

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS TO NEGOTIATION: ENCOUNTERING CHINESE IN CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS MEETINGS

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Business negotiation is a lengthy, difficult process in itself, and becomes extremely intricate when cultural aspects are involved. However, cross-cultural business negotiation is an unavoidable part of international business today, so learning more about the process is an important undertaking. When two negotiating parties from different cultural backgrounds attempt to communicate, the potential for disagreement and misunderstanding is great.

The Chinese are generally recognised to have a tough negotiating style. People from other cultural backgrounds, especially from the West, often find the behaviour of Chinese negotiators strange and unintelligible. This is why much attention has been given to studying the Chinese negotiation style. So far, most research on the topic has focused on successful negotiations and very little has been done to examine the barriers to negotiation. This paper aims to address this need by examining communication barriers between Chinese, Australian and American negotiators. The cases analysed in this paper are derived from a series of business meetings that took place in Australia and China between 1999 and 2002.

The following research questions are proposed:

- What are the barriers to successful negotiation with Chinese business people?
- What is the appropriate approach to overcome these communication barriers and to achieve a win-win outcome?
- What are the implications of studying these communication barriers for international business as well as for diplomats?

In order to answer these questions, this paper will first develop a theoretical framework followed by a discussion of the research method. The theoretical framework will focus on universal or Western cultural dimensions as well as Chinese-specific dimensions. The paper will then proceed to describe and analyse the negotiation cases in light of the proposed theoretical framework. Finally, the authors provide recommendations for Chinese, Australian and American negotiators and highlight significant implications for the study of diplomacy.

Literature Review

This literature review seeks to highlight specific Chinese cultural traits that characterise Chinese negotiation behaviour and to identify possible barriers to negotiating with the Chinese. It begins with a brief outline of negotiation and negotiation theories followed by an examination of cross-cultural dimensions. Three important Chinese cultural traits - Confucianism, face and *guanxi* - are then discussed in detail to complement the universal dimensions.

Negotiation and the Negotiation Process

Negotiation has been a topic of research for several decades and, as a result, many definitions are available. Zartman understands negotiation as a process of two or more parties combining their conflicting points of view into a single decision of mutual interest.¹ Ferraro defines negotiation as “a process between people who share some common interests, people who stand to benefit from bringing the process to a successful conclusion.”² The difference between these two definitions exemplifies the development of negotiation studies: Zartman emphasises that negotiation is mainly used to resolve conflicts, while Ferraro believes negotiation is an approach to better cooperation. At the present, although no definition of negotiation is universal, most authors hold the view that any negotiation involves two or more parties who have both common and conflicting interests, and who interact with one another for the purpose of reaching a mutually beneficial agreement.³

The negotiation process is also divided differently by individual theorists. McCall and Warrington use a three-stage model which involves pre-negotiation, face-to-face interaction and post-negotiation.⁴ Graham and Sano develop a four-step negotiation process:

- Non-task sounding: negotiating parties get to know each other.
- Task-related exchange of information: parties' subjective needs and preferences open to discussion.
- Persuasion: parties attempt to influence the other side's needs and preferences by using various persuasive tactics.
- Concessions and agreement: parties accomplish an agreement which often is the summation of a series of concessions.⁵

The above process is referred to in the following discussion, as it is a synthesised process useful for examining cross-cultural negotiations.

Behaviour Theory. Behaviour theory focuses on human behaviours during negotiation. Ren, Anumba and Ugwu note that “behaviour theory attempts to analyse the negotiation processes in which negotiators influence each other’s expectations, perceptions, assessments, and decisions during the search for an outcome, thereby affecting the outcome.”⁶ They also note three approaches to the study of behaviour. The psychological approach focuses on analysing negotiators’ personalities, perceptions, expectations and their persuasive techniques. The learning approach views negotiation as a learning process in which each party is largely dependent on its experience of the results of past actions by the two parties. Last, but not least, the dual responsiveness model shows that a negotiator’s response is a function of his own previous pattern of making concessions as well as the opponent’s concession rate.⁷ The psychological approach can be relevant to our analysis since we focus on examining behaviours of people from different cultures.

Cross-Cultural Negotiation. Chaney and Martin define cross-cultural negotiation as “discussions of common and conflicting interests between persons of different cultural backgrounds who work to reach an agreement of mutual benefit.”⁸ Cross-cultural negotiation is more challenging than mono-cultural negotiation. In a cross-cultural environment, the negotiation process increases in complexity with the need to consider the factors of different languages and cultures, which are not relevant in a mono-cultural environment.⁹ Ferraro states that:

When negotiating within our own culture, it is possible to operate effectively at the intuitive or unconscious level. However, when we leave our familiar cultural context and enter into international negotiations, the scene changes dramatically. There are no longer shared values, interests, goals, ethical principles, or cultural assumptions between the negotiating parties.¹⁰

Different values, attitudes, interests, behaviours, and languages may produce different negotiation styles, which, if not managed well, can lead to misunderstanding and disagreement and can even break up business relationships.

Gulbro and Herbig believe that the negotiation style used effectively in one culture can be ineffective and inappropriate when dealing with people from another cultural background and actually may result in more harm than gain.¹¹ For instance, being frank and direct may be welcome in some cultures and may help reach a quick agreement, but may not be acceptable in other cul-

tures. In addition, members of different cultures may focus on different aspects of an agreement. In some cultures the attention of negotiators may be directed more towards the specific details of the agreement, while other cultures may focus on how promises can be kept.¹²

Because of such cultural differences, negotiating with Chinese individuals can be a very challenging task. Buttery and Leung consider China to be one of the most challenging countries in which to conduct negotiations.¹³ Ghauri and Fang note that negotiating with Chinese counterparts is quite complex and time consuming.¹⁴ Woo finds that “western business people entering a negotiation in China are often confronted with fierce adversarial bargaining that appears to lack politeness and consideration and find that the Chinese negotiators are tough, shrewd and tenacious.”¹⁵ Searching for reasons why negotiating with the Chinese carries difficulties for Western business people, without exception these authors emphasise the great influence of Chinese culture on negotiation style. They have investigated aspects such as Confucianism, Taoism, collectivism, face, patience, *guanxi*, and social status. Among these aspects, Confucianism, face and *guanxi* are studied most frequently and are believed to be the key factors governing the behaviour of Chinese negotiators. They are also used to indicate a Chinese perspective since we are dealing with negotiation across cultures. This dual perspective is essential for intercultural encounters.¹⁶

In an attempt to bridge the gap between negotiation styles, negotiating parties in cross-cultural negotiations need to have a deep understanding of the cultural realities of their negotiation partners. As Woo and Prud’homme appropriately point out, “in a cross-cultural negotiation, in addition to the basic negotiation skills, it is important to understand the cultural differences, and to modify the negotiation style accordingly.”¹⁷

Intercultural Dimensions

Hall’s High- and Low-Context Cultures. According to Hall, high-context communication emphasises “the physical context or internalized in the person” rather than the “coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message.”¹⁸ A low-context communication, on the contrary, stresses the importance of information vested in the explicit code.¹⁹ Gudykunst and Kim echo Hall’s view, confirming the above description of high- and low-context cultures.²⁰

Referring to the difference between Chinese and American cultures, Lin and Miller state, “members of high-context cultures (e.g., Chinese) are not likely to express their opinion openly and explicitly, whereas members of low-context cultures (e.g., American) appreciate openness and directness with little attention to hidden contexts.”²¹ Unawareness of this kind of difference in

negotiation style can be a barrier to successful communication in cross-cultural negotiations.

Power Distance. Hofstede's power distance can be another factor affecting cross-cultural negotiations. Power distance is "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally."²² Gudykunst and Kim distinguish high power distance from low power distance as follows:

Individuals from high power distance cultures accept power as part of society. As a result, superiors consider their subordinates to be different from themselves and vice versa, while members from lower power distance cultures believe power should be used only when it is legitimate and prefer expert or legitimate power.²³

According to Hofstede's Power Distance Index, different cultures have different attitudes to hierarchy and the distribution of power.²⁴ For example, "the Chinese have a strict hierarchical system and place emphasis on rank,"²⁵ while Australians and Americans tend to pay less attention to social ranking.

Collectivism and Individualism. Hofstede also classifies cultures based on the dimension of individualism and collectivism.²⁶ Leung further explicates collectivism as "the tendency to be more concerned about the consequences of one's behaviour for in-group members and to be more willing to sacrifice personal interests for the attainment of collective interests," whereas individualism refers to "the tendency to be more concerned about the consequences of one's behaviour for one's own needs, interests, and goals."²⁷

According to Hsu, as members of a collective culture, Chinese people emphasise group goals and needs, and strive to maintain relational harmony. In contrast, members of an individualistic culture, such as Australians, value individual autonomy and interests, and encourage competition.²⁸

Confucianism. Confucianism emphasises the responsibilities of individuals toward one another within five important human relationships: those between ruler and subject, husband and wife, father and son, brother and brother, and friend and friend. Confucianism also advocates a social order that values duty, loyalty, honour, filial piety, respect for age and seniority, and sincerity.²⁹ As Woo points out, Confucianism concerns "obedience to, and respect for, superiors and parent, duty to the family, loyalty to friends, and the hierarchy at work."³⁰

Confucianism has implications for negotiating with the Chinese. According to Fang, Confucianism is more concerned with righteousness and human-heartedness than profit. This explains why Chinese negotiators do not rush into formal contract discussions, but take considerable time to build up trust with their negotiation partners. From the perspective of Western business people, an initial meeting with Chinese individuals is seldom a “successful” one, as the Chinese tend to use this meeting simply to collect more information to assess the trustworthiness of their partners. In addition, because Confucianism holds that business is governed by a moralistic notion of sincerity and trust more than by a legalistic concept of contract, Chinese business is largely built on trust rather than law.³¹ Chinese negotiate deals with their partners most effectively when sufficient trust has been established between the parties. A verbal agreement with Chinese business people is as effective as a written contract.³² Finally, Confucianism advocates the relative importance of knowing others and the relative unimportance of being known. This is the reason why Chinese negotiators are so attentive to discern the interests and personalities of their negotiation partners and defensive about freely disseminating information about themselves.³³

Face. Face is described as “a projected social image in a diverse range of communicative situations.”³⁴ More specifically, face “implies status and prestige and is a mark of personal dignity.”³⁵ This is linked to Confucianism and power dimension in Chinese society. Woo and Prud’homme describe the significant role of “face” in Chinese society:

The Chinese are preoccupied with the concept of face and are very sensitive to having and maintaining face in all aspects of social and business life. Having face means having high status and prestige in the eyes of one’s peers. To the Chinese, face can be compared with a prized commodity, something that can be given, earned, taken away, or lost.³⁶

The Chinese are invariably characterised by Western business people as being tough negotiators. The factor of face can be an important reason for this tendency.³⁷ Here, two Chinese face-related terms can be crucial for understanding Chinese negotiation: giving face and losing face. Giving face during negotiations can be understood as showing respect to negotiators on the other side of the table and recognising the status and moral reputation of the negotiators in society. It is important for Western business people to protect their Chinese

counterparts' face, but it is perhaps even more important to give face to them.³⁸ Losing face takes place when one negotiator denounces the status and reputation of another. In negotiations, a Chinese negotiator will lose face if someone is critical of him in front of others. Treating Chinese negotiators as junior in rank when their official status in an organisation is higher can also cause them to lose face.³⁹ Therefore, Brahm believes that it is important to "to give your Chinese counterpart 'face' at the negotiation table without losing it yourself."⁴⁰

Oetzel and Ting-Toomey point out that face negotiation theory provides an organising and explanatory framework for conflict behaviours in negotiation; in particular, they point out that cultural backgrounds directly affect negotiators' attitudes toward face. Therefore, it can have an impact on their selection of negotiation strategies.⁴¹

Guanxi. *Guanxi*, the Chinese term for relationship, is one of the most important Chinese cultural traits. It is also translated as "personal contacts" or "personal connections." The concept of *guanxi* is not unique to China, but it is closely related to the five relations of Confucianism as part of the socio-cultural tradition in China. The Chinese give considerable effort to developing *guanxi*, which is usually established among people who share a commonality of certain identities, for example, schoolmates, fellow villagers or old friends.⁴²

The importance of developing *guanxi* for foreign business people has been emphasised by many researchers. For example, Hu believes that doing business in China is not just a matter of price and product.⁴³ To achieve success, Western business people must rely on good personal relationships. Woo and Prud'homme state that in business negotiations the side that can assemble a stronger *guanxi* network will be more formidable.⁴⁴ Schnepf, von Glinow and Bhambri hold that a fine *guanxi* with high-level officials in Chinese bureaucracy can smooth negotiation and generate good business.⁴⁵ However, *guanxi* is not about immediately returning one favour with another. It may involve constant giving without obtaining a favour in return or *vice versa* for an extended period.⁴⁶

These intercultural dimensions can be used to interpret cultural differences in negotiation. Failure to understand them may lead to barriers to any of the processes in negotiation.

Research Method and Data

The research method is based on case studies. Altogether, we collected the details of ten negotiations between 1999 and 2002. None of the negotiations

were successful. More background information will be given in the next section. One particular case is analysed as an illustration, chosen because it contained features common to each of the negotiations. Two kinds of analytical tools were applied: first, the parameters identified in our theoretical framework were used to analyse the specific encounter. In particular, the negotiation processes discussed earlier are applied. Second, discourse and genre analysis were used to examine the negotiation discourse of each party involved in the cases. Swales examines genre in terms of communicative purposes and strategies, both of which are relevant to this analysis.⁴⁷

Background Information about the Negotiation Cases

From 1999 to 2002, one of the authors of this paper worked at the Investment Promotion Service Centre in Beijing, China, a not-for-profit organisation directly affiliated with and entirely funded by a district government. The mission of the Centre is to act as a liaison for investors in Beijing, and thus it attracted much foreign attention.

In her three years' experience working in this centre, the author participated in no less than ten initial face-to-face meetings between Chinese and Western business people, the latter mainly from Australia and America. For the purpose of facilitating further cooperation between the parties, the meetings took various forms including seminars, negotiations, forums and informal discussions. However, the results of each of these meetings were the same: no business cooperation between the parties occurred. One specific case has been selected for discussion as it clearly represents the different stages of negotiation.

The Case

At the end of 1999, the "F" District Council of Beijing sent a delegation to visit their sister town of "S" in Australia. F and S had already established a sound relationship. The delegation, headed by the deputy governor, consisted of eight people, including four government officials and three businessmen. Following is a description of the meeting, broken down into processes according to the method used by Graham and Sano.⁴⁸

Process 1. When the Chinese delegation arrived at the seminar, more than fifteen business people from S were waiting for them. John, head of the Australian delegation, and Mr Wang, head of the Chinese delegation, greeted each other:

John: "How do you do?"

Mr Wang: "How do you do?"

John: "Welcome to S."

Mr Wang: "We are so glad to meet so many business people from S at this meeting, thank you for your hospitality."

Process 2. Business began soon after they greeted each other. At the meeting, five Australians from different business areas introduced their products and services to the Chinese in detail. For example, Tom, a double-rider bicycle producer, brought a sample to the seminar and explained the functions of his product in detail for the Chinese delegation.

Process 3. Tom said to the Chinese delegation: "I know China has long been called the 'bicycle kingdom,' so I am sure most Chinese people, especially young people, will like this double-rider bicycle, because it looks smart and is of very high quality. If you introduce it to the Chinese market, it must be very popular."

A clear pause occurred after Tom's presentation. Tom seemed to be waiting for responses and questions from the Chinese; the Chinese group, however, responded by nodding and smiling.

Interlude Now it was the turn of the Chinese delegation. The following was the conversation among the three Chinese businessmen when they felt pressed to make a speech:

Mr Lin: "I don't know what to say. You two can represent me."

Mr Ma: "I prefer to be the audience too. You two just feel free to talk."

Mr Liu: "I am not good at talking at all, you two are much better than me, why do both of you ask me to talk?"

Process 2. Since the three didn't reach an agreement, Mr Wang, head of the delegation, announced: "I order Xiao Lin and Xiao Ma to make a speech immediately, and not to hesitate any more." Obeying this order, Mr Lin and Mr Ma talked respectively without any sign of reluctance. They said they were very grateful to the F District Council because the government had offered them long-term support, and they could not succeed in their business without this sup-

port. Concerning their own businesses, they provided the audience with very brief introductions.

The seminar then ended abruptly without any agreements or even cooperative initiative mentioned. Worse, no further contact ensued between the F and S groups after the F delegation returned to China.

Analysis of the Case

The two parties clearly came to the meeting with a common communicative purpose: to develop business collaboration between the two countries. However, the Chinese delegation seemed to have an additional purpose, to establish further trust or relationship before signing any business deals. This difference in communicative purposes led to further clashes in each of the negotiation processes. The processes are discussed in relation to the intercultural dimensions as shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1: A Breakdown of Barriers to Negotiation in the Case

Processes	H/L	PD	I/C	Confucianism
1	Short/long introduction	-	Group/individual	<i>Guanxi</i> and trust building
Interlude (Chinese)	Indirect style	-	Inner/outer group identity	Confucianism
2	Detailed/brief introduction	High/low	Group/individual	Confucianism
3	Open forum/non-response	-	Inner/outer group identity	Face value and <i>guanxi</i>

Note: H/L stands for high- and low-context dimensions, PD stands for power distance, and I/C for individualism and collectivism.

Table 1 details the significant cultural differences that came into play between the Chinese and Australians throughout the negotiation process. Communication barriers related to the differences between Chinese and Australian cultures in terms of the high/low-context dimension and the individualism/collectivism dimension were apparent in all three processes and the interlude. In comparison, the conflict between high and low power distance is less obvious and is seen only in Process 2. Confucianism, which is related to all three of the aforementioned Chinese cultural traits, is another major factor

causing the barriers in this Chinese-Australian business negotiation. As shown in *Table 1*, only three of the four negotiation processes take place in the case, and the third process seems to involve only one-way communication. This may be part of the reason that the negotiation did not succeed. Further barriers in each process are discussed below.

The first process is the non-task sounding process in which both parties begin to introduce themselves to each other. Both parties seemed to have started well, using appropriate terms to greet each other. However, the process did not progress. For the Australians, it ends after brief introductions. For the Chinese, it should involve more than simple greetings. The cultural dimensions listed in *Table 1* show specifically what the barriers are.

The conflict in this process is invisible. The Australian group may have thought that they had finished the first process of getting to know each other. However, the Chinese likely needed more information about their Australian counterparts than provided in the greetings. What the Chinese expected from this process was not information about the Australians' current businesses, but more personal information such as their past work experience and from where they originally came. Such information would help the Chinese group establish *guanxi* with their counterparts. In addition, the conflict can be explained in relation to high- and low-context parameters of their cultures. As members of a high context culture, the Chinese expected more information, but they would by no means directly ask for the information from Australians.

Unlike the first process, the second process did not have a smooth start. As noted earlier, real communication did not take place as the Chinese delegation needed more time to get to know the Australian representatives. As a result, a further mismatch occurred. The conflict between low-context and high-context cultures becomes even more evident in this process. Since the Chinese felt that they had not yet established mutual trust and *guanxi* with the Australians, they were reluctant to speak in front of people they considered strangers. Also, as noted earlier, Confucianism advocates that knowing others is more important than being known.

The Australians, after their extensive introductions to their products and services, must have found it difficult to follow the Chinese speeches, which included extensive acknowledgement of the F District Council but very little information about the Chinese businesses. This kind of acknowledgement reflects the collectivistic nature of the Chinese culture. To Chinese people, any success is the result of group endeavour; individuals are not expected to display their own achievements in public, instead they emphasise the help and support that they have obtained from others. As a result, acknowledgement is an

indispensable part of Chinese speeches, and both Chinese businessmen spent considerable time expressing their appreciation of F District Council, which Mr Wang, head of the delegation, represented. The dimension of high power distance also applies to this process. Mr Lin and Mr Ma followed Mr Wang's order to speak up at the meeting immediately, although they had just shown clear signs of unwillingness.

The barriers increased tremendously in the third process. Tom triggered the beginning of the third process by highlighting the importance of bicycles for China. He attempted to persuade the Chinese group by bringing up two attractive factors of the product: smart design and good quality. However, his invitation to the Chinese group to speak failed to elicit any effective response: the Chinese delegates simply nodded and smiled, a non-verbal symbol of the Chinese high-context culture. Chinese people tend not to use a direct "no" when refusing as they consider it as an impolite expression, especially during the first meeting with strangers. Instead, they use non-verbal expressions or phrases such as "it is inconvenient," "I am not sure" or "maybe." The Chinese delegate may have thought that refusing Tom's offer directly, in front of other people, would embarrass him.

The events of the interlude are also related to the high-context cultural dimension. The reluctance of the Chinese businessmen to give speeches must have made the Australian business people feel impatient. It was impossible for the Australians to understand that the three Chinese businessmen were not actually unwilling to speak at the seminar; instead, they were using a Chinese way to show their modesty, a Confucian virtue.

Recommendations for Successful Negotiation with Chinese

A number of barriers in this business meeting led to a failure in collaboration. Identifying these communication barriers can also be relevant to diplomacy since meetings and negotiations are essential for international relations. We therefore make the following recommendations for both business and diplomacy in order to help overcome these barriers.

1. Make an effort to learn Chinese culture and customs. This will help in understanding and categorising Chinese negotiation behaviour.
2. Be patient during the non-task sounding process. Chinese usually need time to build trust and create *guanxi* with their counterparts before deciding to move ahead with a negotiation.

3. Make sure that trust has been successfully built into the task-related exchange of information process, because Chinese individuals will provide adequate and useful information only to people they trust. This will eventually make the persuasion process easier.
4. Remember that entry to the concessions and agreement process is not the sign of a successful negotiation. Developing good *guanxi* with Chinese negotiators and respecting Chinese cultural traits is the basis for moving forward in this process.

Conclusion

This paper explored barriers in negotiating with Chinese business representatives and analysed authentic business meetings across cultures using a theoretical framework based on negotiation behaviour, discourse analysis and intercultural dimensions. Confucianism, face and *guanxi* were also incorporated in the framework. Specific barriers relating to different cultural values were identified in each of the processes of negotiation. The analysis showed that the major barrier was related to the first process of non-task sounding, and a series of recommendations were made based on this finding.

In general, this approach is useful for identifying communication barriers and for better understanding Chinese negotiation style. These findings offer relevant implications for negotiation in diplomacy. The purpose of any negotiation, business or diplomacy, is to reach a mutually beneficial agreement. Minimising communication barriers can be a big challenge. In particular, in a cross-cultural context, negotiation becomes much more complex and difficult. The difficulty involves dealing with the different sets of values, attitudes, behaviours, and communication styles of the other party. As one way of overcoming the barriers, it is essential for diplomats to apply intercultural dimensions and culture-specific dimensions such as Confucianism to the specific negotiation processes.

Finally, since it is a mutual responsibility for both negotiation parties to understand the cultural realities of their negotiation partners, it is worthwhile for Western diplomats and business people to disseminate their cultural values to their Chinese counterparts as well. Intercultural competency is, after all, a two-way learning and communication process. Further research is needed to explore ways of overcoming communication barriers in cross-cultural negotiation involving a dual cultural perspective.

Endnotes

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Part V.

PROFESSIONAL
AND ORGANISATIONAL
CULTURES

