

THE MUTUALISTIC RELATIONSHIP between Individualistic vs. Collectivistic Cultures and Writing Studies

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Preface

Culture defines us in ways we do not suspect. The way we learn, the way we teach, and the way we interact, talk, present, and think are all affected by the culture we grow up in. In the U.S., while we are a culture that highly values uniqueness and independence, the messages we receive from an early age that reflect those values make us similar despite any contrary beliefs. In psychology, there are two distinct types of cultures--individualistic and collectivistic cultures--which will be examined throughout this paper.

Though we read and write to express ourselves without much thought, the vocabulary, style, and structure of writing communicate a lot to a reader about what kind of culture the writer is from. In this paper, I will not only answer the question of how culture affects writing style, structure, and vocabulary used in Western and Eastern cultures but I will also pinpoint how you can use this information to critically think about the culture a writer may originate from based on their writing the next time you find yourself reading a piece of literature.

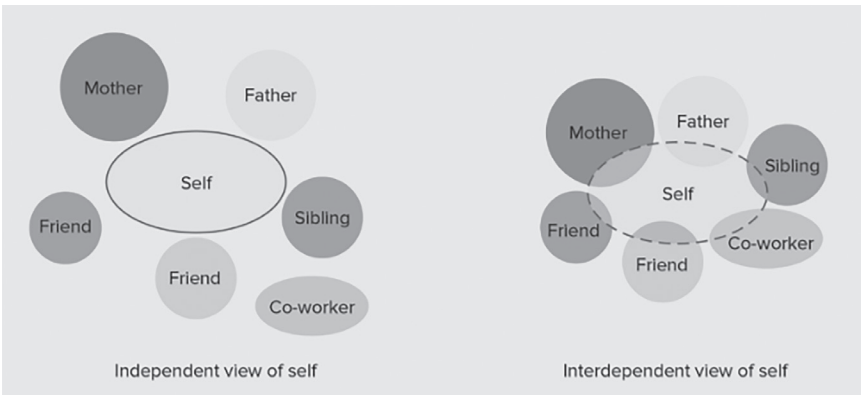
Collectivistic and Individualistic Cultures

Writing is a form of reality, fantasy, and history. There are multiple facets to writing, but what they all have in common is perspective. Writing originates from lived experiences; how those are experienced depends on the individual, which is affected by what they were taught to believe an experience should be labeled. Those who teach are most likely to be the surrounding community, or the culture. To be able to understand how culture affects writing, we need to understand how each culture defines itself. This section will focus on the different behavioral aspects that culture affects, which lends itself to the writing they conjure up, based on the book *Social Psychology* by Myers and Twenge (Myers & Twenge, 14th Edition).

Collectivistic cultures value the well-being of the group over the individual. The group can be a family, community, or society, and the individual's success is measured by their contribution to the group's success. In collectivistic cultures, people tend to prioritize social harmony, interdependence, and cooperation. This is often achieved through sameness and agreement. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining positive relationships and respecting social norms. Loyalty, humility, and selflessness are valued. One must be willing to sacrifice one's self-interest to thrive in this culture, as strong family ties and a hierarchical social structure exist, which in turn further emphasize respect for authority. Many of these collectivistic cultures can be found on the Eastern side of the world, such as China, Korea, Thailand, etc.

Individualistic cultures are just the opposite. Individualistic cultures place value on personal autonomy, independence, individual rights, self-expression, and self-fulfillment over group harmony. Individuals in these cultures are encouraged to be assertive and to prioritize their personal goals and aspirations over the interests of the community. Successes and failures are associated with the individual, so there are high expectations of

that. Freedom, the pursuit of happiness, and self-sovereignty are highly placed on the structure of individualistic cultures. If those words sound familiar, it is because two are from the Declaration of Independence, which indicates the U.S. to be a strongly individualistic culture. Self is identified with personal achievements and experiences, whereas individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to develop a sense of self-based on relationships with family and friends. The following table and graph illustrate these concepts in summary.



Self-Construal as Independent or Interdependent: *The independent self acknowledges relationships with others. But the interdependent self is more deeply embedded in others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).*

TABLE 2 Self-Concept: Independent or Interdependent

	Independent (Individualistic)	Interdependent (Collectivistic)
Identity is	Personal, defined by individual traits and goals	Social, defined by connections with others
What matters	Me – personal achievement and fulfillment; my rights and liberties	We – group goals and solidarity; our social responsibilities and relationships
Disapproves of	Conformity	Egotism
Illustrative motto	"To thine own self be true"	"No one is an island"
Cultures that support	Individualistic Western	Collectivistic Asian and Third World

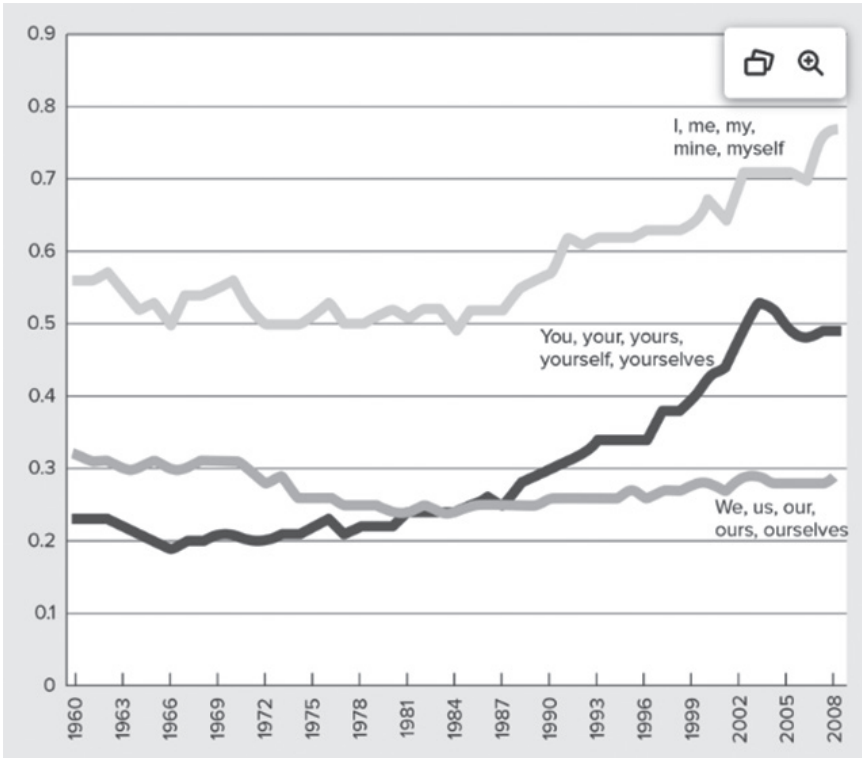
Teaching

As the preface covers, values shape the way a writer formulates the structure and meaning behind the writing. As Minsang Lee perfectly summarizes, “Children in a collectivistic culture

learn how to think within the frame of “we,” while children in an individualistic culture learn how to think on the basis of “I.” Whereas “we” signifies more than an individual, a group, and thus pressures from a group, such as conformity, “I” emphasizes the idea of the self and the self-autonomy one has.

We implement and practice the things we learn. Myers explains how, in individualistic cultures, teachers correct their students based on a standard that places individuals to dispositional faults rather than situational ones, whereas collectivistic cultures emphasize the significance of situation over disposition. “As Western children grow up, they learn to explain other people’s behavior in terms of their personal characteristics (Rholes et al., 1990; Ross, 1981). As a first-grader, one of my [DM] sons unscrambled the words “gate the sleeve caught Tom on his” into “The gate caught Tom on his sleeve.” His teacher, applying Western cultural assumptions, marked that wrong. The “right” answer located the cause within Tom: “Tom caught his sleeve on the gate” (Myers & Twenge, 14th Edition). Just with this difference in grading and academic corrections, children in individualistic cultures learn to associate more things with the self. This was also proven by Hinds (1987), who concluded that “Japanese was a reader-responsible language, whereas English was a writer-responsible one, stating that Japanese tended to focus on a situation, while English had a proclivity to focus on a person. For example, English counterparts of the following Japanese sentences “*Sakebigoe ga shita zo* (A shouting voice occurred)” and “*Yama ga mieru* (The mountain can be seen)” would be “I just heard someone shout” and “I can see the mountain.” (Minsang Lee). In addition, literature itself in individualistic cultures tends to focus more on the self, further enforcing the values of independence and self-autonomy. Google Ngram is an online search engine created by Jon Orwant and Will Brockman in December 2010 that charts the frequencies of words and phrases found in texts from 8 languages

consisting of 5 million books since 1800, and what it shows is that “books published in the United States used the words “I,” “me,” and “you” more and “we” and “us” less,” (Myers & Twenge, 14th Edition). At the bottom, I will provide an illustration demonstrated by the book, but also my search of the word:



In the Google Books database, American books in the 2000s (versus those from the 1960s and 1970s) used I, me, mine, and myself and you, your, yours, yourself, and yourselves more often (Twenge et al., 2012).

Figures 1 and 2 show the usage of “I” in English publications compared to Chinese (simplified) from 1800-2019.

From what we have seen, a combination of direct feedback from educators guiding children’s writing skills and reading literature that writes and conveys messages and values that correspond with appropriate culture lends a way to influence the way students interact with writing and the processes they take to convey their values.



Figure 1: Chinese (Simplified), 2019.

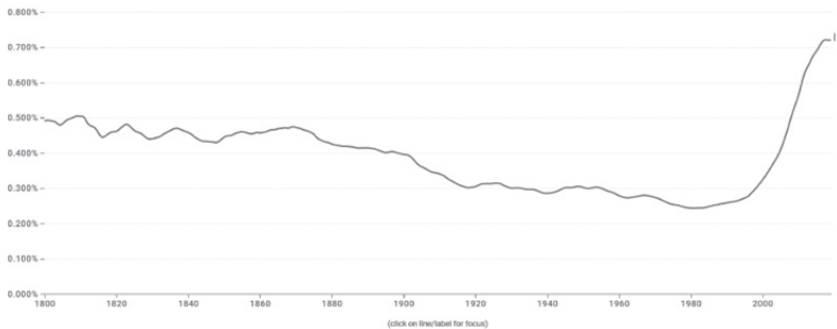
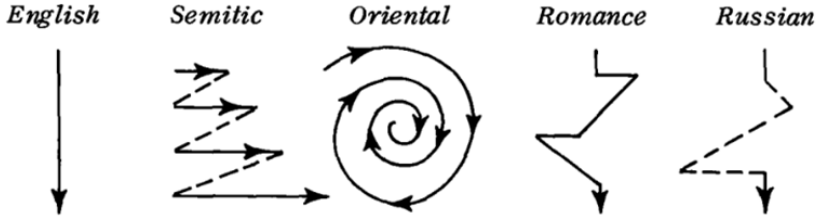


Figure 2: English, 2019.

Writing Process and Language

To start the writing process, a writer must first start brainstorming. In brainstorming, cognitive processes and functions work together to formulate ideas, themes, styles, and messages around the writing. These processes are heavily influenced by the systems we are taught by, and since we teach what we know, it is not surprising that collectivistic cultures will emphasize collectivistic values, and individualistic cultures, individualistic values. Kaplan refers to the differences in rhetoric, or the way someone thinks, as contrastive rhetoric. To find ways to help L1 (first language) writers improve on their L2 (second language) writing, Kaplan analyzed the structure and rhetoric in which different cultures in the West and East differ, naming his research “Cultural Thought Patterns.” He provides an illustration demonstrating the flow of an essay in different languages, which is shown below:



Minsang Lee explains more simply Kaplan’s illustration of essay development, explaining English essays being “developed in a linear fashion, Semitic language essays utilizing parallel coordinate clauses, Romance languages and Russian composition patterns showing linearity at the beginning and the end but digressions in the middle, and Oriental languages reflecting indirectness by having a spiral form.”

Minsang Lee conducts her own study on this concept by analyzing the writings of Korean students, looking particularly for the logical structure and omissions of certain words in the writings. She explains that English rhetoric consists of an introduction-body-conclusion structure, while Korean rhetoric follows the ki(introduction)-sung (development)-chun (deviation)-kyul (conclusion) structure. What she found was that Korean students limited– if not completely excluded– the use of the word “I,” in their essays and that they used Korean rhetoric in their English prompts. The four illustrations display the rhetoric used by the four students who participated in the study. Whereas English is supposed to be linear, these students made use of deviations.



Figure 2. Ji’s rhetorical pattern



Figure 3. Soo’s rhetorical pattern



Figure 4. Han's rhetorical pattern



Figure 5. Lee's rhetorical pattern

Two of the students shared their reasons for their reservation in the use of I, with one stating that “she was an introvert person who was educated her whole life to follow collectivistic values, which often resulted in the suppression of expressing one’s opinion freely for the sake of the group harmony,” and with the second student explaining that he “hardly used ‘I,’ because he did not want to look special and was not certain of his opinion.” This was fascinating because it only proves the power that culture has on writing. The total exclusion of one word that, when used repeatedly, can cause an individual’s identity to associate and revolve around the self rather than the community is nothing short of interesting.

A similar study was conducted by Su-Yueh Wu and Donald L. Rubin, but the writing compared and analyzed were those of American students and Taiwanese students writing in both Chinese and English. What they found was that “Taiwanese students writing in English, as compared with their LI, were more likely to use first person pronouns, were less likely to use proverbs and were less assertive,” as well as “displaying their collective virtues through their use of Confucian principles of humanness.”

American students writing in English were characterized by their strong presence of assertiveness, use of personal anecdotes, and personal pronouns. What was most interesting about this study was the cross-cultural result: though Taiwanese students continued to predominately show collectivistic virtues, simply switching the language in which they wrote changed their use of personal pronouns, such as the word, “I,” previously established as an aspect

more commonly found in individualistic writing.

A final study conducted by Tony Xing Tan, Xiaohui Fan, Lauren B. Braunstein, and Mark Lane-Holbert looked through Mislevy’s sociocognitive perspective. What they found was that “linguistically, compared to American students, Chinese students used more adjectives, adverbs, modal verbs of obligation, and were more direct in offering value judgments,” including being more direct in their writing, and using words and expressions that only had corresponding Chinese translations or Chinese idioms. They used the following table to explain the rank of the reasons students used in response to the prompt given.

Table 1
Themes and number of codes between essays from students in China and students in the United States.

Rank	Undergraduate in China	Undergraduates in the U.S.
1	Opposing the Search for Birth Parents (83)	Appreciating Mother’s Love and Sacrifice (120)
2	Appreciating Mother’s Love and Sacrifice (60)	Communicating Better with Mother (43)
3	Respecting Mother (49)	Taking Education Seriously (38)
4	Lacking Maturity at 18 years of age (40)	Respecting Mother (37)
5	Taking Education Seriously (34)	Opposing the Search for Birth Parents (35)
6	Communicating Better with Mother (33)	Lacking Maturity at 18 years of age (15)

Note: There were 70 essays from students in China and 66 essays from students in the US. Values in the parentheses are the number of codes that we extracted from the texts for the themes. Each theme represents a cultural pattern that capture the writer’s thoughts, beliefs and attitudes that were developed and internalized by the writers as part of their experiences living in their culture.

The thing I found the most interesting about the results was what they found for the theme of “Appreciating Mother’s Love and Sacrifice,” which was a theme that ranked first for American students and second for Chinese students. What they discussed was that the texts “suggested that the Chinese students conceptualized sacrifice to be a key element of raising children and children must recognize and repay such sacrifice, while the American students conceptualized love to be fundamental to mother-daughter relationship and children needed to be reminded that love of the mother was unconditional. These differences are in keeping with cultural differences related to family relations and parenting between the U.S. and China, thus reflecting the students’ respective cultural beliefs.” It was interesting, because (Myers & Twenge, 14th Edition) Chapter 11, explains how individualistic cultures consider

love to be a feeling, and thus are more prone to divorce in marriage after passionate love declines to more compassionate love, whereas collectivistic cultures place more value in the practicality of social attachments, and thus result in longer marriages.

Personal Interviews

To get a first-hand understanding of language and how cultural values affect writing, I briefly interviewed two classmates in English class who are from Vietnam and are studying in the US. The questions are as follows:

1. How has writing challenged or facilitated you in learning English?
2. Have you noticed any differences in the way you write when you switch languages?
3. Do you think differently about certain topics than you did before coming to the USA?

For confidentiality purposes, the names have been changed.

Zoey answered the following questions:

1. Writing has been a tool for facilitating my language learning. Through the process of writing, I have been able to practice and refine my understanding of grammar, and vocabulary. Additionally, I have been able to learn from the mistakes that I have made, as well as receive feedback from teachers and friends who have helped me to improve my writing over time.
2. Yes, I have noticed a lot of differences in the way I write when I switch languages. In Vietnam, I only used adverbs to write, but I had to learn how to conjugate in the U.S. For example, in Vietnamese, “I go to the market yesterday” has the past “yesterday” at the end of the sentence, so there is no need to conjugate “go”. The correct way to say this in English is “I went to the market yesterday.” For it to make sense, the past tense of “go” must be used in the

conjugate form of “went”. Since I was taught to write in that Vietnamese style in school, I have always had trouble with it. When I write, I don’t conjugate the last sentence and mess up my present tense.

3. No, I did not think differently about certain topics before I came to the USA because I was an adolescent.

McKenzie on the other hand, responded in the following manner:

1. Writing has been facilitating me in learning English in many ways. First, by practicing writing, I can improve my vocabulary because I’ll learn how to use words that suit current circumstances. In addition, I can know another word by using a synonym or antonym. Second, I can revise my general flow in sentences and organize my ideas to make it smoothly and easy to understand. By revise again in writing, it can help me to avoid awkward phrases or grammar errors.
2. The differences that I can think of when switch to English is at the beginning, I always have challenge in writing, such as limited vocabularies, grammar mistakes and etc. In English, I’ll more pay attention on how can I express my whole ideas than make my writing becomes egregious.
3. Before go to the United States, I think US academics in college is more accessible to “breath” than other programs.

Modern Days

Aside from essay writing, I wanted to dive into more modern forms of writing, which nowadays take form digitally, especially through the use of social media. Briefly explained, the article “Differences between individualist and collectivist cultures in emotional Facebook usage: relationship with empathy, self-esteem, and narcissism,” illustrates how Spanish and Thai cultures affect the emotions their youth express in social media posts. It found that

regarding the Thai participants scored lower in Cognitive Empathy when compared with the Spanish sample, engaged more on Facebook, and engaged more in emotional expression. The Spanish did not utilize Facebook as often and provided fewer emphatic messages and emotional expressions, which explains their low score on Affective Empathy. However, they did score higher in terms of leadership. The article states that “This cross-cultural variation was consistent with Hofstede’s explanation (1980), given that individuals of Eastern cultures are generally more emotionally involved in their social relationship, but tend less to analyze this kind of events from a rational point of view,” and “With Western countries being characterized by less power distance between citizenship and authority figures, the Spanish sample are possibly socialized to become more independent of their authority and to be higher in terms of their leadership than their Thai counterpart.” I used this article to show how even emotions we express through our writing, even in more modern forms of writing, are heavily influenced by culture.

Conclusion

Culture shapes the way we think, perceive, and communicate. Our cultural background influences the way we write and the way we interpret written communication. It is crucial to understand the cultural and linguistic background of the writer to create understanding between the audience and the author. The differences in language and culture can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and even offense. Therefore, it is important to consider the cultural nuances and use of language. Different languages have different structures, and the transition from one language to another can be challenging. As we have seen throughout the paper, writing is not just a matter of free will, but rather an array of influences introduced to us (writers) early on that have shaped our cognitive processes, use and choice of words,

and messages we believe as urgent to share to others. Writing is a powerful tool to influence others, so as readers, we are responsible for recognizing the influence an author's cultural background has on their writing, and how we will let it affect us and our values. As for teachers specifically, as Minsang Lee perfectly claims, "Teachers should consider L2 learners' cultural influence on their English writing to understand them better (Song & Seong, 2010). There are no less developed children because all children develop differently (Ageyev, 2003), and L2 teachers should be aware of this and consider the diverse cultures of their students in class."

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Think about the culture you grew up in. Was it an individualistic or collectivistic culture? How has that influenced your writing?
2. The author suggests that individualistic cultures are more assertive while collectivistic cultures are less so. What are some elements of these cultures that might contribute to this distinction?
3. In their essay, the author deliberately changes the names of their interviewees. Why do they do this? What advantages and disadvantages does this create for both the writer and the reader?
4. How does the use of visual images (i.e. graphs) help and/or hinder the reader?