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The Two Faces of Chinese Communication

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The Two Faces of Chinese Communication

Introduction

Searching for paradigms to help examine and understand human communication behavior requires constant effort for communication theorists. Probing and identifying the part of the communication process is helpful in understanding the ways groups of people interact. But in doing so, theorists may overlook components of the process within a group that are pertinent to its diversity. This oversight occurs when explaining Chinese communication practices.

Asante (1980) contends human communication can be divided into three cultural divisions—Afrocentric, Asiatic, and Eurocentric—each with its own set of paradigms to guide students, scholars, and practitioners in the study of communication. However, most theories of communication tend to have a Eurocentric bias. Miike (2002, 2003, 2004) believes an Asiatic emphasis would overcome that Eurocentric bias when studying Asian communication practices and offer a more accurate interpretation.

Miike (2003) maintains the Asiatic view incorporates three assumptions: ontologically, an Asiatic paradigm dictates that the myriad of people are interrelated across time and space; epistemologically, the myriad of people can become meaningful only in relation to others; and axiologically, the myriad of people can survive only in a web of harmonious relationships.

Chen and Starosta (2003) echoes Miike's (2003) explication and add that methodologically, an Asiatic view indicates that human communication is a transforming process revolving in an endless nonlinear cycle. They add further that teleologically Asiatic communication tends to adopt the notion of "the way things are," a course of action to which people must adjust their daily interaction.

The Asiatic approach provides a highly abstract picture of the Asian people and offers a convenient way to understand Asian communication practices, stressing the uniqueness of Asian communication as contrasted to the other divisions. Yet Asiaticism tends to oversimplify and overgeneralize the communication behaviors of the Asian peoples "who are so different culturally, socially, religiously, and economically" (Chen & Starosta, 2003, p. 1). Asiaticism neglects the internal diversity within Asia.

This paper attempts to explore the internal diversity of Chinese culture so often overlooked in the process of research. Specifically, this paper examines the way Chinese communicate from the behavioral level and, in doing so, shows the real face of Chinese communication often absent in the paradigm used to guide the research.

The First Face of Chinese Communication

Numerous studies have been devoted to the understanding of Chinese communication behaviors (e.g., Chang & Holt, 1991, 1993; Chen, 1997-8, 2000, 2001a, 2004a; Chen & Ma, 2002; Cheng, 1987; Chung, 1996; Huang, 2000; Hwang, 1997-8, 1988a; Jia, 1997-8; Ma, 1992; Xiao, 2004). The paradigmatic theme among

these studies used to explain the way Chinese communicate is "harmony." The core value of Chinese culture, harmony guides Chinese communication behaviors. Chen (2001a) developed a harmony theory of Chinese communication from the studies in which he assumed that "Chinese communication aims to reach a harmonious state of human relationship" (p. 48), and, based on this assumption, stipulated an axiom: "An increase in the ability to achieve harmony in Chinese communication will increase the degree of communication competence" (p. 58).

Obviously, the concept of harmony has been etched in the minds and hearts of Chinese people for centuries (Wright, 1953). As stated in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, harmony was considered as "the universal path which they all should pursue. . . and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish" (Legge, 1955, p. 2). Thus, all actions are aimed at achieving harmony, and different moral standards and guidelines for appropriate behaviors are then generated based on the concept of harmony.

Thus, to achieve harmony in human interaction, Chen (2001a) pointed out that one has to develop three sets of abilities: first, intrinsically, to internalize *jen* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), and *li* (rite/courtesy); second, extrinsically, to accommodate *shi* (temporal contingencies), *wei* (special contingencies), and *ji* (the first imperceptible beginning of movement) in the action; and third, strategically, to exercise *guanxi* (interrelation), *mientze* (face), and power appropriately. Chen's model represents a more complete picture of examining Chinese communication behaviors from the perspective of harmony. Others more directly applied the concept of harmony to one single aspect of Chinese communication.

For example, Chen and Xiao (1993) relate harmony as the guiding principle in social interactions to the performance of *li* in Chinese communication, and argue that from the principle, eight specific communication strategies could be developed, including *xiam li hou bin* (courteous before the use of force), *li shang wang lai* (courtesy requires reciprocity), emotional control, avoidance of aggressive behaviors, avoidance of saying "no," face saving, stress on particularistic relationship, and ingroup/outgroup distinction. Therefore, in order to successfully communicate with the Chinese, one needs to skillfully apply these characteristics to the process of interaction.

Chen and Chen (2002) looked at the influence of harmony on a specific communication behavior. They argued that to Chinese the state of harmony cannot be achieved unless one maintains appropriate role relationships and accepts the established hierarchy. Thus, indirectness of expression becomes the means of achieving harmony among the Chinese other-oriented communication. Ma (1992) contended that indirect communication style is nonassertive, nonargumentative, nonconfrontational, and reflects a strong emotionally, confrontational style, and the communication of information in the explicit code.

Jia (1997-8, 2001) explored harmony from the concept of *mientze* (face). According to Jia, the Chinese keep a harmonious relationship through three acts of facework: to replace the law for regulation and punishment, to cultivate the gentlemanhood, and to distribute material, rational, and social resources among community members. It is this facework that prevents the Chinese from getting into a conflict situation.

Based on harmony, Hwan (1997-8, 2004) further integrated the concepts of *mientze* and *guanxi* by proposing a model used in Chinese conflict management situations. For the purpose of harmony maintenance in three types of relationships, the Chinese tend to adopt "taking care of face" approach in vertical in-group relationships, "giving face" approach in horizontal in-group relationships, and "striving for face" in horizontal out-group relationships. In addition to the harmony maintenance purpose, Hwan stipulated different approaches used by the Chinese for the purpose of personal goal attainment, coordination, and dominant response in the three different types of relationships.

Harmony is also enhanced by an appropriate execution of *guanxi* (Chang & Holt, 1991, 1993, 2004). As a multi-dimensional concept, *guanxi* (interrelation) is not only a normative factor in Chinese society, but also one constructed through a strategic process. It denotes a way of controlling interpersonal resources, power, and social status (Hackley & Dong, 2001; Yan, 1996). How to develop a harmonious relationship, especially a particularistic relationship, therefore determines whether a successful communication will be achieved while interacting with the Chinese. A Chinese particularistic relationship is regulated by a specific communication rule which dictates to whom to speak, where to speak, and how and when to speak in the process of interaction (Chen & Chung, 1994; 1997).

Chang and Holt (1991) and Chang, Holt, and Lin (2004) extended the harmonious *guanxi* to the concept of *yuan* (destined relations). *Yuan* is Chinese psychological attitude for accepting "having destined affinity" (*you yuan*) or "having no destiny affinity" (*wu yuan*) as it is present or absent naturally. *Yuan* is a prerequisite factor in the process of explaining meaningfully a Chinese interpersonal relationship. Chang, Holt and Lin indicated that *yuan* reflects the existence and depth of relationship, the quality of relationship, the degree of attractiveness, and the attitude towards relationship. *Yuan* as well functions to promote social harmony.

Keqi (politeness) is another rule of Chinese communication developed from the emphasis of harmony (Feng, 2004; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Gu, 1990). *Keqi* is the embodiment of harmony in Chinese communication. As Feng pointed out, *keqi* or polite behavior exercised in the acquaintance relationship which acts as an impetus to develop the relationship into a more intimate state. In other words, to practice *keqi* or keep a polite attitude is a way to sustain harmonious relationship in Chinese communication.

As to *bao* (reciprocity), another harmony based concept Chang & Holt, (1994); Holt & Chang, (2004); and Wen, (1989) indicated that it functions to maintain a dynamic balance in a tension situation of Chinese communication. The practice of *bao* is based on the sincere appreciation towards one's counterparts in interaction, it renders extra amount of goodwill and willingness to sacrifice in Chinese communication so that a better harmonious connection can be developed. Of course, *bao* is like the two edges of a sword, it can either show appreciation or revenge based on the justification of an eye for an eye embedded in the principle of reciprocity.

Finally, two more influential concepts embedded in harmony need to be mentioned: *feng shui* and *zhan bu* (divination). *Feng shui* is an art of time and space arrangement that aims to achieve the maximum benefit of human interaction through the maintaining of harmonious relationship between humans and earth (Chen, 2004b;

Skinner, 1982; Wang, 1991). Chen (2004) analyzed the impact of *feng shui* on Chinese communication and explained that in interpersonal communication *feng shui* endorses a particularistic relationship structure and selective communication style to reach harmonious and happy encountering. In organizational communication, in order to bring in fortune and harmony, a company should select a name that matches its public image, have the company location appropriately be compatible with the surrounding environment, design a comfortable office space for employees, and select personality-matching employees and management.

Zhan bu (divination) represents Chinese dialectical communication which mirrors a Chinese psychological need to pursue the harmonious association among heaven, earth, and human being (Chung, 2004; Jung, 1977; Nan, 1992). As a counseling tool, *zhan bu* gives the Chinese a direction of action or nonaction in the dynamic communication process through which a balancing mind towards high or low fortune can be retained. In other words, *zhan bu* provides an opportunity of self-fulfilling prophecy that helps Chinese reduce communication uncertainty (Chung, 2004).

Together, Chinese communication behaviors explicated above based on the harmony paradigm give us a clear and helpful understanding of Chinese communication. Nevertheless, after carefully examining the literature, we find potential problems. That is, most studies, under the guise of Chinese belief in harmony, tend to reveal or emphasize only the positive side of Chinese communication. People may be misled to think that Chinese society is a conflict-free one in which people are harmoniously striving for a peaceful life, and overlook the potential negative or dark side representative of the other face of Chinese communication (Chen, 2001a; Chen & Zhong, 2000).

The Other Face of Chinese Communication

Another face of Chinese communication emerges when the question is asked: What will happen if harmony cannot be upheld in interaction? Several scholars (e.g., Chen, 2001a, 2002, 2003; Hwang, 2004) asked the question, but did not fully examine it. This is the "power" aspect (Chen, 2001a) or the "power game" Chinese play (Hwang, 1988b) as harmony becomes a victim especially when the need or interactants are incompatible or the resources are scarce. To understand Chinese communication we cannot ignore this aspect.

To appropriately regulate the visible and invisible power running through every knot in the network of Chinese communication and keep it in a balance is the way to establish a harmonious state of interaction for Chinese people. When the balance is in jeopardy, we see that the Chinese can express their emotion quite directly and aggressively in public and launch a fierce and exposed action for resources (Chen, 2002).

Harmony in Chinese society is sustained by *li* (rite/courtesy) which is a rule in playing the power game. At the initial stage of interaction, the Chinese always show a courteous attitude through respect, positive reciprocity, and sincerity in order to build a harmonious communication climate (Xiao, 2004). If one's respect, expressed by "Humbling oneself and giving honor to others" (Xiao, 2002, p. 42) or the reciprocity rule, expressed by "Dealing with someone as he deals with you" (p. 45),

is violated, the principle of "*xiam li hou bin*" (courteous before the use of force) is likely to be applied because Chinese feel their *mientze* is lost (Chen & Xiao, 1993). To Chinese conflict will inevitably rise in this situation.

From the aspect of *keqi* the rule of game for *li* is dictated by the degree of depth of relationship between interactants. According to Feng (2004), Chinese people will show *keqi* when interacting with an acquaintance, but not to strangers and those with intimate relationship. However, it is more likely for Chinese people to get involved in a conflict with strangers rather than with personal friends. This practice has its cultural origin because of the emphasis of a particularistic relationship in Chinese society, one which leads to a sharp distinction between in-group and out-group members. While developing a strong "we feeling" among their in-group, Chinese distrust out-group members. Showing respect, reciprocity, and sincerity to a stranger tends to be less meaningful in Chinese communication.

The loss of "we feeling," the loss of face, the missing of *keqi*, or the denial of *li* in Chinese communication often results in the loss of emotional control and the release of aggressive behaviors. The negative or dark side of Chinese communication will surface subsequently in this situation. This side of Chinese communication is far more dynamic and genuine than the side regulated by harmony dictated by certain destined and explicit rules of interaction.

Two kinds of behavior are manifested in this dynamic side of Chinese communication. The more severe first one is falling into the cycle of *bao chou* (revenge). This is an irrational "an eye for an eye" action which can be justified by the principle of reciprocity mentioned previously. Wen (1989) indicated that Chinese revenge behavior has a strong ethical basis associated with family system, specifically related to *xiao* (filial piety) and often happens accidentally rather than being prearranged. The expression of raw emotion in a revenge situation can be as severe as homicide. Chinese history books never lack for records of homicidal conflict due to discord between different families. The outburst of senseless or irrational behavior in interpersonal communication is not uncommon in Chinese society as well.

While revenge represents an extreme outlet of solving conflicts, utilizing behavioral strategies or tactics to overcome one's counterparts is a more common way practiced by Chinese when harmony is not a concern. Using compliance-gaining or persuasive strategies to achieve one's communication goal is a universal phenomenon in human societies. The development and study of theory, knowledge, and skills of compliance gaining in Western world has a long history in the communication discipline (Burgoon, Pfau, Parrott, Birk, Coker, & Burgoon, 1987; Gass & Seiter, 1999; Marwell & Schmitt, 1967; Miller, Boster, Roloff, & Seibold, 1977; Schneider & Beaubien, 1996); Wiseman, Sanders, Congalton, Gass, Sueda & Ruiqing, 1995). However, Chinese compliance gaining or persuasive strategies are distinct from Western's in three respects (Chiao, 1988a, 1988b, 1989): (1) the records of Chinese compliance-gaining strategies were mainly preserved orally due to the incompatibility with Confucian harmony teachings; (2) Chinese compliance-gaining strategies were generally expressed in a form of metaphorical phrase; and (3) most compliance-gaining strategies were originated from military action that were applied to social or interpersonal interaction.

Studies have examined Chinese strategic behaviors (e.g., Chai, 1993; Chu,

1991; Cleary, 1988; Lieu, 1980, Senger, 1988, Wang, 1990; Yu & Yu, 1995). Among the collections of Chinese compliance gaining strategies, the "36 stratagems" is the most systematically recorded model. It can be classified into five categories, including dangerous situation, indirect action, enemy or opponent, trick or deception, and specific goal (Senger, 1988). Based on the meaning of the 36 stratagems, Chen (1995) further analyzed and grouped them into eight factors; delusion, borrowing, misleading, threat, retreat, termination, espionage, and agitating.

In addition to the 36 most commonly cited stratagems, there are many more used in daily interaction. Chen and Zhong (2000) added 29 more recorded stratagems into the 36 stratagems and found the total of 65 Chinese compliance-gaining stratagems can be categorized into seven dimensions: delusion, burrowing/misleading, distraction, indirect exploration, espionage/self-inflicting, adapting, and deceiving.

The dimension of "delusion" is using strategies to confuse counterparts and take advantage from their miscalculation; "burrowing/misleading" is using counterparts' strength to defeat them; "distraction" is achieving goal by distracting counterparts' attention from the key events; "indirect exploration" aims to use a subtle way to detect counterparts' intention before the next move; "espionage/self inflicting" attempts to alienate relationship between counterparts and to fool them by self-imposing misery; "adapting" is using the current situation as a tool of persuasion; and "deceiving" is saving one's energy by deceiving or delaying.

The above variety of Chinese compliance-gaining strategies shows the dynamic side of Chinese communication which suggests that the Chinese are far beyond the superficial perception as being conservative, polite, humble, and self controlled, but can also be much more humane as being artful, crafty, cunning, deceitful, and sly in interaction.

When the strategic aspect of interaction arises in the harmony paradigm or framework, we see a new spectrum of power game in Chinese society. In other words, under the disguise of harmony, the elements of harmony become a tool used to achieve one's communication goal. For example, unlike Western society the locus of power in China is embedded in seniority and authority (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8). That is, power is attributed to the elder and those in superior positions, such as rulers, parents, teachers, husbands, and educated civil servants, in the particularistic relationship structure of Chinese-hierarchical society. Because their words provided a direct way of solving conflicts, the senior and authoritative by rule are key figures in reinforcing and perpetuating the harmony system in Chinese society (Powers, 1997-8), but in the situation of a power struggle or for personal gains those in the two positions can subtly or publicly abuse the assigned right or power from the system.

Chen and Chung's (2002) provide a case study which illustrates the case of power abuse in the Chinese society. The authors observed an end-of-the-year meeting of a religion group in Taiwan and found that the most senior person (Mr. Li), with an age of 84 and 39 years service in the group, successfully used his seniority to stall the decision-making engine. His behavior completely defied all characteristics of typical Chinese approach, based on harmony, to decision-making or interaction. For example, right at the beginning of the meeting, before he showed his disapproval of the chair-elect (Mr. Lee assumed he'll be elected as the chair), he first said this: "I am 84 years old now, I have been in this religion for almost 40 years, and now I am approaching

the end of my life ..." Then in the process of the meeting Mr. Lee continuously "interrupted" the conversation among the group members by trying to lead the discussion to his own direction, and occasionally he threatened to "open fire" if his points are not recorded. The young chair-elect had no choice but to follow Mr. Lee's "command", because he is only 43 years old with 22 years ensure harmony. Nevertheless, in self-oriented situation in which personal goal is the focus, the Chinese tend to use "say no for yes" strategy to "yu qin gu zong" (concession before gaining) especially in the process of negotiation. Moreover, the "say yes for no" strategy is often used to escape from a disadvantaged situation. This pattern of circular thinking by intentionally violating the rule of language expression can be difficult to imagine for those from linear thinking cultures.

The real face of Chinese communication cannot be demystified until the veil of the harmony paradigm that prevails in the study of Chinese communication is lifted. It is this side of Chinese communication that gives us a dynamic live picture of the daily life interaction in Chinese society. As a philosophical or ideal goal, harmony is no doubt a guiding principle of Chinese communication behavior and that makes Chinese communication a unique process. Thus, to say that Chinese are people of *li* is a true statement, but this does not necessarily denote that Chinese society is a conflict free one. Life with conflict or unharmonious encountering is a norm rather than an exception in any human society. We will not completely know Chinese communication simply having our observation limited on the ideal aspect. A complete picture has to be supplemented by the "here and now" performance which is represented by how Chinese people handle the interaction in a dissonant or conflict situation.

Comment and Conclusion

The paradigmatic approach to the study of human communication has its merit in helping people abstract complex concepts and reach a basic understanding of communication behavior of a specific group of people. Unfortunately, the limitation of a paradigmatic approach is reflected in its oversimplifying of the dynamic nature of human communication.

The harmony paradigm used to understand Chinese communication behaviors tends to mislead scholars to idealize or beautify the Chinese way of interaction. In other words, it runs into a risk of contradicting the Chinese belief of *bian* (change). As an important ontological assumption, the idea of *bian* dictates that human communication is an endless, transforming, and cyclic process in which no substance of its substratum is fixed (Chai & Chai, 1969; Chen, 1996). Based on the ceaselessly dialectical interaction of the two opposite but complementary forces, *yin* (the amiable force) and *yang* (the unyielding force), a great harmony is achieved. Thus, harmony itself is a dynamic rather than a static state.

To further specify that nature of *bian* in regard to human communication, Chen (2004) pointed out that the dynamic interaction of *yin* and *yang* follows the principles of inwarding concentration and forwarding expansion of *bian*. The inwarding concentration represents the internal power of condensing forces within the system which is released at the full point to induce a series of change. The inwarding concentration process itself is a changing process too through which a dynamic

balance can be sustained within the system. The forwarding expansion is the external extension of change which proceeds like the movement of time, continuously and openly. The dynamic diversity is then produced through this forwarding extension process. The inwarding concentration and forwarding expansion exemplify the nature of *bian* that is based on temporal and spatial interaction and integration.

It is from this perspective of *bian* that Chen (2001a) proposed the concepts of *shi* (temporal contingencies), *wei* (spatial contingencies), and *ji* (the first imperceptible beginning of movement) to better examine the real face of Chinese communication. On the one hand, the Chinese learn to act in the right place at the right time by observing the trail of possible consequences of the ongoing interaction so that a harmonious state can be reached and maintained. On the other hand, when harmony becomes a victim or in a conflict situation, Chinese also learn to handle *shi*, *wei*, and *ji* in a skillful way in order to strategically overpower their counterparts in interaction.

This paper affirms the contribution and importance of using the paradigmatic approach to understanding human communication, whether using a centric view, such as the Eurocentric or Asiatic view of human communication (e.g., Chu, 1986; Dissanayake, 1986, 1989, 2003; Miike, 2002, 2003; Wang & Shen, 2000) or a single culture as the unit of analysis. However, the potential limitation of an approach tends to oversimplify, overgeneralize, or even stereotype communication behaviors of a specific group of people. In this paper the harmony paradigm was used to demonstrate the two faces of Chinese communication. But to better draw a complete picture of Chinese communication behaviors, we have to go beyond the harmony paradigm to look into the dynamic aspect of real life interaction in which harmony itself is sacrificed and strategic approaches are taken.

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