Chinese in America: How They Give Gifts

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Abstract

We examine the gift-giving patterns of Chinese in America, using a qualitative research approach. Based on the interpretation of data, the gift-giving patterns of Chinese in America model merged, which focuses on the following ideas: (1) Chinese in America discriminate their gift-giving patterns when dealing with intra-ethnic members versus with cross-ethnic members; (2) Chinese in America experience three stages when exchanging gifts with cross-ethnic members, with a distinctive gifting philosophy and pattern at each stage: “Chinese cultural agent” stage, conformity stage, and “understanding” stage; (3) Chinese in America avoid the dark side of traditional Chinese gift-giving rules when exchanging gifts with other Chinese people, while maintaining the bright side.

Keywords: Gift-giving; Chinese American; Acculturation; Chinese cultural agent

1. Introduction

In recent years, immigration patterns have fueled the growth of ethnic subcultures in the USA. It is estimated that immigration represents 25 percent of annual growth in the USA. The growth of ethnic subcultures has stimulated the growth of research on ethnic issues (McCullough, Tan and Wong, 1986) and studies on immigration consumer behaviors (e.g., Penaloza, 1994). Interestingly, although consumer researchers have shed some light on food consumption patterns (Laroche et al., 1997), media consumption patterns (Khairullah, Tucker and Tankersley, 1996) and shopping patterns (Quester, Karunaratna and Chong, 2001) of ethnic subcultures, there are no recent studies addressing the gift-giving patterns of ethnic groups in the US. A very early study on gift-giving was done (Johnson, 1974) with Japanese American in Honolulu. Considering the culture-laden nature of gift-giving as a symbolic communication tool, the lack of attention to the study of gift-giving patterns of ethnic groups in the US is baffling. Interestingly, there has, however, been increasing research efforts devoted to gift-giving behaviors of Chinese in HK (Joy, 2001; Yau, Chan and Lau, 1999) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Yan, 1996; Wang, Piron and Xuan, 2001).

Practically speaking, Chinese in America (hereafter referred to as CA) represent a huge market opportunity begging greater understanding. Among the growing ethnic groups in the US, CA have increased by 48 percent to over 2.4 million since 1990, leaving the CA community with the highest population of any Asian ethnicity in the USA (Census, 2000). These “new immigrants” are highly paid and educated (Johnson, 2001). The more we know about the gift-giving patterns among ethnic groups, the easier it will be for marketers to make reasonable strategic decisions (Beatty et al., 1990). Furthermore, Joy (2001) indicated the urgency of studying gift-giving patterns of Chinese populations in various parts of the world, including in Mainland, Taiwan, HK and in Western countries. Understanding gift-giving patterns of CA certainly will enrich this research stream and help build a holistic model of gift-giving patterns of the Chinese population.

This study gathers in-depth interview data of a small set of sample of CA in the Southeast region of the USA and conducts extensive cultural analysis in an attempt to explore the uniqueness of CA’s gift-giving behaviors. In this paper we first raise some research questions based on the literature on acculturation, ethnic identification, Chinese culture, and gift-giving. Next we present the emergent research design and methodology. Then, we utilize our findings to provide grounded theory, which we refer to as the gift-giving patterns of the CA model. Finally, we discuss how our model and findings fit with the a priori themes suggested by the literature and suggest future research needs in the area.

2. Literature Review

A gift is generally defined as a good or service (including the givers’ time, activities, and ideas) voluntarily
provided to another person or group through some sort of ritual presentations (Belk and Coon, 1993). This process reflects and supports social structures and values as well as modifies them (Caplow, 1982). Therefore, understanding gift-giving patterns of CAs would benefit from the literatures about gift-giving, the Chinese culture, acculturation and ethnic identity. The following section reviews literature from these four areas and asks several research questions.

2.1 Influence of Chinese Cultural Background on CA Gift-giving Patterns

It is not surprising to find that people from different cultures show some marked differences in their management of gift exchange activities (Rucker et al., 1996). Culture can be defined as an evolving system of concepts, values and symbols inherent in a society (Yau et al., 1999). Previous literature suggests that culture contains three interrelated components: objects (symbols, stories, and rituals as in McCracken (1988)), customs (behavioral styles, habits and ways of expressions as in Berry (1980)), and the process of valuation as in Hofstede et al. (1980). Compared with other consumption activities, gift-giving is more heavily influenced by the consumers’ cultural background, because gift-giving in most cases is a part of cultural rituals and it is guided by traditions (customs) and pervasive cultural values. Thus, several scholars have explored an avenue to understand gift-giving by looking into the influence of cultural background (Beatty et al., 1990; Yau et al., 1999; Joy, 2001) and subcultural background (Johnson, 1974). Johnson (1974) examined gift-giving among Japanese American in Honolulu and reported that “to a surprising degree” the complex gift-giving system found among the Japanese in Japan was followed among the Japanese American families in Honolulu and reported that gift-giving may act as a part of enhancing the Utilitarian-based Guanxi networks. But Yan (1996) pointed out that the Guanxi networks involve not only instrumentality side, but also sociability, morality, intentionality, and personal affection. In other words, Chinese may enter and maintain their Guanxi networks as a system of social support. Therefore, gift exchange behaviors in these Affection-based Guanxi networks may be different from those in the Utilitarian-based Guanxi networks.

The concept of “face”. Chinese are acutely sensitive to having and maintaining face in all aspects of social and business life (Yau et al., 1999). Ho (1975) and Hsu (1963) stated that face in Chinese culture was more a way of meeting the expectations of others than acting in accordance with one's own wishes. Face can have two forms: one represents the "confidence of society in the integrity of the ego's moral character, the loss of which makes it impossible for him to function properly within the community" (Hu, 1944); another one stands “for the kind of prestige life, through success and ostentation” (Hu, 1944). Individuals may gain or lose face during gift transactions. When people present a gift that does not match their status or the status of the recipient, they are losing the first type of face. People desiring the second type of face would expect to receive or present gifts that match their prestigious status.

Previous studies on gift-giving of Chinese population did not explicate the influence of these two types of face. But face was frequently reported to be highly relevant in guiding Chinese people's gift-giving activities (e.g., Joy, 2001; Wang et al., 2001; Yan, 1996). Eight out ten Chinese respondents feel obliged to give gifts for the sake of “face-saving” (Wang et al., 2001). In his study of gift-giving patterns in a Chinese village, Yan (1996) noted that villagers spent 10 to 20 percent of their income on gift-giving while some of them were reluctant to do so. Thus, it would be useful to explore how the face concept influences CA's gift-giving and how often CA are engaged in “face-saving” gift-giving.

The Concept of Guanxi. Guanxi has literally the same meaning as “relationship” in English, but it has a much more sophisticated meaning than “relationship” (Yau et al., 1999). It consists of two Chinese characters, guan and xi that mean “relating” and “bonding” respectively. Early scholarly accounts of Guanxi in Chinese society mainly focused on its utilitarian side (Yan, 1996). The cultivation of Guanxi is interpreted as a power game or a manipulation of interpersonal relations (Jacobs, 1979; Wong, 1998). The instrumentality side of Guanxi networks was often documented to be the basis for business transactions in the Asian Pacific Rim (e.g., Leung, Wong, and Tam 1995). Thus, gift-giving may act as a part of enhancing the Utilitarian-based Guanxi network. But Yan (1996) pointed out that the Guanxi networks involve not only instrumentality side, but also sociability, morality, intentionality, and personal affection. In other words, Chinese may enter and maintain their Guanxi networks as a system of social support. Therefore, gift exchange behaviors in these Affection-based Guanxi networks may be different from those in the Utilitarian-based Guanxi networks.

Research shows that Chinese are more likely to change the type of gift according to different Guanxi types (Kipnis, 1997; Joy, 2001). Thus, Guanxi influence will be examined in this study with a focus on the difference of gift-giving behaviors in the Utilitarian-based versus Affection-based Guanxi networks.

The concept of reciprocity. Although reciprocity has long been cited as a universal norm in gift-giving literature, Goudner (1960) stated that the concrete formulations of
norm of reciprocity may vary with time and place. Yan (1996) advocated that it is important to address the variations of reciprocity in Chinese culture. For example, Yan (1996) reported that his informants (villagers in a typical Chinese village) generally agree that a respected man should avoid the appearance of gift exchanges as payoffs. In other words, a respected Chinese person should not make it obvious that she/he is giving a gift because of she/he expects the receiver to reciprocate in some way. But Western cultures generally manifest reciprocity in an economic and explicative way (see Lowes et al., 1971). While admitting the importance of returning gifts, the most common way of returning gifts in Chinese culture is to increase somewhat the value of the returned gift (Yan, 1996). In terms of timing of reciprocity, Chinese people focus more on the right time of repayment (when both givers and recipients will be benefited), long-term orientation, and non-symmetric aspects (Yau et al., 1999). When exploring CAs gift-giving patterns, one would wonder whether CAs maintain these differences in their reciprocity norm.

Based on the above discussion, we propose the following research question:

RQ 1: How would the gift-giving patterns of CAs reflect the three Chinese cultural principals (a) face-saving; (b) Guanxi; (c) reciprocity?

2.2 Gift-giving as a Reflection of Acculturation Degree

Previous research on immigrants used acculturation and assimilation interchangeably. Early researchers assumed that immigrants were going through a linear and unidimensional process symbolized by the melting-pot metaphor (e.g., Eisenstadt, 1954; Gordon, 1964). This perspective has dominated in most marketing work before the 1990s (Lee et al., 1991). Recent acculturation studies support the coexistence of the identification with the host culture and the identification with the culture of origin (Berry, 1980). Acculturation is usually conceptualized as a process by which immigrants acquire the cultural aspects of a host or dominant culture. But this process requires no concomitant loss of the culture of origin (Laroche et al., 1996). Studies on immigrants have clearly shown that the modes of acculturation (or the degree of acculturation) influence the media consumption (Lee and Tse, 1994), the perception of advertisements (Khairullah et al., 1996; Khairullah and Khairullah, 1999), and the consumption of convenience foods (Laroche et al., 1997). Although no direct studies address the linkage between the degree of acculturation and gift-giving patterns of sub-ethnic groups, we would expect a strong linkage between the degree of acculturation and the gift-giving patterns of CAs in our study. However, it is not clear how the degree of acculturation actually influence CAs’ gift-giving behaviors. Thus, we propose the following research question:

RQ2: How does the degree of acculturation influence the gift-giving patterns of CA?

2.3 Intra-ethnic versus Cross-ethnic Groups

Besides the degree of acculturation, ethnic identity to the culture of origin is also relevant with gift-giving patterns. Research on immigrants shows that people may differ in their ethnic identities in different interpersonal encounters (Rucker et al., 1994). Bicultural individuals (immigrants) are said to be able to switch between cultural frames in response to exposure to culturally associated settings or symbols (Padilla, 1994). Moreover, situation-centeredness in Asian cultures, especially among the Chinese, has been recognized by scholars (McCullough et al., 1986; Hsu, 1963; Yan, 1996; Yau, 1994). Dealing with receivers from different ethnic groups may well represent unique give-giving situations for CAs. Previous studies suggest that people are more likely to identify with their original ethnicity when dealing with intra-ethnic groups than with cross-ethnic groups (Rucker et al., 1994). In particular, CAs are expected to change the type of gifts with a change in the situations (Yau et al., 1999). Therefore, we would expect gift giving patterns of CAs would change with a change of different receivers, especially when the receiver is from intra-ethnic versus from cross-ethnic groups. But how exactly CAs switch their cultural philosophy when dealing with intra- versus cross-ethnic gift receivers is an interesting question. Based on the above discussion, we propose the following research question:

RQ 3: How do CAs change their gift-giving patterns when dealing with intra-ethnic receivers versus cross-ethnic receivers?

3. Method

Driven by the above research questions, we conducted a qualitative investigation of extensive facets of gift-giving patterns suggested by Joy (2001). An in-depth interview approach was adopted in this study based on our research tasks. As verbal reports are generally interpreted as situated, particularistic, and motivated (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, P.493), all the in-depth interviews were conducted in Chinese to facilitate the thorough communication between interviewees and interviewer (the author is a native Chinese). Using native language also allows the author to conduct certain cultural analyses required in this study. Our understanding is based on textual data collected through in-depth interviews with six Chinese informants who are living in USA.

The sampling criteria required that participants be able and willing to volunteer at least one hour of their time for an interview in Chinese. Furthermore, the participants should have acquired either a permanent residence status or American citizenship. Fong and Peskin (1973) reported that “visa” Chinese functioned differently from those with citizenship because they were less motivated to personally
Table 1. Demographic Information of Six Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Length of Years Here</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Retired Prof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Prof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Ms</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Bs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Restaurant owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>Hansen</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Associated Prof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Assistant Prof.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

commit to the new society. Furthermore the “stable state” of CAs with legal guarantees would have more marketing implications for those who target the CA market.

Informants ranged in age from 38 to 81, with a mean age of 53. Two of them were women and four were men. All informants were currently married or previously married. All of them have at least a bachelor’s degree from an American university. The length of time they have lived in the US ranged from 9 years to 60 years. See the Table 1 for details. The names used are pseudonyms.

We began the interviews by advising our informants as to our definition and scope of gifts. Previous studies on Chinese gift-giving suggest no difference of the scope of gifts among Chinese from that reported in Western contexts (e.g., Joy 2001). Therefore, consistent with Komter (1996), we embrace six types of gifts: presents (goods), money, giving food to other persons, letting others stay in your house, giving care or help, and other valuable services. To help them recall their gift-giving activities, we showed them a list of occasions of gift-giving and possible gift receivers. Then interviews were conducted based on an interview guide. The informants were asked open-ended questions about the gifts they gave in the past six months. They were asked to talk about how choices were made and how Chinese values influenced their choices. After the interview questions were covered, a short questionnaire measuring the degree of acculturation (Laroche et al., 1997) and demographic information were collected.

Initial data analyses were conducted in a line-by-line microscopic fashion (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Open coding at this initial stage allowed as many conceptual categories as feasible. A modified constant comparative method focuses both on comparing incidents reported by one informant and on comparing incidents across informants. The categories emerging in the open-coding stage were subsequently subdivided into smaller categories. We then conducted axial coding, establishing the relationships between emergent constructs to answer our previously identified research questions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). During this stage, memos and diagrams were used to allow for the interaction between data and existing literature. Thus, the resulting findings are based on both the data and a priori theories. We also integrated the interview data with the questionnaire data to arrive at the following findings and conclusions.

4. Findings

Based on our interpretation of the data, we developed our Gift-giving Patterns of CA model, shown in Figure 1. Elements of the model serve as the foundation for the discussion which follows.

4.1 RQ 3: Ethnic Identification

We were very impressed by the first question all the informants asked at the beginning of the interviews: “Do you mean gift giving with American people or with Chinese people?” This question strongly suggests that CAs treat intra-ethnic encounters differently from cross-ethnic ones. All the informants have a dichotomy classification of their gift receivers: either intra-ethnic or cross-ethnic. The following excerpts from interviews clarify and further support this point.

Bob: Let me first make it clear: There are two situations of gift-giving: gift-giving among Chinese and between Chinese and American. ... With Chinese people, we should keep our cultural traditions. And it is easier to select gifts and giving occasions to other Chinese. However, when dealing with American friends we should choose the right time, the right situation, even the right climate.

Amy: My family is so frequently involved in gift giving with other Chinese friends. But it is more difficult to choose gifts for American friends. They [American friends] initiated gift-giving more than I did. When I received their gifts, I remembered to buy something for them.

Clearly, CAs treated their American friends as “they”, meaning outsiders (i.e., friends from cross-ethnic groups) while other Chinese friends as “we”, meaning insiders (i.e.,
4.2 RQ 1: Dealing with Insiders and Chinese Culture

As Briley, Morris and Simonson (2000) pointed out, cultural knowledge is often latent but arises to influence cognition under certain conditions. Therefore, we would anticipate some part of Chinese cultural background will act a guidance role when CAs exchange gifts with insiders (i.e. other Chinese people). The following section will describe how our informants pick up some part of Chinese cultural rules while ignoring others.

Face. Although face was shown to be a major influential factor in guiding gift-giving of Chinese society in Hong Kong (Joy, 2001) and in Mainland China (Wang et al., 2001; Yan, 1996), all six informants in this study reported the irrelevance of “face” in their gift exchanging activities in USA even when gift-giving with other CAs. For example, Wendy commented that “you should give gifts based on your own capability, not to try to gain “face” in USA. That is of no use in this society.” Similarly, John confessed that “I won't feel that I lose “face” because of the price of gifts. Maybe in China you have to think about the price, “the weight” of your gift. “The implication here is that worrying about price and equivoques of price is not that relevant here. This consensus among informants on the irrelevance of “face” in gift-giving appears to be unique, compared with the Chinese population in China. In Yan's (1996) field study, Chinese farmers were so concerned about “losing face” if they failed to give gifts or gave cheap or wrong gifts. More generally, 70 percent of respondents in Wang et al.’s (2001) study addressed the “face” issue as a major reason of obligatory gift-giving. Thus, we may conclude that our group of CAs don’t use “face” as their guiding rule when exchanging with other Chinese.

Guanxi is a buzz word in studies on Chinese culture, but none of the six informants reported their intention of using gift-giving to maintain or manage Guanxi networks. In contrast, they tried to avoid the utilitarian side of gift-giving (Yan, 1996). Amy mentioned that her family does not regularly exchanging gifts with her siblings in USA because “we enjoy not being burdened with gift-giving like back in China.” Given the high frequency of gift exchanges across numerous gift-exchange situations in China, this perspective tends to reflect how CAs work to avoid the complex Guanxi networks when they live abroad. Staying away from the motherland offers CAs a good opportunity to ignore the negative side of Guanxi-related gift giving. As Rob said “we don’t need gifts to maintain Guanxi in the USA. I enjoy this.”

As CAs avoid the negative side of Guanxi, they attempt to enhance the bright side of gift exchange. That is what Yan (1996) called affection side of Guanxi. Building personal Guanxi networks through gift exchanges serves as a system of social support and reflects a unique life style in Chinese society (Yan, 1996). This study supports Yan’s argument. Amy and John unilaterally offered treats to Chinese students. Their gift-giving intentions are not explained by a utilitarian purpose, but by personal and psychological needs. Bob invited Chinese students to have Chinese goodies for holidays because he believed giving gifts [free meals] offers a kind of social support for Chinese students as well as himself. John directly referred to
the socialization function of treating other Chinese students.

\[ \text{Bob: For most Chinese people here in USA, we can not be completely integrated in American society. Therefore we try to support each other. I often invite Chinese students to have dinner with my family. I give them good Chinese dishes. They [Chinese students] need some goodie as well as family-like feelings especially during the holidays. Getting together gives us a sort of comfort.} \]

\[ \text{John: I frequently invite some Chinese students from my department to have dinner with my family. In addition to the thoughts of their poor economic and psychological situations, I also try to communicate and socialize with them. We support each other.} \]

Although the informants did not refer to these kinds of gift-giving as a Guanxi network building, treating Chinese students with free meals actually serves as a social support for both the givers and the receivers. That is the bright side of Guanxi networks. Thus, it appears that CAs in our limited sample intentionally avoid the negative, utilitarian side of Guanxi but maintain the affective side of Guanxi in their gift exchange with other CA.

\[ \text{Reciprocity. As Yan (1996) posited, reciprocity is a prevailing gift-giving principle for CA, but the meanings of reciprocity in Western and Chinese cultures are different. Our interpretation of several informant scripts supports his argument. Both Wendy and Hansen admitted that they felt indebted after someone did them a favor, including gifts. However, this indebtedness did not propel them to give gifts immediately after receiving gifts. The literature suggests that Westerners tend to return gifts immediately in order to "extricate themselves from the emotional entanglement"(Yau et al., 1999, p.102). Hansen felt grateful after receiving a gift from his former student. However instead of immediately giving a gift back, his family sought a "suitable opportunity" to give a gift to the former student after that. By suitable opportunity, they meant "a gift that would benefit the receiver the most." Recently he knew the student was expecting a baby, so he viewed it as a "suitable" opportunity to reciprocate.} \]

John also expressed a similar belief after he received some nice gifts from his friends: “I believe I’ll have some opportunities to pay-back. It is not necessary to pay back immediately. I want to find the right time to pay back.” These events repeatedly suggest that reciprocity guides gift-giving activities for CAs just as it does for Western people. However, Chinese people may be more likely to reciprocate favors or gifts with considerate thoughts given as to how to maximize the benefits for gift-receivers. The reciprocity norm lies in long-term time frame rather than immediate pay-back. They intentionally search for “good opportunities” to reciprocate.

\[ \text{4.3 RQ 2: Dealing with Outsiders and the Degree of Acculturation} \]

Based on the short-questionnaire, we calculated the average score of the degree of acculturation (DA) for each respondent. The first respondent (Rob) has the highest DA score (DA=6.71), and the second respondent (Bob) has the lowest (DA=3.29). All other four informants have about the same level of acculturation (DA=4.86 for Amy, Wendy and Hansen, DA=5 for John). Given the small number of our respondents in this exploratory study, it is hard to classify each respondent into different category on a strict, statistic basis. For the purpose of this study, we arbitrarily classified Bob (the second respondent, DA=3.29) into low DA group, Rob (the first respondent, DA=6.71) into high DA group, and the rest into medium DA group. Interestingly, their styles and gift-giving patterns are clearly different when dealing with American friends. In particular, with the lowest DA score, Bob acted as a “Chinese cultural agent” when exchanging gifts with American friends while Rob, who had the highest DA score, was able to “understand” the cultural roots and values behind some American gift-giving rules. Thus, Bob was classified into the “Chinese cultural agent” stage and Rob into the “understanding” stage. For the four other respondents with medium DA scores, most of them chose to conform to the rules without really understanding the underlying reasons (see discussion about “conformity stage”). Some of them also manifested certain similarities as shown in “Chinese cultural agent” and “understanding” stage. The following excepts will illustrate this finding.

“Chinese cultural agent” stage. When Bob (DA=3.29) first met his American supervisor, he strategically chose not to give gifts to him. His rationale may sound familiar to readers from Mainland China, where flattery gifts (gifts given by a person with inferior social status to someone with higher social status) are frequently observed both in the countryside (Yan, 1996) and cities (Wang et al., 2001). He confessed as follows:

“when coming to USA, the first challenge I had to face is what kind of attitudes ‘we’ should take when dealing with Americans. I did not give gifts to my first supervisor and second supervisor, because I thought I was not inferior to them. We were equal. Although I was grateful for their offers, I deserved that. If I gave them gifts, it would make me feel that I was lower than them in positions and that I was trying to flatter them.”

Bob’s confession indicated that he was adopting his understanding of gift-giving rules in Chinese society when first dealing with American counterparts. Obviously his low degree of acculturation indicated his lack of sufficient knowledge about gift-giving rules in American society, thus he had to be armed with Chinese rules. Moreover, Bob used “we” when presenting his thoughtful protection of collective “self-esteem” of all Chinese people. In Chi-
Chinese culture “we” self sometimes can be leveraged to be higher than individual self (Joy, 2001), especially when dealing with people from other ethnic groups. Therefore, when dealing with American supervisor, Bob interpreted his decision as a respectful (at least in his own mind) action because it saved face for all Chinese people. His thoughts can be traced back to his cultural roots: (1) giving gifts can be used as a tool of building utilitarian relations, thus giving gifts to a supervisor implies a flattery intention; and (2) personal actions should protect collective “self-esteem” of all Chinese people, thus giving out flat-tery gifts would not only drag down your own “face” but it would also drag down national or cultural “face”. Thus Bob acted as a “representative” of Chinese culture when first dealing with Americans.

Hansen’s (DA=4.86) dealing with his Dean also manifests the “Chinese culture agent” view. He avoided giving any kind of gifts to his Dean because he believed giving gifts to the person with higher position is a flattery tool. John (DA=5) retrospect about his dealings with his advisor and found that he also tended to use Chinese logic to guide his gift-giving decisions at the beginning. The following except further supports their mental processes at the “Chinese culture agent” phase.

Hansen: Before my Dean was promoted to his position, we had dinner and exchanged gifts. But right after his promotion, we haven’t had dinner until today. I haven’t given gifts to him anymore. In China if you want someone to do you a favor, you’d better buy gifts to him, but here I am quite sensitive about that. I don’t want to have dinner or exchange gifts with the Dean because I want to avoid the flattery gifts.

John: At the beginning I believed there was a hierarchical relationship between my advisor and myself as a doctoral student, so I gave him all kinds of Chinese gifts. Later on, I realized American people exchange gifts because of “real” relationships, thus the gift serves as an end rather than a means to building “Guanxi”.

Bob, Hansen and John adopted Chinese gift-giving rules to guide their decisions of (not) giving gifts to American supervisor early in their acculturation process. However, as CAs stay in USA longer, they generally increase the degree of acculturation, thus they try to incorporate American values into their gift-giving with American friends.

Conformity stage. Staying in the USA longer and becoming more acculturated, it appears that CAs may choose to conform to the American gift-giving customs. But they are not yet comfortable enough to handle the exchange relations, thus they generally avoid initiating gift giving with American friends. In terms of types of gift, CAs imitate their American colleagues by observations or do some types of mental calculations. Amy (DA=4.86) chose to conform to other colleagues when dealing with her American friends. She gave gifts to her colleagues “when other people did the gift exchange across some occasions.” But she “...seldom initiated gift giving”. Most likely she responded to the gifts received. But she said “it is more difficult to buy gifts for American friends. But I will keep an eye on what other Americans give in order to find suitable gifts.” Therefore, as Amy became more acculturated with the gift-giving rules, she conformed to the customs by responding to the received gifts from Americans and choosing the “right gifts.” Wendy (DA=4.86) also reported that her family was involved with gift exchanges with American friends only after gifts were first received. Although respondents did not explicitly elaborate on what Chinese versus American “gift-giving rules” really mean, everyone seemed to admit that Chinese and American cultures have different standards in terms of what types of gifts at what price ranges are customary to which gift-giving occasions.

“Understanding” stage. It appears that by observing, conforming and experiencing American gift-giving rules, CAs further increase their acculturation and finally start to understand the reasons behind the gifting situations.

Having the highest degree of acculturation, Rob’s (DA=6.71) understanding of American gift-giving rules based on his experiences seems insightful. When asking Rob about his gift exchange with American friends, he is capable of evaluating “American values” and criticizing the disadvantages of those values. For example, he reported: “American people give you an immediate and an exact return to your favor; rather than over a long time like Chinese people. After I drew two pictures for my neighbor, he did gardening three times. After that, he would not do gardening for me anymore.”

John’s higher acculturation also seemed to allow him to “understand” American rules. Based on his understanding, he compared with other informants. John reported “...gift-giving is not a means to an end in USA. Gifts are more symbolic here. They [American friends] give gifts for pleasure was more comfortable with receiving gifts from Americans. Because of that, I do not feel as indebted as I would otherwise have had when receiving gifts from Chinese. For example, one of my colleagues gave four gifts recently to my baby and I accepted them with no discomfort. I understood that she really wants to show her love.”

4. Contribution and Limitation

This study examined the gift-giving patterns of a special group of Chinese population: Chinese in America. A Gift-Giving Patterns of CA Model emerged during interpretation of the qualitative data. We believe that this study represents some significant progress in our understanding of CAs gift-giving behaviors. We find that (1) CAs discriminate their gift-giving patterns when dealing with in-
tra-ethnic members versus cross-ethnic members; (2) CAs experience three stages when involving gift-giving with cross-ethnic members, with a distinctive gifting philosophy and patten at each stage: “Chinese cultural agent” stage, conformity stage, and “understanding” stage; (3) CAs avoid using gift-giving to enhance the Utilitarian-based Guanxi networks but to improve the Affection-based Guanxi networks; (4) CAs seldom engage in “face-saving” gift-giving as Chinese in the other part of the world would do.

This study contributes to the literature by first, echoing Joy’s (2001) advocate of studies on gift-giving patterns of Chinese in different parts of the world. This study is the first inquiry into gift-giving patterns of CA. It is hoped that our study will provide a building brick for a more holistic model of Chinese gift-giving. Secondly this study fills in a gap of knowledge about the gift-giving patterns of immigrants in the USA. We believe that consumer researchers should put more effort into examining these unique groups of consumers as the diversity in American society is increasing rather than decreasing. Understanding the gift-giving behaviors of ethnic groups seems highly relevant in today’s diverse marketplace. Finally, we believe that our model provides a dynamic perspective for the influence of cultural knowledge in guiding consumer decisions. It suggests that CA activate different parts of cultural knowledge when gift-giving situations change: as their degree of acculturation increases, CA adopted more American gift giving rules when dealing with American friends. However, their degree of acculturation did not influence their gift-giving patterns with other Chinese. This observation again supports the acculturation theory of immigrants (see Berry, 1980): CAs may accept more American gift-giving rules when dealing with Americans while not losing their Chinese cultural rules when dealing with other Chinese.

However, this study has several limitations. First, our small sample was not representative of typical Chinese American communities. Our sampling pool is a university town where the professions of CA may be higher than other CA community. Future studies should test the model proposed in this study across different types of CA community. Secondly, given the small sample size, this study failed to observe broad differences in the degree of acculturation. After all, our informants had all lived in the U.S. nine years or more. Thus the findings reported in this study are tentative, although the number of informants by itself should not be an indicator of the quality of qualitative studies. We encourage further studies on this fascinating and fruitful topic.

References


