

A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Cultures

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Abstract: This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of English (Anglo-American) and Chinese cultures, focusing on core values, communication styles, social structures, traditions, and artistic expressions. By drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's context model, as well as foundational definitions of culture, the study highlights both convergences and divergences between the two cultural spheres. The analysis reveals that while both societies value harmony and achievement, the ways in which these values manifest—in interpersonal relationships, language use, rituals, and creative arts—differ markedly. Implications for cross-cultural understanding and international collaboration are discussed.

Keywords: English culture; Chinese culture; cross-cultural comparison.

1. Introduction

Culture, broadly defined, encompasses the learned beliefs, values, and behaviors that bind a community together [1]. In an era of rapid globalization, understanding cultural differences and commonalities is vital for fostering effective communication, cooperation, and mutual respect. English (hereafter referring primarily to the culture of native English-speaking countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom) and Chinese cultures represent two of the world's most influential cultural spheres. This paper aims to compare these cultures across five dimensions: core values, communication styles, social structures and relationships, traditions and celebrations, and artistic expressions. Through this multifaceted analysis, we will illuminate how historical legacies, philosophical foundations, and social institutions shape cultural norms and behaviors.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Definition of Culture

Spencer-Oatey defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group of people from another", highlighting both explicit artifacts and tacit assumptions.[2]

2.2. Hall's Context Model

Edward T. Hall differentiates cultures by their communication context—high-context versus low-context. English culture is characterized as low-context, relying on explicit, direct verbal communication, whereas Chinese culture is high-context, where meaning is often embedded in relationships, nonverbal cues, and shared understanding.

2.3. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede's model provides six dimensions for comparing cultures: Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint [3]. English-speaking cultures tend toward low Power Distance, high Individualism, and higher Indulgence, whereas Chinese culture scores high on Power Distance, high Collectivism, strong Long-Term Orientation, and high Uncertainty Avoidance.

3. Core Values

3.1. Individualism vs. Collectivism

In English cultures, individual autonomy and personal achievement are highly prized. From early childhood, educational systems and family environments encourage children to speak up in class, choose extracurricular activities that reflect personal interests, and set individual goals for academic and career success. This emphasis on self-expression fosters a sense of independence: young adults often move out of the family home sooner, view career choices as a personal journey, and value personal branding in professional contexts. Moreover, cultural artifacts—from bestselling self-help books to entrepreneurial success stories—reinforce the ideal of self-reliance.

In contrast, Chinese culture emphasizes collective harmony and family unity. Decisions—from selecting a university major to accepting job offers—are routinely made in consultation with parents and elders, reflecting deep-seated values of filial piety and interdependence [4]. Social behaviors, such as group study sessions and communal celebrations, prioritize in-group cohesion over individual distinction. Even personal milestones—like marriages or promotions—are celebrated as collective achievements, strengthening family reputation [5]. This collectivist orientation manifests in social norms that reward conformity, discourage overt self-promotion, and value face-saving interactions, ensuring that personal ambitions align with broader familial and societal expectations.

3.2. Attitudes toward Authority and Hierarchy

English-speaking societies generally endorse egalitarian ideals, reflected in relatively low Power Distance and direct access to authority figures. In educational settings, for example, students are encouraged to address professors by their first names, challenge ideas during seminars, and engage in open debate without fear of reprimand. In corporate environments, employees at all levels may freely offer suggestions to senior management, fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration. Organizational charts exist more as guides than rigid hierarchies, and feedback loops are often transparent and immediate.

In contrast, Chinese culture upholds Confucian ideals of hierarchical respect. From primary school onward, teachers

are regarded with the same reverence accorded to elders in the family; students use honorific titles and seldom question instructional authority publicly. In workplaces, employees defer to supervisors, often using indirect language—such as framing critiques as questions—to avoid challenging their status. Business meetings follow strict protocols: the most senior person speaks first, and decisions are often ratified after private counsel among leadership rather than open plenary discussion. Maintaining “face” (*miànzi*) is paramount; superiors provide praise publicly but reserve criticism for private settings to preserve dignity. This structured approach to authority extends beyond organizations into social ceremonies, legal contexts, and family gatherings, reinforcing a stable social order rooted in mutual obligations and respect.

3.3. Time Orientation

English cultures balance short- and long-term planning: consumers purchase on impulse, yet companies prepare quarterly reports. Project timelines often span several months, and career planning may focus on immediate promotions or opportunities. In everyday life, Westerners tend to separate work hours from personal time, valuing punctuality but also spontaneity in leisure activities.

Chinese culture emphasizes long-term horizons: five-year state and corporate plans shape strategic decision-making, and families save diligently for future generations. Educational investments reflect multi-decade payoffs, and business relationships may develop over years before formal contracts are signed. Moreover, cultural practices like New Year gift-giving anticipate prosperity in the coming year, underscoring the collective temporal vision.

4. Communication Styles

4.1. Directness and Indirectness

English communication is typically characterized by a low-context, direct style that prioritizes clarity and explicitness. Speakers in English-speaking contexts are encouraged to state their opinions unequivocally, even when delivering critical feedback; for instance, a manager might say, “Your report’s analysis is solid, but the recommendations lack data to support the conclusions,” ensuring that actionable points are clearly understood. Classroom environments in the US and UK similarly value open debate: students raise objections directly and professors welcome challenges to encourage critical thinking.

In contrast, Chinese communication often adheres to a high-context, indirect style aimed at preserving social harmony and protecting face (*miànzi*). Feedback is frequently softened with euphemisms or framed as questions—e.g., “Perhaps we could consider adding more examples here?”—to avoid the appearance of direct criticism. Silence and nonverbal signals, such as a pause before responding or a gentle nod, can communicate disapproval or reservation without explicitly stating it. This indirectness extends to negotiations and conflict resolution; parties may first engage in lengthy pleasantries and storytelling to build rapport before addressing the substantive issues, ensuring that relationships remain intact even when disagreements arise.

4.2. Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication plays a critical role in both cultures but carries different nuances and significance. In English-speaking contexts, gestures, facial expressions, and

eye contact generally serve to reinforce verbal messages. For instance, sustained eye contact during discussion signals engagement and trustworthiness, while nodding conveys active listening. Personal space conventions—maintaining an arm’s length distance—reflect cultural respect for privacy, and handshakes remain the standard greeting in professional settings.

By contrast, Chinese nonverbal signals often substitute or modify verbal communication in high-context interactions. Tone of voice, posture, and spatial arrangements convey social hierarchy and relational dynamics. A slight bow of the head indicates respect, and lowering one’s gaze can express deference. During formal meetings, seating order around a table reflects rank—senior members occupy prominent positions, while juniors wait for nods to speak. Silence functions as a communicative tool: a pause before responding may signal thoughtful consideration or polite disagreement, whereas rapid interruptions can be viewed as disrespectful. Proxemics also matter: close physical proximity within in-groups fosters solidarity, while reserved distance between strangers maintains decorum. Accurately reading these cues is essential for understanding implied meanings and preserving harmony in Chinese contexts.

4.3. Small Talk and Relationship-Building

In English-speaking contexts, small talk serves as a transitional ritual that eases social interactions and establishes a comfortable atmosphere before delving into substantive topics. Common subjects include weather, sports, weekend plans, or entertainment—topics chosen for their neutrality. For example, remarking, “Beautiful sunny day, isn’t it?” signals openness without demanding personal disclosure. Such exchanges also allow subtle personal branding, as individuals might mention favorite teams or recent travels, creating conversational anchors for rapport.

In Chinese culture, preliminary conversations convey strategic relational intent, often focusing on family and communal ties. Questions like, “How is your family?” or “I heard your eldest child got into university—congratulations!” demonstrate genuine concern and respect for kinship. Commenting on common experiences—“The new dumpling restaurant nearby is excellent. Have you tried it?”—leverages shared cultural touchpoints to foster connection. Integrating gestures like offering tea or small gifts during small talk further enhances warmth. This holistic approach lays the foundation for *guanxi*, ensuring that each interaction strengthens reciprocal obligations and trust.

5. Social Structures and Relationships

5.1. Family and Kinship

In English-speaking cultures, the nuclear family structure—comprising parents and their children—dominates household organization. Young adults commonly establish independent households upon reaching adulthood or completing higher education, underscoring personal autonomy and self-sufficiency. Daily family life centers on scheduled gatherings such as Sunday dinners, holiday celebrations (e.g., Christmas in the UK, Thanksgiving in the US), and milestone events (e.g., birthdays, graduations), rather than constant multi-generational cohabitation. Extended relatives—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—maintain close relationships through planned visits, phone calls, and digital communication platforms, yet

typically live separately.

In contrast, Chinese culture places paramount importance on extended family networks, guided by Confucian ideals of filial piety (*xiàoshùn*) and intergenerational support. It is common for three or more generations to share a residence or live in close proximity, enabling seamless caregiving and resource sharing. Grandparents frequently assist with childcare and pass down cultural traditions, while parents provide financial stability, and grandchildren reciprocate by caring for elders in their later years.

Family decision-making in China is a collective process. Significant choices—such as educational paths, career selection, and marriage arrangements—are deliberated in family councils where elders' opinions carry substantial weight. For example, before choosing a university major, many Chinese students consult their parents and grandparents to align personal aspirations with family expectations. Furthermore, annual festivals such as the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival involve large-scale family reunions, ancestral worship ceremonies, and communal meal preparations, all reinforcing family cohesion and cultural continuity.

Beyond cultural rituals, Chinese families operate as informal social safety nets. In the absence of extensive public welfare systems, kin networks provide critical support during crises—such as illness, unemployment, or bereavement—by pooling financial resources and caregiving responsibilities. This reciprocal model contrasts with Western societies' reliance on institutional support (e.g., social security, health insurance), highlighting divergent approaches to social welfare and familial obligation.

5.2. Friendship and Networking

English friendships typically form around shared interests and activities, such as weekend sports teams, book clubs, or workplace social events. These relationships often respect clear boundaries between personal and professional spheres: colleagues may socialize after work, but favors and obligations are usually confined to either personal or business contexts—not both. Invitations to one's home are generally planned in advance, and spontaneous drop-ins are uncommon. Emotional support, mutual trust, and companionship are key features; friends lend each other advice, help move apartments, or cover shifts when needed, but each person's privacy and individual autonomy remain respected.

In contrast, the Chinese concept of *guanxi* (关系) blurs lines between friendship and professional networking, weaving both into a complex web of reciprocal obligations. Building *guanxi* involves repeated cycles of favor exchange—sharing meals, giving gifts, introducing contacts, or providing professional recommendations—that generate a sense of indebtedness and long-term loyalty. For example, attending a friend's family banquet or offering to assist with a relative's business venture creates unspoken social currency, which one is expected to reciprocate in kind. The unwritten rules of *guanxi* dictate that the value of favors should be balanced over time, and debts repaid promptly to avoid loss of face.

Sustaining *guanxi* also relies on symbolic gestures and timing: presenting high-quality tea or specialty foods during festivals like Chinese New Year conveys respect and gratitude, while remembering birthdays and anniversaries—often via WeChat messages or digital red envelopes—reinforces bonds in the digital age. Unlike Western friendships that prioritize

personal affinity and immediate emotional compatibility, *guanxi* networks emphasize collective benefit and strategic long-term reciprocity, reflecting a collectivist culture where social capital is carefully cultivated and mobilized.

5.3. Concepts of Privacy

Privacy holds paramount importance in English-speaking societies, where personal space, data confidentiality, and individual autonomy are rigorously protected. Residential designs feature separate living quarters, individual bedrooms, and fenced yards, creating clear spatial boundaries between households. In workplaces, private offices or cubicles enable confidential conversations, and legal instruments—such as non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and data protection laws—safeguard sensitive information. Social etiquette dictates that intimate inquiries (e.g., questions about income, health, or family matters) are avoided unless two people share a close personal bond. Even casual social media postings steer clear of overt self-exposure, reflecting cultural norms that equate discretion with respect.

Conversely, traditional Chinese culture has historically placed greater emphasis on communal well-being over individual privacy. Multi-generational households and *siheyuan* courtyard layouts foster constant family interaction, and neighbors often participate in one another's day-to-day lives. Community oversight surfaces in practices like extended-family consultations for marriage choices or career paths, where personal decisions are made with collective welfare in mind. However, rapid urbanization, high-rise apartment living, and the rise of digital platforms are shifting these norms. Contemporary Chinese urbanites negotiate cramped living spaces, and public debates around data security and online surveillance signal growing awareness of personal privacy rights. This evolving tension illustrates how China balances enduring communal traditions with emerging desires for individual autonomy and confidentiality.

6. Traditions and Celebrations

6.1. Major Holidays

English culture observes a blend of religious and secular holidays that structure annual social rhythms. Christmas in the UK and US is both a religious celebration and a broader cultural festival: families decorate Christmas trees, exchange gifts, and gather for festive meals—roast turkey or ham—often accompanied by caroling and televised parades. Thanksgiving, unique to the US, centers on a historic feast commemorating early settlers; relatives convene for roast turkey, stuffing, and pumpkin pie, followed by watching football or participating in community service. Easter merges Christian observance with secular customs: church services, egg hunts for children, and chocolate treats symbolize themes of rebirth and the arrival of spring.

In Chinese culture, the Lunar New Year (Spring Festival) is the most significant holiday, heralding the lunar calendar with family reunions, fireworks, and lion or dragon dances to ward off evil spirits. Homes are adorned with red lanterns and couplets bearing auspicious phrases, and elders distribute red envelopes (*hóngbāo*) filled with money as blessings for prosperity. The Mid-Autumn Festival celebrates the harvest by bringing families together under the full moon to share mooncakes—round pastries symbolizing unity and completeness. The Dragon Boat Festival commemorates the poet-statesman Qu Yuan through competitive dragon boat

rices and the making of zongzi (glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves), honoring loyalty and cultural memory.

6.2. Rituals and Symbolism

Holiday rituals in English contexts often blend historical customs with contemporary adaptations. For instance, at Christmas, families might sing carols such as “Silent Night,” attend candlelit church services, and decorate their homes with evergreen wreaths, holly sprigs, and twinkling lights. In the UK, pulling Christmas crackers—festive tubes that snap open to reveal small gifts and jokes—is a staple. Easter traditions include sunrise services, egg-painting sessions for children, and symbolic consumption of hot cross buns to celebrate renewal. Thanksgiving in the U.S. features parades, volunteer events, and football games alongside the central ritual of sharing a meal of roast turkey, stuffing, and pumpkin pie, underscoring themes of gratitude and community.

In Chinese culture, rituals bristle with auspicious symbolism at every turn. During the Lunar New Year, wearing new clothes signifies a fresh start; hanging red lanterns and spring couplets invites good fortune; and setting off firecrackers or lion dances drives away malevolent spirits. Ancestral altar offerings—incense, fruit, and rice wine—pay respect to forebears and reinforce filial ties. The Mid-Autumn Festival sees families gathering under the full moon for mooncake feasts, lantern displays, and poetic recitations that celebrate unity and thanksgiving. At the Dragon Boat Festival, communities race elaborately decorated dragon boats while preparing zongzi—glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves—to honor the poet Qu Yuan and symbolize loyalty and remembrance. Color usage is codified: red for prosperity and happiness, gold for wealth, and white reserved for mourning—an inverse of Western wedding traditions where white represents joy.

These rituals—through music, food, visual spectacle, and communal participation—embed cultural narratives, mark the passage of seasons, and strengthen intergenerational bonds, illustrating how symbolic acts serve as living vessels of collective identity.

6.3. Gift-Giving Practices

In English cultures, gift selection centers on the recipient’s personal interests and preferences. Whether for birthdays, weddings, or holidays like Christmas and Valentine’s Day, gifts such as books by a favorite author, a bottle of fine wine, or the latest tech gadget are chosen to reflect individual tastes. Presentation matters: bespoke wrapping paper, decorative ribbons, and a handwritten card demonstrate thoughtfulness and care. Gifts are usually exchanged at or just before the occasion, and opening them in the giver’s presence is customary to display appreciation. Social etiquette dictates timely reciprocation—sending a thank-you note or a return gift—to acknowledge the gesture and maintain cordial relationships.

In Chinese culture, gift-giving is a highly ritualized act imbued with symbolic meaning and governed by conventions that reinforce social bonds. Presents are offered with both hands, signifying respect and sincerity, and accepted after a polite decline to show modesty. The timing of gift-giving—during festivals like Lunar New Year or Mid-Autumn Festival, or to mark milestones such as weddings and housewarmings—carries its own significance. Gift choices are laden with auspicious symbolism: oranges and tangerines

signify wealth, tea sets express respect, and high-quality liquor conveys honor to the host. Numerical connotations guide gift values: the number eight (bā) symbolizes prosperity, while the number four (sì)—pronounced like “death”—is strictly avoided. Wrapping in red paper or presenting red envelopes (hóngbāo) further amplifies the wish for good fortune. After receiving a gift, hosts customarily reciprocate within a reasonable period, ensuring that guanxi remains balanced and enduring (Hwang et al., 2009).

7. Artistic Expressions

7.1. Literature and Storytelling

English literature has evolved over centuries, showcasing a rich tapestry of genres and styles. Medieval works like Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* blend satire and vernacular speech to explore social classes and human foibles. The Renaissance era produced Shakespeare’s dramas—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*—which delve into individual psychology, moral ambiguity, and political intrigue. Enlightenment prose, exemplified by Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, emphasizes human reason, self-reliance, and exploration. Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge valorized emotion and nature, reacting against industrialization. The Victorian period saw novels by Charles Dickens (*Great Expectations*), the Brontë sisters (*Jane Eyre*), and Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the d’Urbervilles*), combining social critique with complex characterization. Twentieth-century modernists—Virginia Woolf (*Mrs Dalloway*), James Joyce (*Ulysses*)—pioneered stream-of-consciousness techniques, reflecting on the inner workings of the mind and the fragmentation of experience. Across these movements, themes of individualism, social justice, and the tension between tradition and progress recur.

Chinese literature encompasses a parallel depth and diversity. Tang dynasty poets like Li Bai and Du Fu crafted concise verse that celebrates nature, friendship, and philosophical introspection. The classical novels of the Ming and Qing dynasties—*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and *Journey to the West*—interweave history, mythology, and moral instruction, reinforcing Confucian values of loyalty, filial piety, and collective harmony. In the early twentieth century, Lu Xun’s short stories (e.g., *Diary of a Madman*) offered sharp social critique and called for cultural reform. Contemporary writers such as Mo Yan (*Red Sorghum*), Nobel Prize Laureate, employ magical realism to examine rural hardship, historical memory, and the impacts of rapid modernization. Throughout, Chinese storytelling often embeds moral lessons—highlighting the interplay between individual behavior and communal well-being—and preserves collective narratives that bind society together.

7.2. Visual Arts

Western visual arts have traditionally emphasized perspective, realism, and individual vision. During the Renaissance, masters like Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael developed linear perspective and chiaroscuro to achieve lifelike depth and anatomical precision. The Baroque period—seen in Caravaggio’s dramatic contrasts—heightened emotional intensity. In the 19th century, Impressionists such as Monet and Renoir shifted focus to fleeting light effects and color harmonies, while early Modernists (e.g., Picasso, Mondrian) broke with

representation altogether, exploring abstraction and subjective perception.

By contrast, traditional Chinese painting privileges expressive brushwork, harmony with nature, and calligraphic rhythm over photographic realism. Ink-and-wash artists like Fan Kuan and Wang Wei convey the spirit of landscapes through varied ink tones and fluid strokes on silk or rice paper. The *shān shuǐ* (“mountain-water”) genre presents idealized scenes that invite contemplation and reflect Daoist and Confucian reverence for the natural world. Calligraphy—celebrated as the supreme art—combines text and image, with each brushstroke embodying the artist’s energy and character. Color is used sparingly, often symbolically: green for growth, gold for prosperity, red for joy.

In the contemporary era, cross-cultural influences have fostered hybrid practices: Western artists incorporate ink painting techniques into abstraction, while Chinese artists experiment with oil painting and multimedia installations to reinterpret traditional motifs. Exhibitions at venues like the Tate Modern and Shanghai Power Station of Art showcase this dynamic exchange, demonstrating how visual arts continue to serve as a vibrant site of intercultural dialogue.

7.3. Performing Arts and Music

English-speaking cultures boast a long heritage in drama, orchestral music, and modern musical genres. Shakespearean theater—from tragedies like *Hamlet* to comedies such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—epitomizes the enduring power of dialogue, character complexity, and poetic verse on the world stage. Classical music thrives in institutions like the London Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic, where musicians perform works spanning Baroque composers (e.g., Bach, Handel) through the Romantic era (e.g., Brahms, Tchaikovsky). In contemporary times, genres such as jazz (originating in early 20th-century African American communities), rock (emerging from 1950s Britain and the U.S.), and hip-hop (born in 1970s New York City) continue to innovate through improvisation, stylistic fusion, and socially conscious lyrics.

In China, traditional performing arts combine music, movement, and visual spectacle in highly codified forms. Peking Opera integrates stylized gestures, elaborate costumes, and a singular vocal technique that blends speech, song, and acrobatics. Regional opera styles—such as Kunqu and Yueju—feature distinct dialects, melodic patterns, and poetic librettos. Instrumental ensembles center around the guzheng, erhu, and dizi, whose timbral interplay evokes natural imagery and emotional subtlety. Folk traditions include the vigorous lion dance and the fluid ribbon dance; both performed at festivals and ceremonies to celebrate community identity and ward off misfortune.

Modern cross-cultural fusions are flourishing. Western musicals mount Chinese-language productions in Shanghai and Beijing; symphony orchestras collaborate with folk instrument troupes to premiere hybrid concertos; and contemporary ensembles blend pentatonic scales with jazz harmonies. Experimental theater companies interweave Shakespearean texts with Peking Opera staging techniques, while dance troupes merge classical ballet vocabulary with traditional Chinese movement idioms. These hybrid forms illustrate a vibrant artistic dialogue, in which both English- and Chinese-influenced practices are reimagined and revitalized for global audiences.

8. Implications for Cross-Cultural Interaction

Successful cross-cultural engagement between English and Chinese contexts hinges on understanding and adapting to distinct communication norms, educational expectations, and social protocols. In international business, Western negotiators should recognize the importance of *guanxi* by investing time in informal social exchanges, demonstrating patience in indirect discussions, and nurturing personal trust, while Chinese counterparts can improve outcomes by providing clearer, more direct feedback and contractual details that align with low-context expectations. In the realm of education, collaborative programs succeed when instructors blend Western-style Socratic debate—which encourages critical thinking and open challenge—with the structured guidance and respect for hierarchical authority that many Chinese students prefer, thereby creating inclusive learning environments that cater to both learning styles. Tourism and cultural exchange likewise depend on mutual etiquette awareness: visitors from English-speaking countries touring China benefit from learning local customs—such as the polite refusal of initial offers—while Chinese travelers in Anglophone settings feel respected when hosts explicitly invite their opinions and engage them in open dialogue. By synthesizing these insights—ranging from directness and hierarchy to hospitality and reciprocity—businesspeople, educators, and travelers can more effectively bridge cultural divides and foster enduring, respectful relationships.

9. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of English and Chinese cultures underscores both shared human aspirations and distinct cultural pathways shaped by history, philosophy, and social institutions. While both cultures value social harmony and achievement, they diverge in individual-collective orientations, communication norms, and artistic sensibilities. By applying frameworks like Hall’s context model, Hofstede’s dimensions, Spencer-Oatey’s definition of culture, King & Bond’s sociological view, and Hwang et al.’s insights into *guanxi*, this paper elucidates these differences, offering insights to enhance intercultural understanding. In an increasingly interconnected world, such understanding is indispensable for effective communication, collaboration, and mutual respect across cultural divides.

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