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The Concept of *Yuan* and Chinese Interpersonal Relationships

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We take exception to the general trend of regarding Chinese interpersonal relationships as primarily influenced by Confucian philosophy. Instead, through extended interviews with 10 Taiwanese graduate students studying in the United States, together with a variety of cultural materials from Chinese literature and the Mandarin Chinese language, it is shown that the Buddhist conception of yuan (dependent origination) also plays a significant role in structuring how Chinese think about their interpersonal relationships. Moreover, it is argued that yuan is a considerably richer, and potentially more valuable, metaphor for thinking about relationships, Chinese and otherwise. By emphasizing the role of context, this study serves as a critique of Western conceptions of communication and relationship, thus further enhancing understanding of interpersonal communication.

Issues concerning interpersonal relationships have long played a significant role in Western studies of communication. Only recently, however, have interpersonal communication scholars taken cognizance of the fact that any approach to interpersonal communication must necessarily reflect the underlying philosophical assumptions made by the investigator. As Parks (1982, p. 80) notes, the value-laden nature of such assumptions can present serious obstacles to the communication scholars: "The point at which observations meet value systems is inherently problematic for the communication scientist."

This phenomenon is nowhere more noticeable than in comparisons of interpersonal communication between Western and Eastern countries. In the West, communication scholars have held that the study of interpersonal relationship is inextricably tied to the study of communication because relationship is seen to be manifested through communication (Parks, 1982; Sillars & Weisberg, 1987). The key to this perspective is the widespread belief (especially among North Americans) that relationships can be "worked on" through training in communication competence. Many problems encountered in interpersonal

relationships typically are seen as "communication problems." As Katriel and Philipsen (1981, p. 315) point out, many North Americans feel that they need "communication" to make a relationship "work" and that " 'communication' is a culturally distinctive solution to the universal problem of fusing the personal with the communal. In the ideology in which 'communication' is a pivotal term, affirming oneself in and through a process of social interaction is the highest good."

It is not surprising that this prototypically Western conceptualization of interpersonal communication has proven largely untenable when applied to the study of predominantly Eastern patterns of relationship and communication (Kincaid, 1987; Yum, 1988). Westerners tend to view relational outcomes as primarily *dependent on* communication: "The interest in relationships is limited . . . to the extent to which two or more individuals share information with one another and the extent to which they move toward mutual understanding and agreement. *Other aspects of human relationships are not considered* [italics added]" (Kincaid, 1987, p. 339). This somewhat limited perspective on human relationships and interpersonal communication can be illuminated and enriched through a comparative investigation of the ways in which other cultures view interpersonal transactions, especially considering the views of Eastern people, who hold a considerably less instrumental view concerning the role of communication in relationships.

In line with the theme of this volume, we hold that there are many aspects of Asian relationship that Western philosophies, and their resultant models of communication, are ill-equipped to handle. The major overriding factor that contributes to cross-cultural misunderstanding is the differing views of *causation*. The Eastern view—that causation is multidirectional—will be difficult to understand by anyone who is aware only of Western traditions, which generally hold that causation is unidirectional (Maruyama, 1974; Redding & Martyn-Johns, 1979). This is why this study is necessary. Only through an awareness that the *underlying* views of causation in Asian countries are fundamentally different than those found in the West can cross-cultural dialogue about interpersonal communication be facilitated. These inherent differences lead to fundamentally different attributions about how interpersonal relationships are formed, maintained, and dissolved.

Recognizing the essential differences outlined above, we want to examine the role of context in Chinese interpersonal relationships in somewhat greater depth. In particular, we want to focus on how the concept of *yuan* is manifested in the interpersonal relationships of

Chinese on the island of Taiwan. *Yuan* (緣) is a concept derived from Buddhism, and it can be very briefly defined as "secondary causation." Yuan is thought to be the chief force that allows contextual factors to play a role in determining whether people will or will not be associated with each other. Chinese will often say, "I have yuan with another person," meaning conditions are right for them to be together. This concept plays a significant role in influencing present-day Chinese relationships.

To Chinese, the influence of yuan is of equal importance to that of other philosophies. In the past, studies of Asian interpersonal relationships have tended to focus on the role of Confucianism (see, for example, Yum's, 1988, analysis of East Asian interpersonal relationships). However, Confucianism explains only the *primary* causes of relationships, that is, those factors that are under the direct control of individuals; much of Confucianism, for example, is devoted to descriptions of how the *chun-tzu* (superior person) should behave in dealing with others and avoids the more abstract, less easily explicable, facets of relationships, such as the context in which they develop. Therefore, for a truly complete picture of Chinese relationships, one must also examine the principles of other Chinese cultural influences, such as Buddhism. By examining the influence of Buddhism, we are made more aware of the less noticeable, but equally important, influences of Chinese culture on interpersonal relationships.

In this chapter, we will provide a rich, descriptive portrait of Chinese interpersonal relationships through an interpretive analysis of the concept of yuan. Our analysis will be advanced in six stages. First, we will briefly describe the method we used to gather material for our study. Second, we will define in detail the concept of yuan, beginning with its origins in Buddhist theology. Third, we will provide a modern interpretation of yuan through an analysis of interviews with Chinese students. Fourth, we will relate the interview data with eight key Chinese expressions that explain different facets of yuan. Fifth, we will examine the significance of yuan for conceptualizing Chinese relationships. Finally, we will discuss the implications of yuan for the study of Chinese interpersonal communication. Throughout, we emphasize the contrast between the conceptualization of Chinese interpersonal communication under the impact of yuan as a perspective that accounts for contextual factors in relationships, as opposed to the individualistic and self-controlled viewpoint on interpersonal communication that drives much of Western thinking about relationships.

METHOD

The study of yuan, a subtle philosophical concept expressed in a variety of ways in very indirect and suggestive language, requires an interpretive approach toward cultural description. As Geertz (1973, p. 5) writes,

> The concept of culture I espouse . . . is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man [woman] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he [she] himself [herself] has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.

Thus the meaning of a given culture begins with the interpretive voice of the natives of that culture. For this reason, certain methodological strategies (such as quantitative approaches like attitude measurement and statistical analyses or even detailed lists of questions such as those to be found in ethnography of speaking; Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1982) are inadequate for exploring the linguistic and philosophical richness of ideas like yuan. Such methodologies, even though they may appeal to some consensual idea about appropriateness shared by an intellectual community (Jackson, 1986), are not sensitive enough to elicit meanings enacted by the cultural Other.

The key to understanding this broader conceptualization of detecting the meanings of a given culture lies in the realization that *we can never get direct access to what is in the native's mind.* Rather, researchers must formulate an analysis according to their interpretations of the natives' interpretations of their own lives. As Geertz (1973, p. 6) puts it,

> From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures, that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description."

The concepts underlying such analysis are, of course, considerably divergent from those to standard experimental psychology or of so-called objective ethnographic designs. The approach we take in analyzing yuan is derived from Geertz's broader, more flexible interpretation

of what constitutes cultural meanings. The richness and meaning of a given cultural concept such as yuan must rely primarily on the ways in which the natives of a culture interpret it. This is why a simple etymological analysis of the word *yuan* is insufficient to explain its richness. Rather, the study of such concepts is best accomplished through a qualitative analysis of a variety of cultural materials.

To elicit responses adequate to the richness of the topic, we conducted 10 in-depth interviews, ranging in length from one-half to one-and-a-half hours, in March and April 1989. The interviewees were graduate students from Taiwan, ranging in age from 22 to 30 years, attending a large midwestern university; residence times in the United States ranged from eight months to three years. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and were audiotaped, in private areas, and later synopsized in English. Interviews followed a semistructured protocol that aimed at eliciting the respondents' views on the following related subjects: (a) their interpretation of yuan through various Chinese linguistic expressions, (b) their personal attitudes toward the development of relationships, and (c) their interpretation of the role of communication in regard to Chinese interpersonal relationships.

These interviews served as our basic source of data. We organized the interview material according to a schema consisting of eight Chinese linguistic terms that refer to yuan. To enhance, amplify, and enrich the basic interview data, as well as the eight linguistic expressions, we also examined other Chinese cultural artifacts, including newspapers, literature, written cultural accounts, electronic media (i.e., popular music and television), and the personal experiences of the principal author, a native Taiwanese. Fortunately, the idea of yuan is so pervasive in Chinese life that its expression is to be found in almost any situation in which Chinese talk or write about their personal relationships. The consideration of all of these sources of data—taken together—will provide a richer, "thicker" account of the concept of yuan.

THE CONCEPT OF *YUAN*

Because yuan is a concept with its origins in Buddhism, to understand it requires the grasp of at least some of the basic ideas behind Buddhism. Although yuan is an extremely complex notion, its exegesis can be made considerably more understandable if one attends to the meaning of two key Buddhist terms: (a) *karma* and (b) *dependent origination*. First, we will briefly define these two terms, and then, based on these definitions, we will provide a more complete definition of secondary causation (yuan).

The first important key to Buddhism is the concept of karma, a kind of blanket responsibility for an individual's acts on earth during a given lifetime. Karma accumulates throughout uncountable lifetimes spent on earth. "Any deed is invariably accompanied by a result. All that we are at the present moment is the result of the karma that we have produced in the past" (Niwano, 1980, p. 104). Causation, according to Buddhism, is a result of one's acts through various lifetimes and does not stem from some supernatural agency.

A second important aspect of Buddhism concerns its depiction of a universe of interdependent factors, that is *dependent* origination. Any event results from innumerable causes interacting and interpenetrating each other. It is no wonder, with so many contributing factors, that Buddhists regard the natural world as ephemeral and impermanent. Rather than a fixed, Aristotelian/Thomist view of identifiable causes leading to specified results, we are presented with a shifting tapestry of interdependent forces, the slightest change in any of which leads to far-reaching alterations in all the others. As Niwano (1980, p. 94) writes, "Our lives continue from the unlimited past to the endless future; 'today' does not exist in isolation but is like a deep pool or a shoal of the endless river of life."

This perspective can be traced to the Buddhist theology of Tian-Tai Zhi-yi. In an important and influential 20-section work, Tian-Tai Zhi-yi systematized the various teachings in the Buddha's *Lotus Sutra*, generally regarded by Buddhists as his most profound work (Chan, 1963; Fung, 1983). A central facet of Tian-Tai Zhi-yi's work is the Doctrine of the Ten Suchnesses. This consists of ten characteristics of context prefaced by the phrase "such a" or "such an." Of these ten, numbers six, seven, and eight are essential for an understanding of *yuan*: "such a primary cause," "such a secondary cause," and "such an effect." Niwano (1980, p. 111) notes,

> Even when there exists a cause, it does not produce its effect until it comes into contact with some occasion or condition. For instance, there is always vapor in the air as the primary cause of frost or dew. But if it has no secondary cause that brings it into contact with the ground or the leaves of a plant, it does not become frost or dew. Such an occasion or condition is called "such a secondary cause." When a primary cause meets with a secondary cause, a phenomenon (effect) is produced. This is called "such an effect."

Thus primary cause is equivalent to most Western ideas about causation, while secondary cause can be seen as the context that facilitates the achieving of an effect.

This complex account of causation is little known in the intellectual traditions of the West. Aristotle, for example, spoke of four causes—material, efficient, formal, and final—but this is a peculiarly linear notion. It certainly did not allow for the context (secondary causation, or yuan) to have any influence on the effect. Buddhism portrays causation as constrained by the other, secondary, factors. In this view, the cause does not produce an effect by itself but must have the proper conditions before the result will occur.

Keeping in mind these definitions, we are now in a position to define *yuan* as

> a co-operating cause, the concurrent occasion of an event as distinguished from its proximate cause. It is the circumstantial, conditioning, or secondary cause, in contrast with the direct or fundamental cause. . . . *The direct cause is the seed, and yuan is the soil, rain, and the sunshine.* [italics added] (Soothill & Hodous, 1968, p. 440)

To return to our original thesis, recall that we wanted to discuss yuan in terms of Chinese interpersonal relationships. The multiplicity of secondary conditioning factors (for "secondary conditioning factors," read "yuan") gives rise to an interpersonal realm whose complexity is only partially known to the social actor. Buddhists speak of an inability to see all causative or conditioning factors and of the limitation that results from this, namely, that things happen for which one has no explanation.

The principle of yuan has significant implications for interpersonal relationship. According to Buddhism, it is impossible to identify "the," or even "a," major cause of a given event. In this view, the Westerner's preoccupation with communication as a sole, or even as a major, factor in relationship is misdirected. In Chinese thought, any relationship has its roots in uncounted numbers of lifetimes and is situated in a complex web of interdependent causative factors that are outside the control, or even the comprehension, of the human mind. It is much more difficult for Chinese to try to provide a causal account for relationship, in contrast with the Westerner's insistence that communication is one of the factors that can account for relationship success or failure.

Influenced by Buddhism, many Chinese conceptualize relationships as taking place at the nexus of a multitude of causes that an individual

accrues in this and other lifetimes. As Nakamura (1984, pp. 147-148) writes,

> In order to explain the true nature of differences in individual existences, aspects, forms and appearances, I must be able to accept or subscribe to a different context, a framework in which every individual, so to speak, receives influences from other individuals as well as from all other things. . . . All of this must be attributed to countless conditions and causes imposed by an immeasurable past that brings forth unique personalities.

This leads us to what is perhaps the feature most characteristic of Chinese views of relationship: If one does not form a relationship with another, and cannot explain why, more often than not, that person *will not seek to identify a cause why the relationship did not blossom and grow.* He or she will simply say, "We probably did not have yuan." Rather than relying on their ability to identify causative factors in the relationship that can be "worked on" (such as communication), Chinese are more likely to accept the conditions imposed by the context, even if they do not fully understand those conditions.

It is against this backdrop, then, that we must view yuan. Yuan between individuals results from the causes that make up both individuals' lives: their karma, in other words. The results, the fruits, of these karmic decisions, when they encounter secondary causation (yuan), are seen as determining who you will be involved with, to what degree, the kind of relationship, and how long it will last. For example, one might want to make friends with someone else. the primary cause in this case is the subjective willingness or volition on the part of both parties to form some kind of relationship. However, the friendship, according to Chinese belief, will not grow unless conditions of secondary causation (yuan) are fulfilled.

It is worth noting that the notion of yuan exists on at least two distinct levels for the Chinese. The more abstract sense of the word relates (as we have shown) to the complexities of Buddhist theology and particularly to its depiction of a shifting, unstable world of innumerable causative factors. Yet, even though the concept of yuan began in theology, the Chinese have always preferred that which is most immediately useful to them (Chan, 1963). Chinese have appropriated the idea of yuan and find it useful as a means of conceptualizing relationships without having to bother with many of its philosophical subtleties. This second level relates to immediate experience and serves as a metaphor by means of which Chinese come to describe their relationships. This is

the "common" usage of the word. To see how modern Chinese define this concept, let us now turn to an analysis of the interviews.

MODERN CHINESE INTERPRETATION OF *YUAN*

As must be the case with any concept that undergirds the philosophy of a given culture, we found a great deal of repetition among our respondents' references to yuan. The same explanations, and even, in some cases, the same metaphors, are used to express certain ideas about yuan. Therefore, it makes more sense to present our findings in terms of certain key ideas that are brought out by the respondents considered as a group rather than trying to describe each respondent's answers separately. As we examine the data from the interviews, there are two facts to keep in mind: First, there are minor but noticeable variations in the way our respondents talk about this topic, and, second, there is general agreement on the basic principles of yuan. We feel that the former fact is a testimony to the richness of yuan, while the latter is proof of its ubiquity in the Chinese culture.

Some of our respondents considered yuan to be, in the words of one, "a very precious chance" for people to meet. Chinese consider that, out of the many people you *may* come into contact with, conditions will only be right for you to form a relationship with a very few. Thus it is thought that people meet each other *not by accident* but because yuan facilitates the encounter (which is quite different from the Western approach, where the focus is more on relationship maintenance and less on the reasons why people meet each other). In the Buddhist theological language we alluded to earlier, it seems appropriate to refer to such fortuitous opportunities as *facilitative conditions*.

The people we interviewed generally agreed on the importance of yuan as a facilitative condition in which two seemingly unrelated people are brought together. As one female said, "If today I meet you, it is because we have yuan . . . when I say 'nice to meet you,' this 'nice' has the flavor of yuan." Later, this same respondent characterized yuan as "a kind of opportunity": when the proper conditions are satisfactory, one will be able to form a relationship with the other person.

The other side of this coin is that, when conditions are not satisfactory, no amount of effort will ensure one's having a relationship with the other. Thus, as one informant said, "If you can arrange something by yourself, this is not yuan, but if you try very hard and are still prevented from achieving success, we say this is due to a lack of yuan."

The above account illustrates that Chinese people see relationships in ways very differently than those in the West. In fact, to some extent, Chinese pay more attention to secondary causation (yuan) than to primary causation. Westerners tend to believe that personal and individual effort can overcome most obstacles in relationships and seldom if ever pay attention to appropriate conditions—not, at least, until a relationship gone wrong forces this realization upon them. Chinese, by paying attention to yuan at the outset, take a broader and more philosophical perspective toward their associations with other people.

Two common Chinese aphorisms show how pervasive this theme is in Chinese culture. The first expression is, *Ren suan bu ru tian suan* (human beings cannot count what God counts). (Note: All quoted Chinese expressions are Romanized according to the Pinyin system, Choy, 1981.) This can be taken to mean that humans can be aware only to a small degree of the contexts in which they function. Full knowledge of context is reserved only for the deity. In terms of relationships, unless the facilitative conditions are fulfilled, one cannot predict how the relationship will eventuate.

A second common Chinese expression is *tian shi, di li, ren he* (to be successful requires the timing, the place, and the human factors). An individual has a certain degree of control only over the third of these factors, the human factor. Again, this common saying points to the Chinese belief that only when all three conditions are fulfilled can there be a facilitative situation that allows events to transpire.

As we mentioned earlier, relationship is seen by Chinese as similar to a seed: Unless it encounters the right conditions of humidity, rain, temperature, soil nutrients, and so on, it cannot grow. This idea was illustrated in a recent story in a Taiwan newspaper (Song, 1988). In this story, a young man was about to be married. He said that someone had introduced him to his bride-to-be some two years previously. The young man said that, if he had known at that time that she would eventually become his wife, he would have married her then. However, the writer disagreed: She felt that it was only at the later point, when their yuan was right, that they could be together: "I always hear people say, 'If only I had known earlier, I would have . . . ,' " the writer commented, "but even if you had 'known earlier,' it would still have been useless." Because yuan possesses its own timing, one must wait until the environmental conditions allow an association to occur. In contrast to the Western approach (where timing would not have been considered nearly so important a factor), the modern Chinese allows unknown factors to play a significant role in forming a relationship. An individual's effort can succeed only when conditions facilitate it.

To this point, we have seen how modern Chinese people have interpreted the classical Buddhist concept of yuan to help them account for interpersonal relationships. But there is much more to yuan than this very basic definition. To elaborate these ideas more extensively, we now turn to eight key Chinese expressions related to the concept of yuan. In each instance, we will show not only that the interviewees share some definitions of the basic linguistic expression but also that there is considerable individual variation in how they choose to interpret the expression and actualize it in their own interpersonal relationships.

EIGHT KEY CHINESE LANGUAGE EXPRESSIONS RELATING TO *YUAN*

One of the ways that a culture's richness can be manifested is through its language. This is particularly true of the Chinese language, which assigns a large and diverse number of meanings to each individual character. In this section, we will examine eight key Chinese expressions that serve to define the concept of yuan. These eight expressions can be categorized on the basis of their relation to Western ideas of interpersonal activity, with two expressions illustrating each of the following categories: (a) presence or absence of association, (b) quality of relationship, (c) mutual attraction, and (d) attitude toward association.

Presence or absence of association. As we have seen, success or failure in relationships is often attributed by Chinese to whether or not two people "have" yuan. Two commonly used expressions to describe this situation are *you yuan* (有緣), meaning "to have *yuan*," and *wu yuan* (無緣), meaning "not to have *yuan*."

Let us examine *you yuan* first. Chinese do not see association as random; therefore, one expects to associate only with those with whom one has yuan. Moreover, the extent or degree of the relationship is also a factor controlled by yuan. One respondent felt very strongly about the destiny of association: "If two people are destined to have yuan, they will meet each other, even if they have never known each other before. When the time is right, all other factors will accumulate to bring about the chance for them to meet." As one common Chinese saying puts it, "If you have yuan with each other, though you are thousands of miles apart, you will still meet. If you don't have yuan, even if you are face-to-face, you will never know each other." Thus Chinese consider those with whom they do associate to be very special. Yuan itself is, on one sense, a reciprocal concept: those you associate with are considered

to have yuan with you, and those who have yuan with you are those with whom you will likely have important relationships.

Because associations based on shared yuan are considered to be very special, Chinese may develop favorable feelings on the basis of intuitive judgments about whether or not they feel they are likely to have yuan. Such a feeling can vary in degree according to how much yuan one actually has with another. Most female respondents said that they know intuitively who they have yuan with from the very first encounter (that is, those with whom they expect to have subsequent encounters). As one woman pointed out, the feeling of yuan must exist "before I have decided to make friends with someone." Nevertheless, none of these female respondents stated that her decision on whether she has yuan is based on the attractiveness of the other person's personality; rather, it is thought to be some kind of unexplainable feeling. According to one respondent, one can have yuan with another and yet be different in temperament from that person (that is, the yuan may exist, but the attraction on the basis of personality may not). She went on to say, "Most of the time my [initial] judgment is correct" but also that she still reserved her final judgment for later in the relationship.

Because you yuan is considered to represent likelihood of association, it is in romantic relationships that Chinese most strongly hope that they share yuan with the other. Moreover, they usually also hope that they have a great deal of yuan, so much so that they will be able to associate with the other for an entire lifetime. One informant stated that she has a foreign boyfriend (Canadian) and that, even though their relationship is stable at the current time, she sometimes is unsure about how long they will be together. Nevertheless, she says that, if they have a lot of yuan, they will be "together forever." Not knowing how long the relationship will last, this woman leaves the unknown factors to take their own course. Perhaps this is a form of resignation, based on the fact that the informant has had several, largely unsuccessful, romantic relationships in the past.

Next, let us consider *wu yuan*. This means that there is *no* chance for association or interaction with another person. One respondent offered several examples of how this can occur:

> Suppose you live in the same building as some other person for three years, and yet in all that time you have not been able to connect that person's name and face. You don't have yuan with this person: you might look at him or her without really seeing. Suppose a person is in front of you and still cannot attract your attention: with this person you don't have yuan either. Another person and I might admire each other (in terms of a romantic

relationship), but somehow I might also know we will never be together: the other person may have some commitment to someone else, or else there is no match between our personalities. With such people, I will say that we have no yuan.

Another respondent put the matter this way: "There are some people," she stated, "that I feel I have less yuan with, either from the first encounter or after several meetings. I feel that we won't have much chance to interact with each other, or even if I have such a chance, I would not like to interact with them." *Wu yuan*, then, carries a double meaning: People either don't have the *opportunity* to associate with each other or else they have the opportunity but *do not want* to associate. As this respondent told the interviewer, "I always use wu yuan to fend away unwanted suitors." Because they are not rejected outright, "that makes them feel much more comfortable."

Wu yuan is considered to be the saddest condition to have in a romantic relationship. If either romantic partner has the inclination to continue associating with the other, but there is wu yuan between them, then conditions will not allow their romance, regardless of how much one person may want it to occur. A common saying reflects this yearning: "If we do not have yuan in this life, then let us have yuan in a next life." Many Chinese romantic novels revolve around this theme. It is interesting that most of the references our respondents made to wu yuan occurred after we questioned them about reincarnation; though most said they either cannot verify, or do not believe in, a subsequent life, they still consider continuing yuan in a next life to be a very romantic concept. As one female respondent put it, "We think of the next life so that we will not feel so sad in this one." Here one gets a sense of the deep sadness that accompanies the loss of yuan: There is still some emotion, but the *conditions* do not allow the association to continue. Thus there is still something remaining (the emotion), but something has been lost (the facilitative conditions). This is why it is hoped that the emotion will carry on into another lifetime, where perhaps the context *will* allow association. While Chinese acknowledge the importance of personal effort in maintaining a given relationship, they also believe that, to a certain extent at least, failure or success of the relationship depends on the contextual factors.

Wu yuan can also occur between parent and child. In one example known to the principal author, a Taiwanese couple adopted a child and, as is the custom with Chinese parents, went to a fortune-teller for a prediction of the child's life. Without knowing that the child was adopted, the fortune-teller stated simply, "This child will not have yuan

["wu yuan"] with his parents." The parents took this to mean that the child and his natural parents would not be associated to any significant degree. Regardless of whether one grants the prediction any validity, the usage of the term *wu yuan* reveals its inextricable association with Chinese ideas concerning ability, or inability, to associate.

Quality of Relationship

Not only is yuan something that either does or does not exist between people, the term can also serve to describe the *quality* of a relationship. In general, yuan is described as *yuan fen* (緣份), an expression that denotes a "good" relationship (*good*, in this sense, meaning that one "has yuan" with another). In common Chinese usage, as confirmed by our informants, to have yuan is considered to be good, something very special, to be cherished in and of itself.

One important reason that yuan is nearly always considered to be good is that Chinese consider the chance to associate with another to be a very precious opportunity. Because only those who have yuan are destined to be associated, and because the fortuitous combination of secondary causes happens only rarely (depending not only on oneself but on many uncontrollable factors), Chinese respect and make the best use of this opportunity when it presents itself. So important is this feeling that, even if you associate with someone you do not like very much, you will try to cherish the chance to interact with that person.

This seemingly contradictory prescription is perhaps one of the clearest reflections of the collective nature of Chinese society. Many Chinese feel that even stressful relationships have come about as a result of the combination of many different types of primary and secondary causative factors, as these relationships are brought about by the individuals' karmic decisions. Suppose, for example, that one is involved in an unhappy marriage. Even though one may be unhappy, one may yet continue the relationship and comfort oneself with the knowledge that it is not easy to have yuan with the other person. Moreover, because it is brought about by the accumulations of one's own deeds through countless lifetimes, yuan cannot be avoided. Or, in the case of obstreperous in-laws, Chinese may say, "It is not easy to become an in-law; many factors had to combine to cause our families to associate with each other."

Yuan is held in such high regard that disturbance of yuan is considered by most Chinese to be an extremely grave matter. For example, if two people are interested in each other, and one of them asks a third person to offer an opinion about whether or not their association will

be good, the third person can only serve to *assist* the two people to associate, never to hinder them from doing so. As one common Chinese expression says it, "When you advise people in their relationship, advise them to associate rather than to dissociate." Older people in Chinese society believe that interference in a couple's relationship will be punished. Once again, we can see how important relationship is to the Chinese cultural fabric: Any relationship is to be cherished and tolerated, and one must not purposefully interfere with any chance of association.

These examples of respect for yuan may reflect not only the high esteem in which Chinese hold interpersonal relationships but also the Buddhist origins of this concept. Buddhists hold that yuan is accumulated over many thousands of existences. Thus to tamper in the current lifetime with what has been perfected slowly and painstakingly in past lives is to generate extremely negative karma.

This is not to say that Chinese interpersonal relationships are always good. Chinese reserve the expression nie yuan (孽缘) to describe a "bad relationship." The linguistic background of this distinction is very interesting: notice that yuan fen is simply the description of yuan, with no evaluative adjective coupled with it (*fen* simply means "share"). Thus, when Chinese want to distinguish unfavorable relationships, they are forced to couple the word *yuan* with the word *nie*, an extremely derogatory term that means simply "very bad." The description itself can be extremely repugnant to Chinese; as one respondent put it, "This term [*nie yuan*] very seldom comes to my mind. The word 'nie' sounds extremely bad to me, *so I do not even want to look at it* [italics added]." She said that she would rather interpret the phrase as "mistakenly arranged yuan" in order to banish the expression from consideration. "Yuan could not be so bad," she protested, "it could only be a mistake." This is a very clear echo of the point we made previously: Chinese hold human relationship above nearly every other aspect of their culture. It takes a great deal for them ever to give up on a relationship.

Nevertheless, there are many instances of nie yuan, some of which were pointed out by our respondents. One of the most common is the ill-fated romantic affair. One respondent offered the example of two people, each married to someone else, associating and deciding that they have met each other too late. This arrangement must be a "mistake," because social rules (which Chinese hold in high regard) condemn such association. If the two people never associated with each other, everything would be fine. Therefore, the informant explained, "I even use moral standards to make judgment—I would describe this case as being 'immoral.' "

Another respondent suggested that nie yuan sometimes occurs in the case of two people who get married, find out later that they do not love each other, and then get divorced. The hapless spouse in such a relationship may be seen as a victim of nie yuan: A relationship between the two partners should never have happened, but the relationship came about anyway, so the result is guaranteed to be bad. However, another respondent claimed that, if one partner decides to remain faithful to his or her spouse, this could constitute a betrayal of the heart, which is also a kind of nie yuan.

The determination of nie yuan in romantic relationships can become quite complex, however. As one respondent noted, by *nie yuan*, Chinese mean that one has already tried hard to avoid the relationship but has been unsuccessful "because the yuan between the two of you is too strong." According to her, simply falling in love with someone you should not fall in love with is not nie yuan. Nie yuan is reserved for instances of uncontrollable associations that are seemingly compelled by fate.

Moreover, it should not be surprising to find that a person in the throes of a nie yuan-type relationship is often unaware of that fact. Indeed, one respondent said that nie yuan is used to describe a relationship *only after* it turns out to be bad. Another informant said: "You cannot know the result in advance. . . . After the event is over and you reflect on it, you conclude that, 'This relationship should never have happened, but it did, so it is a true nie yuan.' "

Mutual Attraction

As shown previously, the meaning of yuan relates to facilitative conditions and can thus serve as a basis for Chinese to be associated with one another. To Chinese, such persons are noteworthy in a very specific sense: the relationship is held to be interdependent, because yuan has dictated the association not simply for one but for both. Yuan thus becomes a quality that each person possesses and serves as a way for people to decide to associate with each other: In other words, they associate if they "match yuan." Because of this special feeling, yuan becomes a quality to describe the relationship between people rather than simply a statement of conditions of secondary causation.

One example of this idea among Chinese linguistic expressions is *tou yuan* (投缘), which denotes a matching of yuan. One male respondent explained this by means of an unusual metaphor:

Before I knew my girlfriend, I didn't feel tou yuan with any girl. I knew a lot of girls and some of them were either very pretty or very well off, but I didn't feel that I wanted to marry them. You may want to take a picture with a beautiful girl or with a marvelous building to show your friends, but you wouldn't want to live in that building. But the feeling of "matched yuan" is different. When I am with my girlfriend, I want to marry her. I feel comfortable with her and want to live in the building.

Tou yuan is considered by our respondents to be a very comfortable feeling, a sense that "everything is all right" with the other person. This respondent went on to say that tou yuan refers to the feeling you have when a person comes along who fits exactly into your idea of an ideal mate: "The other person 'shoots into' your definition" (in the Chinese language, *tou* means not only "to match" but also "to shoot into").

To Chinese, "matched yuan" is a deeply mysterious feeling, unexplainable by reference to ordinary personality similarities or differences (as compared with the standard Western social psychological account of the role of personality or attitude similarity in forming and maintaining relationships). One female respondent explained, "Matched yuan does not occur because of time, or because of interactions between participants that make them familiar with each other." Our respondents believe that even those with vastly different, even dissonant, personalities can still have "matched yuan" with each other.

However, there can also be a feeling of *bu tou yuan* (不投緣), or "not matching yuan." In such relationships, one is uncomfortable with the other person not because there is a problem in terms of personality incompatibilities, or with communication, but because of a feeling that association with the other is "just not right." One needn't hate such people, or have open conflict with them. It is simply that one knows that relationship with them is impossible. This is different from *wu yuan* (no yuan). In that case, the proper environmental (secondary causation) conditions make relationship impossible. In "nonmatched yuan," the environmental conditions may permit a relationship, but there is always a sense that the relationship is "going nowhere."

Earlier we cited our informants' opinion that yuan is desirable in and of itself. Therefore, if yuan is not matched, this is considered to be undesirable. As one female informant said, "If it is 'not matched yuan,' I would not even use the term 'yuan' to describe it." *Bu tou yuan* (unmatched yuan) is not held to be a problem of communication; it is simply a feeling that "things are not right."

Another expression used to denote mutual attraction is *ren yuan* (人緣), or "human yuan." Persons who are, in general, liked by many

other people are said to have ren yuan. Ren yuan is unique among Chinese descriptors of yuan in that it is the only expression that specifies a relationship between an individual *and a group*. As one female informant said, "When I say 'human yuan,' I refer to the relation between a person and a group of people, whereas other kinds of yuan denote a relationship between two people who, together, form an interaction system . . . the meaning of [this term] is different from the other kinds of yuan we have been discussing."

Unlike *tou yuan* and *bu tou yuan*, however, *ren yuan* refers to a condition in which personality does play a large (though by no means the only) part. As one informant said, such a person "is easy to get along with, is nice to others, and others like him." In a famous Chinese novel, *Where There Is Water in the River, There Is Reflected a Moon* (Xiao, 1990), a mother is praised for giving her daughter ren yuan instead of giving her a beautiful face. The reason personality plays such a large role in ren yuan is that those so designated learn to deal with people and situations in a positive and constructive way. However, people who are simply "nice" or "popular" may not have "human yuan." To Chinese, popularity often simply means that one is sociable, in the sense of having social skills; however, this sort of skillfulness, often manifested through communication, is seldom considered a virtue by Chinese (Becker, 1988).

There was a great deal of controversy about ren yuan among our informants. Some argued that people who have ren yuan know "how to deal with things," that is, they are more socially mature and hence have stronger personalities. As one respondent said, "Those with 'human yuan' need to know a lot to behave appropriately." Some people, according to this informant, may be nice but cannot please everyone because they do not know how to do things in the right way.

However, other respondents claimed that those who have ren yuan are simply *more naive* than those around them. One informant stated flatly that ren yuan means that one finds it easy to please others, so that "others are happy about you." Such individuals, this informant argued, have *no* strong personality and, therefore, find it easy to survive. For this reason, the informant said, the term ren yuan is more often used to describe children than adults.

Perhaps it is for this reason that another of our female informants refused to consider the term *ren yuan* as complimentary. In her interview, she stated, "Usually, such people [those with ren yuan] have less individual personality to claim for their own. They have no guiding spirit and therefore they are easily accepted by others. It is not a very complimentary term."

Generally, our informants believe that one can judge whether another has ren yuan without really knowing the other person very well. However, some informants reserve their judgment until it is verified or rejected by subsequent interactions. One informant claimed that it is necessary for one to have more interactions with someone before judging whether that person has ren yuan. "When you are in a group," this respondent explained, "your judgment is very easily influenced by the judgments of others. If everybody says, 'That person has no human yuan,' I probably will take this as an explanation of his behaviors and keep my distance. If in fact I do have yuan with him, it will take a longer time to know him."

Attitude toward yuan. Even though the preceding discussion has shed some light on the complexities of yuan as a descriptor of Chinese relationships, we have had little to say about how Chinese respond to the influence of yuan in their interpersonal spheres of activity. Two terms reveal the Chinese attitude toward *yuan*: (a) *sui yuan* (隨 緣), which means "follow yuan", and (b) *xi yuan* (惜 緣), which means to "cherish yuan."

First, let us consider *sui yuan,* or "follow yuan." A great deal of Chinese philosophy and culture is based on the idea that wisdom and happiness are achieved when one discovers the ways of the natural world and acts in harmony with them (Haas, 1956). Thus, because yuan is in fact a metaphor that stands for the sum total of all conditions in the natural world, it is to be expected that Chinese would place a great deal of importance on acting in accord with yuan. As one informant stated, "Sui yuan is a feeling of *not forcing* contact between yourself and others in your life. Rather, you naturally meet and interact with people . . . but [on the other hand] you do not *purposefully avoid* chances to meet people." Or, as a male respondent put it, "If there is a relationship, it is OK; if there is no relationship, that is OK, too."

Following yuan is important to our respondents because it is a symbol of respect for the other person. One informant said, "Forcing others to do something they don't want to do is useless. You cannot change his heart. He is here but his heart is not here." Another said, "Even if you can force someone to do something through your personal power, this is not beautiful, and for that reason it cannot be yuan."

The novel *Where There Is Water in the River, There Is Reflected a Moon* (Xiao, 1990) illustrates the depth and beauty of the notion of "follow yuan." In this novel, a young woman attributes her relationships with her family, friends, and lover to yuan. She describes all the love, concern, and care among people as they meet each other. She especially emphasizes the relationship she has with her lover. At the novel's

conclusion, after she has quarreled with her lover, she tries to contact him to tell him how much she loves him. She walks over to his house but hesitates to go upstairs to see him. She sees the light on in her boyfriend's room; after staying there for three hours, she suddenly realizes that their yuan has gone and she leaves without seeing him. As the heroine of the novel says, "Perhaps it is better not to see you. What can I say if you have already made up your mind, if you do not suffer in your heart? To be able to stand like this is fortunate enough for me. Knowing you in this life has already fulfilled my life" (Xiao, 1990, p. 336).

In this complex and moving narrative, one can see what appeals to some people about yuan and also what repels them. Many Easterners would probably like to believe that the heroine of this story is destined somehow to be associated with her boyfriend. This is a very romantic notion, tied to the oldest myth about love, that somewhere there is a "special someone" for each of us and that, when we find this person, we will be truly happy.

Nevertheless, some people (Westerners in particular) might look on the heroine's behavior as too fainthearted and timid. Why does she wait below, instead of "talking things over" with her boyfriend? Between the two of them, they might have been able to change things and get back on the road to recovering their relationship ("get things back on track"). Above all, why does she wait *for three hours,* at the end of which time she "suddenly" decides that the yuan may have vanished? It seems as if she is looking at the concept of yuan to justify her own sense of cowardice, rejecting the one opportunity she has to make things different. Some might say that she has simply given up to fate and not even a fate that has been thrust upon her but one that she clearly chooses herself.

But Chinese see this situation entirely differently. First of all, Chinese see human relationship as something that cannot be forced. The problem is not just that the woman in the novel does not want to talk to her boyfriend, she instead wonders whether the conditions (the yuan) allow her to do so. Chinese do not see relationships as primarily affected by the individual actions of a single person (particularly communicative actions, such as "talking things over") but as the responsibility of both parties (as one respondent said, "you need to respect the other person"). For the heroine to have taken it upon herself to go to her boyfriend, to have forced the issue, would have been useless, because the boyfriend could not have been forced to do something that he did not want to do.

Second, even if she does force the relationship, such a course would not be natural and hence would not be beautiful. For Chinese, nature

sets the model for human beings to follow (Haas, 1956). In this regard, Chinese can be said to have a more "spontaneous" romantic view of relationships: If they do not work out, Chinese would prefer to let them die, beautifully, rather than desperately attempting to keep them alive by extraordinary means. Only when the love story dies beautifully inside the lovers' hearts can the story be kept forever, regardless of how much outward bitterness lovers must suffer. For the Chinese, it is useless to use strategies to achieve relational outcomes; even if the goal is achieved, it is still not beautiful. This can be contrasted with the Western strategic approach to interpersonal communication, which sees relationship as an outcome of communication. To Westerners, communication is often viewed as a *strategy* that produces relational outcomes (O'Keefe & Delia, 1982).

Implicit in the novel is the heroine's realization of her own responsibility in bringing about these results and of the Buddhist doctrine of *sui yuan*. She realizes that sui yuan is not the passive acceptance of an all-powerful fate (Buddhism admits of no such "first causes"), but that any intention she has to act against nature (to try to sustain the relationship by artificial means) is merely a reflection of her own desire, and that this desire will lead her to more suffering. As the heroine of this novel implies, the transcendent experience of realizing the truth of yuan is far to be preferred. It is only through the bitterly difficult process of giving up one's own desire that a spiritual realization can be achieved and one's life can be elevated to a higher sphere.

One of the respondents agreed with this idea but thought it would be difficult to try in practice. "If yuan is not according to your wish," she explained, "of course you will still try hard to change the situation. You won't follow the natural development and surrender quietly: after all, you are only human." This respondent felt that "follow yuan" is more something you say when an association has come to an end and you look back. "You have these feelings only when you have experienced life, and have passed through several other stages. It is not an imaginary feeling; rather, it is a very high spiritual achievement. Understanding is comparatively easy, but to achieve a spiritual awareness is very difficult."

This is not to say, however, that all respondents agreed that these lofty spiritual assessments are to be preferred. Some respondents, in fact would agree with most Westerners that "follow yuan" is entirely too passive. For example, one respondent thought that people sometimes say "follow yuan" as an excuse to avoid action: "If you say 'follow yuan' without doing anything, of course the result will be less than satisfactory. There is still a lot that can be done by human beings; you can do a lot to get the best out of your situation."

Whether "follow yuan" is active or passive is primarily a matter of individual judgment. Sui yuan can have many other implications, as the informants pointed out. As one said, "Such a feeling depends on an individual's attitude." Another respondent concurred, stating that "follow yuan" depends on individual response: If bitten by a dog, one person may say "How unlucky I am!" while another may feel fortunate not to have been hit by a car. Nevertheless, another informant disagreed with this relativistic viewpoint, likening yuan to "a moving force." In "following yuan," she said, one is doing something very active. "You do not falter, but rather you keep going. Thus, to follow yuan is not passive at all."

As important as the concept "follow yuan" is to our informants, however, there is one remaining idea that is even more significant: *xi yuan* (惜緣), or "cherish yuan." In fact, a common Chinese proverb states, *sui yuan bu ru xi yuan* (it is better to cherish yuan than just to follow it). The reason for this distinction is that "cherish yuan" is considered more active and hence more appropriate given the importance of yuan to Chinese culture. *Xi yuan* means that two people do their best to maintain their relationship because the felicitous combination of external causes and internal feeling does not occur very often. Therefore, it is important to treasure the relationship, here and now.

Most of our respondents agree with the elevation of *xi yuan*, believing that "follow yuan" is too passive. One male respondent pointed out that xi yuan puts more emphasis on individual action: "Personally, I think this is a good attitude . . . if you work harder your life will be better. Human beings are limited, but beyond human beings, the *world* is unlimited. I attribute all of this to yuan because I have a need to feel a sense of certainty." One female respondent explained, "Xi yuan represents a sensitivity toward yuan. Those who cherish yuan are more idealistic and sentimental. Only those who are affectionate will feel strongly about yuan. When you see that the relationship is important to you, you cherish it while it lasts, and when it has gone, you hope you will be able to continue it in a future life."

Our informants especially felt the need to "cherish yuan" when a relationship with another was uncertain, such as when there was a danger of the relationship ending. "If we are here," said one respondent, "and our parents are far away, we won't have much time to spend with them. Since human beings are mortal, we will feel strongly about cherishing yuan with them." For Chinese, the chance to have a

relationship is so precious that it must be cherished and not strategically manipulated.

SIGNIFICANCE OF *YUAN* FOR CONCEPTUALIZING CHINESE RELATIONSHIPS

From the foregoing, it should be evident that yuan is not equivalent to relationship but that it serves to reveal how Chinese *think* about their relationships as well as being a means for Chinese to shape their interactional activities. Such knowledge is vital if we are to avoid the pitfalls of trying unreflectingly to apply Western models of communication to Eastern interpersonal relationships (Kincaid, 1987).

As a central organizing metaphor, yuan obviously has a wide range of rich and variable meanings. Nevertheless, these meanings can be summed up in three basic principles: (1) *yuan* is typically used to describe initial interaction conditions; (2) *yuan* is typically used to account for more important relationships; and (3) *yuan* cannot be forced.

First, *yuan is used to describe initial interaction conditions*. Because of the influence of secondary causation, Chinese feel that the initial contact between two people is an extremely significant event. The most important aspect for our discussion is that such occasions for initial interaction do not come about all that easily. In fact, to Chinese, *all initial encounters* share the same quality of specialness. Several informants said that there are millions of people in the world, so that you do not meet any one of them by chance.

Though some people say that the amount of yuan is what sustains the relationship past its initial stages, many Chinese contend that the function of yuan is simply to bring people together. Later on, they argue, the relationship depends upon one's own personal effort. Thus it is possible for Chinese to attribute the success of a relationship to individual effort while at the same time acknowledging that the conditions governing initial interaction remain largely beyond one's personal control. This accords perfectly with the Chinese attitude that one should try one's best and leave the rest to the unknown.

A second overarching characteristic revealed by the interview data is that *yuan is used to account for important relationships*. As discussed before, if people are associated in any way at all, then they are considered to have at least some yuan with each other. Moreover, the amount of yuan will vary in degree according to the relationship. Chinese believe that a relationship will become significant only if people have

a great deal of yuan with each other; thus the concept of yuan is reserved in common parlance primarily to describe those individuals with whom one shares important relationships.

One female informant expressed the idea explicitly: "I have three circles of friends. One is simply acquaintances, one is friends, and the most inner one is close friends. I will only use *yuan* to describe close friends and friends. I won't feel I particularly have yuan with those who are merely acquaintances." Or, as another informant put it, "If you break up with a boyfriend who you do not like very much, you won't use *wu yuan* ["no yuan"] to describe the situation. You will only use yuan to describe a relationship which is very important to you. Although you still have yuan with him to some degree, who cares about yuan with him?"

It is clear that, because our respondents see relationships as something very special and precious, their feeling becomes particularly strong toward those with whom they have the deepest relationships. A sense of "having yuan with," then, becomes very strong when another is associated with you to a significant degree. As one male informant put it, "We always use *yuan* to describe a potential spouse, because you are going to marry that person and will have a lot of involvement with her."

Another important kind of relationship that Chinese view as a manifestation of yuan is that of *kinship*. One informant said that the most difficult thing in the world is to be someone's child or to be someone's sister or brother. The kinship relationship is considered to be very important, primarily because (according to Buddhist theology, at least) the linkages of association among members of a family require a great deal of yuan.

A third metatheme revealed in the interviews is that Chinese view *yuan as something that cannot be forced*. This idea may reflect the very important Taoist influence upon Chinese culture: nature says nothing, the Taoists tell us, yet it paves the way for all things to occur (Chan, 1963). Thus, for the Chinese, the best path for humans is to imitate nature (Haas, 1956). Under the guiding principle of yuan, relationship is not something that can be manipulated but something that must follow its own development, extending beyond human control. By not forcing a final solution to relational problems, Chinese apparently lack the strategic view of "relationshipping," which is the most significant difference between East and West concerning interpersonal relationship development.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF *YUAN* FOR CHINESE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The above-mentioned three basic principles of yuan shed light on the way Chinese view their relationships, as contrasted with the Western focus on interpersonal communication in relationships. Basically, the idea of yuan makes it possible to avoid three possible sources of confusion in applying Western communication models to Eastern interpersonal communication: (a) the role of the individual, (b) the likelihood of future involvement, and (c) the use of interpersonal communication as a means of comforting.

First, the notion of yuan can regulate how cross-cultural researchers view the role of the individual in interpersonal communication and the individual's instrumental approach toward communication. In the Western approach, communicators are seen as separate: "Each communicator is perceived to be a separate individual engaging in diverse communicative activities to maximize his/her own self-interest, usually by means of some form of persuasion" (Yum, 1988, p. 376). According to this Western mode of reasoning, the role of communication thus bears directly on the relational outcome. For example, note Burleson's (1986) review of research confirming that children's peer status can be enhanced through development of communicative competence. Duck (1985) contends that the chief contribution interpersonal communication scholars can make to the study of interpersonal relationships is to investigate the role communication plays in "relationshipping." Berger and his associates, in their theory of uncertainty reduction (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975), argue that close relationships are built upon the extent to which one partner has information about the other—information that is gained, of course, through communication.

According to this Western view, communication is seen to serve primarily functional and practical purposes in the creation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. A clue to the pervasiveness of this general model can be seen in what Parks (1982) calls the "ideology of intimacy," that is, the belief that, so long as relational partners disclose to each other, the *resultant* relationship will be better (deeper, more intimate). This viewpoint, confirmed by the Katriel and Philipsen (1981) study of how North Americans view communication, holds that such intimacy, achieved through communication, assumes predominance over all other factors in the relationship. For Chinese, however, communication is not seen as having a direct relational outcome: Such an idea is subsumed and absorbed by, and must be mediated by, the

overarching themes surrounding the concept of yuan, which focuses upon contextual, not individual, factors.

A second issue raised by the awareness of yuan has to do with speculations about future involvement trajectories. The concept of yuan can serve as a cognitive guide to real situations, because it has to do not just simply with how we talk about the relationship but also with the evolution of *chances* to interact with the other person in the future. As one of the respondents noted, when people associate with each other, some may attribute it to *you yuan* from the very beginning, a factor that can lead to having more chances for subsequent encounters. It is important to realize that Chinese, because they have access to the idea of yuan, possess a relationship-shaping tool that remains inaccessible to most Westerners. In a similar vein, Chinese may retrospectively attribute a relationship to yuan only after several encounters. Whether the remark about yuan is made in the initial encounter or in a subsequent meeting, the result is the same: Yuan paves the way for future encounters.

In this view, the objective facilitating conditions are taken as a subjective force in engaging or disengaging a relationship. Chinese relationships, thus conceived, are not seen as problems of communication or an issue of complementarity between relational partners (Duck, 1985) but as the degree to which one is *willing* to engage a relationship within the allowance of the conditioning factors, as determined by the interactant's personal judgment. Such an approach toward the mysterious feeling about one's relational partner, and its consequent result of increasing chances for interaction, is at odds with earlier Western views that center on the theme of personality, holding that mutual attraction occurs when people's personalities complement one another or when they hold similar attitudes toward one another. This position is also at odds with the Western model because it questions whether relationship is manifested through communication.

Third, the cross-cultural investigator should be alert to the differences in how comforting is perceived by those who know about yuan. For Chinese, the concept of yuan can serve as a means for comforting another in a relationship. While North Americans often try to invoke communication as a means of relational repair, Chinese are more resigned to relational difficulties because they can attribute them to, and explain them by means of, yuan. Rather than going to an intermediary, such as a marriage counselor, to resolve communication problems in conflict resolution, Chinese do not perceive communication as something that can be strategically employed as a means to an end: that is,

to rescue the relationship. One informant (who had served as a social worker, a profession developed in the West) recalled:

> A lot of problems which confuse our clients are more practical issues than relational issues. People who have troubles in their relationships, when they finally decide to come to ask our help, do not perceive their problems as communicative problems. It was not until we told them that they had problems in their communication that they became aware of it.

The cross-cultural researcher who knows about yuan knows that, outside the West, there are considerably greater restraints on how much a relationship can be "worked on." As we have pointed out, the concept of yuan denotes the natural development of a relationship according to its facilitating conditions, conditions that cannot be forced. By resigning themselves to unknown factors that bring association as well as dissociation between people, Chinese feel no need to develop specifically communicative strategies to maintain their relationships. By cherishing the chance of association, and by allowing the relationship to develop according to its own course, Chinese are more willing to tolerate a bad relationship or to disengage a relationship without using communicative strategies to do so. Moreover, even though communication is not perceived as a tool to affect an outcome, Chinese nevertheless realize the importance of communication. Yet, even in this realization, communication is not seen as the chief factor determining whether people are allowed to associate with one another. For if yuan does not allow the association, there is no way one could rescue a relationship, whether good or bad. Relationship is not perceived as an activity to be actively pursued by the actors through communication training but as an activity that develops in its own way and in its own time.

From the above analysis, three conclusions can be drawn. First, acceptance of yuan does not mean that Chinese are fatalistic, giving up on relationships and letting them die. Second, even though Chinese do acknowledge that they can work on relationships, they do not consider communication as the only means of doing so. Third, and finally, granting that Chinese are able to work on relationships through means other than communication, they are willing to leave certain aspects of the relationship to contextual factors, which they regard as largely unknown and unknowable.

In this chapter, we have tried to offer a richer and more philosophical account of Chinese relationships than that proposed by consideration of Confucianism alone. While there is no question that Confucianism, with its specification of roles and its ordering of society, is the most obvious and identifiable aspect of Chinese culture, it is also true that Confucianism's very obviousness precludes its use as a complete account of Chinese interpersonal relationships, with implications for Chinese interpersonal communication. Chinese are subtle and indirect in many respects but in none more so than their interactions with other people. We feel that a consideration of the subtleties of Buddhist thought enables us to apprehend Chinese thinking about relationship more completely.

In fact, much of what our respondents told us about their relationships would (at least from a Western viewpoint) seem to be quite illogical were it not for the organizing principle of yuan. When we place Confucian social prescriptions in the field of yuan, or secondary causation, we are provided with a powerful metaphor for explaining how Chinese come to view relationship and the extent to which relationship is, or is not, an outcome of communicative competence. Such a realization aids us in approaching the goal articulated by Kincaid (1987), that is, to challenge and expand the scope of our own thinking about human communication through an investigation of the similarities and the differences between the Western and Eastern philosophical models.

For Chinese, the concept of yuan is not only an abstract philosophy of interpersonal relationship but also an attitude toward life. From our earlier example of the newspaper story (Song, 1988) about the young couple getting married, we can extract a quotation that simultaneously sums up this attitude and at the same time provides a fitting conclusion to this chapter:

> Don't regret that you meet each other too late, but do be precious about your yuan, because in this life, any yuan is not easy to get. Only those who know enough to cherish yuan will realize that even a small encounter might have been prepared for thousands of years. When yuan is mature, try your best to make it flower with the most beautiful blossoms. Whether the flower blossoms or dies, if you try your best, you will have no regrets.

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