



LUND UNIVERSITY

Building a Cultural Bridge

*A Study of Intercultural Communication between
Sweden and China*

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Abstract

Building a Cultural Bridge:
A Study of Intercultural Communication between Sweden and China

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With the increasing interactions between Sweden and China, it is interesting to see how people of these two countries handle their intercultural communication. Based on my internship experiences, where I encountered many cases of intercultural communication between Sweden and China, this thesis presents some contributions to a better understanding of Swedish-Sino communications. The following questions are discussed:

- Where do communication misunderstandings come into play?
- How do individuals get around cultural misunderstandings?
- What factors facilitate understandings in intercultural contexts between Swedes and Chinese?

Through the analyses of three difference cases, the significance of this thesis shows that:

- Culture is a process.
- Cultural differences exist not only between cultures, but also within cultures.
- Intercultural encounters do not always end up as cultural misunderstandings, while much of the literature on intercultural communication dwells on the issue of difference and misunderstanding.

This thesis argues that intercultural communication needs to nurture a more reflective ethic of difference in which difference is not only recognized and tolerated, but in which recognition and tolerance should be seen as a precondition for the development of new forms of understanding, in the face of difference.

At the end of this thesis, the factors that facilitate understanding in intercultural relations between Swedes and Chinese are discussed. It also emphasizes the important role an intermediary plays in intercultural communication and the reader should gain a better, more accurate and in-depth understanding of Swedish-Sino communication.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Swedish-Sino relations; Cultural Understanding; Cultural Studies; Applied Cultural Analysis; Sweden; China.

Sammanfattning

Att bygga en kulturell bro:

En Studie i Interkulturell kommunikation mellan Sverige och Kina

Lijuan Guan

Med den ökande interaktionen mellan Sverige och Kina är det intressant att se hur människor från de båda länderna hanterar den interkulturella kommunikationen. Baserat på mina erfarenheter från min praktik, där jag stötte på många fall utav interkulturell kommunikation mellan Sverige och Kina, presenterar denna uppsats mitt bidrag till en bättre förståelse av Svensk-Sino kommunikation. Följande frågor diskuteras:

- Var utspelar sig missförstånd inom kommunikationen?
- Hur undviker individer kulturella missförstånd?
- Vilka faktorer underlättar förståelsen av ett interkulturellt sammanhang mellan svenskar och kineser?

Genom analyser av tre olika fall, visar resultaten av denna uppsats att:

- Kultur är en pågående process.
- Kulturella skillnader existerar inte endast mellan kulturer, utan även inom kulturer.
- Interkulturella möten slutar inte alltid med kulturella missförstånd, medan mycket av litteraturen inom interkulturell kommunikation uppehåller sig vid frågan om skillnader och missförstånd.

Uppsatsen argumenterar för att man i arbetet med interkulturell kommunikation behöver vårda sig om en reflekterande "skillnadens etik": där kulturella skillnader inte bara igenkänns och tolereras, utan där igenkännande och tolerans bör ses som förutsättningar för en utvecklad förståelse av kulturella skillnader.

I slutet av denna uppsats diskuteras faktorer som underlättar förståelsen inom interkulturella sammanhang mellan Sverige och Kina. Den viktiga rollen som medlare inom interkulturella kommunikationer betonas även och läsaren ges en bättre, mera korrekt och fördjupad förståelse för Svensk-Sino kommunikation.

Nyckelord: Interkulturell kommunikation; Svensk-Sino relationer; Kulturell förståelse; Kulturella studier; Applicerad Kultur Analys; Sverige; Kina.

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Lund, May 16th, 2010

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Building a Cultural Bridge

A Study of Intercultural Communication between Sweden and China

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Before I went abroad to pursue my master degree, I had been thinking about how life would be when one were to live or study or work in another country, especially when two different cultures meet. Now, I end up studying in another country, Sweden, which I knew little about until a few years ago. I am pleased with the choice because this was a totally new culture to me and I could satisfy my enthusiasm and curiosity about experiencing and learning more about intercultural communication. Honestly, Sweden is not well known to Chinese people. Whenever I told people that I was studying in Sweden, most of them told me that they liked Sweden and Swedish watches were very famous... They mixed-up Sweden with Switzerland! In Sweden, I doubt that Chinese culture is well recognized either. I encountered a few situations when people asked me if I came from Japan.

However, the contacts between Sweden and China seem to have increased in the last two years. Newspapers reported lots of news about the cooperation between Sweden and China, for instance, not long ago Fanerdun project in Kalmar came out of nowhere as a huge project but ended up as a well known failure between Swedish-Sino cooperation; well known brands such as Volvo and SAAB are selling parts of their business to Chinese companies; Sweden is attending 2010 EXPO in Shanghai... It seems like suddenly, Sweden and China have had an increase of cooperation. The main focus of my post-graduate studies is the intercultural communication between Sweden and China.

Whenever speaking of intercultural communication, people may associate it with the stereotyping knowledge that Chinese culture is like this and Swedish culture is like that; when communicating with others, it is important to respect each other's value and to understand the other's culture. Indeed, cultural encounters are dynamic. I find Hannerz's (1992) metaphor used to describe one of the paradoxes of culture is very interesting:

When you see a river from afar, it may look like a blue (or green, or brown) line across a landscape; something of awesome permanence. But at the same time, “you cannot step into the same river twice,” for its durability. The same way with culture - even as you perceive structure, it is entirely dependent on ongoing process. (p. 4).

When you look at a river from a distance, it looks like it stays still, something not changing and permanent; but when you get closer, you can see that it is fluid, and it is swirling all the time. It has been there for a long time, and it has been changing constantly. Since culture is dependent on ongoing processes, it is the same way with cultural encounters. To handle intercultural communication, is more than just respecting and understanding the other’s culture. I argue that developing a better sense for cultural similarities and differences is essential.

1.2. Research Questions

I recently finished an internship project. This project was about improving communication between Region Skåne in Sweden and Guangdong Province in China. The following is a case that I encountered from this internship.

Region Skåne and Guangdong Province are sister provinces. A Chinese delegation consisted of three Foreign Affair Officers and two journalists visited Skåne in September 2009, which was before we went to Guangdong to attend the International Tourism & Culture Festival. When I checked the itinerary of the Chinese delegation, I noticed, and was a bit surprised, that Region Skåne did not arrange a dinner with the Chinese delegation. As a cultural analyst with Chinese background, I suggested it would be better to host at least one dinner with the Chinese delegation. As a Chinese saying goes, what a great joy it is to have friends come from afar. Chinese people are used to welcome friends from afar with at least one nice meal. I notified my concerns to my internship supervisor. He checked with his colleagues and confirmed that no official meal was arranged. I do not know why they did not arrange such a dinner, perhaps the assistant forgot? Perhaps they did not think it was necessary or perhaps because there were two journalists in the Chinese delegation? Sweden is very different from China in this sense. It is common in China to invite journalists for dinner when they are out for work. In Sweden, the situation is totally different. They do not invite journalists out because they are afraid that it will be perceived as bribing, trying to control the media.

However, I interpreted and reported the situation to my supervisor, and his boss accepted my suggestion.

Indeed, there exist a lot of cultural differences between an oriental country like China and a Scandinavian country like Sweden. Even such a simple thing as a daily greeting, as the picture (Figure 1) following presents, differs greatly between east and west.

Hence, how to handle the intercultural communication between Sweden and China?



Figure 1. Greetings between East and West
(Photo from: www.dianping.com)

The objective of this essay is to discuss what I learned about Swedish-Sino intercultural communication from my internship experience and how to apply theories to explain the phenomena.

The thesis will discuss the following questions:

- a) Where do communication misunderstandings come into play? Why are people so afraid of misunderstandings?
- b) How do people get around cultural misunderstandings?
- c) Do intercultural encounters always cause cultural misunderstandings? What factors facilitate understandings in intercultural contexts between Swedes and Chinese?

Two reasons have led to the motivation of this essay. Firstly, I have a strong interest and enthusiasm in cultural studies, especially in the field of Swedish-Sino

communication, which is still not many people are working on. Secondly, I have a desire to contribute my studies to aid Swedes who are interested in improving their communication skills with Chinese people, as a return of favor to my host country where I received my higher education.

1.3. Research Methods

The information I present in my case studies was collected by two major methods, interviews and participant observation.

1.3.1. Interview

At the beginning of my project, I used interview as a pilot study. I chose interview as one of my methods, because it allowed me to access to different perspectives as well as shared knowledge of the field that I am studying. As May (2001) has pointed out, “interviews yield rich insights into people’s biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings” (p. 120). I was able to collect the data about how individuals understood their communication with Chinese and acted upon it.

All the interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to control the interviewing process. As Davies (2008) said:

Researchers may alter the wording and order of these questions [in semi-structured interview], perhaps omitting some that seem inappropriate; they may introduce new topics and supplementary questions not include on the list, and respondents are encouraged to expand on a response, or digress, or even go off the particular topic and introduce their own concerns. (p. 106).

If I used structured interview, then I might not have the chance to encourage them to talk about their own opinions. Instead, they might only answer my questions one by one. On the other hand, if I used unstructured interview, the process might not end up as totally satisfying either. An unstructured interview is more like a conversation. Although I could direct the conversation towards my aim, I did not know how active my informants would be. Supposed they were very shy and hardly talk about their own experience or opinions, then my interview would be considered as having “failed”. In sum, semi-structured interview was most flexible for my research.

The actual interview forms were various. I mainly use face-to-face interview and Internet interview.

Face-to-face interview, it means interviewer and informant stay at the same place and same time to carry out the interview. This is probably the most widely used method of investigating the social world.

Internet interview, I used an Internet chatting system as a media to carry out my interviews. There are many different chatting systems. The most popular ones are MSN Messenger, Skype, Yahoo Messenger and so on. When using the chatting system, you can either type messages like sending a SMS, or talk to informants by microphone. It is like talking on the phone. If the equipment and the informants allow, a webcam could be turned on so you can see the facial expressions of informants.

I had two target groups:

1. Some random Swedish people living in China;
2. Swedish artists and an officer from Region Skåne (my internship supervisor).

They had been to China to attend Guangdong International Tourism & Culture Festival before. They were also the target group of my participant observation.

First I interviewed some Swedes living in China. Because of the distance between us (I was in Sweden and the respondents in China), I used Skype messages to interview them. For the interview content, I was interested in their cultural perspective of living in China. I asked them questions such as if they have been a part of any cultural misunderstandings. What problems did they encounter? Did they feel uncertain about what they need to do in their working or social life?

This method has some advantages. Firstly, since my interview was carried out by typed messages, I saved a lot of time doing transcript. Secondly, through typing messages, informants did not need to hurry to answer my questions. They could get a little time to think about my questions before they answer. Thirdly, when people used chatting system, it is common to use emotional icon called Smileys. For example, 😊 expresses happy, ☹ expresses sad, etc. Through this, I could access my informant's emotions. This also emphasizes the saying, *En bild säger mer än tusen ord* (A picture is worth a thousand words).

However, as Davies (2008) has pointed out, "...all such cues are under the conscious control of the internet users to a much greater extent than are facial expressions and body language in face-to-face encounters" (p. 154). My informant could have used 😊 while he was very upset during our online interview, since I cannot

access to his facial expressions and body language. In addition, as Davies (2008) continued to point out, “[this method] raises question of on-line identities and the capacity to deceive that the Internet offers” (p. 154). Commonly people have an alter ego online in order to protect their real identity. Lupton and Seymour have pointed out that hiding behind an alter ego can be more liberating (as cited in Davies, 2008, p. 154). It can make the shiest people to have opinions, comments and participate in discussions online. But the big draw back here is that you never know who is on the other side. You can never be one hundred percent sure that the person you are chatting with is really the person you think you are chatting with. When I am chatting with my friend, it could be his wife answering on his account, for example.

For the second group, the artists and the officer, I used face-to-face interview. I was interested in their experience from their first visit to China. What did they find problematic? What did they learn from their experience in China?

The interview of the officer from Region Skåne took place after he finished work in the kitchen of his office. He offered me forty minutes for my interview. During the interview, his points are mostly from a political angle. For example, he was very eager to improve the already established relation between Guangdong and Skåne. He also mentioned how excellent of the reception was from Guangdong government during their visit in Guangdong, etc.

For the artists, the interviews took place in their studio. Since I was their guide during the male artists’ first visit in Guangdong, we had lots of shared memories. The interviews became a process for us to review our mutual experiences. They hardly brought up any new experiences or points of view that were new to me from their first visit. I could feel that they were also quite cautious with their words. Perhaps they were aware of the cultural differences and did not want to make a mistake to offend me. For that female artist, it was our first time to meet for the interview, although we had heard a lot about each other before. She was very active. I must admit, in the interview with the female artist the direction was a little bit hard to control.

1.3.2. Participant Observation

I chose participant observation as my research strategy, for the reason that it enabled me to collect concrete evidence of my subjects’ intercultural communication as an insider physically, in terms of sharing the same activities. As Labaree (2002)

mentioned, "... participant observer can reveal a new perspective, a hidden meaning, or a unique understanding that is not otherwise achievable by an outsider" (p. 103).

Moreover, participant observation also avoids the weakness of interview, which is the informant might react or perform differently when they get interviewed. Bernard (1988) called it "reduces the problem of reactivity" – that is, people changing their behavior when they know that they are being studied (p. 150). He explained that as you become less and less of a curiosity, people take less and less interest in your comings and goings (Bernard, 1988, p. 150). People that you are studying behave more naturally, and then the data you collect will be more accurate.

According to Davies (2008), "In the classic form participant observation consists of a single researcher spending an extended period of time (usually at least a year) living among the people he or she is studying, participating in their daily lives in order to gain as complete an understanding as possible of the cultural meanings and social structures of the group and how these are interrelated". I did not live with my subjects during the whole project, but I had been close and participating in their activities during the whole fieldwork.

There are three major activities that I participated in.

The first one was when the artists composed a friendship song for Guangdong Province. We got together in one of the artists' studio in Malmö and spent lots of time discussing and watching YouTube clips together. I found some YouTube clips of Chinese music in different forms to show them, for example, traditional Chinese folk songs, popular songs, music played by Chinese folk instruments and the performance combined with folk song and pop song. My purpose was to inspire them in mixing Chinese elements in the melody. It actually helped. The artists got the feeling of what Chinese music is like and how Chinese people's taste is, and they followed this feeling to compose the music. When the melody was set, we got together again to discuss the lyrics. What was the message they wanted to deliver? Which words would be able to deliver their feelings properly? Did these words sound too flattering to Chinese people?

The second one was when Chinese delegation visited Skåne. I spent two days accompanying them during their stay in Skåne. Most of the participant observation took place in Lund. I went with them to interview some officers from Region Skåne, some professors and International Relations Office of Lund University, Business representative and the artists who composed the friendship song. We also had lunches and dinners together. This participant observation was from the other angle for me to

observe how Swedes reacted when they had contact with Chinese people. It also allowed me to observe the Chinese reaction when they met Swedes.

The third event was during Guangdong International Tourism & Culture Festival; I went to Guangdong with a Swedish music group from Skåne as their project assistant. We spent eight days together, from flying to China until we ended up back in Sweden. During these eight days, we lived in the same hotel, ate together and attended activities together. We attended the welcome dinner hosted by Guangdong government, attended the rehearsals for different performances and we also went to Hong Kong together for sightseeing. This was a great opportunity for me to collect lots of concrete evidences based on the role of observer-as-participant.

Additionally, Gold (1958) has suggested that in fieldwork the ethnographer may adopt one of four possible roles: complete observer; observer-as-participant; participant-as-observer; or complete participant. My role in my participant observation was observer-as-participant, because I put more emphasis on the participation regarding to the involvement of Chinese activities. But on the other hand, I was a complete observer in our spare time. They spoke Swedish in their internal communication and only used English in their external communication. In those cases, I could only observe how they behaved. This might cause some difficulties of collecting data, because sometimes I had to assume or guess what they were talking about. In these cases, my role switched from an insider to an outsider, perhaps I missed some important oral information from their conversations.

1.4. Reflection of Research Methods

In this section, I want to discuss how the methods affected my research and what I learned from the process of practice.

1.4.1. Interview

Concern of interactive informants

When I interviewed one of the artists (a female artist) in the second group, she was very interactive during the interview. When I asked her about her experience in China, she mentioned how she felt about the Chinese people, but at the same time, she also asked me a lot of questions regarding Chinese culture and Chinese language. I argue that interaction between interviewee and interviewer could be very informative as well, because the ethnographer can find out what puzzles the interviewee based on

his/her questions. Simultaneously, my interviewee also sought for some information from me.

Here I want to apply Fallon & Brown's (2002) opinion "moderators should strike a balance between being too directive, and allowing the meeting to digress too far from the point (p. 199)" into my practice. I argue that ethnographers should be sensitive to control the level of interview. For one reason is that interviewer should be ready to be an intermediary while doing interview. When I interviewed that female artist, she asked me a lot of questions regarding her confusion she encountered when in China. I consider that interviewer should not ignore interviewee's confusion, instead, try to mediate her questions, because interviewer and interviewee might need to develop an on-going relation. Ramage, Bean & Johnson (2006) mentioned a point in their practical suggestions of managing the interview, "Be courteous and alert. Your attitude during the interview can help set up a cordial and comfortable relationship between you and the person you are interviewing" (p. 257). Moreover, through mediating her puzzle, it helps me to have a deeper understanding of her cultural misunderstandings. On the other hand, ethnographers should also be aware and prevent digressing too far from the point. It happened to me in the same interview that after talking about Chinese audience's reaction to the artist's performance, my interviewee started to talk about her experience of learning Mandarin and she wanted me to correct her pronunciation and teach her more sentences and expressions. To be polite, I continued to help her with her Mandarin because I thought I could build up a good relationship with my informant, and she might also appreciate my effort. However, I did not find it very helpful for me to collect more data at the end. We did not build up a closer relationship either, because we both kept it on a professional level. This interview actually was very time-consuming and tiring. To summarize, Fallon & Brown's opinion about striking a balance between be too directive and prevent digression in focus group interview is also suitable for individual interview.

Thus, there seems to be a tension here between being a cultural interpreter and an applied cultural analyst during my interview. As a cultural interpreter, I was supposed to coach my client how to understand the cultural confusion and how to adapt to the new cultural settings. As an applied cultural analyst, my role was as a researcher. My aim was to collect data for my studies through the interview. The tension here was "to ask" or "to answer". For my interview, I tried my best to answer my client's questions and coach her regarding her confusions, as I think the interaction can be

informative, and I can build up a better relationship with my client. “Haniff concludes that insidership and being ‘native’ are difficult concepts to define because there is so little ‘distance’ between the researcher and the researched” (as cited in Labaree, 2002, p. 101). While I was coaching my client, I became part of the research when I was supposed to be doing the researching. When I did the analysis, I had to step back to see how the interview process went. However, should intercultural communicators engage their clients as I did? If the answer is yes, it is possible for the researchers to have deeper understanding of informants’ behavior, and perhaps collect more data. But, the collected data might be affected by the stepping in of the researcher. Moreover, the researcher might mislead the informants by his/her engagement. However, this question needs further study.

Concern of Openness of Informants

I consider that interviewer’ ethnic background also influences the process of interview. I learned this from my interview with the two male artists. The following is an excerpt of our interview:

(AH & AG are the two male artists, E is the ethnographer)

E: You had done a few performances in China, what do you think of Chinese audience?

...

AH: It was like extraordinary audience in China, really really good audience.

AG: And very polite. You know, people are very polite in China. It’s very polite people.

AH: The cool thing is that the Japanese people are extremely polite, almost too polite. Because you don’t really know if they mean it, or they just brought up that way. Because I feel like...

E: It’s a bit fake?

AH: It might be a bit fake. You never know. It feels like you never know. It’s a little bit like the U.S. You never know if they mean it or not. But in China, it was like, ok, if the audience likes the performance, they really like it, they show it. But if they wouldn’t have liked it, I think they would have showed it too. I don’t think they would stand like this just to be polite. But I think that would happen in

Japan. It might happen in Japan. So that's a cool difference in one way. I don't say that one is better than the other, but it's ...

(Conversation with two artists, April 27th, 2009)

I know both of the informants since 2006. I worked as their tour leader when they went to Guangdong for the first time and later we keep a good friend-relationship. Because they were two of the artists that would go to Guangdong in 2009, I also interviewed them about their experiences when they first visited China. The interview went quite well because we had a lot of good memories of their activities in China for the first time. They also talked about what experiences they found different. But they did not really talk about their problems or any bad experience. When they compared the audience's reaction between Chinese and Japanese and American, they described Japanese are "too polite", Americans "you never know if they mean it or not", but for Chinese people, they are "polite, good". I do not know if they were being sincere to me. Somehow I felt that they held back talking about their bad experiences. I wonder if it is because I am Chinese, and I am their friend, they did not want to tell me their true feelings to make me feel bad. I was open to hear about their successful or failed experience of interacting with Chinese people during their first visit in China. But, as friends, they were very cautious to talk about their experience, especially the unsmooth ones. From this experience, I agree with Ellis' (2007) opinion that "we constantly have to consider which questions to ask". Perhaps if I could have considered this problem before the interview, and tried to formulate my questions in another way, I might have received different information then. I suggest that ethnographers can try out the interview questions in a small group, and check if the questions are ambiguous, or if the questions should be asked in another way.

1.4.2. Participant Observation

Concern of Language

Participant observation was the most effective way for me to collect data. However, It was a pity that I could not speak Swedish when I did my fieldwork. Most of the time my informants were speaking Swedish when they communicated within their group. They only spoke English when they talked to non-Swedes. When I did the participant observation, sometimes I could only be a "deaf" observer, because I could not understand what they were talking about. In this situation, I not only missed their

discussion, but most important, I could not access their cultural meanings. I also felt uncomfortable to ask them what they were talking about every time they had a conversation, especially in the situation that they were just talking about something that had nothing to do with me or my research. “Their small talk underlined my position as an outsider” (Hansen, 2003, p.156). Because of this, I could not take part in their conversation. Due to this, I could have missed a lot of valuable, interesting and useful information for my studies.

Luckily, the fieldwork did not turn out to be a failed one. Firstly, my supervisor, the leader of the whole group kept me informed on the important information they discussed. Hansen (2003) mentioned in his notes that “one solution [to my lack of Swedish] would be to have gone there with friends...” (p. 166). This was crucial because my supervisor was aware of the communication differences between Swedes and Chinese and he wanted me to be informed of what was happening, so I could coach them how to behave when communicating with Chinese.

Secondly, Swedish is not completely unknown to me. I have been living in Sweden for almost two years and I was taking a beginner’s course. I could guess their discussion by a few words that I knew and their expressions. Sometimes they also told me what they were talking about. Moreover, their interactions were with Chinese, and I am a native Chinese speaker with mastering another two Chinese major dialects. Hence, it was not a problem for me to understand what was happening among their interactions. As Hansen (2003) explained, our past experiences are present as an awareness of what to expect and to do, a kind of confirmation that the world is ordered and meaningful (p. 155). Based on my knowledge of Chinese languages, and little Swedish, I could expect what they reacted and I could act upon on it. This compensated my lack of fully understanding Swedish.

However, Davies (2008) pointed out that, “For the ethnographer attempting to understand another social world, the process of learning the language in which that world is lived out is fundamentally insightful” (p. 87). Supposing I fully understood Swedish in that situation, I could have had no problem of understanding their conversation, and could have collected more concrete data by having an insight of their cultural settings. The insight of understanding their cultural settings could be gained through learning their language. As Kondo (1990) said, at the very least, it helps to establish rapport and provides a reason to interact with people. And experiences in

language learning can become important data. I still collected valuable data, but I believe that knowing Swedish would have made my fieldwork become easier.

1.4.3. The Strengths and Weaknesses of Combining Interview and Participant Observation

In sum, my research methods combined interview with participant observation. Interviews helped me to gain rich insights into people's own experiences of their intercultural encounters with Chinese people, and to understand individuals' interpretations of their experiences and how they acted upon it. Kusenbach (2003) also pointed out, "Ethnographic interviews can provide unique access to informants' biographies and future plans, to their subjective interpretations of others and social interaction" (p. 462). However, as May (2001) mentioned, "while accounts may be a genuine reflection of a person's experiences, there might be circumstances or events which surrounded these of which the person was not aware" (p. 144). Take my informants for example. The artists I interviewed have been to Guangdong before. When I interviewed them, they might neglect some trivial matters because they did not notice or they were used to it, but which could lead to cultural misunderstandings or conflicts. May (2001) also emphasized that "the data derived from interviews are not simple 'accurate' or 'distorted' piece of information, but provide the researcher with a means of analyzing the way in which people consider events and relationships and the reasons they offer for doing so" (p. 144-145). I assume that the information I collected from interviews might include personal feelings of my informants. According to Kusenbach (2003), people's perception of the environment is filtered through a series of veils, one of which is "our emotion, tastes, values and previous experiences, for instance – are shaped by, and sensitive to, social contexts" (p. 466). Through the informants' feelings, ethnographers are able to have a deeper understanding of social contexts in intercultural communication settings.

I also used participant observation, for the reason that it allowed me to observe the circumstances from the point of a cultural analyst. I could collect the trivial matters that my informants might ignore. Moreover, cultural misunderstanding is not only caused by verbal communication, for example, it could be caused by gestures, or body language. Participant observation is beneficial for me to collect data like that. May's (2001) another point also motivated me to use participant observation, "a fuller understanding can be achieved only by witnessing the context of the event or

circumstances to which people refer. The only way in which the researcher could examine these is to be there at the time” (p. 144).

I consider that interview and participant observation are a good combination, which benefited me from collecting individual’s own experience and interpretation through interviews, as well as the better understanding of witnessing the events or circumstances through participant observation.

1.5 Theoretical Framework and Central Concepts

Before I start to draw an outline of my theoretical framework, I would like to clarify a few terms in cultural studies.

1.5.1. Culture

Culture, it is one of the most common words used in our daily life. Yet it is also one of the most challenging words to understand. Whenever speaking of culture, people might associate it with music, art, or customs. So, what is the concept of culture?

Culture can be conceptualized as high culture and anthropological culture. High culture is what common people consider, art, music painting and so on. Anthropological culture, as Guirdham (1999) pointed out, broadly speaking, “the ways in which one group or society of humans live that are different from the ways in which other groups live” (p. 48). People act, think, and feel differently, resulted in their different anthropological cultures. In this essay, when we talk about culture, I refer to anthropological culture.

Culture has been defined in many ways, in Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary, one of culture’s definitions is: “customs, arts, social institutions, etc of a particular group or people”.

However, one most quoted definition in anthropology is from Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1952):

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (that is historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be

considered as products of action, on the other as conditional elements of further action. (p. 181).

This most quoted definition has its strengths and weaknesses. At least, it clarifies that culture:

1. consists of patterns of and for behavior, and the behavior is presented and transmitted through symbols;
2. makes one human group distinguish from other human groups;
3. is produced by action, and it also influences future action.

However, Kroeber and Kluckhohn's discussion of "an essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values" may tend to present an image of culture as something static. "Traditional ideas" and "their attached values" seems to imply that culture is not changing. I claim that the definition of culture should include the idea of cultural flow from anthropologist Ulf Hannerz. As I mentioned earlier, Hannerz (1992) has likened culture to a river, using the metaphor of "you cannot step into the same river twice" (p. 4). Since culture is produced by action, and human's action is always in motion; hence, "culture is a process, something which happens, and is in a constant state of becoming. It never stands still, or is complete" (O'Dell, 2010b, p. 14).

1.5.2. Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is a large field of scholarly activity. In order to provide some insight into the status quo of this field of investigation, I would like to begin by briefly outlining what is meant by the term "intercultural communication", and then by proceeding to concisely relate to some of the precious work that has been done here and which I have related to over the course of the research I am presenting here.

a. Definition of Intercultural Communication

Samovar and Porter (1985) defined intercultural communication as "whenever a message producer is a member of one culture and a message receiver is a member of another". For Collier and Thomas intercultural communication is contact between persons who identify themselves as distinct from one another in cultural terms (as cited in Guirdham, 1999, p. 193). My understanding of intercultural communication is more close to Collier and Thomas' definition. Samovar and Porter's definition has a focus on

the identification of two cultures, but they neglected the fact that culture is constantly changing. They tended to emphasize culture is something static or complete, by stating “a member of one culture” and “a member of another”. Moreover, their definition lacks emphasis of the process of interaction.

Intercultural communication is when people coming from different cultural backgrounds interact. This is my definition of intercultural communication. This definition includes three key points:

1. Culture cannot communicate. In order to have interactions among different cultures, carriers are essential. For intercultural communication, the carriers are people who identify themselves as distinct from others in other cultural groups.
2. Intercultural communication is a process of interaction, because people’s practices are dynamic. Hence, intercultural communication is also a static state.
3. Intercultural communication is often affected by cultural groups’ own identities and prejudices. These involve their stereotypes of other groups.

b. Previous Research

In relation to the vast field of previous research which has been done in intercultural communication, it should be noted that it is hard to find any literature about the intercultural communication between Sweden and China specifically.

However, Günthner and Luckmann (2000) have written *Asymmetries of Knowledge in Intercultural Communication: The relevance of cultural repertoires of communicative genre* based on cases of Sino-German communication. The authors discussed that the problems of intercultural encounters are based on asymmetries of knowledge about cultural specific practices. Hence, it requires a definable amount of shared knowledge among participants. “If accommodation in concrete communicative processes is based merely on such stereotypes and is not checked by experience or accurate information, it results in what may be called interactive hypercorrection” (p. 75). So if communicative processes are checked by experience and accurate information, will then intercultural communication proceed smoothly? Will things work out if participants are being indifferent to the experience or accurate information? It will be an interesting point for a further discussion in my thesis.

In Linda Young’s (1994) *Crosstalk and culture in Sino-American communication*, Young applies a related communicative perspective to the study of Sino-American relations. She intends to find out how communication stereotypes can

unwittingly arise, subtly sabotage interactions, and establish cultural barriers. She tries to provide us an understanding of “why Chinese and Americans are so often so ill-attuned to one another”, and “why Western perceptions of Chinese inscrutability have lasted so long” (Young, 1994). She seems to emphasize that people meet on their own may lack the tools necessary to bridge differences and cannot come to an understanding. As she stated, “...many of these differences go unrecognized or undergo serious misreadings in the routine of talk, sometimes in an obvious fashion, sometimes more subtly” (Young, 1994, p. 193). In this sense, there is an interesting question here: in which cases can an adept cultural analysis, working in intercultural communication, be able to play a crucial role in building the platform for dialogue and understanding? This is something I will explore in my thesis.

However, there is a huge volume written on intercultural communication.

In Maureen Guirdham’s (1999) *Communicating Across Cultures*, it presents a few barriers in intercultural communication and contains eight key intercultural communication theories. This book is like a handbook of intercultural communication, giving a brief introduction of the knowledge and skills of intercultural communication. However, these types of books seem to consider the knowledge and skills in intercultural contexts as static and complete. It actually neglects the fact that culture is a complex process, which I shall argue for in my thesis.

A well recognized book in the realm of intercultural communication is Geert Hofstede’s *Culture’s Consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*. He formulated five main dimensions of national cultures, which are based on his survey conducted in 72 countries. “These five dimensions were empirically verifiable, and each country could be positioned somewhere between their poles” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 29). Cultural differences are simplified into five dimensions according to cultural patterns, and countries are divided on the basis of their scores on the five dimensions.

In 1991, Geert Hofstede published another widely recognized book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, together with his son Gert Jan Hofstede. This book is based on the same research as *Culture’s Consequences* but more focus on organizational cultures. While these works have tended to be highly influential, they tend to work with rather essentialistic and static notions of culture, which as I shall argue below may be more detrimental to the development of cultural understanding than helpful.

Hofstede (2001), for example, made a shorthand definition of culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 9). Hofstede defined culture as “collective programming of the mind”. To be programmed, you are not capable to change. It is also akin to being brainwashed, bound to a thought or a pattern, which is static. Hence, we will lose many dimensions of the complexity of culture. In this case, the metaphor of flowing river is more correct to elucidate culture, for Hannerz emphasized both the processual aspects of culture and the appearance of permanence.

On the other hand, Burke, a leading symbolic interactionist, pointed out that “communication between people can never be perfect, because communication is only possible in the area of overlap between their essential being (what Burke calls their consubstantiality) and this is never total (or individuals would not be unique)” (as cited in Guirdham, 1999, p. 158). Communication isn’t perfect, in part because we all have difference histories of experience. The different histories are used to interpret any message we receive and it can lead to alternative interpretations of the information. The interpretations may not always be true in context. His point is very different from Hofstede’s “software of the mind” and it is one which I intend to investigate further below.

1.5.3. *Habitus*

The concept of *habitus* was presented by Bourdieu (1993) in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, where he described:

System of durable, transposable dispositions...[that function] as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. (p. 72).

Bourdieu discussed that *habitus* is system of dispositions, and embodiments of past experience, which is structured by feelings and emotions, and influence the

individual unconsciously. His concept of *habitus* shows how individuals (with the same national culture) can be different due to social classes or fields they operate in. This concept can be used to explain why people from different cultures, and even within the culture, will think, feel and act differently. This is because they have different life experiences, which influence people's actions without consciousness. You can be a good cultural communicator only if you can understand differences within national cultures as well as between them.

1.5.4. Cultural Identity

In order to discuss cultural identity, the notion of self-identity needs to be presented first.

Self-identity, as Giddens (1991) pointed out, “is the self as reflexively understood by the persons in terms of her or his biography” (p. 52). Individuals can choose what they want to do and who they want to be. Within a certain cultural context, individual's self-identity will be transformed into cultural identity, because cultural identity can be defined in terms of a national culture, but it can also be defined along the parameters of other cultural contexts. In this sense it shifts. Ethnicity is a form of cultural identity. For example, in the United States you have Chinese-Americans and Irish-Americans. They may all see themselves as Americans but have different cultural identities. Individual's occupation, gender and social status, will all affect his/her cultural identity. Hence, cultural identity is a culturally bound identity, not just a form of national identity. Friedman (1994) has mentioned, “Cultural identity is something that individuals have and that is the basis of a certain kind of social identity”. Due to the fact that culture is a process that constantly changes, individual's cultural identity might not be received as he/she expects.

1.6. The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured in several chapters. In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I present a brief introduction of the major events in the last three decades in China. My concern is the mutual stereotype that other researchers might have been influenced by in their communication with Chinese. This chapter of Chinese cultural background provides a clue how Chinese ideology has been changing, and how Chinese look at her own culture and people as an insider.

In the third chapter, based on my empirical material of how Swedes and Chinese interpreted a picture differently, I want to discuss when cultural misunderstandings come into play? Through the concept of *habitus*, it examines that cultural differences do not only exist between cultures, but also within cultures. *Habitus* affects people from different social classes with different emotions, and they also act differently. It reveals that culture is not a state, but a process. By analyzing the elements embedded in a culture that affect people's ideology, I want to discuss why we are afraid of misunderstandings and how we get around them.

In the fourth chapter, my main focus is on how people get around cultural misunderstandings. Based on a case of dressing code for a Swedish artist in a Chinese official welcoming banquet, cultural identity is used to analyze the process of this Swedish artist getting around his misunderstanding in a Chinese cultural setting. Moreover, the values of an intermediary are being discussed.

In the fifth chapter, through a case of communication between a Swede and a Chinese officer, we can see that intercultural encounters are not always problematic, while much of the literature on intercultural communication dwells on the issue of difference and misunderstanding. Furthermore, to what extent can we facilitate cultural understandings between Sweden and China?

The final chapter will be a conclusion of my discussions based on the empirical material I have collected about Swedish-Sino intercultural communication. Generally, it reviews how cultural misunderstandings occur, and how people get around them. Finally, it gets to the points of what factors are possible to facilitate understanding. However, some questions that need further research will be stated as well.

Chapter 2. Chinese Cultural Background-Changing Ideology

In this chapter, I present a few important events happened in contemporary Chinese history. Two motivations have led to the writing of this chapter. Firstly, my target group is people who are interested in making contacts, or someone who already has contacts or cooperation with the Chinese. This chapter will act as a brief introduction of Chinese contemporary history for them to know more about China. Secondly, I have been reading works of many researchers about their description of China. The researchers that I have read all have experience of living, studying, or teaching in China. In Geertz's words, they had really "been there" (Geertz, 1988) for

their fieldwork. However, I want to problematize how little they considered Chinese people's emotions. They only focused on the phenomenon from the angle of the outsider, ignored the feelings of Chinese people, the insiders of Chinese society. Here I present how a Chinese look at her own culture.

There are two particular aspects I want to present in this chapter. One is the Chinese economic reform that happened in the 1980s. This reform made China change very quickly. Most important, the economic reform is not only acknowledged for its economic development, but also cultural changes. The second aspect is the famous Chinese philosophy, which has been influencing Chinese people's ideology for thousands of years. I present this aspect because I want to show how Chinese people interpret the philosophy differently. This aspect also illustrates my point of culture as a process rather than a state in Chapter One.

2.1. Reform and Opening-up Policy (since 1978)

In 1978, Chinese reformist Deng Xiaoping put forward an economic reform, literally called Reform and Opening-up Policy. It first started in April 1979 in four cities (Shenzhen, Shantou, Zhuhai in Guangdong Province, Xiamen in Fujian Province) in Southern China. This policy allows China to open up to the western countries. Here I do not want to discuss this policy any further, but I want to point out that, because of the process of economic reform, Chinese people were able to meet the outside world. The changes have been so quick after China suddenly opened up. Since the 1990's, there has been a tendency for lots of Chinese students to go abroad for further education; at the same time, a lot of foreign expats are imported to work in China as English teachers, government consultants and in other professions. Foreign fast food like McDonald's, KFC (Figure 2), and PizzaHut has started their branches in China and their chains have been increasing quickly.

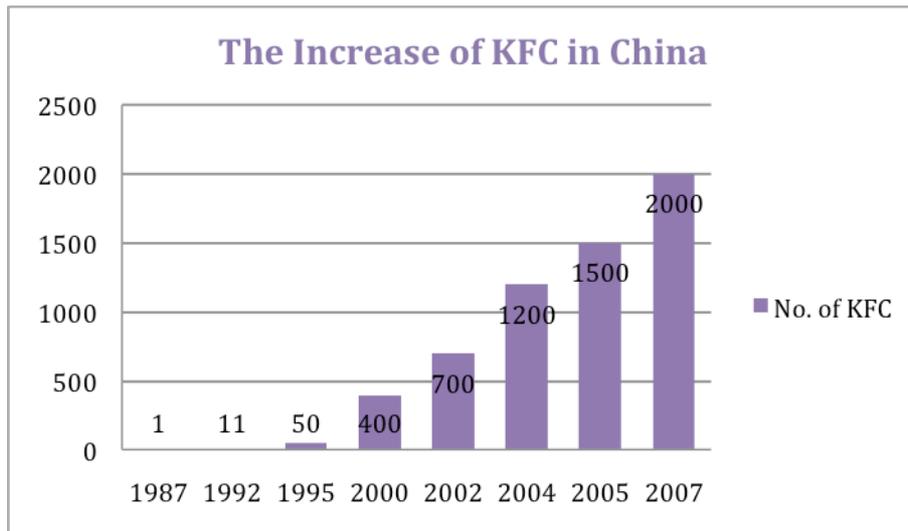


Figure 2. The increase of KFC in China since their first restaurant opened in 1987 in Beijing.
(Source from: <http://www.kfc.com.cn/kfccda/About/>)

Obviously, people's opinions towards things might be different after the economic reform. Take women's fashion for clothes as an example, following is a statue (Figure 3) standing in Shamian Island, Guangzhou.



Figure 3. Women's fashion in 20th Century
(Photo from: www.shamian.cn)

This statue reflects the fashion in 20th century. The first one on the left, the woman is wearing a long gown, usually in blue or gray (Late Qing Dynasty, before

1911); the woman in the middle is wearing cheongsam¹. (The period of Republic of China, 1912-1945). The woman on the right is from modern time. She prefers short pants, sleeveless tight top and wearing sunglasses. It implies how quickly women's fashion has changed. Once people change their tastes, their behavior probably also changes, especially when economy is developing.

What I want to emphasize is that economic reform has brought new stream into Chinese traditional ideology, which also affects people's behavior. Obviously, Chinese youths today think differently than Chinese adults did before the economic reform. They value different things. They act differently. For instance, two or three decades ago, usually Chinese people responded to a compliment with “哪里, 哪里” which literally means “Where, where”, but implies as the meaning of “No, no”. They refused the compliment, it was not because the compliment was not true, or they did not like it. They were just being modest, which was influenced by Confucianism. Many westerners were confused when they got such a response. Most of westerners will say “thank you” to respond a compliment. There is a popular joke today among Chinese students who studying English.

It is said that on an official party, a British couple met a Chinese couple.

The British man made a compliment to the Chinese man, “Your wife is very pretty!” The Chinese man answered, “Where? Where?”

The British man was confused, so he said, “Everywhere.”

However, nowadays when a westerner in China makes a compliment to Chinese people, he/she might get two different kinds of answers, one is “No, no, no” as before, the other is “Thank you”. Some Chinese have new experiences of learning English (and other foreign languages) or living abroad. Their experiences teach them that it is rude to reply a compliment with “No, no, no.” It implies that new experiences change people's practice. It also indicates that when an intercultural encounter occurred with Chinese, it might not always lead to a cultural misunderstanding or cultural conflict. Sometimes intercultural communication can be a smooth one since Chinese people have an

¹ It is called Qi Pao in Chinese. It is one-piece dress for Chinese women. It is considered as Chinese traditional clothes and it is still very popular today.

opportunity to learn about western culture. This issue will be discussed in a further step later.

From the joke, we can see that Chinese people reply a compliment with “No, no, no.” because they were influenced by Confucianism to be modest. However, what does the answer “Thank you” imply? Do people interpret Confucianism differently now and before?

2.2. Confucianism

Confucianism, it is a philosophy founded by the Chinese ancient philosopher Confucius (Kong Zi, 551-478 B.C.). His words and acts as well as his discussions with his disciples were collected by his disciples in *The Analects (Lun Yu)*, which is the representative of Confucianism. Confucian thought is characterized by a spirit of humanism, nationalism, and moralism (Oxford Reference Online Premium). Confucius thus held a position rather similar to Socrates in ancient Greece, who was his virtual contemporary (Confucius was born about eighty years before Socrates) (Hofstede, 2005, p. 208). The central doctrine of Confucianism is the Doctrine of the Golden Mean, which is similar to the Greek ideal of “nothing too much”. It mainly includes *Zhonghe* (moderation, which means “not extreme and keep harmonious”) and *Jiezhi* (restraint, which means “control the situation to a proper degree”).

So important is the Doctrine of the Golden Mean to the Chinese that they have called their own country the “Middle Kingdom”. It is more than a geographical notion: it signifies a way of life which, by holding on to the mean, the normal and the essentially human claims, as the old scholars did, that they have discovered all the essential truths of all schools of philosophy. (Lin, 2000).

This excerpt shows how important Confucianism plays in Chinese society. Perhaps that is the reason why many researchers always combine Confucianism in their discussion when doing a research on China. I do not object to the combination of Confucianism and Chinese culture. However, what I want to emphasize is that people interpret Confucianism differently at different times.

During Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Confucianism was criticized by the “Red Guard”, which was formed by students. It was the period when Chairman Mao Zedong attempted to prevent bureaucratic stagnation. Confucianism was abused by some rebels and got criticized by the “Red Guard”. In the revolutionary magazine HONGQI (vol. 10, 1973), there was an article called 论尊儒反法 (*On Respecting Confucianism, Rejecting Legalism*), in which it says, “儒家是维护没落的奴隶主贵族的反动学派，法家是代表新兴的地主阶级利益的进步学派” (Confucianism is the reactionary system that supports declining feudalist class, and Legalism is the advanced system that represent the profit of the developing landowners’ class).

For example, in the Analects of Confucius: Yan Yuan (12:11), there is a dialogue as following:

齐景公问政于孔子。孔子对曰：“君君，臣臣，父父，子子。”

The duke Jing, of Qi, asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “There is government, when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son.”

At that time, this dialogue was criticized by the “Red Guard” because the dialogue was understood as “Confucius tended to protect feudalism”. During Cultural Revolution, a period that criticized bureaucratic stagnation, Confucius’ words were on the top list to be criticized.²

Nowadays, it is popular that Chinese parents send their children to study Confucianism. Confucianism emphasizes moral education. The need of Confucianism studies is necessary since Chinese children are perceived by some to be very spoiled after China adapted Family Planning Policy, which is more commonly called “One Child Policy”, since late 1970s. Concerning this problem, studying Confucianism as a moral education gets more popular among Chinese parents. For example, regarding the dialogue between Confucius and Duke Jing about government, there is another interpretation nowadays. It is interpreted as “people in different job positions have to do a good job as their jobs require, not more or less”.

² Chinese Cultural Revolution is a complex topic. Since this thesis is not focusing on this event, the author only wants to make a comparison of how people interpret Confucianism in different times.

In Hofstede's (2005) book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, he concluded four key principles of Confucian teaching, which are:

1. The stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people.
2. The family is the prototype of all social organizations.
3. Virtuous behavior toward others consists of not treating others as one would not like to be treated oneself.
4. Virtue with regard to one's tasks in life consists of trying to acquire skills and educating, working hard, not spending more than necessary, being patients, and persevering. (p. 208-209).

I agree with Hofstede that about the key principles are the main Confucian elements influencing Chinese people's value; however, I cannot fully agree with him. For the reason that things are not static and Chinese people's values also change with time. For instance, Hofstede (2005) mentioned the unequal relationships between people:

He (Confucius) distinguished five basic relationships (the *wu lun*): ruler-subject, father-son, older brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and senior friend-junior friend. These relationships are based on mutual and complementary obligations: for example, the junior partner owes the senior respect and obedience, and the senior owes the junior partner protection and consideration. (p. 208-209).

I want to argue this with three points:

Firstly, it is not common to have older brother-younger brother relationship in new Chinese family, and the rate of father-son relationships also decreases. This is due to Chinese Family Planning Policy. Since 1970s, urban families can only have one child; people living in the rural area can have a second child if their first child is a girl³. It means that it is impossible to have two sons in one family; so Chinese children of the

³ This Family Planning Policy is mainly for Han Nationality. In China, there are 56 nationalities, 55 are minority groups, takes about 3% of total population; the majority group-Han Nationality, takes up 97% of the total population. Minority groups do not need to adapt Family Planning Policy because government does not want the minority groups to disappear.

new generation do not have the concept of elder brother-young brother relationship. In the urban families, if the only child is a girl, then that family only has a father-daughter relationship, instead a of father-son relationship.

Secondly, “the junior partner owes the senior respect and obedience” also changes because of the “One Child Policy”. In the old days, a married couple had to take care of several children, some families had seven or eight children; but nowadays, a married couple only has one child. The only-child not only gains the attention from his/her parents, but also his/her grandparents, sometimes even his/her aunts and uncles. The parents always try their best to meet the request of the only-child. There is a Chinese metaphor that describes the new phenomenon of Chinese family relationship well, “*If the child wants the stars, his father can not get him the moon.*” This metaphor implicates how the situation has slightly changed in some way nowadays. Before, “obedience” perhaps means one is very obedient to their parents. If parents ask him/her to go to the west, he/ she will never head to the east. It means one tries to follow what his/her parents’ words completely. Nowadays, this situation perhaps still exists, but there are other ways of being obedient, however. For example, one perhaps respects his/her parents very much, and is obedient most of the time. But regarding to some issues, such as job, spouse and other personal affairs, one probably will make a decision based on his/her own will.

Thirdly, Chinese family used to hold the traditional values that baby boys are preferred to baby girls, because old people believe only boys would carry on their family-line (Yuan, 2004, p. 280). But after the adoption of Family Planning Policy, some Chinese people, especially those who from big cities, started to adapt their traditional values that girls are equal to boys. Although in most of the rural areas, boys are still more preferred than girls. The situation has started to change in urban areas these recent years. Based on a survey about *Do Chinese Couples still Prefer Baby Boys than Girls* at www.sina.com, one of famous Chinese websites, it shows that among 8,422 voters, 46% think that both boys and girls are fine by April 25th, 2010 (Figure 4).

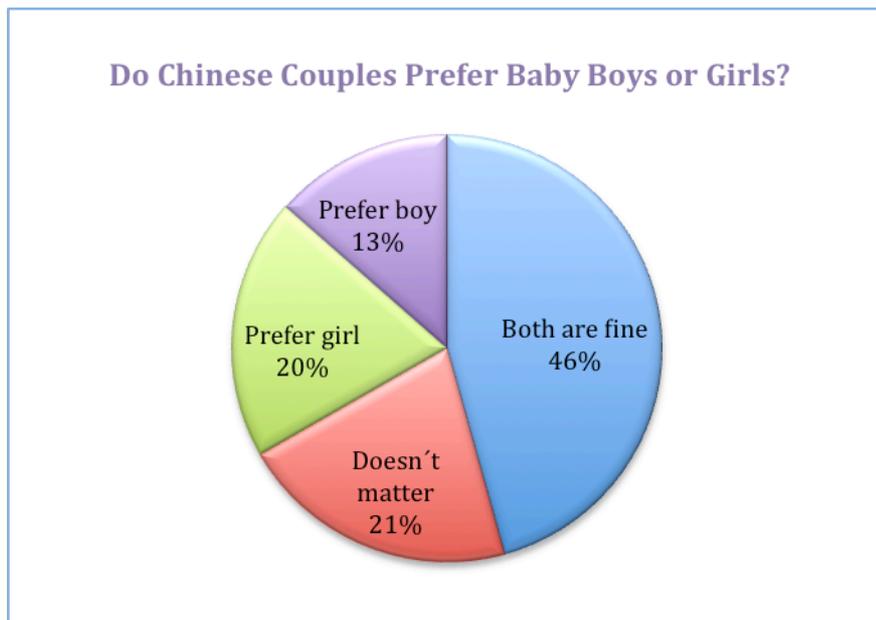


Figure 4. Do Chinese Couples Prefer Baby Boys or Girls?
(Survey at <http://survey.baby.sina.com.cn/voterresult.php?pid=35431>, April 25th, 2010)

In addition, this result of survey reflects how some Chinese people's opinions about having a boy or a girl have changed. However, I want to point out that this survey was carried out online. It means that a lot of people, especially those who live in the rural area, might not be able to handle or even access to Internet. However, this survey reveals that the changes of value are slowly happening in China. A family in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou would be equally happy to have a baby girl as a baby boy.

To sum up, I do not totally agree with Hofstede that consider culture is closed. From the examples, we can see that things are not always static. Chinese people's values change in different times. Even in the same era, different social classes within one society might react differently.

2.3. The Purpose of Presenting these aspects

In general, this chapter serves as a connecting link.

Firstly, the aspects presented in this chapter emphasize the big changes in China caused by the economic reform, and how these big changes can influence Chinese people's ideology and their behavior. It prepares for the following discussion in the case study.

Secondly, it emphasizes my point regarding culture as a process, by comparing how people interpret Confucianism differently before and after the economic reform. I

am arguing that there are a number of common denominators and mutual points of reference which most Chinese can relate to and understand. However, as I am arguing here and shall continue to argue below, we can take the meanings that individuals may attribute to these common points of reference as given. Having a common point of reference is not the same as having an a priori shared understanding of that point of reference. The goal for the cultural interpreter with a background in applied cultural analysis is to be aware of this in the process of facilitating understanding between people with different cultural backgrounds. I now wish to explicate and further nuance this point with the help of the following three case studies – each presented in their own chapter.

Chapter 3. Why Are People So Afraid of Cultural Misunderstandings?

-- Case 1: Picture Selecting for a CD Cover

In this chapter, I will present a case about selecting a CD cover, and start the discussion with the question “where do communication misunderstandings come into play”.

2009 was the 30th anniversary of Guangdong International Sister Relations. As a sister province, Region Skåne wanted to have a friendship song especially composed for Guangdong to celebrate its 30th anniversary. The song would be recorded, and about 1000 CD albums would be distributed among the audience during Guangdong Intercultural Tourism & Culture Festival. When the song was finished, an album cover needed to be designed. Based on the name of the friendship song- HAND IN HAND, the organization sent me a picture (Figure 5) of what they planned to use as the cover picture as follows:

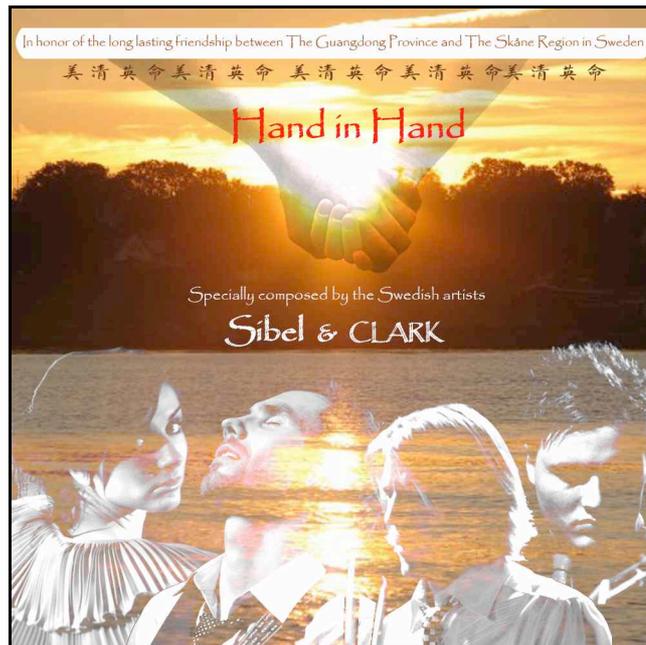


Figure 5. CD cover

It was a picture of two hands holding together. Moreover, there was a rising sun in the background, and it seems like the two hands are holding the sun. My first impression of this picture was not very positive, but I wanted to make sure this was not just my subjective opinion. I interviewed a few other Chinese people about their thoughts of this picture. In general, their responses could be summarized in two types:

- 1. This cover has a sense of worshipping Chairman Mao in the 20th century.*
- 2. It also has a sense of Christianity.*

How could such a CD cover of a friendship song be interpreted into a CD with songs praising Chairman Mao⁴, or a CD with Christian songs? Is it because of cultural differences?

From the feedback I collected from my interviews, there are two main impressions of this picture. Some people said that this picture reminded them of the period of the Chinese Liberation War when the people were worshipping Chairman Mao. Some of them said their first impression of the picture was a CD promoting Christianity.

My internship supervisor, a Swede, and his colleagues were very surprised when hearing the feedback, as it was not their intention with that choice of CD cover. Their intention was to show Chinese people that Swedes and Chinese can be united and the

⁴ These songs are perhaps more known as revolutionary songs. It was very common to use these songs as propaganda during that era.

future is full of sunshine. In what follows I intend to investigate the questions of what affects people's communication so differently and how did the misunderstanding come into play?

3.1. Cultural Differences Affect Associations

To be more specific, the sun in the picture is the main cause of ambiguities. Some Chinese people associate it with the period of highly worshiping Chairman Mao. But for Swedes, they did not feel it in that way. Chinese and Swedes thought and felt very differently regarding this picture. I am arguing that this is because of the cultural differences, which depend on their different past experiences and backgrounds.

In China, almost every Chinese person knows the history of the Liberation War, which liberated Chinese people from feudal society and foreign occupants.⁵ One of the most important leaders was Mao Zedong. Even nowadays, the new Chinese generation has to learn about the history, for the reason to strengthen the power of the Communist Party. At primary school, children have to learn many of the revolutionary songs, including the songs that praise Chairman Mao. In those songs, there are a lot of connections of Chairman Mao and the Communist Party to the sun. For instance, there is a Tibetan folk song called *Beijing de Jinshan shang* (on the Golden Mountain in Beijing), in which the lyrics are:

北京的金山上光芒照四方，毛主席就是那金色的太阳，
多么温暖多么慈祥，把我们农奴的心儿照亮...⁶

It means:

The light on Beijing's Golden Mountain is shedding its rays in all directions. Chairman Mao is like that golden sun. How warm! How kind! It lights up the hearts of us, the farmland slaves...

Here this song links Chairman Mao to the golden sun. This is due to the Chinese history that before the founding of People's Republic China, Chinese people were under the control of capitalism, feudalism and imperialism, which led to the suffering for most of the Chinese people. They did not have enough food for survival; nor enough clothes

⁵ This is at least most of the Chinese people's perspective, although there is a small amount of different opinion on Mao.

⁶ The music clip can be watched at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKnsHc-1_x4&feature=related

to keep them warm, not to mention basic freedom. Not until the founding of the Communist Party in 1921, which led the people into the Liberation War. The success of the revolution finally turned over capitalism, feudalism and imperialism. Chinese people became the owner of their own country and own democracy. They changed their life from darkness to bright future. This is at least what the Communist Party's propaganda strove to indoctrinate into Chinese people. So most of the Chinese people believed the changes were thanks to the leading of the Communist Party, and Chairman Mao was the leader of the Communist Party. To the extent, the Communist Party and the main leader Chairman Mao were linked to the sun, for the reason that they brought better life, brightness and hope to the Chinese people. There are for instance other songs, using similar metaphors to praise Chairman Mao or the Communist Party. Two of the most famous ones are *The Sun in the Sky is Red* and *Chairman Mao's works are like the Sun*.



Figure 6. Chairman Mao and the sun (Photo by: Helen Cai)

Above is a painting (Figure 6) on the wall found in Jiangxi Province. On the picture, Chairman Mao is linked to the Sun. In order to confirm that it is the sun, some sunflowers are pointed to the sun, which is the nature of sunflowers. This kind of painting can still be found all over China, mostly on the wall of old houses.

However, the representation of the sun evokes different images in Swedish context. As O'Dell (2010a) pointed out, "In Scandinavia, with its long dark winters, the sun also works as a symbol of hope, freedom, and better times" (p. 85). Winters in Sweden have very little daylight when the sun rises around eight o'clock and sets

around four o'clock, if the day is clear. But most of the time it snows, which makes the day even greyer. Due to my own experience, we only got approximately twenty-one hours of sunlight totally last November in Skåne. For me, a person who always holds an umbrella in summer to keep myself from being under the sun in China, was badly looking forward to getting some sunshine, as if the sun can take away the cold and darkness in the reality.

Although the comparison within Chinese and Swedish contexts both includes the darkness in the life and the symbols of hope and brightness, what they referred to is asymmetrical. The darkness in the life in Chinese context refers to Chinese people's understanding of life, the control of capitalism, feudalism and imperialism, the hope representing economic development and the improvement of living standards. Regarding to Swedish context, the darkness is a natural phenomenon in Northern Europe, and the hope, freedom and better times reflect their physical and emotional needs. These cultural differences can probably explain why the message deliverer (Swedes) and message receiver (Chinese) have different interpretations of the picture. Cultural differences are well known to affect how people think and act. The asymmetries of knowledge and backgrounds, affects people in different groups to think and act very differently, and even cause different understanding and confusion. However, this comparison between Swede and Chinese reflect how communication misunderstanding came into play. Here it would be all too easy to explain these differences in terms of refined notions of Chinese and Swedish culture. This is, after all, a widespread tendency in the literature of intercultural communications. For example, people find Swedes are very shy, but Chinese people are considered very hospitable. However, instead of doing this I want to demonstrate how a more finely cultural form of cultural analysis can provide us with a deeper understanding of the situation. In order to do this, let us first turn to the concept of "*Habitus*".

3.2. *Habitus and Cultural Differences*

"*Habitus* refers to systems of dispositions that are shaped by the experiences of actors in particular positions in the social structure" (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, & Virk, 2007, p. 261). It implies that *habitus* mediates between structure and practice. Some Chinese people have the experience of worshiping Chairman Mao or the Communist Party, or learning the songs that praise Chairman Mao or Communist Party, so when they see the red sun in the picture, they unconsciously associated it with

Chairman Mao or the Communist Party. However, there is a slight difference among different groups of Chinese people in different eras. Take the people who have experienced the revolutions for example, the peasants and the scholars might react a bit differently due to their different *positions*. Perhaps peasants have stronger feelings towards the Communist Party, because they had experienced the huge changes of life before and after the revolution, yet scholars' life changes slightly less. This is because as lower class, the peasants had to suffer more. They were starving before, but after the Liberation War, they could finally get some food. This is a change from "no food" to "some food". For the scholars, they were considered as middle-class in China, their life became slightly better after the Liberation War, but they did not experience such a huge change as the peasants did. They went from "food" to "better food". In this case, even though both the peasants and the scholars are Chinese, when they see the CD cover, their feelings connecting the picture to Chairman Mao or the Communist Party would be different.

Regarding to the new generation born in 1980s, which has not experienced the Revolution, are their feelings similar to the people who have experienced the revolution? Most of the new generation received the patriot education and learned the revolutionary songs in the schools. They were taught how life was in the old days, how Communist Party led Chinese people to turn over the control of feudalism, capitalism and imperialism and finally Chinese people started to have a better life. In their experience, the linkage between the sun and the Communist Party is taught by teachers, not learned from their own practice. What they experienced in reality is China adapted economic reform; more new things started to come into China from outside world, compared with the novelties, the symbols and the concepts of the revolution seem outdated to some Chinese in the new generation. They like to learn pop songs from Hong Kong and Taiwan instead of revolutionary songs, to imitate the fashion from Hong Kong instead of wearing the military bags and hats⁷ as the following picture.

⁷ The military hats and bags were commonly used by the ordinary people after the Liberation War.



Figure 7. A wedding Photo with Military Outfit (Photo by: Private picture)

What I want to point out here is that some of the new generation Chinese also associates the sun with the Communist Party, but considered the symbolic connection as something out of date. When this group of people looks at the CD cover, they might not have a good impression towards the album, because they probably find the album cover is very boring.

Among other things, this also relates to an issue of taste. The picture above (Figure 7) is actually a wedding picture and the couple is wearing Red Army outfit. Usually Chinese people take their wedding photos before the wedding or after the wedding, but not on the wedding day. They are also able to choose different styles of clothes for their wedding photos. No matter what clothes people choose, there are different cultural positions behind it.

If we take this wedding picture one step further, we may find that people have different feelings towards this picture. The new Chinese generation, which was born in the 1980's, has not experienced any war in Chinese history. They have only heard about the stories of the wars and the Red Army from TV series and history books. Almost all the stories are of heroism, loyalty, sacrifices and hard labor, and all this is for the benefits of People's Republic of China. In this sense, the new generation has a romanticized picture of the Red Army. One of the most famous representatives of the

Red Army is Lei Feng, who was the role model and leading star for how to behave and act as a good soldier of the Red Army at that time. These stories have then been passed on to the generations to come and shaped the perception of the Red Army as heroic army during a time of struggle. However, for the generation that actually experiences the revolutions, will tell you a different story. They will probably tell stories of hard life under bad conditions, no freedom and constantly under surveillance by superiors. To summarize this, the Red Army outfit in the picture above is perceived by the young generation as something cool, romantic and from an era of heroism in building the People's Republic of China. The older generation is instead relating it to hard times and strict controls.

Nevertheless, some people might find traditional Chinese clothes more attractive, because they are interested in Chinese literature and history. Some people will choose traditional Korean or Japanese clothes since they are interested in Korean or Japanese cultures. People with different cultural dispositions lead them to choose different styles of clothes for their wedding photos. It is just like choosing a wedding ring, some people prefer normal golden ones, but some people like white gold, or some others might choose platinum. No matter what kind of material they choose, this is a matter of taste, based on their position in society.

The examination of the concept of *habitus* reflects that at different times and different situations, different social groups have different feelings and reactions to a given object. Although some Chinese people already form the common sense to connect the sun to the Communist Party, but the feelings embody in their bodies are different, which affect their relation to the sun and the Communist Party or Chairman Mao in different ways. For example the picture of Mao and the sun (Figure 6) presented previously, for people from rural area, they might see the picture as part of the daily scenery. While people from urban area will have a different affection: something unusual, something they only read about and a part of Chinese history. That is why my friend from Shanghai took that picture, making it as a proof of have "been there".

As we continue to investigate the other feedback reflected by other Chinese informants, the feedback that connected the sun with Christianity, it reinforce the concept of *habitus* are shaped by experiences. As O'Dell (2010b) mentioned, "Each new experience brings with it the possibility of either reconfirming or challenging the beliefs, values and norms which that person holds" (p. 14). Some Chinese people

associate the sun to the Communist Party, but due to new experiences, some Chinese might associate the sun to something different, for instance, Christianity.

Since China adopted the Economic Reform Policy, a lot of western preachers started to come to China and preach Christianity. “This was true light that gives light to every man who comes into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him” (John 1: 9-10, New International Version of the Bible). This is an exemplary quote from the Bible, which uses the metaphor God as the true light. There are also a lot of Christian songs that link God to the light or the sun. For the informants, they connected the picture with Christianity because they have some knowledge of the religion, and this knowledge is not common for most of the Chinese people. Many people, especially the young students, get to learn about Christianity because they study English. Since China has opened her door to the world, many schools also employ foreigners to teach English. But at the very beginning, the Chinese Education Bureau did not have any regulations about the qualifications of the English teachers. Any native speaker could teach English in most of the schools and colleges. So, many teachers taught English in the class, but talked about Christianity at the English corner⁸. They consider it as a good way for Chinese students to learn about western culture. I am not sure if it is helpful to learn about the Bible in the English corner, but I was a student who had that experience. What I want to say here is that Christianity spread in China only for a period of ten years. It is still new to many Chinese. However, the new experience made some Chinese people associated the sun to the Christianity.

Compared with Chinese, Swedes’ experiences are totally different; hence, their *habitus* also guide them to have different feelings. Swedish society was built on Christian grounds and many of them take this religion as part of their life. “As Richard Dyer, has pointed out, since the middle ages, art in Christian world has used the representation of light from above, especially sunlight, to depict the flow of powers from above” (O’Dell, 2010a, p. 84). This is how sunlight started to be used to portray Christian in the western countries many centuries ago, in the paintings, or movies in the modern times. Although some Swedes are not Christian, they have learned to interpret the iconographic message that is communicated through images of the sun in classical

⁸ English Corner is very common at Chinese schools, where students get an opportunity to practice their oral English. It is like a social club outside of school hours.

as well as contemporary art forms. In another words, they are culturally bound to the understanding of sun. In this case, they did not find that picture unusual to be a CD cover of a friendship song.

Apart from the Christian background, Swedes also have special feelings toward the sun. Here we will discuss *habitus* from another angle – emotion.

Swedes love the sunlight, and it is common to see people consuming sunlight outdoors whenever they get the chance, e.g., waiting for the bus or walking the dog. O'Dell (2010a) explained:

This representation of sun consumption is intimately linked with practices that many people in Sweden indulge in, and feel united with. The consumption of sunlight is, in this part of the world, an act that constantly borders upon the religious, and more than tangentially touches upon beliefs of health and well-being. (p. 149).

It is very common to see people wearing bikini or shorts, lying on the lawn reading, or sitting in the outdoor cafes in the sun. Their feelings are like, “the sun is there, I want to go outside and get some sunlight.” Being tanned is linked to perceptions of health and youth in the west. Sometimes it is also linked to the perceptions of wealth, because only wealthy people can afford the time and money to enjoy sunlight or go traveling, the symbol of which is to get suntanned.

In China, one can hardly see a Chinese consuming sunlight. Perhaps it is possible to see someone working in the sun, but it is not their choice being in the sun. Most of the time, one can see women holding umbrellas to protect themselves from the sunlight. Some Chinese people do not like to get tanned. They believe that lighter skin is more beautiful and attractive. Moreover, some believe that darker skin also represents the status of peasant or lower class, because their agricultural work is taking place outdoors in the sun. Take the white collars for example, they work indoors in the office and will not get suntanned. Indeed, some Chinese people do not hold the opinion that getting tanned is healthy. On the contrary, they think it is unhealthy. Because the sun has strong ultraviolet rays, which can cause skin cancer. On the other hand, some Chinese people like to put their blankets and winter jackets in the sun, because they believe that ultraviolet rays kill the bacteria and germs. However, for Chinese people, their feelings towards the sun are complex. Some of them like the sun as everyone else

in the world, but they do not like the strong and intense sun in the summer, for it is too hot and too strong. At the same time, some of them use the sun to kill the bacteria. The reactions towards the sun between Swedes and Chinese emphasizes again that no matter Chinese or Swedes, different habituses affect people within one group to behave differently.

Through the examination of the concept of *habitus*, it implies that different social classes within a group interpret the symbol of sun differently. Their feelings towards the sun are also different. For the Chinese people, some associate it with the Communist Party or Chairman Mao; some associate with Christianity; some might consider the sun as the representative of hope. Some Chinese people appreciate the sun because they believe the sun can help to kill bacteria; some people dislike the sun because they think the sun will cause skin cancer. In the west, the sun is also interpreted in different ways. For some it stands for “the light from above”, “spirituality”, “spiritual purity and strength”; for some it symbolizes warmth and well-being, and even physical health. Some like the sun because they think getting some sun can keep them healthy, but some people also dislike the sun because they easily get sunburned. The different interpretations are due to their different habitus, which affect them to think and act differently.

Thus, if simply to believe that Chinese people always connect the sun to the Communist Party, or Swedish people always connect the sun to the hope, the communication between Swedes and Chinese probably will cause cultural misunderstandings.

In fact, if participants have similar feelings or interpretations, they probably communicate more smoothly than participants with different feelings or interpretations. People are afraid of cultural misunderstandings, because culture is dynamic. However, to what extent are cultural differences statically or flexibly constructed?

3.3. Chinese Culture in Hofstede’s point of view

“*Software of the mind*”, this is how Hofstede addresses *culture*, which he defines as “the collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9). If people are programmed, it implies that they are not capable of changing. Based on this, I am arguing that Hofstede’s point about Chinese culture is to static.

According to the Chinese Value Survey, developed by Michael Bond, Hofstede pointed out that Chinese values are based on the teachings of Confucius (Hofstede,

2005, p. 208). Since we are working on Swedish-Sino intercultural communication, we will stop by to take a look how Hofstede talks about Chinese culture. Hofstede (2005) described his opinions as following:

The fourth Chinese Culture Survey dimension combined on the one side these values:

- *Persistence (perseverance)
- *Thrift
- *Ordering relationships by status
- *Having a sense of shame

And on the opposite side:

- *Reciprocation of greetings, favors, and gifts
- *Respect for tradition
- *Protecting one's "face"
- *Personal steadiness and stability. (p. 209-210).

Hofstede's point of view summarizes the ideology of Chinese people, but my question is, are these values always static? In Hofstede's previous work, he tends to point out that culture can be classified into categories, for example,

- collectivism/individualism;
- large power distance oriented/small power distance oriented;
- feminine/masculine;
- strong uncertainty avoiding/weak uncertainty avoiding;
- long-term oriented/short-term oriented.

Based on my discussion through the concept of *habitus* above, culture is dynamic. People's experiences change with time, culture also changes based on people's changing experiences. For instance, one of the Chinese values Hofstede mentioned is "ordering relationships by status". He asserts this as though it were true to all Chinese. He does this because he works with a view of culture that is closed, unchanging and can be summed up as a system that you can handle in a simplistic way.

Take my family for example, in my grandfather's generation, the way he respected his father was to be obedient. He found a job which his father wanted him to do, accepted the arranged marriage, and had children once he got married because his parents wanted to become grandparents. In a word, he did almost everything his father

wanted him to do as the way to respect his father. In my generation, I also respect my father, but at the same time my father also learns to respect my choices and my decisions. He reminded me to think about marriage when I was twenty-four years old, but he did not arrange any dates for me. I decided when I wanted to get married and whom I wanted to marry to; I also chose my own career, although my parents expected me to be a teacher; I chose to go abroad for my further education, though my parents were really worried about me being far away from home. However, I am able to choose how my life is to be. Thinking about the similarities and differences of my grandfather's generation and my own generation, we both respect our own fathers, but my grandfather respects his father by focusing on what his father liked, I respect my father but I focus on what I need and how I want to be. It sounds like only the practices are different, but if we take a further step to think about the differences, actually the values also change, because older generation is more collective, and younger generation is more individual.

3.4. Conclusion for Case 1

To summarize, people from different cultural backgrounds have cultural differences; even for people from the same cultural group, take Chinese for example, due to their cultural backgrounds, cultural differences still exist among different classes within one group. There are no fixed rules about how to communicate with Chinese, because the way one talks to Chinese officers is not the same as the way one talks to a high school student, or a peasant working in the field. Cultural misunderstanding occurs upon the encounter of cultural differences. Moreover, culture is a fluid process, which makes intercultural communication more difficult. One's reaction is perhaps never the same because it is also based on his/her perception of the person he/she interacts. One can never foresee what cultural encounter he/she might get since culture is dynamic. This is why people are afraid of cultural misunderstanding, because they are not completely sure that they can handle their communication. However, how do people get around cultural misunderstandings? What factors facilitate understanding in intercultural contexts between Swedes and Chinese? We will approach these questions in the next chapter through another case study.

Chapter 4. How Do People Get Around Cultural Misunderstandings?

-- Case 2: Dressing Code for an Official Welcoming Banquet

In the previous chapter, I have discussed how cultural misunderstandings occur in the intercultural context between Swedes and Chinese. However, in this chapter I will take a further step to study how people get around cultural misunderstandings. What are their reactions towards cultural misunderstandings? What are their attitudes? Are they flexible to adapt to new cultural settings? I will approach these questions through the case below:

This was an official occasion that Guangdong government invited officers from foreign sister provinces and regions to a welcoming banquet in a nice hotel. Swedish artists were invited to perform the friendship song that they especially composed for Guangdong.

In order to have a successful banquet, the three Swedish artists were arranged to have a rehearsal at four o'clock. The welcoming banquet would start at half past six.

When I arrived at the hotel, around six o'clock, an officer from Guangdong Foreign Affairs Office came to me and asked if I know weather the artists were going to change their clothes for performance. I realized that something might go wrong. I asked the officer what happened? She said one artist's outfit was extremely casual. She took me to the backstage. The artist she referred to was wearing a red checked shirt and a pair of blue jeans with a big silver key chain hanging from his waist to his pocket on one leg. Even more conspicuous was his white sneakers. His outfit looks very cool⁹ in the pop music culture. But at the moment, Chinese people considered it as too casual for performing at this official welcoming banquet. I was also very worried, because there was not much time left before the welcoming banquet started, and his outfit was not proper in this occasion.

I explained to the artist that his outfit seemed a bit too casual for this occasion and asked if he had any back-up option for his outfit. The artist was not aware of the situation and he had no idea what he had to do after he heard my explanation. He asked if he could go back to the hotel we stayed to change clothes. I told him that we did not

⁹ Influenced by American culture, the youngsters like to use cool to describe something good, fashionable, stylish or outstanding.

have enough time. My internship supervisor suggested exchanging clothes with other group members. I picked a blacked shirt from one guy, a suit jacket from the other. His white sneakers were replaced by a pair of black ones as well. Sneakers were not ideal but we did not have another choice. But his key chain was still hanging on his waist.

I asked him, "Will you take off the key chain?"

He asked, "Do I have to?"

"It will be better if you can take it off," I answered.

He said he would like to keep it there. He finally asked me to keep his key chain before he went on the stage. The artist looked more suitable in his borrowed outfit. Their performance received a big applause and everyone was satisfied with the welcoming banquet.

This case might be seen as a familiar situation that people are not sure about the dressing codes in a given situation. Nevertheless, if we think about it carefully, we can see that, as trivial as some of the details in the case might be, it might have a big impact in the communication between people.

4.1. Mediating Cultural Identity

In this case, there are two trivial details I want to point out:

Firstly, the artist was quite sure what he wanted to wear for the performance, but he was not aware that what he considered to be proper was not suitable in that situation within Chinese cultural context.

Secondly, he was wearing his key chain especially for this welcoming banquet. Even though he knew it was not very proper for this occasion he was not willing to take it off.

The reaction of the artist reflects something what Giddens calls self-identity. "In the realm of self-identity, increased reflexivity means we are increasingly free to choose not only what we want to do, but also who we want to be" (as cited in Calhoun et al., 2007, p. 222). Since we live in a "global village", we have easy access to information about the world; hence, people have more choices to choose from in terms of what kind of person they want to be, what kind of identity they want to present. The artist, chose to present his identity as a rock musician rather than politician or something else.

At this stage, his self-identity is transformed into cultural identity, because the identity he chose to present can only be recognize within a certain cultural context.

"[Cultural identity] is something which people learn to recognize over the course of

their lives. They learn that they belong to a specific group and they learn that there is a repertoire of cultural attributes or symbols which can be invoked to assert one's ethnic associations" (O'Dell, 2010b, p. 3). For this artist, apart from him playing rock music, the symbol to distinguish his group (rock musicians) from the rest of the guests (politicians, dancers, choir, et al.) is in his dressing. He wanted to identify his status by wearing what is considered cool as a rock musician within his own cultural context.

However, the situation seems more complicated in the cross-cultural context. Self-identity is usually expressed through materiality, such as clothes, accessories, etc. However, how this is perceived depends on cultural contexts. Where the artist would communicate his identity was at a Chinese official banquet. Calhoun et al. (2007) also pointed out, "To exercise choice over your identity involves accepting some anxiety over deciding what might be your "true" identity or your "real" self. It also involves a lot of work to monitor whether your actions and thoughts at any given moment accord with your chosen identity" (p. 222). This is a difficult process of deciding a true identity or real self and monitoring one's own actions and thoughts to accord with chosen identity. The artist wanted to be "appropriate" and "cool" as a rock musician, but he was not sure of how to translate that identity to the public he was facing. This situation exacerbates his anxiety of presenting his true identity. Hence, he took my suggestion to change his jacket and shoes after my explanation.

On the other hand, since he had no idea how to present himself in an appropriate way, he still used the norms from his own culture as a reference to guide his actions, even though the norms are not applicable in this banquet. It was shown when he was not willing to take off his key chain. For him the keychain was the sense of safety and security, preventing him from feeling anxious. But what happened instead was that he was doing something culturally incorrect without knowing about it.

In this case, the artist was trying hard to construct his identity, but he did not realize that not everyone would perceive his identity the same as he does. I am arguing that one should adjust his/her reaction of presenting his/her identity according to the specific situation. As O'Dell (2010b) noted, "we shape our identities, but we never fully control how other people perceives us in the same way, and we must always react according to the specifics of the situation" (p. 5). The case somehow reinforces O'Dell's opinion, and it also raises a discussion on intermediaries that I will return to later.

Here I am also arguing against the point of "Sweden is a country with low-context cultures" (Hall, 1990, p. 7). According to Guirdham (1999), "people in low-

context cultures use a personal style. A person style emphasizes personal identity over social position. Because role relationships and status differences are less important, communication is less formal and often more intimate” (p. 60-61). I do not totally agree with these statements because there are always some exceptions. Like the other two artists who performed with this artist, their outfits were considered as proper. One wore a black shirt and a vest, and a pair of black trousers. The female artist was wearing a one-piece dress. Both of them did not over-emphasize their identities as pop musicians; instead, they were aware of the differences and adjusted themselves into the Chinese context. In this case, Guirdham’s point of view is not absolute, and not every Swede uses low-context communication all the time. However, this artist was the person who Guirdham described. He emphasized his own identity rather than social status. He could wear the same outfit for performing on the campus for university students, and at this official welcoming banquet for high ranked politicians from different countries, because for each occasion, his identity was rock musician. In this case, he neglected the big environment with Chinese cultural settings.

4.2. Intermediary

The performance finally ended up as a great success, even though the artist did not choose the proper outfit at the beginning. He exchanged his clothes with other artists by the suggestions from an intermediary. Intermediary, which is also called go-between, is someone who is able to mediate the cultural differences between two parties. As Guirdham (1999) mentioned:

The role of a go-between, or intermediary, includes:

1. Ensuring that nobody loses face if the request, invitation or proposal is refused.
2. Arranging introductions.
3. Providing appropriate interpretations of sensitive situations.
4. Carrying messages and information that cannot be transmitted in a face-to-face setting. (p. 224).

The function of intermediaries is to act as a bridge to construct a smooth communication between two parties from different cultural backgrounds. To arrange introductions is like door opener, having a good start within communication. Even the

request, invitation or proposal is refused, intermediaries are able to handle the situation and make sure good relations are maintained. Furthermore, the most important is that intermediaries are able to use their expertise to interpret cultural differences, to mediate cultural confusion and to analysis cultural patterns in order to develop people's understanding as well as providing appropriate recommendations. Generally, with the presence of an intermediary, situations of intercultural encounter can be much more relaxed.

For example, the situation of this case required sensitivity to the different ways in which a successful pop star should present himself in the particular formal setting. It required re-interpreting a specific cultural identity in a context unfamiliar for the artist. This is a move that goes beyond understanding formal dress codes in China. It even implies a need to "stretch" those codes (the intermediary's objective was not to dress the artist so that he looked like a politician, but as an "appropriately dressed" artist). This necessitates the translation of dress codes so that they correspond with the cultural identity the artist in question wished to exude. It implied a need to communicate an understanding of his identity, and in a manner that created the trust that was needed for the artist to accept these changes to his self-presentation which he felt rather sensitive about.

In general, it requires high qualifications to be a good intermediary. As a cultural analyst, qualifications in terms of professional knowledge such as access of cultural theories to cultural mediation, as well as the ability to conduct cultural analysis, are important skills. This is because an intermediary has to apply theories to analysis and be able to interpret differences within cultures and between cultures. In addition, social and communication skills are also vital ingredients to be a successful intermediary. Intermediary probably works with a diverse assortment of people from different social classes, such as public servants, academics, artists, managers from a music company. In this case, intermediary has to enable to socialize and communicate with them. It is more difficult to handle the participants' emotions, build up their confidence and develop their faith in an intermediary's ability.

These skills are intertwined; making the whole puzzle, missing one skill is like missing one piece. This is what applied cultural analysis is all about, cultural analysts are able to see the trivial details and significant aspects of the cultural context that one without cultural skills cannot see, and act upon it. Apart from this, cultures are not simplistic, but complex. A culture is a process, not a state; it is not a

category, but categories; it is not a whole, but fragments. This also requires an intermediary to be sensitive to the work involved in cultural mediation.

At the same time, an intermediary also needs to be able to deliver the findings or messages to either party in a proper way. Sometimes it is difficult to convince the participants, as the artist I mentioned in the case. I pointed out that the key chain was not very proper, but he was not willing to take it off. In this case, it requires the intermediary to be able to handle the artist's emotions, build up his confidence and faith in the intermediary's ability. The success depends on the communication skills of the intermediary. Otherwise, there might be a tension between participants and intermediary.

4.3. Conclusion for Case 2

All in all, this case exemplifies how people get around cultural misunderstanding in an intercultural context, however, it only presents one group of people, but there might be some other different reactions for other people when they encounter intercultural communication. Whatever their reactions will be, this case reveals a fact that an intermediary is able to relax interactions, and facilitate understanding between Swedes and Chinese.

What other factors that can help to facilitate understanding in an intercultural context between Swedes and Chinese? I will continue to investigate another case and approach this question.

Chapter 5. What Factors Can Facilitate Understanding

-- Case 3: A Swede Communicated with a Chinese

The studies of intercultural communication, which we have discussed above, have presented us lots of examples of cultural misunderstandings. However, intercultural encounters are always dynamic, since participants' cultural backgrounds are very different from one to another. People might have different reactions when they encounter intercultural problems and proceed in different ways to solve them. Nevertheless, do intercultural encounters always cause cultural misunderstandings? If not, what factors are possible to facilitate understanding? Through the case about how a Swede handled his communication with Chinese as following, I intend to investigate these questions in the Swedish-Chinese settings.

*For the especially composed friendship song **Hand in Hand**, my internship organization was eager to have it performed at the opening ceremony of Guangdong International Tourism & Culture Festival. Regarding talking this issue with Guangdong Foreign Affair Office, my internship supervisor was very cautious with the communication. He asked me what was the proper way to communicate with the Guangdong officers. Actually he asked me to represent him to do the communication later on. So, in one of my emails to Guangdong Foreign Affair Office, I was writing in the following way:*

“...In order to honor the long-lasting friendship between Guangdong Province and Region Skåne, Region Skåne has some artists to compose a friendship song especially for Guangdong, as a gift for the 30th Anniversary of Guangdong International Sister Relations. Region Skåne would like to send the message to all Guangdong people, so is it possible to have this song performed at the opening ceremony of Guangdong International Tourism & Culture Festival? That will be great if the message of the song can be delivered through opening ceremony...”

The result of the case was that the song was not performed in the opening ceremony, but it was performed in another important event. The result still fulfilled my internship organization’s request, although in a different way. Both parties (Swedish and Chinese organizations) were both happy with the arrangement. Chinese organization were happy to show that a sister province wrote a friendship song for their friendship, Swedish organization was happy to get this event to promote Sweden. It was a win-win situation.

5.1. Intercultural Encounters = Cultural Misunderstandings?

To start with, there is a tension at this stage that intercultural communication theories tend to emphasize the problems that occur in communicating rather than things that tend to work out. The sources of miscommunication are divided into two kinds:

...those such as the general problem of intergroup communication, stereotyping and prejudice which are ‘universal’ barriers, but which apply with particular force in intercultural situation; and those arising from the fact that differences of background, whether cultural or subcultural, ethnic, gender based or based on some other distinction, do affect how people communicate. (Guirdham, 1999, p. 158).

It implies that intercultural communication emphasizes the lack of understanding, which causes misunderstandings and conflicts.

Hofstede divided national culture into five categories in order to solve cultural misunderstandings, which include:

1. collectivism/individualism,
2. large power distance oriented/small power distance oriented,
3. feminine/masculine,
4. strong uncertainty avoiding/weak uncertainty avoiding
5. long-term oriented/short-term oriented.

In the same way as Hofstede did, Hall classified countries in high-context and low-context culture. All in all, they simplify the process of intercultural communication. As I discussed earlier, culture is a process and it is constantly changing. Cultural differences not only exist between cultures, but also within cultures. We should not simply classify cultures into categories; otherwise we will lose many dimensions of the complexity of culture.

Before we take a further step to investigate the questions, it is worth to re-think about the question of what intercultural communication is. There are many different versions of the definition of intercultural communication. As I defined it in Chapter One, intercultural communication is when people coming from different cultural backgrounds interact. Again, culture is a process rather than a state. It is always possible to change. We cannot simply define that a certain misunderstanding will occur if one Swede encounters a Chinese, or the other way around. Moreover, because each individual has different histories of experiences that one uses to interpret the information which one receives. These different histories can also lead to alternative interpretations of any message one partakes of. As the case described, the communication is a combination of understanding and misunderstanding. The Swede was aware of the cultural differences in communication. At the same time, he was not sure how to handle it. However, this did not cause any cultural conflict, because he made a good decision by asking an intermediary to handle the communication, who has the expertise of communicating with Chinese people. My argument here is that intercultural communication is a complex process; it does not always cause cultural conflicts as most intercultural communication theories emphasize, because sometimes things also tend to work out. For example, people who have lots of experience of intercultural encounters are possibly able to handle the communication. Take an example in my life: my American

professor from university has been living in China for almost fifteen years. After struggling with cultural misunderstandings in the first a few years living in China, now he does not have any major problems when communicating with Chinese people. The reason is that he has gained a good insight into Chinese culture. In addition, culturally proficient cultural analysts can also handle intercultural communication because they attain professional knowledge. Moreover, people are aware that people with different backgrounds may behave differently. There is a global discourse about cultural difference which can sensitize individuals to the fact that misunderstandings can occur due to these differences. There is in other words the possibility for the recognition of difference, and tolerance of it (as well as the “inappropriate” cultural responses it may cause). In what follows is the examination of the case through the concepts of high-context/low context communication. My intention is to criticize these concepts by pointing out the exceptions, in order to illustrate my argument point from the other angle.

According to the concepts of high context / low context mentioned by Edward Hall, high context people “rely heavily on the overall situation to interpret messages – and so the messages which are explicitly spoken can be elliptical” (as cited in Guirdham, 1999, p. 60). They are used to getting the message meaning between the lines and interpret the message depending on the situational code. For example, if someone wants to borrow money to buy a lunch, he will not ask his colleague to borrow his money directly, instead, he will say, “Oh, I forgot my wallet at home. How can I be so forgetful? I think the hunger will be a good lesson for me. But, the worse thing is, I did not have breakfast either...” From his words, people learn that he is hungry. This can be interpreted that he needs to buy some food. But he does not have money with him. It implies that he needs to borrow some money. This is how people from high-context culture express themselves through words. “Some of the more high context cultures include China, Japan and other Asian cultures” (Schnell, 1999, p. 31). Low context people “rely more on the explicit verbal content of messages” (Guirdham, 1999, p. 60). Usually they express their meaning in a very clear or direct way. If people from low-context culture want to borrow money for a lunch, they will just ask directly, “Can I borrow some money to buy a lunch?” He makes his meaning very clear that he needs to borrow money, and the money is used to buy a lunch. The listener does not need to interpret his words to get what he meant. “Low-context people include Americans, Germans, Swiss, Scandinavians, and other northern Europeans” (Hall, 1990, p. 7).

Above is about how the theory of high-context/low context culture classifies countries into these two categories based on people's communication style. What I want to problematize here is high-context/low-context in relation to essentialism. To start with, China is a country known for high-context communication, according to the high-context and low-context communication, but I am arguing that not all the Chinese have high-context culture. I will exemplify this with my own case. I started to have frequent contacts with Americans because there were a lot of Americans living around me. I met a lot of American university students who came to my city for summer camps. They helped me a lot with my English, and taught me American activities and cooking. That was the first time I played Frisbee, made mashed potato, and tasted roasted bread with butter and jam. Later on, I had a very nice and respectful American teacher, who told me a lot of American culture and slangs, as well as his life as a pilot when serving in the American Military. Little by little, I am used to the way Americans communicate. The experience affects my communication in my future job. I was working as a tour leader for American groups within China. I did not have any cultural conflicts with my clients, most of who were first comers to China; on the contrary, they found me very open and easy to talk to. With some of them, we still keep contact and are still friends. What I want to point out here is, I am Chinese, but I do not carry high-context culture with me all the time. This example illustrates my point that not all the Chinese use high-context communication in all contexts.

In addition, some foreigners also find that Chinese are not high-context. One of my informants, a manager from Sony Ericsson, is assigned to work in Beijing for two years. During a business trip to Lund after she moved to Beijing for two months, we met in Grand Hotel in Lund and she said:

I want to talk about Chinese ideology with you. I am confused with some of my Chinese friends I met in Beijing. They said they were very traditional Chinese, but I found that how they talked and how they thought are very westernized...

(An excerpt of a conversation with a Swede in November, 2009)

Again, the confusion with this Swede illustrates that some Chinese talk is not as high-context as Hall emphasized. Moreover, the categories classified by the concepts of high-context/low-context probably would produce stereotype of Chinese people, which will create confusion or misunderstanding in an intercultural setting.

The same reason, Swedish culture could not be simply classified as low-context culture. As the case described, the Swede did not communicate with Chinese Foreign Affairs officers with low-context culture. Indeed, he was aware of the communication differences, and asked an intermediary to communicate in a high-context way.

Indeed, a cultural context plays a role in framing people, both Chinese and Swedes move in and out of high or low context modes of communicating. I will explain with an example of how I communicated during my internship. Usually Guangdong organizer arranges a performance at the campus for foreign artists every year, but last year we were informed that campus performance would not be arranged. Hence, I assisted my supervisor to arrange a trip for our group to Hong Kong *after* the opening ceremony of the festival. However, we were later informed that Guangdong organizer decided to have the campus performance as usual after all, and it would be arranged *after* the opening ceremony. In this case, we moved the trip to Hong Kong to *before* the opening ceremony. Again, there was a change of plans, the Guangdong organizers decided to have the campus performance *before* the opening ceremony. This forced us to change back to the original plan.

My supervisor got a bit frustrated with the changing of plans. I was not happy with this situation either because it affected our plans and arrangements in Hong Kong. When I communicated with him, I used a more direct form of communication, because we had to find a good solution to handle this situation; when I communicated with the artists, I had to interpret the situation as “Guangdong organization tried to make a better arrangement to ensure your performance to be successful. To have the campus performance earlier is like a warm up for the opening ceremony”; when I communicated with my contact person in Guangdong, I shifted into a high context manner. I told her that Region Skåne and the artists would like to cooperate with them to do a better job, the only problem is that the changing plans made the arrangement of the Hong Kong trip very difficult, especially the appointment with Warner Music Company. In these cases, I communicated in different context manners in different cultural contexts.

In sum, the discussion above has showed that intercultural communication does not always cause cultural conflicts. In addition, to classify national culture into categories is way too essentialist. Individuals within one cultural group do not always behave the same. Their histories of experience, gender, ethnicity and other factors will affect their communication slightly different.

5.2. Factors to Facilitate Understanding

As I discussed above, intercultural communication does not always cause cultural misunderstandings or cultural conflicts. Based on the case, what factors facilitate understanding in the Swedish-Sino settings?

5.2.1. *Recognition of Cultural Differences*

Recognition is more affirmative than tolerance as a stance toward people and groups one finds different from oneself in their values, ways of living or social situation. Tolerance is a stance of mutual non-interference – you leave us alone and we will leave you alone. Its respect for liberty and pursuit of happiness is compatible with indifference. To recognize the other groups, on the other hand, is to affirm a relationship with them at the same time as one keeps a respectful distance, not claiming that underneath we are all the same. (Young, 1999, p. 246).

Young indicates that tolerance implies awareness, the awareness of differences, but it does not imply acceptance or approval. Recognition emphasizes both awareness and acceptance. This quote elucidates the role of cultural interpreters. As cultural interpreters, their job is to interpret the cultural differences for the people of different cultural backgrounds. That is to say, they not only need to recognize cultural differences, but also be able to mediate differences with respect and affirmation.

My internship supervisor was very cautious about the communication with Chinese officers. He has been in contact on several occasions with Guangdong Province in the last few years. Perhaps his past experiences of encountering cultural misunderstandings made him aware of the differences in communication. Hence, he asked me, a cultural analyst and intermediary with Chinese expertise, to help him to communication in a proper fashion. This case reflects that the Swede was aware of cultural differences between Sweden and China. At the same time, he was open to the differences and attempted to deal with the differences.

As Honig stated, “The real challenge posed by the other, is not whether or how to convert, tolerate, protect, or reject those who are not the same, but how to deal with difference, with those who resist categorization as same or other” (as cited in Dikeç, 2002, p. 240). This implies a need to have an ethical disposition towards difference. It

requires us to reflect upon what difference is as well as reflecting on how we can acknowledge it and bridge it at the same time. The ethics of difference are probably not addressed by the intercultural communications literature.

As we live in a world which is said to be increasingly globalized, we do not live in isolated cultures. The Other is always among us. While much of the intercultural communication literature seems to presume that the foreign individual becomes subsumed in a holistic, non-understanding inflexible pool of Otherness. This is not necessarily the case. We learn to see and hopefully respect difference. This is never a process that is complete, but it would be equally incorrect to presume that Other “cultures” are comprised of Others incapable of understanding us. There is, in essence an ethos of understanding, tolerating and recognizing difference out there that does – to at least some degree – facilitate the production of understanding, and the desire to reach understanding. An important question here is how does this fit into the work of intercultural communication. The answer may in part be that we need to see cultural intermediaries not as “negotiators” mitigating cultural difference, but as playing an important role in maintaining dispositions of openness, tolerance, and recognition of both that which is similar as well as that which is different. For example, cultural intermediaries cannot change people’s cultural backgrounds in order to mitigate cultural difference; but they are able to coach how to recognize, tolerate, and be open to cultural similarities and differences in order to smooth interactions within intercultural contexts.

From the previous two cases, the intercultural communication was handled by an intermediary. Hence, it is advisable to use an intermediary to facilitate misunderstanding in intercultural contexts.

5.2.2. Assistance of an Intermediary

Reviewed from the three cases mentioned above, and other cases I collected during my internship, intermediaries have played an important role in handling the intercultural communication.

An intermediary, not only being able to arrange meetings for both parties, but also explaining the situation whenever there is confusion. Moreover, an intermediary is able to provide appropriate interpretations of sensitive situation and coach participant to behave in a proper fashion. A good and reliable intermediary, can make intercultural communication become much more relaxed.

However, there is a risk that intermediaries may bring in false interpretations of the context they are working with, that affects the intercultural communication and create misunderstandings. Each intermediary has individual history of experiences, which affect their interpretations differently. Particularly, intermediaries without a background of a cultural analyst, will not be able to make appropriate recommendations based on theories. Nevertheless, this will be an interesting issue on the role of intermediaries and a possible topic for further studies.

5.3. Conclusion for Case 3

All in all, this chapter discussed the phenomenon that intercultural communication theories emphasize the lack of cultural misunderstanding, and neglect the fact that things can work out in an intercultural setting. On the other hand, this chapter also discussed the factors, which are able to facilitate misunderstanding based on my internship empirical material. And it argues for an ethics of tolerance, openness and recognition of difference that needs to be broadened, and which may in and of itself be seen as a tentative step in the direction of making way for more understanding.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Through the case studies, this thesis has revealed that culture is a process, and it is in a state of constantly becoming yet never complete. At the same time, affected by social classes, past experiences, gender and other factors, individuals within one national culture may have different values, beliefs and norms. Obviously, communicating with a Chinese officer will be very different from communicating with a Chinese farmer working in the fields. Indeed, cultural differences not only exist between two different cultures, but also within the culture itself. Sometimes people seem afraid of cultural misunderstandings, because they do not know how to handle it when being encountered by it. Also, the fact that cultural differences are dynamic, is adding yet another factor of uncertainty in intercultural communications.

However, it seems that the intercultural communication literature anchors on the essentialistic and static notion of culture, which may be more detrimental to the development of cultural understanding than helpful. Studying cultural differences by putting cultures into categories, means we lose many dimensions of the complexity. In addition, the literature also emphasizes a lot on the idea that cultural misunderstandings

occur within intercultural contexts. Participants may have asymmetries of knowledge within intercultural communications, which reflect on their cultural differences. On the other hand, sometimes participants who have encountered similar experiences find their interaction much easier and smoother because their similar experiences has helped them to build up a more mature understanding.

This is what applied cultural analysis is used for: to be sensitive to cultural differences and similarities, even with trivial details, and to interpret cultural patterns and codes in order to facilitate understanding in relation to issues of intercultural communication. As the thesis title indicates, it is like building a bridge between two different cultures.

Since we live in a globalized world, it is important for us to learn to see and respect differences. Most importantly, we should broaden an ethics of tolerance, openness and recognition of differences. A cultural intermediary plays an important role in maintaining dispositions of openness, tolerance, and recognition of both differences and similarities. In addition, they are capable of handling and mediating interactions between people with different cultural backgrounds.

China is a country that has been developing and changing very fast the last couple of decades. Except from the domestic development brought by the economic reform, lots of Chinese students have been studying abroad. When they return, they bring new knowledge, habits and ideas, adding new influences to the fast changes of China. When approaching China in the future, it is essential to abolish stereotypes about Chinese and China, but being sensitive to the differences from Chinese people and within the Chinese people themselves. Hence, it is beneficial to hold an attitude of openness and tolerance when communicating with Chinese people.

This thesis is building a new ground and platform for the studies of Swedish-Sino relations, but there are a lot of potential in continuing studies in this topic. What is the role of cultural ideology in Swedish-Sino communications? How do Chinese people handle the communication with Swedish people?

In addition, a cultural intermediary is a quite new concept in the studies of intercultural communication. How do intermediaries affect the contexts they are working with, contributing false senses of security and understanding or even create misunderstandings? This question will be interesting for further investigation.

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¹⁰ This article has been accepted to be published in the anthology, *Etnicitet, vård och hälsa*, Lund: Studentlitteratur, and is in the process of being translated into Swedish for that volume

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