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Chinese Culture in a Cross-Cultural Comparison

8

General Introduction:
Chinese Culture and the World of Business

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Business managers tend to typically downplay the role of culture in the world of business (Cox, 2001; Gibson, 2000; Harris & Moran, 1996; Hoecklin, 1995; Hofstede, 1991, 2001, 2007, 2010; Oetzel, 2009; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). It is often assumed that business is universal and follows its own rules and guidelines. After all, so the argument, the objective of business is to make a profit. That is arguably a universal objective because no business will be able to survive in the long run if it is not profitable. This is actually in line with the homo economicus theory which argues that the world of business consists of rational actors driven by the same need to maximize utility and economic profitability (Persky, 1995). Hence, the assumption that the world of business is objective, rational, and universal, transcending local cultures.

This impression is reinforced through globalization. After all, so the argument, with globalization many processes have become standardized over the past thirty years. The internet and the use of English as the international language of commerce and business seem to support this trend towards standardization not only in production, but also in management processes. This observation is further reinforced by the fact that many companies around the globe use the same international banks, apply the same accounting methods, use the same computer systems and software, work with the same ISO standards, produce products in one global location for other markets elsewhere, and interact more frequently with international business partners who pursue similar objectives and who are driven by the same motivators; namely, reducing costs and maximizing profits (Cox, 2001; Gibson, 2000; Harris & Moran, 1996; Hoecklin, 1995; Hofstede, 1991, 2001, 2010; Oetzel, 2009; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998).

Theodore Levitt (1983) is credited with first coining the term globalization and arguing that standardization is the most effective and efficient means to conduct business around the world. Many large international corporations sought to do just that in the 1980s. But it was soon realized that local customers did not always prefer such standardized global products which is why companies like McDonald's or CNN went local. About the same time, it became apparent that ad campaigns have to be adjusted locally as well (Harris & Moran,

1996; Hofstede, 2001, 2010; Schneider & Baroux, 2003; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998).

So can one truly claim that the world of business is not influenced by culture? Those who argue in this direction claim that a professional business culture has evolved around the globe that is essentially independent of local cultural influences.[1] If this assumption is correct, then it is possible to explain the communicative behavior one's counterpart solely on the basis of individual personality traits without assuming that a person's culture might also have an impact on a person's communicative behavior. People tend to look for what they expect to see and then to interpret this information from that perspective (Hinner, 2005). For example, in the European Middle Ages before the discovery of germs and viruses, illnesses we now know to be caused by such pathogens were said to have been caused by witchcraft. That is why the focus was on identifying witches back then and not on trying to cure the actual ailment. So if one considers culture to be irrelevant in the world of business, then one will also interpret information from a perspective that ignores culture as a possible cause.

If, however, one assumes that human beings are also influenced by culture in the world of business, then one can postulate that their communicative behavior is also influenced by their culture. After all, human interaction calls for specific patterns of behavior, norms, etc. which regulate such interaction and communication. Rules of etiquette, for example, guide the way specific interactors greet one another in specific situations so that anyone familiar with these rules will know who initiates the greeting, what verbal messages are exchanged, what gestures accompany the verbal messages, how the ritual is drawn to a close, and how to interpret that encounter (Adler & Rodman, 2003; Bovée & Thill, 2010; DeFleur, Kearney, & Plax, 1998; DeVito, 2006; Gamble & Gamble, 2005; Hinner, 2007; Klopf, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Oetzel, 2009; Tubbs & Moss, 2003). Familiarity with such rituals will allow the interactors to predict approximately how such a ritual is conducted, i.e. what scripts and schemata are appropriate for and apply to what situations with what interactors (Hinner, 2013). Scripts are the general idea "of how some event should play out or unfold; it's the rules governing events and their sequences" (DeVito, 2006, p. 59). Schemata are the mental templates that help people organize the information they perceive and give what they have perceived meaning (DeFleur, Keraney, & Plax, 1998). Scripts and schemata function as knowledge structures and, thus, act as frames of reference (DeVito, 2006; DeFleur et al, 1998; Hewes & Planalp, 1987).

Many interactions are regulated by such patterns and rituals because people learn directly and indirectly what is considered to be the right or wrong behavior

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1 For a detailed discussion, see Laumann (2011).

in specific situations through interaction with other people, i.e. through their culture (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Hinner, 2005; Klopf, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Martin & Nakayama, 1997; Oetzel, 2009; Samovar et al, 2010). Whenever the interactors are unfamiliar with these expected patterns, though, this can result in misunderstandings because the interactors follow different scripts and attach different meanings (i.e. schemata) to the same situation and context (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Hinner, 2005; Klopf, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Martin & Nakayama, 1997; Oetzel, 2009; Samovar et al, 2010). This can happen when individuals from different cultures meet and interact. What may be considered right and appropriate behavior in one culture might be improper behavior in another culture (Chen & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Hinner, 2005; Klopf, 1998; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Martin & Nakayama, 1997; Oetzel, 2009; Samovar et al, 2010). For example, maintaining eye contact while talking to someone versus lowering the eyes out of respect. In some cultures, staring might be considered impolite or aggressive behavior while in other cultures avoiding eye contact may be associated with shifty or dishonest behavior.

The same is true for business transactions. When people conduct business, they have to communicate (Bovée & Thill, 2010; DeFleur et al, 1998; Hinner, 2005). This communication involves both verbal and nonverbal communication and is associated with specific scripts and schemata for specific business situations (Hinner, 2013). Here, the advocates of a global, professional business culture argue that business has evolved its own rules and rituals transcending local culture, i.e. homo economicus. For example, it is pointed out that business negotiations are typically associated with specific principles and guidelines on how to conduct negotiations and also what the expected outcome of such negotiations ought to be. The basis for such negotiations is carefully planned communication designed to attain similar meanings among the negotiating parties (DeFleur et al, 1998). The key here, though, is that this familiarity is often grounded in local culture so that the interpretation of one's counterpart's communicative behavior in business negotiations is also based on one's own cultural perspective. That is why Imahori (2010) points out that many business negotiations between American and Japanese managers failed because Americans are low context while Japanese are high context in their communication and both sides did not take this difference into consideration when negotiating with one another. In other words, both sides interpreted and evaluated what they perceived from their own perspective and not from that of their counterpart. That is also why differences in time management caused problems in the negotiation sequence and the adherence to contractual timelines and deadlines (Gibson, 2000; Hoecklin, 1995; Schneider & Barsoux, 2003; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Here as

well, both sides assumed their definition of time management is not only the correct way of defining time management, but that their counterpart must also see it that way as well and, thus, act accordingly. If that is not the case, then obviously the counterpart must be doing something wrong. So when business is conducted and negotiated across cultures, it becomes necessary to also consider cultural differences because different cultures have evolved different scripts and schemata for the same business negotiation (Adair & Brett, 2004; Manrai & Manrai, 2010). And if one is unaware of or ignores these cultural differences, then misperceptions are preprogrammed. That is why one needs to also consider culture in the world of business.

What then is culture, and how might it influence human behavior and communication? In the context of human interaction, culture may be defined as "a learned system of meanings that fosters a particular sense of shared identity-hood and community-hood among its group members. It is a complex frame of reference that consists of a pattern of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of an identity group" (Ting-Toomey & Takai, 2006, p. 691). Bidney identified three interrelated dimensions of culture (Klopf, 1998):

- Artifacts, i.e. the things humans make to enhance their lives
- Sociofacts, i.e. the rituals humans follow to regulate their lives
- Mentifacts, i.e. the cognitive and affective elements that influence human thinking

Culture, thus, encompasses objects, rituals, ideas, information, emotions, beliefs, values, attitudes, etc. which are exchanged between the members of a given human community. Culture is measured objectively and subjectively (Chaney & Martin, 2004). The objective aspects of culture are tangible and include, for example, those artifacts people make, the types of clothing they wear, the houses they dwell in, and the language they use. These artifacts are relatively easy to recognize and analyze which is why it is not too difficult to associate these artifacts with a culture. Many artifacts fulfill a utilitarian purpose, and their function can often be identified. For example, a house provides shelter to its occupants. The natural environment, though, can have an impact on its design. If a house is built in a region with little precipitation, then the roof can be flat since it does not need to bear a heavy load. Large amounts of snow, on the other hand, could provide problems for a flat roof which is why the roofs in snowbound regions are often pitched to improve the load-bearing capacity of roofs. The building materials of a house are often dependent on local materials which is why a roof might be covered with slate, wood, or straw. Consequently, cultural artifacts can be determined by the utilitarian purpose and by the availability of specific mate-

rials. That is why some artifacts can have a similar shape and architecture across culture, such as houses, classrooms, or conference rooms. But why aesthetic elements, though, can vary around the world due to local traditions, tastes, and cultural preferences.

Sociofacts refer to human behavioral patterns, rituals, and roles people assume in specific situations, i.e. scripts. Such rituals can be observed, but it is often not apparent why specific behavior is exhibited and/or expected in specific situations which is why sociofacts are both objective and subjective. For example, who greets whom in what manner in what situations often varies from culture to culture and may not be apparent at first sight. Mentifacts refer to knowledge, beliefs, mental activities, perception, etc., i.e. schemata. Mentifacts are measured subjectively (Chaney & Martin, 2004). For example, what people think they saw, how they interpret what they think they saw, and what meaning they attach to what they think they saw. Two people may focus on different aspects of an event, interpret what they think they see differently, and attach entirely different meaning to this same situation (Adler & Rodman, 2003). For example, someone may see a cow and classify it as a farm animal that could become a nice steak whereas another person sees a sacred animal that should be worshiped. That is why scripts and schemata can vary across cultures.

Culture serves as a frame of reference for its members so that they can make sense of the world around them. This frame of reference is created through a system of meaning that members of that culture share through communication (Klopf, 1998; Martin & Nakayama, 1997; Oetzel, 2009). Parents will convey information to their children, and people at the workplace interact and communicate with one another. This exchange of information permits people to discover, for example, what degree of tolerance is associated with punctuality in what context. Thus, people learn that being punctual at work might mean being there five minutes before the appointed time while punctuality for leisure activity has more tolerance. Some reference frames are specified in written rules and laws, for example, what is considered tax evasion, while others are defined through unwritten codes of conduct, for example, when to use humor (DeFleur et al, 1998) or what type of joke is appropriate in what context and with what audience. People are often rewarded for having done the right thing while incorrect behavior is often frowned upon or even punished. These social reactions reinforce the proper behavior (DeFleur et al, 1998; Adler & Rodman, 2003). Such frames of reference and/or conduct permit people to anticipate expected behavior in specific situations. This helps reduce uncertainty (Adler & Rodman, 2003; De Vito, 2006). By saying or doing something specific in a particular context, one can generally predict how others will react and/or respond. This helps regulate people's interaction with one another in specific contexts. For example,

when one says "that's an interesting idea," does it mean the speaker considers it to be a valuable idea or worthless? These frames of reference are, thus, created through a system of meaning that cultural members share with one another through communication in specific contexts (Adler & Rodman, 2003; Klopf, 1998, Lustig & Koester, 2006; Martin & Nakayama, 1997; Oetzel, 2009). Culture is, thus, created through the interaction with other people. That is why culture cannot be ignored in the world of business.

Today, China can no longer be ignored in the world of business. So an understanding and an insight into Chinese culture will be helpful in beginning to comprehend the behavior and communication of one's Chinese business partner. It is hoped that such understanding and insight will help reduce uncertainty, misunderstandings, and conflicts because all too often we tend to view, interprete, and evaluate the behavior and communication of our counterpart from the perspective of our own culture as pointed out above.

To help reduce such misperceptions, some leading experts have been asked to help provide such insights into Chinese culture. The volume begins with Edwin R. McDaniel's synopsis of Chinese culture. It provides the reader with some essential background and details. Ling Chen and Jung Hui Becky Yeh zoom in a little bit closer to highlight some important differences (but also similarities) existing in the so-called three core Chinese societies; namely, Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Ee Lin Lee expands the view to consider Chinese ethnic communities located outside of China; namely, Malaysia. What she describes probably also applies to other diasporas. Geert Hofstede steps back and compares and contrasts Chinese values with Western values and concludes that these values are also reflected in the respective philosophies. Young Yun Kim picks up this theme, but concludes that both cultural traditions seem to have moved away from their former worldviews which may explain why contemporary Chinese culture is exhibiting characteristics that are divergent from its traditional values.

Since culture and communication are closely tied to one another, the next chapters explore the characteristics associated with Chinese communication. Marieke de Mooij investigates various elements of Chinese communication and explains how these are then expressed in various media, including social media. Peiren Shao explains the elements of traditional Chinese rhetoric in detail, providing some further background to de Mooij's text. Next, Sanjiu Yan and Feng Liu spotlight a central element of Chinese philosophy and communication; namely, harmony. This is followed by Guo-Ming Chen's chapter which notes that harmony is the foundation of Chinese communication. Chen, though, also points out that if called for, harmony can be replaced by aggressive communication which often surprises many non-Chinese. It is this insight which Teruyki

Kume, Noriko Hasegawa, and Hongtao Zhang describe in detail when comparing and contrasting Chinese with Japanese communication styles. This shift towards aggressive communication will also play a role in other contexts, such as business negotiations which will be described later.

But before examining business negotiations, the next section of the book focuses on other aspects associated with Chinese culture. Xuying Wang and Junhao Hong describe stage performances of Chinese contemporary drama. In doing so, the reader gets an insight view into Chinese perceptions of Chinese values including an understanding of how time and space are perceived which help explain, for example, traditional Chinese time management. Jing Yin looks at how women warriors are portrayed by Disney and how that compares to traditional Chinese recounts. Yin notes that Western and Chinese cultures have different perspectives of emancipation which, in turn, is a reflection of different cultural values. That is why Mei Zhong focuses on possible value changes in contemporary China as portrayed through television series and literature. She concludes that there are indications that Chinese culture is undergoing change. Mei Zhong, Hongmei Shen, and Li Gong look at how Chinese self-identity is a reflection of Chinese cultural values and how these values are expressed in consumer behavior. Their study shows that while there are some indications that the younger Chinese generation is shifting towards more individualism, there is still sufficient evidence of continued collectivism. Ming-Yi Wu compares consumer relations in business to consumer electronic commerce environments by comparing Taiwan with the U.S.A. She found that consumers from high context, collectivistic cultures tend to be more hesitant to trust strangers than consumers from low context, individualistic cultures which confirms the characteristics typically ascribed to such cultures. Morris A. Shapero's chapter describes a study his students recently conducted in China. It reveals that the so-called Millennials, i.e. the Chinese generation born between 1982 and 2000, are exhibiting signs of greater individualism and more assertiveness. This is contrasted by Jun Xu and Eileen Küpper's study which found Chinese exchange students to be less assertive and less individualistic as their German counterparts. This seems to contradict some of the other findings, but might be explained by the findings described by Kume, Hasegawa, and Zhang whereby the Japanese consider Chinese communication to be more assertive than Japanese communication, but not quite as aggressive as American communication. James W. Neuliep's chapter concludes this section with a review of numerous previous studies indicating that Chinese culture is changing. But it seems that contemporary Chinese culture is embracing both collectivism and individualism; hence, explaining some of the paradoxes described in the other chapters of this book.

Hairong Feng notes that many studies comparing and contrasting different cultural groups typically emphasize the differences between such groups. She argues, though, that this might be too simplistic. Like Neuliep, Feng concludes that reality is more complex than a simple either or categorization as her study of supportive communication reveals. Vivian C. Sheer studied and compared Chinese and Western negotiation styles, noting while Chinese business managers were impressed by their Western counterparts' communication skills, social manners, and professionalism, it did not prevent the Chinese managers from successfully negotiating business deals. This is in part due to their ability to confound Western managers with deliberate vagueness. So Sheer found evidence that certain typical characteristics associated with Chinese communication, e.g. high context, and Chinese culture, e.g. *Guanxi* (i.e. relationships), continue to play a central role in business negotiations. Paul S. N. Lee looks at how Chinese and Americans handle conflicts. He notes that the traditional Thomas-Kilman matrix of conflict management may be inadequate to describe Chinese conflict management styles. While exploring the differences, Lee found that American students also exhibit conflict management styles typically associated with Chinese culture. That is why Lee concludes that the Thomas-Kilman matrix may offer a too simplistic approach towards handling conflicts. Individual traits can also play a decisive role in why a specific conflict management method is preferred and why another is avoided. Steve Sizoo, Jerome Argusa, and Eileen Küpper studied intercultural conflict in the tourist environment. They did find difference in the behavior of Chinese and Western tourists. That is why they conclude that the tourism industry needs to assign greater relevance specifically to the role of intercultural conflict management and to intercultural communication in general when designing its training programs. Ruifang Zhang and Stella Ting-Toomey present a case study that illustrates what a more comprehensive approach might look like. Zhang and Ting-Toomey present a social-ecological perspective which pursues a multifaceted and multilevel approach that probably comes closer to the truth as to what factors might be involved in a conflict situation than other, more simplistic methods. That is why the social-ecological perspective might be an interesting alternative that is capable of providing a more comprehensive understanding of how various factors are interrelated with one another.

The last two chapters of the book examine aspects of contemporary Chinese culture affecting the Chinese economy and speculate what transformations Chinese culture will still have to undergo in order to maintain and expand its economic success story. Lisheng Dong focuses on Chinese administrative culture, describes the administrative reforms that have already been undertaken, and outlines what reforms still need to be carried out to modernize the country even fur-

ther. Victor Lux Tonn applies mathematical modelling to study the same issue. Like Dong, Tonn concludes that if China continues to undergo and undertake specific economic, social, and political reforms, it will probably be able to not only catch up with the American economy, but even overtake it. Tonn, thus, links culture to economic growth. In other words, culture seems to have a considerable impact on the economy of a country and, thus, also the world of business.

While the individual chapters follow a specific sequence containing an interrelationship with one text building on the others, it is also possible to read the individual chapters out of sequence with the reader picking and selecting the topic according to individual interests. So the reader is encouraged to now embark on a fascinating journey of discovery that will provide fascinating insights into Chinese culture. It is hoped that these insights will then allow one to safely navigate around the shoals of intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts that could wreck mutually beneficial business relationships.

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