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Paper citation:

Abstract:
This study examined interview accounts of intergenerational communication from twenty younger

adults (M age = 24.05; Age range: 19 to 33) and thirteen older adults (M age = 67.10; Age range: 62 to

72) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed into

Chinese. Meaningful descriptions of intergenerational communication were then translated to English.

Using an emergent theme analysis approach, we identified themes that fell into three broad areas: 1)

positive intergenerational communication behaviors, 2) negative intergenerational behaviors, and 3)

ideal intergenerational communication. The analysis also revealed that some themes of the two age

groups were congruent (e.g., the mutual endorsement of filial piety), while others were incongruent

with each other (e.g., disagreement on perceptions on equality and superiority). Themes are compared

to descriptions of intergenerational communication found in research within Western cultures. Themes

are also discussed in relation to cross-cultural intergenerational research, the Communication

Predicament of Aging model, and the changing Chinese economic and political system.

Text of paper:

Harmonies and Tensions in Chinese Intergenerational Communication: Younger and Older

Adults' Accounts

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As communication and aging research has become more popular due to the demographic increase in the older population and humanistic concerns for the psychological well-being of these individuals, studies on intergenerational communication have increased (Cai, Giles, & Noels, 1998; Giles, Harwood, Pierson, Clément, & Fox, 1998; Giles, Liang, Noels, & McCann, 1999; Noels, Giles, Gallois, & Ng, 1999). The Communicative Predicament of Aging (CPA) model (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986) has provided the theoretical framework for much of the intergenerational communication research. This model, grounded in Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991), outlines how the recognition of age cues by a younger communicator may prompt negative age stereotypes of incompetence and dependence. These stereotypes, in turn, suggest the need for speech accommodations on the part of the younger communicator (e.g., slow speech, loud speech, and simplified vocabulary) to help the older person to process the talk. Unfortunately, according to the CPA model, this over-accommodation to negative age stereotypes may create a negative feedback cycle for older individuals, leading to loss of self-esteem, emotional decline, and reinforcement of age stereotypical behaviors.

Research has not only supported the basic tenets of the CPA model (see Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995; Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995), but has extended the model to encompass the operation of positive as well as negative age stereotypes (Hummert, 1994; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Henry, 1998), and potentially harmful and unsatisfactory old-to-young and young-to-old communication

(Harwood, McKee, & Lin, 2000; Williams & Giles, 1996). The majority of the research on intergenerational communication, however, has focused on the U.S. and other Western cultures (e.g., Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Germany). Examination has only recently been extended to Eastern cultures (see Giles et al., 1999). This study adds to the growing body of research on intergenerational communication in Eastern cultures, focusing on perceptions of intergenerational communication held by old and young adults in the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Giles et al. (1999) suggest that intergenerational communication may be different in the East than in the West due to the Confucian principle of filial piety held by people in Eastern cultures. *Xiao* (孝; "filial piety"), which is the belief that older adults should be respected and supported, is a classic Chinese value that remains influential among Chinese people all over the world (Chow, 1991, 1999; Levy & Langer, 1994; Ng, Liu, Weatherall, & Loong, 1997).

Filial piety's power derives partly from its consistency with the four major Confucian principles guiding Chinese people's behaviors. According to Yum (1988), these include 1) *Ren* (仁; "humanism"), 2) *Yi* (仪; "righteousness"), 3) *Li* (礼; "propriety"), and 4) *Chong* (聪; "wisdom"). At the micro level, filial piety is a family-oriented ethical rule that encompasses behaviors varying from honoring ancestors, obeying, and respecting parents to providing financial support for parents (see Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). At the macro level, filial piety has a broader meaning: older adults have, by virtue of their age, a higher social status than younger people. This status designates older persons as the objects of respect in both family and society. In this regard, the norm of filial piety guides young adults' communication behaviors toward older individuals and older individuals' expectations of young people (Chow, 1999).

Some analytical and field studies have indicated that as a result of the norm of filial piety, aging is seen as positive and that older adults' experiences and knowledge are valued (e.g., Nagasawa, 1980;

Sher, 1984). Levy and Langer's (1994) experimental study revealed that filial piety played an additional positive role in beliefs about aging, with Chinese participants having more positive attitudes than Americans. In addition, they found a positive correlation between the participants' positive views of aging and their memory performance, as well as that the Chinese older participants had superior memory performance to that of the Americans.

Though research directly examining age stereotypes and intergenerational communication in the PRC is rare, several researchers have studied Chinese communities in other areas, for example, Hong Kong and New Zealand (Chow, 1999; Ng, Liu, Loong, & Weatherall, 1999). Using modified instruments generated in the West, Chow's study of the role and status of older persons in Hong Kong indicated that, in the modern era, older adults are no longer regarded as heads of the household and are no longer entrusted with the responsibility to make final decisions. In other words, though the traditional values of filial piety are still revered and endorsed, they have little bearing on older adults' roles and status. Chow's study also revealed that while older adults' contributions to their households (i.e., helping with the household chores and nurturing grandchildren) are highly valued, older adults as a group are also perceived negatively (e.g., as stubborn, dependent, and isolated). Using multiple methods, Ng and his associates (1997,1999) have provided insightful perspectives on intergenerational communication among the Chinese community in New Zealand. Their findings revealed that: 1) filial piety is strongly respected; 2) Chinese New Zealanders hold more positive views of older adults than European New Zealanders; and 3) mutual accommodation in intergenerational communication is the ideal.

Recently, several other attempts have been made in the area of cross-cultural communication and aging research to study age stereotypes and intergenerational communication in Pacific Rim cultures (see Cai, Giles, & Noels, 1998; Giles et al., 1998; Giles et al., 1999; Williams et al., 1997).

Regardless of their original claims or beliefs about the positive nature of Chinese intergenerational communication, the findings from these studies have portrayed a different picture.

> Using scales derived from previous studies on stereotypes, aging, and intergroup processes (i.e., Levin, 1988; Sanders & Pittman, 1988), Giles et al. (1998) found that stereotypes towards older adults were more positive in California than in Hong Kong. In another cross-cultural study, Williams et al. (1997) used items drawn from Williams and Giles (1996) that reflected accommodative and nonaccommodative intergenerational conversations. They then asked young people in both Western (Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand) and Eastern nations (Philippines, Hong Kong, The PRC, South Korea, and Japan) to assess the extent to which these items applied to their interactions with non-family elders. Williams et al. (1997) found that young adults in the Eastern nations were less likely to agree that older adults were accommodative to younger adults than those in the Western nations, and that younger adults in Hong Kong and China expressed this view most strongly. Young adults in the Eastern nations were also less likely than those from Western nations to view their communication with older adults as generally positive and satisfying.

Cai et al. (1998) examined perceptions of intergenerational communication in the PRC from older adults' perspective. Using items on accommodative and non-accommodative intergenerational conversations from Williams and Giles (1996), Cai and her colleagues found that older adults from the PRC perceived their peers to be more nonaccommodative than younger persons. They also found that the older respondents viewed young family members as more accommodative than young people from outside the family revealing the complexity of intergenerational communication in the Chinese context.

While these cross-cultural studies constitute important contributions to intergenerational communication research, each has employed survey items generated in prior research within Western cultures. In addition, these items have been used to measure Eastern cultures through quantitative hypothesis-testing procedures. These measures and procedures may not be culturally appropriate or sensitive enough to capture the complexities of intergenerational communication in the PRC where little research has been done. As a result, this study used interviews with older and younger people in the PRC to gather accounts of intergenerational communication, which were then analyzed for themes. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the positive intergenerational communication behaviors of older and younger adults as perceived by the interviewees?

2. What are the negative intergenerational communication behaviors of older and younger adults as perceived by the interviewees?

3. What behaviors constitute ideal intergenerational communication from the perspective of the interviewees?

Method

Participants

Twenty younger participants (M age = 24.05; Age range: 19 to 33) and thirteen older adults (M age = 67.10; Age range: 62 to 72) were interviewed in the summer of 1999 in the PRC. The younger interviewees were from a small-sized Chinese vocational college (13 students and 7 young faculty and staff members). The college is located in a small coastal city, and younger participants were either residing in the city or from the local rural areas. The mean education for these participants was 13.9 years (SD = 1.71).

The older interviewees were recruited from a local community. They were either residing in a medium-sized city or a small town in China. All of the older adults were living in independent-living apartment complexes. Their years of education varied from basic education to college level (M = 10.20; SD = 4.54).

Data Collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with individual participants. The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to approximately an hour. Two Chinese interviewers who spoke local dialects and standard

Chinese conducted the interviews separately. They chose which to speak depending on the preference

of each interviewee. The interviewers were trained and proficient with the interview protocol.

Participants were informed that the study was concerned with the intergenerational

communication between younger (18-35) and older adults (55+).   The interview protocol was

developed from questions used in a focus group study by Hummert and Mazloff (in press). Younger

adults were asked to describe how older adults in general talk to younger adults, including the satisfying

and dissatisfying conversational styles of older adults (e.g., "In your observation of conversation

between younger and older adults in general, how do older people talk to young people"?).

Interviewers provided contexts or settings of possible younger and older adults communication such as

friends' homes, stores, restaurants, and other public places to guide participants when needed. After

respondents commented on the ways in which older people talk to younger people, subsequent

questions probed for specific examples (e.g., "Could you provide specific examples to illustrate your

point"? or "What aspects of an older person's talk made you feel that way? Was it the tone of his/her

voice that made you feel that way? Was it what was said?").

Once the first question had been exhausted, younger subjects were asked to describe

conversations that were positive, that is, those encounters that made them feel satisfied, comfortable

or happy. They were also asked about negative interactions that made them feel dissatisfied,

uncomfortable or unhappy. Finally, young respondents were asked to comment on how they would like

older adults to change their communication behaviors and how they would convey that to older adults.

The same protocol was followed in the interview with the older adults, but they were asked to comment

on their communication with young adults.

We intentionally avoided directly asking the interviewees to describe their own family members

or how they were talked to in intergenerational contexts for two major reasons. The first concern was

protecting the participants' self-esteem. To avoid any direct manipulation of self-esteem or negative

stereotypes, we asked participants to comment on intergenerational communication in general rather

than their own experience of being patronized or intergenerational issues within their own households.

In Chinese culture, *Mian Zi* (面子; "face, image") can be saved and lost. Gaining face or losing face is

closely related to issues of honor, dignity, and disgrace. Being patronized is an unpleasant experience

resulting in losing one's face, and being asked to describe this painful experience may compound the

negative effect of losing face.   Our second concern was that of getting truthful information. This is

related to face saving by another Chinese proverb *Jia Chou Bu Ke Wai Yany* (家丑不可外扬;"Family

disgrace should not be revealed to the outsider") (see Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). If confronted, one

might choose to conceal dysfunctional family relations in order to save face.

Transcription

Interviews were transcribed into written Chinese by the first author. Since one of the aims of

this study was to uncover themes in the discourse, most nonverbal aspects were ignored in the process

of transcription. To ensure the reliability of transcription, another Chinese graduate student currently

studying in the United States checked the transcriptions for accuracy. Any discrepancies were discussed

and resolved.

Analysis

The thematic analysis was inductive in nature and involved an iterative process (Luborsky,

1994). Initially, the first author listened to the interview tapes several times while reading through the

Chinese transcripts in order to get a general picture of Chinese intergenerational communication as

described. Then we began to look for broad themes using a process involving several steps.

First, the meaningful descriptions of intergenerational communication in the Chinese transcripts were identified. A meaningful description was defined as any discourse about intergenerational communication (e.g., statements, examples, and stories) elicited by a single interview question. Second, each meaningful description was then translated into English, and typed on a separate page. Translation from Chinese to English involves issues such as a true understanding of the Chinese text and English word choice to represent the original meaning. To ensure the validity of the translated descriptions, the Chinese text was examined in terms of semantics by the first author and another Chinese graduate student currently studying in the United Sates. Then the English version of the descriptions was read and interpreted by another graduate student knowledgeable in both English and Chinese to make sure the original meaning was not distorted. Third, selected descriptions were then back translated to Chinese to ensure the accuracy of the translation, and discrepancies were resolved. Finally, when the two sets of English descriptions (one for young and one for old) were created, the authors independently read them in order to identify important themes. A similar thought or idea expressed by a majority of the respondents in an age group was categorized as a theme. The goal of the thematic analysis was not to develop data for a statistical analysis of theme frequency, but to create a comprehensive and accurate summary of the interviewees' beliefs about, attitudes toward, and experiences with intergenerational communication.

<div align="center">Results</div>

The analysis identified themes from the discourse of both age groups that fell into three broad areas: 1) positive intergenerational communication behaviors, 2) negative intergenerational communication behaviors, and 3) ideal intergenerational communication.[1] The descriptions of intergenerational communication behavior that constituted these themes were relatively long statements that were supported by examples and narratives.

Positive intergenerational communication behaviors

The positive behavioral descriptions reflected the interviewees' satisfying intergenerational communication experiences. In this discussion, we feature young people's accounts of older adults, older adults' accounts of young people, and older adults' accounts of their own age group. Interviewees' comments about their own age group were relatively rare, partially due to the interview questions. However, older interviewees spontaneously offered comments about the positive behaviors of their peers with sufficient frequency to constitute a separate theme.

Positive communication behaviors of older people: Young interviewees' accounts. Two positive themes emerged from the young interviewees' descriptions of older adults' intergenerational communication behaviors: Caring and helping. The essence of the caring theme reflects the young participants' appreciation of and satisfaction with the care and love shown by older adults. The following statements illustrate this theme. In these and all excerpts within this paper, "S" refers to the interviewee and "I" to the interviewer.

Excerpt 1 (Interview 2, young male)

1	I	So do you like to be with older adults?
2	S	Yes. I believe so. I always feel that I am loved when I am with them. My

grandfather died early. My grandmother loved me so much. Whenever I went back for a visit, I always liked to talk to her, and she enjoyed our conversation. She saved all the good food for me. She was not well educated, and she concentrated her conversation on daily, trivial, and family related matters. However, her conversation made me feel so close to her. I could feel her love from the bottom of my heart.

Excerpt 2 (Interview 16, young male)

1	I	In your observation, how do older adults talk to young people in general?
2	S	Older adults are all supportive to young people. This is the Chinese tradition.
		Older adults always care about young people more than themselves.
3	I	Could you provide an example?
4	S	Give an example, uh. Like when I chat with my grandfather-in-law, he always
		expresses concerns about the young people in the family but he seldom talks about himself.
5	I	Why is that?
6	S	He thinks he should be that way. It seems like caring for the young is
		his duty. The more he cares about them, the better he feels. He tries his best to save money for the young, and he hopes they will have a good life.

Excerpts 1 and 2 show that the young interviewees see the food and money provided by older family members as symbolic of the deep love of the old for the young. They also presented these as typical examples of the positive behaviors used by older adults in intergenerational interaction.

The helping theme too revealed the young interviewees' positive experiences in intergenerational interaction. The young participants noted that they either learned new things or benefited emotionally from interacting with an older person, as exemplified in the following statements.

Excerpt 3 (Interview 3, young male describing older adults in general and one of his colleagues in specific)

1   S   Older adults always encourage young people. They motivate young people to

make progress. We laugh together, we tell each other jokes, and he does not act

like a superior…he is also good at keeping secrets for you.

Excerpt 4 (Interview 18, young female)

1   I   When do you initiate talking with older adults?

2   S   When I run into difficult situations. They have rich life and social experiences.

When I am in difficult situations and cannot walk out of them, I like to seek help

and instruction from older adults. In such situations, older adults can always offer help
and suggestions.

Excerpt 5 (Interview 4, young man)

1   I   Why do you enjoy talking to older adults?

2   S   Personally, I think I enjoy talking to them because what they say is thought-

provoking. For one thing, older adults are caring. For another, I could learn

things I did not know before. Their philosophy of life could influence mine. Though we
live in different worlds, what they have experienced is instructive and helpful to our
future.

As the above excerpts show, young people were likely to seek advice from older adults, because they felt that the older adults could help them "to make progress" (Excerpt 3). In addition, they felt that the experiences of older persons enabled them to offer help and instruction to young people.

Positive communication behaviors of older people: Older interviewees' accounts. The older interviewees also endorsed the helping theme. Older interviewees perceived their own age group as being experienced and offering help and/or encouragement to young adults, as illustrated in Excerpts 6-8.

Excerpt 6 (Interview 5, older woman)

1   S   Through conversation, knowingly or unknowingly, older adults give help and

encouragement to younger people. Every older adult wants young people to be on the right track, to do good deeds, and to make progress.

Excerpt 7 (Interview 8, older man)

1	S	Older people have life experiences and they have more experience than young people.
2	I	I agree with you.
3	S	Young people have a lack of experience.

Later in his interview, this interviewee reconfirmed his position that experience was older adults' strength, and he went on to draw an analogy between older adults' experience and a gold mountain (Turn 3 below).

Excerpt 8 (Interview 8, older man)

1	S	Experience is older adults' advantage and strength.
2	I	Yes
3		SExperience is a valuable source of wealth. It is a golden mountain. I people want to contribute to the society, the whole country, in order to make the country better, they should dig the golden mountain and make full use of the treasure, because experience is a rich resource.
4	I	Oh
5	S	Otherwise, you [referring to young people] achieve only half the result with twice the effort. If the gold mountain is dug well and fully used, you [referring to young people] can achieve twice the results for half the effort.
6	I	Oh
7	S	This is just this simple.

As we can see from these excerpts, older interviewees acknowledged not only that they were experienced, but they also strongly believed that their experience is useful for younger people. In fact, their experience is a treasure, a "gold mountain" (Excerpt 8, Turn 5).

Positive communication behaviors of young people: Older interviewees' accounts. Two positive themes emerged: *Ke Qi* (客气; "polite or politeness") and *Xiao* (filial piety). *Ke Qi* is a basic principle of Chinese communication practice, especially in intergenerational communication. The older interviewees indicated their satisfaction with young people when *Ke Qi* was performed, that is when young people showed good manners and care toward older adults. The following examples illustrate this theme.

Excerpt 9 (Interview 2, older woman who had just expressed dissatisfaction with another bus driver)

1   S   We took number 34 bus one day, and the driver was very different. After I got on
          the bus, he escorted me and helped me to find a seat by asking "anybody who
          wants to give your seat to this old lady?" He does not have to be that polite, but it
          is pleasant to listen to him rather than listening to that hysterical driver.

Excerpt 10 (Interview 10, older woman)

1   S   There is a young guy upstairs. He is very nice. He is very *Ke Qi*. He always
          greets me and asks me "Grandmother, where are you going?" Nice kid. I often
          praise him. The young man next door is also very nice, he always calls me aunt
          politely when he sees me.

According to Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), the notion of *Ke Qi* plays an important role in preserving peaceful and harmonious relations with others in Chinese society. As illustrated in Excerpts 9 and 10, older interviewees highly praised young people who performed *Ke Qi* behaviors toward older

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adults, that is, when they engaged in polite, respectful, and considerate behaviors toward older persons in public places. While *Ke Qi* reflects the satisfying behaviors performed by young people toward older adults in public places, *Xiao* indicates positive behaviors from young family members. The following older interviewees' accounts provide examples of *Xiao*.

Excerpt 11 (Interview1, older woman)

1   S   He is a role model of Xiao. That does not necessarily mean he buys goodies for

his mother everyday. He tells his mother everything. No matter what, as long as his mother wants to listen, he tells her. After his business trip, he came back and shared everything with his mother including whom he had dinner with and who paid for the bill. Older adults enjoy listening to this type of matter. How much money you spend on your folks including buying food or clothes for them does not make you *Xiao*. We do not need money or material things, we hope young people can come home to visit us frequently and talk to us.

Excerpt 12 (Interview 11, older man)

1   S   My clothes are bought either by my daughter or son. They are very trendy and

colorful, but I wear them. This shows that I am in their heart.

These excerpts demonstrate older participants' appreciation and pride when young adults performed behaviors of *Xiao* with them (e.g., sharing information, buying clothes for them). In essence, these two excerpts indicate that to the older interviewees, *Xiao* may take many different forms, but all forms are interpreted as outward signs of the children's love for their parents and grandparents.

Negative intergenerational communication behaviors

Analysis of the interviewees' descriptions also revealed negative themes relating to older adults and young people 's communication behaviors. While positive themes reflected the interviewees'

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satisfying experiences with the other generation, negative themes represented dissatisfying ones. No interviewees described the communication of their own age group in negative terms.

Negative communication behaviors of older people: Young interviewees' accounts. Two negative communication behavior themes emerged: older adults' superiority and *Laodao* (唠叨; "endless repeating"). The superiority theme included younger respondents' descriptions of older adults as bossy, demanding, scolding, and overly negative. In general, young participants complained that older adults were performing as superiors. The following extracts describe this negative communication style.

Excerpt 13 (Interview 17, young male)

1   I   In your daily observation, how do older adults talk to young people?

2   S   In general, older adults act like superiors when talking to young people. They

think they are wise, and young people are no match. During the conversation,

knowingly or unknowingly, they start to act like superiors, talking to young people

in a reprimanding manner.

Excerpt 14 (Interview 19, young male)

1   I   In your opinion, were there inappropriate conversation styles used by older adults

when talking to young people?

2   S   Reprimanding is the inappropriate style. They like to educate young people to act

like them in a demeaning manner. Young people do not want to listen to them

when this style is being used.

Excerpt 15 (Interview 7, young female)

1   I   How do older adults talk to young people?

2   S   Older adults are not democratic. They do not treat young people as their friends,

they act like superiors. You dare not have disagreement with them. They do not

allow young people to express their opinions. They do not respect young people's

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choices. They like to force their opinions on young people.

Clearly, each of these young interviewees experienced this "superior" communication style of older adults as patronizing. Their comments suggest that this style is a source of dissatisfaction with and negative perceptions of older adults, and that it may result in young people avoiding intergenerational interactions.

The young interviewees' descriptions also identified *Laodao* as a negative communication style

of older adults. *Lao* refers to talking, and *Dao* means speaking. Combining these two words produces

Laodao, meaning endless repeating. In the Chinese context, *Laodao* is perceived as one of the negative

behaviors of older adults. The following excerpts illustrate young inerviewees' views of *Laodao*.

Excerpt 16 (Interview 1, young female, describing older adults)

1   SThat is, in daily life, as long as they think something is
        important, they will adopt a *Laodao* tactic, *LaoLao DaoDao*, *LaoLao DaoDao*… Young
        people get bored with this endless *Laodao*.

Excerpt 17 (Interview 12, young female who had just indicated discomfort with her grandfather's communication)

1   I   What aspects of your grandfather's conversation styles make you uncomfortable?

2   S   In general, I stop listening to him when he starts to repeat the same topic again

             and again. I am bored. Repeating once or twice is fine, but I do not want to listen

             to their endless repeating. He knows the saying that good words lose their

             effectiveness after being repeated three times. Sometimes I say "Could you

             stop"?

3   I   You mean he repeats endlessly?

4   S   Yes. He is just like this. Whatever is in his mind and whenever he wants to say

		it, he repeats and repeats.
5	I	How do you deal with it if he does not stop?
6	S	I change the conversation topic to something else.
7	I	Change topic?
8	S	Yes. Sometimes, I ignore him or go to watch TV.

Excerpt 18 (Interview 1, young woman)

1	S	The majority of the young people know from the bottom of their heart that *Laodao* is for their own benefit; however, they are often bothered and Bored. They hate the older adults' *Laodao*. I think this is a typical situation.
2	I	Could you please provide an example?
3	S	For instance, there is an older adult, she has a grandson who is the only grandson in her family circle. She is very concerned about his marriage, but he is going to school away from home. She asks him all the time "Have you got a girlfriend? How about finding a girlfriend at home?" She wants him to get married, but she does not understand that as a student, he is not ready to think about that. They have totally different values. He has his own thoughts and ambitions. She has hers. This difference makes him feel "Oh God, why does she think in this way?" He hates this.

These comments show that the young participants recognized that older persons often use *Laodao* because they care about their younger family members. Regardless of these positive motivations, young people indicated that they perceive *Laodao* as boring, unpleasant, and intrusive. As a result, they may ignore *Laodao* or change the conversation topic, thus hindering intergenerational communication.

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Negative communication behaviors of young people: Older interviewees' accounts. Three negative themes emerged from older interviewees' descriptions of younger people's communication: 1) using wrong *Chenghu* (称呼;"forms of address"), 2) being verbally condescending, and 3) being secretive with personal information.

Chenghu is very important in the hierarchical Chinese culture, with different *Chenghu* specifying different social relations and age status. Older interviewees expressed their displeasure with the improper forms of address used by young people. The following excerpts illustrate the discourse of older adults on the issue of wrong *Chenghu*.

Excerpt 19 (Interview 1, older woman)

1   S   I used to know her grandmother, and her grandmother and I have the same age range. If she calls me aunt, how should her mother address me then? You know, I feel this is disgusting. That is why I always ignore her and do not want to talk to her. She is very naïve, and this naivete is correlated with her family background…. *Chenghu* is important. For example, it is not polite to address somebody as your uncle, if he is as old as your grandfather is. If you address somebody in your father's age range as uncle, it is pretty normal. If you address people in your age range as brothers, Mr. or comrade is OK, because you belong to the same generation. *Chenghu* determines older adults' evaluation of conversations.

Excerpt 20 (Interview 8, older man)

1   S   He called me 'old head'. I am old, but I do not want to be called an 'old head'.
          This is a terrible *Chenghu*. He should know the opening of conversation is important.
          He does not respect me. If he respects me, he would not have called me 'old fellow'.

> Nowadays, the phrase 'old head' becomes popular in China. This is not appropriate. Respectful people will not open their mouths and address an older man as an 'old head'.

Within the Chinese culture, *old head* is an informal and demeaning label for older men. As these excerpts illustrate, wrong *Chenghu* may take different forms ranging from the merely impolite title of *aunt* in Excerpt 19 to the highly disrespectful *old head* in Excerpt 20. Together these excerpts show that wrong *Chenghu*, regardless of its form, may threaten older adults' age status and dignity, and it may discourage them from further communicating with the young person. In addition to wrong *Chenghu*, the theme of verbal condescension also emerged. This theme related to young people's overly directive, controlling and patronizing behavior toward older persons. The following excerpts exemplify this theme.

Excerpt 21 (Interview 10, older man)

1   S   Some young people have ill manners. Some have sharp tongues. One day I took

the public bus, and I saw an old man who showed his senior citizen card right after he got on the bus. However, the driver, who was a young man complained in a condescending tone that the old man was slow. The driver said "Why you are so slow?" The older man asked "When am I supposed to show it?" Then the driver shouted "You got to have it in your hand while you are getting on the bus!" The young driver reprimanded the old man. The old man did not say anything further. If I were him, that would not be the end of it.

Excerpt 22 (Interview 2, older woman describing a public bus driver)

1   S   "Sit down, sit down, and do not fall"! The words were good, but his tone was

condescending. His face, eyes, and the tone of his voice showed that he did not want any older people to get on his bus. I felt very bad listening to him. My husband only said one sentence, "why do we have to bear with him?"

Older adults viewed condescending talk that happened in the context of public service negatively as illustrated by these two excerpts. According to these individuals, what is said and how it is said can be equally disturbing.

The theme of being secretive reflects instances when the older interviewee perceived that young people withheld information from them or did not want to include them in the conversation. The following excerpts provide examples of this theme.

Excerpt 23 (Interview 2, older woman)

1   S   Older adults want to know everything about their younger ones, therefore they

like to ask questions. My son, who has a business, is very secretive about everything.

Excerpt 24 (Interview 11, older man)

1   I   You have mentioned that there are gaps between older and young adults,   could

you be more specific?

2   S   Sometimes it is hard to understand each other. My friends' son divorced some six

or seven years ago. They want to introduce him to another girl. He does not want to talk about it. "Mind your own business" is always his answer to his parents. He should share his thoughts with his parents, and he should not be this secretive. He tries to push his parents out of this issue.

These excerpts demonstrate older adults' desire to be part of their younger family members' lives. They want to know as much as they can about their children and are hurt or angry when young adults keep information from them in conversations.

Ideal intergenerational communication behaviors

While the positive and negative themes reflect the interviewees' intergenerational communication experiences, the interviewees' descriptions of ideal intergenerational communication reveal their personal interests, desires, and expectations.

<u>Young interviewees' accounts: Filial piety and equal status.</u> Two themes emerged from the young interviewees' accounts of ideal intergenerational communication: Endorsement of filial piety and having an equal status with older adults in intergenerational communication.

The young interviewees expressed their willingness to respect older adults regardless of contextual situations and personal satisfaction. The young participants acknowledged that aging was an inevitable and difficult phase in everybody's life span and that *Xiao* (孝; "filial piety") was the ethical norm to follow. Thus the young interviewees endorsed the idea that they should make the first effort to accommodate to older adults' needs in terms of speech topic, content, and style. The following statements reflect this theme in the interviews with young persons.

Excerpt 25 (Interview 2, young woman)

1   S   When one gets old, problems come. Considering everybody gets old eventually,
            young people should respect older adults, care for their well-being, and communicate
            with them sincerely.

Excerpt 26 (Interview 4, young man)

1   S   Young people should try to avoid topics of conversation that make older adults
            uncomfortable. Young people should try to find common subjects to talk about.

Excerpt 27 (Interview 1, young woman)

1   S   Chinese young people endorse the principle of *Xiao*. Though young people have
        had so much modern education, *Xiao* is deep-rooted in their mindset.

Excerpt 28 (Interview 13, young man)

1   S   Young people should respect older adults' ideas, and should not argue with older
            adults even if they are right. Older adults, after all, are older adults.

One thing evident from these statements is that the younger interviewees were willing to conform to the cultural norm of *Xiao.* They expressed their willingness to accommodate to older adults

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– in terms of showing respect, shifting to appropriate conversational topics, caring for older persons'

well-being, etc. – regardless of their personal satisfaction.

> While showing willingness to conform to the Chinese social norm of filial piety, the younger interviewees also expressed a desire to achieve an equal status with older adults in communication. The following excerpt represents this view.

Excerpt 29 (Interview 1, young woman)

| 1 | I | In your opinion, how should older adults change their behavior? |
| 2 | S | I have watched some TV dramas from Britain and America. Older adults are |

portrayed very lovely, because they are cheerful and humorous. Of course, they have their cultural background. Older adults hang out with their grandsons addressing each other by name. Their relationship seems very equal and friendly. Even if they have a quarrel, it does not matter. However, in China younger adults have to be extremely respectful and obedient to older adults in order to make them feel at ease. Could Chinese older adults be open-minded, since they have been living in the world for so long, and experienced so much? Older adults could show their experience and knowledge, but not their superiority. This is the premise of mutual understanding in intergenerational communication.

Excerpt 29 clearly indicates the young interviewee's uneasiness with Chinese older adults who

require extreme respectfulness and obedience from young people. This excerpt also reveals the young

interviewee's admiration of the equal relationship between older and younger adults portrayed in

British and American TV dramas, and her desire to communicate with open-minded older adults (Turn

2). Clearly, this young woman believed that mutual understanding was the ideal of intergenerational

communication.

Older interviewees' accounts: Filial piety and hierarchical relations. Two themes also

emerged from the older interviewees' accounts of ideal intergenerational communication:

Endorsement of filial piety and maintaining superiority. The older interviewees strongly

endorsed the notion that young people should respect them, and that being respectful to older

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adults was the precondition for satisfactory intergenerational communication. The following statements are examples of this view.

Excerpt 30 (Interview 12, older man)

1 S Older adults should be respected, this is a principle for young people to follow.

Excerpt 31 (Interview 9, older woman)

1 S No matter what, older adults are older adults, young people should be obedient

regardless.

Older interviewees not only believed that young people should show respect to older people, but they also stated that intergenerational communication is inherently hierarchical, with older people holding a higher status than young people. The following excerpt presents both perspectives.

Excerpt 32 (Interview 1, older woman)

1 S Being polite is the first condition, if young people do not follow this, there will

not be mutual language. It may be said that over 90% of the older adults like to be respected by young people. After all it is a relationship between superior and subordinate. It is not an equal relationship. Therefore, this condition should be the precondition of communication between older and younger adults. With this condition, the conversation between younger and older adults will be more harmonious. This is a premise.

Discussion

The descriptions of intergenerational communication provided by these interviewees revealed a mixed picture of intergenerational communication in the PRC, one in which tensions and harmonies co-

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exist in a *Yin* and *Yang* relationship. On the *Yang* side, young interviewees spoke highly of older adults'

caring and helping behaviors, and older interviewees praised young people's *Ke Qi* (politeness) and *Xiao*

(filial piety). Intergenerational communication in such descriptions appears harmonious (i.e., young

people are loved and older adults are respected). On the *Yin* side, young interviewees expressed a

strong dislike of older adults' superior behaviors and use of *Laodao* (endless repeating) while older

interviewees complained about young people using wrong C*henghu* (forms of address), being verbally

condescending, and being secretive with personal information. The harmonies derive from congruent

themes, that is, ones on which those from the two generations have consensus. The tensions, on the

other hand, reflect incongruent themes, in other words, issues on which the two generations have

opposing opinions.

Harmonies in Chinese Intergenerational Communication: Congruent Themes

Experienced and helpful older adults. Older adults' experience and helpfulness were

unanimously acknowledged and endorsed by both the young and older interviewees. This positive

perception of older adults as being experienced and helpful appears to facilitate the young interviewees'

interaction with older adults. For example, interviewee comments indicated that this positive view

enhanced young people's awareness of the importance of being good listeners, and thus may contribute

to the quality and satisfaction of intergenerational interactions. A Chinese saying, *Bu Ting Lao Ren Yan,*

Chi Kui Zai Yan Qian (不听老人言，吃亏在眼前; "Not listening to older adults, immediate failures"), may

serve as a regulator for young adults, reminding them to listen to older adults whose rich knowledge

and valuable experience are helpful. At the same time, older adults' image of themselves as being

experienced and helpful may encourage them to be active participants in the intergenerational

communication process.

Endorsement of filial piety. Both age groups also endorsed the principle of filial piety. Older

interviewees strongly advocated the notion that young people should respect them, and reported with

pride numerous instances of young persons showing them that respect. Younger interviewees were in

agreement in this regard. They expressed their willingness to respect older persons regardless of context

and personal satisfaction, identifying *Xiao* as the ethical norm to follow. These views are consistent with

other research emphasizing the importance of filial piety in the Chinese culture (Chow, 1991, 1999; Ng

et. al., 1997, 1999). A future-oriented perspective may be one factor that explains the willingness of

some young persons to follow the prescriptions of *Xiao,* as suggested by the interviewee's comment in

Excerpt 25 that "everyone gets old eventually." Seeing themselves as the future beneficiaries of *Xiao*

may encourage young Chinese individuals to preserve its practices through their communication with

the older generation.

Tensions in Chinese Intergenerational Communication: Incongruent Themes

However, these mutual conceptions do not guarantee satisfactory intergenerational relations,

as the incongruent themes revealed.

Equality versus superiority. The young interviewees indicated that they appreciate older

people's experience, but not their superiority. For example, although the younger interviewees

endorsed the idea that younger adults should make the first effort to accommodate to older adults'

needs in terms of speech topic, content, and style, they also revealed their desire for   equal status in

communication with older adults. In contrast, the older interviewees emphasized the need for

maintaining hierarchical intergenerational relationships, and stressed that young people's respect and

obedience were a precondition for intergenerational communication.

The older interviewees' comments on the importance of using proper *Chenghu* reflect this

tension. As those comments indicated, older adults are very much concerned with how they are

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addressed, and they find it distressing when Chinese young people use informal communication styles that disregard such social proprieties as *Chenghu*. Likewise, they reported that it was disturbing when young people were verbally condescending or patronizing to them (e.g., "You know nothing"; "Why are you so slow?"; "What is wrong, old head?"). While older persons in Western cultures have voiced similar complaints about informal address forms (Ryan & Cole, 1990) and patronizing talk from younger people (Hummert & Mazloff, 2001), their complaints focus on how such talk violates general politeness norms (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast, the complaints of the older Chinese interviewees emphasize how such talk violates status norms. The young interviewees' call for equality in intergenerational relations reinforces the centrality of status issues in the Chinese culture.

Older adults' caring concern versus intrusive love. Older interviewees described how their peers attempt to communicate their love to younger people by inquiring into their lives, but the young interviewees saw such inquiries as intrusive. For instance, many of the conversations reported as unsatisfactory by young and old interviewees dealt with marriage plans (See Excerpts 18 and 24). Marriage is traditionally a family concern in the PRC. If a young person does not get married by a certain age (e.g., before 30), it becomes a serious issue and may be the primary topic around the dinner table when three generations reside under the same roof. However, young people in China increasingly want to make their own decisions about when to get married and whom to marry. They find it annoying and intrusive when older adults express their concerns about marriage through *Laodao*, and may respond by being secretive or verbally condescending. Both of these behaviors are equally disturbing to older family members.

In the Chinese culture *Laodao* has many characteristics of nagging (不断地责怪;"Bu Duan De Ze Guai"), but is not synonymous with it. While a person of any age may nag (责怪;"Ze Guai") another, *Laodao* is a term applied mainly to the repetitious advice and questions of older adults. Occasionally,

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Laodao may be used to describe younger adults who are repetitious, but the implication is that the young person is acting "old" (e.g., Gee, what is wrong with you, you are not old, but you are acting like an older person to be this *Laodao*).

This type of patronizing old-to-young talk seems prevalent cross-culturally. *Laodao*, despite its distinctive status within the Chinese culture, is similar to the overparenting style of patronizing talk from older persons described in the written accounts of American young people (see Giles & Williams, 1994; Williams & Giles, 1996). Likewise, the reactions of young Chinese persons to *Laodao* are similar to the response to overparenting reported by American young people. Our Chinese interviewees indicated that they either chose to ignore *Laodao* or cope with *Laodao* by being secretive, while Williams and Giles' respondents indicated that they tended to avoid communication with older adults when faced with dissatisfying communication such as overparenting.

 Filial piety, the changing Chinese culture, and intergenerational communication

The Chinese traditional norm of filial piety in the context of a changing culture may account for both harmonies and tensions identified by the interviewees. *Xiao*, as a dominant ethical code, guides intergenerational communication in the PRC, as exemplified in the mutual endorsement of filial piety by young and old interviewees in this study. Research has characterized Chinese societies as collectivistic with their Confucian principles of harmony and hierarchy (Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Ting-Toomey, 1994). In a hierarchical society emphasizing harmony, everyone has a designated role and position. The traditional Confucian ethical principle of filial piety specifies hierarchical roles based upon age, with older adults having a status superior to that of younger ones. This study shows that older adults are particularly strong proponents of this ethical rule. As the comments of older interviewees show, older adults in the PRC feel that their superior status creates the obligation to educate the young. As a result, they may feel that they have the right to exercise power over young people in general. The communication of Chinese older adults to younger ones, then, may reflect the Chinese proverb *HaoYao*

Ku Kou Li Yu Bing; Zhong Yan Ni Er Li Yu Xing (好药苦口利于病;忠言逆耳利于行: "Good medicine is bitter to your mouth but is good for your body; good words hurt your ear but benefit your deeds"). Unfortunately, young persons may perceive such communication as arrogant and controlling.

The principle of filial piety specifies a subordinate role for young people, as exemplified in the Chinese saying, *Nian Qing Ren Yao Shao Shu Duo Ting* (年轻人要少说多听; "Young people should talk less and listen more"). However, the Chinese culture, like all cultures, is not static. Culture changes along with other elements in the system: politics, economics. The increasing presence of foreign media, the institution of economic reforms and especially the advancement of new communication technologies have brought changes to every corner of Chinese society (Ng et al., 1997; Williams et al., 1997), including intergenerational relations. As a result of these changes, young people in the PRC are becoming more and more independent, and this study shows that they desire equal status with older adults in intergenerational communication.

The perceptual differences between older and younger adults (e.g., equality versus superiority, intrusive love versus caring) might explain why younger people in the East report less satisfaction with intergenerational communication than do young people in the West (Giles et al., 1999; Cai et al., 1998; Giles et al., 1998; Williams et al., 1997). This study suggests that this dissatisfaction might be due to the increasing awareness of the Western ideologies of equality, democracy, and freedom of speech (see also Ng et al., 1997; Williams et al., 1997) in combination with the continued societal commitment to *Xiao* (filial piety). These results are also consistent with Coupland, Wiemann, and Giles' (1991) argument that the ideological framing of talk and sociocultural power imbalances constitute the deepest level of miscommunication.

Implications for the CPA model

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As noted in the introduction, the Communication Predicament of Aging Model (CPA; Ryan et al., 1986) has served as a framework for much of the research in intergenerational communication. The CPA suggests that younger adults' negative stereotypical views of older adults influence their expectations and conversational styles in intergenerational communication, ultimately resulting in inappropriate behavioral modifications (e.g., overaccommodation to negative age stereotypes or patronizing talk) that carry potential dangers for older adults' psychological and physiological well-being. Although initially focused on the predicament engendered when younger persons were in a position of caregiving to older persons, the model has been developed and elaborated in subsequent research as a useful heuristic for understanding intergenerational communication in many contexts (Giles & Williams, 1994; Harwood et al., 1995; Hummert, 1994; Hummert et al., 1998; Williams & Giles, 1996). This study contributes to the body of research on the CPA, showing how *Xiao* and hierarchical age relationships contextualize the model within the PRC.

The predicament for the young interviewees in this study was quite similar to that reported by the U.S. students in the Williams and Giles (1996) study. Both groups described intrusive advice and controlling behavior on the part of older persons as a source of dissatisfaction. Both groups viewed these behaviors as underaccommodative or nonaccommodative to their needs. However, the young interviewees in this study alluded to two themes that the Western young people did not: the hierarchical status accorded age within the PRC and the continuing cultural endorsement of filial piety. Their need for satisfactory intergenerational interactions was overshadowed by their need to conform to these societal norms, especially when older adults' intrusive communication was attributed to positive intent. These results suggest that young persons in the PRC may feel more constrained by cultural norms for intergenerational interaction than those in the West, and therefore more enmeshed in the "predicament." This interpretation is certainly consistent with the pattern of cross-cultural differences found by Williams et al. (1997).

From the perspective of our older interviewees, the predicament in intergenerational communication centered on young adults' abandonment of titles of respect (*Chenghu)* and their unwillingness to disclose personal information. These behaviors could be characterized as nonaccommodative or underaccommodative to the needs of older communicators. The issue of proper titles has also emerged from interviews with older persons in the West (Ryan & Cole, 1990). However, although both cultural groups may see improper titles as disrespectful, they interpret the source of the disrespect differently. For Western interviewees, the disrespect arises because they have been categorized as "old", and therefore weak, sick, dependent or not worthy of respect (Hummert & Mazloff, 2001; Ryan & Cole, 1990). That is, consistent with the CPA, they have been *negatively* stereotyped and the younger persons have *overaccomodated* to the negative stereotype. For the PRC interviewees, on the other hand, the disrespect arises because the young persons are not conforming to the cultural norms of filial piety (*Xiao*) and hierarchical relations based on age. That is, the younger persons have not appropriately accommodated to a *positive* age stereotype of older persons as loving, caring, and of higher status. As with the similarities in the predicaments described by young people in the PRC and the West, the cultural norms of filial piety and age status lead to differences in interpreting and accounting for the predicaments.

Conclusions

This study revealed challenges to the traditional norm of filial piety in today's PRC because long held traditions concerning interpersonal relations are being replaced by more informal and equal practices. Our interviewees painted a *Yin* and *Yang* picture of intergenerational communicators holding harmony and tension in a precarious balance. The danger is that the tensions may override the harmonies creating miscommunication between the generations. As Ng et al. (1999) suggested, young and older adults should honor each other's autonomy, practicing both accommodation and respect to improve communication satisfaction and avoid miscommunication. Identifying how young and older people within the PRC can achieve this ideal is a worthy goal for future research. For instance, research attention to strategies that young people could use to respond to *Laodao* in ways that acknowledge filial piety may help to reduce the intergenerational tensions reported by our interviewees – both young and old. In addition, observations of interactions between young and

older persons in the PRC may help us understand how these discursive tensions are negotiated during discourse.

On a more general note, this study extended our understanding of the CPA model by highlighting the importance of cultural norms in defining the "predicament" for specific young and older people. This study also revealed that the congruencies and incongruencies in young and older individuals' perceptions of intergenerational communication are important areas to explore in other cultural contexts as well. These congruencies and incongruencies may provide the key to diminishing tensions and building more harmonious intergenerational relationships, a goal important to older and younger people of all nations and cultural backgrounds.

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Notes

[1] Though the interviewees were not asked to describe each other's traits and characteristics, their descriptions of intergenerational communication also revealed evidence of trait-based stereotypes. This data is presented and discussed by Zhang, Hummert, and Garstka (2000) in conjunction with the results of a separate study of Chinese age stereotypes.