

## **Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution: Overview and Implications**

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Two main trends have hastened the need for the world to understand the communication of people from the Chinese diaspora. First, with their large population and the rapid development of their economies in the last two decades, the Chinese people in the mainland, in Taiwan, in Hong Kong, and elsewhere overseas have gradually formed a powerful network that affects almost every aspect of world affairs. Second, as the world is moving toward a global community, mutual understanding among people of different cultures has become an indispensable requirement for global citizens to live together peacefully and productively. Knowing how the Chinese think and communicate is one way to develop a more interrelated future world. The goal of this special issue, then, is to improve our understanding of the Chinese people(s) by exploring how they manage and resolve those conflicts they encounter in the process of human interaction.

Culture and conflict management/resolution have an interdependent relationship with one another. According to Chen and Starosta (forthcoming), three aspects of culture especially influence conflict management/resolution: cultural context, language differences, and thinking patterns. Ting-Toomey (1985) theorizes that differences are found in conflict management/resolution between low-context and high-context cultures. For example, people of high-context cultures tend to enter into conflict when their cultural normative expectations are violated, tend to adopt a non-confrontational and indirect attitude towards conflicts, and tend to use an affective-intuitive style of conflict management. In contrast, people in low-context cultures tend to become involved in a conflict when their personal normative expectations are violated, tend to adopt a confrontational and direct attitude towards conflicts, and tend to use a factual-inductive style of conflict management. Representative studies by Becker (1986), Chua and Gudykunst (1987), Chung (1996), Hsu (1953), Lindon (1974), Ma (1990, 1992), Nomura and

Barnlund (1983), and Ting-Toomey, Trubisky, and Nishida (1989) all demonstrate the impact of cultural context on conflict management.

Language differences that affect conflict management are mainly reflected in verbal communication styles. We develop verbal communication styles at the early stage of language acquisition. Because such styles reflect and embody the beliefs of our culture, when we impose our verbal communication style in the process of interaction, conflict can occur (Kochman, 1982). Verbal communication styles can be classified into direct and indirect categories. According to Hall (1975), people who are direct in communication style value self-expression, verbal fluency, and eloquent speech, and have a tendency to persuade counterparts to accept their viewpoints by directly expressing their opinions. By contrast, people of indirect communication style tend to be more silent and use ambiguous language in interactions, and avoid saying "no" directly to others in order to foster or maintain a harmonious atmosphere. In other words, people with a direct communication style are more likely to engage in conflicts and to select a confrontational style in managing or resolving a conflict than those with indirect communication styles. Studies by Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), Hsu (1981), Okabe (1983), and Park (1979) have examined the impact of different verbal communication styles on interaction and conflict styles.

Finally, thinking patterns differ from culture to culture. Thinking patterns give us a way to understand how people in different cultures reason and solve problems. They directly affect how people manage conflicts. Generally, Western people believe that, through a linear process of logic and rationality, we can discover the external, objective truth. However, Easterners may believe that non-linear thinking patterns are the best way to construct the truth, which manifests itself without employing instruments of logical reasoning or rationality. Kaplan (1970) indicates that thinking or reasoning patterns are reflected in language systems. For example, the most common thinking pattern of English speakers is linear in language sequence, while the reasoning pattern behind Chinese or Japanese languages tends to be nonlinear, and is characterized by an indirect writing style that is akin to the method of deduction. Differences in reasoning patterns behind languages may induce intercultural and international misunderstanding and conflicts. Thus, patience and perseverance become critical components for successfully dealing with people from different cultures (Glenn & Glenn, 1981). Studies from Condon and Yousef (1975), Ishii (1982), Klopff (1995), and Pribram (1949) also examine potential conflicts caused by different thinking patterns.

Differences in cultural context, language system, and thinking patterns among the Chinese and people of other cultures unquestionably lead the Chinese to have their own conflict styles and unique ways of managing and resolving conflicts. This

special issue is devoted to examining the characteristically Chinese ways of conflict management and resolution. Eight articles approaching the issue from different perspectives are included. Together they provide an emergent picture of Chinese conflict management and resolution. The following sections first overview these articles. Second, determinants of Chinese conflict management are indicated. Finally, implications and directions for future research in this line of inquiry are discussed.

### **Overview of the Special Issue**

The eight articles included in this issue represent a diverse theoretical and methodological orientation for the study of Chinese conflict management and resolution. They form part of the growing literature in this line of research by investigating the problem from the perspective of communication and by extending their insights to a variety of cultural, economical, historical, political, and social conditions. In the first article, "Guanxi and Mientze: Conflict Resolution in Chinese Society," Kwang-Kuo Hwang provides a theoretical model to explain the Chinese way of conflict management and resolution. Using the concept of "harmony" as the axis and *guanxi* (inter-relation) and *mientze* (face) as the two wings of harmony, the model is applied to three categories of Chinese interpersonal networks: vertical in-group, horizontal in-group, and horizontal out-group. Combining with personal goal pursuing, five Chinese conflict resolution styles are identified: confrontation, severance, endurance, obey publicly/defy privately, and compromise. In order to provide a more comprehensive model the author further integrates two aspects of conflict management into the model, i.e., coordination strategies and dominant responses. Thus, a total of twelve conflict resolution styles can be used to explain Chinese conflict behaviors. In this article the author draws empirical data from various research studies to validate some of the twelve Chinese conflict resolution styles. This model serves as a solid framework for learning Chinese conflict management and resolution from the Confucian perspective.

Aiming to improve on the use of Western theories, especially politeness theory from Goffman and Brown and Levinson, to explain communication behaviors of Eastern people, Wenshan Jia's "Facework as a Chinese Conflict-Preventive Mechanism - A Cultural/Discourse Analysis Approach" synthesizes a framework of facework from an emic perspective to explain Chinese conflict behaviors. Based on the interpretation of a videotaped interaction among a group of Chinese in a real life setting, the results show that facework is a cultural force that reproduces typical Chinese communities.

Xuejian Yu's "The Chinese 'Native' Perspective on Conflict (*mao-dun*) and Conflict Management Strategies: A Qualitative Investigation" examines conflicts from the perspective of the traditional Chinese concept *mao-dun* and considers how

the meaning of *mao-dun* is broadened in modern China. In-depth interviews are also conducted in this study to look at the Chinese perspective of conflict and conflict management. Traditionally, *mao-dun* is similar to the meaning of "contradiction" that refers to "mutually opposed" or "logically incompatible." In modern China *mao-dun* is expanded, especially by Mao Zedong, to include all dynamic relationships of interaction in terms of differences, problems or difficulties, and antagonism in interpersonal or group situations. This is much closer to the western meaning of "conflict." The study further finds three Chinese ways of managing a *mao-dun*: first, avoiding confrontation in order to keep harmony, largely centering on *guanxi* and *mientze*; second, seeking intermediaries to resolve conflicts in order to reduce the need for direct and emotional responses; and finally, reluctantly going to court when all other means fail.

Jianglong Wang and Wei Wu's "'Ideological Work' as Conflict Management: A Dialectical Approach in Chinese Communication Campaigns" investigates how the Chinese government (the collective) uses "ideological work" (*si xiang gong zou*) as a means to manage conflicts or contradictions (*mao-dun*) between the individual and the collective in public communication campaigns (e.g., family planning campaign). Based on Mao Zedong's thoughts and influenced by Marx's materialistic dialectics, Taoist concepts of *yin* and *yang* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, "ideological work" is the most suitable method for alleviating tensions between two opposing social forces that form a dialectical process in which (1) the identity of a given contradiction unites the opposites, (2) contradictory opposites transform into each other in given conditions, and (3) quantity of struggle promotes quality change in a contradiction. The collective and the individual form the opposite ends of a contradiction. Thus, through the "ideological work" the contradiction between the two opposites can be resolved when either the individual transforms into the collective by giving up his or her interests or the collective transforms into the individual by losing ground in given cases.

Bei Cai and Alberto Gonzalez's "The Three Gorges Project: Technological Discourse and the Resolution of Competing Interests" takes a critical perspective to analyze the debate between the proponents and opponents of the Three Gorges Project. Using Foucault's theory of discursive rules in discourse the authors indicate that the conflict resolution around the Three Gorges Project becomes a site of hegemony in which some interests are represented, advanced and legitimized, while others are suppressed by institutional normative forces. The discursive rules used by the opponents form a network of power that is regulated by two normative forces: (1) the dominating episteme ascribes economic development as the valuable and the legitimate topic to be talked about, and (2) the Chinese cultural conventions that prioritize collective interests at the cost of the regional and the individual interests. As a result, the Chinese government approved the project. The process shows that

Chinese political rhetoric is characterized by a positional society where communication is downward, centralized and lacks dialogue and openness.

Yanru Chen and Xiaoming Hao's "Conflict Resolution in Lovers' Triangles: Perspective Offered by Chinese TV Dramas" aims to examine how the Chinese resolve conflicts by analyzing 300 episodes of 15 Chinese TV dramas from 1992 to 1995 involving triangular love relationships. The authors first report seven major causes of conflicts in Chinese lovers' triangles that are depicted in TV dramas: (1) conflict between pursuit of knowledge and pursuit of money, (2) conflict between career aspirations and familial roles, (3) conflict arising from arranged marriages, (4) conflict between different life goals, (5) conflict caused by change in social status, (6) conflict caused by non-love marriages, and (7) conflict caused by mere transfer of affection. The authors also find that the style of managing and resolving the love triangles conflict tends to be non-confrontational. No matter if it is settled by those who involved, by parental intervention, or by organizational pressure, the resolution always leans toward reconciliation. The authors conclude that the development of the Chinese economy has affected patterns of interpersonal relationships. The change not only expands the content and scope of conflicts, but also gradually deemphasizes traditional methods for dealing with conflict.

Twila Tardif's "Negotiation of Conflict by Beijing Caregivers and Their Toddlers" analyzes the discourse of negotiations that takes place between the Chinese caregivers and their toddlers in moments of conflicts, and compares this with such negotiations in Britain and the United States. Using a participant methodology, the author collects the data through a naturalistic observation. The analyses show that the Chinese adults, in contrast to British and U.S. adults, are more likely to suggest alternative activities and use other strategies in negotiating with the toddlers in conflict situations rather than directly issuing an explicit refusal. It is also found that the Chinese children tend to use a strategy of not responding or ignoring the caregivers' requests rather than directly refusing or disobeying. The results provide an opportunity for us to understand the socialization and emergence of cultural differences in negotiation styles.

Finally, John Powers' "Conflict Genres and Management Strategies During China's 'Ten Years of Turmoil'" attempts to identify conflict genres and management patterns reflected in extant autobiographical materials regarding the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976. The analyses show that seven conflict genres are predominant in this ten-year period: public struggle meetings, direct confrontations, institutional interrogations, interpersonal confrontations among urban/educated youth and rural/uneducated peasants, camp guards and the rusticated youth, and residents' committees and the narrator's family (the last three genres are predominant in the second phase of Cultural Revolution). Conflict management strategies often used in this phase include personal authority,

classifications/categories/names, quotations or slogans based on Mao's words, signs, and narrative probability. The author concludes that the strategies of handling conflicts in the Cultural Revolution era are still widely used in contemporary China.

### **Determinants of Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution**

After closely examining the eight articles included in this special issue, we can generate four major factors that play an important role in the process of Chinese conflict management and resolution: harmony, inter-relation (*guanxi*), face (*miantze*), and power.

Harmony is one of the primordial values of the Chinese culture. The Chinese consider harmony as the universal path which we all should pursue. Only when harmony is reached and prevails throughout heaven and earth can all things be nourished and flourish (Legge, 1955). The purpose of human communication is then to develop and keep a harmonious relationship in a continuously transforming process of mutual dependency among interactants. Thus, harmony is the end rather than the means of human communication. To the Chinese, conflicts are not treated as problems of communication but rather as detractors from harmony. Human communication is not a process in which we strive to direct the interaction to our own favor. Instead, it is a process in which we try to adapt and relocate ourselves in the dynamic process of interdependence and cooperation. To sincerely display a whole-hearted concern for the other is therefore a gateway to reach a harmonious relationship (Chen, 1994). As a result, aiming to establish a conflict free interpersonal and social relationship is the ultimate goal for Chinese interactions (Chen & Chung, 1994).

The Chinese practice of conflict prevention is maintained by the principle of *li* (propriety, rite). *Li* refers to norms and rules of proper behaviors in a social context. It is an external means to achieve the ideal state of harmony by showing a feeling of respect or reverence to others (Chen & Xiao, 1993). Thus, in conflict situations *li shang wang lai* (reciprocity) is primarily a principle of harmony rather than a materialistic principle of mutual benefit. It requires people to show mutual responsibility in social interactions. In addition, *shian li hou bin* (courteous before the use of force) should be used only after the failure of *li*. In this case, one can gain moral support from third parties by putting the blame for destroying the harmonious relations onto the other party.

As the axis of the wheel of conflict management and resolution, harmony is supported by two spokes: *guanxi* and *miantze*. *Guanxi* forms the structural pattern of the Chinese social fabric and *miantze* is the operational mechanism that connects the nodes of *guanxi* network. The two concepts are natural products of the

emphasis of harmony in the Chinese society. They function to keep the wheel of harmony in good repair.

*Guanxi* refers to relationships between two parties. These relationships include friends, family, supervisor/subordinate, teacher/student, coworkers, and many others. The Chinese place a heavy weight on particularistic relationships and establish a clear boundary between ingroup and outgroup relationships. The emphasis on particularistic relationships is originated from the Confucian "Five Code of Ethics" that specifies an unequal and complementary relationship between ruler (supervisor)/subject (subordinator), father/son, husband/wife, older brother/younger brother, and between friends. Particularistic relationships are regulated by a set of specific communication rules and patterns that give individuals a direction of interaction in order to avoid an embarrassing encounter or serious conflict (Chen & Chung, 1994; Hwang, 1988; Jacobs, 1979). In other words, particularistic relationships are potentially powerful in persuasion, influence and control, and can be used not only to avoid conflicts but also to resolve conflicts (Chang & Holt, 1991; Chung, 1991; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987).

The emphasis on particularistic relationships leads to a clear distinction between ingroup and outgroup members. Those who belong to the network of particularistic relationships are ingroup members and all others are outgroup members. The "we feeling" among ingroup members greatly reduces the possibility of confrontation or conflict, while harmony often becomes a victim of distrusting outgroup membership.

*Mientze* refers to the projected image of ourselves in a relationship network (Ting-Toomey, 1988). It represents our social position and prestige gained from the successful performance of our specific social roles that are well recognized by other members in the society (Hu, 1944). In order to follow the principle of *li* mentioned above one should show due respect for others' feelings and act to save their face, because any conscious act of making others lose face will damage one's own image, and saving one's face is a way to heighten one's self-esteem (Chen & Xiao, 1993). Showing no concern for face saving in social interactions often leads to emotional uneasiness or to a serious conflict. Thus, the Chinese incline to use all kinds of means to "earn face" (Chu, 1983) and to "make face" for others to establish a harmonious atmosphere (Chiao, 1981).

To integrate *guanxi* and *mientze* into the concept of harmony, we see that the Chinese endeavor to establish *guanxi* and give face to others to reach a state of harmony in social interaction in order to avoid confrontation and conflict. If conflicts are unavoidable, harmony is still the goal for reducing the negative impact of conflicts by searching for any possible *guanxi* or saving face between the two parties. At the same time, the Chinese tend to use an intermediary to help them resolve an unavoidable conflict to save face. This leads to an indirect

communication pattern by which the Chinese can pursue a smooth verbal and nonverbal interaction in the process of conflict management and resolution. In addition, the indirect communication pattern also provides the Chinese with an opportunity for not saying "no" and not showing aggressive behaviors in public, for both saying "no" and showing aggression violate the principle of *li* and are detrimental to harmony.

Finally, power refers to the control of resources valued by the other party. It seems universal that power will decide the type of conflict styles we will select. In the Chinese society power is embedded in two concepts: seniority and authority.

Seniority plays an important role in the Chinese social interaction and conflict management process. Under the influence of Confucianism, especially in China and Japan, elders receive a wide range of prerogatives and power (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Carmichael, 1991; Nishiyama, 1971). For example, in a case analysis of conflict between two factions of the ruling party in the 1990 Taiwanese presidential election campaign, Chung (1996) indicates that seniority is one of the most discernible qualities for the recruitment of mediators, who are between 78 and 92 years old. Elders also play a key role in Chinese politics, both in Mainland and Taiwan, and in other aspects of life. Seniority is also connected with credibility. Trust usually increases the control over the interaction process and the acceptance of other's influence (Griffin, 1967). In the Chinese conflict situation the degree of trust originating from seniority often determines whether persons adopt a cooperative or competitive stance.

Authority is embedded in the structure of the Five Code of Ethics. The hierarchical structure of particularistic relationships ascribes the ruler (supervisor), father, husband, and older brother with authority to receive more power or control over their counterparts. As indicated in Cai and Gonzales's article in this issue, although knowledge and expertise can serve as powerful tools in persuading the opponents of the Three Gorges Project, the final decision must be made by the political leaders who are culturally accepted as the decision-makers and problem solvers. In other words, in the Chinese society persons with higher status in the particularistic relationship structure are considered to be more knowledgeable in the process of problem solving or conflict management/resolution. Thus, as a determinant of Chinese conflict management and resolution, power can be an internal contingency that works with *guanxi* and face to reinforce the ultimate goal of harmony. Nevertheless, in socially and politically disturbing times, such as the ten-year Cultural Revolution period as indicated in Powers' article, power can be abused and engenders a negative force that destroys the ethical principle of relationship structure and face saving system. As a result, harmony becomes a casualty of power. In this case, power is an external contingency that constantly challenges the harmonious model of Chinese conflict management and resolution.



Chinese history is replete with examples of the negative impact of power on harmony.

To summarize, harmony, *guanxi*, *mientze*, and power form the framework for the model of Chinese conflict management and resolution. However, in addition to these four concepts, a more complete model for the study of Chinese conflict management and resolution should include the following secondary concepts: reciprocity, courteous before the force is used, particularistic relationship, ingroup/outgroup distinction, avoidance of showing aggressive behaviors, avoidance of saying "no," indirect communication, seniority, trust and authority.

### **Implications and Directions for Future Research**

The eight articles collected in this special issue draw a picture of Chinese conflict management and resolution. Although the picture is still far from being panoramic, the authors' examination of the topic from different aspects of Chinese life provides a great opportunity for us to understand Chinese conflict behaviors. Several implications and directions can be drawn from this line of research in order to reach a deeper understanding of the Chinese conflict management and negotiation.

First, articles collected in this special issue basically focus on conflict at the interpersonal and political levels. Future research can extend the study to different contexts, such as organizational conflict and international/intercultural conflict. The research results can be compared to determine differences and similarities between different contexts, including intercultural settings, in conflict management and resolution.

Second, culture is dynamic. It changes over time due to various mechanisms such as innovation, diffusion, and natural and human-induced calamities. Also, it changes from living among those of differing cultural socialization. Traditional cultural values emphasized in the process of conflict management and resolution will inevitably change. For example, Chen and Hao's article indicates that the rapid development of the economy tends to change the traditional methods of resolving conflicts in romantic relationship. Powers' article also shows a surprisingly different pattern of conflict management and resolution during the Cultural Revolution period. Further research needs to be conducted to examine the change of cultural values and how this affects the Chinese conflict behaviors. For instance, to what degree can Hwang's model of *guanxi* and *mientze* and Jia's facework approach be used to explain the conflict behavior in modern Chinese world?

Third, most research (including most of the articles in this special issue) examines Chinese conflict management and resolution from the Confucian

perspective. There is no doubt that Confucian thought traditionally dominates Chinese culture and behaviors, but other schools of thoughts such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Legalism (Lu, 1994) also show great impact on personal aspects of Chinese life. When we study Chinese conflict management and resolution, it is especially important for us to examine the influence of Taoism and Legalism. Wang and Wu's article mentions the indirect influence of Taoism on Mao's dialectic principle. We believe that schools other than Confucianism can provide abundant information for further understanding Chinese conflict behaviors, especially strategies used to resolve conflicts.

Fourth, two concepts embedded in Buddhist and Confucian thoughts mentioned by Chen and Xiao deserve further investigation: *yuan* (destined affinity) and *ming* (fate). *Yuan* and *ming* represent the deterministic views the Chinese hold when facing a difficult situation. The two concepts combining with the practice of divination and *feng shui* form a large part of the Chinese folk culture (Chang & Holt, 1993; Chen, 1996; Wen, 1988). They greatly affect how the Chinese make decisions in the process of conflict management and resolution. It may be productive to consider urban/rural setting, education level and class differences as factors that indicate how powerfully folk beliefs are at work in managing or resolving conflicts.

Fifth, when dealing with the conceptual model of Chinese conflict management and resolution, scholars often neglect to discuss another influential concept, *zhi* (wisdom). *Zhi* refers to using knowledge to make an appropriate judgment about achieving our goals in social interactions. Chung (1997) treats *zhi* as an indispensable variable for understanding superior-subordinate conflict management in Chinese organizations. According to Kao (1976), in managing conflicts *zhi* can foster our memory power of the situation, our ability to understand the situation, our ability to adapt to the situation, and creativity. Thus, "to fight a battle of wits, not of limbs" is a preferable principle in the Chinese conflict management and resolution. It is *zhi* that provides a foundation for effectively integrating our action in the right time (*shi*) and right situation (*wei*) with an acute and accurate judgment for noting the first barely-perceptible movement during a conflict (Chen, 1995a). To include *zhi* in the process of Chinese conflict management and resolution therefore will make the conceptual model more complete.

Sixth, research on Chinese conflict management and resolution should extend to the areas of mediation, compliance gaining and negotiation. Mediation is a method of conflict resolution in which neutral third parties offer counsel or regulate discussions to assist disputants to resolve the conflict. As previously indicated, due to the emphasis of harmony, the Chinese heavily rely on a third party to help resolve conflicts. *Shuohe* (speaking peace) is the term the Chinese use to mean "to

mediate." The role *shuohe* plays in the process of Chinese conflict management and resolution is an intriguing topic for further research (Christiansen, 1997; Pierce, 1994; Wall, 1991).

How to reach a satisfactory outcome or win over the opponent in a conflict situation is a concern of compliance-gaining strategies. The Chinese cultural traditions contain abundant literature regarding how to manipulate the conflict situations to maximize benefits. The most famous information is the *san shil liu ji* (the 36 stratagems) that represents an ancient Chinese collection of strategies for dealing with conflict situations (Chen, 1995b; Chiao, 1988, 1989; Chu, 1991; Senger, 1988). Chen and Zhong (1996) generate a model of Chinese compliance gaining strategies by factor analyzing 65 stratagems recorded in Chinese literature and find seven dimensions: delusion, burrowing/misleading, distraction, indirect exploration, espionage/self-inflicting, adapting, and deceiving. Further exploring this area for future research will make significant contributions to the understanding of strategies the Chinese use to manage or resolve conflicts.

As part of the conflict management and resolution process, negotiation is another important topic scholars should continue to pursue. The rise of China in economical, political, and military arenas has increased the urgency for us to explore how the Chinese negotiate in interpersonal, organizational, intercultural, and international levels (Chen & Pan, 1993; Pye, 1982; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987). The negotiation process between Chinese and British governments regarding the reversion of Hong Kong to China is a good example to show the importance for studying this topic (Weiss, 1988). Chen (1997) provides a list of variables that affect the Chinese negotiation in conflict situations (i.e., authority, avoidance of saying "no," being humble, bribing, credibility, emotional control, expertise, face, fairness, gift giving, harmony, honesty, patience, reciprocity, relation, self-restraint, seniority, sincerity, status, and trick) and attempts to explore the rank order of these variables in business and international negotiations. Continuing this line of research will prove to be not only important to the understanding of Chinese negotiation behaviors but also potentially significant in promoting business interaction and world peace.

Finally, one derivative area that is as yet unexplored but that could bring new insights is to learn whether those of Chinese extraction from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and elsewhere have begun to merge the traditional Chinese styles of conflict resolution with those of the local culture. Under what conditions do overseas Chinese retain their traditional styles of conflict management and resolution, and under which conditions and for what motives do they adopt the styles of the local population?

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