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Management of Interpersonal Conflict in Negotiation with Chinese: A Perceived Face Threat Perspective

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Management of Interpersonal Conflict in Negotiation with Chinese:

A Perceived Face Threat Perspective

Abstract

Despite increasingly frequent business interactions between China and the West, negotiations with Chinese remain a great challenge to most Westerners. Sino-Western discrepancies in cultural values and social norms lead to massive misunderstandings and inevitable conflicts in business negotiations. Grounded on the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson 1987), this study aims to better predict Chinese negotiation behaviors from an indigenous perspective by exploring the impact of face on Chinese conflict handling strategies. With a sample of 608 Chinese business representatives, this research demonstrates the significant effect of perceived fellowship-, moral-, competence- and autonomy-face threats on Chinese conflict management styles in business negotiations. It is found that Chinese do not always act as politely and agreeably as expected when bargaining with their business partners, especially in a conflict context. Based on their perceptions of face threats induced by various conflict issues, they may adopt different strategies, ranging from competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating to avoiding, to negotiate with their counterparts. In addition, it is confirmed that both a contextual antecedent (*guanxi*) and an individual trait (public self-consciousness) will significantly influence Chinese representatives' face threat perceptions and, subsequently, determine how they will behave in business negotiations.

Keywords Business negotiations, conflict management styles, perceived face threat, *guanxi*, public self-consciousness

1 Introduction

Given that Chinese are widely perceived as extremely 'tough' negotiators, business negotiations with Chinese have been extensively studied for decades (Ghauri and Fang 2001; Kirkbride et al. 1991; Ma et al. 2015). It is believed that Sino-Western discrepancies in cultural values and social norms have led to recurrent conflicts in negotiations (Ghauri and Fang 2001) and different conflict handling strategies adopted by the negotiators have eventually determined their gain or loss in the bargain (Thomas 1992a). As a result, numerous researchers have explored Chinese conflict handling styles and their cultural antecedents such as Confucianism (Ghauri and Fang 2001; Ma et al. 2015), hierarchy and power distance (Kim et al. 2007), as well as harmony, *renqing* and *guanxi* (Kirkbride et al. 1991; Leung et al. 2011). Among all these studies, a remarkable focus is to recognize the influence of face (*Mianzi*) (Aslani et al. 2016; Chuah et al. 2014; Johnson et al. 2004; Merkin 2018; Oetzel et al. 2001; Peng and Tjosvold 2011; Ting-Toomey 2005; White et al. 2004; Zhang et al. 2015). Face is a strong and critical concern in Chinese culture. It represents a person's social self-worth established on others' assessment (Ho 1976; Kim and Cohen 2010) and often suffers during interpersonal conflicts (Brown and Levinson 1987; Ting-Toomey 2005). As recent research starts to consider the social and

psychological cost incurred by conflict in negotiations (Curhan et al. 2006), face has been increasingly employed to explain different conflict styles and consequent bargaining behaviors in China.

In contrast to extant research that has simply used face and face concerns post hoc to explain the relationships between conflict styles and cultural variables such as individualism/collectivism, a distinguished framework known as the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) has directly linked personal face perceptions to conflict handling behaviors. Researchers have proposed that politeness strategies used in many different cultures are mainly derived from certain assumptions about face, and the purpose of using polite wording in interpersonal conflicts and negotiations is to reduce the negative impact of face threat and to repair the relationship between parties after face loss (Brown and Levinson 1987; White et al. 2004; Sias et al. 2012). According to the Politeness Theory, the application of different politeness strategies is tied to three social determinants (i.e., content of the message, relative power between interactive parties, and their social distance), especially the offensiveness of the message transmitted in conflicts and the induced threatening perceptions to personal face (Brown and Levinson 1987). While other studies mostly focus on the effect of conflict intensity and conflict importance on personal face concerns (Oetzel et al. 2001), the Politeness Theory, based on the complexity and multidimensionality of the face concept, calls for attention to the effect of conflict issues and specifically points out that different facets of face would be threatened distinctly in interpersonal interactions (Johnson et al. 2004; Park and Guan 2009; Sias et al. 2012). For example, Johnson, Roloff and Riffe (2004) argue that a refusal to a request can bring completely different threats to the requester's negative and positive face, and it is the contingent sense of specific face under threat that determines the requester's adoption of persuasive or forgiving statements after the refusal. Likewise, Park and Guan (2009) indicate that cultural differences in apology intentions are moderated by the type of face under threat, and the apology intention of Chinese is strongly related to perceived positive face threats. Apparently, studies on this topic are mainly grounded on Brown and Levinson's (1987) classic work that distinguishes between positive and negative face. However, such a dichotomy of face appears insufficient and incomplete for analyzing Chinese conflict behaviors in negotiations. In subsequent research, positive face is further divided into two sub-types: fellowship face and competence face (Lim and Bowers 1991). Meanwhile, a new dimension known as moral face (Hwang 2012) has been widely adopted in many indigenous studies. By synthesizing the aforesaid dimensions, this research aims to figure out whether and how these various facets of face will be threatened during negotiation conflicts and, then, lead to differentiated conflict styles.

The other two social determinants of choosing politeness strategies under the Politeness Theory point to the relationship among negotiating parties (Brown and Levinson 1987). The first one is the relative power, representing vertical relations between the parties, and the other is social distance, indicating horizontal relations among the parties. For many years, studies on interpersonal relationships, face perceptions and conflict handling choices mostly focus on vertical relations between superiors and subordinates (Brew and Cairns 2004), and limited research examines the impact of horizontal relations. Relationships among negotiating parties with equal status are usually referred to as *guanxi* in Chinese. According to Buttery and Leung (1998), *guanxi* is deemed important as it has been enshrined as a golden principle in the sense that Chinese have relied on maintaining harmonious *guanxi* to conduct businesses since the Confucian era. It is not about getting through one negotiation, but about building up a long-term relationship by multiple negotiations (Pye 1986). As such, *guanxi*, to some extent, determines a person's negotiation behavior in China, particularly

in a conflict context. This study attempts to explore how high-quality *guanxi* influences personal perceptions of face threats in a conflict during business negotiations.

With the widely application of the Politeness Theory, researchers further propose that perceived face threat in negotiation conflicts should be a co-product of situational context and individual differences (Miles 2010). As an important supplement to the original model designed by Brown and Levinson (1987), future development puts forward an individual difference trait as face threat sensitivity to measure the degree to which a person will view a situation as a threat to face (White et al. 2004). This construct contributes to the exploration of face dynamics. However, it remains doubtful whether it is appropriate and sufficient to explain the role of face in behavioral decisions via a new face-related concept. In light of the universally acknowledged definition of face (Goffman 1955), this research attempts to investigate individual psychological antecedents of face perceptions from a self-worth perspective. It is a basic claim of human-being to establish and maintain a positive sense of self-worth. In a typical *guanxi* society such as China (Hwang 1987), people tend to define themselves as social objects and recognize or confirm their self-worth on others' assessments (i.e. face) (Ho 1976). Such an individual tendency of self-awareness is described as public self-consciousness (Fenigstein et al. 1975) in the psychology field, distinguishing from another inward attention, private self-consciousness (Fenigstein et al. 1975). Therefore, in this research, we try to examine the effect of individual public self-consciousness (instead of personal face threat sensitivity) on face threat perceptions, which may help us to better understand the dynamics of face.

The remainder of this paper is arranged as follows. Section 2 furnishes a brief literature review on interpersonal conflict, conflict management styles, face and perceived face threats. Hypotheses are formulated and explained in Section 3, followed by a description of research methodology in Section 4. Based on a sample of 608 Chinese business representatives, Section 5 presents the main research results. Finally, discussions are offered in Section 6, followed by some concluding remarks in Section 7.

2 Management of Interpersonal Conflict in Negotiation with Chinese

2.1 Interpersonal conflict in negotiations

Interpersonal conflict naturally arises in business negotiations. It is defined as a perceptual state (DeChurch et al. 2013) that emerges with the experience of incompatibility between or among parties (Korsgaard et al. 2008). In view of the fact that incompatibility may occur both on the cognitive and the affective level, Jehn (1997) have proposed a dichotomy of conflicts. A task conflict stems from cognitive disagreements concerning the content and procedure of goals and tasks, and a relationship conflict is due to the expression of anger and frustration over perceived differences and oppositions. By reviewing research based on the task/relationship dichotomy, we find that two meta-analyses have led to quite different conclusions. De Dreu and Weingart (2003) note that both types of conflicts are negatively related to overall performance and individual satisfaction, while De Wit, Greer and Jehn (2012) confirm the negative effect of relationship conflict and the positive effect of task conflict. Given contradictory empirical evidence and substantial reports on high correlations between the measurements of task and relationship conflicts (De Dreu and Weingart 2003), researchers have suggested that it is difficult to distinguish these two types. Because most interactions arising in business settings are related to a certain goal or task (Ohbuchi and Suzuki 2003) and a task conflict

can be easily transformed into a relationship one (Jehn 1997), a conflict can rarely be identified as purely task-focused or purely relation-induced (Rispen 2012). For this reason, our research traces back to experienced incompatibilities in negotiations, which usually root in differences of individual interests, intellects, and evaluations between/among parties (Harinck et al. 2000; Thomas 1992b), and identifies three types of conflict issues. According to the specific issue that triggers a conflict event and later becomes a topic of negotiation, we classify negotiation conflicts into three types: an interest conflict, concerning the gain-loss issue in business negotiations, mainly results from the divergence of personal interests and the scarcity of resources; a cognition conflict, regarding the correct-incorrect issue in business negotiations, originates from the disagreement in personal views or interpretations of an objectively verifiable problem; and a value conflict, focusing on the right-wrong issue in business negotiations, arises from the variation in personal beliefs, values or expectations (Harinck et al. 2000; Ohbuchi and Suzuki 2003). This categorization of conflict is related to a typology proposed by Thomas (1992b) and is developed based on earlier typologies that distinguish between conflict about interest and conflict about information (Levine & Thompson 1996). Conflict about information usually occurs when people have different information or when they disagree with the validity or relevance of certain facts (Levine & Thompson 1996). It can be further divided into two sub-types that center separately on cognitive and evaluative issues. The following part of this research will be designed on this trichotomy of conflict and compares individual face perceptions relating to three different conflict issues.

2.2 Conflict management styles

Defining conflict from a perceptual state view motivates researchers to properly classify conflict issues, but this definition tends to neglect the interacting process that is relevant to manage those perceived incompatibilities (DeChurch et al. 2013). As it is now accepted that the consequence of a conflict mostly depends on the way how all parties approach this issue (Thomas 1992a), conflict management thus becomes a hot topic in negotiation research. As Thomas (1992a) has presented, an individual usually has a general and consistent orientation toward his/her opponents in conflicts, as reflected in observable behaviors that form a pattern and share common characteristics over time. Such orientations are referred to as conflict management styles in literature and have been the subject of various theoretical and empirical studies since the mid-20th century. According to Thomas's review on this topic (1992a), individuals choose different conflict resolutions primarily based on two concerns – 'concerns for self' and 'concerns for others'. Different combinations of the concern levels yield five styles: competing (high concerns for self, low concerns for others), collaborating (high concerns for self and others), compromising (moderate concerns for self and others), accommodating (low concerns for self and high concerns for others), and avoiding (low concerns for self and others).

So far, extensive research has been carried out on the selection of conflict management styles in business negotiations. With the advance of globalization and rapid growth of Chinese economies, the influence of cultural values, especially face and face concerns, has become a key focus in this field (Aslani et al. 2016; Brew and Cairns 2004; Merkin 2018; Miles 2010; Oetzel et al. 2001; Zhang et al. 2015). These studies have reached a consensus that, in China, face is a central explanatory mechanism for different conflict management styles (Ting-Toomey 2005).

2.3 Face and perceived face threats

The concept of face is used ubiquitously in Chinese daily life. Generally speaking, face represents a person's claimed sense of positive self-worth (Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1955) and relates directly to the social value attached to his/her public image, reputation, and status (Ho 1976). As such, face is mainly based on others' assessment (Ho 1976; Kim and Cohen 2010) and, hence, becomes vulnerable in interpersonal conflict. No matter what the conflict is about, the public image that a person strives to maintain can be at peril due to negative social feedbacks such as disagreements, oppositions, and interruptions (Brew and Cairns 2004), leading to a perception of reduced self-worth. Therefore, a person's perceived face threat can be defined as the risk of possible face-losing resulting from a certain event (Johnson et al. 2004). It will significantly influence his/her behavior as a social cost (Curhan et al. 2006; Miles 2010).

Grounded on a traditional formulation concerning the locus of face, empirical research has investigated perceived threats to self- and other-face in negotiation conflicts (Brew and Cairns 2004; Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003; Zhang et al. 2015). It has been demonstrated that perceived self-face threat is associated with confronting behavior, while perceived other-face threat is often related to non-confronting behavior. These findings have successfully verified two different face-saving motives proposed by Goffman (1955): a defensive orientation for saving one's self-face, and a protective orientation toward saving other-face. Notwithstanding the achievements, studies based on the locus of face still have a shortcoming as they fail to account for the complexity of self-worth, which represents the core of face. Self-worth is multifaceted and primarily derived from human beings' various psychological needs. According to different values that a person desires for, Brown and Levinson (1987) put forward a model distinguishing positive face from negative face. In their Politeness Theory, positive face is 'the positive consistent self-image or personality claimed by interactants' (p.61) and is crucially rooted in the desire for appreciation and approval. On the other hand, negative face is 'the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction' (p.61), which is originated in the need for autonomy. Subsequently, the positive/negative dichotomy of face has been widely adopted and further advanced (Hastings and Bell 2018; Johnson et al. 2004; Park and Guan 2009; Sias et al. 2012). For instance, Lim and Bowers (1991) propose an extended model that further decomposes positive face into fellowship face and competence face, while substitutes autonomy face for negative face. The fellowship face primarily stems from a psychological need for affiliation and represents a person's perceived self-worth as he/she feels to be included and accepted. The competence face is based on a desire for approbation and represents a person's perceived self-worth as he/she appears knowledgeable or his/her ability and efficacy is respected. The autonomy face arises from a basic want for not being imposed upon and represents a person's perceived self-worth as he/she gains freedom from imposition (Hastings and Bell 2018; Lim and Bowers 1991). Furthermore, in addition to fellowship and competence face, indigenous research on Chinese face even highlights one's moral character as an important part of social evaluation and puts forward moral face to represent personal claim of positive self-image as an upright person (Hwang 2012). For Chinese who grow up and socialize under the long-term influence of Confucianism, it has been a dearly held notion to become a man of integrity and honor. Thus, his/her claim to moral face may be more important than any other facet of face (Hwang 2012) and plays a crucial role in negotiations. By synthesizing the aforementioned research models, this study focuses on four perceived face threats, which are threats to fellowship,

competence, moral, and autonomy face.

3 Hypotheses

3.1 Interpersonal conflict in negotiations and perceived face threats

When incorporating interpersonal conflict into the analysis of negotiations, researchers find out that different conflict issues usually lead to distinct resolutions and, hence, help to predict the negotiation process (Harinck et al. 2000; Harinck et al. 2018). For example, when an interest is involved, a negotiation will evolve quite differently compared to when an intellective or evaluative problem is at stake. Among all the studies attempting to open the “black box” between conflict issues and conflict behaviors in negotiations, a particular focus has been laid on the impact of face. It is widely recognized that conflicts between negotiating parties are permeated with extrinsic provocations such as disagreements, negative emotions, and interferences. As the Politeness Theory notes, these provocations suggest substantial threats to personal face (Brown and Levinson 1987; White et al. 2004). Given the basic claim of every human-being for establishing and maintaining a positive sense of self-worth, the motive of face-saving, at least in part, plays a significant role in an agent’s strategic behavior in conflicts and negotiations (Chuah et al. 2014). What needs more explanation is that self-worth is a multifaceted concept relating to a person’s various traits and psychological needs (Crocker and Knight 2005), resulting in different types of face. When a specific conflict issue triggers distinct interpretations and norms about proper conduct, the momentary feeling of self-worth (i.e. perceived face) will fluctuate around typical trait level in response (Crocker and Knight 2005). In other words, the fellowship, competence, moral, and autonomy face, based on different aspects of self-worth, can be affected heterogeneously by different conflict issues. It is the contingencies of face threat perceptions that constitute the source of psychological vulnerability and motivation in conflicts, and subsequently induce distinct behaviors.

The subtle relationships between conflict issues and perceived face threats have been discussed by Brown and Levinson (1987) in the Politeness Theory. They indicate that personal perceptions of face threats are primarily tied to potential offensiveness of the messages that are exchanged in conflicts, and the negative and positive face tends to suffer differently in such social interactions (Brown and Levinson 1987). Our study tries to extend this conclusion and move forward. As conflict issues in business negotiations are generally classified into three types, interest, cognition, and value conflict (Harinck et al., 2000), we hypothesize that each of them will cause threat perceptions for different kinds of face. For instance, a dispute on distributions of benefits (i.e. interest conflict) is usually treated as a disgrace by Chinese negotiators, because they have long been taught and trained to be a gentle, courteous, and generous Confucian Man (*Junzi*). Negotiating to maximize their own gain at the expense of others is inadvisable as it may cause a depressed sense of self-worth contingent on the domain of morality and lead to a perception of losing moral face (Aslani et al. 2016). On another note, disagreements in personal views or interpretations of an objectively verifiable problem (i.e. cognition conflict), which often represents in a way as a judgment of right or wrong, good or bad, can manifest a negotiator’s expertise, capabilities, and skills (Ohbuchi and Suzuki 2003). Being doubted or opposed in a cognitive conflict event will jeopardize the negotiator’s authority and his/her knowledgeable image, causing negative effect on the perception of competence face. If the negotiator is required to change his/her behavior or ways of

conducting business, the psychological need for autonomy and related sense of self-worth (i.e. autonomy face) will be threatened (Brown and Levinson 1987; Aslani et al. 2016). Furthermore, perceived incompatibilities centered on values, beliefs, and traditions (i.e. value conflict) seldom involve evaluations for morality, competence or autonomy, but still erode the relationship and destroy the harmony between parties (Chuah et al. 2014; Leung et al. 2011). Such an outcome may imperil the negotiator's momentary feeling of self-worth that is contingent on affiliation, or in other words, his/her perception of fellowship face. In summary, it is expected that:

H1: *Different conflict issues will cause different effects on negotiators' autonomy, fellowship, competence, and moral face perceptions.*

H1a: *An interest conflict will cause threat perceptions for negotiators' moral face.*

H1b: *A cognition conflict will cause threat perceptions for negotiators' competency and autonomy face.*

H1c: *A value conflict will cause threat perceptions for negotiators' fellowship face.*

3.2 Guanxi and perceived face threats

Except for conflict issues, personal perceptions of face threats in negotiation conflicts are highly dependent on the context, especially the interpersonal relationship between negotiating parties (Miles 2010). In the theoretical model of Brown and Levinson (1987), they have listed two relational factors that are crucial in determining the level of perceived face threats: relative power and social distance, representing the vertical and horizontal relations between two interacting parties, respectively. When reviewing existing research dealing with interpersonal relationship, face perceptions and conflict management styles, we note that previous attempts have mostly concentrated on the vertical ones (i.e., relative status between superiors and subordinates) (Brew and Cairns 2004; Merkin, 2018; Peng and Tjosvold 2011), but the impact of horizontal relationships is rarely examined (which is typically referred to as *guanxi* in Chinese). Apparently, *guanxi* is more prevalent in business negotiations with Chinese (Kirkbride et al. 1991; Leung et al. 2011). It naturally includes feelings of emotional intimacy and bond, and, hence, reflects the psychological distance between parties.

Guanxi, in Chinese, refers to a special relationship between two individuals due to certain pre-existing ties (Jacobs 1979). These ties can be established on some common traits (e.g., kinship and native place) or achieved status (e.g., attending the same school) as important aspects of personal identities (Jacobs 1979). Besides, in business settings, there are two potential bases for initiating *guanxi*. One is a common third party, and the other is an intention or promise to engage in future exchanges (Chen et al. 2013). In light of the important role of *guanxi* in resource allocation (Xin and Pearce 1996), Chinese representatives are generally eager to set up and maintain an ideal image for fostering such relationships, and this instinctive desire serves as a basic motivation for face management (Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003). Once *guanxi* is established, the connected parties are bonded by an implicit psychological contract to maintain a long-term relation with reciprocal obligations (Chen et al. 2013; Xin and Pearce 1996). It will lead to continuous investment and enhanced commitment in *guanxi*, thereby improving the quality of *guanxi* and closing the psychological distance between the parties. When involving in a high-quality *guanxi*, negotiators may have more confidence in their counterparts (Chen et al. 2013), and better understand and properly deal with disagreements,

confrontations, and queries arising in the bargaining process (Brown and Levinson 1987).

In this case, their perceptions of face threats will be reduced, which lead us to hypothesize:

H2: *The quality of guanxi between negotiators is negatively related to the level of perceived fellowship (H2a), moral (H2b), competence (H2c), and autonomy face threats (H2d).*

3.3 Public self-consciousness and perceived face threats

In light of Goffman's (1955) original definition of face as a personal claim of social self-worth, a basic premise of the Politeness Theory stresses that human struggles for face are universal and only differ slightly in the degree of personal face want between individualism and collectivism cultures (Brown and Levinson 1987). For this reason, while exploring the mechanism of face, researchers have mainly focused on social and contextual determinants of face threat perceptions and overlooked the variations between individuals. Along with the widespread applications of the theory, a crucial improvement has been made to bring forward an individual difference trait of face threat sensitivity to measure the degree to which a person will view a situation as a threat to face (Miles 2010; White et al. 2004). Though this new development has ensured a more complete model of the Politeness Theory, it remains unclear whether we can make it clear how face works by simply introducing another face-related concept. In this study, we attempt to capture the effect of individual traits by exploring the psychological antecedents to face perceptions.

A person's sensitivity, or reactivity, to face threat is a stable individual trait (White et al. 2004). It essentially reflects the importance and value of face to the person, or, in other words, his/her desire and want for face. The more he/she cares about face, the more he/she is likely to perceive a conflict issue or message as threatening. As such, face characterizes an image of an 'expected self' or 'ideal self' in the eyes of others (Ho 1976), and the self-worth represented by face can only be recognized and confirmed through others' assessments or social comparisons (Ho 1976; Kim and Cohen 2010). Therefore, personal desire for face can be inferred by the tendency to be aware of oneself as a social object, as well as the orientation to establish self-worth based on what others think about him/her. Such an outward attention in self-awareness is defined as public self-consciousness in the field of psychology (DaSilveira et al. 2015; Fenigstein et al. 1975), in contrast with an inward attention as private self-consciousness (Fenigstein et al. 1975). Obviously, people high in private self-consciousness will develop the sense of self-worth on their own belief and evaluation (DaSilveira et al. 2015; Fenigstein et al. 1975), and thus, pay little attention to face. On the other hand, those high in public self-consciousness are interested in self-presentation and place greater concerns for face. The more they value face, the more sensitive they are to potential face threats, and the more intensive their perceptions are.

H3: *The degree in public self-consciousness is positively related to the level of perceived fellowship (H3a), moral (H3b), competence (H3c), and autonomy (H3d) face threats.*

3.4 Perceived face threats and conflict management styles

Research propositions about the impact of perceived face threats on conflict behaviors have been supported by numerous empirical studies (Brew and Cairns 2004; Peng and Tjosvold 2011; Zhang et al. 2015). Pilot research based on the Politeness Theory generally concludes that face threat perceptions lead to non-cooperative and competing behaviors (Holtgraves 1986; White et al. 2004). Yet, later studies on

differences between individual concerns for self-face and other-face notice that a negotiator may either sacrifice his/her personal interests to help his/her counterparts achieve their targets (out of a protective motive toward other-face) or stick to his/her own position regardless of the appeals from the opponents (out of a defensive motive toward self-face). By probing further into the very essence of face, we find that Chinese concerns for other-face imply a tendency of self-serving and manifest a special expression of self-face concerns. For example, there has been a proverbial Chinese idiom ‘*yi tui wei jin*’, meaning ‘one step backward today for two steps forward tomorrow’. When confronted with a conflict issue, Chinese people may give up their positions not only for giving face to their counterparts, but also, to a greater extent, for maintaining their own fellowship face and moral face. In anticipation of reciprocity, they presume that their goodwill and sacrifice will get payback in the future. In summary, it is the desire for maintaining a positive social self-worth that fundamentally drives the selection of conflict management styles, and our study will dedicate to exploring the relationships between contingent face threat perceptions and personal conflict management styles in negotiations.

In existing literature, there is a consensus that Chinese negotiators tend to cooperate, compromise, and retreat with reservations in a conflict for the sake of maintaining favorable interpersonal relationships (Aslani et al. 2016; Brew and Cairns 2004; Kirkbride et al. 1991; Oetzel et al. 2001). Scholars are inclined to attribute this phenomenon to the cultural difference between individualism and collectivism. They conclude that Chinese people, acting in accordance with the doctrine of Confucianism, prioritize harmony and prefer to avoid conflict in most negotiating contexts (Aslani et al. 2016; Chuah et al. 2014; Leung et al. 2011). Consistent with these research results, interviewees in our study even indicate that they might give in and show deference to their opponents in minor trifles in order to exchange for a long-term relationship. All these observations support the claim that perceived fellowship face threats should be positively related to collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding styles, but negatively related to the competing style.

H4: *Chinese negotiators’ level of perceived fellowship face threats is positively related to their tendency to choose collaborating (H4a), compromising (H4b), accommodating (H4c), and avoiding styles (H4d), but negatively related to their tendency to choose the competing style (H4e).*

As for moral face, the aforementioned relationships will be further strengthened. In Chinese culture, *Junzi* (a righteous person or a perfect Confucian person) is deemed to be modest, polite, and restrained in almost all situations, as well as to show mercy and goodwill to the one with whom he/she interacts (Ghauri and Fang 2001; Ma et al. 2015). His/her behavior in daily life has to conform to social norms and benefit the harmony of the community. Therefore, in order to keep a public image as a perfect Confucian Man and maintain his/her moral face, a Chinese business negotiator tends to show great concerns for others and takes a low profile to avoid fierce contention and competition. Therefore, the next hypothesis can be presented as follows.

H5: *Chinese negotiators’ level of perceived moral face threats is positively related to their tendency to choose collaborating (H5a), compromising (H5b), accommodating (H5c), and avoiding styles (H5d), but negatively related to their tendency to choose the competing style (H5e).*

However, personal pursuit for harmony, or in other words, for self-worth contingent upon affiliation and morality, may not always be the most important consideration in some conflict circumstances, especially in negotiation settings where participants’ performance is deemed to represent their competence and capability.

When confronted with such a threatening issue, Chinese people prefer to choose direct, assertive, and competing resolutions out of the competitive norms (Brew and Cairns 2004; Chu 2006), tracing back to Sun Tzu's 36 stratagems to prevail over their enemies (Fang 1999). This is due to the fact that business relationships based on a strong norm of harmony tend to be stable in Chinese culture. Once an agreement is reached for different partners' roles and responsibilities in business transactions, the status hierarchy of this relationship can hardly be challenged (Aslani et al. 2016). Therefore, Chinese negotiators will take every possible opportunity to show their competence and capability to outperform their counterparts and achieve a favorable status in the relationship (Aslani et al. 2016). If their competent image is questioned and offended in a conflict, they will make every effort to maintain their status and restore their face unless they are put at a hopeless situation or completely lose their confidence. In the latter cases, Chinese people will choose to hide away and divert others' attention in order to avoid further face damage (Chu 2006). All of these constitute Hypothesis 6.

H6: *Chinese negotiators' level of perceived competence face threats is negatively related to their tendency to choose collaborating (H6a), compromising (H6b), and accommodating styles (H6c), but positively related to their tendency to choose competing (H6d) and avoiding styles (H6e).*

Autonomy face, equivalent to Brown and Levinson's negative face, is originated from the basic psychological need for autonomy. As a widely accepted view of self-determination has indicated, an inherent orientation for human beings is to make decision or choice without any external influence or interference (Ryan and Deci 2000). When exposed to extraneous pressure, tension, or command, individuals are apt to experience negative emotions (e.g., embarrassment, disconcert, anxiety, and anger) and respond with resistant and defensive behaviors (e.g., explain, dissuade, retaliate, and avoid) to save their autonomy face (Johnson et al. 2004; Ryan and Deci 2000). Furthermore, they may also try to keep their autonomy by speaking ambiguously in public (a special form of avoiding) and sometimes even acting aggressively by arguing with, revenging, attacking, and offending their opponents (Chu 2006; Ting-Toomey 2005).

H7: *Chinese negotiators' level of perceived autonomy face threats is negatively related to their tendency to choose collaborating (H7a), compromising (H7b), and accommodating styles (H7c), but positively related to their tendency to choose competing (H7d) and avoiding styles (H7e).*

In short, the intricate relationships between perceived face threats and conflict management styles in business negotiations can be summarized in Table I as follows.

Insert Table I here

Figure 1 represents the theoretical model of this study.

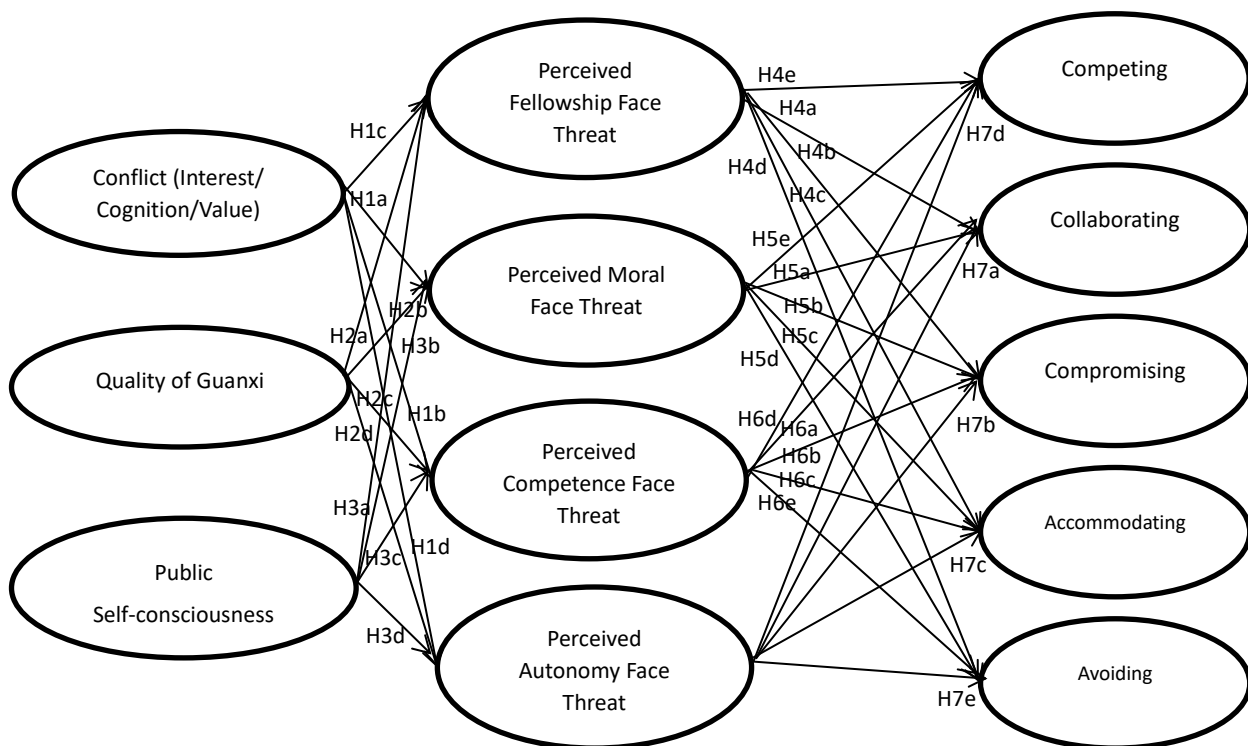


Figure 1. Theoretical model of this study

4 Methodology

4.1 Respondents and procedures

Respondents of this study consist of business representatives from 32 companies located in both Shanghai and Hangzhou, China. These companies were picked because their managers took part in the MBA program in the East China Normal University and attended the Marketing course taught by the second author. A total of 900 copies of questionnaires were distributed and 677 were collected, with a response rate of 75.2%. All the respondents were experienced in business negotiations, as they are from departments that often deal with customers, agencies, suppliers, or cooperative partners (such as marketing, sales, purchasing, and financial department). They were asked to recall a most recent episode in which they had a conflict with their counterparts in a business negotiation, and describe the cause or trigger of the conflict (i.e. conflict issue) in detail. They were also required to depict their relationship with counterparts (measured by the quality of *guanxi*) and, then, to report perceived face threats induced by the issue as well as their behavioral response. In addition, we organized a second-stage test of personality at the end of the survey (after all the descriptions and reports were collected from participants) and involved an assessment of public self-consciousness as individual difference tendency in a well-designed scale system.

After data collection, two doctoral students who were expert in the conflict management field were assigned to read through the 677 written descriptions and to encode every conflict issue according to the three types classified in this study (i.e. interest, cognition and value conflict). Then, their codes were further checked and

compared by the first author. Only when both codes of the same description were identical, would the data collected from the very respondent be kept for subsequent analysis. Such a check led to an exclusion of 51 copies of questionnaires, as two researchers did not reach an agreement on their labeling of the issue. Along with an extra exclusion of 18 questionnaires with missing data, the final sample was left with 608 responses (330 men, 278 women, all Chinese citizens), who were born between 1960s and 1990s (nearly half of them were born after 1980). 45.1% of the respondents hold postgraduate degrees, and 53.6% of them hold undergraduate degrees. Based on the conflict issue coding, the sample data were divided into three groups: the interest conflict group (116 responses), the cognition conflict group (249 responses), and the group of value conflict (243 responses).

4.2 Measures

Perceived face threats. Empirical explorations that focus on perceived face threats are mainly in the field of pragmatics, sociolinguistics and interpersonal communications. Grounded on Brown and Levinson's positive/negative dichotomy of face, these studies mostly simplify the impact of conflicts on various aspects of self-worth. As per an elaborate classification of fellowship-, competence-, moral-, and autonomy-face proposed in this study, we develop a 12-item integrative scale (3 items for each) in light of several existing tools (Chu 2006; Johnson et al. 2004; Park and Guan 2009; Sias et al. 2012; Willer and Soliz 2010) to assess personal perceptions of face threats in negotiation conflicts. Descriptions of each item and the factor loadings are presented in Table II. As shown in the table, there exists a cross-loading issue for the item "my opponents' words, actions, and attitudes in the conflict would lead others to believe that I cannot take my own initiative" in measuring perceived autonomy face threat. As such, this item and related data are eliminated from future analysis.

Insert Table II here

Quality of guanxi. Based on a set of influential theoretical works about Chinese *guanxi* as well as recent empirical research (cf. a systematic and complete review of Chen et al. 2013), this study adopts a 7-item scale to measure the quality of *guanxi* between the respondents and their negotiation counterparts. Items from this scale primarily weigh on the level of trust, psychological interdependence, and commitment between negotiating parties. Such as 'We trust each other', 'We focus on long-term reciprocity in this relationship', and 'I would seek help from him/her when I am in trouble'.

Public self-consciousness. The measuring instrument of public self-consciousness advanced by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) has been improved and refined for years (DaSilveira et al. 2015). We choose 5 items with high factor loadings out of the scale due to limited length of the questionnaire. Items involved include 'I am usually worried about making a good impression', 'I am concerned about what other people think of me', 'I am concerned about the way I present myself', 'I am usually aware of my appearance', and 'I am concerned about my style of doing things'.

Conflict management style. Negotiators' conflict management styles are measured by the Organizational Conflict Inventory II (ROCI-II) (Rahim 1983) in our study. Such measurement is widely accepted and used in business settings for its unique differentiation among conflict objects (i.e. superiors, subordinates, and peers) (Kim et al. 2007). We apply the 'conflict with peers' edition of ROCI-II to capture the characteristics of a

horizontal relation between negotiating parties and ask the respondents to concentrate directly on their ways of handling conflicts in business negotiations.

All the measures mentioned above are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Control variables. We control the severity of the described conflict that respondents experienced in negotiations, since it affects individual face perceptions (Brew and Cairns 2004) and corresponding conflict management behaviors (Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003; Johnson et al. 2004; Kim et al. 2007). Specifically, the severity of a conflict is measured in three aspects by three sets of appositive adjectives, each on a 5-point scale, with 1 = not at all intense, 5 = very intense; 1 = not at all important, 5 = very important; and 1 = can be easily resolved, 5 = cannot be resolved at all. In addition, respondents' gender, age and educational background are also controlled in this study.

5 Results

First of all, we conduct a Harman's single factor test to address the potential common method bias issue. By performing an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) wherein all the measuring items were entered, we obtain a satisfactory result with 11 factors having eigenvalues greater than 1. All the factors together explain 73.86% of the total variance, and the eigenvalue of the factor with the most significant explanatory power is 6.49 (explains 15.09% of the total variance). After that, as a supplement to Harman's single factor test, an *ex post* Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is further conducted to test the common method variance (Williamms et al. 2003). We introduce a new latent variable in such a way that all manifest variables are related to it and then test the one-factor model with AMOS 21.0 statistical software. Not surprisingly, such a measuring model shows really poor goodness-of-fit ($CFI=0.21$, $IFI=0.21$, $TLI=0.12$ and $RMSEA=0.16$), and strongly supports the result of the EFA. When we include the 11 latent variables of this study, as well as their relationships, into the one-factor model, it exhibits a good fit ($CFI=0.90$, $IFI=0.91$, $TLI=0.89$, and $RMSEA=0.05$) and suggests a great improvement ($\Delta \chi^2 = 9330.90$, $\Delta df=89$, $p<0.000$). Thus, we can conclude that there is no evidence to suggest the common method bias issue in our self-report survey research. The descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlations among variables are presented in Table III.

Insert Table III here

In order to examine whether face threat perceptions vary across conflict scenarios (as predicted by H1), we categorize the described conflict issues into three types (interest, cognition, and value conflict) and put the data into three subsamples accordingly. Mean values of these subsamples show that (1) a cognition conflict poses the greatest threat to a negotiator's competence face ($M_{C/PCFT}=3.36$), which is much higher than an interest conflict ($M_{I/PCFT}=2.67$, $p<0.01$) and a value conflict ($M_{V/PCFT}=2.61$, $p<0.01$). There is no significant difference in perceived competence face threat between the interest and the value conflict groups. (2) Though perceived fellowship face threat induced by a value conflict is relatively small ($M_{V/PFFT}=3.39$), the discrepancy among the three subsamples is insignificant ($ps > 0.20$). (3) For perceived moral face threat, the mean values of the three subsamples show significant differences at the 5% significance level, with the highest one in the interest conflict group ($M_{I/PMFT}=3.43$), and the lowest in the value conflict group ($M_{V/PMFT}=3.06$). (4) In terms

of perceived threat to autonomy face, the discrepancy between the interest ($M_{I/PAFT}=2.68$) and the value conflict group ($M_{V/PAFT}=2.60$) is significant ($p=0.046$), while the mean value of the cognition conflict group ($M_{C/PAFT}=2.65$) falls in-between. These results strongly confirm H1a and H1c, partly support H1b, and together indicate that different conflict issues in business negotiations cause diverse levels of perceived threats to personal competence-, fellowship-, moral- and autonomy-face.

Next, we test the theoretical model separately in the three subsamples by applying a multi-group structural equation modeling (SEM) approach with AMOS 21.0 statistical software. Before conducting multi-group comparisons in structural paths of the theoretical model in SEM, we first need to evaluate the equivalence of measurement models across the three subsamples. The results are summarized in Table IV. From this table, we clearly notice that the unconstrained multi-group model exhibits a good fit: $\chi^2/df=1.42$, $IFI=0.94$, $TLI=0.93$, $CFI=0.94$, and $RMSEA=0.03$. When we set the factor loadings and error variances equal across groups for the measurement variables as well as the inter-factor structural coefficients and co-variances, the goodness-of-fit indices of the constrained models again confirm the factor structure invariance across three groups (See also in Table IV).

Insert Table IV here

Once the measurement equivalence and factor structure invariance conditions are both verified, we proceed to test the theoretical model shown in Figure 1 to compare the path coefficients across the three sub-samples. Firstly, a multinomial logistic regression demonstrates that there is no significant demographic difference in terms of age, gender, and educational background among three groups ($ps>0.5$). As indicated by the indices in Table IV, the structural model fits the sub-samples well ($IFI, TLI, CFI>0.9$, $RMSEA\leq 0.05$), while the path coefficients denoting correlations between latent variables vary across different conflict scenarios. For example, in the value conflict group, path coefficients between quality of *guanxi* and perceived autonomy face threats, as well as between individual public self-consciousness and perceived autonomy face threats are both insignificant ($ps>0.53$). The results of multi-group path analyses suggest significant differences in these paths across the three conflict sub-samples (for $GX\rightarrow PAFT$ path: $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df) = 8.61(2)$, $p<0.05$; for $PSC\rightarrow PAFT$ path: $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)=20.82(2)$, $p<0.001$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is further validated, showing that personal perceptions of face threats are context-dependent and change primarily as per the conflict issues.

At the same time, the path coefficients from quality of *guanxi* and public self-consciousness to perceived face threats are quite similar across the three subsamples. A negative relationship between quality of *guanxi* and perceived face threat mostly supports Hypothesis 2, especially H2a, H2b, H2c and H2d in the interest conflict group and cognition conflict group ($\beta_s<-0.11$, $ps<0.05$). In the value conflict group, the negative effects hypothesized in H2a, H2b, and H2c are proved as well ($\beta_s<-0.13$, $ps<0.05$), though the negative relationship between quality of *guanxi* and perceived autonomy face threat (i.e. H2d) is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($\beta=-0.02$). As for the positive relationships between public self-consciousness and perceived face threats hypothesized in H3a, H3b, H3c and H3d are well supported in the cognition conflict group ($\beta_s>0.11$, $ps<0.05$), and mostly supported in the interest and the value conflict groups. The two exceptions are the positive relationship between public self-consciousness and perceived competence face threat ($\beta=0.02$, n.s. H3c) in the interest conflict group, and the relationship between public self-consciousness and perceived

autonomy face threat ($\beta=0.02$, n.s. H3d) in the value conflict group.

Finally, Hypotheses 4 and 5 are firmly confirmed. As shown in Table IV, personal perceptions of fellowship- and moral-face-threat are positively related to an individual's tendency to choose collaborating, accommodating, compromising, and avoiding styles of managing conflict in China, but negatively related to the inclination to apply the competing style. Hypothesis 6 is thus partially proved. The expected positive relation between perceived competence face threat and the adoption of competitive strategies is demonstrated in the interest and the cognition conflict groups ($\beta_s>0.12$, $p_s<0.05$), and the negative impact of such a perception on personal preference for collaborating and compromising styles is proved only in the value conflict group ($|\beta|s>0.14$, $p_s<0.05$). Besides, the negative relation between perceived competence face threat and the application of the accommodating style, as well as the positive relation between perceived competence face threat and the use of the avoiding style, are well supported in all the three subgroups ($p_s<0.01$). Furthermore, the positive coefficients of the perceived autonomy face threat and the competing style paths ($\beta_s>0.16$, $p_s<0.01$), and the negative coefficients of the paths from perceived autonomy face threat to the compromising style ($|\beta|s>0.15$, $p_s<0.01$) validate Hypothesis 7 in the interest- and the cognition-conflict subsamples. It is confirmed that a negative relationship exists between perceived autonomy face threat and personal selection of the collaborating style in the interest conflict group as well as between perceived autonomy face threat and personal selection of the accommodating style in the cognition conflict group. These results partially support H7. However, it is unexpected that another negative relation is demonstrated between perceived autonomy face threat and the use of the avoiding style in all three subsamples (even though only the path coefficient in the interest conflict group is significant). This is in direct contrary to H7.

Apart from the aforementioned analysis, ANOVA results reveal the effects of control variables. Firstly, male respondents are more sensitive to face threats centred on capacity and skills ($M_M=3.19$, $M_F=2.66$, $F=8.30$, $p=0.000$). They are inclined to apply competing strategies to deal with negotiation conflicts ($F=2.72$, $p<0.05$), and are reluctant to defer to their counterparts ($F=3.73$, $p=0.01$). On the other hand, female respondents care more about fellowship face ($p=0.06$) and are more accommodating in conflict contexts ($F=3.05$, $p<0.05$). Besides, no significant gender differences are present in the other two dimensions of perceived face threats ($p_s>0.20$). Secondly, respondents born in the 1980s generally show stronger public self-consciousness than those born in the 1970s ($F=4.61$, $p<0.01$). The younger generation seems to be more sensitive to competence face threats ($F=2.15$, $p<0.05$) and tends to take a more confrontational stance in negotiations ($F=3.07$, $p<0.05$). Thirdly, respondents with postgraduate degrees pay more attention to their independence and freedom and are more sensitive to autonomy face threats ($F=3.01$, $p<0.05$). Fourthly, consistent with previous findings, the severity of a conflict is positively related to personal perceptions of face threats ($\beta_s>0.18$, $p_s<0.05$), as well as the adoption of competing, collaborating, and compromising styles in both interest and cognition conflicts ($\beta_s>0.15$, $p_s<0.05$), but is negatively related to the use of the avoiding style in value conflicts ($\beta=-0.19$, $p<0.05$).

6 Discussions

Along with the increasingly frequent interactions between China and the outside world, negotiations with Chinese have arisen as a great challenge to their foreign business partners (Ma et al. 2015). Experience and

knowledge relevant to Chinese negotiation practices will help generate insights into Chinese business mindset (Ghauri and Fang 2001) and increase the success rate of Sino-Western business cooperation.

During a business negotiation, the negotiators, either consciously or subconsciously, are subject to various disagreements and clashes of interests. Their responses not only determine the outcomes of a conflict, but also notably affect their bargaining performance (Thomas 1992a). According to Kirkbride, Tang, and Westwood (1991), negotiation behaviors, to a certain extent, can be predicated on culturally influenced conflict management styles (i.e. competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding). Consequently, in the last few decades, cultural antecedents leading to Chinese conflict handling styles have been widely discussed in literature (Ghauri and Fang 2001; Kim et al. 2007; Leung et al. 2011; Ma et al. 2015). In particular, face (*Mianzi*) arises as one of the key concerns (Aslani et al. 2016; Johnson et al. 2004; Merkin 2018; Peng and Tjosvold 2011; Ting-Toomey 2005). It is acknowledged that the traditional Western portrayal of negotiations as strategic interactions practiced by rational agents pursuing self-interest and economic gains (Curhan et al. 2006) may not be readily carried over to the oriental face cultures (Aslani et al. 2016). When confronted with negotiation conflicts, typical Chinese are more likely to think of face threats, and such unpleasant personal perceptions will cast significant influences on their conflict handling behaviors (Merkin 2018; Ting-Toomey 2005) in a form of social and psychological cost (Curhan et al. 2006). In order to reveal the mechanism of face, previous research has focused on the locus of face to investigate the relationships between perceived self/other-face threats and various conflict management behaviors, and successfully distinguished two behavioral orientations as face-defending (toward self-face) and face-protecting (toward other-face). However, it is unfortunate that the multidimensionality of the individual self-worth represented by face has been largely overlooked. In general, human beings derive their social self-worth from various domains (Crocker and Knight 2005). Feelings of fluctuations in self-worth in a conflict episode, which is usually conceived as perceived face-gain/loss in China, are contingent on the specific domain affected by the conflict issue, and consequently determine personal behaviors (Crocker and Knight 2005). For this reason, in light of the primary self-worth domains with which most Chinese are concerned, combined with a positive/negative dichotomy of face proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), this study puts forward a refined four-dimensional model consisting of competence-, fellowship-, moral-, and autonomy-face, and, then, carefully examines the role of perceived face threats in negotiation conflicts. Empirical evidence reveals that Chinese negotiators involved in interpersonal conflicts in business negotiations always experience different threats to face, and they will respond in accordance with their perceptions in subsequent decisions of conflict management styles.

The theoretical model of our study is grounded on the well-known Politeness Theory in the research field of face dynamics, and concentrates on the impact of two contextual factors and an individual antecedent to personal perceptions of face threats. As highlighted by the Politeness Theory, one of the contextual factors is related to the content of messages exchanged in a negotiation conflict (Brown and Levinson 1987). When examining the relationship between interpersonal conflict and face perceptions, previous studies have primarily focused on several basic features of a conflict event, such as intensity, importance and resolution potentials (Brew and Cairns 2004; Chu 2006; Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003; Zhang et al. 2015). It is well recognized that direct, immediate and face-to-face confrontations, coupling with furious expressions and behavioral manifestations of negative emotions, which together are interpreted as intensive conflicts, will

cause great damage to a negotiator's face perceptions (Brew and Cairns 2004; Chu 2006; Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003), while polite, tactful, and advisory expressions will effectively reduce perceived threats (Park and Guan 2009; Zhang et al. 2015). In addition, conflict that is identified as 'a big deal' with great importance is verified to be more closely connected to face perceptions than 'a little tiff' that is easy to settle (Brew and Cairns 2004; Chu 2006; Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003). Nevertheless, the content of a conflict has rarely been taken into consideration (Johnson et al. 2004; Oetzel et al. 2001). As a supplement to existing research, this study validates the role of conflict issues in influencing Chinese negotiators' face threat perceptions, and reveals why Chinese behave differently in various conflict scenarios. Based on a review of existing studies on negotiation conflicts, we differentiate three types of conflict issues to characterize the most-commonly experienced incompatibilities in business negotiations (Harinck et al. 2000). According to the results of data analysis, we find that different conflict issues will pose distinct threats to negotiators' competence-, moral- and autonomy-face. Generally, a cognition conflict issue, usually relating to the judgment of 'correct or incorrect' (Ohbuchi and Suzuki 2003), furnishes a benchmark for measuring the level of knowledge and capability and, hence, represents a significant threat to personal competence face. On the other hand, an interest conflict issue in negotiations will cause the greatest threat to the moral face (compared to a cognition or a value conflict issue) as Chinese negotiators are expected to take a conciliation stance as the cardinal Confucian requirement for a *Junzi* to 'value morality and etiquette above interests' (Zhong Yi Qing Li). In addition, a value conflict issue usually induces relatively low threatening perception to autonomy face, indicating that debates around values and beliefs usually have little to do with the sense of self-control or autonomy. In terms of perceived threats to fellowship face, there are no significant discrepancies among the three conflict issues. Such a result again illustrates that interpersonal conflict is naturally detrimental to the relationship among different parties and hurts the momentary feeling of self-worth that is contingent on affiliation.

The other contextual antecedent to personal perceptions of face threat underlined by the Politeness Theory is the relationship between negotiating parties. Distinguished from most previous studies that concentrate on vertical relations, we stick to *guanxi*, a typical Chinese horizontal relation, to explain a situational impact on face perceptions in a negotiation conflict. In the last few decades, when investigating interactions between a person and his/her close friend or family member, researchers tend to treat personal face concerns as a context-dependent variable and come to totally contradictory conclusions. Some of them insist that *one needs to pay high attention to and carefully manage his/her face in a close relation* (Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003), but the others find that *he/she does not need to care about his/her face and can present a true-self in such a high-quality relationship* (Brown and Levinson 1987; Hwang 1987). This is really confusing. Our research suggests that the fault lies with the 'indefinite definition' of face concerns. As an individual difference variable reflecting personal interest in and care about face, it should be individual-dependent and remain stable for a period of time. Moreover, by drawing on the work of the Politeness Theory, we recognize that it is the personal perceptions of face-gaining/losing that vary across different conflict scenarios. Therefore, the quality of *guanxi* between negotiators will not change their personal face concerns, but affect their perceptions of face threat in the conflict. Consistent with Holtgraves' (1986) experimental results, a negative correlation is confirmed between the quality of *guanxi* and perceived face threat in this study. The implication is that a quality *guanxi* leads to close psychological distance between business partners and promotes mutual understanding and trust in negotiations. Under such a relation, Chinese negotiators are conditioned to give

friendly interpretations toward their counterparts' offensive behaviors, thereby alleviating the sense of face threat (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Based on a premise that emphasizes cross-cultural universality of face want, the initial Politeness Theory has primarily centered on situational factors and overlooked individual differences in face perceptions. This shortcoming is soon recognized and improved by subsequent studies that introduce a personal trait variable of face threat sensitivity (Miles 2010; White et al. 2004). Following this idea, we propose and demonstrate a positive relationship between a personal tendency of public self-consciousness and perceived face threat. Public self-consciousness, defined as an outward orientation of self-awareness (Fenigstein et al. 1975), ideally reflects the importance of face to most Chinese who live in a culture that accentuates collectivism and *guanxi* (Oetzel et al. 2001; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Zhang et al., 2015). This concept helps to avoid the recurring dilemma of 'circular arguments' in existing face research (i.e. to explain how face works via a set of face-related concepts). Results of our study indicate that Chinese negotiators with a significant and strong focus on external assessments and social aspects of self-identity tend to be more sensitive to insulting, hostile and negative information that is common in negotiations, and easier to interpret this information as a face threat. For future studies, we strongly recommend that public self-consciousness can be further applied to clarify the mechanism of face.

In terms of the effect of various face threat perceptions on Chinese utilization of different conflict management styles, this study comes to following conclusions. Firstly, an increase in perceived fellowship face threat leads to more collaborating and compromising actions, but visibly reduces competitive behaviors in negotiations. This result can be attributed to the dominant pursuit of harmony in China (Leung et al. 2011). Even confronted with an interest conflict issue, Chinese negotiators will typically insist on a fundamental business principle of 'He Qi Sheng Cai' (which means 'harmony brings wealth') under the Confucian tradition, and commit to collaboration and reciprocity in negotiations. These non-confrontational strategies contribute to maintaining a long-term relationship as well as personal face based on fellowship and *renqing*, which implies an obligation for payback in the future. In addition, we find that the standardized path coefficient between perceived fellowship face threat and a use of the compromising style in all three subsamples is larger than that between perceived fellowship face threat and the application of the collaborating style. In other words, when Chinese negotiators recognize threats to fellowship face, they prefer to seek trade-off rather than cooperation. This behavioral tendency is primarily due to the reciprocal obligation in Chinese *guanxi* (Chen et al. 2013) and reflects the Chinese notion of fairness, which highlights not only impartiality, but also mutual respect and benefit in a relation (Hwang 1987).

Secondly, compared to the aforesaid effect of perceived fellowship face threat, our study reveals similar correlations between perceived moral face threat and different conflict management styles. Especially, a higher perception of moral face threat significantly enhances the use of both avoiding and accommodating strategies. This result is induced by typical Chinese concerns for a positive public image as a perfect Confucian person (*Junzi*). When engaged in a conflict that may jeopardize their *Junzi* image and cause a loss of moral face, Chinese negotiators are likely to behave courteously, gently, and generously, and even to restrain themselves or sacrifice their own interests. At the same time, they tend to step back to avoid further escalation in conflict and possible damage to their image.

Thirdly, we find that a threat to competence face usually causes a great sense of being offended or insulted and, hence, a confrontational intention is likely to arise in response. Under this circumstance, Chinese negotiators are inclined to apply competitive strategies to demonstrate their strength and strive to outperform their counterparts, aiming at an upper-hand and favorable position in the relation ($\beta=0.12$ and 0.14 , respectively, in interest conflict and cognition conflict subsamples, $ps<0.05$). It is unlikely, however, for them to take an accommodating attitude ($\beta s<-0.12$, $ps<0.05$). It is noteworthy that the contending orientation rarely appears in negotiations with value clashes ($\beta=0.07$, $p>0.5$). This may be attributed to the fact that value conflict issues, arising from differences in personal beliefs and referring to the judgment about 'right or wrong' (Ohbuchi and Suzuki 2003), seldom involve assessments on an individual's capability, skill or competency. If there is any probability that their knowledgeable image will be threatened in a value conflict, Chinese negotiators are ready to take a hard line and exclude compromising and collaborating strategies from viable alternatives ($\beta=-0.14$ and -0.21 in the value conflict group, $ps<0.05$ and 0.001). In addition, empirical evidence also indicates that Chinese negotiators tend to evade or quit negotiation conflicts if they cannot ensure that their ability and efficacy are respected herein.

Fourthly, the relationships between perceived autonomy face threat and conflict management styles are well demonstrated in the two subsamples of interest and cognition conflict. The path coefficients mostly support Hypothesis 7, illustrating that Chinese negotiators tend to express their opinions and to behave defensively in a threat to autonomy face. To manifest their self-worth as an independent and autonomous agent, they will try to fight back, to explain and dissuade, but reduce their strategic choices as to collaborate or compromise. Nevertheless, there appears an exception showing a negative relation (contrary to the hypothesized positive relation) between autonomy face threat perception and the adoption of the avoiding style. It can be explained by a widespread sense of 'autonomous experts' in knowledge workers (Robertson and Swan 2003) to which most of the sampled business representatives belong. This type of workers, with specialized expertise, high degree of confidence and professional pride, is eager for a high level of autonomy (Robertson and Swan 2003). They prefer to seek solutions actively instead of evading under external pressures or interferences.

In summary, the exploitation of specific conflict management styles and conflict behaviors in business negotiations largely relies on individual interpretations of conflict issues. In consideration of the common concerns on face in China, perceived face threats caused by a conflict issue prove to be key antecedents to Chinese negotiators' decisions, which then determine the evolution of a conflict event. For example, a perceived competency face threat induced by a cognition conflict issue may lead to distinct confrontational, uncooperative and hostile behaviors and, in turn, cause even greater threatening perceptions for the counterparts. This is a familiar story of conflict escalation and usually shows as a common scene that an inappropriate response sets off a long-running feud. However, if all participants of a negotiation are aware of the relationships between face perceptions and conflict behaviors, an appropriate and wise response can easily lead to a proper resolution of the conflict.

7 Limitations and Future Opportunities

Despite the interesting findings, this study has its limitations. One drawback is the source of data. Due to the complexity of measuring a subjective, multifaceted and intangible face concept, we primarily rely on

self-report measures that are known to be vulnerable to the social desirability bias. Although the measurement tools adopted in this study have been well tested and widely applied in existing face-centered research, we still exercise extra caution in designing the questionnaire to minimize the negative impact of the social desirability bias. For instance, before answering the questions, respondents of our study are well informed of the academic purpose of the survey to put them at ease. When recalling the conflict episodes, they are asked to report actual experiences and behaviors, instead of intentions, to improve data accuracy. In the future, studies on the same topic should be further improved by a multi-research-method design for cross-validation.

The individual difference variable, public self-consciousness, was conceptualized as a stable trait in this study and measured in a second-stage test after the survey (the measuring items were mingled with a Big-Five Inventory). However, it is possible that once one recalled his/her perceived face threats in a negotiation conflict, he/she would become more aware of himself/herself from a public perspective, which might influence his/her self-evaluation. Such a risk can be mitigated by an attentive research design, either to organize the personality test at the very beginning of the survey or in a few days.

In contrast to existing research that typically concentrates on the difference between Chinese and Westerners in their negotiation strategies and conflict management styles (e.g., Buttery and Leung 1998; Fang 1999; Kim 2007; Oetzel et al. 2001; Zhang et al. 2015), our study focuses on Chinese-Chinese dyads owing to the strong face culture in the Chinese community. On the other hand, it would be a worthy and timely topic to examine whether the influences of face perceptions on conflict behaviors can be extended to Sino-Western negotiations given the increasingly frequent interactions between China and the West.

In addition, our study demonstrates different effects of interest-, cognition-, and value-conflict issues on personal perceptions of face threats, as well as direct influences of face threat perceptions on Chinese conflict management styles in business negotiations. However, given that Chinese people maintain both a protective and an acquisitive orientation toward face (Ho 1976), we reckon that it is insufficient to reveal just the importance of a face-protecting orientation and related 'threat' perceptions on Chinese negotiation behaviors. Given the complexity and uncertainty of conflict outcomes and their distinct impact on bargaining performance, future research should also pay attention to personal perceptions of 'face opportunities', which might reflect the possibility of face-gaining as detected in certain conflict episodes.

Last but not least, this study builds upon the Politeness Theory and focuses on the effect of various perceived face threats on Chinese conflict management styles, whereas negotiators' interpretations and comprehension of a conflict issue are framed as an antecedent to personal perceptions of face threats. To offer a holistic view, a worthy topic in future research is to examine the moderating effect of different conflict issues on perceived face threat as the effects of conflict content have not been well researched for years.

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Table I. The relationships between perceived face threats and conflict management styles

	Collaborating	Compromising	Accommodating	Competing	Avoiding
Perceived fellowship face threat	+	+	+	-	+
Perceived moral face threat	+	+	+	-	+
Perceived competence face threat	-	-	-	+	+
Perceived autonomy face threat	-	-	-	+	+

Table II. Factor loadings of perceived face threat scales

Item	PCFT	PFFT	PMFT	PAFT
During or after this conflict, doubts will arise about my capabilities.	.737			
Evading conflict will make others to suspect my lack of required knowledge or capability.	.723			
During this conflict, my social image as an expert will suffer from my opponents' disrespect.	.774			
What I say or do in the conflict may put my opponents on the spot.		.703		
Confrontations (e.g., objections, refusals, and criticisms) in the conflict will make it difficult for me to seek cooperation from my opponents in the future.		.687		
Altercations and confrontations are harmful for the interpersonal relationships.		.740		
Engaging in the conflict will make others to consider me as narrow-minded.			.698	
Involving in this conflict will establish me as a tough person to get along.			.731	
Holding firm my belief and opinion will present me as an arrogant person in the eyes of others.			.702	
My opponents' words, actions and attitudes in the conflict appear as orders to me and deter me from making free choices.				.761
What my opponents have done in the conflict infringes on my autonomy.				.729
My opponents' words, actions, and attitudes in the conflict would lead others to believe that I cannot take my own initiative.	.435*			.502*
Factor eigenvalue	3.867	2.142	1.821	1.507
Cumulative % of Variance	35.155	54.630	71.181	84.882
Notes: PCFT represents perceived competence face threat, PFFT stands for perceived fellowship face threat, PMFT means perceived moral face threat, and PAFT depicts perceived autonomy fact threat.				
* indicates that this item is eliminated from the future analysis due to the cross-loading issue and their loading coefficients are listed here for the sake of completeness.				

Table III. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. PSC	3.692	.645	<i>.723</i>										
2. <i>Guanxi</i>	3.911	.640	.049	<i>.808</i>									
3. PCFT	2.933	.954	.205***	-.148***	<i>.806</i>								
4. PMFT	3.248	.840	.137**	-.080*	.193***	<i>.777</i>							
5. PFFT	3.404	.802	.229***	-.096*	.242***	.373***	<i>.787</i>						
6. PAFT	2.652	.603	.059	-.069	.085*	.112**	.135**	<i>.803</i>					
7. Competing	3.122	.841	.175***	-.035	.141**	-.134**	-.196***	.106**	<i>.822</i>				
8. Collaborating	4.066	.701	.182***	.349***	-.057	.154**	.148***	-.046	.046	<i>.820</i>			
9. Accommodating	2.637	.762	.035	-.046	-.128***	.209***	.095*	-.038	.205***	-.163**	<i>.749</i>		
10. Avoiding	2.714	.784	.043	-.115**	.186***	.243***	.108**	-.039	.139**	-.204***	.369***	<i>.797</i>	
11. Compromising	3.565	.729	.170***	.121***	-.066	.212***	.290***	-.108*	.214***	.256***	.101**	.179***	<i>.735</i>

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; $N = 608$. The numbers in italics along the diagonal are reliability alphas.

Table IV. SEM results of multi-group comparison

	Interest Conflict	Cognition Conflict	Value Conflict
χ^2/df	1.333	1.531	1.397
IFI	.915	.935	.951
TLI	.905	.928	.946
CFI	.913	.934	.950
RMSEA	.054	.046	.040
γ : GX → PFFT	-.164**	-.181**	-.159**
γ : GX → PMFT	-.104*	-.212***	-.129*
γ : GX → PCFT	-.123*	-.137*	-.302***
γ : GX → PAFT	-.114*	-.135*	-.017
γ : PSC → PFFT	.325***	.358***	.306***
γ : PSC → PMFT	.297***	.278***	.113*
γ : PSC → PCFT	.020	.201**	.117*
γ : PSC → PAFT	.297***	.150**	.015
β : PFFT → Competing	-.143**	-.206***	-.323***
β : PFFT → Collaborating	.283***	.167**	.281***
β : PFFT → Compromising	.400***	.278***	.319***
β : PFFT → Accommodating	.131*	.021	.137*
β : PFFT → Avoiding	.058	.246***	.108*
β : PMFT → Competing	-.132*	-.180**	-.124*
β : PMFT → Collaborating	.180**	.112*	.190**
β : PMFT → Compromising	.141*	.167**	.180**
β : PMFT → Accommodating	.245**	.224***	.154**
β : PMFT → Avoiding	.221***	.228***	.237***
β : PCFT → Competing	.117*	.136*	.066
β : PCFT → Collaborating	-.047	-.053	-.206***
β : PCFT → Compromising	-.036	-.046	-.139*
β : PCFT → Accommodating	-.121*	-.147**	-.350***
β : PCFT → Avoiding	.192**	.162**	.380***
β : PAFT → Competing	.191**	.158**	.008
β : PAFT → Collaborating	-.143*	-.091	-.029
β : PAFT → Compromising	-.151**	-.185**	-.067
β : PAFT → Accommodating	-.003	-.107*	-.036
β : PAFT → Avoiding	-.114*	-.091	-.012
Unconstrained model: $\chi^2/df=1.418$, IFI =0.937, TLI =.0931, CFI = 0.931, RMSEA = 0.026			
Constrained model (measurement weights): $\chi^2/df=1.412$, IFI =0.936, TLI =.0931, CFI = 0.936, RMSEA = 0.026			
Constrained model (structural weights): $\chi^2/df=1.418$, IFI =0.934, TLI =.0931, CFI = 0.934, RMSEA = 0.026			
Constrained model (structural covariances): $\chi^2/df=1.418$, IFI =0.931, TLI =.0928, CFI = 0.929, RMSEA = 0.027			
Notes: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$			