

# **Cultural knowledge and foreign language teaching and learning: A study of Chinese Family schemas in language, culture and intercultural communication**

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## **Abstract**

A wide range of cultural knowledge with regard to families has been abstracted from Chinese life experiences over generations as Chinese Family schemas. This paper applies schema theories to the study of Chinese language, culture, and intercultural communication in the context of mainland Chinese speakers of English interacting with Anglo-Australians. It is found that Chinese Family schemas are extensively instantiated in the Chinese folk art of *chun lian*, literature, idioms and common sayings, forms of address, greetings, Chinese discourse and intercultural discourse. It is argued that, since Chinese Family schemas are culturally-constructed and the instantiations of the Family schemas are culturally-saturated, if not appreciated or ignored, they are likely to cause intercultural miscommunication. Thus it is implied that teaching and learning a foreign language (English for instance) may incorporate the overt investigation of cultural knowledge such as family schemas in the curriculum. Teaching materials might include some cross-cultural texts for learners to analyse the embedded cultural knowledge, and classroom activities might be organised with the theme of cultural experiences. The goal of language teaching and learning may include learners' ability to negotiate at the level of cultural schemas as well as the level of language, to achieve successful communication.

## **Introduction**

It has been observed that the family plays a pivotal role in the life of most Chinese people. "Arguably, Chinese culture may be specified as the culture of the family" (Mak and Chan, 1995:70). Stockman (2000) holds that family is the bedrock of Chinese society. The Chinese family is also regarded as a basic institution or social unit where "the values of the members are socialised and the pressures of social change are adapted to" (Lau, 1993:20.2). Chinese people foreground families in conceptualisations or knowledge configurations

to the extent that Chinese families serve as an analogy for wider human relationships in the culture (Leng, 2003).

The family and family relationships within each culture are conceptualised on the basis of internalised models or schemas. At a high level of abstraction and idealisation, Chinese Family schemas have emerged from the 5,000-year history of people searching, in the course of their interactions, for cultural meaning as Chinese who accord with Chinese cultural norms and values. The sources of Chinese Family schemas include the ecological conditions of agriculture, family economy, the cultural tradition of appreciating multi-generations living under one roof and the cultural experiences of ancestor worship. Moreover, the vast resources of Chinese classics, which have served as teachings of core cultural values and norms, also contribute to the emergence of Chinese Family schemas (Leng, 2003).

This paper first gives an account of schemas, cultural schemas and Chinese Family schemas. This is followed by examples from different aspects of Chinese language as instantiations of Chinese Family schemas. Examples collected from Chinese discourse in classroom discussions are then presented. Further examples of intercultural discourse collected in the context where mainland Chinese speakers of English interact with Anglo-Australians are also provided. It is concluded that the Chinese Family schemas influence the Chinese ways of speaking to the extent that, when Chinese people speak, both in Chinese and English, they invoke Chinese Family schemas as their in-built background knowledge to interpret and produce the on-going discourse. The implication of the paper is that in the context of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, the curriculum may incorporate some cross-cultural materials for learners to analyse the embedded cultural knowledge such as family schemas of many different cultures, and classroom activities might be organised with the theme of cultural experiences. The goal of English teaching and learning might include learners' awareness of cultural sensibility in the discourse that they and their interactants produce, and the ability to engage in meaning negotiation at the levels of language and cultural schemas.

### **Schemas, cultural schemas and Chinese family schemas**

Schema theory has proved to be a highly useful explanatory tool in cognitive studies for over half a century (Sharifian, 2001). It has been applied to the explanation of issues in such disciplines as artificial intelligence, cognitive science, cognitive psychology, cognitive anthropology, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics and the teaching of reading.

Basically, schemas are conceptual structures where human beings store, interpret and predict their experiences of the world. Plato was regarded as the first to establish the concept of schema as an ideal type that exists in the mind (Malcolm and Sharifian, 2002). However, it was Bartlett (1932) who was the first to use schema in the 1920s, although he owed the term to Head, the neurologist, who postulated “postural schema” to account for body disorder (cited in Brewer, 2000).

Cultural schemas are interchangeably called cultural models in the discipline of anthropology. In the 1990s, schemas in cognitive anthropology were studied by drawing on connectionism (e.g., D’Andrade, 1995; Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Connectionism is a new psychological paradigm in modelling the mechanisms of human cognition (e.g., McClelland et al. 1986; Rumelhart et al. 1986). Connectionism employs the models of parallel distributed processing (PDP) to study schemas in a scale of units. In accordance with PDP, a thorough understanding of schemas “should go beyond the individual units ... and look for schemata as properties of entire networks rather than single units or small circuits” (Rumelhart et al. 1986: 8). Thus, a schema in connectionism is viewed as “a coalition of units which cohere and that configurations of such coalitions determine the interpretations that the system can attain” (Rumelhart et al. 1986:53).

Strauss and Quinn (1997:6) discuss schemas in connectionist models of cognition. They define schemas as “networks of strongly connected cognitive elements that represent the generic concepts stored in memory”. They also contend that “schemas as construed in connectionist models are well-learned but flexibly adaptive rather than rigidly repetitive” (Strauss and Quinn:53). Sharifian (2003), following D’Andrade (1995) and Strauss and Quinn (1997), develops a model of cultural conceptualisations to explain how cultural conceptualisations may be represented in a distributed fashion across the minds in a cultural group. Sharifian (2003:187) states that “[h]uman conceptualisation is as much a cultural as it is an individual phenomenon”. He employs the notion “distributed representation” against “localised representation” after connectionism and explicitly advances the notion that “the minds that constitute the cultural network do not equally share all the elements of the schema, nor does each mind contain all the elements of the schema” (in press). Sharifian (2003:189-190) also maintains that “a large proportion of conceptualisations are ultimately ‘spread’ across a cultural group”.

The merit of Sharifian’s distributed model of cultural conceptualisations lies in the systematic and self-contained explanations it provides of why culture is not necessarily equally shared knowledge. The model allows for

discrepancies and disparities found within a cultural group. Sharifian (2003:192) reiterates that:

[t]his pattern of knowledge representation clearly accounts for ‘fuzzy’ understandings that characterise the reality of our communications. In reality people draw more or less on a schema; they do not exactly share the same schema. (*italics in original*).

Conversely, not every single member of a cultural group is expected to represent cultural knowledge in the same schemas. Age, gender, personality and personal life experiences, etc. may account for the differences in cultural schemas. Cultural schemas, in line with the model of cultural conceptualisations, are considered to emerge from the interactions between people of a cultural group when they negotiate and renegotiate their meanings over generations. They are the highly idealised and emergent patterns of interrelated cultural knowledge which enable an individual to interpret cultural experiences and react accordingly as a cultural member.

Chinese Family schemas are one of the specifications of Chinese cultural schemas. They are abstracted from the Chinese cultural experiences of agriculture and family economy, the tradition of multi-generations living together as one family, the custom of ancestor worship, and the vast resources of linguistic materials for the teaching of core Chinese values. Chinese Family schemas are composed of the knowledge that:

- a) families are the origin of life support
- b) families nurture an entwined relationship among family members
- c) family structures can be extended to include more than parents and children
- d) family members abide by filial piety to maintain family hierarchy and harmony.

It is also considered that Chinese Family schemas accommodate different degrees of recognition and access. Individual discrepancies from the instantiations of Chinese Family schemas under discussion are appreciated as evidence of a distributed representation of cultural knowledge.

### **Instantiations of Chinese family schemas**

Schema instantiations provide instances of the operation of schemas. Cultural schemas are instantiated and reflected extensively at different levels and units of language such as speech acts, idioms and metaphors (Sharifian, 2003). Words and phrases trigger off schemas. Chinese folk art, literature,

idioms, forms of address and greetings are observed to instantiate some aspects of Chinese Family schemas.

### ***Folk art, literature and family schema instantiations***

Chinese Family schemas are instantiated in Chinese *chun lian*, a folk art of couplets popular during the Chinese New Year as a part of its celebration. In *chun lian*, the family, paired with other pervasive entities in nature, is seen to be a frequently-depicted theme. The family appears with clouds, mountains, the earth and spring in *yun shan cheng xiu qian ban mei, da di geng xin wan hu chun* (Cloudy mountains are presenting beauty of a thousand kinds, the good earth is getting fresh when spring comes to visit ten thousands families), and it appears with the sky, year and the cosmos as in *tian zeng sui yue ren zeng shou, chun man qian kun fu man men* (As the sky grows with the year, men are getting one year older; as the cosmos becomes spring, families are blessed with happiness). In addition, families are coupled with light and air as in *bian di xiang guang lin fu men; man tian xi qi ru hua tang* (Auspicious light on the earth is wished to visit every family, happy air of the sky is wished to come to rooms). In a word, the instantiation of the schema that Chinese families are the origin of life support is achieved through the conceptualisation that families are as essential as other natural elements in the widely spread folk art *chun lian*.

Literature is another common medium of instantiation of Chinese Family schemas. A good number of Chinese poems feature Chinese families. One example is Traveller's Song by a Tang Dynasty poet Meng Jiao (AD. 751-814). He wrote *ci mu shou zhong xian, you zi shen shang yi, lin xing mi mi feng, yi kong chi chi gui* (The thread in the hands of a fond-hearted mother, makes clothes for the body of her wayward boy; Carefully she sews and thoroughly she mends, dreading the delays that will keep him late from home). The poem depicts the delicate love that the mother feels for her travelling son through the careful stitches. The closely knitted relationship between mother and son is instantiated through words such as threading, sewing and mending.

The theme of family is well represented in the classics of Chinese literature, *Hong Lou Meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber). *Hong Lou Meng* was written by the Chinese Qing Dynasty's greatest novelist, Cao Xueqin (1717-1763). In *Hong Lou Meng*, the complex relationships between members of a large family of the upper-class society are described through a tragic story. Likewise, *Jia* (The Family, 1931) by a celebrated Chinese modern novelist *Ba Jin*, offers a critique of contemporary society by recounting the lives of three sons of a powerful family.

In these literary works, families are conceptualised as societies, and the relationships between family members are mapped onto social relationships, which reinforces the conceptualisation that the whole nation is one family, instantiated in the Chinese characters *guo jia* (country family for “country”), and people included in any group are called *da jia* (big family for “everyone”).

### ***Idioms, common expressions and family schema instantiations***

Several Chinese idioms and linguistic expressions instantiate the filial piety schema. A four-character Chinese idiom such as *zun lao ai you* (respecting the elder, and looking after the younger) is a highly recommended value. A filial son/daughter, who looks after his/her parents carefully at the cost of his/her own interests, is semantically represented as *xiao zi xian sun* (a filial or dutiful daughter/son). Such a *xiao zi* is construed as an honest person, who is worthy of friendship and responsibilities. In contrast, a person who violates filial piety becomes an unfilial/undutiful daughter/son in Chinese, which is represented in the four-character idiom as *bu xiao zhi zi*. He/she is categorised as a black sheep of the family, cruel and contemptible and undeserving of trust.

Many Chinese common expressions instantiate Chinese Family schemas. *er bu xian mu chou, gou bu xian jia pin* (A child is not disdainful of his ugly mother, just like a dog is not of his poor house”) expounds the mother-children relationship in the similes of child and dog, mother and house. Another saying *jia you yi lao, ru you yi bao* (Having an elder living at home is like having a treasure) also illustrates the Chinese value of respecting the old.

The schema of respect for the old is largely related to the Chinese cultural knowledge that, when a person grows old, he/she is full of life experiences, and is rich in common sense and life wisdom (Lin, 1937). Many Chinese sayings depict an elder who is supposed to be able to understand the present and predict the future. Examples of such sayings are as *lao ren chi de yan bi nian qing ren chi de fan hai duo*; *guo de qiao bi nian qing ren zou de lu hai chang* (The salt an elder takes in is more than the rice a young man eats in his life; the bridges an elder crosses cover longer distance than a young man travels on foot); *sheng jiang hai shi lao de la* (It is the old ginger that gives the best spice), *lao ma shi tu* (An old horse knows the way: an old hand is a good guide) and *lao jiang chu ma, yi ge ding lia* (When a veteran goes into action, he can do the job of two”), give the reason why young Chinese should learn from the elders. Otherwise, the young ones will suffer losses before their eyes if they ignore parents’ advice (*bu ting lao ren yan, chi kui zai yan qian*).

A well-quoted Chinese allusion *Kong Rong rang li* instantiates the schema of promoting harmonious family relationship. *Kong Rong rang li* was developed from a well-known Chinese story which is about a four-year old boy, *Kong Rong* of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD). He always placed other people's interests above his own by offering the best li (pear) to his brothers. *Kong Rong* gave the best pear to his younger brother, because he thought he was older than the younger brother, and he offered the best pear to his older brother on the grounds that he was younger than the older brother. The story of *Kong Rong rang li* is learned by Chinese children to promote courtesy between siblings or cousins and friends.

Sharifian (2003:196) maintains that “[p]roposition- schemas ... act as models of thought and behaviour”. Many Chinese idioms and sayings have been conceptualised by Chinese people as such that they have become proposition-schemas and given rise to Chinese value systems. These idioms may regulate people's behaviours while instantiating Chinese Family schemas.

### ***Forms of address and family schema instantiations***

Some common everyday forms of address also instantiate Chinese Family schemas. Titles of mother and father are embedded in the titles of aunts and uncles in the Chinese language. Aunt Mother is used for *yi ma* (mother's sister), *jiu ma/mu* (the wife of mother's brother), *da ma* (the wife of father's first elder brother), *er da ma* (the wife of father's second elder brother), *shen niang* (the wife of father's younger brother) and *gu ma* (father's sister) and uncle father is used for *jiu fu* (mother's brother), *bo fu* (father's elder brother). In Chinese extended families, therefore, it would seem that aunts and uncles are conceptualised as close as parents.

Similarly, brothers and sisters are embedded in Chinese cousins. Cousins in China are addressed as cousin brothers or cousin sisters, or simply and more frequently, merely as brothers and sisters, as if they belonged to the same biological parents. Thus someone's eldest cousin brother can be addressed as *da biao ge* (Eldest Cousin Brother) or *da ge* (Eldest Brother).

To a great extent, marriage expands the family network and it is strengthened through family titles. Father and mother are the only accepted titles for the in-laws. Older sisters and brothers are also extended to be the titles for the spouse's older sisters, brothers and cousins. Any given name used in these contexts will be considered as an insult and will cause offence.

### ***Greetings and family schema instantiations***

The Chinese speech act of greetings is another instantiation of Chinese Family schemas. “Going home (*hui jia*) ?” is commensurate to “Good-bye!” in Chinese and “Going home (*hui jia*) !” as a reply functions as “Good-bye!”. “Coming home *lah (lai jia lah)*?” functions as “Hello, how are you?” in Chinese, and “Coming home *lah (lai jia lah)*!” by itself can be used as a reply and functions as “Fine, and how are you?”. Depending on the relationship between the interlocutors and the greeting context, “Coming home?/!” and “Going home?/!” may elicit replies with different details. A smile or a nod can be a reply, if the addressee is in a hurry or, as mentioned above, the confirmation can also be a brief reply. Some Chinese may even use this greeting as a conversation initiator and extend the conversation too.

Family members and extended family members are often embedded in Chinese greetings which are not only common in informal and oral Chinese conversations, but also in formal and official letters. On the occasion of congratulating the first Chinese astronaut, Yang Liwei, the two provincial government officials of his hometown, Suizhong, Liaoning Province, wrote a letter of greetings to his parents and wife and extended their congratulations to them (see translation below). They associated Yang’s achievement with the family and praised Yang for gaining glory for the country as well as for the family.

Parents of Comrade Yang Liwei and his wife:

We are very delighted to hear about the success of launching into space the first Chinese manned spaceflight Shenzhou-5 this morning on 15 October 2003, which entered the planned orbit. As the first space-exploring hero in our country, Comrade Yang Liwei is the pride of every Chinese, and the honour of your family. Comrade Yang Liwei’s hometown is in Suizhong, so the people in Liaoning are very proud of having such an outstanding son. On behalf of Liaoning Provincial Committee, Liaoning People’s Government and ourselves, we would like to express to you our sincere congratulations and warm regards!

We attribute Comrade Yang Liwei’s special honour and gaining glory for our country to your great support. We wish you could care about and support the national astronautic career as much as you did before, and meanwhile wish you could look after the family, take care of your health, and continue supporting Comrade Yang Liwei’s work, so that he could contribute more to the country.

Wish you a good health, successful work and a happy family!

Wen Shizhen

Party Secretary of Liaoning Committee;

Director of the standing committee of People's representatives

Bo Xilai

Deputy Party Secretary of Liaoning Committee;

Governor of Liaoning Province

(translated from Liaoning Daily: 15/10/2003)

What might be culturally distinctive that emerged from the letter is that not only the spouse but also the parents of the adult astronaut were conceptualised as family members who received the greetings. Extending concern for and paying respects to the astronaut's parents in the hometown and honouring them for their attachment with the astronaut are considered as an appropriate manner of greeting the astronaut himself. To a large extent, it is the Chinese Family schemas that underlie the official letter.

Thus far, the Chinese Family schemas have been shown to be instantiated from Chinese folk art, literature, idioms, common expressions, forms of address and greetings. Schema instantiations are achieved through the semantic content that these Chinese folk art, literature, common linguistic expressions and greetings convey. The semantic content influences the Chinese conceptualisations of the world and Chinese learn how to think and behave accordingly. As Liu (1986:98) comments "[w]hen Chinese read classical stories and novels bequeathed from earlier generations, they learn how to think and behave like the characters in these stories and novels".

### **Chinese Family schemas in Chinese discourse**

*The Joy Luck Club*, a movie adapted from the novel by Amy Tan (1993), was chosen to stimulate a discussion for the investigation of family schemas in Chinese discourse. The movie reveals the conflicts and the mutual appreciation among family members in the experience of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their four respective daughters born and raised in America. Whilst the conflicts largely embody the different cultural values that the Chinese mothers and their American daughters hold, the appreciation tends to arise painfully out of the identification and negotiation of core Chinese family values on the part of the mothers and their respective daughters.

Nine adult mainland and overseas Chinese students studying in a pre-university college in Western Australia participated in the study. They were shown the whole movie continuously once. The nine participants came back

to participate in the discussion two days after the movie was shown so that they could have some time to ponder on it. The discussion was prompted by the question “Which character or episode in *The Joy Luck Club* impressed you the most and why?” The discussion which lasted for two hours was conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audio-recorded.

Below are direct translations of some parts of the transcribed discussion which express the participants’ interpretations of the movie characters and their reflections on their own life experiences. “P” followed by a number stands for the number of participants speaking up in the discussion. A second number after a hyphen stands for the number of times that the participant spoke up. For example, P1-1 means Participant 1 speaking for the first time.

### *Interpretations of the movie characters*

In the discussion, many participants found the stories of Lindo, her daughter Waverly, Suyuan and her daughter June very impressive. They not only gave an account of their stories, but also elaborated on them with their interpretations.

(P1-1) When her daughter Waverly got a champion, Lindo took her and the magazine with Waverly as the cover girl to the street to show off to every passerby. It’s very interesting here. In China, many parents like to compare their children with other children, as if to raise their own status. Most Chinese would compete for being Number One, i.e., if they’ve got a Number One, they’re perfect. If they themselves [parents] failed, they would insist that their children should get Number One. Eventually, if their children got Number One, they would be very happy, and would tell others about it. Getting Number One is an honour. In the past, people worked hard to achieve academic success to honour and glorify their ancestors, to let others know about their family. That is, to make their family famous. This tradition continues all these years ...

(P1-2) Later when Waverly grew older, in order to please her parents, she married a Chinese. More often than not, if you don’t do things according to mom’s will, mom will show her unpleasant facial expression to you. So, in order to please her mom, Waverly then married a Chinese. This has to do with Chinese tradition.

(P3) I understand why Suyuan wanted her daughter June to be perfect, although June at first quarreled with her mother, telling her she wasn’t. Suyuan rested all her hopes on June. She lost two twin baby daughters, and she would like June, the survived daughter, to shoulder all her hopes, and it’s June’s family duty. Chinese parents and children have a close tie, but so close that I feel it

brings pressure on children, just like on June. But eventually, June agreed to try.

(P5-1) Lindo, Auntie Lindo, I feel, she, she left me the deepest impression, that is, Lindo experienced many struggles in her mind, and she changed her view of life. When she was young, she could not control her fate, she was arranged by her mother, arranged by her mother to a marriage ... Just because she didn't have any say in her own life, she didn't want her own daughter Waverly to repeat her own miseries in life, she arranged her daughter this, and arranged her daughter that ... So when the daughter made achievement, her mother was very happy. Chinese people pay attention to the connections between family members. So when the daughter made achievement, the mother naturally felt happy for herself.

(P5-2) The daughter [Waverly] was rebellious [when she was young]. However, she learned to obey to her mother when she grew up. When she had a boyfriend, she made a point to seek her mother's opinion. She hoped her mother would accept her boyfriend. Chinese stress the importance of family, and this makes them Chinese.

(P6-1) She [Lindo] herself had never had such an opportunity of learning to play chess, so she felt, she placed all her hopes on her daughter. She regarded her own, her own daughter as the extension of her own hope.

(P6-2) The boyfriend Waverly found herself was also very successful... She hoped that her mother could realise this, hoping her mother could agree to her own choice.

(P8) The tension between Waverly and June was surfaced, but indeed, the tension, there were also subtle tensions between the two mothers [Lindo and Suyuan], although they were friends, playing mahjiang regularly together. As a matter of fact, the tensions between the women were the tensions between two families. In tradition, Chinese people are inclined to stress their own family, their own family's status, hoping to honour and glorify their ancestors... Although Chinese always want to brag themselves, to show that they are better than others, for most Chinese, from the perspective of the tradition, this indeed shows that their family is better than other families. It is their family that is better than others'. It is their family that can bring up such a successful person. As a result, in order to compete between families, they [the younger generation] cannot follow their own wills, as they wish. Parents and other people of the older generation will force you to accept their ideas. If your father wished to be a lawyer, but he failed, he would want you to be a lawyer. If you wished to be a doctor, your father would be unhappy with you.

(P9) Whenever she [Waverly] had some ideas, or whenever she had something to do, her mother [Lindo] would say opposite words, would be very strict with

her daughter in her attitude. Indeed, at the bottom of her mother's heart, her mother loved her, and cared about her very much)

It seems that one of the reasons why the stories of Lindo, Waverly, Suyuan and June left the participants with a deep impression is that the stories triggered off the participants' embedded cultural knowledge about Chinese families and family relationships. The entangled relationship between Lindo, Waverly, Suyuan and June reflected that in Chinese culture, parents would involve themselves in their children's lives, either to prevent their children repeating their own past miseries (P5-1), or to take pride in what their children have achieved due to their involvement (P1-1; P5-1), or their love and care (P9). The striving for an individual's success might be motivated by family glory (P1-1) or pushed by competition between families (P8). Most Chinese children, as a result of family expectations, would try (or more frequently be forced to try) to live up to their parents' expectations (P3), and try to please their parents when making decisions so as to achieve family harmony (P1-2; P5-2; P6-2). The Chinese Family schema of an entwined relationship also underlies P6's interpretation (P6-1) that children are the extension of their parents' hopes.

### *Participants' self-reflections*

In the discussion participants also related certain movie episodes to their own life experiences, which, to a large extent, verified the movie story and consolidated their interpretations.

- (P2) Chinese parents are proud of their children's academic achievement. They would think, the parents would think, that children's achievement is their own, is what they have planted. My parents are proud of me and my sister studying here overseas. Children would please their parents to show their love, or get good marks for the exams, or accompany their parents whenever they've got time, and be filial to their parents.
- (P4) I think it's good to listen to parents [heed what parents say]. Certainly good. Because they have more experiences than me... Children should listen to their parents. If not, they will regret and suffer losses.
- (P7) I won't ignore their [my parents'] vanity, because Chinese give priority to the word filial ... It's not easy for parents to give birth to you and to bring you up. They have sacrificed pretty much. You should appreciate their favours and return their favours.
- (P8) My brother and I have been in Australia for over three years. We don't work here. My parents have been supporting us, paying our tuitions and bills. They are willing to pay, because they want me to study better. They are worried for

my future, my future work, my future family and many of my other stuff.  
They have exhausted their hearts for me (cao xin).

It can be seen from the participants' discussion that Chinese Family schemas were elicited when the participants interpreted the movie and their own related experiences. They drew on the evoked core cultural knowledge to comment on parent-child relationships in the movie and in real life. Their accounts indicated that Chinese Family schemas propel individual Chinese, particularly adult children, to strive for the goal of family honour and family glory. Other family members, parents in particular, are involved in the process along with the striving children. The involvement is conceptualised as parents' responsibility, love, care, exhausted hearts and sacrifice, although parents' own wills and dreams and interference are also involved. The entangled family relationship also underlies children's accommodating parents' interference, attending to parents' words, pleasing their parents and understanding and appreciating them.

### **Chinese Family schemas in intercultural discourse**

Sharifian (2001:125) maintains that "schema theory provides a powerful tool for examining culturally determined cognitive structures which underlie the production of distinctive discourse patterns". Intercultural communication takes place not only at the level of language forms, but more importantly, at the level of each other's cultural knowledge. The gaps in cultural schemas may lead to gaps in communication.

The following conversations were excerpted from an audio-recorded intercultural communication corpus collected from adult Anglo-Australian (Australian = A) and Mainland Chinese (Chinese = C) participants in Western Australia. Fifty pairs of Australians and Chinese were invited to meet and chat informally for about an hour at a time and place of their convenience. Some distinctive and recurrent features regarding Chinese cultural knowledge of families which emerged from the corpus are interpreted from the perspectives of the Chinese and Australian participants during follow-up interviews and are thus identified as Chinese Family schemas in intercultural communication.

#### ***Excerpt 1: Children's future***

1. A19 I've got a son and a daughter. My son was quite able, (C19: right) high school, very good (C19: um) and at the beginning of Year 11, he said he wanted to leave school.
2. C19: Why (anxiously)?

3. A19: He wanted to go. He wanted outside work (C19: right). He didn't want inside work (C19: right, yeah) and for outside work, you really need to go to something like TAFE college (C19 right) and he is
4. C19: And what's your, you know what's your...?
5. A19: I'm delighted,
6. C19: Oh, you're delighted! (in an amazed tone and laughing)
7. A19: Because that's what he really wanted. (C19: OK), and after that, I mean it's so hard for young people to know what they want (C19: ah). I mean, but we were called to school to make, meet his student counsellor, the subject adviser and, who was horrified that a person who has the ability to go to the university was going to leave school.
8. C19: And choose to leave school?
9. A19: Yeah, I said you must listen to the boy, what does he want (C19: Yeah), it's not that adults
10. C19: I think you're so open, you know, you agree he took his choice.
11. A19: I always listen to kids, I always believe them (C19: oh!). They have a right to be heard, their opinions count.
12. C19: Right. And now what's, what's your, your, your son's place?
13. A19: He is, he went through, he got a plumbery apprentice. ....
14. C19: But the Chinese parents are quite different from you, if my son told, tell me, oh, I want to go to, you know, just be a worker or (A19: yeah) something, I will be, I will be shocked (C19 and A19 laughing), because all the Chinese people, whether they are educated or not, they wish their children can go to university ... Also me (laughing), I need to push my, my son, I have one son,
15. A19: One son, and he, he is here with you?
16. C19: Yes, he is nine years old, and I try to give him all the opportunity I didn't get. You know, even though I'm poor, I bought a piano for him (A19: wow!), I send him, I'll send him to a Australian youth choir (A19: yes), and just give him ANY opportunity (A19: um, yeah) to, you know, improve his quality (A19: yes) or any ability.
17. A19: Yes, I'll certainly identify their skills and make sure they get (C19: yeah) use, I mean we all did that too to our kids, I think and LOTS of Australian families to you. You're around and you're sure they join clubs and they learn the extra things you don't get at school (C19: yeah) ...
18. C19: Just give, give them chance
19. A19: The opportunities, yes

20. C19: Develop, develop the  
 21. A19: Develop their potentials  
 22. C19: Yes, yes. My husband wish him be an athletics.  
 23. A19: Of course, yes, sports, yes,  
 24. C19: But, because he like football, soccer, (A19: yeah), but my, I know my son is not very good at sports, but still you know, send him, to as-, let him to join a soccer club.  
 25. A19: Right, yes  
 26. C19: Last year,  
 27. A19: He's quite young to do all these things.  
 28. C19: Yeah (laughing)  
 29. A19: Will your husband come to agree with you for this sort of thing?

In the excerpt, both C19 and A19 as parents “love” their children, but the expression of this love is shown to attach to different understandings of responsibilities for children, which are generated from two family schemas. According to his family schema of observing independence and freedom among family members, A19 considers that parents show their love for their children by always listening to them (Turns 9 and 11). C19, however, expresses her love for her son according to the schema which lays on parents the responsibility to push children (Turn 14), make decisions for them and provide all the possible opportunities to improve their quality and abilities (Turn 16). C19's schema is indeed embedded in the Chinese Family schema that sees family members as entwined with each other, and it is parents' responsibility to gear children to succeed for the family.

C19 interpreted A19's discourse according to her Chinese Family schema. Her anxiety concerns the reason why A19's son made his own decision to leave school at a young age (Turn 2), and what the father's opinion was towards his leaving school (Turn 4). C19's amazement (Turn 6) and surprise (Turn 8) at hearing that A19 was delighted at his son's decision to leave school were the activation of the Chinese Family schema. C19's comment on A19 as an open-minded father (Turn 10) implied that she saw it out of the ordinary for a father not to be involved when children made vital decisions.

It seems that C19's family schema urged her to make an enquiry about A19's son at Turn 12, which also displayed her hesitation in appreciating A19's belief and behaviour with regard to allowing a young man to make his own decisions. C19's own belief was that she and her husband should make choices for their son (Turns 16 and 22). Not only should she offer her son all the opportunities that she had missed, but her husband also thought it adequate

to impose his own interests in football on the son, even though the son was not good at sports (Turn 24).

As Palmer (1996:7) observes, “[a]n emotion term, such as *love*, predicates not only feeling states, but also scenarios of discourse and social action”. A19’s remarks demonstrated a gap between his Australian family schema and C19’s schema. In Turn 27, A19 claimed that he did not think a nine-year old could accommodate so many hobbies of learning the piano, joining an Australian youth choir and playing football all at the same time. A19 operated on his schema of the family which saw parents as granting children freedom to make their own choices rather than children being pushed to fulfil the parents’ wishes. A19’s question (Turn 29) about whether C19’s husband agreed with her also indicated that his schema of giving freedom to children made him feel uneasy with what C19’s son was pushed to do.

***Excerpt 2: Mother’s silver spoon***

1. C16: I found, I found it’s a very different thing, VERY different from China thing is, you know the old lady have, has a very beautiful spoon, a beautiful spoon and cup, it’s silver, silver spoon, spoon and cup, and
2. A16: Is this, is this in Adelaide?
3. C16: In, in Brisbane,
4. A16: In Brisbane.
5. C16: Yeah in Br- Brisbane. And when, when we wen- went together to, to, to her son’s home, and, and she bring there, bring them there.
6. A16: Aah!
7. C16: And you know, in Brisbane there, and after the lunch, it’s very interesting thing, and her son washed it very clean, and let her mother bring back to home. In China it’s quite different. In China maybe,
8. A16: ‘cos it doesn’t happen here.
9. C16: Yeah?
10. A16: No, I mean it doesn’t happen in our family.
11. C16: Yeah, yeah, it’s. No?
12. A16: No.
13. C16: No, no.
14. A16: No, perhaps it’s special for her.
15. C16: But, but, maybe special, but maybe, but in China, you know, the, the mother and the son usually regard as the same, the same family,
16. A16: Yes,

17. C16: Everything should be ours,  
18. A16: Yes,  
19. C16: Not only yours or mine.  
20. A16: Yes. That's interesting.  
21. C16: It's quite so different  
22. A16: Yeah.  
23. C16: From yours?  
24. A16: My, because, no, I mean, if I go to my, my mum's place,  
25. C16: Yes, you, you bring something, special thing?  
26. A16: No,  
27. C16: And you'll,  
28. A16: No,  
29. C16: You'll bring it back?  
30. A16: I'll, er, (...) oh, no I'll bring food, I'll bring some,  
31. C16: Because maybe, maybe, maybe the old lady thought it's very expensive, so should, "I should keep it".  
32. A16: Yes.  
33. C16: Yeah, how about your family?  
34. A16: No, I mean, if my mum, if my mum comes to my place, aaand um, when I'm having a big, I'm having, I'm having a dinner. I've got my family. I have my sister come around with her husband, and my mum and my dad come over, and um, me and my partner, we'll sit down, we'll have a meal,  
35. C16: Yes.  
36. A16: And sometimes, I'll cook everything,  
37. C16: You'll cook everything.  
38. A16: And other times, mom will bring something, and my sister will bring something, and I'll bring, I'll do the main meal,  
39. C16: Main meal, ok,  
40. A16: Like I'll put dessert on tray, and then we'll sit down and we'll have our meal, but we'll use all of my plates and of my cups and, you know all of my stuff.  
41. C16: Oh, oh, oh what I mean is that maybe the old lady think we are, we are new, new person, maybe their habit to bring a special thing,  
42. A16: Yeah,  
43. C16: Yeah.  
44. A16: Oh, I see.  
45. C16: Yeah, special thing, special spoon, and special spoon. But I mean, I think, the, the, the old lady in China should been, shouldn't bring them back.  
46. A16: Should, no,

47. C16: Bring them back, because she will, she will, she will keep them to the, to her, to her son's home.
48. A16: Aaaaah!
49. C16: Here it's quite different.
50. A16: Oh I see!
51. C16: Yours is yours, mines is mines (laughing).
52. A16: Yes, well, everything is all shared,
53. C16: All shared in China,
54. A16: And in China,
55. C16: Nearly in China everything is shared.
56. A16: That's the way it should be.
57. C16: It should be? Here it should be?
58. A16: No, no. It doesn't, it's not like, it's definitely this is ours, and that's yours, so,
59. C16: Ok, ok.

Excerpt 2 shows that C16's comment about the Australian lady's behaviour is not consonant with Chinese Family schemas. C16 reiterated that the Australian lady's behaviour of bringing back her silver spoon and cup from her son's place was something very different (Turns 1, 7, 21 and 49). On the basis of his Chinese Family schema that family members are embedded in one interwoven network, mother and son (even after marriage) usually regard themselves as "the same family" (Turn 15), and family members should not draw a clear demarcation for material things (Turns 17, 19, 45 and 47).

Like C19 in Excerpt 1, C16 also interpreted A16's discourse with his Chinese Family schema. When A16 tried to justify the Australian lady's behaviour, telling C16 that perhaps the silver spoon was special for the lady (Turn 14), C16 could not agree with her. He insisted that the family network should outweigh the individual's special choice (Turns 15, 17 and 19), and even if the old lady wanted to keep the silver spoon, it might be because of the value of the silver spoon *per se* (Turn 31), rather than that the lady found it special for herself. Then C16 suggested that what made the silver spoon special was not its significance to the lady, but the special occasion that the family were entertaining guests. The Chinese schema that family should extend its structure to include and honour guests with something special (Turn 41) was activated. Furthermore, C16 contended that the special and valuable thing should be shared, and the Australian lady should give the silver spoon and cup to her son (Turns 45 and 47). This is because, as C16 repeated, "nearly in China everything is shared" (Turns 53 and 55).

A16's family schema of sharing is different from C16's. Her schema is based on her understanding that family members should make contributions to

share the responsibility (of cooking) (Turns 30, 38). Her concept of sharing was based on a clear demarcation of “it’s definitely that is ours, and that’s yours” (Turn 58). However, C16 associated A16’s concept of sharing with his Chinese Family schema that sharing was based on “everything should be ours” (Turn 17).

Different understandings of sharing are related to two family schemas with regard to family relationships. His belief that “nearly in China everything is shared” (Turns 53 and 55) eventually made A16 realise that what should be in China is not what should be, or like what should be in her family (Turn 58).

The two conversations demonstrate that the Chinese speakers of English (C19 and C16), equipped with Chinese Family schemas, could not agree with the Anglo-Australians who profited the Western family schemas (A19 and A16) and *vice versa*.

## **Conclusion and implications**

This paper is an application of schema theories to the study of Chinese Family schemas in language, culture and intercultural communication. Chinese Family schemas are understood in the model of distributed representation of cultural conceptualisations. They are shown to be instantiated not only in the Chinese folk art, literature works, idioms and greetings, but also in Chinese discourse and intercultural discourse. Chinese Family schemas influence the Chinese ways of speaking to the extent that they surface in language and affects intercultural communication.

The abundant instantiations of Chinese Family schemas suggest that cultural schemas function as a navigator in discourse production. The study thus implies that foreign language teaching and learning in non-native cultural contexts should take into consideration the teaching of cultural schemas through cultural studies, cultural experiences, and cultural interaction. The curriculum and teaching materials could include cross-cultural texts for the learners to become culture-sensitive. Testimonies of cultural experiences could be presented as classroom activities. The negotiation of cultural schemas should be taught as viable and tangible ways of meaning negotiation, for achieving desirable intercultural communication.

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