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Establishing Professional Intercultural Relations: Chinese Perceptions of Behavioural Success in a Sino-American Exchange Visit

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which professionals from different countries handle first encounters when they wish to initiate and establish business/professional relations. The majority of research on business relations in intercultural contexts has so far focused on misunderstandings, face threats, and conflict. There has been comparatively little research into the initiation and establishment of relations from a positive perspective. This article addresses this lacuna by analysing how Chinese delegates built positive relations with American counterparts on a visit to the USA. Drawing on insights from the analysis, it proposes a conceptual framework for future research in this area.

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Good relations are important in all contexts and this is especially the case when professionals wish to build connections with counterparts or customers in different parts of the world. Holmes and Marra (2004) argue that there are two broad types of relational practice: (a) constructing and nurturing good relations, and (b) damage control by maintaining people's dignity, saving their face and minimizing conflict. The majority of intercultural research, both theoretical and empirical, has up to now focused on the latter, especially on issues of face and conflict (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013; Wang & Spencer-Oatey, 2015). There has been comparatively little international/intercultural research into two other key areas: (a) the processes by which participants make evaluations of others (Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2019), and (b) the processes of initiating and establishing relations from a pro-active, positive point of view (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, in press). The latter is particularly surprising, given that over 35 years ago Graham and Herberger (1983), in a widely cited international business article, identified non-task rapport building as the most important first stage of business negotiations. They advised Americans when working internationally to be "patient and plan to spend more time in non-task sounding. Let the other side bring up business and put your wristwatch in your coat pocket" (Graham & Herberger, 1983, p. 166).

This article addresses the research gap with regards to the two sides of the relational coin (evaluation of others and behavioural strategies to foster relations) by using data

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from a Chinese delegation who visited the USA. We explore how they evaluated their American counterparts' behaviour from a relational perspective, and the strategies they themselves used to try and promote relations. We then consider the conceptual implications of the findings for theorizing in intercultural relations.

Literature review

Fundamental to any intercultural study is the role that culture may play, so we start our review of the literature by considering that. We then turn to the main focus of our study, relational management, and examine it from both an evaluation and development perspective.

Culture, values and context

Much work in social/cross-cultural psychology and the intercultural field has focused on the impact of different values on behaviour (e.g., Gudykunst, 2004; Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995), but recently there has been increasing awareness of the potential impact of conceptions of situation or context (Lefringhausen et al., 2019, Spencer-Oatey et al., 2019; Leung & Morris, 2015; Smith, 2015; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). The notion of situation or context can be unpacked in various ways, but for understanding communicative interaction, Brown and Fraser (1979) classic depiction is extremely useful (see Lefringhausen et al., 2019 for an overview). They draw a fundamental distinction between participants and scene, and within the latter they propose several particularly helpful concepts, one of which is activity type. This refers to the type of communicative activity that is taking place, such as a negotiation meeting or a farewell banquet, with the idea that communication will vary across different types of activity. Allwood (2007) identifies the following key parameters for activity types: purpose, procedures (i.e. for carrying out the activity), roles and role rights and obligations, artefacts (i.e. tools needed), and environment (social features like atmosphere and physical features like furniture). From an intercultural perspective, activity type is a very important construct because participants of any given activity may hold different conceptions and expectations around each of these features (Lefringhausen et al., 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, in press). Any mismatch in expectations can affect participants' evaluations of each other and hence impact on their relations. We consider that next.

Managing relations and the evaluation process

Within the intercultural field, a key theory associated with the evaluation process is Expectancy Violation Theory (Burgoon & Ebesu Hubbard, 2005). According to this theory, participants hold two different types of expectations, which Burgoon and Ebesu Hubbard (2005, p. 151) explain as follows:

> There are actually two different senses of "expected". One reflects the regularity with which a behavioral pattern occurs, that is, its central tendency. *Expectancy* in this sense refers to communicative acts that are modal (most typical) in a given culture or subculture. The other meaning of expectancy reflects the degree to which a behavior is regarded as appropriate, desired, or preferred.

These two types are often labelled as "predictive expectations" and "prescriptive expectations". The former fall on a frequency continuum, while the latter are arrayed on a valence continuum, ranging from good to bad. The distinction also relates to Cialdini's (2012) notion of descriptive norms (what is typically done) and injunctive norms (what is typically approved of and required).

In intercultural interaction, there may be significant differences in participants' expectations because of different descriptive and injunctive norms, different mappings of the norms on the continua of frequency and valence, different levels of looseness–tightness for defining and upholding the norms (Gelfand et al., 2011), and different contexts (e.g., range of different activity types) to which the norms are regarded as applying (Lefringhausen et al., 2019).

However, despite the theorizing in this area, there has been comparatively little empirical research into how the participants make evaluative judgements, especially in specific intercultural interaction contexts. Our study addresses this need.

Pro-actively building relations

While a significant amount of research has focused on the processes associated with ongoing interpersonal relations (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Duck, 1993), there are very few models or frameworks of the processes of initiating and/or fostering (intercultural) relations. Gudykunst (2004) has a chapter on developing relationships with strangers and identifies three main areas that are relevant: self-disclosure, face-management, and communication rules. However, he provides little detail and lists some supposedly universal communication rules (e.g., "we should look the other person in the eye during conversations", p. 318) that are not in line with other findings (e.g., with Saville-Troike, 1997, who found that looking someone in the eye conveyed disrespect in Navajo culture). Spencer-Oatey (2008) identifies face enhancement as a rapport orientation but provides no details as to how it might take place. Haugh and Carbaugh (2015, p. 461) comment that "getting acquainted with others is one of the most basic interpersonal communication events" but point out that there has been very little research into the issue. There is thus a clear need for greater research into the positives of intercultural relations: strategies for building and enhancing intercultural relations, not just ways of avoiding or minimizing problems.

One of the few process models available, especially for the development of intercultural relations, is Casmir's (1999) "dialogic communication model of third-cultural building". Casmir points out that the model only applies to long-term relationship development (not short-term interactions). He proposes an extended four-phase process during which "all participants gain an understanding of and appreciation for others while negotiating purposes, standards, methods, goals and eventual satisfaction in a dialogic, conversational setting" (Casmir, 1999, p. 108). However, apart from pointing out that some kind of need is necessary (e.g., need for companionship, curiosity, economic benefit, and so on) for a relationship to grow and develop, he provides few if any details as to the strategies that participants may use to build the relationship.

A more detailed framework comes from work on the Chinese concept of *guanxi* 关系 (relations). *Guanxi* is a rich and complex concept, as Chen and Chen (2004, p. 305) point out:

> The concept of *guanxi* is enormously rich, complex, and dynamic [. . .]. In English as well as in Chinese, *guanxi* conjures up different meanings and images.

Given its complexity, the concept has been debated and analysed at length (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2004; Luo, 1997; Yen & Abosag, 2016). Some people have interpreted it in an instrumental way; namely, regarding it as the drawing on personal connections in order to secure favours. However, as Wang (2013) points out, this is too narrow an interpretation. In fact, Chinese people use it extremely frequently in their daily lives with a range of meanings, sometimes with broad meanings such as some kind of connection (e.g., between events as well as people), and sometimes with more specific meanings, such as rapport or specific relationships. The description offered by Yen and Abosag (2016, p. 5725) illustrates the latter use:

> Chinese businesspeople practice *guanxi* in their daily interactions with others for building, maintaining and enhancing their interpersonal as well as inter-organizational relationships with different counterparts at various levels. . . . *Guanxi* consists of three sub-dimensions, namely *ganqing* (affection, emotional bonding), *renqing* (exchange of favour reciprocally), and *xinren* (interpersonal trust).

Chen and Chen (2004) propose a process model of *guanxi* development which has three main stages: initiating, building, and using. The first two stages are particularly relevant to the focus of this paper and the authors indicate that relationship building entails two key interrelated elements: a cognitive element and an affective element. The cognitive element refers to learning about each other and finding points of commonality, which they say is achieved through mutual self-disclosure. The affective element refers to building expressive ties through dynamic reciprocity, but there are few details on how this can be achieved in practice, especially in intercultural contexts.

We are not aware of any other process models of relational development in the early stages, that apply to professional contexts, and there is a similar paucity of empirical research. To the best of our knowledge, only a limited number of studies have investigated the building of new professional intercultural relationships, especially in introductory business meetings.

One of the few studies that has explored this in detail was carried out by Spencer-Oatey and Xing (1998) in relation to a Chinese delegation visit to a company that had sold them an engineering product. The visitors had just flown into the UK that morning and after a brief visit to their hotel, arrived at the company before their hosts were ready for them. As a result, they needed to wait about half an hour before all the British meeting participants arrived. One might imagine that this would appear to the visitors as annoying bad management and yet ironically it provided the opportunity for extensive small talk which the visitors appreciated (as shown in post-event interviews). Spencer-Oatey and Xing (1998) analysed how this pre-meeting time was handled and identify the following core strategies: finding common ground, showing concern, and making positive comments about the other (see also Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, in press, for further details).

"Finding common ground" corresponds to Chen and Chen (2004) notion of familiarization during the initiation stage of *guanxi* development, especially establishing common third parties and building commons social identities. "Showing concern" and "positive comments on the other/their relationship" has close links with Chen and Chen (2004) second stage of *guanxi* development, where the aim is to increase feeling and trust.

In a later study, Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2003) compared the handling of this meeting with a second similar meeting. In this second meeting, the Chinese visitors became very annoyed, and the authors argue that the extended period of small talk in the first meeting, which did not occur in the second meeting, played an important role in influencing the establishment of good professional intercultural relations.

Studies by Li et al. (2001) and by Zhu (2011) report findings that are in line with this. Li et al. (2001) analysed an intercultural business meeting in which three Chinese businessmen met a British businessman for the first time at the Chinese company's office in China. They report that at the end of the meeting, instead of focusing on the business purpose of their meeting (i.e. the task) and summarizing what they had agreed, they spent time on small talk. The most senior Chinese host started building common ground with the British guest by referring to an occasion when he had visited England. He also mentioned meeting again for dinner, thereby referring to future contact and implying the value of their relationship. Zhu (2011) analysed two initial negotiation meetings held in New Zealand between New Zealand and Chinese business people. According to Zhu, one meeting was successful and the other was unsuccessful. She argues that in the unsuccessful meeting, the New Zealand businessman moved too quickly to business topics, while the Chinese visitors were still engaging in small talk preliminaries.

All three of these studies only analysed a single meeting, yet building intercultural relations typically takes place over time. This study, therefore, reports on the building of relations over the period of a three-week exchange visit and explores two key facets: the Chinese participants' evaluations of their American counterparts' behaviour and the strategies they used to foster good professional relations. In this paper, we report on the following research questions:

RQ1: What behaviour by the American participants were perceived by the Chinese delegates as affecting their professional relations?

RQ2: What actions did the Chinese delegates take to promote their professional relations?

RQ3: At the end of the visit, how did the Chinese delegates evaluate their success in achieving their relational goals?

Methodology

In order to investigate these questions, we have drawn on case study data involving a delegation visit to the USA by a group of senior Chinese officials. The aim of the visit was to build relations with their American counterparts.

Data collection

In the summer of 2010, a delegation of 20 senior Chinese officials (17 male, 3 female, with an average age of around 50 years), along with the second author as field researcher, visited the USA for a 3-week exchange visit. They were all from a specific Chinese government Ministry and had worked with each other for a long time and knew each other well. All had had prior experience of interacting with non-Chinese professionals and had previously been abroad for work purposes. They were visiting their

corresponding American government ministry, with a view to sharing experiences and building links.

The delegation visited many different US organizations associated with the ministry in several different cities, so were continually meeting new people whom they wanted to build relations with. Daytime meetings comprised presentations by their American hosts, discussion sessions, and site visits. Both American and Chinese participants gave permission for all these daytime meetings to be recorded (usually video, occasionally audio) and this amounted to over 20 hours of video recordings and 2 hours of audio recordings. There were occasional meetings at some federal government buildings and sites where no electronic devices were permitted which made recording impossible.

In addition, the head of the delegation (HoD) convened a meeting every workday evening with the following aim: to reflect on what had happened during the day so that they could draw out the key points of learning, identify issues to pay attention to, and make plans for the following day. The evening meetings (EMs) were always held in the HoD's hotel suite and there was no time limit or agenda. Any delegate could raise any issue and make any comments. When all the issues of concern raised had been covered, the HoD would simply conclude the meeting. There were 12 EMs altogether, averaging 20 minutes in length. The field researcher took full records, using interpreter's shorthand. Over 50 pages of shorthand notes were transcribed and translated into a record of more than 15,000 words. All 20 members of the delegation, plus the field researcher, took part in all the EMs. The method of participant observation was adopted, and the degree of the field researcher's involvement varied across different activities (Spradley, 2016). For example, she did not participate in the EM discussions but stayed on the sidelines, observing and taking notes. These meetings thus offered us a rare opportunity to find out how the Chinese participants interpreted their interactions with their American hosts, with minimal researcher intervention.

It should be noted that the field researcher played a dual role throughout the trip. On the one hand, she was working as the administrator and occasional high-level interpreter for the delegation, and this enabled her to attend all events as a true participant, accessing the delegation's spontaneous interpretations and their reactions and responses to the situations as they occurred throughout the visit. In other words, she did not need to rely on researcher-initiated interviews. On the other hand, she was a field researcher and all the participants were aware that she wanted to collect the data for research purposes. We do not deny that the dual role may have had a certain amount of impact, particularly on the American participants who might have perceived her as a member of the Chinese delegation and thus might have adjusted their behaviour and been reluctant to reveal their perceptions of the Chinese side to her. However, we believe this was not significant for two reasons. Firstly, a comparison of the American participants' communication styles in the unrecorded meetings (i.e. those where recording was not permitted) were very similar to those in the recorded meetings. Secondly, from the post-event comments collected from the Americans, they made frank remarks and talked about both positive and negative feelings. In addition, as explained below, our focus was on Chinese perspectives, and since the field researcher was well known to the delegation members, they treated her as a true insider, not showing any reservations over their comments. For confidentiality reasons, all the names of the delegation members, as well as their Ministry, have been anonymized. The Chinese delegates were given a code each and referred to by

D plus a code, e.g., D9, except the Head of the Delegation (HoD) and the Deputy Head of the Delegation (DHoD). The American officials were referred to by A and a code, e.g., A12.

Data analysis

In our analysis we have focused on the Chinese participants' perspectives, partly because that was more feasible given the practicalities of the trip and partly because it is less common to hear Chinese participants' voices commenting on interactions with people of other nationalities. Since we wanted to focus on the issues that were important to the participants, we started by examining the EM data where the Chinese delegates spontaneously commented on the things that had happened that were particularly salient to them. For the incidents that they referred to, we found the corresponding sections of the video recordings and examined them to gain a deeper understanding.

Transcripts of each of the EM meetings (in both the original Chinese and English translations) were imported into the qualitative data analysis software package, MAXQDA. After repeated reading of all the transcripts to enable in-depth awareness of the issues raised, the data was coded using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this procedure, the coding categories are derived directly from the data rather than pre-decided on the basis of theory. Iterative coding then took place, in which the transcripts were analysed multiple times, exploring different relational facets, such as evaluative comments on the American participants' behaviour, on specific incidents, on the quality of their developing relations with their American counterparts, strategic relational planning, and so on. Two units of analysis were used. For specific incidents, the incident was used as the unit of analysis; in other words, mention of a particular incident was only coded once per code, no matter how many delegates contributed to the discussion of the incident. For generalized comments, such as the quality of their relations or American behaviour in general, the EM was used for the unit of analysis; in other words, a generalized comment was only coded once per code per meeting, no matter how many delegates made a generalized comment on a particular issue in a single EM.

We report our findings in the next section, organized by our research questions except for an initial introduction. Comments translated from Chinese are shown with the character 中 at the beginning and end.

Analysis

Introduction: Goals for the visit

In the very first EM, the HoD made clear that an important goal for the visit was to promote strong relations between the two government ministries.

Data extract 1: Visit rationale and goals (Workday 1 EM)

> 中This trip is hosted by the US [name of government department] as our counterpart. [. . .] we must develop a good relationship with every organization in order to promote the development of relations between the Chinese [name of ministry] and the US [name of department]. From the time we arrived till the day we leave the USA, we must put the relations with the US [name of department] first and every exchange and every visit are opportunities to boost our relations. 中 (HoD)

In this way, the HoD made the relational focus of the trip very explicit. He went on to say that in order to help achieve this goal, they were to meet together every evening in order to discuss how the day had gone and to plan for the next day.

RQ1: Chinese delegates' evaluations of impact of American participants' behaviour on professional relations

At the EMs, the Chinese delegates made a number of evaluative comments about the American counterparts they had met during the day. At least one such comment was made at every EM except the last one, where the focus was on summing up (see RQ3). Figure 1 shows a collapsed screenshot view of the distribution of comments according to their valence (positive/neutral/negative) and Figure 2 shows the same information in an uncollapsed view, so that the sub-categories can be seen.

As can be seen from Figure 2, behaviour that was evaluated positively revolved round two themes: facilitating the building of common ground and consideration towards the delegates' needs. With regard to the former, the delegates commented positively (a) on discussions that enabled them to draw links with their own professional contexts, and (b) when the American counterparts demonstrated familiarity with (or interest in) China. Data Extracts 2–5 illustrate these points.

Data extract 2: Building relations through discussion (Workday 2 EM)

> HoD: 中The [name of role] and [name of role] had a very vivid discussion with us relating their work to ours. As a result, we had developed fairly good relations with them. 中

In this positive evaluation of their discussion, the HoD attributed it at least partly to the connections they could draw between their respective work contexts and experiences. This was reiterated by the Deputy HoD (DHoD) two days later, who commented on their



Figure 1. Screenshot of codings on Chinese delegates' perceptions of American participants' behaviour and manner (collapsed view).

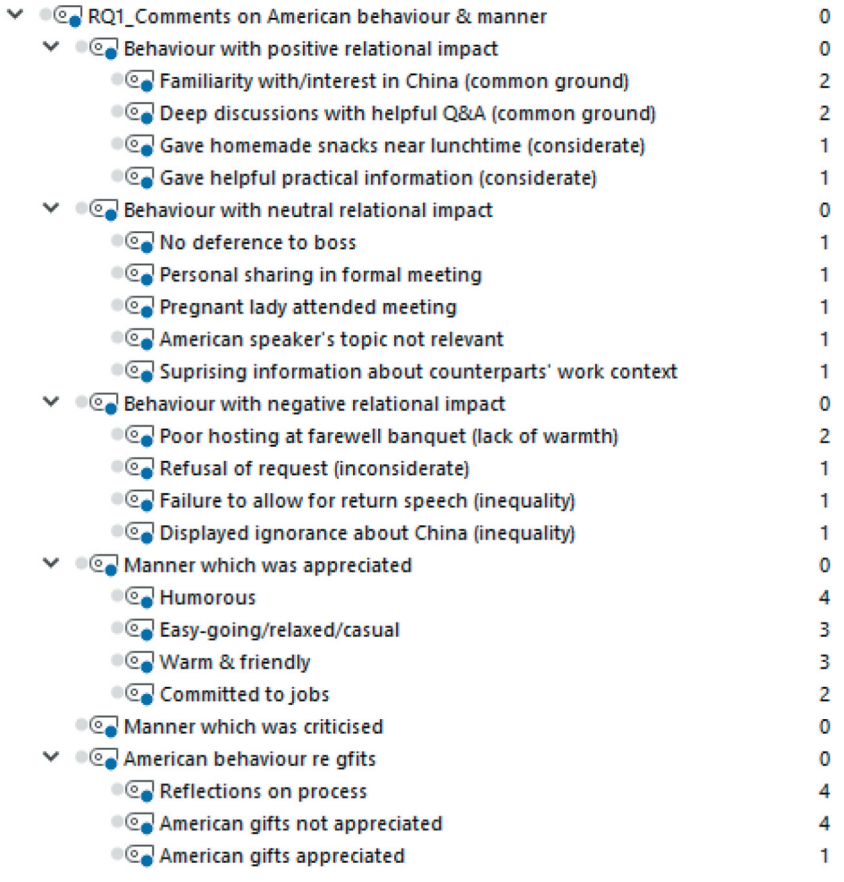


Figure 2. Screenshot of codings on Chinese delegates' perceptions of American participants' behaviour and manner (uncollapsed view).

shared professional problems. She also linked it with a relaxed atmosphere, as shown in Data extract 3.

Data extract 3: Building relations through drawing work links (Workday 4 EM)

> DHoD: 中The similarity between us in terms of problems and the work we do laid a solid foundation for our *guanxi*. Moreover, today it was easier to narrow the distance between the American side and us because the general atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. Our *guanxi* with the American side has become closer than in the past few days. 中

The delegates particularly appreciated it when the American hosts built common ground in terms of Chinese culture. For instance, on their third day, one of the American speakers referred explicitly to Chinese history and tried to use Chinese characters. An extract from the meeting is shown in Data extract 4.

Data extract 4: Building relations through referring to Chinese culture (Workday 3)

A1:	OK, I've made myself a little time chart here. This is time going on. On one side, I put USA. On the other side, I put China. By the way, did I spell China correctly? [i.e. write the character correctly]
	[He points at the flip chart at the front of room.]
Interpreter:	[Translates into Chinese]
	[The Chinese delegates nod their heads and laugh in response.]

One delegate (D15) went forward after the meeting to praise the speaker face-to-face for his knowledge of Chinese history, and in the evening the group spoke highly of his knowledge of China, maintaining that this had contributed to the overall *guanxi* with the Americans.

Data extract 5: Building relations through referring to Chinese culture (Workday 3, EM)

As can be seen, D17 commented that he was pleasantly surprised by A1's familiarity with Chinese characters and history.

There were a few occasions when the Chinese delegates expressed surprise at the behaviour they encountered, but it did not seem to influence their relations. For instance, they were very surprised when a noticeably pregnant lady attended the meetings and they commented in the EM that in China this would not happen. On another occasion, they

DHoD:	中The American official we met today had a better understanding of China. This is one of the reasons why our *guanxi* with the American side has become closer. 中
D17:	中Yes, the official in the morning was quite humorous and he could even write Chinese characters. I was pleasantly surprised. That undoubtedly drew us closer. 中
D15:	中That's true. I actually praised the official after the meeting, saying that he really knew Chinese history. 中

expressed surprise that an American speaker referred to his grandchildren in his formal speech, saying that they would never mention personal information in such a context. (See Figure 2 for a list of further examples.)

There were a few occasions when they were upset or annoyed by their American counterparts' behaviour. The most serious of these was when their request for a change of schedule was bluntly refused; in the evening they commented on this at length, saying the person was completely inconsiderate, did not take into account how tired they were, and that in China hosts would be more caring towards their guests.

Another negative evaluation concerned the farewell lunch at the end of the trip, organized by their hosts. They were disappointed that it was not as animated and lively as they felt it should have been. Data extract 6 shows the DHoD's remarks on this.

Data extract 6: Reflections on the disappointing atmosphere of the farewell lunch (Workday 11, EM)

DHoD: 中the farewell lunch lacked the due atmosphere of successful completion of a visit. It should be a jolly, warm and exciting event where people talk animatedly, emphasize how successful the trip has been, indicate the possibility for future cooperation and exchange

> visits, and show greater caring for each other's work and life, and so on. Most of our expectations fell short. No liquor and no animated talk. It was too formal and too quiet for a farewell lunch and it was a little bit disappointing. 中

Overall, though, the delegates made many positive comments on their hosts' interactional style or manner, mentioning particularly their informal relaxed manner, their humour, and their warmth and friendliness. However, they negatively evaluated most of the gifts they were given; for instance, on one occasion they were given a T-shirt and a mug, and at the EM one delegate commented sarcastically "We can divide the T-shirt and mug into 20 pieces." In fact, they were unsure how to interpret their counterparts' gift-giving behaviour as Data Extract 7 illustrates.

Data extract 7: Reflections on American gift-giving behaviour (Workday 5, EM)

> D5: 中To be frank, originally I thought the Americans did not care about us by not giving us any gift at the organizations we visited. Many of us thought the same this week when we went to the [place name] for instance. [...] We might misunderstand the American organizations. As summarized by DHoD at the meetings, they may not have the habit of giving gifts. 中

As we explain in the next section, gift-giving was an important relational management strategy for the Chinese delegates.

RQ2: Chinese delegates' attempts at promoting relations with their American counterparts

Figures 3 and 4 show the strategies that the Chinese delegates used to try and manage relations with their American counterparts. Figure 3 provides a collapsed screenshot view of their two overarching strategies and Figure 4 shows the same information in an uncollapsed view, so that the sub-categories can be seen.

At the beginning of the visit, the Chinese delegates' relational management strategy focused very noticeably on preventative behaviour. The seven codings in this category nearly all occurred in the first three days of the trip and the HoD's and DHoD's strategy was one of adaptation and avoidance: don't complain (lest the American counterparts perceive them as fussy), don't argue (as this can upset relations), and don't ask the hosts about unclear matters, but raise them at the EMs instead (lest by asking, they embarrass both parties). This latter point was explained very clearly by the DHoD at the first EM (Data extract 8).

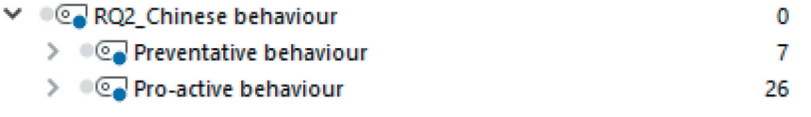


Figure 3. Screenshot of codings on Chinese delegates' pro-active attempts to promote good relations (collapsed view).

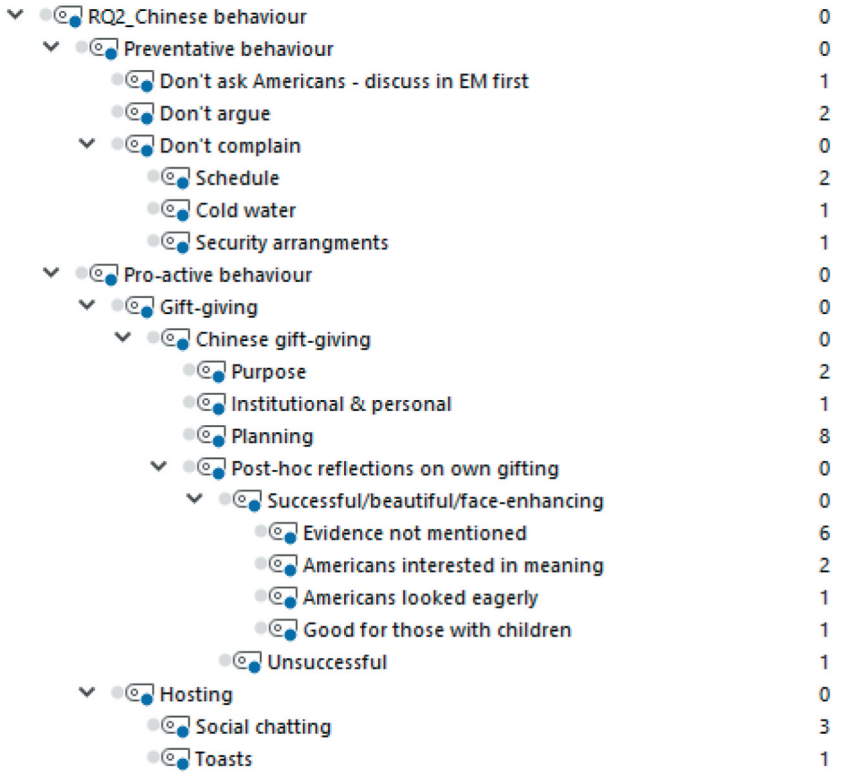


Figure 4. Screenshot of codings on Chinese delegates' pro-active attempts to promote good relations (uncollapsed view).

Data extract 8: Avoid asking about unclear matters (Workday 1, EM)

> DHoD: 中When it comes to problematic situations, we should not speak or behave rashly. We'd better show that nothing is going wrong otherwise it may embarrass both sides. We may discuss the reasons and solutions as much as possible in our internal meetings afterwards. Let's accomplish this trip successfully. 中

When delegates were dissatisfied with certain situations (e.g., serving of iced water, brief break at lunch time), the HoD and DHoD told them to adapt or find solutions (e.g., take a flask of hot water with them).

From a pro-active perspective, by far the most important strategy for the Chinese delegates was gift-giving. The HoD commented on that explicitly, as Data extract 9 shows.

Data extract 9: The relational importance of gifts (Workday 11, EM)

> HoD: 中the individual gifts and the organizational gifts alike represent our sincerity to build and develop a lasting relationship. When they put them in the office, they will remember us. The gifts are like a personal bond and embody our good will and good wishes for their organizations and themselves. 中

The delegates talked about gifts at every EM except one, reflecting on how their gifts had been received and planning what gifts to give on subsequent days.

Data extract 10: Reflections on gifts given and appreciated (Workday 4, EM)

> DHoD: 中The gifts we chose were well received and this was face-enhancing. The gift for the male attorney in the afternoon was particularly relevant as he related the Chinese character on the framed calligraphy to his work and of course part of our work. When he put it in his office, it has increased our delegation and our ministry's face. 中

Data extract 11: Planning gift-giving (Workday 9, EM)

> DHoD: 中All together we have around 30 gifts left, so we have more gifts than enough for the rest of American agencies and individuals. Don't worry. We have extra presents. 中

Data extract 12: Reflections on gifts given and received (Workday 11, EM)

> DHoD: 中We have given the best office gifts to the [name of department], our major host, and [name of organisation], the final agency officially arranged by the US [name of ministry] for our visit. The terracotta warrior miniature and the bronze antelope statue in the end were the highlight of our trip and elevated our face to a new height. It was a successful conclusion with really good relationships between us. The last was the best. It was an excellent ending. In exchange each of us received a small bag of gifts, key rings and small things from the major host, the [name of department]. I didn't look at them carefully, but in this way, we don't need bother too much about how to divide them up. 中

The other main relational management strategy used by the Chinese delegates was hosting. Since they were guests in the USA, they had few opportunities for this. However, on one occasion they decided to invite some support staff (e.g., international office staff, drivers and translators) for a dinner. They were delighted afterwards, saying how pleased they were that the male participants had participated so actively in the drinking and toasting, and how they had been able to chat so well together. They shared family photos, found points of common interest, and maintained that they had become "real friends" by the end. This contrasted very strongly with the disappointment they felt at the farewell banquet organized by the American hosts, as Data extract 13 illustrates (see also Data extract 6).

Data extract 13: Reflections on a disappointing farewell lunch (Workday 9, EM)

> HoD: 中The farewell lunch was not bad. The only problem was that they didn't provide liquor and we had to propose toasts with red wine, but the atmosphere was not all right in the first half. The American head of the international office proposed a toast to our delegation on behalf of all Americans present and that was all. He did not go to the other tables. I was sitting with him in the same table and as he did not do that, I felt obliged not to do more than the host. It was a pity! [. . .] Overall it was not bad but not as animated as we

> expected. One reason was that the Americans were not warm enough at the beginning and we could not replace them to play the host's role and be much warmer than them. I rate it 60. 中

Clearly, warm-hearted, lively hosting in social contexts was perceived by the Chinese delegates as particularly relationship enhancing.

RQ3: Chinese delegates' overall evaluation of relational goals

As demonstrated by Data Extract 1, at the beginning of the trip the HoD identified building relations as a key goal for the visit, and it remained of central importance to them throughout their time in the USA. A lexical search within MAXQDA showed that the term "relations" or "relationships" (guanxi, 关系) was mentioned a total of 41 times across 11 EMs. Despite a few ups and downs (as reported above), at the end of the trip the delegates felt all in all it had been very successful in building relations. The HoD and the DHoD commented explicitly on this in their final EM, as shown in Data extract 14.

Data extract 14: Reflections on relational enhancement through the trip (Workday 12, EM)

> HoD: 中The primary goal of developing good relations with the Americans has basically been achieved. [. . .] 中
>
> DHoD: 中 [. . .] In general, we have enhanced our *guanxi* with the [name of department]. More specifically, we have formed new *guanxi* with a dozen or so agencies. Smooth communication and friendly moves such as gift-giving have enabled us to jump-start our *guanxi* with these agencies such as [name of agency]. We have strengthened *guanxi* with the organizations that we had previously cooperated with, such as [name of organization], contributing to longer-term development of *guanxi* between us. Our understanding of various organizations and the [name of government department] is moving in an upward spiral. [. . .] All of you were willing to communicate and ask good questions. We have not only progressively strengthened our *guanxi* with the US [name of government department] but also between ourselves. It will be an unforgettable memory for me. 中

All in all, then, the delegates felt that their relations had been significantly enhanced through all of their interactions during their trip.

Discussion

Evaluating intercultural behaviour and its impact on relations

As can be seen from Figures 1 and 2, the Chinese delegates' evaluations of their American counterparts varied in valence: some were positive, some were negative, and some were neutral. The positive evaluations were made when common ground was built, either through the sharing of common professional experiences or else through a demonstration of awareness of Chinese culture. Positive evaluations were also made when the American counterparts showed care and consideration for their visitors, such

as preparing delicious homemade cakes for a meeting held near lunch time. Negative evaluations were made when one of the Americans was perceived to be inconsiderate, when behavioural omissions or comments suggested a sense of superiority on the part of the Americans, and/or a lack of warmth. Neutral evaluations were made when the behaviour was surprising in some way, but was not regarded as impinging on the delegates from a personal or interpersonal perspective.

These valenced judgements are in line with theorizing on descriptive and injunctive norms and expectancy violation theory, and in fact may seem obvious and understandable. However, the situation is a little more complicated in intercultural interaction. For instance, as we have reported above (see Data extract 7 and Figure 2), the Chinese delegates had particular difficulty in evaluating their American counterparts' gift-giving behaviour. The presents were much smaller than expected and sometimes no presents were given at all. The delegates could easily have judged the hosts very negatively for that and assumed it reflected a lack of care for them. Fortunately, they thought consciously about it and concluded that there must be cultural differences in their respective norms.

This raises the question as to what the relational consequences might have been if they had not thought it through in this way. It demonstrates that evaluation in intercultural interactions not only relates to expectations, and whether they have been met or violated, but also to the relational meaning that is attributed to the behaviour, including the degree of intention that is thought to lie behind it. As Malle et al. (2014) and Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (in press) point out, part of the evaluation process entails the assignment of agent causality and agent intentionality. In intercultural interaction, this can be a particularly challenging aspect of relational management. There is always the risk that participants may make judgements about others (e.g., rude, inconsiderate), without considering the possible impact of cultural differences, or even based on negative prior experiences or prejudices. Conscious, mindful reflection is needed (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019), especially if combined with discussion with relevant others. In this way, mismatches between intended and interpreted relational meaning, as well as intended and interpreted agent intentionality, can help minimize inadvertent relational upset.

Conceptualizing relational management strategies

On the basis of the codings shown in Figure 4, we suggest that the Chinese delegates' relational management strategies can be divided into three broad groups: adaptation strategies, cognitive-oriented strategies, and affective-oriented strategies (see Table 1). Needless to say, these three types are closely interconnected, each affecting the other. Nevertheless, they are in line with the common intercultural notion of ABC: Affect, Behaviour, Cognition (e.g., Ward et al., 2001), and can offer a helpful big picture guide.

On the whole, it seems that the adaptation strategies and cognitive-oriented strategies worked well and it is possible that they operated similarly for both the Chinese and American participants. The most noticeable difference was in terms of the affective-oriented strategies. Gift-giving, including careful selection of the most suitable gifts, was a top priority for the delegates, yet the American hosts were more casual about this, only occasionally giving small, possibly token, gifts. One possible reason for this could be

Table 1. Types of relational management strategies with examples.

Type of relational strategy	Examples from the data
Adaptation strategies	• Get used to the short break at lunch time • Get used to the iced water or find a solution to the issue • Accept the security arrangements which are different from those in China
Cognitive-oriented strategies	• Build common ground in terms of professional similarities • Build common ground by displaying knowledge of/interest in the other's culture • Build common ground through finding points of mutual interest • Enhance familiarity through sharing personal information
Affective-oriented strategies	• Build emotional rapport through gift-giving • Build emotional rapport through lively (热闹) hosting

differences over ethical concerns. In many north American contexts (and elsewhere) gift-giving (e.g., Cuervo-Cazurra, 2016; Gangone, 2010) is discouraged for ethical reasons. Employees are typically required to declare to their employers the gifts they have received, to ensure that they are all of small monetary value and not going to give rise to a conflict of interest.

Another possible reason could be different preferred strategies for building emotional rapport. For the Americans, it could be that they were focusing on a different affective-oriented strategy, such as complimenting. We propose that conceptual insights on the range of different types of affective-oriented strategies that different people may show preferences for can be gleaned from the work of an anthropologist, Gary Chapman, on different "love languages" (Chapman, 2010). With reference to romantic relationships, he argues that love can be expressed in different ways and identifies five such ways: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. He further argues that people may differ in the relative importance that they attach to these various "languages", for instance, with some attributing prime importance to quality time together and others to gift-giving, or with some wanting frequent compliments and others wanting practical help. He argues that if there is a mismatch in a couple's preferred way of conveying their love, then dissatisfaction is likely to emerge.

We suggest that this conceptualization can usefully be reframed for a business context in terms of the following expressive strategies:

- Convey face-enhancing comments; pay compliments; express appreciation
- Allocate time for getting to know each other socially; do not focus solely on the task
- Exchange gifts
- Provide practical help to each other
- Manage physical and interpersonal space

All of these elements impact on the affective component of relationships. Other studies have highlighted the problems that may occur when some of these are not handled well in intercultural contexts, because of different priorities. For instance, with regards to physical space, Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2008) report the relational problems that occurred when British business hosts seated their visitors in a crowded room according to practical constraints, but when their Chinese visitors interpreted it from a power perspective. In the data reported above, we see the differential importance attached to the exchange of gifts

and the amount of time allocated for socializing at lunch. However, more research is needed in order to ascertain how helpful this framework might be for analysing preferences and strategies for building emotional rapport in professional intercultural settings.

Interpreting the role of culture

Looked at superficially, it might seem that the Chinese delegates differed from their American counterparts in the importance they attached to relationship building, and that this could be a manifestation of difference in values, such as in individualism–collectivism (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). However, we would argue that a more nuanced, contextually-oriented interpretation of culture is more helpful, drawing on the notion of activity types and associated norms and expectations. For instance, with respect to a "celebratory" professional lunch, the artefact of "liquor" was key to the Chinese, while wine was perfectly adequate for the Americans. Similarly, while both parties probably agreed on the purpose of the lunch (viz. to convey mutual appreciation for the professional exchange), their expectations around procedures were different. For the Chinese delegation, multiple toasts at all the different tables was vital for showing warmth and enthusiasm, whereas for the Americans, one toast among everyone was perfectly adequate. Moreover, in this activity type (a farewell banquet), lively (热闹) behaviour was expected (an injunctive norm for effective relationship building) whereas on another occasion (not reported here for reasons of space, but see Wang & Spencer-Oatey, 2015), when the activity type was a formal professional meeting, the HoD criticized the delegates for taking photographs too enthusiastically when they entered an historic building and before the meeting started.

A contextually-based approach, drawing on the notion of activity types, is also helpful for considering intercultural adjustments and advice, in that the amount of individual variation is likely to be lower than for a decontextualized approach. There may also be some regulatory features, such as limits on purchase of alcohol for hosting visitors that could be explained. On the other hand, it is important to remember that there are still likely to be considerable variations across organizations and sectors.

Limitations

We acknowledge that there are a number of limitations to our study. First and foremost, it would have been ideal if we could have captured the evaluative perceptions of the American participants in greater detail. Schedule practicalities mostly precluded that, and one might also question how open they would have been with their comments. However, occasional opportunities arose, and when we were able to collect that data from the American counterparts, on the one hand they were very frank, freely talking about both positive and negative feelings; on the other, substantial interpretive differences emerged, especially around perceptions of face-threat (for more details, see Spencer-Oatey & Wang, 2019). This suggests that gaining in-depth data from both parties is highly valuable; unfortunately, practical constraints often limit that in the busy schedules of professional meetings.

Secondly, we have not discussed the practical implications of our findings. For example, what recommendations we might make around gift-giving, or amount of

drinking of liquor at banquets. This is a complex area that would require detailed discussion. In fact, the delegation received some training prior to departure from China in which they were told that Americans open presents on the spot. When their hosts did not do that, they were confused. It is possible that their American counterparts had been advised that Chinese do not open their presents on the spot, and so refrained from doing so. As a result, the training did not help, but rather confused. Discussion of the practical implications of our findings for training purposes would thus take us beyond the scope that is feasible to cover in this single article.

Thirdly, this data was collected from one particular delegation, from one professional sector of society, at a given point in time. We cannot and should not generalize from this data to other professional delegation visits, let alone to all Chinese people. Chinese society (like all societies) is complex and variable, and context always needs to be taken into account. In this article we have focused on context from the perspective of activity type, but other contexts are also important, including differences in participants and possible cultural shifts over time in norms and expectations. Nevertheless, we hope that this study has (a) drawn attention to the importance of considering the context, rather than simply focusing on generalized national differences, and (b) brought to the fore the need for greater attention to be paid to the process of developing positive intercultural relations, and especially possible differences in preferences for different types of affective-oriented strategies.

Concluding comments

Our study has revealed ways in which intercultural professional relations were initiated, interpreted and developed during a Chinese delegation visit to the USA. While much intercultural communication research tends to centre on the mismanagement of rapport and focus on misunderstandings and face-threats, we maintain that more attention needs to be paid on the one hand to participants' evaluative judgements, and on the other to the processes of positive relationship building. In this paper, we have drawn on authentic intercultural interactional data, combined with spontaneous comments by interactants, to examine both of these aspects. In doing this, we have emphasized the importance of taking a contextual approach to the analysis of intercultural interaction.

Going forward, we urge more empirical research into intercultural relational management. More cross-cultural and intercultural research is particularly needed in the following areas:

- conceptions of the various facets of activity types, including expected processes for carrying them out, participants' role rights and obligations, and key artefacts.
- strategies for managing intercultural relations, not only from a preventative (adaptation) perspective, but also in terms of cognitive-oriented strategies and affective-oriented strategies.

We recommend that future research takes a process approach, explores different sectors (e.g., international business, international education, international development, international diplomacy), draws on insights from different disciplines, and examines different types of activity types. In this way it can enhance our understanding of the building of new professional relationships across cultures in a variety of sectors and contexts, addressing the theoretical and empirical limitations that currently exist.

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