

A Comparative Look at Chinese and American Stereotypes

A focus group Study

Lin Zhu

University of Massachusetts Boston

Abstract

This paper employs a focus group approach to examine stereotypical perceptions of Chinese and U.S. Americans from each other's perspective. Eight focus groups were conducted involving 34 undergraduate participants from two universities in the U.S. and China. Group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes. Results showed that there were converging and diverging perceptions between Americans and Chinese. Specifically, both Americans and Chinese perceived Americans to be individualistic and independent, and Chinese to be family oriented and collectivistic. However, Americans and Chinese differed in the extent to which Americans are perceived as social and Chinese as quiet. Sources of people's stereotypical perception were also explored. Theoretical and practical implications of the study were discussed.

Keywords: *stereotype, focus group, intercultural contact, mass media*

Introduction

Perception is keenly related to communicative activities. Preexisting perception about a different culture sets expectations and guides our intercultural communication with people from that culture. While traditional stereotype research focuses on relationships between different racial or ethnic groups within a culture, more and more recent studies have examined people's perception of other national groups (e.g., Gries, Crowson, & Cai, 2011; Zhang, 2010). The current study employs focus group to elicit discussion about national stereotypes of Chinese people and U.S. Americans. In addition, the paper explores the sources and process of the formation of stereotypes.

China has become the U.S.' most important trading partner (Ito, 2009). Additionally, China has surpassed India to become the top country sending students to study in the U.S. With the increasing interdependence between the China and the U.S. in the areas of economy, national security, and culture, this study has practical implications for professionals as well as all individuals involved in interaction with people from another culture.

Stereotypes Defined

Lippman (1922) defined stereotypes as an oversimplified picture of the world that satisfied a need to see the world as more understandable and manageable than it really is. Human beings think in terms of categories. As Lakoff (1987) states, "There is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action and speech" (p. 5). The human mind is like a miser cognitively, and storing information in categories saves work and space (Lakoff, 1987). The formation of a stereotype is a by-product of

categorization of people (Macrae, 2001). As Rinehart (1963) explains, stereotypes are “sets of beliefs, usually stated as categorical generalizations, that people hold about the members of their own and other groups” (p. 137).

Stereotypes usually contain a list of attributes or features. The attributes can be about physical attributes, such as skin color or gender; they can also be attached to intelligence or personality. For example, Chinese immigrants in America have been stereotyped as intelligent, hard-working and having a tendency to interact with people from the same ethnic groups (Kao, 2000). A common stereotype of the English people is that they “keep a stiff upper lip” and display the attributes characteristic of the “British bulldog” (Goddard & Patterson, 2000:189). When two nations have different races, stereotypes become more distinct because of the difference in physical appearances. Kinder (1998) explains national stereotypes by saying that visible features such as skin color are associated with membership in social groupings and they activate personality traits that are associated with the category in the long-term memory.

Since stereotypes are categorical perceptions of a group of people, they are often oversimplified. Most contain only a few common attributes (Tajfel, 1981). However, despite being oversimplified, once stereotypes are formed, they are universally recognized and remain unchanged for a long time. Ethnic or national stereotypes are consistent and pervasive across different countries. Buchanan and Cantril (1953) investigated national stereotypes across eight countries and found that stereotypes of ethnic groups were approximately the same throughout the Western World. For example, people generally agreed that Russians were “domineering,” Americans were “practical,” Chinese were “hardworking,” and British were “self-controlled” (Guichard & Connolly, 1977:348).

Stereotypes and Intercultural Communication

Stereotypes have double-edged effects on effective intercultural communication. On the one hand, generalized characteristics that distinguish a particular culture or its members may be helpful to outside members, because these generalizations provide initial expectations that help reduce anxiety and uncertainty associated with intercultural communication (Beamer, 1992). On the other hand, stereotypes may hinder intercultural communication because they only reveal a part of the whole culture (Kealey & Ruben, 1983; McCaffery, 1986). Furthermore, because stereotypes are often evaluative, negative stereotypes may lead to misunderstanding and prejudice. Even positive stereotypes may hinder effective intercultural communication because “positive stereotypes may seem like compliments to some, but do not appear to be taken as such by those targeted by the stereotypes” (Czopp, 2008:419).

Intercultural communication also affects the formation of stereotypes. There are two types of intercultural communication: mass media consumption, or mediated intercultural communication, and interpersonal intercultural communication. Whereas mediated intercultural communication is a major mechanism through which individuals acquire cultural stereotypes (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976, 1994; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980, 1994; Lippman, 1922), interpersonal intercultural communication has been considered as instrumental in reducing stereotypes (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Wilner, Walkley, & Cook, 1952; Works, 1961).

Chinese and American Stereotypes and Intergroup Relationship

Stereotypes are not only descriptive but also evaluative. Researchers have found that when stereotypes are used to describe a group to which one belongs, the ingroup, they contain attributes that glorify that ingroup; when stereotypes are employed to depict a group to which one does not belong, the outgroup, they tend to be denigrating toward that group (Nardo, Voils, & Monteith, 2001; Wetherell, 1996). Therefore, stereotypes are often related to prejudice and discrimination (Dong & Murrillo, 2007; Rinehart, 1963).

The valence of stereotypes is affected by intergroup relationships. Sherif (1962) observed that if two groups are engaged in competitive relations, stereotypes of each other tend to be negative. He proposed the model of realistic conflict to conceptualize this intergroup prejudice resulted from competition (Sherif, 1962; 1966). The theory of realistic conflict helps to explain the change of stereotypes of ethnic minority groups within a nation or across different nations. For example, in the mid-20th century, Hispanic descendants were perceived by Americans as “respectful, hard-working, musical, and interested in mechanical training” (Niemann, 2001:56). However, with increasing conflicts between Hispanic immigrants and local Americans, Latino immigrants are seen as “a parasite on society, feeding off food stamps, and living on welfare” (Chavez, 1993:101).

In the U.S., stereotypes of Chinese also reflect the current increasing economic interdependence between the two nations as well as Americans' fear for China's rising economic power. One prevalent image is the model minority stereotype. Although employed by the media to refer to Asian Americans in general (Kawai, 2005; Lee & Joo, 2005; Shim, 1998; Taylor, Landreth, & Bang, 2005; Wong, Nagasawa & Lin, 1998), the stereotype is often used to refer to Chinese specifically. The model minority stereotype describes Asian Americans as highly affluent, well educated, professional, and technologically skilled (Paek & Shah, 2003). However, some scholars argue that this seemingly positive image of Asian Americans is just the benign version of the Yellow Peril, a negative stereotype resulting from fear of and distaste for early Asian immigrants in the U.S. (Okihiro, 1994; Shim, 1998).

In the Chinese entertainment media, portrayals of Americans include positive depictions of Americans as business partners, friends, and even lovers. Many American characters in Chinese popular TV dramas are portrayed as free-spirited, modern, and most importantly, interested in Chinese culture. However, because China is a homogenous society in terms of race, portrayals of Americans are very rare. Most Chinese still rely on Hollywood movies for depictions of Americans.

Despite growing interest in the topic of stereotypes of Chinese and Americans, little is known as to the specific national stereotypes from each other's perspectives and the sources of these stereotypes. The current research is conducted to find out answers to the following questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese people view U.S. Americans?

RQ2: How do American people view Chinese?

RQ3: What factors are important to the formation of national stereotypes of Chinese and Americans?

Method

An ethnographic approach — focus group approach — is employed in the current study. As Spradley (1979) stated, the purpose of focus group research is not to reach quantitative conclusions, but to describe a culture. Focus groups are appropriate for use when little is known about a topic and no presumptions can be reasonably formed. The rationale behind using focus groups for the current study is that there is insufficient literature to determine existing stereotypes and formulate hypotheses about Chinese and American stereotypes. Focus groups were preferred to in-depth interviews in this study because a focus group can create a social atmosphere for people to talk about their stereotypes and prejudices more naturally. This section describes the participants, procedure, and the analysis used in the study.

Procedure

For this study eight focus groups were conducted with college students as participants. Previous research has used similar samples because researchers either believe that there are minor differences held by different groups of people (Rinehart, 1963), or that the college population often plays the role of an opinion leader in social change (Maykovich, 1972). Hetsroni & Tukachinsky (2006) argue that the

advantage of using student participants is that it increases internal validity by eliminating alternative interpretations of the results based on socio-educational factors.

American born non-Chinese-Americans were recruited from a large Southern university in the U.S., and Chinese born Chinese were recruited from a major university in Beijing. Sixteen American participants volunteered for the study, and 18 Chinese students volunteered after learning about the research. The American sample consisted of 8 females and 8 males. There were 4 African Americans, 10 Caucasians and 2 non-Chinese Asian-Americans. In the Chinese sample, there were 10 females and 8 males. They were all from the Han ethnic group, the dominant ethnic group in China. The groups were not considered big in size. Templeton (1994) argued for using smaller focus groups (from 3 to 8 people) if the purpose is to gain in-depth insights. Brown (1999) also stated that a focus group should consist of 4 to 12 participants if the group is homogeneous. Most participating college students had not had real and meaningful relationships with people from the other nation.

In American groups, two trained moderators (one White American, one White European) were asked to host the four focus groups. No major differences in the content of discussion were found between groups moderated by different researchers. For Chinese groups, a trained Chinese moderator hosted all four sessions.

Open-ended questions in both Chinese and English were prepared as a guideline for all moderators in both countries. The questions are comparable in content, but in the United States, moderators mainly asked questions about Chinese and sources of information about China; while in China, the moderator mainly asked questions about Americans and sources of information about America.

Analysis

Each focus group was recorded with digital recorder or video camera. After each focus group, the audiotape/videotape was analyzed. The audiotapes and videotapes were transcribed with the help of moderators, and Chinese focus group audiotapes were transcribed and translated to English. Data were analyzed through identifying recurring themes. Topics or concepts across different focus groups were identified and supporting statements from different participants were put together.

Results

This section reports the five recurring themes regarding stereotypes and the sources of stereotypes. Each theme is followed by explanations of the theme and quotes from the participants across different focus groups.

1. Independent, Low Power-Distance Americans vs. Family-Oriented, High Power-Distance Chinese: Convergence of Perceptions

Both American and Chinese participants felt that Chinese and Americans have different family values. This topic occurred in 7 focus groups (four American groups and three Chinese groups). Many Chinese participants said that Chinese are very respectful towards their parents or the elderly. Chinese focus group members also noted that American children do not respect their parents in the same way Chinese do. For example, one Chinese participant said, "They(Americans) would call parents by their first names." Another Chinese focus group member said, "Chinese would never call their parents' names. If they do, it's not showing respect and piety." One Chinese member used a foreign teacher in her high school as an example:

Another thing about Americans is that they do not attach the same amount of importance to family. She (referring to her American teacher) would flatly say that her mother was selfish because her family had money but wouldn't buy her a car for her birthday... I think in America, people are more independent and they could make more emotion-free judgment of

their parents, but to a Chinese like me, at least I wouldn't make such harsh comment about my mom.

Among American participants, there was an agreement that Chinese are more family-oriented. Phrases such as “family-oriented” and “attach a lot of importance to family” were used to describe Chinese by all American focus groups. For example, one American participant said, “They really put a lot of efforts on sacrificing for the good of family, for the family honor or the family name.”

Even though focus group members from both countries agreed that Chinese people attach more importance to family than Americans do, they felt there are social and cultural contexts for different behaviors and that the Chinese family system is not necessarily better than the American system. Focus group participants believed there is a more equal relationship between parents and children in America. American participants noted that Chinese parents tend to be very strict and children “are not allowed to have freedom.” Chinese participants felt that American parents and children are more like friends and there is more “equal communication.” For example, one Chinese participant said, “American kids wouldn't be beaten up (by their parents).” Another Chinese focus group member said,

I don't think Chinese necessarily love children more than Americans do. It's just different forms of love. Chinese parents take care of every aspect of their children's life. Of course, it's not a bad thing. It helps to establish a strong relationship between parents and children. American parents might not center around their children like Chinese parents do, because they have their own work and life, but children grow more independent this way.

One American participant rationalized why Chinese take care of their parents while Americans do not when they are old:

We can take care of ourselves. Here (meaning America) we can leave our parents in the nursing home, but they (meaning Chinese) are bound to take care of them. It's more like an obligation. For us, it's like “well, she'll be taken care of, she'll have friends of her age and the house she needs...”

Another American participant observed that “taking care of parents” was more like a “trade-off” in Chinese culture. Some American focus groups argued that the difference in family values was due to the individualism and collectivism distinction. For example, one American participant said, “I remember learning that America is more individual-oriented and China, or Asia, is more collective-oriented. They work for the whole, for the team.” Another American participant said, “They are more collectivistic... They concentrate on the society as a whole rather than individuals and sacrifice what they have to survive.”

Interestingly, even though Chinese participants agreed that Chinese are more family-oriented compared with Americans, they did not associate family with a collective group. Chinese participants actually had a distaste for “collectivism” and they felt that collectivistic values are outdated. For example, one participant said, “I think of collectivism as belonging to the beginning of China's liberation (1950s). Since the market economy was implemented (in the 1980s), China is moving towards an individualistic society.” Another Chinese participant agreed, “The concept of ‘sacrificing individuals for the benefit of the group’ is not realistic. It's too radical and unnecessary.” Chinese participants were happy to see that more emphasis was placed on individuality in China. One Chinese student said that this showed the progress of Chinese society.

2. Social Americans vs. Quiet Chinese? Divergence of Perceptions

American participants generally agreed with the prevailing stereotype of Chinese as “quiet” and Americans as “social.” All four American focus groups described Chinese as “quiet,” “not outgoing,” and “less social.” In comparison, American participants perceived Americans (the ingroup) as social and outgoing. One American participant commented, “(Americans are) partiers. We like to have our fun.” She

used the word “boring” to refer to Chinese because “they are so quiet.” The word *quiet* is a neutral word, but in this context she assigned a negative connotation to the word *quiet*.

Furthermore, American focus group members observed that Chinese students like to form cliques and “they are not so quiet within their own group.” One American participant said, “They (Chinese) are mostly quiet, unless you see them in numbers. They stand outside the buildings, kind of group up. They seem to group up more than other races.”

However, the distinction of “social” and “quiet” did not appear in Chinese focus group discussions. Chinese participants believed that Americans are quite the opposite of being social. One Chinese participant used a term “Americanism” to describe some Americans who are “a little arrogant, and a little cold and distant. Maybe it's because they think of their race as superior or something.” Another Chinese participant also talked about his interaction with some Americans in China, “They would sit face to face with you but wouldn't usually talk to you. They seem standoffish. Sometimes they have (their) Walkman with them and (they) put on their earphones. They isolate themselves. I feel that's strange.”

In contrast to the “social Americans” and “quiet Chinese” distinction observed by the Americans, Chinese participants believed that the distinction of “open Americans” and “reserved” or “traditional” Chinese better captures the difference between the two groups in terms of social life. All four Chinese groups described Americans as *open*. When the moderator asked participants to define the word *open*, participants used terms such as “uninhibited in personality,” “sexual openness,” and “outgoing.” For example, a female participant talked about an American teacher she had in high school, “I feel that he was very open. He could talk about anything with me, including his crush for a Chinese girl. He did not have inhibitions.”

Another Chinese participant described the difference between Chinese and Americans in dealing with relationships in the following statements:

Chinese are more reserved. For example, if a Chinese has feelings for someone, he/she's probably going to think very carefully (before acting on these feelings). He/she will not express these feelings whenever he/she wants. He/she would think of the consequences for him/her and how expressing feelings would affect his/her future. But Americans are probably less reserved. I like you and I want you to know my feelings and to feel in the same way, so I say it. It's as simple as that.

According to three Chinese focus groups, Americans are also uninhibited in having sexual relationships. One Chinese participant stated:

They think that if two people like each other, they could naturally have a (sexual) relationship. They have one-night stands often... because Americans seem to always go to bars. Maybe their work is too stressful and they think it's a relief (to have sex with others)... I believe they might even have affairs after they get married. They have a different perspective. They feel it's a need.

The speaker is not the only Chinese participant who tried to avoid using the word *sex*. Instead, the phrase “having a relationship” often substitutes for “having sex.” *Sex* is such a taboo topic in China that merely mentioning it is embarrassing or uncomfortable for young college students. Many Chinese participants attributed the difference — Americans being open and Chinese being reserved — to different education, both from school and from parents. One Chinese participant noted, “In China, if you have boyfriends or girlfriends at the age of 12 or 13, your parents would be really mad (at you). But American parents wouldn't be like that. They would probably be like, ‘Congratulations. You're a grown-up now.’” Another Chinese participant also said:

When I was in high school, my teachers did not teach about sex, and would skip textbook chapters related to human body by ourselves. But American schools, I heard, would have education on sex from grade school and schools might even give out condoms. American

parents would openly discuss sex with their children. They do not consider sex as a taboo topic.

Overall, both Chinese and American focus groups observed differences in sociality between Chinese and Americans, but the emphases they placed are clearly different: American participants focused on overt behaviors, whereas Chinese students emphasized the differences in underlying values.

3. Hard-Working Chinese or Threatening Chinese?

According to American participants, Chinese are “hard-working” whereas Americans are “lazy.” The perception of Chinese as being hard-working occurred in all four American focus groups. Two American participants also used “lazy” to describe Americans. Three American participants said that they saw Chinese “studying all the time.” One American participant described his Chinese friend in the following statements, “I have a Chinese friend. I asked him whether he's got a girlfriend. He's like, no, I have project and project and project.” One American focus group also noticed that Chinese, or Asian-Americans, worked hard to assimilate into American culture. One participant from this group said:

I would agree with the hardworking part. Chinese and Asian people try harder than other immigrants to adapt to American society. It seems Asian people attempt quicker and harder to learn to speak English...they seem to try to mesh with Americans and American culture more than other immigrants do.

However, American participants did not necessarily perceive hardworking as a valuable attribute when it is applied to Chinese — an outgroup. One American participant admitted that Americans are “lazy,” but she further explained that Americans are lazy because “We must have our fun.” She said this with certain pride. Another participant echoed her attitude:

It seems that (Chinese) people always have a mission, (and) have a goal, something in front of them. “I have to do this, I need to do that, then I have to go to work.” In America, it seems that people are more relaxed, you have a little bit more freedom, because obviously, it's (China) a communist country.

Furthermore, hardworking is also associated with other qualities that are almost synonymous to boring. For example, one American participant said:

They all look the same way. It's like robots. They all go to the same factory, (wear) the same shirt... it's not like anybody is strolling around. They are all doing something. There is not a moment that they are partying at all. They are all on a mission or something.

Analysis of focus group discussion revealed that consciously or subconsciously, American participants see the hardworking Chinese as threatening. One American participant used the word “sneaky” to describe how Chinese outsmart Americans at work. Another American participant commented:

They are passive aggressive, kinda. They lean back, but as soon as they see something, they turn on. It's like a switch. They are very conscious of their surroundings. The moment they see an opportunity to attack, capture, they just go.

4. The Role of Mass Media in Forming Stereotypes

Focus groups discussed the role of mass media on the formation of stereotypes. Participants used mass media to form many of their ideas about *others*, from physical appearance to personality. Among American groups, *kung fu* movies seem to have the biggest influence among all types of media on Americans' perceptions of Chinese. One American participant said that she used to think that all Chinese could fight. Another American participant described the influence of *kung fu* movies by saying:

I would have to say kung fu movies (are the biggest influence). I know that was not how people actually are in those types of settings. Those are pretty much ridiculous, but I kind of take it from there...And then get a glimpse of this and that.

Three *Kung fu* movies were mentioned as especially influential: *Kung Fu Hustle*, *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon*, and *Rush Hour*. From these *kung fu* movies, American participants noticed the stereotypical differences between Chinese and Americans. For example, one American group member described Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker in *Rush Hour*, “Chris is a funny guy, and Jackie Chan is more serious...they make a good combination.”

In Chinese focus groups, mass media also have great influence on Chinese participants' perceptions of Americans. Some Chinese participants mentioned that they learned about the American way of living from movies and television shows while they learn about politics from the news media. One Chinese participant said, “I like movies about common people's life. We say ‘art is an elevated representation of reality, and it comes from life.’ Therefore, there must be some truth in the movies about America. Of course, there must be some distortion and exaggeration.” Another Chinese participant answered the question of “sources of information for learning about Americans” by saying,

To me, it's mainly Hollywood movies (that have influenced me). I feel that America is using Hollywood movies to promote its image to the outside world. They advertise the American way of life. The movies attract people to learn more about America. Even though I don't know how accurate they are, I am affected, so are other Chinese.

Even though Hollywood movies as a whole are important sources of information, Chinese participants did not specify names of movies. Instead, several television shows were mentioned: *Friends*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Gray's Anatomy*, and especially *Prison Break*. One Chinese participant specifically talked about how *Prison Break* depicted a different kind of relationship in America and helped him understand that brotherly love, father-daughter attachment, and husband-wife devotion exist in America. He believed that the television depictions were true to a certain degree. He said:

...art is an abstract reflection of life, but art comes from life. There must be some similarity (in reality with what is depicted on television). At least it shows that American culture encourages brotherly love...previous media are misleading in saying that Americans are more confrontational and brothers are unlike Chinese brothers who are always loving to each other.

Even though both Chinese and American participants relied on mass media for perceiving each other, they were aware that such information is not sufficient and they were critical of the role mass media play. Two American focus groups talked about how American TV made fun of different ethnic groups by using stereotypes. One American focus group discussed the potential damage TV shows could do to other people. One member from this group commented:

I think a lot of what we see as making fun of is just reinforcement of stereotypes, and that's why what we see on TV is pretty consistent. It doesn't show any different view on the Chinese culture. It's always one common outlook, stereotype.

This focus group also pointed out that mass media failed as a source of information about other ethnic groups. One of its members said, “I think they failed in the fact that we don't know anything about their culture. We know from the movies and fictional shows, but we don't really know how they actually live.”

Chinese focus groups also criticized mass media as an inaccurate information source and they realized that it was important to get all sources of information, especially for political issues. They understood that getting information from the Chinese media alone is not enough. For example, one Chinese participant said, “I found that as to political issues, different countries always defend their own positions. They

sometimes only give partial information. You have to get all sources to get a fuller understanding.” Another Chinese participant from a different focus group said,

Hollywood movies influence my understanding of American life. In politics, it's my father who appreciates the American system. He feels that Chinese television programs are not very free. For example, Chinese news would not even show the front image of the Taiwan 'president,' and this intentional concealment is really unnecessary.

One Chinese student used YouTube regularly for entertainment and also for learning about Americans (the study was conducted before YouTube was banned in China), because she felt that “Chinese media do not provide accurate information.”

5. Effects of Personal Contact on Formation of Stereotypes

Most of American participants' understanding of Chinese came from observing Asian-Americans. Three American participants specifically said that they could not distinguish Chinese(-Americans) from other Asian people, which is consistent with what Kawai (2005) observed, “Racial stereotypes of the yellow race do not distinguish yellows here from yellows there — Asian Americans from Asians, Chinese from Japanese, or Koreans from Vietnamese” (p.111). Therefore, even though many American participants talked about interacting with Chinese, it is very likely they were referring to Asian-Americans.

College classrooms, Chinese restaurants, donut shops, and gas stations were cited as settings where Americans interact with Chinese or Asians, but these places do not provide an appropriate environment for prolonged social interaction. In fact, none of the American participants had developed close relationships with Chinese or had been engaged in meaningful relationships with Chinese. However, despite the limited interaction, personal contact still has a significant influence on perception of Chinese. Results of the focus groups in both China and America suggest that people are ready to evaluate an outgroup based on their limited contact with that group.

Many American group members based their perceptions of Chinese on their previous contact with Asian Americans. For example, one American participant said, “my neighbors are Chinese. They have two or three families living together. They all worked. Very family-oriented in coming together to help each other or getting established.” Another American participant from another focus group said, “I grew up in a small town. Chinese people in my neighborhood always owned small grocery stores, so I assumed that Chinese people were all rich.” Another American participant felt that Chinese were ALL soft-spoken because he had a professor before (he didn't mention whether the professor was from China or other Asian countries) and he observed, “She's really soft-spoken. A lot of students made fun of her and laughed at her. She wouldn't do anything.”

Participants used these insignificant anecdotes to infer characteristics of Chinese. In addition, contact with Chinese does not necessarily reduce negative stereotypes or inaccurate generalization. One American participant who used to travel to China summarized his experience in the following statements:

I lived in Guangzhou. And basically, it's like you are living in a communist country. You just feel that you have to stick with the tour guide. You can't ask too many questions to the people staying there. You can't get too involved with what's going on. You just do the sightseeing and buy a souvenir and get in the car and go back. You can't interact with people. It's not like going to Europe, you can interact with people. It's not like that at all. You just go to the Great Wall and the Square. You only interact with the tour guide. People there don't speak English at all. It's very tight. You don't get the experience as in other countries of interacting with people.

For many Chinese participants, the only exposure to Americans is through interacting with their foreign teachers, or *waijiao* — a term that has been used specifically for non-Chinese who teach English in China. One Chinese participant said, “The only American I had contact with was my foreign teacher in high school. I feel Americans are not shy, especially those who have the courage to come to China are not

shy.” Another Chinese participant believed that Americans are very responsible in work and serious about maintaining social order. She said,

In my senior high I had a foreign teacher. She was always on time. The first time I was a bit late and I felt ashamed. I was never late again. Also, when they wait for buses, (they always wait on line)... they always follow rules. They are unlike Chinese who can bend the rules for acquaintances or grant favors and conveniences (to relatives and friends).

When media depiction conflicts with perceptions from personal contact, media stereotypes are often discarded or modified. For example, when Chinese participants talked about Americans being more casual about “sexual relationships,” one participant said,

... in Sex and the City, Americans are very casual, but if you talk to Americans, they would tell you that most Americans are not like that, not even like what is depicted in the Friends show. I think the reality is probably somewhere in between: Americans are more casual in sex than Chinese, but less so than depicted in movies.

Another Chinese participant recalled his visit to America and how a very important politician showed up at his son's parental meeting despite his busy schedule. The participant thus concluded, “I feel that Americans do attach importance to education, unlike what I heard before (from the mass media): American parents leave (the responsibility of) educating children (to school).”

Discussion

Overall, the focus group analysis revealed convergent and divergent views regarding perceptions of American and Chinese among participants from the two cultures. First, there were some discrepancies in the way people view themselves and an outgroup view them. For example, American participants agreed that compared with Chinese they are more “social” and they like to have fun, but Chinese participants did not view Americans as more social than Chinese. On the other hand, some stereotypes are consistent among ingroup and outgroup members. For example, both Americans and Chinese noted that Americans are more independent, whereas Chinese are more family-oriented.

Focus group members also demonstrated tendencies for ingroup enhancement and outgroup denigration. For example, American participants noted that Chinese are boring and quiet whereas Americans are fun. Chinese participants observed that Americans are casual about sex. Even seemingly positive stereotypes assume negative connotations when they are used to describe an outgroup. For example, American participants all agreed that Chinese participants are hard-working and compared with Chinese, Americans are “lazy.” On the surface, American participants used a positive word — hardworking — to describe an outgroup, and a negative word — laziness — to refer to their ingroup. However, participants also associated “laziness” with the ability to have fun and enjoy life, and “hard-working” with negative words such as “monotony” and “boring.” Furthermore, hardworking seems to be a threatening trait for American participants, because Chinese are “passive aggressive,” and once they “they see an opportunity to attack, capture, they just go.” Just as Kawai (2005) explains, “people of Asian descent become the model minority when they are depicted to do better than other racial minority groups, whereas they become the yellow peril when they are described to outdo White Americans” (p.115). Considering the rise of China's economic power and media portrayal of China as a competitor and potential threat to the U.S., this kind of mentality is understandable.

Results from this study are also consistent with previous research on cross-cultural differences (e.g., Hofstede, 1980). Even though most participants did not use exact terms, they observed the cultural differences between the U.S. and China in individualism/collectivism and power distance. Participants noted that Chinese are more collectivistic in that they attach more importance to family and other collectives, and Americans are more independent or individual-focused. In addition, American society is low in power distance compared with the Chinese society. When discussing family relationships,

Americans are more ready to criticize their parents. In contrast, Chinese are more respectful to seniors such as parents. Filial piety, or absolute respect for parents, is a concept mentioned by more than one Chinese participant.

Participants from both cultural groups commented on the important role of personal contact and mass media in forming perceptions of the other group. Even though participants acknowledged that mass media portrayals are not accurate, it seems that they used these depictions to form the basis of stereotypes, especially in the absence of personal contact with the other culture. Previous intercultural training literature has argued that movies simulate natural observation process that happens when one encounters other cultures, so the use of movies have been recommended for intercultural learning (e.g., Cardon, 2010; Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley, & Riedel, 2006; Verluyten, 2007). Unfortunately, most participants have not had any meaningful interaction with members from the other group, and the superficial interaction they had often reinforced their preexisting perceptions of each other. This finding has implications for intercultural training programs. It indicates that merely pairing individuals from different cultures and engage them in superficial interactions may not be effective in reducing stereotypes and promoting mutual understanding.

Finally, previous literature has found that Americans are stereotyped to be materialistic, romantic, professional, promiscuous, aggressive, and wasteful, and Asian Americans to be deceitful and shrewd (Maykovich, 1972; Ornatowski, 1996; Shah, 2003; Willnat, Zhou, & Hao, 1997). Findings from this study extended previous literature on outgroup stereotypes. There is a high level of agreement among American focus groups to perceive Chinese as hardworking, quiet, obedient, shy, and formal; while Chinese perceived Americans as open (both socially and sexually), friendly, outgoing, adventurous, independent, and self-centered. Furthermore, American participants also commented on their ingroup members to be lazy, social, and fun-loving, while Chinese perceived themselves to be responsible compared with Americans.

This study has limitations. A convenience sample was employed and the sample size is small. The extent to which findings from the study can be generalized to all college students is questionable. Second, the focus group discussions in both countries followed a predetermined list of questions. These questions were created by the researchers and they are likely to be susceptible to researchers' preexisting assumptions and bias. Third, even though focus groups provide a suitable setting for discussion, it is possible that social desirability or other factors prevented participants from expressing negative stereotypes or attitudes freely. Finally, focus group participants are not always aware of the source of their stereotypes. Although participants in this study attributed the formation of their stereotypes to mass media and intercultural contact, this may very well be their bias. Future research, especially experimental studies and longitudinal research, should reexamine results from the current study.

In conclusion, this study used a focus group approach to gain in-depth understanding of stereotypes of Americans and Chinese from each other's perspective. The findings of the study contribute to the ongoing research of national stereotypes of Americans and Chinese, and the sources of such stereotypes. The ethnographic approach offers insights that cannot be gained through quantitative methods. The findings from this study should encourage continued investigation of the role of stereotypes in intercultural communication between Americans and Chinese.

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Appendix A: Focus group guideline

1. Could you please describe a typical Chinese/American?
2. What are some characteristics of Chinese/American concerning their behavior and personality?
3. How did you get your ideas about Chinese/Americans? From the Internet, TV, books, school, or parents or friends?
4. Are Chinese different from Americans? In what ways are they different or similar? Please give me some examples.
5. Are American culture and Chinese culture different/similar? In what ways? Please use examples.
6. You have a friend who's going to China/America. What advice would you give him/her concerning interacting with the Chinese/Americans?
7. If you have to use five words or phrases or sentences to sum up Chinese/American characteristics, what are they?

About the Author

Lin Zhu (Ph.D., University of Maryland, 2012) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Boston where she specializes in Intercultural Communication and Negotiation and Conflict Management. She has published in journals such as *Communication Research*, *Journal of International Communication*, and *China Media Research*.

Author's Address

Dr. Liu (Julie) Zhu
 Communication Department
 University of Massachusetts Boston
 Boston, MA 02125
 Office: Wheatley Building 06-86
 USA
 Phone: 617-287-3144
 Email: lin.zhu@umb.edu