

The Principal Role of Mother-Tongue Cultural Schemata in Intercultural Communication

Jianfeng Zhang*

College of Humanities and Foreign Languages, Xi'an University of Science and Technology, Xi'an 710054, China

*Corresponding author: Jianfeng Zhang, zhangjianfeng091024@126.com

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: With the accelerated development of globalization, intercultural communication among various ethnic groups and countries around the world has been continuously strengthened. However, in actual communication, due to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, people tend to overly emphasize the understanding of Western culture, thereby neglecting the importance of passing on the mother tongue's culture, so that the native language culture is at risk of being marginalized. Based on schemata theory, the principal role and the importance of mother-tongue cultural schemata are discussed. It argues that these schemata function not merely as passive background knowledge, but as the primary cognitive and interpretive filters through which individuals perceive, negotiate, and articulate cultural meanings across boundaries. Ultimately, recentering mothertongue cultural schemata is essential for resisting the invasion of Western culture and safeguarding the security of traditional culture.

Keywords: Cultural schemata; Intercultural communication; Principal role

Online publication: July 15, 2026

1. Introduction

Language is a tool for communication and a carrier of culture. There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between language and culture. The unique historical experiences and thinking patterns of different ethnic groups have shaped diverse cultural backgrounds. Learning a foreign language necessarily means learning to communicate across different cultures, and at the same time, it requires adapting to a different way of thinking and a different set of cultural habits.

With the expansion and deepening of the globalization process, political, economic, and cultural exchanges on a global scale have become increasingly extensive. Intercultural communication has become a common form of communication in today's economic world. However, during the communication process, Western developed countries such as the UK and the US, with their advanced media systems and mature cultural industries, have gradually formed a cultural hegemony on a global scale, strongly impacting traditional Chinese culture and pushing it to the verge of marginalization.

To bridge this critical gap, this study draws on the schema theory, which originated from the field of developmental psychology and has since been applied to second language acquisition and pragmatics research. This paper intends to start with the basic principles of schemata theory and explore the principal role of the mother-tongue cultural schemata in intercultural communication in the context of globalization. It emphasizes the construction of a complete and comprehensive mother-tongue cultural schema to promote the development of the native culture, resisting the strategic offensive of Western culture, maintaining one's own cultural sovereignty and cultural autonomy consciousness, and continuously promoting the excellent Chinese culture to the world.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural schemata and intercultural communication

The concept of schema was first proposed by psychologist Bartlett in the 1930s. It refers to the way in which the knowledge or background knowledge acquired by each individual is stored in the mind and is the reflection or active organization of the brain based on past experiences ^[1]. It is the process by which learners store information in their memory that affects new information and the process of enriching the new information into the learners' knowledge base. Therefore, schemata are the units of knowledge existing in people's brains. Each person's brain stores countless facts, which are classified according to situations and form schemata, providing learners with a comprehensible reference system.

Schemata theory is the generalization and elevation of the specific application of schemata knowledge in cognitive practice. This theory holds that when people are trying to understand, absorb, and input information, they need to link the input information with their existing knowledge. The decoding and encoding of new input information rely on the information, frameworks, or networks that are already stored in the brain ^[2]. Meanwhile, the input information must match these schemata in order to complete the series of processes for information processing, so schemata usually can be divided into two parts: schema availability and schema activation ^[3]. Schema availability aims to emphasize the establishment of schemata during the cognitive process. When information floods in, people will unconsciously process the information based on the existing schemata in their minds and establish new schemata. Schema activation refers to the process by which certain information is input into the brain, enabling the schemata to function, allowing for the reception, decoding, reorganization, and storage of information. Schemata are essentially a cognitive model of knowledge.

Because the schemata form a vast network system in the human brain, they have strong cultural characteristics. The background knowledge structure of people and the schemata for perceiving the world are all determined by culture. Therefore, cultural schemata refer to the pre-existing knowledge structure based on experience and established through elements such as local customs, traditions, and folk customs within a specific cultural context ^[4].

Intercultural communication refers to communication between native speakers and non-native speakers, or any communication between people with different languages and cultural backgrounds. Languages vary from country to country, and cultures also differ. The differences in culture directly influence the generation, development, and change of language.

Cultural schemas have a close relationship with intercultural communication. In communication, whether it is expression or understanding, it is impossible to do without the cultural schemata of the

communicators. Any communication behavior that deviates from social and cultural norms will change the special information expressed by the original structure, generate a new meaning, and thus cause communication difficulties ^[5]. The relevance theory holds that the essence of communication is actually a cognitive activity, which enables the encyclopedic knowledge stored in the long-term memory of the human brain to be organized in some kind of block structure (chunks) ^[6]. This block structure or chunk is actually a schema.

During the cognitive process, due to the differences in geographical locations, natural environments, beliefs, lifestyles, and customs among different ethnic groups, the expressions of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of people from different ethnic groups have developed distinct cultural characteristics. As a result, they have formed cognitive structures with their own cultural traits. These cultural patterns abstracted and generalized from social life will become relatively stable once formed and possess great sedimentation and inheritance properties ^[7]. In other words, intercultural communication is a process of gradual and integrated cultural assimilation, which is usually achieved through the acceptance and dissemination of cultural schemata.

2.2. The positive transfer of mother-tongue cultural schemata

Research in pragmatics shows that the phenomenon of transfer exists in intercultural communication. Transfer refers to the process by which learners transfer previously acquired knowledge and experience to the learning of new knowledge. Transfer can be either positive or negative. If the transfer of old knowledge aids and facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge, it is positive; conversely, if old knowledge and experience impede the acquisition of new knowledge, it is negative transfer, i.e., interference ^[3]. A learner who has grown up in a Chinese cultural environment will inevitably be influenced by Chinese culture when learning a foreign language and will consciously or unconsciously use their own modes of thinking and cultural perspectives to understand and express the foreign language. In communication, to avoid cultural misunderstanding and conflict, people often concentrate solely on studying the negative transfer of mother-tongue cultural schemata while neglecting their positive transfer—that is, the way a deep grounding in one's mother-tongue culture can assist and facilitate communication.

The language of any nation carries and transmits that nation's cultural information. The philosophical thought, ethical norms, values, aesthetic sensibilities, national psychology, and customs of every person are all broadly and deeply embedded in their language. Yet schemata also possess commonalities. These commonalities are mainly embodied in content schemata, particularly in shared knowledge and shared cultural background knowledge ^[8]. For instance, the basic sentence structures of both Chinese and English consist of a subject and a predicate; basic speech acts (locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts) are realized in both languages, and both operate according to cooperative and politeness principles; the Pinyin system, derived from the Latin alphabet, bears a certain resemblance to English phonetic symbols; parts of speech in lexis are basically equivalent, and the two languages have both borrowed numerous words from each other. Moreover, many famous masters of foreign language studies—such as Fu Lei, Qian Zhongshu, Ji Xianlin, and Xu Yuanhong—have all been scholars well-versed in both Chinese and Western learning, both ancient and modern. Therefore, in intercultural communication, mother-tongue cultural schemata should be correctly recognized and utilized so as to maximize their positive transfer.

Being able to mediate effectively among several languages and cultures on the basis of a thorough

knowledge of one's mother-tongue culture, an acquired second language, and an understanding of the target culture is an important component of comprehensive communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence^[9]. The role of mother-tongue cultural schemata in intercultural communication cannot be ignored. Using the analytical abilities of mother-tongue logical thinking to distinguish between the similarities and differences of the mother tongue and the target language yields twice the result with half the effort. Wholly rejecting or attempting to escape the influence of mother-tongue schemata is neither advisable nor possible. Only by consciously making cultural comparisons and activating native Chinese cultural schemata can a solid linguistic and cultural foundation for intercultural communication be laid.

3. The principal role of native Chinese cultural schemata in intercultural communication

Chinese culture is a sophisticated ethical culture centered on Confucianism and incorporating concepts from Buddhism and Daoism. Harmony between Heaven and humanity and a ceaseless striving for self-improvement constitute the basic spirit of traditional Chinese culture. It emphasizes reaching a realm of supreme truth, goodness, and beauty through a process of ascending along the righteous path within a context of pluralistic harmony and limited opposition. Western culture, represented by British and American cultures, is a developed secular culture rooted in the soil of ancient Greek secular culture, Judaic covenantal culture, and ancient Roman political culture, and has undergone the shaping influences of Christian culture, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment^[10]. Cultural differences are therefore an unavoidable issue in intercultural communication.

3.1. Native Chinese cultural schemata as the Soul of the Nation

Due to the long-lasting feudal rule, the development of Chinese culture gradually fell behind that of the West. For over a century in the early modern and modern eras, the Chinese nation suffered the bullying and aggression of virtually all imperialist powers in the world. Yet it was never completely annexed, enslaved, or assimilated by any invader, but consistently maintained its great dignity. Traditional Chinese culture is a formidable force that cannot be ignored. As a source of cohesion and a unifying force, it is the Soul of the Nation^[11].

A nation's development depends on two crucial preconditions. The first is cultural identification within the nation. Sun Yat-sen once argued, "That China could attain such a powerful position in the past was not caused by one single factor. Generally speaking, the reason a country can become strong and prosperous is that, at the beginning, it relies on military force, and subsequently, the flourishing of various cultures brings success. However, to maintain the long-term standing of the nation and the state, there is also the issue of morality. Only with sound morality can a state achieve long-term peace and stability"^[12]. The humanistic morality embedded in Chinese cultural schemata is the fundamental content of traditional Chinese culture. The surface phenomena of culture may change over time, but the core of culture is irreplaceable; this is the key to whether a nation possesses cohesion. A person without mutual cultural identification is no more than a heap of loose sand, unable to form a resultant force. The second precondition is the overall cultural quality of the nation. Culture is not an ethereal theory; it is connected to people's actual conduct. The precepts promoted in the traditional classics—"The superior man understands righteousness; the petty man understands profit," "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire", and "He who wishes to establish himself should

also seek to establish others; he who wishes to achieve success should also help others to achieve success”—are all precious treasures to be cherished. Moral practice is greatly beneficial for elevating the quality of the nation. Only when the overall quality of the nation is raised can people speak of the nation’s development and stand independently among the world’s nations.

In the age of so-called global integration, exchanges between different cultures have become more convenient. Yet this is a double-edged sword: it benefits people by enabling them to learn from the outside world, but it can also, to a certain extent, dissolve their own mother-tongue culture. This calls for the effective activation of mother-tongue cultural schemata and the exertion of their principal role in intercultural communication so that they possess a strong national cohesive force and truly become the Soul of the Nation.

3.2. Using native Chinese cultural schemata to resist cultural aggression

Due to historical and economic reasons, among others, the transmission and reception of information in current bilateral intercultural exchanges have long been in a state of asymmetry. Faced with dominant Western civilization, people have excessively accepted Western cultural values and orientations. These elements are constantly being schematized in the Chinese cultural environment and, eventually, are imitated and internalized. In addition, because China’s science and technology lagged behind that of the West for so long, the study of Western science and technology has often been given top priority in school education, while the input of native cultural schemata has been neglected. As a result, the cultural identity of the nation’s members is in a state of diffusion. In this sense, intercultural communication appears more like a kind of cultural aggression.

The late-Ming scholar Gu Yanwu clearly differentiated between the “loss of the state” and the “loss of the world.” The “loss of the state” merely means a change in political power and a change of dynastic houses, while the underlying culture remains intact, posing no threat to the overall scheme of things. The “loss of the world”, however, means the total overthrow of both the political order and the underlying culture, representing a complete national extinction and racial annihilation.

Currently, many learners cannot specify the exact times of Zheng He’s seven voyages to the Western Seas or explain the historical significance of the Maritime Silk Road, yet they mechanically apply themselves to understanding why westerners were so enthusiastic about navigation and the significance of the 15th- and 16th-century geographical discoveries. They have not grasped the essence of the Confucian concept of “benevolence” (ren), yet they hold forth at length about the Christian concepts of “universal love” and “all men are born equal.” They have never heard of the ancient Chinese “study of paired opposites” in ideological thinking (i.e., the tradition of dialectical thinking), yet they expound at length upon the Western “scientific spirit.” They do not understand the “Great Harmony” (Datong) ideal that integrates Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism, yet they fantasize about Western “democracy” and “freedom.”

The construction of native Chinese cultural schemata is, in essence, the process of modernizing traditional Chinese culture, and it is also a matter of educational philosophy. Educators need to introduce mother-tongue culture systematically and effectively, and help learners construct a complete and comprehensive mother-tongue cultural schema. This belongs to the realm of cultural strategy and must not be overlooked. It requires long-term investment and planning, with concrete objectives and appropriate methods, in order to resist the powerful impact of Western culture represented by British and American cultures.

3.3. The role of mother-tongue culture in intercultural communication

A thorough understanding of the essence of traditional Chinese thought and culture, such as the principles of being a person, the spirit of actively exploring nature, the method of comprehensively analyzing problems, and the broad-mindedness of extensively studying and absorbing various disciplines, is an aspect worthy of being inherited and carried forward by learners. Maintaining the spirit and vitality of the native language culture and integrating it with advanced Western scientific culture can lead to more effective intercultural communication.

Without the foundation of the mother-tongue cultural schemata, the learning and understanding of Western culture would be blind, passive, and superficial. Only by mastering and deeply understanding the mother-tongue culture can one truly integrate the two, and can one effectively avoid all kinds of obstacles that may arise in cross-cultural communication. The cultural schemata of the learners' native language play a decisive role in intercultural communication. Only by constructing and activating the mother-tongue cultural schemata can one successfully assimilate Western culture and incorporate it into the original framework when engaging in communication, in order to recognize and understand the cultural commonalities in communication.

In today's world, where cultural exchanges are increasingly frequent, it is necessary to firmly establish the dominant position of the Chinese mother-tongue cultural model, strengthen the identity of the mother-tongue culture, and consciously disseminate and inherit the characteristics of the native culture, so as to achieve an equal discourse position with the dominant Western culture.

4. Conclusion

Whether it is the group-oriented values in the east or the individualistic orientation in the west, in an era of coexistence of diverse cultures, there is bound to be a process of mutual collision and integration. Intercultural communication is an important way for one's own cultural system to exchange energy and information with other cultural systems, enabling mutual understanding and acceptance.

However, in today's world, where cultural exchanges are not completely symmetrical, the disadvantaged ethnic groups should particularly pay much attention to the dominant role of their native language cultural patterns in intercultural communication, in order to resist the cultural invasion of the dominant Western culture. At the same time, the special connotations and extensions of the mother-tongue culture are used to fill in the gaps of other ethnic cultural patterns, in order to enhance mutual understanding among different cultures. It is necessary to establish the dominant consciousness of the mother-tongue culture and cultural schemata, enhance the sensitivity to the differences between the native culture and Western culture, reduce communication misunderstandings, and promote cultural exchanges.

Funding

This study is sponsored by the Educational and Teaching Reform and Research Project of Xi'an University of Science and Technology (26156).

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Bartlett FC, 1932, *Remembering*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- [2] Cook G, 1992, *Discourse*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- [3] Yule G, 1996, *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- [4] Han S, Lin X, Wang X, 2025, An Interpretation of Cultural Schemas and Translation Paths in Chinese Energy Discourse. *Journal of China University of Petroleum (Social Science Edition)*: 41(1): 67–73. <https://doi.org/10.13216/j.cnki.upcjess.2025.01.0008>
- [5] Jia Y, 1997, *Intercultural Communication*. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Shanghai.
- [6] Sperber D, Wilson D, 2001, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing.
- [7] Xie Y, Wang L, 2025, The Latent Framework of Thinking: Historical Evolution and Structural Logic of Sino-Western Cultural Psychological Differences. *Journal of Minzu University of China (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*: 52(5): 32–44. <https://doi.org/10.15970/j.cnki.1005-8575.2025.05.009>
- [8] Wen X, 2025, Revisiting Cultural Cognitive Linguistics. *Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University*, 2025(3): 1–10.
- [9] Huang W, 2026, Bidirectional Cultural Schema Reconstruction in the Translation of Ethnic Classics: A Case Study of the English Translation of *Manas*. *Language and Translation*, 2026(1): 60–66.
- [10] Hu A, 2026, Exerting the “Explanatory Power” of Culture: Reflections on the Strong Paradigm of Cultural Sociology. *Sociological Studies*, 41(2): 168–195 + 284.
- [11] Wu Z, 2025, The Development Path of Human Intelligence in Translation Education under Generative Learning Theory. *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*, 2025(6): 124–133.
- [12] Sun Y, Ma N, 2024, An Exploration of Cognitive Metaphor in the New Perspective of Cultural Linguistics. *Foreign Language and Literature Research (Series)*: 2024(3): 71–83.

Publisher's note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.