

**Special Issue:  
Management Communication Instruction  
in Internationally Oriented MBA Programs**

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# CULTURAL VALUES AND COMMUNICATION ONLINE

## Chinese and Southeast Asian Students in a Taiwan International MBA Class

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*Whereas many researchers have examined differences in values and behavior between Westerners and Asians, fewer have investigated differences within Asian cultural groups. A recent government initiative in Taiwan to encourage international education has led to the development of an international MBA program at the National Cheng Kung University in Tainan; both Chinese and Southeast Asian students participate in the program. They exhibit different behaviors in their classes, particularly in their postings in online discussion boards. For reasons that can be partly explained by the students' responses on a Chinese-Value Survey, Chinese students tend to post fewer messages than Southeast Asians, and both groups post fewer messages than Westerners in the classes under study. Instructors in multicultural classes have to consider such differences when they design assignments and set expectations for students in online discussions.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese values; cultural differences in online behavior; differences in Chinese and Southeast Asian MBA students*

DIFFERENCES IN VALUES between Westerners and Asians have been analyzed by many researchers (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980, 1997; Triandis, 2004). But differences also exist within Asian cultural groups, differences often not recognized from a Western perspective. A recent initiative by Taiwan's government to encourage international education gave us at National Cheng Kung University (NCKU) in Tainan the opportunity to study differences in cultural values between Chinese and Southeast Asian students. This article reports on one research project that analyzed the impact of those values on student participation in an online portion of two MBA classes.

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### **THE IMBA PROGRAM AT NCKU**

The recent government initiative was a major contributor to the development of our international MBA (IMBA) program. NCKU is a well known and highly ranked university within Taiwan and internationally. The IMBA program was inaugurated in July 2003 with a limited yearly enrollment of 55 students, with 25 of those slots reserved for local Taiwan students. Although Taiwan universities have always accepted applicants from overseas, with large numbers of overseas Chinese traditionally applying, non-Chinese-speaking foreign students entering Taiwan face the often insurmountable problem of language. Even though textbooks written in English are often used, lectures in Taiwan are given in Mandarin Chinese, which non-Chinese-speaking students find difficult, especially the technical vocabulary used at the MBA level.

With the launch of the IMBA, for the first time a Taiwan business program has specifically reserved space for foreign applicants to ensure a multicultural classroom setting. In the context of Taiwan's diplomatic isolation by the People's Republic of China, this, and other similar programs, is an attempt at directly creating business and social relations with other countries. Although anyone can apply, accepted foreign students are mostly from member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Local Asian MBA programs are common and are offered at all top universities, along with executive MBA (EMBA) programs; both tend to focus on local business issues and are taught exclusively in local languages. Exceptions include the use of English in classes offered at some business schools in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. With existing MBA, executive MBA, and international management programs within the College of Business, NCKU was able to draw on resources and experience to create the new program that differed from previous offerings by holding class lectures completely in English and emphasizing an international perspective. Locally applying students were required to pass a minimum TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score, and international professors were actively recruited for teaching. The result was a program set in a Chinese cultural environment, but the emphasis within the program was on Western MBA approaches taught in English.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The sample for our study consisted of 44 students (25 Chinese, 12 non-Chinese Southeast Asian, and 7 non-Asian Westerners) participating in two IMBA courses during the 2004 school year, one in marketing management and one in consumer behavior. Southeast Asian students came from Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand, whereas Western students were citizens of Canada, Australia, South Africa, Czech Republic, and the United States. Participants in this study were, on average, 33 years old, with 60% female.

The classes were run along the lines of an EMBA program (maximizing convenience for working students), meeting once every 2 weeks on weekends. To facilitate participation, the instructor established a posting board (<http://warden.idv.tw>) and required students to use it, with the number of posts an indicator of class participation. Most students had had no previous experience with such computer mediated communication. We did not require students to post any particular number or type of messages. Total postings of each participant were counted without regard to length or content, although we did make some incidental observations about these. Every class meeting, students were reminded and encouraged to post, with some posts acting as discussion topics within class.

To see if differences in posting behaviors between Southeast Asian and Taiwan students correlated with or could be predicted by differences in cultural values, our major research interest, we asked students to respond to the Chinese-Value Survey (CVS; Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) (see the appendix). By measuring respondents' distance from these Chinese values, we hoped to define differences and similarities that influence online behavior as well as general attitudes and actions in class.

## CHINESE VALUES

From a Western perspective, Asian cultures are often clumped together and assumed to reside at the end of a continuum, with the West at the opposite end. There is a basis for some similarity within Asia, considering the centuries of Chinese influence and political dominance over this area (Stuart-Fox, 2004). The same can be said when looking at the West. Among the group of nations that compose the West, the United States is often seen as holding the most extreme, or the most "Western," values. Hofstede's (1980, 2001) dimensions, for

example, show U.S. and Chinese cultures holding opposite values, with numerous Southeast Asian nationalities generally clustering near each other and close to the Chinese values held by those in Taiwan, whereas other Western nations rank closely to the United States. Although the cultural distance between Southeast Asian cultures is small when compared to the gap between Asian and U.S. culture, there are nonetheless potentially important differences that can affect the classroom environment. Michael Bond and his associates have asserted that numerous Chinese values have not been captured by Western concepts of culture and the surveys used to measure them; they therefore developed a Chinese cultural value description that includes integration, human-heartedness, moderation, and Confucian work dynamism (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987), all values asserted to be uniquely important in Chinese cultural settings.

While it is convenient to equate culture with national boundaries, culture is more related to ancestral heritage and shared languages (Jackson & Garner, 1998), which may easily cross national borders. Using language to distinguish between cultural groups, we find Southeast Asian nations are culturally very diverse, with populations speaking languages from several unrelated language families (Katzner, 2002). Languages from the following language families are spoken in nearly every mainland Southeast Asian nation: Austronesian, Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai, Miao-Yao (previously called Hmong-Mien), and Sino-Tibetan (Diamond, 1999; Katzner, 2002; Keyes, 1995). The Chinese languages (e.g., Mandarin and Cantonese) are all from one branch of the Sino-Tibetan family called the Sinitic branch.

Historically, the major mainland Southeast Asian ethnic groups (excluding Austronesian speakers) are thought to have come from what is now southern China where they were displaced by the southward expansion of the Han Chinese. This long process took place in waves as each ethnic group migrated south. The most recent example of this pattern is the Tai people who took over the lands of several preexisting kingdoms, such as the Khmer (Keyes, 1995). Although numerous ethnic groups are present in Southeast Asia, there are many similarities, including genetic (Diamond, 1999). In Taiwan, the majority of the population is descended from Chinese speaking peasant farmers from Fujian Province in Southern China. A large financially and politically powerful population also moved to the island with Chang Kai-shek from China, at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949.

Looking at the belief systems between mainland Southeast Asians and Chinese, we see many similarities but also some notable differences. Buddhism, for example, is the main religion of both these areas.

In mainland Southeast Asia, excluding Vietnam (which is similar to China), the popular religion is Theravada Buddhism (Keyes, 1995). In China, Mahayana Buddhism was adopted, where it was further merged with existing Taoist and Confucian ideals. Although not a religion, Confucianism is arguably the greatest philosophical influence in China and is widespread throughout Asia. Confucianism was indirectly transferred to Southeast Asia, with Vietnam being an exception as it was part of the Chinese empire for a millennium (Tarling, 1966). China has tended to reject outside influence, whereas Southeast Asian cultures have incorporated diverse belief systems from other cultures (Steedly, 1999), including China.

Educational systems also differ, with the Chinese educational system well known for its rigorous memorization and focus on exams. The Confucian meritocracy of Ming-Ch'ing period China (1368-1911) implemented social mobility through success on the civil service examinations (Woodside & Elman, 1994). The cultural influence of the Chinese immigrant populations on Southeast Asia cannot be overlooked. Despite their minority status, they often have disproportional economic power and political influence (Freedman, 1979; Skinner, 1996) that has resulted in a diffusion of Chinese values throughout the region.

## RESULTS

The small sample size and lack of random sampling place limits on our results, but some differences were large enough to be statistically significant. Survey results were analyzed using ANOVA (analysis of variance) to find how the three cultural groups—Western, Chinese, and Southeast Asian—differed. Because of the large number of variables in the CVS survey, factor analysis was next undertaken to reduce the data into noncorrelated variables that could then be used in a regression model. The strongest cultural value influences were then described from the regression results.

Reliability for the CVS scale was good, with  $\alpha = .93$ , and Guttman Split-half = .89. The three groups differed significantly in the number of posts made during the semester, with Southeast Asian students exhibiting the highest posting levels ( $M = 52.86$ ,  $SD = 34.83$ ), the Western students next highest ( $M = 34.86$ ,  $SD = 25.59$ ), and the Chinese students lowest ( $M = 19.76$ ,  $SD = 16.8$ ). Of the 40 CVS questions, ANOVA results (see Table 1) showed significant differences across the three groups for eight questions (filial piety, loyalty to superiors, moderation,

**Table 1. Analysis of Variance Among Three Groups**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Post Hoc</i>
Posting	2	7.29	.00	S > C
Q1. Filial piety	2	4.89	.01	C > W, S > W
Q23. Loyalty to superiors	2	6.44	.00	C > W, S > W
Q26. Moderation	2	6.69	.00	C > W, S > W
Q30. Patriotism	2	4.81	.01	C > W, S > W
Q31. Disinterested and pure	2	3.19	.05	C > W
Q32. Persistence	2	3.4	.04	W > C
Q36. Trustworthiness	2	5.29	.01	W > C
Q38. Being conservative	2	3.26	.05	C > W

NOTE: C = Chinese; S = Southeast Asian; W = Western.

patriotism, disinterested and pure, persistence, trustworthiness, and being conservative). Multiple comparisons (Tukey post hoc) demonstrate that even with a small sample size, the Western students stand out from both the Chinese and the Southeast Asians in relation to values because they rated these values as less important (with the exception of persistence and trustworthiness, which the Western students rated higher than the Chinese students). Although confirming the CVS's face validity in contrasting Western and Eastern values, the Western group was made up of students from a variety of areas, including Eastern Europe, South Africa, Australia, and North America. Furthermore, these non-Asian students were already present in Taiwan, working in local jobs, unlike the Southeast Asian students, who applied and tested for the program while still overseas. This lack of similarity in background for the non-Asian respondents accounts for the wide range in their posting activity, indicated by the mean score falling between the Chinese and Southeast Asian groups. There were also only a few non-Asian students. For this reason, and to concentrate on differences between the two Asian groups, the non-Asian students were dropped from subsequent analysis.

Responses from the Chinese and Southeast Asian groups were combined and factor analysis performed, reducing the 40 survey questions to 12 factors (eigenvalues greater than 1), which accounted for 81% of the variance. Resulting factor scores were next combined for regression analysis, with ethnic group included as a dummy variable. The number of posts was held as dependent, and all 12 factors independent, along with the ethnic measure. Results produced a model with an *R*-squared value of .6, but this is inflated because of the number of variables included in the model. Adjusting for this inflation, the adjusted

*R*-squared value was .37, supplying a reasonable amount of variance explained by the model, especially given the small sample size.

Even with the limitations of our sample, regression results clearly showed ethnic group ( $B = 28.93, p = .01$ ) and a factor composed of survey questions Q26, Q34, and Q24 (moderation, adaptability, reciprocation) playing major roles in increasing posting activity ( $B = 9.44, p = .02$ ). The next highest variable to influence posting ( $B = -5.55, p = .16$ ) was a factor composed of the questions: Q38, Q12, Q20, and Q14 (being conservative, thrift, respect for tradition, cultural superiority), which combined to have a negative pressure on posting amount.

## DISCUSSION

In agreement with previous studies, Westerners and Asians in our sample demonstrated clear differences in posting behavior (Nisbett, 2003; St. Amant, 2002). This may reflect in part the fact that debate has been a central tenet of Western society since ancient Greek times. In contrast, Asian culture has no real history of debate; instead, the master-student relationship is emphasized, and thus Asian students are at a disadvantage in the online posting board used for class discussions.

But the CVS was not able to adequately differentiate between the two Asian groups to account for the large posting difference we saw. Because the CVS is a self-rating survey, students may respond in ways that project a persona of what is socially accepted as normal even though actual behavior may diverge. Furthermore, the idea of cultures holding universal values that are measurable and numerically scaleable is questionable. Investigations using these cultural dimensions have been the subject of some criticism (Baskerville, 2003; Osyerman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

Although the CVS did not strongly differentiate between the two groups, we did find some CVS variables that might explain why the Chinese students made the lowest number of posts. Values of moderation, adaptability, and reciprocation might encourage not doing too little or too much, adapting to requirements, and reciprocating actions from others. In addition, the values of being conservative, thrift, respect for tradition, and cultural superiority might also lead to fewer posts as they are in agreement with the practice of following established methods and not wasting anything.

Confucianism and the educational system of Taiwan might also play a role. Chinese attach great importance to the teacher as a master figure. Stern teachers are often admired and thought to prepare students



for good scores on entrance exams. To save face in this environment, students have been trained to minimize self expression while avoiding actions that could lead to criticism or embarrassment. Trying to protect face would likely cause greater hesitation among the Chinese students in their posting activity, and an educational system that does not promote discussion is likely to also affect participation. The students from Southeast Asia are brought up in cultures very much influenced by the Chinese culture, as made evident by our CVS results. However, differences in behavior were obvious in the actual classroom as well as on the posting board. We suggest that although Southeast Asians hold similar cultural values, they are less constrained by instructional traditions and the need to protect face and are therefore more active online in our sample.

One of the most active threads, begun by a Southeast Asian student, on purchasing a mobile phone and service in Taiwan, illustrates the difference in posting between Chinese and Southeast Asian students. The poster blamed a mobile phone shop owner for being misleading about international phone service charges. Responses by local Chinese students tended to smooth over any controversy by explaining that the issue was a misunderstanding and offering information on other service plans. This general pattern was often observed, with Chinese students responding to topics begun by Western or Southeast Asian students. In class, the instructor (also the research director) found this difference to be even more evident, with local Chinese students hesitant to initiate in-class discussions but willing to follow up on topics begun by classmates. Moreover, both Chinese and Southeast Asian students were happier to engage in small talk online, establishing context in the low-context medium, than were Western students, who were polite but remained more focused on the topic. Tu's (2001) study showed how Chinese students studying in the United States found it difficult to express themselves online because of the lack of context.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR MBA INSTRUCTION**

With increasing acceptance and use of online instruction in numerous cultural contexts, instructors should be aware of the diversity of their students and potential effects of culture on varying levels of participation. The results of our study suggest that simply redesigning course tools developed in the West according to generalized ideas about Asian cultural values is not enough. Students from cultures with supposedly similar values show significant variation in online behavior. Cultural

context and values, such as the importance of face, which play a role in the classroom, also appear to carry over to an online environment. Thus, instructors need to design their approach to allow for and encourage differences in participation and avoid rigid expectations about how students will respond to online work. They should provide the option of adding context to online communication through encouraging off-topic discussions and the exchange of such personal information as pictures and videos, which can help create an almost-face-to-face effect.

Further research is needed on the differences between Asian cultures, in particular, on how those differences affect the use of online systems of communication. Care should be taken in basing that research on past cultural theories, which may not take into account aspects of the modern classroom. How certain technologies can build upon or play against cultural predispositions is vital knowledge for individual teachers as well as program directors planning IMBA programs. The common use of the English language may make an international class of students appear to be on the same wavelength, but as this study has found, the meaning and use of teaching tools will be interpreted through each student's internalized value system.

## APPENDIX

### Chinese-Value Survey Results

<i>Chinese</i>	SD	SE	<i>Asian</i>	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Very important to me</i>	<i>Important to me</i>	<i>Somewhat important to me</i>	<i>Somewhat unimportant to me</i>	<i>Unimportant to me</i>	<i>Not at all important to me</i>
1. Filial piety	3.80	0.96	4.17	1.19	-1.01	.32						
2. Tolerance	3.48	0.71	3.67	0.65	-0.76	.45						
3. Humbleness	3.72	0.74	3.25	1.22	1.46	.15						
4. Rituals	2.92	0.81	3.45	0.93	-1.74	.09						
5. Kindness	4.00	0.82	4.00	0.74	0.00	1.00						
6. Solidarity	3.36	0.99	3.00	1.13	0.99	.33						
7. Self-cultivation	3.80	1.00	4.00	0.85	-0.60	.56						
8. Righteousness	3.68	0.99	3.92	0.90	-0.70	.49						

9. Noncompetitiveness	2.68	1.11	2.17	1.34	1.23	.23
10. Resist corruption	3.20	0.87	3.33	1.50	-0.34	.73
11. Sincerity	3.88	0.88	3.83	0.94	0.15	.88
12. Thrift	2.88	1.27	3.42	0.67	-1.37	.18
13. Patience	3.88	0.88	4.08	0.67	-0.71	.49
14. Cultural superiority	2.88	1.17	3.17	1.27	-0.68	.50
15. Prudence	3.48	1.00	3.92	0.67	-1.36	.18
16. Sense of shame	3.16	1.37	3.00	1.13	0.35	.73
17. Contentedness	3.20	0.96	3.33	1.23	-0.36	.72
18. Protect face	3.24	1.01	2.92	1.16	0.87	.39
19. Chastity in women	2.88	0.88	2.42	1.08	1.39	.17
20. Respect for tradition	2.88	1.13	3.00	1.13	-0.30	.76
21. Industry	3.44	1.16	3.83	0.58	-1.11	.28
22. Harmony	3.64	1.04	3.33	0.78	0.91	.37
23. Loyalty to superiors	3.24	0.93	3.67	0.65	-1.43	.16
24. Reciprocation	3.20	1.04	3.25	0.75	-0.15	.88
25. Education	4.08	0.81	4.25	0.97	-0.56	.58
26. Moderation	3.16	0.94	3.33	0.78	-0.55	.58
27. Relationships by status	2.92	1.19	2.67	0.78	0.67	.51
28. Benevolent	3.28	0.98	2.42	0.90	2.57	.01
29. Personal steadiness and stability	3.68	0.90	3.58	0.90	0.31	.76
30. Patriotism	3.08	1.00	3.00	0.60	0.26	.80
31. Disinterested and pure	3.04	1.21	2.58	1.08	1.11	.27
32. Persistence	3.04	1.02	3.08	0.51	-0.14	.89
33. Repayment of actions	2.76	1.01	2.67	1.15	0.25	.80
34. Adaptability	3.56	0.87	3.75	0.62	-0.68	.50
35. Wealth	3.32	1.07	4.08	0.67	-2.26	.03
36. Trustworthiness	3.88	0.88	4.33	0.49	-1.65	.11
37. Courtesy	3.44	0.92	3.50	0.52	-0.21	.83
38. Being conservative	2.84	1.14	2.75	1.06	0.23	.82
39. Intimate friend	3.84	1.11	3.83	0.58	0.02	.98
40. Few desires	3.12	1.20	3.25	0.97	-0.33	.75

SOURCE: Chinese Culture Connection (1987).

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