better understand a culture, we need to go back to its root...



- **“Han zi” (Character)**, which has evolved over time, is at the root of Chinese history and culture
 - >100 000 “Han Zi” including ~5 000 most popular ones
 - Deriving from individual pictograms (~4%), ideograms, compound ideograms or rebuses
 - Numerous proverbs developed from a variety of sources: literature, legends, songs, ...
- The economic development and globalization trend has impacted Chinese culture especially among the young generation (e.g. Increasing individualism), but a 5 000-year-old culture will always keep its root!





What are the most important Chinese values?
What characters and proverbs illustrate them?

1. Harmony



和 諧



- 共和国
"Country of harmony"
- 合同  
Contract
- 天人合一
Heaven and man are as one
- 四海之内皆兄弟
All men are brothers
- 静坐常思己过，闲谈莫论人非
Sit quietly and think about one's own faults; Chat without gossip on men's errors



2. Endurance & Patience



- 卧薪尝胆 *To lie on firewood and taste gall bladder; fig. suffering patiently, but firmly resolved on revenge*
- 小不忍, 则乱大谋 *A little impatience spoils great plans*
- 退一步, 海阔天空 *Conceding a single step may take you to a higher level*
- 是可忍孰不可忍 *If this can be tolerated, what else cannot*

忍
耐

- 若是功夫深, 铁棒磨成针 *With time and patience the iron stick becomes a sewing needle*
- 水滴石穿 *Constant dripping can wear the stone*
- 精诚所至, 金石为开 *Faith moves mountains*
- “欲速则不达” *Haste brings no success*



3. Pragmatism

踐行

- 百闻不如一见 *One eyewitness is better than ten hearsays*
- 纸上得来终觉浅，绝知此事要躬行
The knowledge that you acquired from books is after all superficial. You must put it into action
- 摸着石头过河 *Wade across the stream by feeling the way*



踐行

- 桃李不言，下自成蹊 *The peach and the plum do not speak, yet a path is worn beneath them for their attractive flowers*
- 讷于言而敏于行 *A gentleman would rather be quick in action than talk a lot*
- 言多必失 *He who talks too much is prone to error*



4. Contradictory Evolution

轉化

危 机 转 化

水

《鸟鸣涧》
人闲桂花落，
夜静春山空。
出惊山鸟
时鸣春涧中。

危 机 转 化

Threat = Danger + Opportunity

- 祸兮福所依，福兮祸所伏 / 塞翁失马，焉知非福 *Luck and misfortune come in turn / A loss may turn out to be a gain*
- 物极必反，否极泰来 *Things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme; Things at the worst will mend*
- 水满则溢，月满则亏 *Water brims only to overflow; The moon waxes only to wane*



How different are Chinese and Western cultures? (1/2)

Opinions



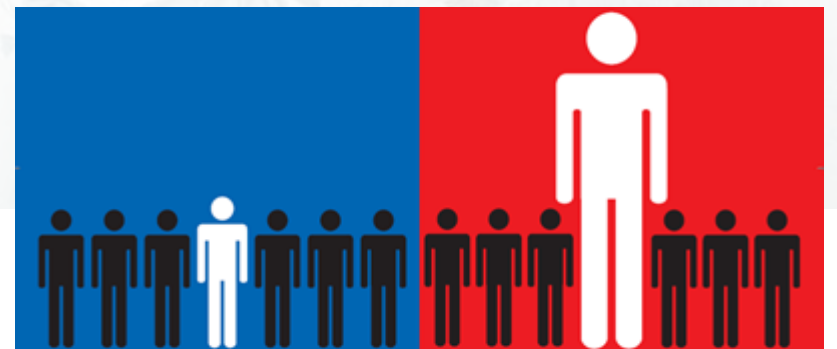
Treatment of problems



Anger



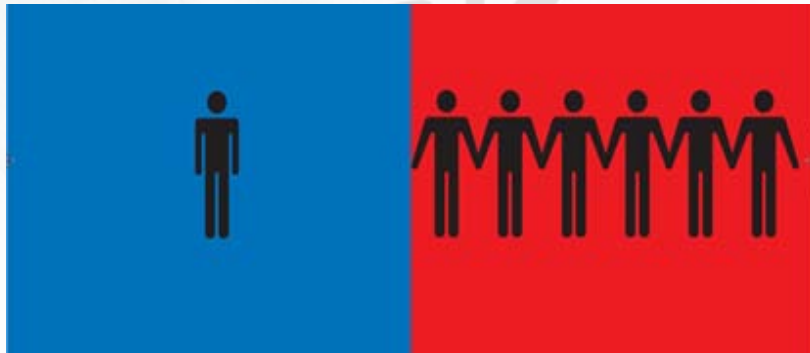
Boss



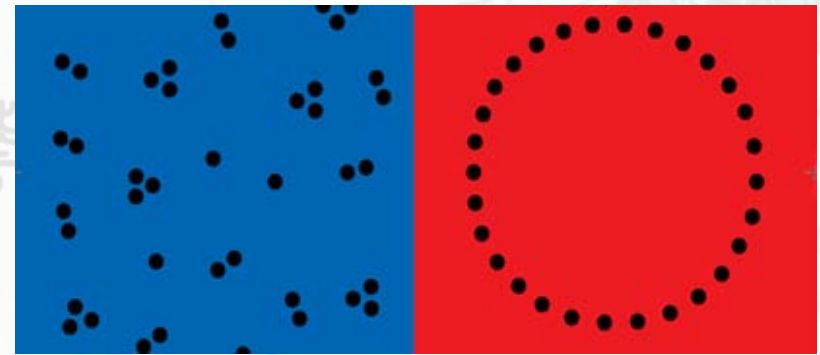
Blue: Western; Red: Chinese

How different are Chinese and Western cultures? (2/2)

Lifestyle (but with increasing individualism among Chinese young generation)



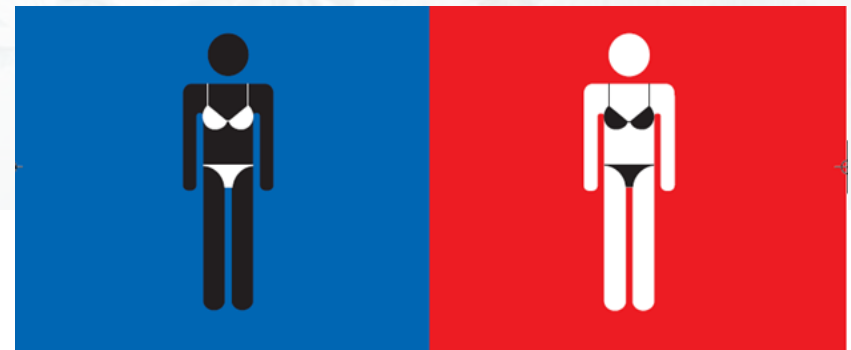
Party



3 meals



Criteria of beauty



Blue: Western; Red: Chinese

French culture vs Chinese culture (1/2)

French Culture



- Gastronomy
- Importance of relationships
- Confrontation
- Sense of criticism (often towards others) with very demanding approach
- Debate (Culture of “Café de Flore”) / Ideas and discussions
- Important “Coffee time”
- Meetings often planned in advance
- Separation between Fact and People, Professional and Personal Life
- ...

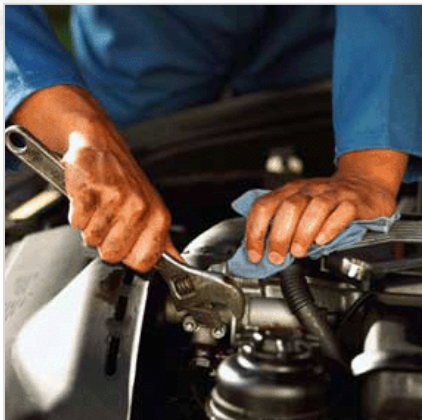
Chinese Culture



- Gastronomy
- Importance of “Guanxi”
- Harmony
- Auto-criticism; Looking for the “Balance”
- Actions and execution / Taking less initiatives sometimes
- “Karaoke” for team building
- Meetings often not planned in advance
- Mixing Fact and People, Professional and Personal Life
- ...

French culture vs Chinese culture (2/2)

Illustration - When a car no longer works...



- French people will firstly try to understand the causes: one thinks it's due to the engine while the other thinks it's a problem of spare parts. They cannot agree with each other, so they'll start to debate
- As long as the causes are not clearly identified and structured, they will not take action to repair the car
- Chinese people will also try to understand the causes at the beginning. However, they will not spend too much time on that, before they directly take action, even if they're not yet 100% sure about the causes
- With their initial understanding, they will try different methods, until finding the one that really works. And they consider that the problem is resolved!

“Looking for what we have in common while maintaining our differences”

求同存异
兼容并包

“Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding” ~Albert Einstein



(G20-meeting in Toronto; Source: Facebook)

Q & A



水
雲
琴
琴

Questions? / Comments? / Anecdotes?

《鳴喜洞中》
出惊山鸟，
夜静喜山空。
闲桂花落，
鸟鸣涧》

