

The use of semiotic resources in a British and Chinese cross-cultural family within three generations

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the utilisation of semiotic resources and attitudes of families after transiting from a single cultural family to a cross-cultural family. The participants of this study include three generations and six family members from a Chinese and British cross-cultural family located in the East Midlands of England. This Chinese family comes from a developed city in southern China. Among these three generations of six members, the grandparents and the mother are monolingual. The three children are multilingual and have varying degrees of proficiency in Mandarin and English, as well as an understanding of the cultures of both countries.

This study adopted an ethnographic research method, using field notes and interactive approach to collect data within one month, while combining participants' daily observations and conversations on media platforms to answer the research questions. This study conducted the research on three parts: recording data, identifying semiotic resources, and analysing resources. The study also applied systematic data analysis using PEEL (Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link) writing format under the guidance of Gibbons (2019).

The results of this study indicated that semiotic resources are reflected in the pendant of Chinese calligraphy, hot water culture discussed on social media, birthday cards, and daily etiquette. In addition, the attributes behind these semiotic resources reflected recognition and appreciation of multiculturalism among family members, as well as an open attitude towards diversity. When using semiotic resources, cross-cultural communicators selectively used a certain language, image, or method to construct the text they needed to adapt to the current conversational environment, thereby achieving successful meaning creation and developing cooperative abilities

Keywords

Semiotic resources
Cross-cultural families
British Chinese family communication
Ethnographic study semiotics
Translingual competence interaction
Multimodal meaning-making strategies

Introduction

According to the data from the UK Government, there were 393,141 people from the Chinese ethnic group in the 2011 Census of England and Wales, which showed a 0.3 percentage point increase compared to the 2001 Census (GOV.UK, 2020). In the most recent Census conducted in 2021, Chinese immigrants in England and Wales have reached 445,646 (Office for National Statistics, 2022). With the surging Chinese population living in this multicultural country, people's lives are intertwined with the use of semiotic resources. Semiotic resources are a contextual and emotional interaction. This interaction includes the speaker's discourses and life experience (Busch, 2021). Semiotic resources can be composed of dialogues, texts, images, or sounds. Meanwhile, they change and as a result "they exercise their own agency, the choices they make and the plans they have for their future" (Machowska-Kosciak, 2020, p.3). As a member of a British and Chinese cross-cultural family living in England, my family and I also interact and illustrate our bond through different semiotic resources and "diversified linguistic practices" (Lanza, 2021, p.764). This kind of family background has encouraged several studies, but so far, none of them have demonstrated contextualised and specific experiences of three generations of the British and Chinese cross-cultural family. According to Canagarajah's definition of 'competence', to successfully communicate within the cross-linguaging context,

translinguals need to have "suitable negotiation strategies and corrective practices" (Canagarajah, 2012, p.173). Under the guidance of this definition, combined with my background and the gap defined, my study discussed the significance of the use of semiotic resources after transforming a single culture family into a cross-cultural family. Then it identified why it is important to comprehend the choice of semiotic resources in the context of cross-cultural family. At the end, it illustrated the broader attitudes and implications of the use of semiotic resources in the family unit and its potential impact on a bigger community. The research employed ethnography as the methodology, with field notes collected within one month from three generations of a family.

Literature Review

Introduction

There are ample literature reviews on the use of semiotic resources in cross-cultural communication (see Canagarajah, 2013; Li, 2018 and Lanza, 2021). These reviews have not only provided me with pioneering ideologies but also served as a prompt to connect with my own family background, which nevertheless, is difficult to find relevant content in existing literature. As a result, my research aims to review existing literature on the use of semiotic resources in cross-cultural families, its relationship with translingual practice that helps me critically

evaluate British and Chinese cross-cultural family background. The structure of this review is that firstly, the semiotic resources of cross-cultural communication will be summarised and critically understood. Secondly, the methods of interactional approach and field notes are reviewed, such as analysing participants' dialogues and behaviour records. Finally, attention is also paid to the aspect of how members from different generations in the cross-cultural family use different semiotic resources and the resulting implications in a broader community.

Theoretical Background

Canagarajah (2012, pp.173-179) established his notion of translingual communication, which includes two dimensions: "Performance Competence and Cooperative Disposition". These dimensions are defined as the ability to engage in dialogue, interaction, and communication strategies. They not only focus on daily communication, but also emphasise extensive social negotiation, helping to establish and form the meaning of discourses. He believes that the association among semiotic resources, environmental factors, and human subjects of Performance Competence allows successful communications. In comparison, this has enabled me to draw to another literature by Gomes in 2022. In his article, the character Emma, as the 3-year-old daughter from a Brazilian-Norwegian family in Norway, potentially chose the right language (Norwegian or Portuguese) among different environmental activities and speakers, so that she was allowed by her mother to use her first language Norwegian for smooth communication. Being indicated by these two articles, the position taken within this particular research is that the diverse semiotic resources such as words, pictures, gestures and signs facilitate to communicate meanings, identities, relationships or exclusion, meanwhile, "Cooperative Disposition" mentioned above by Canagarajah (2012, p.178) has piloted my research to reveal the attitudes behind my family members, whether they are "open to negotiating diversity and the co-construction of meaning". In other words, it can be reformulated integrating with human attitudes, instead of the original focus of classroom teaching and pedagogical approaches by Canagarajah himself.

Previous Methods

Many scholars have studied this domain and used various benchmarks and approaches. The commonly used methodology to evaluate it is ethnography. Ethnography measures the behaviour and language use of specific communities and collects original data through researchers' participation in daily activities and interactions in the community. It helps ethnographers comprehensively understand the use of language in context (Jones and Themistocleous, 2022). Specifically, the most effective methods are field notes, observations and interactional approach. However, before the emergence of these methods, predecessor Leopold (1939) proposed the famous Diary-based research method, and afterwards Busch in 2016 further added that this method facilitated researchers to yield understandings of literacy skills of the participants in everyday life. This method has not been applied in my research, as it was mainly introduced to capture child language, which does not align with my participants. In contrast, field notes and interactional approach were implemented to obtain data due to the following reasons. After the promotion of interactional approach by the symbolic interactionism Goffman in 1959, Busch again provided an explanation of it, meaning that interaction is regarded as a social interactional phenomenon because speakers raise other char-

acters and events during the conversation. The notion then was further verified in Gomes's article in 2022. He employed a range of methods including semi-structured interviews and field notes while conducting his study of the Brazilian-Norwegian family. He mentioned that this combination pattern enables him to have a more comprehensive understanding of multilingual activities between parents and children. Serving as an implication, it has prompted the most suitable method deemed as being the combination between field notes and interactional approach in this research.

Cross-culture

Culture is not isolated, instead, it is "the repository of resources jointly made in social interaction" (Kress, 2012, p.370). In Kress's further establishment in his article (Kress, 2012, p.376), "multimodal" communication refers to the diverse social groups and identities exhibited by participants in activities, and the joint completion of communication tasks. Only when communication is multimodal can semiotic resources have completeness and reflect the participation of various social groups. As a result, multimodal communication is an important concept of cultural integrity, and each communicator in an activity communicates and achieves common tasks through their professional endeavours and positions. The concept was verified with an image example. He described the process of four medical staff who completed a surgery to emphasise the significance of multimodal communication, meaning diverse manners of "talking and acting", "histories and values", "domains of responsibility and foci of attention" (Kress, 2012, p.375). This idea is captivating for me because of performing as a multi-modal communicator and cross-culture holder. Here a 'cross-culture holder' is created and defined as an individual who has the capacity to understand and socialise with different cultures. All six members of my British and Chinese cross-cultural family are classified as cross-culture holders, because of our understanding and performance associated with British and Chinese cultures. This will be described with details in the findings. However, it is worth mentioning that Machowska-Kosciak (2020, p.28) believes "intercultural competence" aims at personal value and identity which are unchangeable, so it only has symbolic meaning rather than communicative function. This viewpoint conflicts with my ideas. Indeed, compared to immigrant children in their article, it is suitable and sophisticated, but my research has a different context where people live in a family with multiple cultures at the same time, as a result we may develop the sense of changeable personal values and identities towards ourselves.

Conclusion - Literature Review

In conclusion, the previous studies have provided valuable references in terms of theoretical framework, research methods, and ideologies. Canagarajah (2012) has provided me with a theoretical framework that was crucial in assisting my research, enabling me to critically reflect on how Performance Competence and Cooperative Disposition contribute to the research questions. In the field of research methods, Leopold (1939), Busch (2016), and Gomes (2022) have delved deeper into the explanation of ethnography. However, for different research participants and contexts, the most suitable approach must be chosen. Through analysis, the combination between field notes and interactive approach is the most reasonable method for this study. At the end, although Li and Kramsch's (2011) ideology of cross culture communication ability is inconsistent with the one

outlined in this research, it will demonstrate through examples that it is feasible in this research context.

Research Methodology

In the context mentioned above, this study provides an explanation and analysis of the use of semiotic resources in a cross-cultural family. This will help deepen the understanding of user choices and attitudes in a multicultural context. Therefore, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

Research questions

Research Question 1: What semiotic resources are used in this British and Chinese cross-cultural family within three generations?

Research Question 2: What are the attitudes behind these semiotic resources used?

Participants

There were six participants in this research, all of whom are three generations of members from my British and Chinese cross-cultural family, including my husband Henry, mother-in-law Kelly, sister-in-law Kate, grandfather-in-law Dan, grandmother-in-law Pattie (all pseudonyms), and me. Below, the specific situational context will be introduced. Henry is from England and worked in China from 2018 to 2023. During this period, he only returned to England once to visit his family. He loves learning languages, and in 2022, he passed the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi grade 4 Mandarin proficiency test, which is equivalent to a B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference regarding languages. Kelly and Kate were living in England during that time but visited Henry in China once in 2018. Kelly is very fond of symbolic commemorative items, such as cards, photo albums, and souvenirs with cultural value. Kate is 21 years old. She chose Mandarin Chinese as her GCSE modern foreign language. At the age of 15, she also participated in a cross-cultural exchange activity at her school and went to Hefei University in China to experience the event. Pattie and Dan have never been to China and understand limited Chinese culture. They said the limited understanding has improved because their grandson Henry was in China. Moreover, I have learned English for more than 20 years and studied British culture at university. I have also worked with people from various countries, therefore, I would consider that I am relatively familiar with a myriad of Western cultures.

Data collection

The methodology adopted for this study is ethnography. Specifically, field notes and interactional approach to collect data was mainly used, while also combining observations' and media platforms' assistance to answer my research questions. In the field notes, some daily conversations were documented. When decorations and items in the house that were related to my research questions were seen, question and answer sessions were conducted with them. In addition, it was also found that some chat records on the media platform WhatsApp were valuable, as they demonstrated the use of semiotic resources by the members, and this will be displayed as the excerpt through screenshots.

Data analysis

This study presented and analysed the collected data through

three parts. In the first instance, it documented the nature of the data, such as images, decorations in the house, or behaviours behind the participants. Next, it identified the use of semiotic resources based on the description. Lastly, the analysis was combined with the user's reasons and attitudes. Under the guidance of Gibbons (2019), the writing model Point, Explain, Evidence and Link (PEEL) allows me with a more systematic written form. As a result, in research question one, the semiotic resources used have been presented in the form of excerpt. In research question two, the PEEL model for discussion has also been applied to point out the main ideas in each paragraph. Then, the collected data was explained to confirm these ideas. Next, the intention of the participants was given evidence of using semiotic resources, and finally the attitudes of the participants were linked with the main viewpoint.

Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations and research procedures of this study follow the requirements of the British Educational Research Association (2018). It consists of the following four aspects:

- 1) The participants in this study are all adults aged 18 and above. Participants were informed of the study and chose to participate or not according to their own interests. After agreeing to participate, they were informed of the resources that this study would collect, including images, conversations, and field notes.
- 2) Data privacy. All participants in this study were given pseudonyms and their identities were not disclosed. The resources and data collected in the study are for analytical purposes only.
- 3) Before the study began, participants signed a consent form. They have the right to withdraw their participation in research at any time.
- 4) Potential benefits and risks. There is no risk in this study. Participants were informed of its benefits, including: providing family cases about semiotic resources; attitude towards the use of language materials in cross-cultural families; analyse the possibility of obstacles in cross-cultural communication.

Discussion of Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, a discussion and answering of the two research questions through excerpts, quotations, and images will be achieved. An appendix will also be attached at the end of the article.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1: What semiotic resources are used in this British and Chinese cross-cultural family within three generations?

Semiotic resource 1:

During the study using ethnography for research, a realisation occurred whereby both Kelly's house and Pattie's house have interesting pendants – Chinese calligraphy. The one in Kelly's was familiar and held personal sentimental value since it was created in a Chinese calligraphy activity while Kelly visited Henry during Chinese Spring Festival. On the red paper (Figure 1.1),

there is a Chinese character ‘福/fú/’, in its ancient form, for blessings, symbolising a happy and joyful life. This is a pendant that every household prepares during Chinese Spring Festival and every family hangs on the door or wall to welcome a beautiful new year. Similarly, there is another calligraphy pendant in



FIGURE 1.1: 福/fú/ IN ITS ANCIENT FORM



FIGURE 1.2: 福/fú/ IN ITS MODERN FORM

Pattie’s house, depicting ‘福/fú/’, in its modern simplified form, and Pattie and Dan’s homophonic sounds of names (Figure 1.2).

Semiotic resource 2: It is well known that drinking hot water is popular in China, and the history of this can be traced back to 4000 years ago. According to Legge (2024) in the Warring States period, they drank soup in winter. ‘Soup’ in this context refers to hot water. In modern China, it is still believed that drinking cold water can be harmful to health, while drinking hot water can slow down illnesses or even cure them (Koo, 1984). Henry,

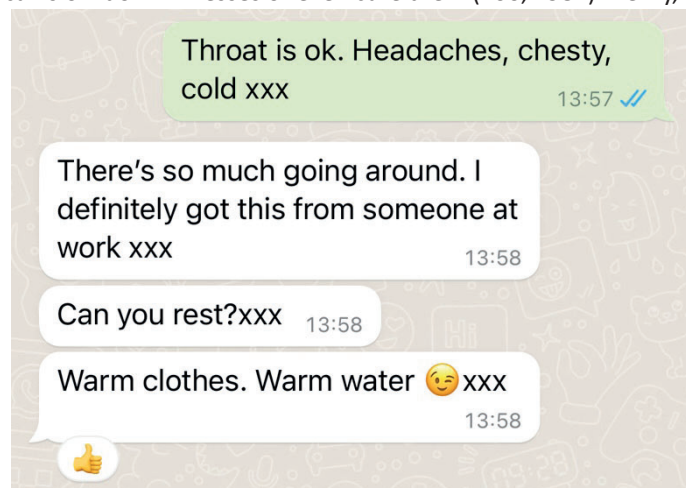


FIGURE 1.3: WHATS APP EXCHANGE

who lived in China for nearly six years, is very familiar with this culture nowadays and has also integrated into it. Figure 1.3 is a WhatsApp conversation screenshot between Henry and Kate. When Henry felt unwell, Kate took the initiative to remind him to drink hot water. If this reminder had come from Henry, it would have seemed more reasonable. To understand it, I interacted with Henry and found out that he often shared his interesting stories in China. He told his sister Kate about the culture of drinking hot water and emphasised that he believed drinking hot water was effective, so Kate sent out this message of ‘Warm water’.

Semiotic resource 3: Upon coming to England, it was learned

that every family would send greeting cards during various holidays, such as Christmas, New Year, birthdays, etc. This is the card (Figure 1.4) prepared for my mother-in-law Kelly on her birthday in 2023. The main sentences on the card were written in Chinese by me, and below the Chinese, it was translated into English using a literal translation method. I told her that in China, most blessings are four-character idioms, and it was hoped to give her both Chinese and British blessings at the same time.

Semiotic resource 4: In Chinese families, we hug each other mainly on special festival or when we have not seen each other for a long time, but it is barely seen in daily life etiquette. Additionally, this kind of hug is not ‘strict’, which means family members are not expected to hug everyone once. What impressed me deeply is that this etiquette is of great difference in England. Family members not only follow the rule of hugging each other once but also hug each other again before going to bed every day. I am not used to this behaviour because it seems to break through personal space but still insisted on doing so and integrating into everyone’s conventions. Nevertheless, what is also worth mentioning is the greeting of saying ‘love you’ to family members. In most families in China, people rarely hear members say ‘love you’ to each other. Before going to bed, it is inclined to say ‘good night, have a good dream’ and so on. In my cross-cultural family, however, when leaving home, returning to the house, or going to sleep at night, ‘love you’ is a frequently spoken phrase by them. Please note that here I used pronoun ‘them’, instead of ‘we’, and I noticed that Kelly would say ‘love you’ to her children Henry and Kate, but she would not take the initiative to tell me that because she seemed to understand that I still have not broken the constraint to do so.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2: What are the attitudes behind these semiotic resources used?

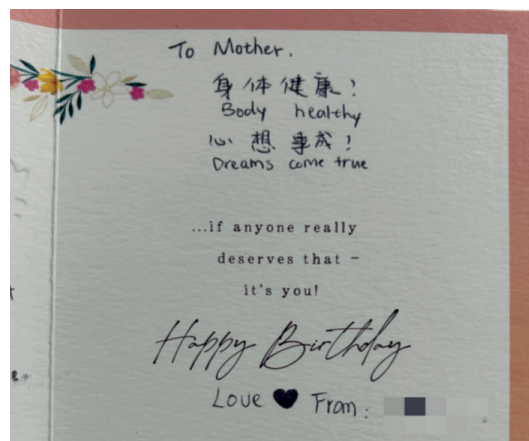


FIGURE 2.1: BIRTHDAY CARD

Canagarajah (2012, p.175) stated that the communication between cross-cultural communicators relies on three components, referring to “context”, “language resources” and “values”. In an-

other word, to achieve successful communication in the context of my cross-cultural family, using language as a medium and having the ability to appreciate multiculturalism are both pivotal. Among the calligraphy pendants of Kelly’s, Pattie’s and Dan’s, the most prominent feature is their recognition and appreciation of Chinese culture, as both pendants are conspicuously placed in their homes. Based on the field notes and participant responses (Appendix 1), it is confirmed that they hope guests can discover the items when they visit and know that their family member Henry has a profound relationship with China. In addition, image in Figure 2.1 includes the handwritten signatures of Kelly, Pattie, and Dan at the bottom (they have been

covered up to conceal real names). It reveals their intention to “enact social relations” (O’Halloran, 2023, p.194), establishing a cultural identity relationship between the UK and China.

Guided by the theoretical framework of “Performance Competence and Cooperative Disposition” proposed by Canagarajah (2012), cross-cultural communicators construct the texts they need, to adapt to the current conversational context to achieve successful meaning-making. Henry established a cross-cultural understanding by conveying the hot water culture to his sister Kate, and in return Kate emphasised her “conscious choices” (Danielsson and Selander, 2021, p.19) in the existing dialogue environment by establishing a new recognition of this culture, in order to complete this communication with her brother who used to live in China. Additionally, what is worth mentioned is that nowadays, “actions, opinions, and feelings” of human life can be displayed through digital media platforms, which are providing new ways to investigate cross-cultural families (Lanza, 2021, p.768; O’Halloran, 2023, p.194).

The magnetising mindset “meaning is constructed, not given” has largely caught my attention. It comes from Kramsch (2010, p.21), and in the explanation he mainly elaborated that selectively using a certain language, text, or manner brings an effective function of constructing the meaning we want. It is not difficult to notice that traditional blessings did not appear in the birthday card I wrote to my mother-in-law. As a cross-cultural family between China and England, the implication given here is that this culture has been hoped to be reflected and recognised, especially recognised in things with special significance. Meanwhile, the arrangement shown of the two languages has been designed. It is presented in a one-to-one translation format. This incorrect grammatical structure creatively reflects a cultural equality. Although Canagarajah (2012, p.176) said “structuring syntax” is not simple, such a choice is actually a “process of mindfully making” (Mavers, 2004, p.49), reflecting the strong cultural identity and desire for communication among us.

Caldwell-Harris et al. conducted cultural research on Chinese people expressing ‘I love you’. Their research found that conventional Chinese people did not express ‘I love you’ until “the New Culture Movement in the early 20th century” (2013, p.43), which implies a short history of it. Moreover, Chinese people deliberately try not to use intimate language that embodies the saying ‘I love you’, as such language is regarded as a creation of an ‘awkward’ environment. Therefore, expressions of ‘I love you’ with intense individual feelings often cause pressure and constriction on Chinese speakers and receivers. This kind of intimate expression often appears in British families, and when Kelly found out that it could be difficult for me to use such expressions, she did not force or bring me into that ‘awkward’ environment, but gave me enough space to handle it, which is a respect for the diversity of use of semiotic resources. As described in the literature review, “Cooperative Disposition” mentioned by Canagarajah (2012, pp.178-180) reveals the attitudes behind my family members. Specifically, it reinforces “social values” as one of the key characteristics in the three fields. What deserves extra attention is the open attitude towards variety within this value system. When embracing etiquette with family members, as a cross-cultural holder, I develop my interactive abilities while acknowledging this cultural open attitude.

Implications for Practice

The development of globalisation has intertwined different

cultures and languages among different populations, forming diverse cross-cultural communities. However, cultural differences between the West and East are often obvious, especially in the East, a region dominated by High Context culture, where communication methods and values can be very different. For example, Nishimura et al. in their cultural research on high and low contexts discovered that “non-verbal” abilities (2008, p.785) are more outstanding in high context cultures, while verbal communication is more straightforward and ambitious in low context. Therefore, analysing a wider range of semiotic resources will greatly help humanity understand the development of cross-cultural communities. Of particular concern to researchers is the diversity of emotional attitudes, as this is a dimension for understanding the speaker’s authentic story and stance, exploring the ways in which multilingual individuals construct and navigate the communities (Lanza, 2021). As this is an ethnographic study, it is the hope of the author to add to or even begin to create a conversation in this space, allowing it to become relatable and to determine to what extent it can become relatable. Conversely, if other ethnographic research contradicts the experience outlined in this research, it could allow comparisons to be drawn and potential explorations into these differences.

Limitation

At present, research on the use of semiotic resources in high and low context countries is still limited, which implies that more high and low context communication should be studied, which will provide a deeper understanding of various types of cross-cultural communities. Although this study selected three generations from a family for discussion, there is a limitation that all three generations are adults. As Kress (2012) stated, adults have a higher ability and greater use of expressive semiotic resources, which indicates that young generations should also be considered within the scope of the study to further analyse the use of semiotic resources of people of different age groups. This will help improve the overall society’s understanding, comprehension, and induction of correct approaches to cross-cultural communication.

Conclusion

This study extracted semiotic resources from cross-cultural families in England and China, including pendants, cards, textual information, and multicultural message information, which were sourced from six participants in this family. Field notes and an interactional approach have shown that in both the East and the West, people tend to use visual semiotic resources to express their attitudes towards understanding each other’s cultures. In social etiquette, easterners may not easily be able to adapt to intimate greetings. However, this data is expected to be improved in future research to potentially increase the accuracy.

During the research process, a significant amount of cultural respect, identity, and meaning creating were presented, as well as prominent differences and boundaries between Eastern and Western cultures. It is worth mentioning that regardless of whether it is the semiotic resources of objects or behaviours, members of this cross-cultural family maintain a positive and cooperative attitude, attempting to create conditions for successful communication. Guided by the theoretical framework of “Performance Competence and Cooperative Disposition” (Canagarajah, 2012, pp.173-179), this study reveals the ability and

creativity of participants using semiotic resources, as well as the social values and cultural identity behind their use of them. In future research, due to cultural differences between high and low contexts, it is encouraged to strengthen the study of semiotic resources between the East and the West, to enhance understanding of people's attitudes towards resource utilisation in cultural backgrounds with significant differences.

Appendix 1

First, ask for consent for the daily life conversation regarding semiotic resource use.

Interviewer: Do I have your consent to interview you and to use any artifacts I capture in my research?

After that, ask questions when there were items identified related to the topic.

Interviewer: Oh hey, you have the Chinese calligraphy as well. Same as Kelly, right?

Pattie: Right! Yeah! Got it on Amazon because, yeah, it looked ornate and colourful hahaha, and I wanted something special for the garden room, you know.

Interviewer: That is really nice!

Pattie: Yeah! Right!

Interviewer: Wow you also got your signatures on it, hahaha, brilliant!

Dan: Right, it was our first time using calligraphy brush, hahaha, yeah.

Interviewer: I am surprised you hang it right here, you know, right in the middle.

Pattie: Oh right! We just love it, you know, especially em, when you and Henry were in China. Just think of you guys all the time, yeah. People can see it here as well.

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