



# Chinese Walls



Body Language and Algospeak





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To the Western mind, the Chinese have had a strong reputation for **inscrutability**. Why? Is it the complexity of the Chinese language? Or is it our inability to differentiate Chinese faces? Or maybe it's our sense of Chinese 'reserve' in social interactions. 'Gentlemen must be able to control emotions and maintain gravity,' said Confucius, adding to the perception that the Chinese are cool and lacking emotion. To reveal neither joy nor anger is a characteristic of strength and nobility to the Asian mind, but to Europeans and Americans the 'poker face' signals **suspicion** and distrust.

Studies show that Western subjects are likely to express emotions with explicit and incidental facial expressions involving their eyebrows and mouths, whereas Chinese respondents tend to express emotions with implicit and controlled facial expressions, especially when feeling excitement and **revulsion**. The Chinese are also more reserved and calmer when excited or disappointed.<sup>1</sup>

In the West, people are focused on individualism, the 'I', and 'rights of privacy', whereas Eastern collectivist culture values 'we', harmony, and belonging.

In the field of human perception, research into eye movement reveals different strategies when scanning own- and other-race faces.<sup>2</sup> This is known as the other-race scanning effect (ORSE). This effect has been observed among not only adults but also children and infants. Chinese participants

spend more time looking at the eye region of Caucasian faces relative to Chinese faces and more time looking at the noses and mouths of Chinese faces relative to Caucasian faces.

Chinese faces tend to have wider noses and smaller mouth widths than Caucasian faces. Also, nearly all Chinese people have black eyes, whereas Caucasian eye colours vary greatly. Thus it makes sense that Chinese observers spend longer scanning the Chinese nose region because this provides more information for distinguishing individual Chinese faces. In viewing Caucasians, Chinese people scan the eye region because it affords more information to distinguish Western faces.

Body language may not be changing anytime soon, but in internet communication a new movement is happening in Chinese society. Computer surveillance has **given rise to** a new English word: "Algospeak" is changing our language in real time,' wrote Taylor Lorenz, a columnist at *The Washington Post* on 8 April 2022. 'Algospeak', a combination of 'algorithm' and 'speak', refers to the replacement of phrases that are disfavoured by social media algorithms with seemingly harmless ones. To evade Chinese government's filters, Chinese internet users have developed an extensive **lingo** of substitution phrases to **outwit** the authorities. For example, after Covid-19 first exploded in China, the government blocked the word 'Wuhan' – so users started using the shortform

'wh'. When the Chinese Red Cross's logistics were under scrutiny, citizens figured those conversations would get shut down too, so they began calling it 'red ten' (since the Chinese character for 'ten' resembles a cross).

In the West, as the pandemic pushed more people to communicate online, algorithmic content-moderation systems down-ranked videos mentioning the pandemic by name in an effort to combat misinformation. To counter this, anti-vaccine groups on Facebook and Instagram began changing their names to 'dance party' or 'dinner party'. Vaccinated people were termed 'swimmers' and 'pandemic' became 'panini' or 'panda express'.

So if you want to keep your online information private, 'algospeak' may be a smart way to build a Chinese Wall around your secrets.

Paul Smith

### Vocabulary Trainer

• <b>inscrutability</b>	Unergründlichkeit
• <b>suspicion</b>	Verdacht
• <b>revulsion</b>	Abscheu
• <b>to give rise to sth.</b>	etw. entstehen lassen
• <b>lingo</b>	Fachsprache (ugs.)
• <b>to outwit sb.</b>	jdn. austricksen

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#### Sources

<sup>1</sup> Explicit and incidental facial expression processing: an fMRI study – M L Gorno-Tempini, et al.

<sup>2</sup> Visual scanning and recognition of Chinese, Caucasian, and racially ambiguous faces – Qiangdong, Wang, et al. Gorno-Tempini, et al.