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The Splintering of One Language into Many Languages in Genesis 11:1-9 as Foundation for Understanding Linguistic Context in U.S-China Relations

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Abstract- This document posits that the splintering of one language into many languages in Genesis 11:1-9 offers framework for interpreting linguistic differentials central to misunderstanding within U.S.-China interfacing and that matters associated with context are the most pressing. This focus is on linguistic differentials central to misunderstanding, not necessarily disagreement. Matters of simple understanding are proving to be beyond reach and the ramifications are of theoretical and practical relevance. Focus on this matter has foundation that goes beyond the histories of China and the U.S. and into biblical frameworks as manifested in Genesis 11:1-9.

Introduction

U.S.-China superpower relations pose challenges for global security. We continually see issues whereby agreement is elusive and, beyond that, simple understanding (void of focusing on agreement) is even more elusive. This would be interesting merely as an academic exercise but life and death issues hang in the balance at times and one is left to wonder why such understanding cannot be established. It is a multiple pronged problem that involves a range of social science explanations to include theological interpretations.

This document will posit that the splintering of one language into many languages in Genesis 11:1-9 offers framework for interpreting linguistic differentials central to misunderstanding within U.S.-China interfacing and that matters associated with context are the most pressing. I want to clarify I am talking about linguistic differentials central to misunderstanding, not necessarily disagreement. Matters of simple understanding are proving to be beyond reach and the ramifications are of theoretical and practical relevance. Focus on this matter has foundation that goes beyond the histories of China and the U.S. and into biblical frameworks as manifested in Genesis 11:1-9.

Genesis 11:1-9 reveals that the world had one language. "All people spoke a single language."[1] This assertion is boldly stated. Little is left to the imagination for interpretation. Furthermore, "the narrative . . . . beginning with the 'whole earth' and 'one language' is nicely balanced in verse nine with 'all the earth' and 'the language of all the earth.'"[2] This statement implies uniformity of thought as well. "All members of this community, relatively few in number, speak the same language and have a common vocabulary."[3] Emphasis on the sense of community is clear.

The interconnectedness of all people at that time is worth noting. Humanity has experienced this interconnectedness, then gone through scattering to the far reaches of the planet and now the new communication technologies are bringing us back into contact again. It is this type of macro level thinking that is worthy of application insofar as helping us interpret the present time we live in.

God wanted them to disperse across the land and multiply but instead the people decided to stay in one place and build a tower in recognition of their advanced social order. As a result God created a situation whereby the people spoke different languages instead of one language and they could not understand each other. This thwarted their ability to coordinate their efforts with tower construction and the project was abandoned. They then dispersed across the land speaking the multiple languages and this provided foundation for our present day scenario whereby we are challenged by different languages that reflect different frameworks for understanding and this leads to misunderstanding and confusion.[4]

Closer attention to biblical analysis reveals the larger landscape within which Genesis 11:1-9 frames the aforementioned scenario whereby God splintered the single language into multiple languages that resulted in the associated effects. David Pratte explains "They (descendants of Noah) sought to disobey God's command to scatter to fill the earth . . . .He was bothered by their pride of achievement. . . . Their egotism is expressed in their speech 'let us…lest we.'"[5] Derek Kidner elaborates with explanation about man

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[1] *Abingdon Old Testament Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2004) 9.

[2] Walter Bruggemann. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Genesis* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1982) 98.

[3] *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994) 411.

[4] *Common English Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Common English Bible, 2011), 8-9.

[5] David E. Pratte, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Bible Study Notes and Comments* (www.gospelway.com, 2016) 128.

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seeking to glorify himself by building a tower. "Man, conscious of new abilities, prepares to glorify and fortify himself by collective effort (building a tower). . . .They betray their insecurities as they crowd together to preserve their identity and control their fortunes."[6]

This point is further stressed in such a way that corresponds with ways we function in contemporary times. "These people may think that they can 'make' something, including a 'name' for themselves, but they completely fail to realize the awesome gap between themselves and the Lord of all creation, however high their tower may be."[7] This equates with nationalistic pride that we often see in present day superpower nations.

Guthrie and Motyer highlight the transition from all people speaking one language to having to contend with multiple languages. "The confusion possibly resulted from a protracted process, but probably a supernatural intervention is intended, a strange miracle of confusion."[8] There is considerable contextual framing for this splintering to multiple languages to occur. Laymon summarizes by describing "an alienation among men which makes communication and cooperation between them extremely difficult if not impossible."[9]

The aftermath is clearly confirmed via indication that the people could no longer function as one and that dispersal was the result. James Okoye expresses "The Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city."[10] Metzger and Coogan summarize the situation in expressing "The narratives recount . . . the scattering of tribes and tongues."[11] This accounting clearly underscores that the people had received instruction from God, they had ignored that instruction, God had punished them for disobeying and the effects were felt then and today.

We can recognize the relevance today when we consider how we have varied languages that differ with regard to multiple linguistic measures. "The multiplicity of languages and man's dispersal across the globe points to the futility of man setting himself against his creator."[12] One can imagine how much easier cross-cultural dialogs would be if we spoke one language in the present day though it is worth noting our languages differ to varying degrees. Linguists have been able to highlight this significance.

Some of our current global languages are similar in framework, such as English and Spanish, but some of the languages are much different such as English and Chinese. Aside from complexities involved with linguistic variation the challenges become more complex when we recognize that language frames cognitive processing of information. Thus, U.S.-China relations are especially confusing because different languages are spoken and the worldview frames of reference differ. So there can be problems associated with simple understanding and there can be problems associated with disagreement based on differing objectives.

The exchange of meaning in China that involves an American poses unique challenges for both the U.S. and Chinese perspectives. It requires not only understanding the particular phenomenon being addressed but also the cultural context within which the topic exists. In *Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication*, Ray Heisey stresses how the interaction of Eastern and Western communication perspectives should emphasize an understanding of the cultures within which these communicative practices exist.[13] Such a stress can initially consider the relevance of language.

Devito states that language is "a social institution designed, modified, and extended to meet the ever changing needs of the culture or subculture."[14] The element of context is important in this understanding. "As we grow up in the world, our experience is formed by the language in which it is presented and talked about, and this language becomes so much a part of the mind as to seem a part of nature."[15] Ochs emphasizes this degree of context more strongly in saying that "language is the major vehicle for accomplishing communication, language functions both *in* context and *as* context, simultaneously constructing and being constructed by the social occasion."[16]

Chinese people, and the Chinese language which reflects the culture, are less likely to communicate ideas in a direct manner in comparison to people in the United States. "Within Chinese conversational style is a tendency to respond in terms of expectations, goals, even models rather than mundane

[6] Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1967), 109.
[7] *Abingdon Old Testament Commentary*, 9.
[8] Donald Guthrie and Alec Motyer (eds.), *New Bible Commentary* (Carmel, New York: Guideposts, 1970), 91.
[9] Charles Laymon (ed.), *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), 10.
[10] James C. Okoye, *Genesis 12-50: A Narrative Theological Commentary* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), 34.
[11] Bruce M. Metzger and Michael Coogan (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 245.
[12] J. Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume I, Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987) 242.
[13] Ray D. Heisey, *Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication* (Stamford, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 2000), xix.
[14] Joseph A Devito, *The Interpersonal Communication Book* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 148.
[15] James B. White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitution and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 276.
[16] Eleanor Ochs, "Introduction: What Child Language Can Contribute to Pragmatics." In Ochs, Eleanor. and Bambi Schiefflen (eds.), *Developmental Pragmatics* (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 206.

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facts."[17] The important role of context cannot be overstated when the aforementioned is paralleled with the system of government in China. "China's governance involves both the overt system of public institutions with whose members we interact rather easily and the more shadowy system of political and security organs whose work is not open. . . ."[18] This process is defined as high-context communication.

Hall states that high-context cultures must provide a context and setting and let the point evolve.[19] Low-context cultures are much more direct and to the point. Andersen explains that "languages are some of the most explicit communication systems but the Chinese language is an implicit high context system."[20] He goes on to explain that "explicit forms of communication such as verbal codes are more prevalent in low context cultures such as the United States and Northern Europe."[21]

So, in consideration of the aforementioned, it should be clear that the Chinese tend to operate using a high-context perspective for conveying and receiving meaning. Conversely, it should be clear that Americans tend to operate using a low-context perspective for conveying and receiving meaning. As such a foundation exists for significant confusion and conflict, not just for advancing differing objectives, but for even achieving a common understanding of what the issues are.

I offer a minor footnote to the previous paragraph. The reader should observe I indicated that the Chinese and Americans "tend" to operate in such ways. It should be understood that there are exceptions. That is, this is not a pure science. There are some Americans that lean toward high context approaches and there are some Chinese who lean toward low context approaches. The point is that, for the most part, Chinese (and the Chinese government) will practice high context approaches and Americans (and the U.S. government) will practice low context approaches.

This premise has relevance for understanding U.S-Chinese cross-cultural exchanges on the interpersonal, group, organizational, societal, mass communication and cyber-space levels. As I present the following illustrations, the reader should consider how paralleled situations in his/her own life could exist if confronted with similar kinds of phenomena. This will obviously vary from person to person.

I offer my marriage as an example from the interpersonal level. My ex-wife is Chinese. We are now divorced but our marriage lasted 20 years and we have a son together. We functioned in a cross-cultural marriage. I periodically joke that we sometimes had disagreements that I did not even know we had. That is, our understanding of some issues was so far apart that I missed perceiving there was a problem. Some of this has to do with predictable gender difference but most of it flows from the cultural divide. The practice of feng shui offers an illustration that exemplifies the perspective I am stressing.

Many Chinese practice feng shui principles. It has to do how one physically arranges material objects in their world. For instance, how one arranges household furniture. When we moved from one location to the next I found that I was concerned with direct (low context) functional implications regarding furniture placement. For instance, I preferred that my file cabinet be next to my desk so I could reach into the cabinet and get a folder without needing to stand up.

My ex-wife, on the other hand, had a concern with the overall energy effect in any given room. There is a form of energy flow, on the high context plane, regarding furniture placement that enhances daily living. I initially observed this to be some sort of superstition but learned there is an entire school of thought on this that relates to architectural design on a macro level. It is an important matter for Chinese.

Consequently, I learned that the household was at peace if I followed her wishes regarding initial furniture placement and then conveyed my desires regarding anything that might be done to improve my daily functioning. For instance if I wanted the dish rack on the left hand of the kitchen sink, instead of the right hand side of the sink, to enhance my dishwashing movements (I washed the dishes in our household) then I let her decide how this change could be made. Thus, the end result was that she got what she wanted and I got what I wanted but, in reality, we had achieved this end without fully grasping the perspective of the other.

I am hesitant to speak of a failed marriage in this document because it is a personal issue being conveyed within a formally structured document. However, I think this type of hesitancy is not warranted in that our personal experiences have direct effect with our frame of reference. Hence, applications from a failed marriage actually offer excellent illustration because they connote well seasoned levels of first person experience and marriage is a common experience so it is an exceedingly familiar construct.

What is true for interpersonal encounters also holds true for group behavior. Context is still key. China is very much a collective society. That is, they tend to function in groups and this group functioning further reinforces their collective nature. The U.S., on the other hand, is much more of an individualistic society. That is,

[17] David P. Murray, "Face-to-Face: American and Chinese Interactions." In Kapp, R.A. (ed.), *Communicating with China* (Chicago: Intercultural Press, 1983), 13.

[18] Ibid, 10.

[19] Edward G. Hall, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1984), 41.

[20] Peter Andersen, "Explaining Intercultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication." Paper presented at the 1987 meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Boston, Massachusetts), 23.

[21] Ibid, 24.

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we tend to be more independent of each other and think nothing of going our separate ways if our objectives necessitate a change of direction away from family and friends.

Meanings conveyed via the societal communicative channel are more grounded in the collective mindset of the Chinese social order. The role of the individual is clearly subordinate to the larger society. It is just the opposite of what we practice in the U.S. Consequently, Chinese individual rights are only understood within the larger context of what best addresses the interests of the larger society.

Mass communication practices in China differ from mass communication in the U.S. for two main reasons: 1) Chinese mass communication processes are heavily regulated by the central government whereas in the U.S. mass communication processes occur much more in relation to free enterprise variables; and 2) the contextual themes of both countries (high-context versus low-context) are reflected in the messages conveyed and their subsequent interpretation. The resulting effects are readily observable and it is clear how these effects reflect the Chinese social order.

What I have conveyed with these illustrations underscores how U.S.-China relations differ with regard to language and context and how these differences are rooted in different languages. Furthermore, I am grounding the existence of these different languages within the biblical context offered by Genesis 11: 1-9 insofar as God's action to impose multiple languages in place of having a singular language. This is very much a macro level assertion that is equally compelling on the micro level.

In conclusion, in this document U.S.-China superpower relations have been addressed as being relevant with regard to challenges associated with global security. There is recognition of routine issues within which agreement is elusive and, beyond that, simple understanding in the process of exchanging meaning is problematic. It is a complex phenomenon that involves theological considerations rooted in disciplines across the social sciences.

This inquiry has established how the splintering of one language into many languages as described in Genesis 11:1-9 offers a framework for interpreting linguistic differentials central to misunderstanding within U.S.-China interfacing and that matters associated with context are the most pressing. This study acknowledges simple matters of misunderstanding and more complex matters having to do with disagreement. Focus on this matter has relevance that goes far beyond the history of China-U.S. relations and deeper into biblical frameworks manifested in Genesis 11:1-9.

This analysis has revealed that some languages are similar in framework while other languages are significantly different regarding framework and the latter results in vivid variation having to do with frame of reference. English and Chinese exemplify two languages that are considerably different. Aside from complexities involved with their linguistic variation the challenges become more complex when we recognize that language frames the cognitive processing of information. Thus, U.S.-China relations are especially confusing because different languages are spoken and the worldview frames of reference differ. So there can be problems associated with simple understanding and there can be problems associated with disagreement based on differing objectives. Hence, Genesis 11:1-9 offers foundational insight into this query.

It is worth considering how the new communication technologies are laying foundation for a rejoinder of sorts in relation to humanity being re-engaged via a common format. A common format that is not language based but format based. The internet has opened up possibilities for global linkage that was barely comprehendible a hundred years ago. Equally compelling is that we are in the infancy of the information age. What the future portends has the potential to not only reconnect all humanity but to redefine what it means to be human.

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