



# A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Similarities and Differences in Chinese and American Body Language and the Reasons

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**Abstract.** In cross-cultural communication, the scientific understanding and appropriate use of body language can promote the presentation of sound communication effects. China and the United States are the first and the second largest economies in the world, playing essential roles in international politics and economy respectively. The research question of this paper is to analyze the similarities and differences in body language between China and the United States, and the reasons for the similarities and differences. Literature and Comparative analysis methods are mainly used for the study. The significance of this is to help people make better use of body language in daily communication and public speaking, and simultaneously eliminate or avoid misunderstandings arising from cultural differences in body language.

**Keywords:** Body language; Intercultural communication; Chinese and American language comparison; Cultural differences; Documentary method; Comparative analysis method

## 1 Introduction

There is no doubt that language is one of the most important communication tools for human beings. However, non-verbal body signals play a very important role in the spread of human civilization and social interaction. In other words, most of the effective information of interpersonal communication and interaction is transmitted by the body movements of the actor, which we call Body language. The deepening of economic globalization will inevitably lead to more frequent. Communication activities between countries. Whether it is due to the need for foreign affairs activities at the national level or the needs of individual citizens to study abroad, visit relatives and friends, travel, and other needs, body language can boost the effectiveness of social communication. Recognizing the differences in the connotation of body language in

different cultural backgrounds and respecting and understanding the body language signals that are different from their habits are undoubtedly good channels for both sides to reach a friendly and efficient consensus.

### **1.1 Research Objectives and Questions**

First objectives is to explore the similarities and differences in body language between China and the United States. Second objectives is to analyse the reasons for the differences and similarities between Chinese and American body language.

First questions is what are the similarities and differences between Chinese and American body language? Second questions is why are there similarities and differences between Chinese and American body language?

## **2 Research Significance**

In 2010, China rose to become the second largest economy in the world, and with the continuous construction of the foreign discourse system of socialism with Chinese characteristics with "One Belt, One Road" and "Community of Human Destinies" as the main content, China has played an increasingly important role in the world's political and economic arena. China is playing an increasingly important role in the world's political and economic arena. China is playing an increasingly important role in the world political and economic arena. The United States is the only superpower in the world, and the frequency of interaction between China and the United States has been on the rise. Learning the laws of body language between China and the United States and rationally looking at the differences between China and the United States will be conducive to better communication and cooperation between China and the United States, and will be more conducive to promoting the cause of world peace and the healthy development of the global economy.

## **3 Literature Review**

Research Status Academic research on body language shows a certain degree of fragmentation and lag, and more research on body language began after 2000. The research on body language is more diversified, not only from the point of view of body language expression itself, but also from the point of view of the characteristics and ways of body language expression in different countries.

### **3.1 Research on the basic functions of body language**

Body language is a way for human beings to express and convey their thoughts and feelings through their facial expressions, gesture movements, and changes in body posture. Using one's body to express one's thoughts is almost an instinct of human beings, because it is simple, fast, intuitive, widely used in real life, sometimes silent,

and skilfully expresses the message, leaving more space for the other party's imagination. It can strengthen and supplement the speech-language expression and coordinate the language message <sup>[1]</sup>. Non-verbal communication is an important part of human communicative activities, and its status is getting more and more attention. Starting from the types and functions of nonverbal communication, this paper systematically analyses the relationship between nonverbal communication and culture and its role in cross-cultural communication. Through comparative analysis, it finds out the universality, specificity, differences, and similarities of non-verbal communication in cross-cultural communication, understands its different cultural meanings, and puts forward strategies to avoid cultural conflicts <sup>[2]</sup>.

### **3.2 Reasons for the study on the differences between Chinese and Western body language and their causes**

With the integration of the global economy and the increase of cross-cultural contacts in various fields, the study of body language has become more and more important, as it plays an important role in disseminating information and expressing emotions. Therefore, people should endeavor to learn and accumulate the characteristics of different body languages of different cultures. To avoid misunderstanding or conflict, they should acquire the ability to analyze the meaning of body language in specific environments and situations to ensure effective and successful cultural communication. At the same time, knowledge of different cultures is essential because body language can vary due to cultural differences <sup>[3]</sup>. Body language can convey messages in specific situations, but the expression of body language messages will vary during interpersonal communication in different language countries. Therefore, in the process of intercultural communication, it is necessary to understand the meaning of body language expression of people from other countries for better intercultural communication. Dong Fangyue has limited the corresponding scope in the field of researching the differences between Chinese and American body language, moreover, he takes individualism and organism in Hofstadter's theory of cultural dimensions as the theory to find out the main reasons for the differences between Chinese and American body language expressions <sup>[4]</sup>. In the process of intercultural communication, people communicate at first sight not through words but through body language. For example, Chinese people communicate more by shaking hands, while Americans express more by hugging. It can be seen that there will be some differences in body language expression between China and the United States, and this difference is attributed to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Mastering the differential expression of body language can avoid embarrassment in communication, understand the thinking patterns of people in different cultures, and emphasize the use of body language expression. We need to pay attention to differential expression to enhance the accuracy of information expression <sup>[5]</sup>.

### 3.3 Body language conveys emotion

Abramson Leo, Petrank Rotem, Marom Inbal, and Aviezer Hillel in "Social Interaction Contexts Shape Emotion Recognition Through Body Language, Not Facial Expressions", suggest that "In addition to using language to express emotions, people also shape emotion recognition through body language, not facial expressions, during interactive communication.", proposes that "in the process of interactive communication, in addition to using language to express emotions, people can also perceive each other's emotional expressions through non-verbal forms, and in the course of the study [6]. Hong, through experiments, recognized body expressions such as fear and anger and eventually found that people, when confronted with different facial expressions, were able to accurately recognize each other's emotional expressions, forming a two-way interactive process [7]. Huang Xuejun's aesthetics "body language in the vocal performance of the significance of the book," mentioned, "body language is not only embodied in social occasions, but also applied to the field of art, such as vocal performance is more the application of language, the performer's artistic performance is also the performer's artistic performance is also affected by body language, and even body language directly affected, and even the performer's artistic performance is also affected by body language. influence and even body language directly affect the audience's aesthetic experience, so in the process of stage performance, we should constantly improve our artistic taste and pay attention to the expression of body language [8]. In "Huang Xuejun Proposal", the UK is best at using body language in stage performances, in the 18th century, when film and television drama were limited by technology, could only use body language for emotional expression, that is, we are most familiar with the mime expression, and found that the greater the amplitude of the limbs of the expression, the more it can cause the audience's resonance [9]. Zhao Hongbin's "body language in Choral Conducting in the artistic Value of" "body language is not only affected by social culture and regional influence, but also by individual differences, prompting the same thing in the expression of the body movement deviation, that is, each person will have a unique form of body language expression, through the body language can be enriched by the expression of the content, to express more emotions [10]. " The artistic value of choir conductor body language is analyzed by taking symphonic choir conductor as an example. Through combing the literature of foreign scholars, it is found that the research of body language by foreign scholars is more in the expression of emotion, not in the differences of body language expression in different countries, but more in the field of art.

## 4 Research Methodology

Literature research method: CNKI search platform and the school library platform on the "body language" literature as the basis of research, around the research topic of this paper to search for relevant literature, literature summary and collation, analysis and judgment of the literature, to deepen the theoretical basis of this study, enrich the writing ideas. In order to solve Q1.

Comparative analysis method: The comparison of body language between China and the United States is more to find the differences between China and the United States in the process of body language expression, and in-depth analysis of the main reasons for the differences in body language expression, so it is necessary to compare the same meaning of body language expression between China and the United States. In order to solve Q2.

## **5 Comparative Analysis of Body Language in China and the United States United States of America**

The various parts of the human body can only coordinate their movements by cooperating. The human body, with the cooperation of various body parts, can present an overall postural meter, which reflects the inner thinking of the actor more comprehensively and systematically than a single movement of a specific body part. Although human postures vary greatly, there are commonalities and patterns in reflecting the inner subjective world, which provides a premise for us to explore the differences in body language between China and the United States. At the same time, due to the influence of various factors such as physical environment, religious beliefs, social history, and culture, the connotations expressed by the body language of China and the United States will be different, which is also the individuality of body language. Therefore, body language is the unity of commonality and individuality. This chapter will explore the differences in body language between China and the United States from the aspects of head movements, facial movements, hand movements, and body distance.

### **5.1 The Body Language Comparison of Head Movements**

A body language comparison of head movements can be seen in these three subtle movements nodding, scratching, and lifting the head. First, nodding. In China and most Americans, nodding means "yes" and shaking means "no". As Ms. Zhao Lirong recites in a droning voice in the Chinese New Year skit "The Old General is Out", "Nodding is nodding, shaking is not shaking, coming is coming, going is going", referring to the meaning of nodding and shaking. In mainstream American culture, a nod of the head means "yes" and a shake of the head means "no". Among American Indians, however, a nod of the head means yes. However, among American Indian groups, the head is turned up and down for "yes" and sideways for "no." Also, in India and Bulgaria, nodding the head means "no", while to express a positive meaning, the head must be shaken vigorously. Second, scratching the head. In Chinese culture, scratching the head is a common body movement when an actor is confused about something or wants to remember something very much; in American culture, scratching the head is done when dealing with a complex problem and urgently needs to make a decision. Of course, in cross-cultural communication between China and the United States, scratching one's head can also be a common expression of "give me time to think". Finally, look up. In the U.S., if you are in an urgent and dangerous situation, you can

yell "Heads up" to alert the other person to avoid the danger, and the other person will immediately look up to find the source of the danger and then avoid it. In China, when people look up at the stars, they tend to "think hard".

## 5.2 Body Language Contrast of Facial Movements

Of all body parts, the face is the "sense organ" and the actor's true feelings that we are most likely to observe come from their facial expressions. The face is the most important "transmitter" of our inner emotions in all body language and social communication. Studies have shown that the same facial expression can only express seven basic emotions. Even the body language of the same facial gesture has different meanings in different cultures and values. For example, smiling. In both traditional Chinese culture and the wider English-speaking world, a smile means "warm", "friendly", "pleasant", or "hospitable". In American Indians, however, crying is used to express these emotions. In China, people don't like to show their feelings easily in front of strangers, so smiling is a kind of "politeness" for Chinese people on many occasions, and smiling sometimes means fear, nervousness or embarrassment. For example, a Chinese student studying in the U.S. was so embarrassed when many of his American classmates smiled when he walked onto campus for the first time that he rushed back to his dormitory to look in the mirror and check his clothes. The smiles of his American classmates were just a sign of "welcome", not "ridicule". Another example is ridicule. In the United States, sneering jokes emphasize the meaning of insincerity. In China, cynicism is more of a scorn and contempt. Frowning is even more so. In the United States, Zou's frown indicates frustration, depression, or opposition. In China, frowning means thinking or questioning. Finally, let's look at the difference in eye contact. In China, we taste malice or provocation if the other person stares at us all the time in non-conversational situations; Chinese people also always avoid direct eye contact in conversation as a sign of humility, respect, or obedience, and if the other person similarly focuses their gaze on them, we also consider it disrespectful, impolite, and rude. Eye contact in conversation is unavoidable in the U.S. The person you are interacting with knows that when talking, both parties should look at each other and that if one party does not look at the other, it implies fear of the other, contempt, indifference, or guilt. Even when speaking to the public it is important to look straight at the listener and not bury your head in a speech without looking up at the listener, otherwise, people will think he is disrespectful. When talking, the listener should also usually look the speaker in the eye to show that he or she is listening carefully. Americans believe: "Never trust someone afraid to look you straight in the eye." At the same time, Chinese and American cultures define the role of blinking in communication differently. In China, a quick wink indicates annoyance; in the United States, constant winking is a sign of distrust.

## 5.3 Body Language Comparison of Hand Movements

Gesture refers to a specific language system established by human beings with the position and shape of the palm and fingers as the language center. The linguistic signals conveyed by hand movements are highly expressive body language, simple, intuitive,

rich, and varied, with a wide range of applications. Many dances and songs use sign language to convey messages, such as "Thousand Hands of Goddess of Mercy," "Grateful Heart," and "Star Wishes. Given the different historical and cultural backgrounds of China and the United States, gestures have been given different social communication functions. We can compare the differences in hand-body language between the two countries in terms of the body language displayed by a single finger and the body language expressed by the combination of body movements between different fingers. Firstly, look at the body language of A's single finger. One is a thumbs-up. In China, a thumbs up means "praise and cheer" while a pinky means poor or bad; in the United States, a thumbs up means you want to hitchhike while a thumbs down means bad. In addition, a Chinese person puts his thumbs up near his temples and massages them in a circle to show that he is smart; in the United States, this behavior conveys the meaning of madness. The second is the index finger. In China, extending the index finger is usually used to point in the right direction. The fingers of both hands touch each other, indicating "aggression"; in the United States, the index finger extends upwards to indicate "let the other party wait". The third is the little finger. The little finger is the last of the five fingers, under the influence of traditional culture, the little finger represents "bad", "insignificant", "contempt" and other meanings. In the United States, the meaning of the little finger gesture is similar to that of China, the only difference is that in the United States, the vertical little finger contains the meaning of "bet". Secondly, from the point of view of body movement, the combination of different fingers. One is to form a circle with the thumb and index finger. In the United States, it means "OK"; in China, such a gesture is mostly understood as "zero"; the second is to express "3". In China, we are accustomed to the thumb and forefinger together into a circle or pressing the thumb on the first knuckle of the bent forefinger, the other three fingers open; in the United States, the expression "3" requires that the thumb, forefinger and middle finger open, and the ring finger and pinky finger to the palm to bend. The third is to straighten the index and middle fingers at the same time and bend the other three fingers together. In the United States, "V" means to omit, which is the initial abbreviation of the English word "Victory"; in China, we sometimes understand this gesture to mean "2", which means "2". Americans extend the thumb and forefinger to indicate "2". The fourth is the handshake. A handshake is a common form of contact that can be used instead of words to convey "hello", "goodbye", "deal", "congratulations" and many other messages. "and many other messages. There are many other messages. In China, the handshake for the first meeting, generally not be too hard, and the handshake stops; while in the United States, the handshake uses a lot of strength, not enough strength will be regarded as a lack of confidence in the performance. Americans ridicule the Chinese handshake as a "dead fish handshake", while the Chinese as are "broken bones handshake" back to the American handshake. Chinese men and women stand when shaking hands, while American women do not.

## **6 Analysis of the Causes of Differences in Body Language Expression Between China and the United States**

The reasons for the differences in body language expressions between China and the United States are the result of a combination of factors, mainly the differences in the natural environment, the differences in agricultural and industrial cultures, the differences in religious beliefs, and the differences in social norms. An in-depth analysis and discussion of the reasons for the differences in body language expression will help us fully understand and correctly treat the different meanings of the use of body language in daily social communication between Chinese and American people, and promote better communication and cooperation between China and the United States.

### **6.1 Physical Environment Differences**

The main component of the natural environment is the physical environment, which consists of two levels: the natural physical environment and the artificial physical environment. This paper discusses the differences between the natural environment of China and the United States mainly from the climate, weather, and geographic factors in the natural physical environment. From an anthropological and sociological point of view, the geographical location and natural conditions of different countries largely determine their cultural orientation, social lifestyle, and citizens' behavior. Fixed geographical location and climatic factors also affect the connotation of body language. China is located in the eastern part of Asia and is one of the four ancient civilizations, with a vast area, vast land, and abundant domestic resources of all kinds, coupled with thousands of years of feudal society that have continued the small peasant economy of self-sufficiency, the people's livelihoods are affluent, and the internal interpersonal relationships within the patriarchal system of the family are harmonious, so the people do not have a strong desire to keep in touch with the outside world. Popular phrases such as "sweeping the snow in front of one's door while relying on others" and "hanging on to the sky without thinking about oneself" are a reflection of this relatively isolated pattern of interpersonal relationships. China's special geographical location and climatic conditions have formed a shy, static mode of human thinking, which has had a greater impact on the formation of China's excellent traditional culture of respect, humility, and courtesy. The United States is a North American country located between the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. The geographical conditions facing the sea make Americans more adept at making a living by the sea. In addition, the characteristics of the United States facing the sea also make the United States' international trade business more prosperous. There are also more and more immigrants coming to the United States by sea to work, employment, and entrepreneurship. It is because Americans often communicate with the outside world, so Americans are more outgoing, more talkative, more open and direct body movements, and more diverse forms.



## 6.2 Differences in Agricultural and Industrial Cultures

Since the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, China has developed the idea of "valuing agriculture and suppressing commerce", advocating agricultural warfare as a reward. It was the most basic economic guiding ideology of the feudal dynasties in China, which advocated the importance of agriculture as the basis and constrained the development of industry and commerce. In the Song Dynasty, the idea of "emphasizing agriculture and suppressing commerce" was relaxed, and it was only after the invasion of Western capitalism in the late Qing Dynasty that the "New Deal" implemented by the Qing government was gradually dismantled. The social atmosphere of "emphasizing agriculture and suppressing business" provided a quiet and peaceful living environment for the simple and hardworking Chinese people, who lived on the same piece of land for generations and gradually formed the idea that "it is hard to leave one's homeland". They helped each other and cared for each other in this "small circle," and the scope of human interaction was very small. The Mayflower sailed westward, brushed away the layers of mist on the vast ocean, and discovered the New World. Coupled with the fact that the English Puritans were constantly persecuted by the British Crown, more and more Englishmen chose to emigrate to the "New World". The United States has a history of only two hundred years (founded in 1776), and the core of its cultural system is industrial culture. The industrial economy of the United States was very different from that of China's small farmers, especially in terms of geographical flexibility. The land required for cultivation is not characterized by ease of relocation, but the location of factories will suitably adjust conditions in response to changes in policy, climate, economic development, and other factors. As a result, workers in factories do not develop a strong attachment to the land. The strong mobility of factories and enterprises determines that employee groups in the U.S. are unlikely to have long-term relationships and feelings in their daily interpersonal interactions. In a society dominated by "fast-food" interpersonal relationships, their body language movements are also characterized as fast, blunt, and superficial.

## 6.3 Differences in Religious Beliefs

In the history of China's religious development, traces of the indoctrination of people's interpersonal relationships are more obvious in Taoism and Buddhism. Taoism is China's indigenous religion. Its cultural essence is respect for life and care for the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. At the same time, Taoism also promotes the value of helping people and serving society<sup>[11]</sup>. The influence of Taoism on human relationships can be divided into the following two levels<sup>[12]</sup>. The first is "inaction". By "inaction", we do not mean that we "do nothing", but rather that we avoid insatiable greed, competition, and internal strife. On the contrary, "inaction" allows us to achieve equality and harmony in our interpersonal relationships<sup>[13]</sup>. Secondly, Taoist culture emphasizes the importance of individuality in interpersonal relationships. Fish are born in the water and people die in the water. They are bound to be different from each other, and therefore they are good and bad. Therefore, the sages of the past made different things according to the different abilities of people. "This shows that all things have

their own Tao characteristics, each with its own good and bad. It also reminds people to respect each other in their daily interactions and to fully recognize the differences in body language expressions. The Buddhist culture emphasizes that "before becoming a Buddha, one must make ties with all living beings" and puts forward the ideas of "four things", "four relatives", "six harmonies" and so on. "and the six harmonies. These ideas have a positive effect on the harmony of social relationships, the purification of the mind, and the perfection of the personality. Christianity is the religion practiced by most people in the United States. Christianity believes that God loves everyone, including sinners and outcasts, the charitable, and the dead. They emphasize that life is equal and teach all beings everywhere. Believers are encouraged to influence the world. It builds a relationship of values centered on love and the relationship between God and man and between people<sup>[14]</sup>. By taking "love your neighbor as yourself" and "love your neighbor as yourself" as an expression of love for God, Christianity's doctrine of "love" is reflected in human relationships in the sense that human beings are to love one another, as Jesus commanded: "Love one another. As Jesus commanded, "A new commandment I give to you, but I want you to love one another; as I have loved you, so you must love one another." "Mutual love is based on reciprocity. Based on mutual love, people are to be respected, and treated with sincerity, honesty, trustworthiness, and justice. We must be fully aware of the differences in the "social group personality" formed by the people of China and the United States as a result of the different religious beliefs of the two countries in their daily interpersonal interactions, and maintain an attitude of understanding and learning from the body language expressed abroad, be more tolerant, and seek common ground while reserving differences.

## 7 Conclusion

With the acceleration of economic globalisation, international cross-cultural exchanges are becoming more and more frequent<sup>[15]</sup>. Since body language plays an important role in the transmission of information and the expression of human emotions, it is of great significance to conduct a comparative study of body language in China and the United States. On the one hand, it is necessary to have a broad international vision and try to understand the characteristics and connotations of body language in different cultural contexts of China and the United States, so as to reduce and avoid misunderstandings and conflicts in interpersonal communication due to the differences in the meanings of body language. On the other hand, analysing the meanings of body language in different contexts can promote effective and successful cultural exchanges between China and the United States.

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