

Sino-German Communication Interferences in Intercultural Teamwork:

A Postmodern Approach

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### Abstract

Previously, research on multinational teamwork with various nationalities and cultures involved, which looked at the aspect of communication, was largely based on the examination of specific facilitators and barriers to its communication (i.e. Watson, et al., 1993; Hofner Saphiere, 1996). There it was found that multinational teams might have specific communication facilitators dependent upon the cultures involved. This is reflected in the theoretical development in the field of intercultural management, which gives guidance for culturally complex team settings (i.e. Trompenaars, 1993).

The complexity managers' face is increasing further through China's involvement in the implementation of globalization strategies (Podsiadlowski, 2002). Recently, the relevance of China's involvement has been increasing for Germany, in particular given Chinese companies' investments in Germany. Therefore, the study of various nationalities in one research project has been reconsidered and currently there is new demand for studies, which seek to understand the complexity of Sino-German teamwork (Podsiadlowski, 2002). However, besides non-research based literature, research focusing solely on Sino-German teamwork occupies a marginal place (i.e. Podsiadlowski, 2002).

Additionally, much of the multinational team research (for example, Watson, et al., 1993) looked at outcomes and disregarded the team members' experience itself by using quantitative methods. It provided an understanding influenced by positivistic perspectives, saying that certain factors are pre-conditions for successful team communication. This study recognized these positions, but questioned the positivist bias demonstrated there. Throughout this research, associated factors were understood as being non-linear and interrelated, representing the complexity managers are experiencing.

As a result this study argued that Chinese and Germans working in teams were marginalised in the intercultural management research field until today and their needs were not addressed by much of the existing research. These led to my conclusion that there is a need to conduct research that for the first time is informed by a postmodern theoretical framework that seeks to privilege multiplicity and diversity and that also attends to the silences surrounding this group. Therefore, a postmodern framework provided the theoretical lens through which this research, and its authorial, methodological, and interpretive characteristics were construed and represented. This perspective emphasised local stories about experiences, attended to 'difference', was concerned with the multiple

nature of 'reality', and recognised the importance of language as a medium for the social construction of what may be considered 'truth' (Cheek, 2000).

Narrative inquiry represented in this thesis the postmodern epistemological framework to understand subjective experiences by exploring the stories of twelve Chinese and German participants and the meanings derived from these. These stories were themselves experiences structured and recalled inside wider cultural and social contexts (Kirkman, 2002; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The socio-cultural contexts were woven into the language used by the participants to explain their experiences and signified the meanings of these experiences. However, Chinese and Germans not only differed with regards to language and language variety, but also with respect to their patterns of usage and how meaning was generated in interactive situations on the basis of socio-cultural knowledge. Therefore, my narrative inquiry took into account both linguistic and socio-cultural aspects and addressed the relations between interactive communication strategies and larger social and cultural phenomena.

Within the context presented above, the focus and contribution of this study were the descriptions of the intercultural communication experiences of members of Sino-German teams and the analysis of factors relating to interferences in communication to provide a thicker explanation of communication interferences in intercultural communication, where theoretical attempts so far remained rather fragmented, and to contribute findings from different perspectives on what has traditionally been viewed from a positivistic standpoint. Through sharing the participants' lived experiences of working and communicating with Chinese and Germans and vice versa, a number of linguistic and socio-cultural factors influencing communication behaviour and causing interferences were uncovered. The factors identified from the study resonate with a number of factors previously established in existing multinational teamwork research and whilst others contributed new information that adds to the understandings of the meanings that may be made from such experience of communication interferences.

Comparing the experiences related by Chinese participants with those related by German participants showed a substantial consensus with regards to the communication interferences experienced in Sino-German teams and the factors relating to these interferences, as well as observable differences in communication behaviours.

The lack of foreign language proficiency on the side of both Chinese and German individuals was stated as being a major factor for communication interferences that was further enhanced through the strong linguistic barrier between these two languages. Good

language proficiency minimises the occurrence of misunderstandings and miscommunications. It allows better personal contact between the team members since it better enables people to establish personal contacts and relationships, as well as to use an interlinked communication structure that allows informal communication and therefore compliance with the Chinese cultural 'rules of the game'.

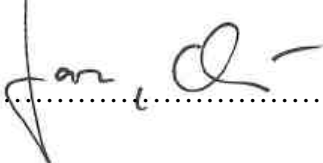
However, foreign language proficiency alone is not a guarantee for successful intercultural communication in Sino-German teams. This study also analysed, in addition to the practical and theoretical significance of language and language skills, the cultural influences on the communication between Chinese and German team members. Many participants were either unaware (especially on the German side) or only partially aware of the fact that differences in communication behaviour are based on different culture-specific communication conventions and strategies. It was found that intercultural awareness on the part of individuals in a team, meaning the knowledge and awareness of culture-specific conventions and norms, had a positive influence on communication within the team. Knowledge of the meaning of the two key terms *mianzi* and *guanxi* plays an important role in Sino-German teams. On the other hand, an ethnocentric perspective on either one or both sides inevitably results in mutual negative attributions.

This findings added to the understanding how this communication could be improved and, most importantly, as a prerequisite for actions of any kind to achieve improvements, to draw the attention of German team members to the relevance of communication when working with their Chinese colleagues and vice versa. Furthermore, the study functioned as an act of empowerment, a way to give voice to managers and team members who were methodologically not heard.

**Authors Declaration**

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed .....  ..... Date...May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013.....

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## **1 Introduction**

### ***Research background***

Communication is a vital issue for organisations. For instance, Boje, Oswick and Ford (2004, p. 571) consider organisations as “material practices of text and talk set in currents of political economy and sociohistory”. Following this perspective, an organisation is determined by communication and everything that happens in and to an organisation can be seen as a phenomenon of communication. Consequently, ‘functioning’ communication is a crucial issue at the organisational level, as well as at the employee and working group levels.

This is evident in Buckley and Casson’s (2001, p. 123) suggestion that “the efficiency of internal communication is a major factor in the overall cost of decision-making, and hence a major determinant of the performance of the firm”. Indeed, numerous studies suggest that various facets of (‘functioning’) communication contribute significantly to a sustainable competitive advantage and, consequently to the long-term success of organisations (Barney, 1991; Smidts, Pruyn, & Riel van, 2001; Carmeli & Tishler, 2004).

In particular, communication can be considered an important mechanism of coordination and control (Mohr, Fisher, & Nevin, 1996; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999) within and between organisations. However, “because the opportunities for miscommunication and distortion are so rich” (Ouchi, 1978, p. 173) the transfer of control is a central challenge of hierarchical organisations as unintentional (and intentional) errors between superior and subordinates can occur. Consequently, “every organisation apparently has internal communication problems and conflicts between various individuals and groups” (Mayer, 1974, p. 2).

As a result of the problems and conflicts that interfere with communication the effectiveness of the organisation may suffer. In other words, the results of communication interferences “are needless, usually unproductive, and can cost organisations dearly in terms of time, money and material and human resources” (Axley, 1986, p. 17). Therefore, to ensure the appropriate ‘functioning’ of an organisation, communication can be considered to be a critical challenge for organisations.

Communication can be defined as the interaction of two or more individuals in order to exchange messages and create meaning (Adler, 2002). It includes any behaviour that is aimed at indicating something to someone else who perceives and interprets it (Burkart, 2003). In addition, communication can be seen as a complex interpersonal process that uses speech, writing or other signals in order to exchange ideas, information et cetera (Kittler, 2008).

Even within a national cultural context, with a dominant native language, organisations are embedded in highly fragmented and competitive environments. Doing business across national (and cultural) borders consequently boosts the complexity and its consequences as a result of the internationalisation of the business environment, where individuals from different cultures work together mostly with the joint aim of meeting both their own job requirements as well as the requirements of the organisation in question by means of cooperative actions (Thomas, 1996).

Culture is another “powerful social construct” (Boyacigiller, Kleinberg, Phillips, & Sackmann, 2004, p. 99) and a central issue many organisations are confronted with. As Doney, Cannon and Mullen (1998) discuss, an increasingly diverse and multicultural workforce makes culture another central issue for organisations. Also, corporate interest in how cultural differences impact organisational performance, as well as the increased globalisation that has occurred in the business world during the last few decades stress the

relevance of culture. This has led to a simultaneous increase in interest by scholars regarding culture and its impact on organisations.

Whereas traditional research in this field has been particularly concerned with economic and legal issues as well as organisational forms and structures, the prominent role of culture has become increasingly important in the last two decades (Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005). Despite the growing interest in cultural issues, culture remains “clearly a very complex entity” (Triandis, 1983, p. 83) and according to Javidan, House, Dorfman, Hanges and Sully de Luque (2006, p. 899) definitions of culture “vary from the very inclusive (‘culture is the human-made part of the environment’ Herskovits, 1955) to the highly focused (‘culture is a shared meaning system’ Shweder & Levine, 1984)”.

Culture is particularly closely related to the communication issue in a highly focused perspective. For instance, Hall (1959, p. 217) defines that “culture is communication and communication is culture” and suggests that the use of context in communication varies in different cultures (Hall, 1979). Intercultural communication is a subsequent phenomenon when communication takes place across cultural borders. This intercultural background makes communication even more complex than it is in an intracultural setting where, for example, all members may speak with the same mother tongue.

Beyond language, which is considered an important aspect of culture, further aspects of culture eventually cause members of different cultures to “see, interpret, and evaluate things differently, and consequently act upon them differently” (Adler, 2003, p. 250). Communication can be seen as a transmission of meaning from one person to another while each person is influenced or socialised by a different cultural context (Kittler, 2008).

Even when communicating about (the term) culture, the intercultural issue becomes evident: for example, Hofstede (1980) refers to different meanings of the term culture in different languages that might already lead to confusion when communicating about culture across national borders. This becomes another major challenge for many of today's organisations, in which there is a ubiquitous need to carry out communication across cultures.

For instance, as international companies globalise they are experiencing "a rapid transition due to increasing cultural diversity" (Ady, 1994, p. 30). As a consequence, the number of intercultural interactions between individuals within these companies, as well as in foreign business environments, employing a number of different languages and communication styles, increases (Kittler, 2008). The increased frequency of intercultural communication can be associated with a higher number of communication interferences bearing various types of more or less successful attempts to communicate (House, Kasper, & Ross, 2003).

This is based on the assumption that, even when making all possible efforts to exchange meaningful information when communicating, this does not automatically result in the desired outcome. Communication may not result in understanding but may produce different results and therefore different degrees of understanding, indicating the presence of interferences. Furthermore, increased relevance and frequency of intercultural communication and contact could have created "a new set of external adaptation problems" (House, 2004, p. 258).

Consequently, 'functioning' intercultural communication and avoiding communication interferences can be seen as a challenge and as becoming a critical factor for effectiveness and efficiency for many business activities (Yoshida, 2002; Scudder, 2004) as shown in the following section.

***Relevance of communication interferences in intercultural collaboration***

The growing frequency of intercultural collaborations resulting from a higher degree of multiculturalism and increased globalisation has been fostered by a number of (recent) developments. Technological and political achievements in particular can be considered as drivers for this phenomenon (Drucker, 1980; Von Hoffman, 1999). The higher availability and growing popularity of various IT developments recently has increased the impact of technology. For instance, communication media, which enable face-to-face communication over large geographical distances, are now easily accessible even to small businesses and individuals.

Furthermore, international business activities benefit from almost globe-spanning principles such as the WTO agreements or institutions of regional integration. In addition, processes of political liberalisation facilitate international mobility resulting in migration processes. These developments lead to an increased number of intercultural encounters, making intercultural communication a significant issue in today's (business) world. As a result, communication interferences may also be considered as a significant issue in intercultural encounters (Kittler, 2008).

The following sub-sections indicate the relevance of communication interferences in intercultural collaboration by showing the increased complexity that arises when different cultures are involved in communication at country, organisational or individual level. Since this research project was conducted within the scope of business and management studies, all three levels will be related to their consequences for businesses.

***Country level.*** On a country level, communication has historically been considered to be a central issue because it facilitates trade between individuals. A common culture and common language seem to foster successful communication. The assumption that there will be more successful economic transactions if the agents involved have a more

homogeneous cultural background (Langner, 2005), for instance, triggers policies that subsidise assimilation through the acquisition of the majority language (Lazear, 1999). Vice versa, a negative impact on economic performance by people lacking the means to communicate effectively with each other can be assumed (Gradstein & Justman, 2002). This view is reflected in educational policies and the discussion on the socialising role of education (Langner, 2005) or in discussions on the role of communication skills for the social and economic integration of immigrants (Dustmann & Van Soest, 2002).

Economists have studied the link between language proficiency and productivity extensively. Consequently, a country that fosters ‘functioning’ communication among its indigenous population provides a fertile environment for business activities (Trompenaars, 1993; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Marschan-Piekkari, et al., 1999; Leung, et al., 2005; Javidan, et al., 2006). The challenge to provide a common ground for communication within a country is prominently featured in political discussions.

With different cultures and languages getting involved in the mix, the complexity and consequently the associated cost of dealing with these changes increases significantly. For instance, the number of official languages within the European Union (EU) has reached a total of 23 across 27 member countries. Since the EU extends equal treatment to all member countries’ official languages in order to enable citizens to understand and apply EU-policies correctly, communication across (former) borders is obviously considered to be a significant issue. The extensive multilingualism causes high direct costs of over 300 million Euros per year for translation (European Commission, 2012). This sum only accounts for the translation of written communication. The consequences of the equal treatment policy for verbal communication are not considered at all in this figure.

For written communications there are further indirect costs in the form of institutional slack that result from “a bureaucratic machinery that increasingly takes on

Babel-like proportions” (Fidrmuc & Ginsburgh, 2007). The need to translate legal documents involves long delays and inaccurate translations with a lack of sensitivity for culturally ambiguous terms or topics could result in serious misunderstandings. Consequently, the direct costs of precise translation are enormous. A reduction of the number of official languages to sensible levels on the basis of the economics is likely to be thwarted by political considerations.

Furthermore, this policy on the EU-level also has a direct impact on businesses. For example, patents in the European Union have to be translated into a large number of languages that makes the protection of intellectual property a cost-intensive exercise. Despite current discussions about simplifying the procedures, Elting, (2007) mentions that currently as much as 70 percent of the total filing costs result from the translation of patent applications within the EU.

Compared to other regions or countries, the heterogeneity in communication causes higher costs and is a risk for innovative businesses in the EU. Such heterogeneity in communication may also be assumed for Sino-German bi-lateral communication with similar consequences in comparison to homogenous cultural backgrounds.

*Organisational level.* On the organisational level, communication also plays a vital role and its ‘functioning’ is regarded as crucial for company performance. For instance, Hegele and Kieser (2001), discuss the idea that the shareholder value of a company can be increased by effective communication. In particular, communication can be considered as an important mechanism for coordination and control on an intrafirm and interfirm level (Marschan-Piekkari, et al., 1999).

As mentioned earlier, “because the opportunities for miscommunication and distortion are so rich” (Ouchi, 1978, p. 173) for instance, transmission of control is a central challenge for hierarchical organisations because unintentional (and intentional)



errors between superiors and subordinates are likely to occur. Consequently, “every organisation apparently has internal communication problems and conflicts between various individuals and groups” (Mayer, 1974, p. 2). As a result, the effectiveness of the organisation may suffer. Walker and Hampson (2003, p. 124) provide a résumé of examples from the construction industry (an industry where the importance of efficient communication might not be expected to be as high as in other industries or sectors such as IT or media): problems in communication “lead to expensive delays with costs potentially escalating dramatically while the various discrepancies are resolved and/or rework is undertaken during the construction phase”.

In international business, large companies tend to maintain dispersed subunits, which encounter language barriers when communicating with their local business community as well as within their network (Luo & Shenkar, 2006). As Hofstede (2001, p. 440) argues, “the functioning of multinational business organisations hinges on intercultural communication and cooperation”. Welge and Holtbrügge (2002, p. 16) also point out the importance of managing intercultural challenges and the consequent significance of communication for global firms.

Again, efficient communication is regarded as a major source of competitive advantage in equal measure, since it is a prerequisite for most processes inside organisations, such as the internal knowledge transfer and the generation of innovation (Cantwell, 2001; Holtbrügge & Berg, 2004). For instance, communication among international companies’ units is a necessary condition for the transfer of complex and often tacit knowledge (Ghoshal, Korine, & Szulanski, 1994; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000) and the increased availability of electronic communication media has made frequent interunit communication feasible (Castells, 2000; Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2003). However, communication flows in international businesses – “a critical feature of the

modern international firm” (McKern, 2003, p. 3) – not only take place between and within subsidiaries, between them and the headquarters, as well as outside the corporation, but also across cultural borders. Therefore, interferences in communication processes and the malfunctioning of communication can be seen as an even more common phenomenon for international businesses compared to domestic businesses since communication takes places within a diverse set of cultural contexts (McKern, 2003).

Along the same line of reasoning, Phatak (1994, p. 228) argues that, “despite the sophistication and speed of contemporary systems, the geographic distance between a parent company and a foreign affiliate continues to cause communication distortion”. Furthermore, cultural differences, particularly differences in the native language between the communication partners also account for interferences in the communication process (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Watson, et al., 1993). Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman (2003) justifiably argue that international companies are unusual organisations in almost being multilingual by definition.

When operating within different cultural contexts, language plays a particular role (Piekkari & Zander, 2005) and communication tends to become a more severe challenge than within a single cultural context. Generally, “when communication breaks down it is very costly – socially, psychologically and financially. Misunderstandings affect morale, productivity and quality” (King, 1994, p. 64).

**Individual level.** King’s (1994) conclusion also reflects the individual level, where, according to Zander (2005, p. 83) “communication is considered an essential component of leadership and a vital managerial competence”. According to Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, and Henwood (1991) managerial functions and tasks are fundamentally tied to communication. As evidence supporting their claim, they argue that among Mintzberg’s (1973) ten managerial roles five are explicit communication tasks: liaison, monitor,

disseminator, spokesman, and negotiator. The other five roles also tend to depend upon skilful communication, although without being explicit communication tasks. In consequence, “communication and management appear inextricably linked because of the nature of management and managers’ responsibilities” (Penley, et al., 1991, p. 57).

Consequently, on an individual level, communication is considered as a crucial issue and it can be argued that individuals who have good communication skills is also crucial for a business. Communication interferences, in contrast, have a negative impact on the business, as well as for the individual, with unnecessary strain being placed on individuals when communication goes wrong. “Managers and non-managers find these [communication interferences] the most difficult, nebulous, and frustrating of all their problems and challenges” (Mayer, 1974, p. 2).

In an international context, the ability to communicate seems to become an ever more important business tool, as well as “a prerequisite for the management of global economic organisations and effective government in complex societies” (Haslam, 2002, p. 14). Internationally mobile managers ranked communication skills as the number one criteria when selecting expatriates (Zander, 2005). Related to this, a global mindset is seen as a factor of success in internationalisation (Kedia & Mukherji, 1999; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Paul, 2000; Nummela, Saarenketo, & Puumalainen, 2004).

The reason for this is that beyond the knowledge of language, “a fundamental weakness in communicating with other people can be our failure to emphasise or to put ourselves into the position of the recipient(s) of our message. If we endeavour to make this imaginative leap then we will be much more likely to communicate effectively than if we simply assume the recipient will understand” (Sagan & Drake, 2004, p. 122).

In the context of international business activities, ‘functioning’ communication for instance, plays a prominent role in the field of foreign assignments and expatriate

adjustment. In line with other authors (for example, Caligiuri, Phillips, Lazarova, Tarique, & Bürgi, 2001), Puck, Kittler, and Wright (2008) argue that ‘functioning’ communication and appropriate language skills are prerequisites for intercultural adjustment to take place.

From a business perspective, this result emphasises the need for an adequate consideration of communication and language abilities when sending employees abroad. As Buckley, Carter, Clegg, and Hut (Buckley, Carter, Clegg, & Hut, 2005, p. 48) put it: “Language is associated with knowledge, which, in the context of international business, has long been identified as a key part of the firm’s comparative advantages in doing business in foreign markets”. Although many international companies already offer language courses for managers, they often neglect the importance of language skills when selecting expatriates for foreign assignments (Kittler, 2008). The resulting communication interferences also affect the expatriates’ adjustment to living abroad, which is related to various forms of expatriate failure.

### ***Focus of my study***

As demonstrated above, communication is a multilevel phenomenon. The previous examples illustrate the relevance of communication interferences within and across cultural environments on country, organisational and individual levels, as well as their consequences for businesses. However, according to Piekkari and Zander (2005) there is to date only a limited knowledge of the implications of these complex, multicultural and multilingual communication processes in international management.

Individuals are accorded a central position when focusing on communication issues, even when discussing communication issues on a supra-level such as knowledge flows in international companies. For instance, emerging research highlights how language fluency enables certain individuals to act as gatekeepers with regards to communication and information flow within and between subsidiaries (Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005).

Also Gudykunst, one of the most cited intercultural communication scholars of the 1980s and early 1990s (Hart, 1999), suggests in an overview of the study of international communication in one of the seminal readers in the field: “The unit of analysis in intercultural communication is typically the interpersonal dyad” (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002, p. 2). This view relates to the common assertion that interpersonal interaction builds the basic form of human communication.

My study focuses on interpersonal communication in intercultural environments. Since interpersonal communication across cultural borders is argued to be a more complex phenomenon than communication within a national context and the number of intercultural encounters has increased and is expected to significantly increase further, the danger of various facets of communication interferences also increases. The practical and theoretical significance of communication interferences in intercultural communication will be discussed in the following section in more detail.

### *Practical significance of intercultural communication interferences*

At first glance, the central problem of communication interferences in intercultural communication seems to be a significant problem to focus on. Furthermore, Varner (2000, p. 53) argues that in order to advance the field of intercultural communication there is a need to “conduct further research on the relationship between culture [...] and communication”. However, considering a problem does not automatically confirm the significance of the issue raised for further discourse.

An essential consideration when planning and designing a research project is, from my point of view, to identify a significant problem. Based on Ackoff’s design of social research, Level and Waters (1976) in their experimental design in communication research present a list of criteria that may help to determine whether a research problem is practically significant. The problem has to be:

1. Timely
2. Relate to a practical problem and/or a wide population
3. An influential or critical population

The area in which the problem of this thesis is located is in the field of intercultural communication. The following section discusses these three criteria for practical significance and refines my specific research focus.

### ***Timeliness of intercultural communication interferences***

The previous discussion has already indicated that intercultural communication has emerged as a timely issue. In particular, technological and political achievements have exposed individuals to a continuously increasing number of interactions across national and cultural borders. In order to give substance to the effect of these developments, the following section presents major historical technological achievements and infers their impact on the number of intercultural encounters.

The effects of technological development are not just a recently recognised phenomenon. For instance, half a century ago Fuller (1959, p. 74) pointed out that the significance of cultural contacts is by no means only historical: “Modern transportation and communication makes an increasing number of intercultural contacts inevitable”. The negative stance of this statement already points at problems related to intercultural contacts.

Hitherto, the “passage of time” (McDaniel, Samovar, & Porter, 2005, p. 6) has changed the face of intercultural communication quite drastically and communication between people from different cultures was made easier and simpler. In the period of major technological innovation in the 19th century a number of breakthroughs, particularly the

completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad in America or the Indian railways across the sub-continent started to reduce geographic distances significantly, fostering individual contacts far beyond the previous local scope.

Half a century later America and Europe were about to be connected by one single giant step. In the year 1919 US-pilots undertook the first transatlantic flight (Stoff, 2000) and this made the world even smaller as international contacts across continents became possible. As Priestley (as cited in Morley, 2000, p. 307) comments in 1944, “The world of rapid aerial transport - and of almost instantaneous communication - is clearly shrinking fast, and it is really quite different from the world of yesterday. The world of air-travel cannot help but be an international world. The airman moves too fast for national borders”.

As a consequence of the enormous technological progress the physical distances on a global scale declined and this simplified and fostered an increasing number of intercultural contacts. Today, frequent flights across borders and even continents are a common phenomenon in the international business world, thus making intercultural communication a timely issue.

Rapid developments in information and media technology produce an even more intense narrowing of members from different cultures. Rather than actually reducing the spatial distance, today’s media and information technology virtually bridges geographical distances. While the preceding examples showed how easy it has been to overcome large geographical distances, developments in the field of media seem to have driven the increase of intercultural contacts even more significantly.

The idea of the ‘global village’ in the notion of McLuhan and Fiore (1967) started to become more concrete shortly after this remarkable observation: in the autumn of 1969 the ARPAnet, the antecedent of today’s internet was launched consisting initially of only four tied nodes. By 1992 the internet had reached more than a million users and we can

only guess at the number of computers connected to the World Wide Web today. Most sources reckon on a figure of around two billion users for the year 2012 (Shelly & Campbellm, 2012). The internet has narrowed the world by allowing people to efficiently interconnect in a virtual manner around the globe. Email has evolved to be the most frequently used communication media and yet is far from being the end in the progressive development of information technologies. As a consequence of these developments, communication across cultural and national borders has become an almost daily routine for many people, which again makes this a timely issue.

However, Nachum and Zaheer (2005) recommend a more critical perspective when discussing the “death of distance” (Cairncross, 1997, p. 2), because despite the reduced costs involved bridging geographic distances, costs do still remain and distance does not only refer to geography (Inkpen & Ramaswamy, 2006). The same applies for the unreflective use of the idea of a ‘global village’ (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967).

A more critical perspective is also suggested by Ghemawat (2001) when discussing the costs and risks of international business activities resulting from barriers created by distance. Ghemawat (2001) introduces the CAGE-framework that considers three further attributes of distance in addition to economic distance: cultural distance, administrative distance and geographical distance. In the context of interpersonal interaction in particular, all four dimensions are argued to play a role from a company’s perspective. However, it is predominantly the geographic and cultural distances that can be argued to have an impact on the communication between individuals from different countries. Although large geographic distances can be overcome easily by travel, cultural distances may remain.

In consequence, cultural distances may not diminish in the way that geographical distances have diminished to become less of a hindrance to interactions between individuals from different, or even quite remote, countries (Goodmann & Cohen, 2003).



But according to the research of House (2004) it appears that geographic proximity facilitates cross-cultural communication and the spread of values. An exception is when countries, such as many English-speaking countries that are not physically close, share the same colonial heritage or an equivalent immigration background. Furthermore, geographic and cultural distances do not generally correspond and are only correlated for selected country pairs while being completely unrelated for others (Harzing, 2004). Also Hofstede (2001) assumes that developments in the field of information technology and electronic communication will not eliminate cultural differences.

Hofstede (2001) also warns of the widespread belief that technologies such as email and the Internet will not only foster more and intense connections between people across national and cultural borders, bringing individuals of different nationalities together in a ‘global village’, but also reduce cultural differences. Electronic communication increases the amount of information accessible to individuals around the globe “but it does not increase their capacity to absorb this information or change the pre-existing value systems”.

As an explanation Hofstede (2001, p. 453) argues that “users have to select what information they recognise. [...] We select our information according to our values. Like our parents, we read newspapers that we expect to give our preferred points of view, and, confronted with the new bulk of electronic information, we again pick out whatever reinforces pre-existing ideas”. Or as House (2004, p. 1) put it: “Ample evidence shows that world cultures are getting more and more interconnected and that the business world is becoming increasingly global”.

As economic borders come down, cultural barriers will most likely go up and present new challenges and opportunities in business. When cultures come into contact, they may converge on some aspects, but their idiosyncrasies will likely amplify”. Because

of the persistence of cultural differences, despite other merging developments, the absolute frequency of various types of communication interferences in intercultural communication can be expected to remain at a high level at the very least. As communication interferences are likely to be associated with the enormously increased number of intercultural interactions, communication across borders can be considered to be not only a timely phenomenon but also a timely problem.

***Intercultural communication interferences - a practical problem***

Although they are still a timely issue, various types of communication interferences have been considered a practical problem for businesses for quite some time. Blake and Mouton (1968) had already suggested that communication interferences were a major factor contributing to breakdowns in organisational effectiveness. In their cross-cultural study, a majority of the responding managers mentioned distortions in the communication process “as the single greatest barrier to corporate excellence” (Hill & Baron, 1976, p. 408). Therefore, from a business perspective, distortions to ‘functioning’ communication can be argued to be a practical problem in general. In particular, the problem of communication interferences in an intercultural context becomes practical when there is evidence that the business activities take place in and across different cultural contexts (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Shaw, 2004; Staples & Zhao, 2006; Watson, et al., 1993).

A recent indication of ongoing internationalisation is documented in the World Investment Report 2012: the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2012) reports a consecutive rise in global foreign direct investment (FDI) flows and of FDI flows into various regions. An example is the continued enormous interest in the Asian region, making China currently the most attractive destination of FDI (UNCTAD, 2012).

Beyond classical patterns of internationalisation originating from developed countries, an increasing number of transnational corporations from emerging economies continue to expand overseas (UNCTAD, 2012). For instance, the outward FDI of Chinese international companies (Luo & Tung, 2007; UNCTAD, 2012) is the opposite phenomenon of traditional Western internationalisation paths, also leading to intercultural encounters. The multilingual context in which international business activities are embedded makes the increased number of intercultural encounters into a problem of practical significance.

In addition to language barriers, further cultural differences remain despite some unifying tendencies of globalisation. The answer to the question of whether culture still poses a problem for business communication across national borders relates to the globalisation convergence-divergence debate and lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

However, anecdotal evidence focussing on culture and communication suggests the remains of cultural differences. For instance, House (2004, p. 709) while acknowledging “that global communication, technical innovation, and industrialisation can create a milieu for cultural change, a convergence of cultural values is by no means assured”. As Giddens (1994, p. 81) points out, “Globalising influences are fracturing as well as unifying, create new forms of stratification, and often produce opposing consequences in different regions or localities”.

In consequence, it may be important not to assume a fully universalising process and accept the existence of cultural differences that interfere with communication. The remaining barriers to intercultural communication can affect communication quality and therefore accentuate the presence of a practical problem.

***Relating to a wide population - Chinese and German employees***

All the prerequisites of a significant research problem are not represented only by timeliness and practical significance, as was suggested by Level and Water (1976).

Another necessary condition is, according to them, whether various forms of communication interferences in intercultural communication relate to a wide population.

The previous discussion already delivered some indications of this assumption on an organisational level. However, since the focus of this research is on interpersonal communication, intercultural communication issues need to be related to a wide population of individuals. This is the case if many individuals have to communicate across cultural borders and use a language other than their native tongue as is currently experienced by Chinese and German employees working in Sino-German teams.

In the course of the commercial race for a share of the Chinese market, almost two thousand German enterprises have established branches in China (dpa, 2008). A considerable number of Germans employed by these companies are now based in China. They work together with Chinese colleagues and their success or failure is of crucial importance for the economic wellbeing of their German parent companies as well as, to a certain extent, the whole German economy. In 2011 the Chinese economy became more important for the German export industry than the Italian economy (Ohanian & Kühnlenz, 2012) with China accounting for 6.1% of total German exports. China therefore became Germany's fifth most important trading partner, on a par with the United Kingdom whose role becomes increasingly less important (Ohanian & Kühnlenz, 2012).

In addition, Germany's trade surplus in 2012 will be higher than in any other country and therefore also higher than China's trade surplus, which stresses the importance of the export business itself as well as China's share in German export volumes. China's demand for German products is increasing year after year. Over the last ten years exports

to China from all German industries have increased by more than ten percent (Ohanian & Kühnlenz, 2012). This leads to an increase in work-related interactions between Chinese and German nationals and the consequent communication between these two cultures is still growing since large parts of western China's economic area are still untapped by Western enterprises. Smaller German companies have also started to set up local branches in China and Chinese enterprises are beginning to invest in German companies and establish their own branches in Germany as previously mentioned with regards to the new outward FDI of Chinese companies (Milliken & Martins, 1996; Arndt & Slate, 1997; Hirn, 2005; Zinzius, 2007; Steinfeld, 2010).

The subject of Sino-German communication is therefore of growing importance for Chinese and German organisations, as well as individuals of both nationalities and a crucial issue for their future. However, due to the very different cultural contexts, such an intercultural setting can be argued to be very complex and associated with a higher number of communication interferences.

Consequently, it can be argued that communication interferences in intercultural communication is an issue related to a wide population of individuals, one wide population of which is employees working in Sino-German organisations, as well as other similar bi-national groups that communicate across cultural borders and thus represents large groups of individuals. This relates to the importance of not only addressing a wide population, but also a critical population in order to confirm the practical significance of the research problem. Teams making up a critical population for businesses will be identified in the following section and it will be suggested that this type of group is also affected by communication challenges beyond the bi-national Sino-German context.

*Teams as a critical population*

In addition to the increasing importance of intercultural communication there is another ongoing development of great significance in today's enterprises. The restructuring of corporate organisations to allow greater flexibility and reduce organisational hierarchies is a worldwide trend. Amongst other things this entails improving communication structures with group and teamwork high on the agenda (Tung, 1997).

The characteristic of changing towards teamwork within corporate structures is based on the need for an increase in communication within and between different units (departments, project groups, teams et cetera) and a confrontation with the 'otherness' since, depending on the task at hand, the groups will frequently have a new composition and therefore different people will find themselves having to work together (Furnham, 1997; Tung, 1997). Therefore, Ezzamel and Willmott (1998) consider teamwork to be the most popular form of restructuring for organisations. There is an increasing trend to coordinate and shape work processes via teams and groups (Milliken & Martins, 1996) making workgroups an essential part of current organisational structures (Guzzo & Shea, 1992; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Dematteo, Eby, & Sundstrom, 1998) and a "growing trend in organisations is to give more responsibility for important activities to teams rather than individuals" (Yukl, 1998, p. 351).

Organisations rely considerably more on the efficiency of teams to achieve their organisational goals (Tannenbaum & Salas, 1996) and these can be monocultural, bicultural or multicultural as well as international, multinational or transnational. This shift towards teams is part of a larger paradigm shift that affects the design of organisations, as well as the characteristics of performance-oriented systems. It is assumed that teams are the ideal basis for improving performance and increasing contentment but loss of

communication and friction are, however, possible and these prevent optimum functioning (Tannenbaum & Salas, 1996).

According to the Gestalt psychological principle that ‘The whole is greater than the sum of the parts’ the advantages of teamwork arise from synergistic effects (Spieß, 1996). It is a characteristic of teamwork that, by means of coordination and integration, it goes beyond the simple addition of individual performances. “The increasing popularity of team-based organisational structures reflects the widely-shared belief that teamwork offers the potential to achieve outcomes that could not be achieved by individuals working in isolation” (Jackson, 1996, p. 53).

As indicated above, from a business and management perspective, teams in organisations form a **critical and influential** population. Combining this with the **current wide population** of involved Chinese and German nationals, especially those Chinese and German nationals working in teams, shows how they may well be currently experiencing the **practical** problems of intercultural communication interferences.

*Summarising the practical significance of communication interferences in Sino-German teams*

The discussion above demonstrates that investigating and understanding communication interferences in intercultural communication is an issue of practical significance. Extended infrastructures and technological developments have made intercultural interactions a timely phenomenon. A practical problem was identified because language and culture can affect communication across borders. This problem can also be related to a wide population (Chinese and German nationals), as well as to an influential and critical population of teams in today’s organisations, which includes Sino-German teams as well as other multicultural teams, which are an inevitable consequence of today’s business world and form a core part of organisations (Larkey, 1996). These working

groups and teams are, due to their multidisciplinary nature, for the most part not only characterised by heterogeneity and different mother tongues but increasingly by the different cultural backgrounds of their members.

Since there has been a marked increase in cooperation between China and Germany, Sino-German cultural diversity and intercultural communication in multinational organisations is becoming increasingly more significant<sup>1</sup>. As teamwork features very strongly in today's working world and German subsidiaries are being set up in China, as well as Chinese branches in Germany, there is more cooperation between Chinese and German employees resulting in an increasing number of Sino-German working groups and more communication taking place within them (Tung, 1997) with a possibility for a higher number of communication interferences. My study's focus on interpersonal communication in intercultural environments can therefore be refined towards a focus on the communication between Chinese and German members of Sino-German teams.

### ***Theoretical significance of intercultural communication interferences***

Research on intercultural issues is not a new phenomenon. For instance, Hamnett and Porter (1983) mention that cross-national social science research, as an antecedent of cross-cultural or intercultural research, has a rather long research tradition with the comparison of data on aspects of two or more societies having its roots in the 18th century.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms *culturally diverse working groups* and *multinational working groups*, which in the literature are often used synonymously, will be differentiated here as follows: In the context of *culturally diverse working groups* all aspects of cultural differentiation are taken into account. Depending on the concept of culture used this may include a differentiation according to race, religion, ethnicity, nation or, in a broader sense, according to gender, age, occupation et cetera as well (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Cramer, 2007), so that the terms *culturally diverse working group* or *multicultural working group* used in the present thesis serve as umbrella terms. *Multinational working groups* comprise members who either naturally belonged to different national cultures or were socially integrated into them. Henceforth, they are referred to as *multinational* or *national culturally diverse* working groups. Within culturally diverse groups a distinction is made between *national cultural diversity* and *ethnic cultural diversity*. The latter refers to the analysis of group members who are of the same nationality but different ethnicity, which is commonly used in studies on diversity. Political and organisational considerations support the existence of numerous multinational working groups (Ilgen, LePine, & Hollenbeck, 1997). This is based on the hope and assumption that, due to the heterogeneous and diverse group configuration, there exists a wider choice of skills, beliefs, values and experience to draw upon, resulting in a potential benefit if individuals from top management down to self-organised working groups in offices, administration, production and at customers' sites exchange their different views with regards to the same problem (Dahlin, Weingart, & Hinds, 2005).



The field of intercultural communication research is considerably younger. As Gudykunst and Mody (2002) argue, preparadigmatic work is to be attributed to intellectuals of the 19th and early 20th century such as Darwin, Marx or Freud. For instance, the roots for early interpretations of the unconscious level of culture are inspired by Freud's concept of the unconscious. Based on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, anthropologist Hall (1959) argued in his first seminal work "The Silent Language" that individuals tend to be partially unaware of elements of their non-verbal communication behaviour. According to Leeds-Hurwitz (1990), Hall's foundational book, together with introducing intercultural communication to the Foreign Service Institute in the early 1950s, popularised and conceptualised the idea of intercultural communication. However, even half a century later, communication theory is still just at the dawn of responding to the global imperative (Monge, 1998).

Furthermore, to many business professionals, intercultural communication, even in the prominent medium of language, is not considered to be a particularly important managerial issue (Welch, et al., 2005). As Varner (2000, p. 40) puts it: "While the international/intercultural business literature does not focus on communication, the intercultural communication literature traditionally does not examine communication in a business context but a more general context". Consequently, "there is much room for speculation about how culture might affect communication in a multinational organisation" (Teboul, Chen, & Fritz, 1994, p. 15) or, in a wider scope, how culture might affect communication in general.

According to Gudykunst (1983) the first attempts in systematic theorising on intercultural communication can be found in the 7th volume of the International and Intercultural Communication Annual of the year 1983 with more sophisticated theories in further theory-focused volumes in this series (Kim & Gudykunst, 1988; Wiseman, 1995).

To date a number of theories have been established (Gudykunst, 2004): first, culture can be integrated with the communication process in the theories of communication. Second, theories can be designed to describe how communication varies across cultures. And third, theories can be generated to explain communication between people from different cultures. The latter tends to be the area where most theorising attempts take place, with theories focusing on effective outcomes, accommodation and adaptation, identity management, communication networks and adjustment and adaptation to new cultural environments (Gudykunst, Lee, Nishida, & Ogawam, 2004).

However, up to this point, the theoretical attempts remain rather fragmented and even theories on intercultural communication effectiveness (as described in chapter 2, section ‘What is intercultural communication?’) do not particularly approach communication interferences in intercultural communication. For instance, Hinnenkamp (2001, p. 1) in an essay constructing communication interferences as a cultural event, points out that “attempts at grounding misunderstanding somehow empirically” remain very rare.

Apart from the gap in understanding communication interferences in intercultural communication, when looking at intercultural communication in multinational teams, without a specific focus on communication interferences but rather from a perspective of a multinational organisation, a review of the literature indicates that in contrast to the political, economic and legal factors that often attract a great deal of interest from scholars, the aspect of communication in multinational teams generally gets far too little attention. The limited research that has been undertaken on the aspect of communication looked at various nationalities in one team and was largely based on the examination of specific facilitators and barriers to (successful) communication (for example, Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993; Hofner Saphiere, 1996). There it was found that multinational teams

might have specific communication facilitators dependent upon the cultures involved. This is reflected in the theoretical developments in the field of intercultural management, which give guidance for culturally complex team settings (for example, Trompenaars, 1993). In addition, apart from non-research based literature, research focusing solely on Sino-German teamwork, with or without a focus on communication, let alone communication interferences, occupies a marginal place in the evidence base (for example, Podsiadlowski, 2002; Cramer, 2007).

Additionally, much of the research (for example, Watson, et al., 1993) looks at outcomes by using quantitative methods and thus disregards the impact of the team members' experience itself (Cramer, 2007). In other words, as an example, the voices of Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams were neglected, meaning that first person accounts of experiences were very seldom explored. Current research interested in the outcomes of the processes of multinational and specifically Sino-German teamwork is more focused on what actually happened in teamwork situations and collaboration while the subjective meaning that the team members construct out of what happened is widely ignored. In other words, no focus was given to analysing what effects such an experience had on the team members who were living (and had to live) that experience and what were the perceptions and conclusions they drew from it.

In summary, there is a need for scholars to understand communication interferences in intercultural communication generally and specifically in Sino-German teams as there is still a 'research gap' with regards to this issue that has seldom been explored in terms of the experiences of the individuals involved. This is why I want to gain an understanding of the meaning of the experience(s) of team members, even if it only provides a window into a subjective reality. I am aiming to acquire an understanding of the social and cultural perspectives and the way in which team members make sense of their experiences as I

believe this can offer both the reader and myself an alternative and more meaningful lens for understanding communication interferences in Sino-German teamwork.

Since the broad focus of my study is interpersonal communication, classified as a social action, it is always tinged with subjective significance, which I consider can only be extrapolated by means of analysing subjective experiences. Based on my research philosophy (see postmodernism, chapter 3, section ‘Being an affirmative postmodern researcher’) I also believe that specific understandings and interpretations of the team members experience will reflect more general cultural patterns that are integrally political, meaning that each person brings their own ‘baggage’, such as life experiences as well as social and cultural origin, to any practice or event (Webster & Mertova, 2007). I am also more interested in accessing the depth of the views of team members instead of the breadth of knowing (for example in terms of teamwork outcomes).

Therefore, the focus and contribution of this study is to describe the communication experiences of members of Sino-German teams and to explore the factors relating to interferences in the communication experienced in these teams. The aim is to draw the attention of German employees and team members to the relevance of communication when working with their Chinese colleagues and vice versa.

The research into factors relating to interferences in the communication experienced in Sino-German teams also arises from a personal interest, as I have worked in various Sino-German teams for a long time. I have been living and working in China for several years and it is also where I met my (Chinese) wife. Thus, I have personally experienced the intercultural communication difficulties between Chinese and German people. Since I am still an active participant in Sino-German intercultural communication, and a member of both the Chinese and German language communities, I have the advantage of ‘direct’ experience of the general problems involved in Sino-German

intercultural communication. This knowledge not only allows me to have a certain sensitivity, understanding and general interest regarding the communication interferences of those involved, but it also allows me to compare the opinions and experiences of other members of Sino-German teams with my own.

***Research topic, aim and questions***

The *research topic* of this thesis is the communication between Chinese and German team members in Sino-German teams, with particular attention being paid to national cultural diversity as described in the following. The analysis does not focus on teamwork per se. As described above, it is more that teams constitute the critical population in Sino-German cooperation and communication generally in contemporary international enterprises.

The *aim* of this research is to describe the communication experiences of members of Sino-German teams and to analyse the factors relating to interferences in communication. Since foreign language proficiency alone (for example, English in the view of this study's author and its participants) is no guarantee for (successful) intercultural communication in teams, this study also analyses, in addition to the practical and theoretical significance of language and language skills, the cultural influences on the communications between Chinese and German team members.

As indicated by the above, the scope of culture in this thesis is on the national level. This is done despite the fact that individuals involved in most intercultural communication activities are also members of subcultures such as organisational or group cultures. One reason for this is that despite membership of these subcultures, individuals generally remain to some extent embedded in, or socialised by, the national setting by factors such as speaking a domestic language. In other words, despite all the differences specific to an individual subculture, subcultures still have a common core of worldviews, values,

standards and action patterns that demonstrate their belonging to a certain *national culture* (Knapp, 2003). In spite of the complexity of the concept of culture, a simplification is therefore considered acceptable for this analysis of the communication interferences between Chinese and German team members, so leaving aside the issues of subcultures et cetera, a distinction between Chinese and German culture is made whereby nationality and language are considered to be two characteristics that differentiate one culture from another (see ‘national culture’, chapter 2, section ‘Inclusion/exclusion criteria’).

As “the business of international business is culture” (Hofstede, 1994, p. 1), the scope on concepts of national culture seems to be justifiable in line with further reasons that support the use of national culture concepts. For instance, Hofstede (1980), one of the most popular contributors, argues that a concept of national culture is elaborated on the conceptual level as well as being suggestive of practical use. According to Newman and Nollen (1996), substantial criticism such as Child’s (1981) observation that this concept is conceptually underdeveloped for comparative research has been addressed by a large number of works further conceptualising and developing the field. As Newman and Nollen (1996, p. 754) further suggest, “there is ample empirical evidence that national cultures vary and that a variety of management practices [...] differ by national culture”. As shown in the remainder of this section, these differences in national cultures can also be expected to be important for communication.

Another prominent reason for national scope is the Sapir-Whorf ‘hypothesis’ (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956), which suggests a close relationship between language and thought. According to this ‘hypothesis’, speakers of different languages construct different worldviews as a result of their different languages. From a postmodern view this is expressed in that a major factor regarding the representation of realities arising from writing and speaking is language, which acts as a ‘medium’ for the social construction of

realities (Grace, 1987) (for details see section ‘The importance of language from a postmodern perspective’, Chapter 3 ‘Research Methodology’). As communication involves language, which can (at least to some extent) be related to national borders, a national scope again seems justifiable.

The use of national culture in research on intercultural communication is also documented by previous studies. As one of the fields where national culture oriented research can make a contribution to communication, Hofstede (1984, p. 27) suggests that in the communication related field of intercultural negotiations: “Many political and business negotiations take place between persons who are differently programmed by their respective personal backgrounds”. In line with authors like Smith and Bond (1998) or Thomas and Osland (2004), Zander (2005, p. 86) also implicitly emphasises the national perspective for communication issues when arguing that “communication style differences act as barriers to managers perceiving, analysing, and decoding interactions effectively across national borders” and discusses specific communication styles that vary across countries. Furthermore, because of the lack of feasibility of such research projects, studies on nationally influenced behaviour and orientations do not tend to discuss subcultures within countries.

However, the use of national cultural differences has to be used with care. Following the discussion of Fang (2005) on cultural dynamism or the argumentation of Craig and Douglas (2006) on international mobility causing intercultural interpenetration resulting in cultural contamination – a line of reasoning that relates to acculturation in terms of Berry (1980, 1997, 2003) – consequently makes it difficult “to identify the ‘ethnic’ core of a culture” (Craig & Douglas, 2006, p. 322). Therefore, I argue that ethnically culturally diverse groups may not represent multinational groups. In ethnically culturally diverse groups all the members can have the same nationality and they may have

lived for a longer period in the country to which their nationality belongs (due to immigration, for example).

Teams in international companies, such as Sino-German teams, which is the focus of this dissertation, are usually made up of members from different nationalities (Staples & Zhao, 2006). This means that the members come from different national cultures and are, except through temporary stays abroad, located in the country of their nationality (for example Chinese nationals working at a subsidiary of an international company in China) or German nationals working at such subsidiaries for a number of years only (also referred to as *expatriates*). Team members having the same nationality have mostly experienced the same political, social and cultural influences of the country that nationality belongs to, which may influence them in their daily teamwork and communication. In other words, in one team with members of different nationalities, especially mixed from Western and Asian countries, its members have not got the same general influence that would be given by any one country.

Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen (1993, p. 593) who researched the cultural diversity impact on interaction processes and the performance of culturally homogenous and culturally diverse groups agreed on this differentiation: "Groups with all members from the same nationality (...) are referred to herein as culturally homogeneous groups". When comparing ethnically culturally diverse groups living in one country with ethnically culturally homogenous groups living in the same country there is the possibility of not recognising a significant difference in terms of their national culture (value system, for example). When comparing diverse nationality groups with homogenous nationality groups there is the possibility that the differences are more significant (Watson, et al., 1993; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Staples & Zhao, 2006; Cramer, 2007). Because of this, such



differences are clearer and more informative. The same applies to research on multinational teams where results could also be clearer and more informative than research on ethnically culturally diverse teams only (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Cramer, 2007).

This is the first reason why literature for studies on multinational instead of multicultural teams will be reviewed in the next chapter. The second reason is, as indicated before, that research focusing on Sino-German teamwork occupies only a marginal place in the evidence base so literature on multinational teams offers a larger knowledge base for review. After the literature review, the following chapters aim to provide answers to the following *research questions*, based on the identified practical and theoretical significance, in order to understand communication interferences in Sino-German teams, describe the experiences of members of these teams and to explore factors relating to interferences in communication:

1. What communication interferences do Chinese and German team members experience in their communications in Sino-German teams?
2. What are the factors relating to these communication interferences?
3. What role do language and language skills play in the communication interferences experienced by Chinese and German team members?
4. What differences in communication behaviours are recognised by Chinese and German team members?

#### ***Research project to be undertaken***

As previously mentioned, this research on communication in Sino-German teams is concerned with the communication experiences of Chinese and German team members in their daily business intercultural interactions and collaborations. On the basis of my postmodern epistemological and ontological position (see postmodernism in chapter 3, section 'Being an affirmative postmodern researcher') the communication experiences of

six Chinese and six German participants formed the basis upon which to analyse concrete communication interferences, the factors relating to interferences in communication and the differences in communication patterns. This study, therefore, has been specifically constructed by examining phenomena associated with human experience while acknowledging that conceptions of realities and people's ways of being are neither objective nor absolute. This is in opposition to those 'scientific methods' that treat human beings as independent/non-reflective objects in the way that they ignore "their ability to reflect on problem situations and act on these reflections in an interdependent way" (Robson, 1993, p. 60).

The study engages with experiences because the social sciences are concerned with humans and their relations with each other and their environments and, as such, are founded on the study of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). However, this thesis not only provides a straightforward account of the subjective opinions and experiences of team members but also an analysis of the communication interferences experienced by Chinese and German team members from a postmodern perspective. This perspective believes that specific understandings and interpretations of the team members experience will reflect more general cultural patterns that are integrally political, meaning that each person brings their own 'baggage' such as life experiences as well as social and cultural origin, to any practice or event (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The term 'experience' in this study does not just mean occurrences or events personally encountered by people but rather the notion that experience is linguistic and understood via a way of talking (Allen & Cloyes, 2005). Linguistic means that experience is understood, organised and communicated as **stories** lived and told (Riessman, 2002; Heo, 2004). This is because storytelling is a way for individuals to make sense of, as well as bring meaning to, complex experiences in the way that they ascribe meaning to events

and other issues in their lives by constructing stories about them (Sankey & Young, 1996). By looking at stories in this thesis, the voices of Chinese and German individuals working in Sino-German teams, who may have been methodologically silenced, can be heard (Hevern, 2002) (see chapter 3, section ‘Being an affirmative postmodern researcher’). Stories ‘open’ a special way into the insights of team members’ experiences and they offer “a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems” (Wetherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 180).

However, the importance of experience, as well as the understanding that experience as constructed here, has a powerful linguistic dimension and is conceptualised as stories, is present in a wider spectrum of academic genres beyond the social sciences. Hence, an inter-disciplinary approach based on literary theory and intercultural studies is applied. A narrative inquiry creating interactions between these disciplines was adopted.

Narrative inquiry as a research method allows participants to tell their own stories and allows them to talk about their experiences and the meanings they have gained from these (Foster, McAllister, & O'Brien, 2006). By doing so we can better understand team members’ experiences and the communication interferences within Sino-German teamwork as also by exploring the stories of Chinese and German team members that structure and recall such experiences. By using narrative inquiry “our voices echo those of others in the socio-cultural world and we evidence cultural membership both through our ways of crafting stories and through the very content of these stories” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 2).

In other words, stories may even include ‘generalised’ perceptions of certain events shared by the respective cultural group to which a storyteller belongs. That is to say that, stories are considered to be a ‘product’ of certain social encounters rather than the communication of facts which are independent of any social and cultural relations (Savage,

2000). The language used by Chinese and German individuals to explain the experience might entail socio-cultural knowledge, which signifies the meaning of experience, but which is not explicitly expressed in their stories. Different socio-cultural groups not only differ with regards to language and linguistic variety but also with respect to their patterns of usage and how meaning is generated in interactive situations on the basis of socio-cultural knowledge. Therefore, by adopting narrative inquiry, I am taking into account both the linguistic and socio-cultural aspects and addressing the relations between interactive communication strategies and larger social and cultural phenomena.

My personal account was used to interrogate this larger social phenomena such as the experience of being a member in a Sino-German team (Cole & Knowles, 2001), where my experiences are presented as narratives of the self that seek to extend understanding of the issues raised (Sparkes, 2000). As a regular member of Sino-German teams, who has explored the experiences of other team members in such teams, the choice of narrative inquiry as the research methodology, within a postmodern theoretical framework, may be seen to combine my personal and professional background with postmodern research values and concepts.

The professional background is based on my work experiences, since I have been working in Sino-German teams for a long time. I was working in such teams for about one year (2006 – 2007) in Shanghai (Bayer AG in China) after my graduation from a German university and returned to Germany as a Project Manager for Sales in China for SMS Siemag AG (2008 – 2011). In this role I spent one third of my working time in China, mainly working with Sino-German teams consisting of Chinese customer's employees and team members of my employer. At the end of 2011 I joined an international automotive supplier in a similar role as a Sales Manager for the Chinese market and have been relocated to Shanghai in March 2013. Due to this background in living and working in

China for several years, I have personally experienced the intercultural communication difficulties of Chinese and German nationals. Since I am an active participant in Sino-German intercultural communication and a member of both the Chinese and German language communities I have the advantage of having knowledge of the general problems involved in Sino-German intercultural communication. This knowledge not only allows me to have a certain sensitivity for, as well as the understanding of and an interest in, the communication interferences of those involved, but also to compare the opinions and experiences of members of other Sino-German teams with my own.

On the other hand, my personal background is based on being married as a German national with a Shanghainese since 2009 whom I met during my first year in Shanghai. She joined my return to Germany in 2007 for her postgraduate studies in Germany. Personally I do enjoy being a part of the intercultural marriage, since it provides me a chance to understand myself as a German through the perspective of a person with a Chinese background. This personal participation in a 'micro' or 'family Sino-German intercultural communication' further led to my purpose to study the various facets of Sino-German intercultural communication. I therefore argue that this personal and the professional background may be seen to combine synchronous with my research values and concepts, which formed the underlying theoretical and philosophical constructs and capacity for this research and specifically the narrative inquiry adopted in following.

However, before narrative inquiry was undertaken (its philosophical background will also be described later on), a literature review of research on multinational teamwork was undertaken in order to identify factors influencing communication in multinational teams. The factors that influence communication negatively can be considered to be 'interferences' in the flow of communication as became very clear in my research on Sino-German teams. Whilst searching for factors that influence communication in a positive

manner I may find factors that influence communication negatively, meaning that the non-presence or different degree or form of the factors influencing communication positively can, in some cases, be seen as influencing communication negatively. Therefore, the literature review aims to undertake a systematic review of research on multinational teamwork in order to identify factors influencing communication, both positively and negatively, in multinational teams.

Since Sino-German teamwork occupies only a marginal place in the evidence base and the focus in research on multinational teamwork (that itself has had few studies) on communication as a part of processes and results is more prominent than in research on Sino-German teams, the literature review will focus on multinational teams.

## **2 A Systematic Review of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ Studies on Intercultural Teamwork in Multinational Teams: Aim and Methods**

The developments described in the previous chapter can be summarised by saying that decision-makers at all levels in international companies are facing more complex situations than in previous decades (Podsiadlowski, 2002), which are often caused by the implementation of globalisation strategies and new ways of collaboration. Complexity is often increased when organisations decide to internationalise their business and enter into foreign markets. This represents one of the significant changes in the work environment in the last decade (Dahlin, et al., 2005). The complexity managers face is for example, as explained previously, currently further increasing through China’s involvement in the implementation of these globalisation strategies (Podsiadlowski, 2002). Recent trends in industry that increase the complexity of collaboration inside international companies, such as globally integrated product development, are based on the premise that organisations will be more efficient if they bring together a diverse team of experts from different countries to solve problems (Dahlin, et al., 2005).

In such complex situations, reviews of the available evidence can provide insights and guidance for intervention into the operational needs of practitioners and policymakers (managers for example) (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). Management reviews are usually narrative and researchers who argue for so called ‘evidence-informed’ management reviews, such as Fink and Hart (as cited in Tranfield, et al., 2003), believe that narrative reviews often lack thoroughness and promote ‘bias’ within the researcher. Their underlying assumption is that narrative reviews are not conducted in a systematic, ‘transparent’ and ‘reproducible’ manner and are therefore not an ‘evidence base’. By arguing in this way, they position themselves such that they affirm it to be possible for researchers to provide

definitive explanations that can provide 'true' insights and guidance for practitioners if the literature review conducted is 'rigorous' (Tranfield, et al., 2003).

However, since I believe that all methodologies, including how to conduct a literature review, are based on philosophical underpinnings that in turn shape research and, for example, the conduct of reviews, these underpinnings provide a lens through which researchers see phenomena and become involved with literature (see chapter 3 'Research Methodology'). Therefore, I do not believe that there is a 'rigorous' way of conducting a literature review. I do not see narrative reviewing as necessarily less 'rigorous' than other methods and to my mind no method is capable of providing definitive explanations. Rather I believe that all literature reviews are influenced by ontological and epistemological assumptions and these are the grounds for the choices made by the researcher regarding the literature review methodology, its process and its results. However, since I believe that there are multiple approaches to viewing or interpreting 'reality' I evaluate in the following whether a narrative review or a more 'rigorous' review (in the eyes of researchers like Tranfield et al. (2003)) can contribute to my research on a specific type of multinational teamwork, whilst at the same time not agreeing to all their underlying assumptions.

According to methodology researchers narrative reviewing very often means the practice of describing and ordering (and perhaps selecting) primary studies (for example published research findings in journals) narratively with commentary and interpretation (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young, & Sutton, 2005). Such reviews, as frequently found in management research, have often been criticised, as previously mentioned, by some researchers, but also by practitioners because they have become too fragmented and divergent (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This according to Tranfield et al.'s (2003) view implies a lack of means for making sense, for example, for managers. One trend that has originated



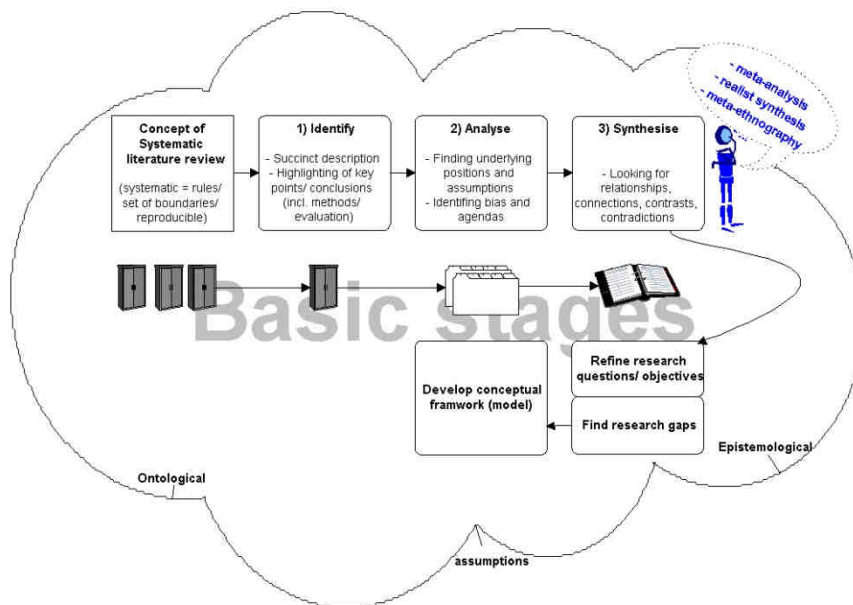
as a result of such critique in the field of management research is the growing interest in ‘evidence-based decision making’.

An ‘evidence-base’, as suggested by researchers arguing for ‘rigorous’ conduct in literature reviews, is created by the incorporation of the ‘best evidence’ from the available knowledge base, which can provide insights and guidance for interventions to fulfil the operational needs of managers (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Although I do not agree with the underlying assumptions of so called ‘rigorous’ literature reviews, it has to be acknowledged that the ‘evidence-based movement’ has already had a major impact in certain disciplines before it came to management research, especially in medical science.

In medical science and health research the interest in ‘evidence-based’ approaches has been observed since the late 1980s, because previous practice was based on poor ‘quality’ evaluations of the literature, which sometimes caused inappropriate medical recommendations (McDermott, Graham, & Hamilton, 2004; Tranfield, et al., 2003). Therefore, researchers were required, by government agencies and other institutions, to apply a more systematic approach to the practice of reviewing the literature (Bryman & Bell, 2007). As a result, there seems to be a pervasive view amongst medical practitioners that medical science has made significant progress over the last decade in attempting to improve the ‘quality’ of the review process by synthesising research in a systematic, ‘transparent’ and ‘reproducible’ manner (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998; Tranfield, et al., 2003; McDermott, Graham, & Hamilton, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2007; Thomas & Harden, 2008). This resulted in the development of the *systematic review tool* as a key tool for developing the ‘evidence base’ according to Tranfield et al. (2003), who developed such a systematic review tool for management reviews.

Figure 1 shows the basic stages of the approach to a systematic review based on a general review process for all kinds of studies, as I understand it from the available

literature on the systematic review approach (Popay, et al., 1998; Tranfield, et al., 2003; McDermott, et al., 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2007; Thomas & Harden, 2008).



**Figure 1.** Basic stages of a systematic review approach based on my understanding.

The systematic review process can be described by its main sequential activities: search strategy development, inclusion and exclusion of studies based on criteria, ‘quality’ appraisal and synthesis. Many research methods publications do not differentiate between these activities. What I commonly experienced during the development of this literature review is that they often label the whole systematic review process as purely synthesis by calling it *meta-ethnography* or *thematic analysis* for example. In my opinion, this may lead to confusion because systematic literature review represents a broader approach to the way in which literature review, rather than just synthesis, is conducted. In other words, I see synthesis as just a part of systematic review. Furthermore, synthesis starts with the analysis of the literature only after certain literature has been included and assessed by the methods of systematic review (Tranfield, et al., 2003). In what follows, systematic review and its

synthesising methods (such as meta-ethnography or thematic analysis) are clearly differentiated.

Tranfield et al. (2003) also suggests the application of the systematic review tool for management research as a method for improving the 'quality' of literature review in management. This alternative differs from traditional narrative management reviews by adopting the 'replicable' and 'transparent' process developed in medical science in order to 'minimise bias' and also by making explicit the values and assumptions underpinning the review as further explained in the following. As mentioned before, I do not agree with the assumption that a fully 'replicable' and 'transparent' process is possible for all researchers since the personal theoretical framework of the researcher influences all their intellectual endeavours. Therefore, I also do not believe that 'bias' is something negative, which needs to be 'minimised' and leads to a lower 'quality' literature review since I believe that 'reality' is multifaceted and that there are multiple approaches with differing qualities to view or interpret these realities. I argue that this also applies to the selection of the research to be included in a literature review which is, therefore, always also subjective.

However, I appreciate that since the systematic review process includes exhaustive literature searches of published and unpublished studies and provides an audit trail of the reviewer's decisions, procedures and conclusions (because this can lead to an integration of multiple voices and beliefs available in the wider academic community) it will pick up literature that might be overlooked when using only a narrative review without an explicitly defined process. At the same time, systematic reviews could provide practitioners in the management field with a basis (which I understand as open-ended and multi-voiced) for formulating decisions and taking actions in a complex and non-linear context such as intercultural communication. I believe this is particularly important because practitioners in today's complex globalised work environment are under growing

pressure and need to take action more quickly based on the available knowledge base (Tranfield, et al., 2003).

However, I admit that there might be a discrepancy between the theoretical assumption that practitioners will refer to systematic reviews and the actual practice in the management of international companies. In practice, managers might not be able to access such reviews where such work is not promoted by the researchers, or even where their use is not promoted enough by the management community of a company or industry. Besides, decision-makers are more likely to use personal experience and problem-solving skills rather than rely solely on the results of a literature review (Tranfield, et al., 2003).

However, complex problems and situations “demand complex forms of evidence” in the knowledge base for practitioners, not just specifically in the management field (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005, p. 45), rather than as a so-called ‘reliable’ basis providing a generally accepted understanding which is ‘true’ for all cultures, races, societies and so on. I agree that systematic review can help to provide such an open-ended and multi-voiced basis. Besides, researchers trying to address this complexity often state that both ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research, in addition to other kinds of knowledge (such as practitioner knowledge), need to be considered in complex situations. In other words, besides the trend in management research to conduct literature reviews more systematically, various other forms of research are also considered in order to tackle the complexity practitioners face. However, in my opinion, the researcher should be warned against a strict separation between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research as such a separation is based on a false opposition Lewin (1981). He says:

*“In order to determine the quantity of an object the quale should also be stated, the quantum of which is to be determined with regards to this object, because the quantity of an object varies. It also varies according to over what the ‘quantitative’ comparison ranges ...”* (Lewin, 1981, p. 97).

This reflects the general problem regarding the definition of ‘qualitative’ research as there is no clear and concise definition (Kohlbacher, 2006). The reason for this, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), is that ‘qualitative’ cuts across disciplines, fields and subject matters and therefore “a complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts and assumptions surround the term” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 2). However, the “word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on the processes and meaning that are experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8).

In addition to my view that there is no clear-cut objectivity or ‘true knowledge’ or one single ‘reality’, such ‘qualitative’ research approaches are assumed to have emerged from *interpretive* paradigms with the emphasis on *constructivist* approaches which share the same assumptions (Kohlbacher, 2006). Rather ‘qualitative’ researchers often “study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). I believe that the distinction between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research is just a helpful constructed differentiation from either rather positivistic researchers or to certain degree researchers who support the idea of following this differentiation in a less clear-cut way, for example in order to be sure of finding studies for my literature review that are in the ‘qualitative’ category (Tranfield, et al., 2003).

However, current literature reviews in the management field also only favour ‘quantitative’ forms of research (Tranfield, et al., 2003) by relying on a clear-cut distinction between ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research. I believe that excluding ‘qualitative’ research could have negative consequences because some issues can only be tackled by considering a broad range of studies (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005). Dixon-Woods et al. (2005), who argue for the inclusion of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research in

systematic literature reviews in medical science also note that the inclusion of studies of both ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research methods can highlight contradictions, which I see as part of a multi-voiced knowledge base.

Since the middle of the 1980s in the field of management research it has been widely recognised that management research should not only output high academic ‘quality’ studies, but also studies which are practitioner and context sensitive by considering the use of any kind of research method (Tranfield, et al., 2003). Where management researchers often desire an output which is ‘field tested’ and ‘grounded in technological rules’ that can be used to prepare and implement solutions for specific problems in the *daily life* of management (Tranfield, et al., 2003), I prefer to place the emphasis on various different types of research as I believe that there are many kinds of approaches to analysing realities and therefore I do not prioritise any specific one.

The earlier trends in medical science and the later trends in management research can be summarised as a movement towards ‘evidence-informed decision making’, utilising systematic literature review as an important technology along with the recognition of the need for various kinds of research in literature review even though these might be based on different ontological and epistemological assumptions depending on which paradigm they have emerged from. For example, ‘qualitative’ research will often come from a different paradigm to ‘quantitative’ research.

As a result of this, researchers with various ontological and epistemological assumptions tried to include ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ studies in systematic literature reviews (Pawson, Trisha, Harvey, & Walshe, 2004). Because systematic review includes synthesis as a major step, some researchers with an *interpretivistic* ontological position (who tend to ‘prefer’ to apply ‘qualitative’ research criteria) complain that their findings cannot be integrated by synthesis. They justify their complaints by explaining that the

findings of 'qualitative' research are attached to a unique and inconstant context (Sandelowski, Docherty, & Emden, 1997). This means that these researchers believe that their study findings are specific to a particular context at a certain point in time and history and that concepts, experiences and practices cannot be assumed to have homogenous meanings. Homogenous meanings would mean in this sense that meanings stay constant across time and place, but interpretivistic researchers argue that different contexts support a variety of meanings. Therefore, they state that a detaching of meaning from its context, such as is done by synthesising, will cause its loss, because meaning is dependent on context and only context allows the researcher to get an unique insight into the understanding of social phenomena (Sandelowski, et al., 1997).

By summarising the arguments of interpretivistic researchers, the main issue is whether 'qualitative' research can or cannot be 'generalised' to some degree by the integration of its findings, which means, in other words, whether the specificity of concepts which arise from 'qualitative' research are transferable to some degree across settings. This question can be described as a *postmodern* debate (Campbell, et al., 2003) (see 'affirmative postmodernism' in chapter 3 'Research Methodology'). *Extreme postmodern* researchers may insist that concepts, which are in a continuous flow of time, are not suitable for any 'generalisation' because such a 'generalisation' will be fruitless in a practitioner's attempts to understand society.

More *moderate postmodern* researchers may argue that practitioners continue to operate upon some shared meanings of social concepts, recognising that these change over time and have context-specificity. In other words, more moderate postmodern researchers agree that some understanding may be gained from enquiries into literature reviews which include 'qualitative' studies and that some explanations, such as those from a literature review, can be more qualified than others. At this point, researchers may position

themselves regarding their agreement/ disagreement with the synthesis of 'qualitative' findings (McDermott, et al., 2004). I agree that 'qualitative' research can be 'generalised' to some degree by the integration of its findings, meaning that the specificity of concepts that arise from 'qualitative' research is transferable in some cases across settings. I argue for such an integration not only because I believe that practitioners continue to operate upon some shared meaning, but also because I recognise and appreciate the need to include a multiplicity of voices and beliefs from the academic community and a multiplicity of approaches, such as 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research, to analysing realities in a literature review.

Many of the synthesising methods that can integrate 'qualitative' research originated from the very first method introduced for the synthesis of 'qualitative' research. This first attempt to develop a method for synthesising 'qualitative' research was made by Noblit and Hare (1988). They described a way of synthesising ethnographic research by meta-ethnography but the method has been shown to be also applicable to broader categorisations of 'qualitative' research (Britten, et al., 2002; Campbell, et al., 2003). Other methods have been developed more recently such as meta-study, critical interpretive synthesis and meta-synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Many of these recent methods have similarities with the meta-ethnography approach developed by Noblit and Hare (1988) and often do not hide this fact. In sum, meta-ethnography tries to identify key concepts from studies and translate them into one another. Translation refers, in this context, to the process of taking concepts from one study and finding the same concepts in another study although they may not be described with the same words in the original study. Explanations and theories connected with these concepts are also extracted and a line of argument may be developed, pulling corroborating concepts together and, essentially, going beyond the content of the original studies. Many



scholars even argue that going beyond the primary studies is the most important part of synthesis and differentiates such synthesis from narrative synthesis in narrative literature reviews where just a summary of findings for each study is described (Britten, et al., 2002).

In addition to postmodern researchers of a more moderate persuasion, there are researchers who agree to include ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research in one single literature review and interpretive synthesis, rather than limiting it to the inclusion of work from ‘qualitative’ research (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young, & Sutton, 2004; Pawson, et al., 2004). Besides researchers who argue for the synthesis of ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research in one single literature review, practitioners may also agree with this idea. This applies to practitioners who are using reviews and are interested in the answers that can be provided by ‘quantitative’ research rather than just by ‘qualitative’ research and who may not be able to handle the mass of information even if they could locate, read and interpret all the relevant research themselves (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Because of the desire to incorporate ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research in one single review, and therefore the synthesis, plus the interest in the synthesis of ‘qualitative’ research as described before, efforts have been made to develop additional methods for this purpose because most of the existing methods for synthesising are focused mainly on ‘quantitative’ studies while some purely on ‘qualitative’ studies.

Only a few of these methods for research synthesis can be applied to both forms of research (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005) in order to bring the findings together and deliver them to a wider audience while, at the same time, preserving and respecting the essential context and complexity of ‘qualitative’ research (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The application of these methods that synthesise ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research are still under-developed and need further work (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005). However, the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (as cited in McDermott, et al., 2004) reflects

the trend, to synthesise ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research in applied sciences, by insisting on the inclusion of ‘qualitative’ studies in systematic literature reviews. Critics of this trend insist on specific synthesis and systematic review methodologies for each ‘research type’ (Campbell, et al., 2003; Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998). However, since I see the differentiation of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research just as a helpful construction I do not agree with these critics and therefore consider in the following one synthesis method which draws together the outcomes of both ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research.

Thematic analysis has been identified as one of a range of potential methods for synthesis, alongside meta-ethnography and meta-synthesis, as it is able to integrate both ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research (Savage, 2000; Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005; Tooher, Middleton, & Crowther, 2008). Thematic analysis means “the identification of prominent or recurrent themes in the literature and summarising the findings of different studies under thematic headings” (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005, p. 47). This often includes summary tables “providing description of the key points” (Mays et al. as cited in Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005, p. 47). This method has often been selected if the literature included for synthesis contains studies which do not offer data suitable for statistical pooling (‘quantitative’ studies) (Tooher, et al., 2008). This is mainly the case when ‘qualitative’ studies are included for synthesis (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005; Tooher, et al., 2008). Thematic analysis enables the reader to clearly identify ‘prominent’ themes in an organised and structured way.

Beside this it is an advantage that thematic analysis is able to integrate both ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research at the same time. Its disadvantage is, according to Dixon-Woods et al. (2005, p. 47), “a lack of clarity about exactly what thematic analysis involves and the processes by which it can be achieved, plus a lack of explicitness about

procedures and aims, including how far thematic analysis should be descriptive or interpretive”. This critique refers to the question of how ‘prominent’ themes can be recognised by the researcher as being ‘prominent’.

One way could be to rely on the frequency with which particular themes appear in all included studies; another way could be that they are weighted according to their explanatory value (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005) (both of which use an implicit ‘quantitative’ logic as well as ‘qualitative’ judgement). Researchers who have applied systematic literature review and therefore also synthesis in both ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ studies, such as Dixon-Woods et al. (2005), suggest clearly distinguishing between these two approaches in order to ‘remove’ the lack of ‘transparency’. However, I believe that the recognition of themes, whether concerning frequency or explanatory value, cannot be done ‘objectively’ and ‘transparently’ because both judgments are based on the researcher’s implicit and explicit ontological and epistemological assumptions. This also applies to the more general issue of whether a thematic analysis is data or theory driven in finding themes in the literature itself.

Data-driven (or inductive) thematic analysis means that the researcher carefully reads and re-reads the data, looking for themes. A theory-driven, deductive approach is guided by specific ideas or research questions that the researcher wants to assess. In the latter case the researcher may still closely read the data prior to analysis, but his/her analysis categories have to a larger extent been defined in advance without taking any consideration for the data (although this rather positivistic idea of the non-influence of the data on the researcher and vice-versa would seem impossible).

However, I believe the theory-driven approach that is guided by specific ideas is not as different from a data-driven approach as it may seem, because researchers will bring their theoretical framework, social assumptions and subjective worldview to bear on the

analysis of the literature anyhow (no matter which approach is adopted). There are always, at the very least, unconscious pre-defined categories in the researcher's mind and 'transparency' is therefore not possible. On this basis, I do not agree with a theory-driven approach that is considered by some researches to be more structured and therefore more reliable.

For the same reasons, I also do not agree with other scholars who consider data-driven approaches as having greater 'validity' because they argue that they are more flexible and open to discovering themes not previously considered. But which approach offers more 'reliability' is also contested by *non-postmodernist* researchers, as well as whether both approaches overlap during execution. For example, theory-driven analysis does not preclude the analyst from uncovering unexpected new themes (Guest & MacQueen, 2008).

### *Summary of my literature review methodology*

My systematic review is based on a postmodernist assumption that it is possible to include 'qualitative' studies in a synthesis alongside 'quantitative' ones in order to reflect a broad and multiple voiced range of research (Britten, et al., 2002). This review is based on Tranfield et al.'s (2003) method for systematic review although I, as a postmodern researcher, find the systematic review's aim to 'reduce bias' problematic for the reasons I explained previously. Besides, it includes an assumption of the superiority of the positivist model of research, which is expressed throughout the methodological criteria applied in evaluating the validity of studies ('quality' assessment stage) and through the explicit procedures used to produce reviews that are aimed at being 'objective'.

There has also been considerable critique of the systematic review methodology, which MacLure (as cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 92) gets to the heart of in stating, "it is hostile to anything that cannot be seen and therefore controlled, counted and quality

assured”, meaning that studies that do not conform to the systematic review methodology’s underlying assumptions may be more likely to be excluded. In addition, Hammersley (as cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007) criticises systematic review for being inconsistent with its own guidelines in that there appears to be no or very little ‘evidence’ that systematic review leads to better ‘evidence’.

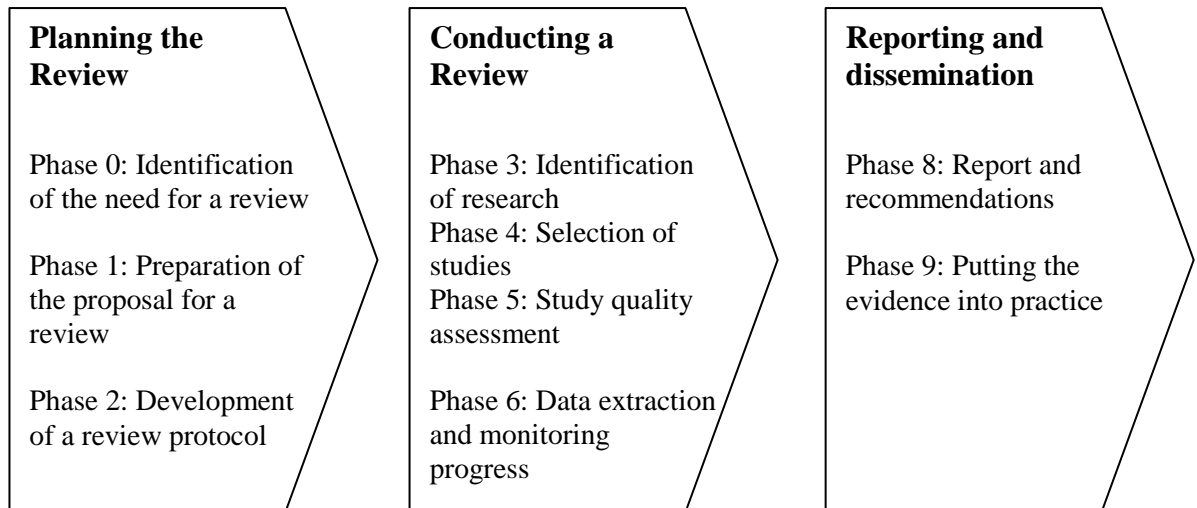
Other critiques are often more ‘technical’. For example, that the systematic review approach can lead to a bureaucratisation of the process of reviewing the literature and is more time consuming when identifying ‘qualitative’ studies, because this cannot be done on the basis of an abstract or summary only. I agree with this critique of systematic review due to my philosophical position because I do not assume that an ‘objective’ judgment about the ‘quality’ of an article can be made. In relation to ‘qualitative’ research especially, there is little consensus on how the ‘quality’ of studies should be assessed (Bryman & Bell, 2007), an issue that will be returned to in the following ‘quality’ assessment stage of this systematic literature review.

However, I believe that the other critiques and the positivistic underlying assumptions do not overwhelm the main advantage of Tranfield et al.’s (2003) systematic review approach, because such a review can help to accumulate knowledge from a range of studies that managers are not able to handle separately by themselves. I believe that rather than trying to be ‘objective’ (‘minimising bias’) creating a knowledge base so that decision makers can make more sensitive judgments, is the ultimate common aim of Tranfield et al.’s (2003) systematic review. This is also true for the literature review in this dissertation as well as its later comparison with my own research on Sino-German teams.

Due to the dominance of ‘quantitative’ research in the field of intercultural work groups, demonstrated by the search results described later in this review, synthesis methods such as meta-ethnography (synthesis methods for ‘qualitative’ research only) were

rejected, even though the research methods literature predicted that intercultural issues could be addressed mainly by ‘qualitative’ research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In line with the overall research aim of this thesis to describe the communication experiences of Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams and to analyse the factors relating to interferences in communication within these teams, the thematic analysis of the studies included tries to answer the question as to what the factors influencing communication, whether positively or negatively, in multinational teams are, by searching for corresponding themes in the literature.

The thematic analysis undertaken is mainly based on the recommendations by Thomas and Harden (2008) of the EPPI-Centre in the Social Science Research Unit at the Institute of Education of the University of London. Their approach offers clear procedures for the reviewer and it is one of very few approaches that can synthesise ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research into one single review and can follow a more theory-driven approach at the same time. This was the main reason for choosing such a synthesis method. Fulfilling all of the three process stages of thematic analysis (identification of ‘prominent’ themes, summarising of the findings under thematic headings and the development of higher order thematic categories) was always kept as a focus. These process stages were applied after the three stages of the systematic review had been conducted, which are: 1) search strategy development, 2) inclusion and exclusion of studies based on criteria and 3) ‘quality’ appraisal (see Figure 2 for detailed stages).



**Figure 2.** Detailed stages of a systematic review in management research based on Tranfield et al. (2003)<sup>2</sup>.

### *Aim*

The aim of this review is to undertake a systematic review of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research on multinational teamwork in order to identify factors influencing communication – both positively and negatively – in multinational teams.

Although my research is concerned with Sino-German teamwork (also considered as a specific kind of bi-national teamwork) I review only literature on ‘multi-national’ teamwork since no research-based study focusing solely on Sino-German-teamwork was found in the knowledge base.

When I carried out the following comprehensive review, by searching published and unpublished sources regarding Sino-German groups and teams, no study with this specific (Sino-German) bi-national focus was found. However, studies which include Chinese or German participants were only found within research projects focusing on teamwork that included several different nationalities (‘multi-national studies’). As a result

<sup>2</sup>From “Towards a Methodology for Developing Evidence-Informed Management Knowledge by Means of Systematic Review,” by D. Tranfield, D. Denyer and P. Smart, 2003, *British Journal of Management*, p. 210, Copyright 2003 Blackwell Publishing Limited.

only non-Sino-German bi-national studies could have been included in this literature review but their research results may not represent research results on multinational groups, and even more not on Sino-German groups, because the nature of the outcome might be different from the outcome of studies of multinational groups, or in other words very specific depending on the two nationalities involved. Therefore this literature review considers only research on multinational teamwork in order to identify factors influencing communication in multinational teams and hopefully to a certain degree in Sino-German teams.

Factors relating to interferences in communication are reflected as factors that influence communication negatively. As mentioned earlier, in searching for positive factors that influence communication I may also find factors that influence communication negatively, meaning that the non-presence or different degree or form of the positive factors influencing communication can in some cases be seen as influencing communication negatively.

### *Search Strategy*

#### *Literature Scoping*

As suggested by Tranfield et al. (2003) with regards to management research, a scoping study was conducted before the review commenced to initially assess the amount of literature available on multinational teamwork and to delimit the subject area by finding studies of different subject areas, for example from areas focusing on working groups, teams and intercultural collaboration. The scoping study included a search for existing reviews and primary studies suitable to the review's objectives. On 31<sup>st</sup> May 2009 relevant electronic databases (Business Source Premier, IBSS (The International Bibliography of the Social Sciences), PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES) were searched through using



combinations of the following search terms: *multinational and multicultural and intercultural and teamwork or working group*.

Furthermore McDermott, Graham and Hamilton (2004, p. 14) suggested that a “hand search” can also be applied, thus the practitioner knowledge of Dr. Elmar Stachels (former CEO of Bayer AG in China), who is a key informant in this field, was considered. He provided both research and non-research literature that he used in his former role to formulate policies with regards to multinational teamwork.

One outcome of the scoping study was that no systematic review has dealt with ‘quantitative’ and/or ‘qualitative’ research on multinational teamwork. Another outcome was that ‘quantitative’ studies dominate the research on intercultural working groups as was already mentioned in the introductory chapter. This pattern is also observed in the work of other researchers, who have conducted non-systematic literature reviews in this field (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Cramer, 2007). This dominance is also found in many practice-relevant intercultural management studies (Bryman & Bell, 2007) even though ‘qualitative’ studies are regarded by educational resources as more appropriate for intercultural issues (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Bryman & Bell, 2007).

However, for the purpose of developing this systematic literature review on a broad range of studies, ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research should both be considered while taking into account, as mentioned previously, that such a clear-cut differentiation does not exist and that so-called ‘qualitative’ research may offer more insight into the social, emotional and experiential phenomena as are found in multinational teamwork. Hence, findings from ‘qualitative’ research may contribute to this systematic review. Therefore, the search outline should try to include both research methodologies by making search results related to ‘qualitative’ research possible and acknowledging the current dominance of ‘quantitative’ studies.

*Search outline*

Tranfield et al. (2003) suggest carrying out a comprehensive review by searching published and unpublished sources, which means that different sources in published journals, listed bibliographic databases and unpublished sources (such as conference proceedings and internet pages) regarding multinational working groups and teams should be searched for studies. Firstly, I conducted searches on core bibliographic databases, which cover journals, books and dissertations. The following databases have been searched via EBSCO: Business Source Premier, IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences), PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES. Secondly, for conference proceedings, Zetoc was searched. Thirdly, the Internet source Google Books/ Google Scholar was utilised due to its extensive database resources (including Emerald, for example). It has to be noted that only items not previously found were used from the Google results. Relevant books were also retrieved from a local library and reference citations from relevant research were followed up for further potential literature.

Within these three stages non-research based literature was not excluded. The search keywords and search terms were generated as a result of the learning set meeting of the University of Gloucestershire's "Doctor of Business Administration" cohort in Munich and were created in line with the systematic review practice of the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (CRD) (as cited in McDermott, et al., 2004). I joined this "Systematic Literature Review" course on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2009 (this module gave an introduction to theoretical frameworks and the various approaches to literature review). The CRD has developed a series of electronic search strategies, for example, to capture studies for inclusion in PsycINFO. Each of these search strategies can be applied to review-specific search strategies and offer a very broad and well-known example for search term development in applied science or medical science (CRD, 2001). Therefore,

their search terms have been taken as examples for this literature review. The execution of the search terms showed that identifying 'qualitative' studies in such databases is problematic, because most recent databases have not indexed 'qualitative' research, which could have been represented by a specific function in their search forms (McDermott, et al., 2004).

This means that most databases do not have specific subject headings for the selection of 'qualitative' research, or in other words, there is no possibility of using a 'tick-box' in a search mask or search field to select only the 'qualitative' studies from a database. This seems from my point of view inconsistent with the strict differentiation between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' in the research methodological literature and I had therefore not expected this. In order to be able to proceed with the literature review and 'manually' overcome the above-mentioned 'problem' the only approach seemed to be to use free text words (McDermott, et al., 2004). These should be able to identify sufficient 'qualitative' as well as 'quantitative' studies that are comprehensive enough in terms of their multinational teamwork focus to contribute to the identification of factors influencing communication in multinational teams.

Drawing on McDermott et al. (2004) to solve the issue mentioned before the search terms were divided into two categories: 1) Study design terms like *qualitati\** and *focus group* alongside others like *questionnaire\** and *survey* 2) Words which might appear in 'qualitative' research like *explor\**, *experience\**, *perception\** and *perspective\** beside others like *measure\* point* and *task\**. Terms that were likely to occur within a description of multinational research, like *multinational\**, *multicultur\**, *intercultur\**, *culture\**, *nationali\** and *ethnic\**, were kept unchanged.

As already similarly experienced by McDermott et al. (2004), the above-mentioned study design terms led to high specificity and produced fewer irrelevant items, but only a

few of the studies found focused on working groups/teams and multi-nationality at the same time. Initial readings showed that most of them referred to the concept of *diversity*. Therefore *divers\** was added as a search term and provided a good recall of studies in the field of multinational working groups and teams but also many false hits on diversity in general, educational and hierarchical diversity in teams and gender-diversity (for search terms used see Table 1 in Appendix 1).

It must also be put on record that no research-based study focusing solely on Sino-German-teamwork was found as indicated before. But it has to be considered that terms that are likely to occur within a description or abstract of multinational research (as above) do not explicitly contain search terms regarding Chinese or German participants. They have been adjusted accordingly, purely in order to confirm the gap in research on Sino-German teamwork, but Chinese and German participants were only found within research projects focusing on teamwork that included several different nationalities.

Therefore, the results of the search in terms of the size of the literature confirmed the need for a study focusing on Sino-German teamwork. This problem will be partly solved by my research on Sino-German teamwork and its dissemination. Additionally, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, recent research also identifies a lack of existing research on factors that influence communication in multinational teams (Nam, Lyons, Hwang, & Kim, 2009; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993), which will be partly addressed with this study's focus on Chinese and German participants.

### ***Search results***

The three search steps resulted in 4,046 citations. The abstracts and titles of these were read and 3,813 studies were rejected since the majority of these were not concerned with teams or working groups (taking it more at the company level, for example), were not focused on multinational heterogeneity in such teams (rather gender diversity, for example)

and some do not contain a research methodology description. Furthermore, double citations were also rejected. This left 233 citations, which were read through (title and abstract) for a second time and 120 of these were rejected for similar reasons. The final number of potentially relevant citations that were retrieved for a more detailed evaluation of the full text (Tranfield, et al., 2003) was 54. At this stage the final number was still tentative because the abstracts often did not contain enough information to ensure that they fitted the aim of this literature review. Therefore, the 54 studies were extracted in the next step (for search results and the numbers extracted see Table 2 in Appendix 1).

#### ***Inclusion/exclusion criteria***

Following the key characteristics of the systematic review method, the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria on the extracted 54 studies, that were formulated at the planning stage (Bryman & Bell, 2007) was performed (see Table 3), after each study was read through completely. The application of these criteria resulted in 18 studies that fitted the inclusion criteria for this review.

**Table 3***Inclusion/exclusion criteria*

Parameters	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Group diversity	Multinational diverse groups (multiple nationalities)	Bi-national- and bi-culturally diverse groups Ethnically culturally diverse groups Mix of several types of diversity within one group research project (for example gender / age / education / experience AND nationality)
Time frame	Studies published from 1990 onwards	Studies published before 1990
Population	Studies which focus on real existing teams	Studies which only focus on virtual teams
Outcome	Studies concerned with the processes and <u>results</u> of multinational teamwork that differ from national homogenous teams	Studies which do not report on processes and results of multinational teamwork
Study type	Primary research Studies containing findings which are based on 'quantitative' and/or 'qualitative' methods (data collection and analysis)	Book reviews, literature reviews, opinion pieces Studies which do not report on methods applied (unclear methodology) for data collection and analysis

In order to justify the exclusion of studies from the knowledge base and to illustrate the reasons for exclusion, the criteria for each parameter are explained in the following.

### ***Group diversity***

Research results on bi-nationally and bi-culturally diverse groups (consisting of two nationalities or cultures) may not represent research results on multinational groups because the nature of the outcome of bi-national group studies is, according to the social psychologist Tajfel (1974) who researched 'discrimination' processes underpinning inter-group processes from a more positivistic standpoint, different from the outcome of studies of multinational groups. One reason argued is that bi-national groups tend to be easier to divide into two camps than groups with several nationalities and a different result would be obtained if bi-national studies were combined with studies of multinational groups in a single synthesis in this literature review.

Another reason for not including research results on bi-national and bi-culturally diverse groups is that, depending on the specific background of the two nations involved, one party could easily become a minority group because of its different cultural or national historical background (for example wars, development stage) or a different number (ratio) of team members could also lead to a different, or in other words very specific depending on the two nationalities involved, basis for research results than with research conducted on multinational groups (Tajfel, 1974). (Of course I acknowledge that my own later published research result on Sino-German teamwork may not be suitable for inclusion in a literature review on multinational teamwork for the same reasons.) In addition, research results for ethnically culturally diverse groups may also not represent research results on multinational groups as described in chapter 1, section 'research topic, aim and questions'.

Although these two criteria may overlap in some studies, for the purpose of the creation of a systematic review for my thesis focusing on Chinese and German nationals

working in teams and which selects its participants according to these two nationalities, only studies reporting on multinationally diverse teams were considered. Therefore, also studies reporting only on the results of a mix of several diversity types (for example gender or age and nationality) were not included. However, as a postmodernist I do not consider culture to be a static value. In my opinion, intercultural communication within teams, such as Sino-German teams, will change over time in accordance with the social, political, economic and cultural developments of both societies involved. Therefore, a further opening of Chinese society and a further globalisation of the world economy will inevitably lead to a rapprochement between Western and Chinese cultures.

### ***Time frame***

As globalisation involving China and other emerging countries is a major factor in creating multinational teams in international companies today the review needed to focus only on studies that reported on teams in the globalisation period that started in 1990 (Hirn, 2005).

### ***Population***

It is obvious that virtual teams may show a differing style of teamwork and communication than teams meeting face-to-face. According to social presence theory, virtual interaction is extremely low in the feeling of *being together*, in comparison with *face-to-face teams* (Walther as cited in Nam, Lyons, Hwang, & Kim, 2009). Although the results for the problem-solving and decision-making of virtual teams turned out to be qualitatively equal to face-to-face teams in some studies, virtual teams may take more time to do it and it might be harder for them to find mutual agreement (Nam, et al., 2009). In order to clearly differentiate between research on virtual and face-to-face teams many researchers in the field of intercultural teamwork either decide to focus their studies on one type of interaction (virtual or face-to-face) or explicitly separate the research findings per



type of interaction (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Staples & Zhao, 2006). This systematic review is intended to be a basis for research on Sino-German teamwork and therefore needed to take into account that Chinese people show a strong preference for face-to-face communication (Zinzius, 2007; Kuan & Häring-Kuan, 2008) (as described later in relation to ‘informal communication’ in chapter 5, section ‘It is necessary to party with them, it is necessary to booze with them’). In order to clearly express the dissertation’s focus on face-to-face teams and its applicableness to Sino-German teamwork, only studies reporting on face-to-face teams were included.

### ***Outcome***

In order to identify factors influencing communication in multinational teams it was necessary to include studies that reported on the processes (for example communication) and results (for example understanding and misunderstanding) of multinational teamwork. These studies had to be searched for these factors via thematic analysis. Studies that only report on multinational teamwork, without considering processes and results, are only reporting on the outcome of multinational teamwork. Since the factors influencing communication during teamwork are not a kind of outcome, but rather kinds of input or preconditions, such studies could not assist in achieving the aim of this review in identifying factors influencing communication in multinational teams.

### ***Study type***

Based on Clarke and Oxman’s study of how to conduct a literature review of ‘qualitative’ research (as cited in Tranfield, et al., 2003) I believe that only primary studies reporting research results can contribute to the syntheses of research results from various studies. As this synthesis of research results is a following step of this literature review, book reviews and literature reviews had to be excluded (for details of the studies meeting the inclusion criteria please see Table 5).

*Problems with inclusion/exclusion criteria*

The inclusion and exclusion criteria led to problems due to their application to 'qualitative' research in relation to identifying the year of data collection (parameter: time frame) and the applied methods, which were often not explicitly described (parameter: study type). Campbell (2003) described such problems related to the selection of 'qualitative' studies by systematic review and showed that the systematic reviews' foundation is a more positivistic, linear and pre-defined process whilst 'qualitative' research is more flexible and non-linear. McDermott (2004) experienced similar problems in her systematic review of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research results and highlighted alternative search strategies that are related to sampling techniques such as data saturation, snowball citation and theoretical sampling to avoid such problems.

As expressed by Jensen and Allen (1996), who developed an interpretative meta-synthesis method for the synthesis of 'qualitative' research results, what such rather positivistic strategies risk is the omission of relevant data that could lead to multi-voiced and open-ended results. Therefore, such alternative strategies have not been followed in this review and studies with such 'problems' were not excluded at this stage, but the 18 studies identified for the 'quality' appraisal stage might have also been identified via some of these alternative techniques due to their narrow range of sources (for sources of the studies meeting the inclusion criteria please see Table 4 and for details ('qualitative'/'quantitative' research, for example) of the studies meeting the inclusion criteria please see Table 5).

Due to the author's position as a postmodernist 'qualitative' researcher, it has to be considered that the step-wise exclusion procedure described above may risk excluding studies that have potential value for the review's aim, but which value is not recognised at the inclusion/exclusion stage. In order to cope with the positivist tendency of the

systematic literature review methodology, and specifically with its exclusion of studies whilst at the same time not changing its processes, the following procedure has been observed each time a study was identified for exclusion. Since two recent narrative, and therefore non-systematic literature reviews, on multicultural working groups (also including multinational teams) are included as a preface in two identified research studies (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Cramer, 2007), each study identified for exclusion was searched for in the two reviews. If the study for exclusion was found within one of the two reviews, then the text of the study to be excluded was re-read to confirm that the exclusion criteria are sufficiently fulfilled. By doing so I tried to see if these studies have potential value for the review's aim, even they were suggested for exclusion at the inclusion/exclusion stage.

#### *'Quality' assessment*

A 'traditional' systematic review, for example of studies with controlled trials and a more positivistic theoretical framework, would contain a 'quality' assessment stage. The aim of such assessment would be to exclude studies that do not provide 'reliable' answers to the review question. However, it is contested whether such assessment methods should be applied to literature because such methods are not generally accepted by the methodology research community, mostly with regards to the assessment of 'qualitative' research (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Besides, I am not searching for 'reliable' answers in these studies but rather for contradictions between studies and gaps in their findings leading to identification of a multiplicity of voices in the academic community.

Since no comprehensive 'quality' assessment method for both 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' studies is generally accepted in the methodology research field and due to my philosophical stance, all 18 studies, after application of the inclusion/exclusion criteria in this systematic review, were included for synthesis. Twelve of the included studies were

conducted in a university environment and had students as participants; three studies focused on students with work experience (MBA students). None of these are 'qualitative' studies. Six studies were conducted in a company environment; four studies are 'qualitative' (including two which utilise both research methods). Although this clustering indicates a clear separation between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research it is often difficult to classify research as being entirely 'qualitative' or 'quantitative' as explained previously. Additionally, the selection of studies as described above and as experienced by other researchers interested in the synthesis of 'qualitative' research in literature reviews showed that much research contains both aspects (Thomas & Harden, 2008). However, as mentioned before, the terms are in common use and helpful for this literature review, so they were used in this thesis in order to classify studies.

Not undertaking a 'quality' assessment stage, when having 'qualitative' studies included in a systematic reviews, is, according to Dixon-Woods (2005) who have conducted literature reviews which included both 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' studies, a choice of equal rights, like undertaking exclusion of literature through 'quality' assessment. Thomas and Harden (2008) of the EPPI-Centre, on whose recommendations the thematic analysis of this review is based, do not strongly suggest such an exclusion of 'qualitative' research because, "there is little empirical evidence on which to base decisions for excluding studies based on quality assessment" (Thomas & Harden, 2008, p. 8). Besides, Tranfield et al. (2003) add that in the management field it may be possible to execute a 'quality' assessment stage, but management researchers usually rely on the implicit 'quality' rating of a particular journal, rather than formally applying any 'quality' assessment method. Other scholars argue more broadly (for 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research) saying that papers should not be excluded for reasons of 'quality', particularly where this might result in synthesisers discounting important studies for the sake of surface

mistakes, which are distinguished from fatal mistakes that ‘invalidate’ the findings (Jensen & Allen, 1996; Sandelowski, et al., 1997).

***Integrating/synthesising ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research on multinational teamwork and its results***

Thematic analysis was utilised as a synthesising method for this systematic review in order to identify factors influencing communication in multinational teamwork. As suggested by Dixon-Woods (2005), I would like to point out that this thematic analysis is primarily theory-driven, meaning that the literature was searched according to rather pre-defined categories, in other words according to my understanding of intercultural communication as learned from theory and practice (as described in the following section). As my description of intercultural communication is based on an underlying conceptualisation the theory-driven approach helps to focus only on factors influencing communication in multinational teams, rather than on the conceptualisation of intercultural communication itself. They were recognised based on the frequency (‘prominent’ in this view) with which they appeared in all studies included, because a weighting according to their explanatory value would be a type of ‘quality’ assessment that has already been found to be not suitable for this review or for my approach.

***Definition of communication***

This thesis, on a broad level, and this systematic literature review analyse factors influencing communication in multinational teams. The factors presuppose a clear idea of what ‘communication’ actually is and, in my opinion, it is first of all necessary to define the term ‘communication’ to a certain extent.

Hardly any other word is currently so frequently used as the term “communication” (Cramer, 2007). The phenomenon of communication is ubiquitous and scholars from various disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, informatics,

psychology, sociology, linguistics, media science, literature, et cetera have all focused on it. The diverse nature of the communication phenomenon makes it difficult to give a general or specific definition for ‘communication’, especially since this is not entirely desirable from a postmodern perspective. In the 70s Merten had already identified 160 definitions of the term communication (Merten, 1977). However, it is rare to find a definition of communication in books or articles on intercultural communication (for example Hymes, 1979; Ting-Toomey, 1988), even while authors make attempts to further refine terms such as “communication events”, “communication situations”, “communicative competence” and the like. There is also no definition of communication to be found in the two-volume Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science although phenomena like “communication conflicts”, “communication disorders” and “intercultural communication” et cetera are addressed. Whether this lack of a definition for the basic term “communication” is an oversight or to the authors’ considering it to be a term of everyday life, the meaning of which is obvious, is not clear.

Considering some of the definitions given for “communication”, such as the ones stated below, it becomes obvious that the meaning of this word, although playing an important part in everyday life, is not always unambiguous.

*“Communication means shipment of messages.” (Merten, 1977, p. 174)*

*“Communication can also be understood as a procedure for reaching understanding.” (Faßler, 2003, p. 14)*

*“Communication means a verbal exchange of information that refers to a background understanding constituted by reflexive co-orientation.” (Merten, 1977, p. 178)*

*“Communication is a three-digit selection process. [...] the selection of the information itself, [...]secondly the selection of its messages, [...]thirdly the expectation of success, the expectation of an acceptance selection” (Luhmann, 1984, pp. 194-196)*

*“Communication is the transfer of meanings between two systems capable of communicating.” (Merten, 1977, p. 181)*

*“Communication means acting. The theory of communication comprises specific theories of action.” (Meggle, 1997, p. 5)*

These “communication” definition examples demonstrate different understandings of the term that thus qualify the supposed simplicity and the everyday understanding of the concept of ‘communication’. However, it is not the aim of this thesis and the systematic literature review to express an opinion on the different communication definitions or to develop a new definition. In view of the fact that the term ‘communication’ penetrates into various different disciplines, a ‘simple’ definition would lead to an insufficient understanding of the dimensions of communication. Therefore I rather seek understanding of communication as a complex and multifaceted construct. The following explanations aim at demonstrating the multi-faced basis that supports this thesis and the systematic literature review.

***Communication as an interactive process of exchanging information and reaching an understanding.*** The present thesis, and therefore this systematic literature review, analyses interpersonal communication so the term ‘communication’ distances itself from the mathematical-technical view of transferring data. In this thesis, communication is not conceived of as being a unilaterally designed process (like notification, transfer or interpretation of information) but a symmetrically structured process (in the sense of interaction and the process of dialogue to gain understanding). Therefore, communication does not mean that “someone conveys something complete in itself to another person and that this other person simply seizes or rejects such a message that has been transmitted” (Hartung, 1991, p. 241).

Interpersonal communication is always a matter of reciprocal exchange of information, opinions, ideas and attitudes and it is always about “externally visible,

concrete interactions between individuals within a joint spatio-temporal reference system” (Hartung, 1991, p. 241). Communication partners can be senders and receivers at the same time. Communication is therefore not only about one partner sending a message and the other receiving it but that both partners mutually create something new, whether it is a joint text (conversation) or “a certain view of the subject of communication that reaches beyond the individual perspectives” (Hartung, 1991, p. 241).

Therefore, I do not see communication as a linear process in the way that most communication models do with a tendency towards having three basic elements: a sender, a message, and a receiver (Kittler, 2008). For instance, McDaniel, Samovar, and Porter (2005, p. 8) offer a more sophisticated view with a number of additional components that better suits my interpersonal perspective. A source of information, often referred to as ‘sender’, a message to be transmitted, a channel through which the message is transmitted, and a receiver to whom the original message is addressed are the central elements. Furthermore, the reciprocal ideas of feedback and noise that interfere with the transmission are included.

The sender can be described as the individual or group who originates the message. According to McDaniel, Samovar, and Porter (2005, p. 8) “a sender is someone with a need or desire, be it social, occupational, or information-driven, to communicate with others”. To address this desire, the sender transmits an encoded message through a channel to the receiver(s). The message originating from the sender consists of the information understood to create an intended meaning. Communication can therefore be described as the interaction of two or more individuals in order to exchange messages and create meaning (Adler, 2002). Messages characteristically consist of verbal or non-verbal behaviours, which are encoded and transmitted through a channel to the receiver. The channel is considered as any means that provides a path for moving the message from the



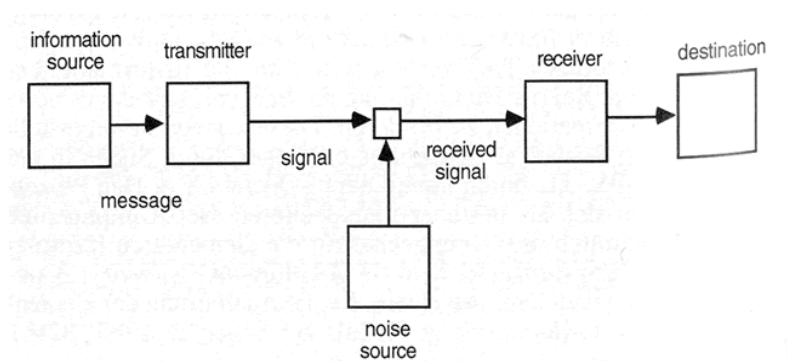
sender to the receiver. The receiver is the intended or unintended recipient of the message (Kittler, 2008). Resulting from the information received, the recipient creates meaning. Since the receiver may interpret a message according to his own frame of mind, which does not necessarily match that of the sender, errors are likely to occur.

Interferences that affect the transmission can be termed ‘noise’. A prominent type of noise that interferes with communication is physical noise (for example, a car passing by during a communication between two individuals, adding unintended noise and thereby altering the message sent). Another type of noise could be that individuals communicate in a culture-specific way that hampers transmissions between them in particular ways due to their different cultural backgrounds (as described in relation to cultural matters being reflected in communication in the section ‘What is intercultural communication’ in this chapter). Feedback will occur after and even during interpreting the message and generating meaning, the receiver will respond according to the meaning he or she assigns to the message and take the role of a sender as well. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this is based on the assumption that often even the best efforts to have a meaningful communication do not necessarily produce the intended outcome.

Communication may not have one clear result with clear understanding but have varying results and therefore different degrees of understanding, indicating the presence of interferences. This also reflects my perspective that communication partners can be senders and receivers at the same time. This interpretation of communication conforms to the etymological sense of the word because the term communication can be attributed to the Latin word *communicare*. It has three principal meanings: 1. to unify; 2. to share something with someone; 3. to talk something over with someone. The interactive aspect of communication does not mean “that this aspect is only manifested in the form of cooperation; similarly, it cannot be excluded that interacting participants may attempt

deceptions or that they fall prey to misunderstandings” (Hartung, 1991, p. 241). In what follows, a communication model will be described that reflects my above-mentioned perspective on communication.

Shannon and Weaver (1949) developed a model focusing on the transmission and reception of messages. The model introduces elements that are not found in older models such as a source for noise. Shannon’s original model for electronic communication developed at the Bell Laboratories during a research project on the problem of cryptography later came to the interest behavioural scientists, but can also be considered as the most prominent linear, one-way transmission model and therefore not suitable for my view on interactional interpersonal communication. Weaver’s introductory note suggests that Shannon’s communication theory could be applied in a broad sense to include “all of the procedures by which one mind may affect another” (Shannon & Weaver, 1949, p. 3). The model includes information as a mathematical constant. An intended meaning converted by an information source into a signal is transmitted through a channel to the receiver who, again, converts the signal into comprehensible content. Interferences caused by noise source(s) distort the transmitted signal and reduce the predictability of what the original sent message was. The model is illustrated in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Communication model of Shannon and Weaver (1949)<sup>3</sup>.

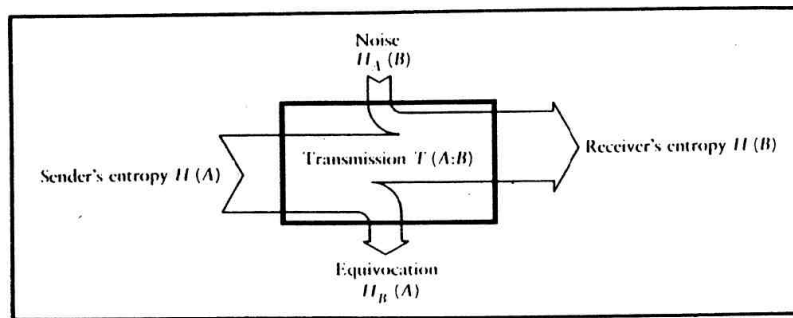
<sup>3</sup> From “The Mathematical Theory of Communication”, by C. Shannon and W. Weaver, 1949, p. 9, Copyright 1949 University of Illinois Press.

Other process models offer modified approaches or different terminologies, but still remain related to the idea of message transmission as it originated in the model of Shannon and Weaver (1949). However, Shannon and Weaver's (1949) communication model does not reflect my perspective that communication partners can be senders and receivers at the same time and interact reciprocally with each other.

Another concept that fits better with my research perspective is Krippendorff's (1986) information theory. As the name "information theory" suggests, "information" is the key to Klaus Krippendorff's (1986) approach to communication. Intended to provide structural models for 'qualitative' data, Krippendorff's (1986) work also introduced a model for information transmission, which can be considered to be an extension of Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model. Following Sullivan (1986, p. 5), Krippendorff puts information theory "into a framework that most social scientists can readily comprehend and evaluate". Furthermore, his approach is "particularly successful at making a rather complicated system [...] as simple as possible" (Sullivan, 1986, p. 5) in his view. The aim of communication is to transport an intended meaning from a sender to a receiver. The sender's entropy can be compared to the meaning of the message. The message sent and the message received does not have to be identical but should correspond to one another. In this ideal case, Krippendorff (1986) speaks of a perfect channel where encoding and decoding are considered to be the inverse of each other.

In the process of communication, interferences are likely to occur that lower the quality (in terms of effectiveness and efficiency) of communication. Krippendorff (1986) identifies two basic categories of interferences: equivocation and noise. Figure 4 shows the flow of information through a communication chain and visualises these two interferences: "Equivocation subtracts from the sender's entropy, yielding the quantity of information actually transmitted, and noise adds unrelated variation to this transmitted quality, yielding

the entropy at the receiver. The amount of information transmitted is the entropy shared by both - input and output, sender and receiver, and so on” (Krippendorff, 1986, p. 24).



**Figure 4.** Krippendorff's (1986) model of information transmission<sup>4</sup>.

Equivocation occurs, when the message sent has two or more equally plausible meanings. These are messages that are ambiguous, indirect, contradictory, or evasive (Adler & Rodman, 2003). Ambiguity in meaning can result from inherently ambiguous words or phrases that make it difficult to interpret any specific meaning. An equivocal message sometimes contains words or phrases with double meanings. “These messages leave it up to the receiver regarding how to interpret the message” (Chovil, 2007, p. 106). As a consequence, the exact same intended message can be sent to different receivers with different meanings.

Noise relates to the different types of interferences that plague every communication event (McDaniel, et al., 2005). Considered technically, the term noise refers to anything that distorts the message the source/sender encodes (Jandt, 2003, p. 31) “If noise is introduced, then the received message contains certain distortions [...] [and] the received signal exhibits greater information - or better, the received signal is selected out of a more varied set than is the transmitted signal” (Shannon & Weaver, 1949, p. 19). The question therefore is whether the information is desirable or not.

<sup>4</sup> From “Information Theory. Structural models for qualitative data”, by K. Krippendorff, 1986, p. 25, Copyright Sage Publishing.

Rather than Krippendorff's (1986) information theory per se - which is more frequently employed in rather technical disciplines - the basic idea that the information between the sender and the receiver is altered by external interferences which either add or subtract information seems adequate in the context of my communication perspective, because the information transmitted depends to what extent sender and receiver share the entropy or change the entropy through the process of dialogue. Therefore, this model can, to some degree, reflect communication as an interactive process of exchanging information and reaching understanding. **For this systematic literature review and thesis, external factors that add or subtract information and lead to interferences in communication are defined as negative influences, while factors that do not add or subtract information are defined as positive influences.** Further facets of my understanding of communication are explained in the following.

*Communication channels.* The existence of at least one communication channel, through which information can be transferred, is a necessary condition for the accomplishment of communication (Watzlawick, Beavin Janet H., & Jackson Donald D., 1972). Depending on whether information is being transferred by written or spoken language a distinction is made between written and oral communication. Spoken language is the principal communication channel for interpersonal communication (Cramer, 2007).

However, language is not the only communication channel for interpersonal communication. It is also possible to communicate by means of gestures and facial expressions (body language) and in other ways. This is why we distinguish between verbal and non-verbal communication. In the context of verbal communication some information is conveyed through intonation, pauses, laughter, sighing, silence and the speed of speech. This is referred to as paralinguistic communication. Only oral communication is analysed in this thesis. In light of this, special attention is paid to the verbal level of communication

and “non-language”/ non-linguistic (such as socio-cultural) communicative aspects are also considered. The reason for this is that spoken language is not the only channel of communication but the most important one for interpersonal and therefore also for intercultural communication.

In addition to the language, socio-cultural knowledge can also have an influence on communication. For example, whereas communication partners are generally immediately aware of language problems (misunderstandings due to wrong translation for example) they are often unaware of socio-linguistic problems (different meanings of words in different cultures for example) that can result in further misunderstandings and conflicts. In other words, I believe that communication is the transmission of meaning from one person to another with each person influenced by a different cultural context (Kittler, 2008).

***Content and relationship aspects of communication.*** Each communication has a content and a relationship aspect (Watzlawick, et al., 1972; Adamzik, 1984). Each communication is therefore not only a matter of transferring information but also of building relations between the communicants. When communicating, the individuals involved always establish a relationship with each other. “They perceive each other as individuals – either via the contents of the communication or independently of it – judge the partner either positively or negatively, want to be seen in a certain way and so forth” (Hartung, 1991, p. 71).

As mentioned above, communication is not only a means of conveying information but communicating individuals also exchange information, opinions and so on reciprocally. However, if the communication partners do not cooperate, for example due to a lack of communicative competence or knowledge about relevant conventions or standards of communication on the part of one or both communication partners, then misunderstandings

and miscommunication arise thus affecting the relationship between the communicating partners.

*Communication knowledge, conventions, standards and styles of communication.*

There is more to communication than linguistic knowledge (Cramer, 2007). In order to be understood or even accepted as a communication partner certain rules, conventions and standards need to be observed (Cramer, 2007). Communication competence implies knowledge regarding conventions, standards and appropriate styles of communication. The two terms ‘convention’ and ‘standard’ are often used as synonyms. ‘Conventions’ are defined as “rules for interpersonal dealings and social behaviour that are considered to be standards of conduct within a society” (Drosdowski, 1980, p. 1548); and ‘standards’ are “generally acknowledged rules considered to be authoritative” (Drosdowski, 1980, p. 1894). In a given language community conventions and standards of communication are, in actual fact, to be understood as a consensus with regards to communicative behaviour and disregard of these conventions and standards a violation. Conventions and standards of communication always imply their socio-cultural background.

Communication partners from different language communities and cultures possess different communication know-how and under particular communication circumstances they will often use various orientations of activities and patterns of interpretation (Kittler, 2008) reflecting their influence or socialisation by different cultural contexts. This creates numerous differences with regards to the approach to coding, transferring and decoding; in some cases, however, this can also be the basis for communication interferences (Kittler, 2008).

In this thesis the term ‘style of communication’ is also used in the context of analysing communication behaviour. ‘Style’ is an ambiguous term. It refers to “different

aspects of linguistic action” (Sandig, 1986, p. 31). The term ‘style’ in this thesis and systematic literature review can be considered to be in line with the definition by Sandig (1986) as:

*“being, for the participants, a meaningful way of conducting concrete actions that trigger effects in given situations by means of texts/remarks, in relation to the participants’ (not necessarily conscious) knowledge of types of situations, action patterns, patterns of text and know-how, types of stylistic sense and stylistic effects, types of stylistic structures and principles, style techniques, style inventory and style patterns” (Sandig, 1986, p. 157).*

Style is here understood to be a “choice” (Sandig, 1986, p. 32). In fact, for particular communication situations there are often alternative styles to choose from. It is quite common that communicating individuals have certain preferences with regards to style (Sandig, 1986). In the analysis conducted in this thesis and therefore also in the systematic literature review, a distinction is made between a ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ style of communication. With regards to an ‘indirect’ style of communication this means that “an intention, which could be understood from the situation and/or context, is not phrased literally but in an ‘indirect’ manner” (Sandig, 1986, p. 252).

In summary, I therefore see communication as an interactive process as expressed by Krippendorff’s (1986) model but on its own it tends to ignore the complexity and richness of facts due to different communication channels, the content and relationship aspect and the use of communication knowledge, conventions, standards and style based on the communication partner’s language/ cultural background. These missing elements are essential to my understanding of communication. This model plus the missing essential elements provide a ground for my understanding of intercultural communication, which is explained in the following subsection.

### ***Intercultural Communication***

***What is culture?*** Culture is a word that is also commonly used whilst, to my mind, the meaning of the term is not always clear and cannot be defined in any clear-cut way.



Many researchers have addressed the term or the phenomenon 'culture'. Even back in the 1940s the American cultural anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified more than 150 definitions for this term. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, according to Javidan, House, Dorfman, Hanges, and Sully de Luque (2006, p. 899) definitions of culture "vary from the very inclusive ('culture is the human-made part of the environment' Herskovits, 1955) to highly focused ('culture is a shared meaning system' Shweder & Levine, 1984)". In a highly focused perspective culture is particularly closely related to the communication issue. For instance, Hall (1959, p. 217) provides the definition that "culture is communication and communication is culture" and suggests that the use of context in communication varies in different cultures (Hall, 1979). Apart from Hall's (1979) focused perspective only a few of the definitions relevant for intercultural communication are considered here.

The following early definition of culture given by Taylor (1871) in his book "Primitive Culture" in 1871 is often quoted by anthropologists: "Culture or civilisation in the broadest ethnological sense is such epitome of knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, conventions and all the other skills and habits that man, as a member of his society, has acquired." For Linton (1974, p. 13) the term culture also implies the behavioural patterns of the members of a society. "A culture is the overall complex comprising of learned behaviour and results of behaviour, the individual elements of which are shared and passed on by the members of a certain society".

However, the American anthropologist Brislin (1981, p. 2) describes culture as "an identifiable group with common convictions and experiences, with value systems that are associated with these experiences and with an interest in a common historical background". In cultural anthropology the term culture is mainly considered to be a system of concepts, convictions, attitudes and value orientations that become apparent in the behaviour and

actions of people as well as in their intellectual and material products (Maletzke, 1996, p. 16). According to this understanding of culture the Chinese and the German societies, for example, each form their own respective cultures.

In cognitive anthropology, culture is defined as being the cognitive world of the members of a culture, which is represented by the entirety of knowledge or of such knowledge systems that enable actions, which are compliant with existing regulations and culturally accepted (Leonhoff, 1992, p. 121). According to Goodenough (1967, p. 36), the main representative and founder of cognitive anthropology, culture is not a material phenomenon:

*“It does not consist of things, people, behaviour, or emotions. It is rather an organisation of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, and otherwise interpreting them. As such, the things people say or do, their social arrangements and events, are products or by-products of their culture as they apply it to the task of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances.”*

Modern linguistic research in the field of human communication is strongly influenced by Goodenough’s concept of culture in the context of cognitive anthropology (Hymes, 1979). According to this cognitive understanding of culture, culture is something that people have in their heads and under its guidance individuals control their behaviour.

This small selection of definitions out of the numerous definitions of culture may suffice to demonstrate the complexity of this term. Culture, in sum, can be divided into at least three different dimensions: as orientation of activities, as entirety of artefacts that can convey values and meanings or as concrete actions carried out (Leonhoff, 1992) and taken together these three form the foundation for this thesis.

As an important, but hard to quantify, factor culture has an influence on any communication process and any interactive process. Lastly, it is important to emphasise from a postmodern view that culture is not static but dynamic and adaptable and within a certain society culture is not monolithic and homogeneous but heterogeneous. A society

like the one in China with more than 50 national minorities is a complex, non-homogeneous social construct and it can reasonably be concluded that one could talk of several cultures that can easily be differentiated. Such cultures of subgroups within a society are referred to as subcultures. “Each subculture stands out against other subcultures due its specific subcultural characteristics but at the same time blends in with the overarching culture” (Maletzke, 1996). However, the concept of subculture is not limited to ethnically defined subgroups but also applies to other subgroups. In Germany, for example, western and eastern German as well as southern German and northern German subcultures can be identified. The well and less educated, adolescents and elderly, town dwellers and villagers, each enterprise as well as different professional sectors exhibit their own subcultures. It is therefore possible for one individual to belong to several subcultures.

As expressed in the section ‘research topic, aim and objectives/questions’ in chapter 1 ‘Introduction’, despite all the differences specific for an individual subculture, subcultures still have a common core of worldviews, values, standards and action patterns that demonstrate their belonging to a certain culture (Knapp, 2003) and therefore a distinction between Chinese and German culture is made whereby nationality and language are considered to be two characteristics that differentiate one culture from another (see ‘national culture’ in chapter 1, section ‘research topic, aim and objectives/questions’).

***What is intercultural communication?*** Intercultural communication is generally understood to be communication between members of different cultures. Language and ethnic origin are considered to be two major criteria for intercultural communication. In their book “Theories in Intercultural Communication” Kim and Gudykunst (1988, p. 305) define intercultural communication as follows:

*“Intercultural communication is defined as the communication process that takes place in a circumstance in which communicators’ patterns of verbal and non-verbal encoding and decoding are significantly different because of cultural differences. ... We are primarily concerned here with communication situations of*

*direct, face-to-face encounters between individuals of differing cultural backgrounds. The term culture is used broadly and inclusively to refer to the collective life patterns shared by people in social groups such as national, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, regional, and gender groups. Communication situations are considered intercultural to the extent that the participants carry different cultural and subcultural attributes. The more the participants differ in their cultural and subcultural attributes, the more intercultural the communication is.”*

Since culture is an overall concept and has numerous variables, resources for intercultural communication can include gender, social class affiliation, dialect et cetera. Communication between individuals that speak the same language but have a different ethnic background like, for example, between white and black Americans, is often considered to be intercultural communication. From my postmodern perspective a clear distinction between intercultural and intracultural communication is difficult to make. In a sense, every communication is an intercultural communication. In the vast majority of cases in the field of linguistic research (Kittler, 2008), however, intercultural communication is perceived, in a more restricted sense, as communication between interacting partners from different cultural backgrounds where at least one of the partners uses a language that is not his/her mother tongue. This also includes situations where all communication participants are using a second language.

In intercultural communication one comes across other codes, conventions, attitudes and behaviours. Communication processes between members of two or more different cultures are much more prone to distortion than communication between members of a single culture. Even if members of two different cultures are capable of communicating fluently in a given language irritations and misunderstandings occur more often on average than for single culture communications. However, not every intercultural encounter is bound to produce communicative distortions; rather the communication partners generate them during their interactions. However, the possibility of individuals being capable of

adapting to strange conventions and standards of communication and of learning and applying new communicative expressions should not be excluded.

In summary, I therefore understand intercultural communication, under the following assumptions:

- there are several distinguishable cultures
- communication partners are always participants in or members of a culture
- cultural aspects are reflected in communication (without cultural membership communication is not possible at all)
- cultural membership means communicating in a specific way
- common cultural membership facilitates communication, different cultural membership makes it more difficult (Hinnenkamp, 1992, p. 142).

This understanding reflects the pre-defined categories that were used for searches in the literature. It helps to focus only on factors influencing communication in multinational teams since the conceptualisation of intercultural communication is the ‘theory-driven’ element of the thematic analysis of this systematic review. In the following section the results are presented.

### *Results*

The analysis process comprised three stages: the identification of ‘prominent’ themes with regards to factors influencing communication, the summarising of the findings under thematic headings and the development of higher order thematic categories. The main questions in intercultural communication research that occurred over and over again when analysing these studies were to what extent different communication structures, behaviours and forms of organisation of different cultures have an influence on the communication process and what interferences they can cause as well as how to resolve these ‘distortions’ of intercultural communication. Besides, due to the occasional

separation in the research on communication in multinational teams by team member or group level in the studies included, the identified factors were also separated into *team member factors* and *group factors* (for summary tables providing description of key points see Tables 6 and 7 in Appendix 1.) The following synthesis is structured by each thematic heading (language skills, for example), which includes a summary of the findings and finally the development of the higher order thematic categories (as a result).

***Team member factors which influence the communication in multinational teams***

***Language skills.*** Members of multinational teams mostly do not use their mother tongue as a working language in their team because these teams are usually made up of members from different nationalities, meaning that members have different national-cultural backgrounds and often speak different languages (Staples & Zhao, 2006). There appears to be a universal view that there is interference in team communication through an increased complexity and an increased probability of misunderstandings, caused by the composition of a team with different nationalities (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Shaw, 2004; Staples & Zhao, 2006; Watson, et al., 1993). However, some scholars feel that it is not the composition itself but rather the language barriers and differences in mother tongues that cause such problems (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004). Others see similarities in the mother tongue as one of the reasons for less misunderstandings and less conflicts (Staples & Zhao, 2006). Thus, I argue that the level of ability of each team member to speak the language in which the collaboration of the teamwork is performed can have a positive or negative impact on team communication.

***Knowledge about cultural background.*** According to Milliken and Martins (as cited in Staples & Zhao, 2006) in any diverse team both observable differences and unobservable differences in team members can be found: the former ones include race, ethnicity, gender and age; and the latter skills, information and knowledge, values,

cognitive processes and experiences. Variety in visible characteristics is usually referred to as surface-level diversity or external differentiation characteristics, whilst variety in invisible characteristics is regarded as deep-level diversity or internal differentiation characteristics (Staples & Zhao, 2006).

A number of influential studies that examined the impact of cultural values on multinational teamwork showed that the cultural knowledge of team members can be based on either external differentiation characteristics (ethnicity, race for example), which often cause prejudices against other team members, or on internal differentiation characteristics (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993). External differentiation characteristics may vary depending on a team member's birthplace or his/her nationality, including race, ethnic characteristics, and native language (Staples & Zhao, 2006). Internal differentiation characteristics are cultural values, which depend on the country, for example, where people come from, in that the national culture where one grows up and lives may influence one's thinking and behaviour (Staples & Zhao, 2006). There seems to be a pervasive view that *internal cultural knowledge* regarding other team members, including cultural commonalties, will decrease the amount of conflict and even improve team communication (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Watson, et al., 1993).

This theoretical orientation is consistent with intercultural management ideologies that are believed to foster a stronger understanding of other cultures through such methods as teaching internal cultural knowledge at intercultural seminars, or by certain training methods such that communication with team members from other nations is strengthened. Current practitioner knowledge conforms to this ideology (Zinzius, 2007; Kuan & Häring-Kuan, 2008). Therefore, I strongly believe that the cultural knowledge of each team member regarding other team members typically supports a better team communication.

Hofner Saphiere (1996) argue further that with such cultural knowledge multinational teams can even function as cultural interpreters and mediators in organisations. In framing the value of internal cultural knowledge in this way there is a strong recognition of the role of each team member's level of internal cultural knowledge as a factor positively or negatively influencing the communication in multinational teams.

*Time allocation/ time devoted by members.* The question of whether time plays an active role in the positive or negative development of communication within multinational teams or whether the role of time is more limited, even unimportant, is contested. Based on the definition of Watson et al. (1993) that the group process comprises the actions of group members that affect one another over time, time in this sense means the period during which such a group process takes place. The literature provides a clear direction that the low-lying diversity characteristics of each nationality within a team, which means here the internal differentiation characteristics, may need time to be explored by the team members. Additionally, the same scholars argue that the advantages of multinational teams in terms of a plurality of views and ideas may take time to develop (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Watson, Johnson, & Merritt, 1998; Watson, et al., 1993).

Some scholars see a direct link between such *team learning* and better team communication, arguing that after a certain period of executed teamwork fewer conflicts and better team communication may be a result of such exploration of the internal differentiation characteristics (Staples & Zhao, 2006; Watson, et al., 1993). This view is supported by many scholars who hold the belief that the process of *getting to know each other* and building relationships takes time and is more likely to take longer in multinational teams than in nationally homogenous teams (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Podsiadlowski, 2002). There appears to be no indication, however, regarding the length of time needed by multinational teams to



communicate equally, or better than, nationally homogenous teams. On the other hand, there is also literature that has fewer concerns regarding the time issue, even showing that multinational teams have better team communication than nationally homogenous teams right from the beginning of the collaboration (Thomas, Ravlin, & Wallace, 1996; Thomas, 1999). Whilst many scholars agree that time, either to discover team diversity or to get to know each other, does play an important role in the positive development of team communication, it is more accurate to say that this does not represent the consensus view. However, I agree with Staples and Zhao (2006), that lack of time for teamwork can be a barrier, either for discovering team diversity or getting to know each other, leading to unsatisfying team communication. In other words, each team member or the team leader devoting sufficient or insufficient time to this aspect indirectly positively or negatively influences the communication in multinational teams.

***Relational interaction versus task-oriented interaction.*** Relational interaction happens in any kind of human collaboration, let alone in multinational teams (Nam, et al., 2009). Today, most of the tasks in organisations are completed through team-based work structures, aimed at facilitating team member interactions in order to reach successful completion of tasks. Therefore, task-oriented interaction also appears in multinational working groups (Nam, et al., 2009). Keyton (as cited in Nam, et al., 2009) defines task-oriented interaction as a focus on achieving a goal and relational interaction as a focus on the interpersonal relationships among group members. Many scholars share a common view that multinational teams may show more relational interactions than nationally homogenous teams (Cramer, 2007; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Hofner Saphiere, 1996). Some see relational interaction at the beginning of teamwork as an enabler for the social integration of each team member and as a means of identifying each team member in the group (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Watson, et al., 1993).

Moreover, according to some studies, relational interaction in the form of building relationships is a precondition for multinational teams to communicate well in order to solve problems and finish tasks (Cramer, 2007; Watson, et al., 1993). Such theoretical orientation is consistent with new team management ideologies for intercultural communication and current practitioner knowledge supports this ideology (Zinzius, 2007; Kuan & Häring-Kuan, 2008). Therefore, I argue that in multinational teams each team member needs to be aware of the importance of focusing on relational interactions as well as focusing on task-oriented interactions to improve team communication since insufficient relational interactions may negatively affect team communication. Hofner Saphiere (1996) supports this with his study, showing that high performing multinational teams have increased relational interactions in terms of both informal and private communication.

***Group factors that influence communication in multinational teams***

***Types and styles of communication.*** Communication here refers to the interaction patterns among team members and is the process during which they bring their individual resources to bear on team tasks. DeSanctis and Lu (2005) divide communication, with regards to multinational teams, into three influencing factors:

1. Volume (amount of communications among team members)
2. Evenness (equal or unequal contributions by team members)
3. Structure (communication hierarchy).

Such a sharp division does not represent the consensus view since only the broad themes of style and type were found in the reviewed literature. Style as referred to in the identified theme relates to open or reserved communication, which describes whether ideas, different opinions, interpretations and problem explanations are shared within the group or not. Type of communication here means face-to-face communication or virtual communication. There has been little research exploring how communication styles and

types can influence the communication itself in multinational teams, whereas it seems that a great deal of research in this area has been conducted on non-nationally-diverse teams. Some researchers focusing on multinational teams regard face-to-face communication as a type of communication that is essential for multinational teams at the commencement of teamwork in order to communicate well (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996). Additionally, many scholars suggest that different opinions should be shared within the group because an open communication style can significantly improve team communication (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Cramer, 2007; DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Podsiadlowski, 2002). Therefore, it can be concluded that the communication style and type of team are important in positively or negatively influencing the communication of multinational teams.

*Distribution of nationalities within one group.* The issue whether the distribution of nationalities within one group plays an influencing role in team communication, or whether its influence has some significance or is completely insignificant, is again debated. Many scholars have a common view that high nationality diversity may lead to a better team communication, at the same time, however, they point out that in very diverse teams more different opinions may appear (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Elron, 1997). All in all, few studies were able to confirm this relationship or even suggest a null relationship of diversity and group communication (Nam, et al., 2009; Staples & Zhao, 2006).

However, there is literature that positions very nationally diverse teams such that the intense diversity is a barrier to good communication in such teams and there is also literature that regards such intense diversity as an accelerator for communication (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; van der Zee, Atsma, & Brodbeck, 2004). Considering this, there appears no consensus on the relationship of increased diversity with better or

worse team communication. Besides the focus on high nationality diversity it seems that a great deal of research into sub-groups has been undertaken. Some researchers have found that sub groups within multinational teams, which are relatively more homogenous than the whole team, may polarise the group process, but no agreement on whether this has a positive or negative impact on team communication can be found (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994; Dahlin, et al., 2005; DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Shaw, 2004). Since most scholars agree that the distribution of nationalities within one group can be an influencing factor on team communication it is possible to say that this represents the majority view. Because of this, I also agree that this influencing factor is mostly determined at the time when a team is put together.

*Types of tasks.* The multinational team's communication in a task-solving context may depend on the nature of the task that is given to the group. Early research in the field of multinational teams in the eighties found that heterogeneous groups will 'outperform' homogenous groups on types of tasks that call for a variety of viewpoints to be communicated within the team (Watson, et al., 1993), such as tasks requiring creativity (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998). Therefore 'type' refers here to either routine tasks that do not require many different viewpoints or to non-routine tasks that do require different viewpoints.

Also, in the reviewed literature, there seems to be a pervasive implication that multinational teams have advantages regarding communication in terms of a wider number of points of view and ideas and that they can find better solutions for non-routine tasks (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993). As Cramer (2007) and Shaw (2004) argue, creative tasks, especially as a type of non-routine task, suit the advantages of multinational teams but, as I understand it, non-routine tasks generally require a wide range of points of view and ideas, so it would therefore make sense to

allocate multinational teams to such tasks rather than to routine tasks which may not 'require' the team's diversity. Therefore it is safe to say that the type of task may have an influence on communication in a multinational team.

***Reflection and feedback.*** Gersick (as cited in Watson, Johnson, & Merritt, 1998) defines feedback in project teams as a process by which the team tends to examine its behaviour at critical points in its life cycle and often adjusts the way in which team members work together. This could be described as *internal feedback*, whereas guidance or feedback provided by non-team members during a team's life cycle regarding both team and individual member issues can be called *external feedback*. There has been little attention given to the practice of reflection and feedback in multinational teams. The observations of some of the studies reviewed have been based on groups who received regular feedback, either from the researcher (external feedback) in order to take independent measurements, or had internal communications during training as kind of feedback process (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Watson, et al., 1998; Watson, et al., 1993). All of these groups demonstrated better team communication so I think that sufficient (meaning 'enough') reflection and feedback may have a positive impact while insufficient feedback may have a negative impact on group communication.

***Trust development.*** As mentioned before, there is a risk that individuals base their perceptions on external differentiation characteristics and there is a pervasive view that this could cause prejudices and hinder trust development within a multinational team (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993). Trust refers to the extent to which team members have confidence in one another to fulfil obligations (DeSanctis & Lu, 2005). Additionally, many scholars argue that a foundation of trust has a positive impact on team communication while a lack of it would cause team communication to deteriorate (DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004;

Watson, et al., 1993). Therefore, I draw the conclusion that the existence or non-existence of trust in a group may be an important factor influencing the communication positively or negatively in multinational teams.

### *Summary*

Those working in the field of management are seeking a way of tackling the growing complexity caused by the implementation of globalisation strategies and new ways of collaboration through a more 'reliable' knowledge base that assists in formulating decisions and taking appropriate action. One part of the complexity is caused by the increased collaboration that is taking place in multinational teams. Facilitating team member interaction aims at promoting successful task completion. Multinational teams have very specific facilitators and barriers to communication that represent the complexity managers' face.

Key sources of knowledge to identify factors positively or negatively influencing communication in multinational teamwork include research on multinational teams and the perspectives of multinational groups and their members. 'Qualitative' research provides access to both these sources of knowledge through studies of the processes and results of multinational working groups. 'Qualitative' studies on how multinational teamwork is conducted occupy only a marginal place in the current knowledge base and it is 'quantitative' studies assessing the processes and results of multinational teamwork that provide the main source of knowledge.

No systematic review has yet been conducted on multinational teamwork and this systematic review was designed to fill this gap. It provides the first systematic review of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research in order to identify factors influencing communication in multinational teams. The review included studies published since 1990, identified through comprehensive search strategies. It showed that there was little research

available on how and why communication in multinational teamwork is influenced (for example the contributing factors) and demonstrated the need for an ‘empirical’ study focusing only on Sino-German teamwork (see ‘theoretical significance’ in Chapter 1, section ‘Theoretical significance of intercultural communication interferences’).

The findings of the studies were synthesised through a three stage process: the identification of ‘prominent’ themes in the literature included in the studies regarding factors influencing communication in multinational teamwork; the summarising of findings under thematic headings and the development of higher order thematic categories. The factors that positively or negatively influence team communication, for both team members and group, were quite consistent across the studies. The synthesis suggested that certain factors can positively or negatively influence team communication. In trying to describe this, the synthesis created higher order thematic categories that represent factors influencing communication in multinational teamwork and which can be, when looking at them together, further clustered into broader higher order thematic categories.

On a **team member level** the factors can be further clustered into two broad higher order thematic categories:

**1) Knowledge of the individual**

- Level of ability of each member to speak the language in which teamwork is undertaken
- Knowledge of each member regarding the culture of other members

**2 ) Process focus of the individual**

- Devotion of sufficient or insufficient time to the communication aspect of their work by all members
- Sufficient or insufficient focus of team members on relational interactions compared to task-oriented interactions

On a **group level** the factors can be also further clustered into two broad higher order thematic categories:

**1) 'Internal' to the team's 'control'**

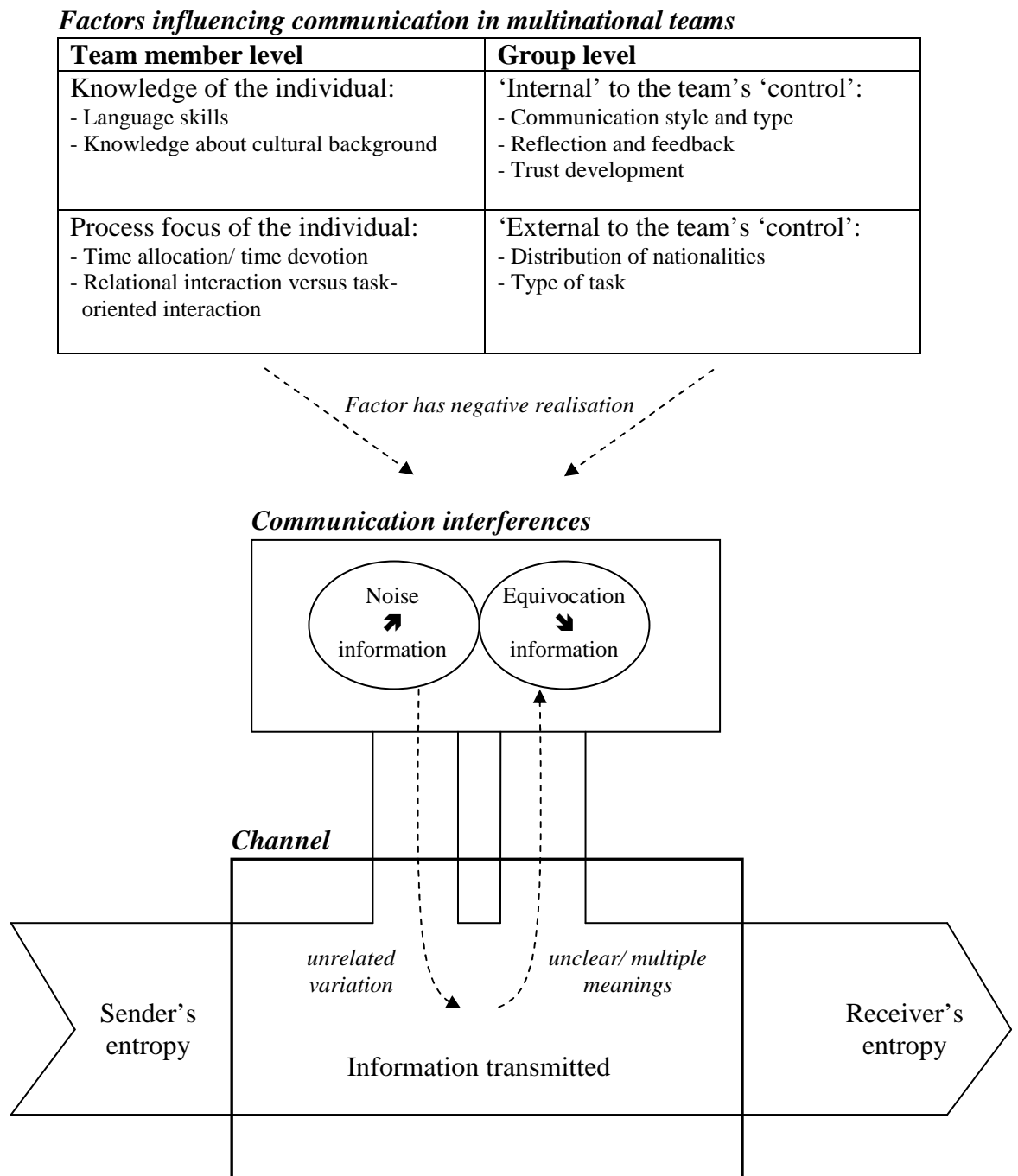
- Communication style and type
- Sufficient or insufficient reflection and feedback within the group
- Level of trust within the group

**2) 'External' to the team's 'control'**

- Distribution of nationalities
- Allocation of routine or non-routine tasks to multinational groups

The systematic literature review results include my understanding of intercultural communication in multinational teams as learned from theory and practice as reflected in the theory-driven synthesis that created higher order thematic categories. They can therefore be visualised as follows in figure 5.





**Figure 5.** Visualisations of systematic literature review results based on my understanding.

As this systematic literature review indicates, systematic reviews combining both 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research are still in their infancy and the methods appropriate to it are still under development although the development of methods for 'quantitative' research has progressed further. But this should not lead us to exclude

'qualitative' research, because 'qualitative' research can give us insights into group behaviour and into the feelings of group members, which is far less likely to happen in 'quantitative' studies. In the case of systematic reviews, 'qualitative' research offers a rare and privileged access to the inner realities of multinational teams. As such, it provides an important source of information and understanding of communication in multinational teams for team members, team managers and international companies. The low number of 'qualitative' studies uncovered in the knowledge base gives cause for concern. With the majority of the studies being 'quantitative', one important conclusion of this systematic review is the need to increase the number of 'qualitative' studies that capture the 'real' nature of multinational teamwork, especially as regards the factors relating to interferences in communication in Sino-German teams.

Building on the issues highlighted in this review and introduction, it makes sense to note the **need for a 'qualitative' study on the factors relating to interferences in communication in Sino-German teams** as a specific contribution to 'qualitative' studies on multinational teamwork. The overall research aim of this thesis, to describe the communication experiences of Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams and to analyse factors relating to interferences in communication, is meant to cater for this. However, the objective was not only to compare or evaluate the factors that are influencing communication in multinational teams found in this systematic literature review with those found in Sino-German teams, but by drawing on the communication experience of Chinese and German nationals in their day-to-day intercultural interactions and cooperation within Sino-German teams, to establish what the concrete communication interferences were, along with their specific influencing factors as well as the differences in communication behaviour patterns and the speaking habits of Chinese and German

nationals. Before going into this in detail the following two chapters describe my research philosophy and methods that form the foundation for my research.

### **3 Research Methodology**

#### *Introduction*

As already explained in the systematic literature review, I believe that methodologies are based on philosophical underpinnings that in turn shape research because these underpinnings provide a lens through which researchers see phenomena and get involved in analysis (Morse & Richards, 2002). In other words, methodologies are grounded in ontological and epistemological standpoints or a kind of philosophical stance that incorporates “an explicit or implicit theoretical framework” (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2002) and certain assumptions about social realities and how they can be understood (Morse & Richards, 2002; Lapum, 2009). Ontology is concerned with the nature of realities and with what actually exists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lichtman, 2010). Epistemology is characterised as the study of the nature of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lichtman, 2010). Epistemology refers to “how we know what we know” (Lichtman, 2010, p. 244). There seems to be a pervasive view in the research methodological literature that ontological and epistemological assumptions, whether implicit or explicit, are the grounds for all intellectual undertakings and are essential for the ‘authentic’ conduct of research because research results are always influenced by these assumptions and should be evaluated relative to them (Silverman, 2010). My assumptions are explained in what follows in order to show what it is I accept as knowledge.

In the systematic literature review I have already explained one part of my assumptions. In being a moderate postmodern researcher, I have positioned myself clearly in regards to the question whether ‘qualitative’ research can or cannot be generalised to some degree by the integration of its findings, which means in other words, whether the specificity of concepts that arise from ‘qualitative’ research is transferable in some cases across settings. As a moderate postmodern researcher, I agree with this idea because I

recognise and appreciate there being a multiplicity of voices and beliefs in the academic community and various approaches to analysing realities. For this reason I included 'quantitative' as well as 'qualitative' studies in the synthesis of the systematic literature review. In the following section my assumptions are further refined and these lay the ground for my methodological choices as well as representing the overall theoretical framework for this study.

### *Being an affirmative postmodern researcher*

Within the philosophical and research methodological literature there seem to be different views on postmodern thought and how to define it (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Polit-O'Hara & Beck, 2004). In general, the word "postmodern" is used on the basis of several different opinions regarding both the concept *modern* and the meaning of the prefix 'post' (Rose, 1991). Where some writers refer to the meaning of 'post' as a continuation of the modern (Kvale, 1992), others use the word simply to refer to the time after the modern (Grodin & Lindlof, 1996).

The fragmentation of the definition of postmodernism can also be seen in the belief expressed by Grodin and Lindlof (1996) that postmodernism is the intensification of *modernism*. In response to the contested nature of the term, Rossouw (1995, p. 2) states that postmodernism is "one of the most used, but also abused concepts in our times". Additionally, *extreme postmodernists* would resist categorising the definitive characteristics of postmodernism (Lötter, 1994). As a result, it is difficult to locate postmodernism temporally or historically – or as Featherstone (1988, p. 207) summarises: "There are probably as many forms of postmodernisms as there are postmodernists". However, many of these forms of postmodernism highlight that 'reality' is multifaceted and that there are multiple approaches to viewing or interpreting these realities (Savage, 2000).

While agreeing with these common characteristics, in this thesis I refer to the postmodern thought that has its origin in the post-industrial economy and its related postmodern culture that developed after the Second World War. At that time, postmodernism was initially expressed in architecture as a critique of the functional, monotone, uniform and replaceable architecture of modernism, for example by reintroducing ornament, colours and human scale to buildings (Jameson, 1991). The critique of modernism was later applied to knowledge and its changing organisation in society after the Second World War (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008) and resulted in what may be called a “pervasive cultural transformation” (Polit-O'Hara & Beck, 2004, p. 14). As a result, postmodernism today refers mainly to the structure of knowledge in societies (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008).

The first definition of postmodernism in relation to knowledge in societies, rather than related to art or architecture, was introduced by Lyotard (1984, p. xxiv) using the term “an incredulity toward metanarratives”. Lyotard (1984) meant by metanarratives the grand theories comprising paradigmatic systems of knowledge containing established worldviews and describing a total picture of society. Such grand theories are the basis upon which to make truth claims and judge the validity of knowledge (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). In other words, metanarratives legitimate what people do and justify their choices of action, because each worldview encompasses shared assumptions, concepts and premises (Lötter, 1994; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Examples of metanarratives are Marxism, capitalism and so-called ‘modern science’ (Rosenau, 1992; Appelrouth & Edles, 2008).

Lyotard (1984) argued that all the facets of ‘modern societies’, even its science as a possible source of knowledge, are based on metanarratives. This means that metanarratives can be seen as authoritative explanations of how things work (Childers & Hentzi, 1995). They provide definitive explanations and reflect the *modernist* perspective that it is an

achievable and desirable goal to search for ‘the truth’ (Childers & Hentzi, 1995). In research, these metanarratives provide the underpinnings of ‘scientific theory’, where truth and knowledge are to be gained from a ‘scientific’ proof-based logical form (Lyotard, 1984; Webster & Mertova, 2007). This form is represented, for example, in research methodologies that produce knowledge that is meant to be true for all cultures, races and languages (Webster & Mertova, 2007). I have criticised such a methodology before and demonstrated my postmodern thinking within the ‘traditional’ systematic literature review approach (see chapter 2 ‘A Systematic Review of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ Studies on Intercultural Teamwork in Multinational Teams’) is based on similar assumptions and aims.

Lyotard (1984) introduced postmodernism as a critique for metanarratives because changes in the structure of contemporary societies due to progress in the areas of communication, mass media and computer science, have led to scepticism about the legitimacy of metanarratives (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). People living in the modern world may also be more aware of the diversity of worldviews since the world can now be seen as a ‘global village’ (Webster & Mertova, 2007) although maintaining a critical perspective regarding the concept of a ‘global village’ is suggested due to the remaining cultural differences (see chapter 1, section ‘Timeliness of intercultural communication interferences’).

From a postmodern perspective these metanarratives are just constructed realities or worldviews and can be seen as serving “to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organisation” (Klages, 2006, p. 169). Klages (2006) found that this process of ‘masking’ can be compared with metanarratives. He sees metanarratives as a method of creating order which “always demands the creation of an equal amount of ‘disorder’, but a ‘grand narrative’ masks the constructedness of these categories by

explaining that ‘disorder’ really is chaotic and bad, and that ‘order’ really is rational and good” (Klages, 2006, p. 169). The assumption of modernism behind this ‘masking’ is that establishing higher rationality is beneficial to establishing more order and that greater order in society will facilitate a better working society (Klages, 2006). Therefore, ‘modern societies’ have to be constantly on guard against anything which could be seen as ‘disorder’ – disrupting the order (Klages, 2006). In summary, from a postmodern perspective order is only maintained in ‘modern societies’ by the use of metanarratives, which can be seen as totalitarian stories a society tells itself regarding its practices and beliefs (Lötter, 1994).

As an alternative to metanarratives Lyotard (1984) argues for the recognition of ‘mini-narratives’ present in the stories of the experiences in small practices and local events instead of generally accepted concepts. Based on this idea, I would argue that knowledge is more locally than globally determined. I do not agree that it is possible to gain universal access to a single reality and we should rather look to local stories which are open-ended, multi-voiced and which do not prioritise a specific interpretation (Savage, 2000). By looking at ‘mini-narratives’ in this thesis, the voices of Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams, who may have been methodologically silenced, can be heard (Hevern, 2002). Such local stories of the Chinese and German team members are situational, temporary (at the time being told) and do not assume universality and truth (Klages, 2006).

This reflects the anti-positivistic standpoint of postmodernism, which values an individual’s experiences in the form of ‘mini-narratives’. Thus, the analysis of stories may be seen as researching first-person accounts of experience (Coffex & Atkinson as cited in Savage, 2000). By doing so, postmodern researchers therefore argue that the specific understandings and interpretations of such ‘mini-narratives’ reflect more general cultural



patterns that are integrally political (Rice & Ezzy, 1999), meaning that each person brings their own ‘baggage’ such as life experiences as well as social and cultural origin to any practice or event (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The focus on specific and therefore local and individual understanding through such ‘mini-narratives’, in order to counteract the exploitation of those who have been silenced, represents a specific postmodern approach. According to Rosenau (1992) this orientation is called an *affirmative postmodern* position, because it has an optimistic view of the postmodern age and believes in the possibility of ‘social change’ – meaning here that such exploitation can be counteracted. *Affirmative postmodernists* aim to create conditions for such ‘social change’ by applying intervention strategies, for example through a specific research inquiry (Rosenau, 1992).

This reflects the optimistic orientation of affirmative postmodernism in order to introduce social change (Miller & McKergow, 2011), because an ‘optimistic’ precondition for social change is that some understandings may be possible through inquiry and that some explanations can be more ‘qualified’ than others (Mathison, 2005). Such a perspective still does not believe in absolute truth but rather realises that attempts to achieve a certain clarity may sometimes help (Mathison, 2005). This reflects a more moderate view of postmodernism as already applied in the systematic literature review, whereas extreme postmodernists may argue that such attempts just produce new marginalisation (Mathison, 2005). As I have defined myself as a *moderate postmodernist* in the literature review and further elaborated my specific postmodern direction on the basis of Rosenau’s (1992) definition, in the following the term affirmative postmodernist will be used instead of moderate postmodernist.

However, most of the moderate and extreme postmodernists share the critique of the assumptions embedded within modernist thought (Cheek, 2000). These postmodernists

have no “confidence in the narratives of truth, science and progress that epitomised modernity” (Cheek, 1999, p. 384). Postmodern researchers rather emphasise the plural nature of reality (therefore ‘realities’ is the term used in this thesis) and the multiple positions from which it is possible to view any facet of those realities. For example, one event may be looked at, reported and analysed differently in different cultures (for example Western or Asian culture) or even in relation to different people.

This stands in contrast to the modernist notion that affirms that researchers are able to represent one reality, speak for others, make truth claims and achieve generally accepted understandings. In research, modernism is reflected as the ambition towards objectivity. According to this view, the inquirer acts as an impartial observer generating an authoritative and unified account (Savage, 2000). However, postmodernist researchers doubt whether such an approach can sufficiently cover the complexity of experiences and multiple perspectives involved and argue for approaches that can address these issues (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Additionally, such modernist research is seen as “people-free” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 33) because human centeredness is neglected. Postmodernism can therefore be seen as a shift towards greater human subjectivity, more reflexive research and experiments with forms of writing that express multiple voices and perspectives (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In other words, postmodern researchers would rather recognise the presence of multiple voices, multiple beliefs and multiple approaches to analysing any aspect of realities (Cheek, 2000) as shown later in this thesis. Rather than laying claim to the truth about communication interferences between Chinese and German members of Sino-German teams, the final outcome of this postmodern study brings to the surface various shared experiences, which are based on specific contexts and asks questions that

can help to progress the discussion regarding what it means to communicate in Sino-German teams.

Besides, bringing shared experience to the surface, in contrast to modernist researchers, postmodernists assume that the representation of one's individual experiences, or one's broader personal reality is, in any text, only a partial representation (Cheek, 2000). This is especially important for my postmodern view where I look at stories (first person accounts of experiences). In using the word 'text' in this postmodern study, texts are seen as anything that can be defined as an expression of language, such as stories for example (Savage, 2000). A text may not have one unified and single meaning given to it by the text's speaker but rather a multiplicity of meanings in a text are implicitly combined by the listener (Savage, 2000). For example, in creating a story or text the author selects what will and what will not be expressed according to unwritten or unspoken assumptions (Cheek, 2000). A postmodern reader therefore explores gaps in the text and what these reveal in terms of other unspoken meanings.

This contrasts with the modernist thought that, for example, in 'scientific research reports' like this thesis, by following 'scientific' conventions in terms of the way that both the research and the subsequent research report are structured the results are free from the researcher's influence (Cheek, 2000). Postmodernists, on the other hand, analyse what is absent from representations in texts or stories with the same interest as what is present. As a result, in this study what Chinese and German participants do not say in their stories is as interesting as what they do say (Cheek, 2000) (for example the Chinese team members were much more reserved and cautious with regards to their criticism than the Germans I interviewed (see chapter 7, section 'Negative appraisal and criticism of the partner'). This demonstrates the postmodern focus on language and its critique, which is further explained in the following section.

*The importance of language from a postmodern perspective*

A major factor regarding the representations of realities arising from writing or speaking, such as in texts or stories, is language, which acts as a 'medium' for the social construction of realities (Grace, 1987). The social construction of realities refers to the process we are using when we actively create and shape our world through social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Human beings use language as an essential tool which makes a social construction of their individual reality possible (Grace, 1987). For example, when we are discussing any subject matter we quickly arrive at a way of looking at and talking about that subject matter, which strongly influences everything we subsequently do or say about it (Grace, 1987). Grace (1987, p. 3) found that "the isolation of particular objects of investigation as objects and the characteristics which are attributed to them once they are isolated are aspects of this creation of objects, of this 'reality construction' ". The selection and definition of the subject matter along with the way we view it after definition are products of our reality construction (Grace, 1987). Additionally, language is not only seen as the means by which realities are constructed, but also as a tool to preserve and transmit them from person to person and from generation to generation (Grace, 1987).

Although realities are constructed via language, modernists may claim that language is a transparent medium, which grants us access to 'unmediated reality' (Rossiter, 2000). Modernists may also claim that language works in a straightforward way by mirroring that single reality and that words simply represent the objects to which they refer (Childers & Hentzi, 1995). From a postmodern perspective truth and knowledge are constructed realities and there is no objective truth. Postmodernists claim from the other side that we have no innocent access to our reality, because an individual reality is also an effect of language and we cannot know anything outside of language (Grace, 1987). An

extreme postmodernist may even argue that there is no human knowledge, but only texts, or in other words, language (Savage, 2000).

This reflects the interest of postmodernists in the underpinnings and relations that develop texts into 'production' (Savage, 2000) as expressed with 'unwritten and unspoken' assumptions in the prior section. Such relations could be explored by asking, "Who speaks? Who writes?" (Savage, 2000, p. 1495). In other words, postmodernists assume that any description of an individual reality is 'produced' within the power relations of the social construct 'language' (Rossiter, 2000). This means that, according to Cheek (2000, p. 40), postmodernists expose "language itself as being both constituted by, and constitutive of the social reality that it seeks to represent".

Postmodernism is therefore more interested in revealing this social construction as well as what was described by Wittgenstein (1953) with 'language games' (*Sprachspiele*), showing dogmas, power and differences. Wittgenstein (1953) used the analogy of a game by saying that the rules of language (grammar) are similar to the rules of a game. In further argument he explained that expressing a meaning in a language can be compared to making a move in a game (Wittgenstein, 1953). Based on this analogy he concluded that words only have a meaning if they are embedded in the diverse social activities of humans. In other words, such language games are socially shared uses of language that organise social settings, relationships and interactions as kinds of events (Miller & McKergow, 2011). Examples of a game-like organisation of language are the telling of jokes, expressing and accepting sympathy and reporting on events (Miller & McKergow, 2011).

Instead of the game-like organisation itself Wittgenstein (1958) focuses on the social contexts in which people tell jokes, express sympathy, report on events and otherwise use language to achieve their practical aims (Miller & McKergow, 2011). An example of this would be that what is a funny joke in one social context might not be funny

in another social context. Based on this example one can recognise that meaning emerges within the interplay between a person's concrete use of language and the social context that frames his/her interaction (Miller & McKergow, 2011). In other words, the meaning of words, or broader use of language, cannot exclusively be understood on the micro level (that is, the local 'production' of meaning in the concrete use of language) but only in connection with the macro level (which is to say, the social context that the individual brings to bear as a 'baggage of knowledge' on each interaction and which he/she reproduces interactively). In summary, the creating of text from a postmodern perspective is a 'product' of certain social encounters rather than the communication of facts which are independent of any social relations (Savage, 2000). Thus, from a postmodern perspective the micro level, as well as the macro level, of language should always be considered (details of how this is reflected in my research are given in the following section 'Postmodern understanding of intercultural communication').

As a possible conclusion arising from this study, the language used by Chinese and German team members working in Sino-German teams to explain their experiences might entail social and cultural representations of truths or realities, or broader socio-cultural knowledge that signify the meanings of experience, but which are not explicitly (for example being more in their communication behaviour) expressed, in other words, not directly said in their stories. It also reflects the postmodern perspective that advocates "epistemological holism" (Stiver, 2001, p. 11), where words, or in a broader view language, do not stand in atomistic discontinuity from the larger streams of life in which they are embedded (Stiver, 2001).

### *Postmodern understanding of intercultural communication*

However, 'language as a social construct' is not only important from a postmodern perspective for understanding the meaning of texts and stories, but also here because my

study analyses intercultural communication behaviour and communication interferences. That means that in this study my postmodern understanding of ‘constructed language’ in texts or stories is transferred to the intercultural communication between Chinese and German nationals. While language is not the only channel of communication, it is the most important one for interpersonal and therefore also for intercultural communication (see ‘Language as the most important channel of communication’ in chapter 2, section ‘Channels of communication’).

Also, in the context of intercultural communication, which is what the stories of Chinese and German team members are about in this study, I presume that in addition to the linguistic aspect on the micro level of communication, non-linguistic socio-cultural knowledge on the macro level of communication can also have, as a relevant factor, an influence on communication events. Whereas communication partners are generally immediately aware of linguistic problems, which can be solved by means of questions or the use of an interpreter, partners are often unaware of socio-linguistic problems that can result in further misunderstandings and conflicts.

In addition, the violation of linguistic rules in intercultural communication is tolerated most of the time whereas disregard of socio-cultural rules is not sanctioned and could have a negative effect on interpersonal relations (see ‘the influence of knowledge about cultural background on communication in multinational teams’ in chapter 2, section ‘Knowledge about cultural background’). However, it would be naive to believe that all conflicts in intercultural communication are consequences resulting from cultural differences. Equally naive, however, is the belief that solely a purely linguistic analysis is able, by means of, for example, transcribed verbal intercultural communication, to text-immanently explain and analyse intercultural communication interferences. This would

mean that macrosocial links of interactions are excluded since the interpretation would be purely on a text-immanent basis (Günthner, 1993).

In other words, reasons for intercultural communication interferences that are outside of the actual language use (for example cultural membership) are not taken into account. Quite often, the communication participants do not explicitly address different interpretations, cultural affinity and misunderstandings in intercultural communication. Since I believe that cultural elements such as conventions of communication and communication standards or the social and cultural contexts always have a conscious or subconscious influence on an individual's communication behaviour **my analysis is meant to take into account both the micro level of the communication phenomenon as well as the macro range of culture**. This is because it is important from a postmodern point of view to incorporate both these perspectives.

My study is opposed to studies where the analysis is generally restricted to the micro level of describing the ways of realising certain speech acts, ignoring the institutional and cultural determinants of communication behaviour. In this thesis, resulting from the view of language taken, the study of communication behaviours and communication interferences, as well as the analysis of the stories by the Chinese and German team members themselves, was extended through the inclusion of the macro level based on my postmodern understanding of language. In other words, the stories of Chinese and German team members were analysed in view of both linguistic and socio-cultural influencing factors that encroach on communication behaviour as well as the stories themselves. The interpretation of the stories and the analysis of the communication interferences in connection with the socio-cultural backgrounds are based on the postmodern conception that communication as a social action is regulated by culturally shaped mindsets, moral concepts, standards and conventions. Although I do not consider



culture to be a static value at any given time and fixed place, there is always, in my opinion, a cultural consensus that is part of a society's knowledge system.

This represents my affirmative postmodern position in that I believe that some understanding may be possible through inquiry and that some explanations can be more 'qualified' than others (Mathison, 2005). However, it is not intended to provide an abstract overall presentation of culture but only to define concrete and specific ways of thinking, standards and conventions that can have an impact on the stories, as well as on communication behaviour and communication interferences. In this study, the analysis of Chinese and German communication behaviours and the communication interferences experienced was therefore undertaken by using a culture comparing approach. In my opinion, the explanation of culture specific contexts is very important for the analysis of the communication between Chinese and German members of Sino-German teams since they live in societies that are geographically, historically and culturally very far apart and they generally had little knowledge of each other before their countries established economic ties.

#### *An interdisciplinary view*

Due to the culture comparing approach of this thesis there is an overlap of my postmodern research interest in the socio-cultural construction of language with the classical research approaches to intercultural communication, which are represented by interpretative socio-linguistics and the ethnography of communication. Therefore, my postmodern analysis of communication interferences in Sino-German teams can be considered to be interdisciplinary. Where such overlaps and similarities occur is explained briefly in the following.

Similar to the postmodern perspective, in interpretative socio-linguistics language is also viewed as embedded in a social context. That is to say interpretative socio-linguistics

researches language use and the culture-specific organisation of verbal actions (Hymes, 1979). However, contrary to my postmodern interest, non-verbal activities are also included here. Interpretative socio-linguistics analyses how such activities are interactively negotiated, and on the basis of which strategies those who are interacting arrive at what kind of interpretation. Just as from a postmodern perspective the relations between interactive strategies and larger social and cultural phenomena are addressed. For example, verbal activities are considered to be a 'product' of certain social encounters rather than the communication of facts which are independent of any social and cultural relations (Savage, 2000). Therefore, interpretative socio-linguistics shares its central question regarding verbal activities with my postmodern interest in the socio-cultural construction of language: how, for example by the use of verbal means, meaning is generated in interactive situations on the basis of socio-cultural knowledge, just as from the postmodern view, interpretative linguistics takes into account both the linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of the speech event to be analysed.

Further overlaps with my postmodern interest in language can be found within the ethnography of communication. The ethnography of communication attempts to describe speech patterns "with regards to the naturally-occurring appearances of constructive factors of speech events" (Hymes, 1979, p. 54). In accordance with my postmodern understanding of language, the ethnography of communication assumes that different socio-cultural groups not only differ with regards to language and linguistic variety but also with respect to their patterns of use that refer to situational contexts. Here the focus is not on the 'langue' but on the 'parole', in other words, the main focus is on language use. By analysing a linguistic form in its utterance context it is possible to identify the rules of an appropriate, in other words, not only grammatically correct, speaker behaviour for an individual or a group in certain speech situations (Hymes, 1979, p. 53). The speaker's

communicative competence, which ethnography of communication assesses, is addressed here by the rules of appropriateness. Just as with my research aim, namely communication interferences between Chinese and German members of Sino-German teams, the ethnography of communication is cultural-anthropologically oriented and tries to determine, mainly by comparing cultures, the values and standards of groups within a language community including conventional ways of behaving, forms of interaction and patterns of socialisation et cetera. And as in my postmodern view, the focus is mainly on aspects reflecting social values, cultural values and norms. This shows that ethnography of communication and postmodern research can both contribute to clarifying the relationship between language and culture. As in my study, the analysis includes both the micro level (meaning the local 'production' of meaning within a concrete intercultural communication situation) and the macro level (namely social and cultural factors that the interacting participants bring along as a 'baggage of knowledge' into each interaction and which they reproduce interactively) (Günthner, 1993).

### *Narrative inquiry*

In the introduction of this thesis I have argued that Chinese and Germans working in teams have been marginalised in the intercultural management research field and their needs have not been addressed by much of the existing research that has looked at outcomes by using quantitative methods and thus disregarded the impact of the team member's experience itself (Cramer, 2007). These limited views led to my conclusion that there is a need to conduct research that for the first time is informed by a postmodern theoretical framework that seeks to privilege multiplicity and diversity and that also attends to the silences surrounding this group. Therefore, a postmodern framework provides the theoretical lens through which this research, and its authorial, methodological, and interpretive characteristics are construed and represented. This perspective emphasises

local stories, attends to 'difference', is concerned with the multiple nature of 'reality', and recognises the importance of language as a medium for the social construction of what may be considered 'truth' (Cheek, 2000). These and other postmodern assumptions guide the conduct and writing of this study and results in my use of narrative inquiry.

Due to this focus of my research on 'mini-narratives' expressed as first person accounts of experience that describe small practices and local events experienced by Chinese and German team members, narrative inquiry was chosen because it provides a rich framework for this 'story focus' (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Besides, communication interferences between Chinese and German nationals in intercultural collaboration are difficult to capture from 'outside' through observation. I argue that these can be better explored through first person accounts of experience. Also, narrative inquiry has been chosen as the overall methodology of this study based on my research philosophy, because the epistemological assumptions of narrative inquiry are often associated with postmodernism (Webster & Mertova, 2007), for example, as shown by the acknowledgement of the influence of social and cultural values on the construction of language (Webster & Mertova, 2007). However, both modern and postmodern researchers are able to utilise narrative inquiry (Webster & Mertova, 2007) due to the various theoretical perspectives such as hermeneutics, phenomenology and social constructionism that were the basis for its development (Webster & Mertova, 2007). As a result, narrative inquiry cannot be affiliated with any one specific socio-logical school of thought (Riessman, 2002) and is used in many fields of science. As experienced in this study, the outlines of narrative inquiry in the current methodological literature are fuzzy and still under development so there is no unified theory concerning how to conduct a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

However, most approaches to narrative inquiry have a social constructionist, or more broadly interpretive, orientation as they **focus on exploring individual experiences inside wider cultural and social structures and contexts (Kirkman, 2002; Webster & Mertova, 2007)** just as from my postmodern standpoint. As explained previously with ‘mini-narratives’, the term ‘experience’ in this study does not just mean occurrences or events personally encountered by people but rather the notion that experience is linguistic and understood via a way of talking (Allen & Cloyes, 2005). Linguistic means that experience is understood, organised and communicated as **stories** lived and told (Riessman, 2002; Heo, 2004). Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 375) explain the linguistic concept of story as “a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful”. This is also reflected in this narrative inquiry that represents a systematic epistemological way to understand subjective experience by exploring the stories of Chinese and German participants that structure and recall such experiences.

Within the field of inquiry we tell stories of experiences and modify them by retelling and reliving them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Heo, 2004), because the understandings of human beings are continually developed, reshaped and retold (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Besides, stories may be restructured in the light of newly experienced events. This and the continuous development of understanding reflects a narrative inquiry that is not associated with short-term experiences and events but rather with longer-term sequences of events and experiences along with their understanding (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This is also shown in the way that people describe their world and make sense of their lives through stories (Silverman, 2010), because they ascribe meaning to events and other issues in their lives by constructing stories about them (Sankey & Young, 1996). Storytelling can therefore be seen as the most vital and natural aspect of communication

because we come across stories all the time in our daily life and they shape and characterise how we interact with others (Webster & Mertova, 2007). More broadly, stories can be seen as “the ‘substance’ of generations, history and culture” which reflects our life journey (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 25). For example, to be a member of a culture or community, such as German employees working in China, requires having certain shared knowledge represented as a set of well known stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

From my postmodern viewpoint, by using narrative inquiry “our voices echo those of others in the socio-cultural world and we evidence cultural membership both through our ways of crafting stories and through the very content of these stories” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 2). Stories may even include ‘generalised’ perceptions of certain events shared by the respective cultural group to which a storyteller belongs. Narrative inquiry as a research method allows participants to tell their own stories, lets them talk about their experiences and the meanings they have gained from these (Foster, et al., 2006). As a result, narrative inquiry is human-centred in that it captures and analyses stories. Therefore, it is not of such great interest what happened (the situation or event described in the story) but more what subjective meaning the participants constructed out of what happened. Since I wanted to gain an understanding of the meaning of the participant’s experience(s) it was important to acknowledge that a constructed text, such as a story, only provides a window into subjective reality. Therefore, I view Chinese and German teamwork experiences in relation to communication interferences in Sino-German teams as expressed in stories that are, like any intercultural communication in such teams, individually, culturally and socially constructed (see also section on ‘the importance of language from a postmodern perspective’). As a result, it can be argued that it is the **meaning** of a storyteller’s experience, but not the experience as it occurred, which is

transferred to the listener. The experience itself, as it was lived by the storyteller, is not transferred and is kept in the storyteller (Ricoeur, 1976).

**In other words, stories enable us to see what effect an experience has on people who are living that experience** (Webster & Mertova, 2007). This view lays the ground for my postmodern epistemological assumptions. I understand that what people interpret in their stories does not reflect how something has really happened (for example in terms of sequence) because stories are the interpretations of a storyteller's experience in a specific situation, social context and cultural context. This means that stories are the result of a storyteller's perception and interpretation of the world – representing his/her own reality (Czarniawska as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007). Whether or not an event or situation really took place is not as important in this study as the perception and impact this experience had for the Chinese and German team members involved.

This can be seen as an alternative mode of thinking and learning and one which is concerned with a way of knowing that is different from the modernist conception of 'scientific knowing' as it is not regarded as 'objective' and does not focus on the generalisation of findings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Silverman, 2010). Even 'scientific knowing' would not seek a generalisation of findings but rather only an insight into one aspect of 'reality' and in this respect, narrative inquiry represents an alternative way of knowing. The narrative structure of a story is not a mere material connection of happenings, but rather a connected unfolding of events that does not necessarily follow logic (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Such connections are made in order to allow a listener to understand a situation by developing it (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

In analysing such 'designed stories' it is not necessary to be explanatory in the sense of a 'scientific' approach that shows necessary connections among appearances (Webster & Mertova, 2007). When examining the phenomena associated with human

experience, conceptions of realities or people's ways of being, they are neither objective nor absolute (Lapum, 2009). Whereas 'objective knowledge' tends to be associated with modernist 'scientific methods', narrative inquiry allows us to understand what an experience can do to people who are living that experience (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry, by illuminating these experiences and acknowledging the wider connections to a human worldview is, therefore, human-centred (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Aristotle expressed this idea by arguing that human action should be explained in 'its own terms' (Carr as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007). 'Scientific research methods' may not sufficiently address issues such as complexity of experiences, multiplicity of perspectives and human-centeredness (Webster & Mertova, 2007), but understanding the social and cultural perspective can add insight and offer an alternative and more meaningful lens for understanding.

Due to the human-centeredness of narrative inquiry I assume that human beings make sense of random experiences by creating stories about them (Webster & Mertova, 2007). They may even select only certain elements of experiences and make them available in stories. Therefore, this postmodern study is only assumed to be particularistic. Besides, it is only particularistic because it explores a certain point in time and space and aims to find meaning in a particular case or issue within that context, which in this study is the experience of twelve Chinese and German team members working in Sino-German teams.

The purpose of this study is therefore not to speak for everyone but rather to create thick and rich accounts that show the experience of certain people with the aim of extending the understanding of a certain issue (Stringer, 1999). Instead of 'scientific methods', which are often unable to describe the grounds by which ordinary people make sense of their own and another's actions (Bruner, 1996), this postmodern study honours subjectivity and highlights the participants ability to reflect and articulate their experiences



by storytelling. This represents the postmodern view, which is interested in the individual and seeks the influence of experience and culture on the construction of knowledge (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The ability to tell stories is also a way of summing up and giving meaning to complex experiences. However, these stories are limited by being locally and historically situated so narrative inquiry is more interested in accessing the depths of these limited views rather than the breadth of knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In general, in this postmodern narrative inquiry, depth of experience was accessed with careful attention to detail, context and the nuances in ways of knowing that parallel the knowing that is embedded in social lives. This approach to a narrative inquiry leads to obtaining a greater depth of data contained in the stories because it elicits intangibility and implicitness with clarity and therefore enables the researcher to understand why, as well as why in a certain way, a particular story is told. Stories relating experiences implicitly may enclose tacit knowledge (Conle, 1996, 1999). For example, by collecting people's stories and analysing the nature of the stories, the deeply hidden assumptions of the storyteller can be recognised (Duff & Bell, 2002). The researcher tries to access such tacit knowledge that the storytellers may not express explicitly of their own accord (Duff & Bell, 2002). Such knowledge may be so deeply embedded that it is implicit and often almost inaccessible for the researcher through other means (Polyani, 1983). Stories are seen to offer a way of accessing some of this tacit knowledge (Conle, 1996, 1999).

In summary, narrative inquiry tends less towards finding universal truths than increasing the researcher's understanding (the meaning for the researcher), which is developed via attention to stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Silverman, 2010). Narrative inquiry in an affirmative postmodern fashion still aims to understand realities but the resultant knowledge comprises representations of those realities. The purpose of this

narrative inquiry is to deepen the understanding of the experiencing of communication interferences between Chinese and German study participants who are working in Sino-German teams, so as to enable further thinking and storytelling by inviting others into the story.

This means that I recognise that there is no singular truth but only local versions of truth. These local versions of truth refer to factors that are ‘true’ or fit to the knowledge and experience of Chinese and German team members who are in certain difficult situations when working in Sino-German teams. Such local truths are always situational and contextual and they may even overlap with truths of other individuals even when they are not identical for everyone (Morgan, McWilliam, & Lather, 1997). Therefore, in this narrative inquiry I assume that some truths expressed by the storytellers will resonate with others who identify with this experience.

#### ***Defining ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ for this study***

As mentioned before, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define narrative inquiry as a research methodology using stories, alongside other field texts, as data sources. In the literature (methodology literature and studies with a narrative inquiry approach) the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ are often used interchangeably (Foster, et al., 2006). Story can be distinguished from narrative in that a story is a representative account of people’s actions (Sarbin, 1986). In this study, the stories that arose from narrative inquiry are the first person accounts of the experiences of Chinese and German team members. Frank (2000, p. 354) argues that “people do not tell narratives, they tell stories”. Stories are also considered part of one’s personal identity and of one’s culture. In terms of the ‘self’, the story allows us to construct who we are and with regards to culture it provides the commonness of shared beliefs (Gudmundsdottir, 1991). For example, from our childhood we are told ‘bedtime stories’ based on cultural, moral, social and political values of the current or past

generation. Alternatively, as mentioned before, there is the example that a community of German employees working in China may also have certain shared stories.

In comparison to a story, a narrative can be defined as “the performative process of making or telling a story” (Denzin, 1997, p. 158), which means that narrative refers more to the structure, knowledge and skills which people utilise when they create a story (Denzin, 1997). A narrative can be drawn out through analytic attention to **how** stories are compiled in specific ways and what assumptions they take as given (Wiltshire as cited in Lapum, 2009). In this study, the long-term work experiences in Sino-German teams and experiences of communication interferences as recounted by the participants were referred to as their ‘stories’ (since they may tell more than one story within one conversation), whereas the research inquiry was referred to as ‘narrative’, where the participant tells his/her stories and the researcher describes and interprets these.

Referring to Frank’s (2000) argument and in order to differentiate between narratives and stories, this study defines stories as accounts of **actions, characters and events (or more simply, ‘contents’)** which have a temporal (time when a story is told) and contextual dimension (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lapum, 2009). In addition to the stories that people tell there are certain **underpinnings (or more simply, ‘structures’)** that develop the stories (Silverman, 2010), these are referred to as narratives in this study. Therefore, the term narrative is used when referring to such story underpinnings and narrative inquiry when referring to the use of stories/narratives as a research methodology (Silverman, 2010).

#### ***Central tenets of narrative inquiry: temporality and contextuality***

The temporal dimension is a central tenet of narrative inquiry because people are themselves temporal beings and their experiences are therefore lived temporally (Ricoeur, 1984; Conle, 1999; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The social scientist Polkinghorne (1988, p.

1) expresses another temporal dimension to which I refer in this study by saying “narrative meaning is a cognitive process that [specifically] organises human experiences into **temporally** meaningful episodes”. This organisation that underlies narrative is plot formation, such formation means the thread of design and its active shaping force (Brooks as cited in Lapum, 2009). A plot can also be defined as a circumstance that creates the meaning and organisation of a story by connecting a series of diverse events and actions (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). This means that a plot is the structuring of both story and narrative leading to a meaningful totality of ‘widespread’ events (Ricoeur, 1984). This is a more designed connection that helps us understand an event by developing or unfolding it (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Generally, a number of elements are contained in plots as found by Lapum (2009, p. xiii), which include “a central character (and usually other characters), a number of events, some sort of problem that is described and explained (and may or may not be resolved), an outcome and a level of emotional cadence (including not just a description of how things happened, but an affective dimension of how things felt).” The process in which the storyteller describes how these events, characters, interactions and outcomes are related can be called ‘narrative em-plot-ment’ (White, 2001). The storyteller is developing a chain of causality which includes relations and associations (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007) and results in a meaningful totality, but only at the moment the story is told (Ricoeur, 1984). This meaningfulness can therefore be seen as a temporally constructed combination of opportunity, goals and causes (Ricoeur, 1984).

Like Polkinghorne (1988) other scholars agree with the idea that the ways in which stories are emplotted also have eminent **temporal** links (Ricoeur, 1984). That is, emplotment leads to shifts in the stories because stories are told and retold within human life (Mattingly, 1994). Re-emplotment may happen when storytellers retell stories and reposition themselves. A restructuring may also take place in the light of newly

experienced events or, in a broader sense, new contexts. Besides, it is human nature that people's experiences are always a part of their history and present and that people always think themselves into their futures (Carr as cited in Lapum, 2009). This means that in the context of the orientation of this narrative inquiry regarding stories and storytelling, stories that people tell at a certain point in time and place are always connected and shaped by their past experience, the present and their anticipation of the future as available at the moment the story is told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

As described before, such stories are a series of carefully connected and goal-oriented sequences (intentions) because stories are told from a particular vantage or standpoint, which may be situated within social, cultural and institutional discourses, or in other words, context (Conle, 1999; Frank, 2000). People may hold common perceptions of phenomena and events within the cultural groups to which they belong (Webster & Mertova, 2007), expressing the common view of a group of individuals. This may lead people to *make* such specific connections and specific sequences in order to 'fulfil' their conscious and unconscious intentions. For example, when participants recall past experiences they are using memory processes. These processes are constructed within certain cultural conventions and therefore are culturally determined. From this point of view, a memory is a social construct and its content cannot be viewed as a 'true' representation.

Therefore, in this postmodern study no claim is laid to capturing the 'whole truth' of the participant's experience, but it lays claim to the constructing of meaning in the multiple stories of Chinese and German team members working in Sino-German teams. Therefore, the researcher's attention to contextuality allows an understanding of the situatedness of the storyteller and his/her vantage point (Lapum, 2009) although, in line with my research philosophy, I believe it is not possible to achieve a full understanding.

Modernist researchers would attempt to create a taxonomy that can be applied to all contexts, whereas in this postmodernist study context is ever-present (but changeable over time) and can be described as the ‘background’ and ‘scene’ in which the story is constructed. Stories may reveal the storyteller’s worldview in the context of Sino-German teamwork.

It is important not only to consider how stories are shaped by people’s experiences and standpoint, but to analyse how these experiences affect and shape them as people and change their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The underlying assumption is that a person’s experience is not a separate unit but is a part of his/her life/world that existed before Sino-German teamwork participation and will continue afterwards, although changes in the ways in which such teamwork might be participated in are possible (for example adjustment of communication behaviour). Through the changing of such participation in the form of revising, for example, actions and behaviours, experiences can lead to a changed identity and vice versa (Bruner, 1985; Lapum, 2009). A narrative inquiry enables the researcher to access not only how and why people narrate accounts of communication interferences within Sino-German teamwork, but also their identity that is compiled within the construction of these accounts. Polkinghorne (1988) states that narrative inquiry acknowledges the importance of individual experiences by paying attention to how they work as parts of a whole, and I would argue furthermore, how they work as parts of an identity. As Silverman (2010, p. 226) clearly expresses “identity is never a fixed entity lying somewhere inside people’s heads”. Narrative inquiry is therefore especially suitable for exploration regarding the aspects of selfhood (Smith as cited in Lapum, 2009). Narrative inquiry also allows the researcher to understand the participant’s identity, although I assume due to my epistemological stance that this cannot be ‘fully’

comprehended. However, stories can help us to come closer to knowing the dimensions of identity.

In summary, contextuality and temporality are important in understanding the reason a story is told and why in a certain way (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

*Specific reasons for choosing narrative inquiry to consider communication interferences within Sino-German teamwork*

**Complexity.** As already articulated in the systematic literature review, research on multinational teamwork is concerned with a complex phenomenon because that specific kind of teamwork is in itself often complex and non-linear. Such complex phenomena can be messy and they can be elusive and vague when researched (Law, 2004). One part of the complexity is caused by the increased collaboration in multinational teams aimed at facilitating team member interaction in an effort to promote successful task completion. Multinational teams are often confronted with communication interferences, as described in the literature review, which represent the complexity managers face. Researchers and managers trying to handle the complexities of these phenomena can often find it all very disturbing (Law, 2004). Besides, the common modernist methodological approach may not be holistic enough to capture the complexity. Therefore the methodology used in this study involves a postmodern narrative inquiry because it allows the complexity to be ‘tackled’ and at the same time allows the researcher to understand it (Etherington, 2004). In this narrative inquiry complexity was ‘collected’ via the outcome of narration, which was complex and expressed “itself by drawing together descriptions of states of affairs contained in individual sentences into a particular type of discourse” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 36). People construct a sense of meaning, pulling together dimensions of this complexity by telling stories (Lapum, 2009). Therefore, when a story unfolds, the complexities of

characters, relationships and settings can also illuminate complex problems such as communication interferences within Sino-German teamwork (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

**Contribution.** Narrative inquiry is a growing and currently often-used methodology in different areas of science (Etherington, 2004; Heo, 2004; Riley & Hawe, 2005; Clandinin, 2006; Bryman & Bell, 2007; Webster & Mertova, 2007; Lapum, 2009; Gill, Helkkula, Cobelli, & White, 2010; Carrillo & Baguley, 2011). Stories and storytelling are the focus of the whole research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories ‘open’ a special way into the insights of team members’ experiences and they offer “a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 180). By bringing narrative inquiry into management research, we can better understand team members’ experiences and their communication interferences within Sino-German teamwork. Team members’ experiences in multinational teamwork have been explored before; though mainly through modernist ‘quantitative’ research, but an approach of listening to stories is absent from the literature. In addition, the systematic literature review showed that much research on multinational teamwork looked at outcomes and disregarded the impact of the experience itself due to using ‘quantitative’ research. By using narrative inquiry this study will provide a unique contribution to research. Using narrative inquiry to understand the participants’ experiences can also be seen to overcome some of the limitations of modernist ‘scientific’ approaches.

**Familiar process.** In this study, the understanding of Chinese and German individuals’ experiences in relation to communication was reached through the exploration of experiences and meanings as expressed in stories. The process of storytelling is found in people’s lives when they make meaning out of their experiences and make sense of their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Bruner, 2002). Storytelling gives individuals a chance to understand one another’s experiences in a social and cultural context and to clarify their



own thinking (Heo, 2004). People's storytelling enables the relating of experiences using social and cultural patterns and practices of communication and this is learned early in life (Heo, 2004). Since storytelling is a familiar way for people to talk about their experiences, narrative inquiry was chosen as a suitable methodology for this study.

## **4 Research Methods**

### *Participants*

#### *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

The target population for this study, as stated in the introductory chapter, were Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams in China because such teams currently commonly exist in Sino-German joint ventures, wholly foreign-owned subsidiaries of German companies in China and other Sino-German organisations in China. Following the issues identified within the systematic literature review, such teams needed to contain only two nationalities (Chinese and German). In addition, the teams had to be real, individuals were excluded if their team was mainly a virtual team or if they were working in a team of which I was a member, because this study was not conducted using an emic approach from inside a team member's experience, but rather from the perspective of an interested and 'knowledgeable' team member from another Sino-German team (see 'resonance' in this chapter, section 'Data Collection Method').

#### *Number of participants*

One part of the selection process was to determine the number of participants. As mentioned before, the target of postmodern research is not statistical inference and generalisation (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry is a way to summarise and give meaning to complex experiences that are locally and historically limited and situated. Therefore, narrative inquiry is more interested in accessing the depth of these views instead of the breadth of knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) implying a smaller number of participants than 'objectivistic' and especially 'quantitative' methods may suggest since 'quantitative' research is often associated with large 'sample' sizes. This would be a weakness here because it would not allow for an inquiry that reaches the intended depth of this postmodern narrative study (Patton as cited in Lapum, 2009). The logic of 'sampling'

is different in postmodern research. The target of this narrative inquiry was rather to take a 'sample size' that allows theoretical saturation in terms of indented depth and sufficiently rich stories. Therefore, the word 'sample' is more used in modernist research. There are only a few discussions in the narrative methodology literature about how many participants should be included (Lapum, 2009). However, many scholars recommend that the number of participants in a narrative inquiry must be small in order to access rich data (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). Narrative inquiry accumulates a quantity of rich stories and therefore a small number of participants is recommended. This is a consistent view in narrative research, but Sandelowski (1995) argues that for interpretive research in general, studies with a notably small or 'too small' number of participants will not contribute to a rich and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore I rely not only on the views of narrative researchers but also consider recommendations from the field of non-narrative research.

In order to also have a recommendation from interpretive non-narrative researchers regarding how many participants should be included in my study, as a first step, the methodology literature, which does not specifically involve narrative inquiry, was reviewed in order to find recommendations regarding the number of participants for studies using multiple methods. The use of two different data analysis methods (see 'Data analysis') can be seen as using multiple methods at the same time (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The outcome of such methods can be a rich data set so in this case also a smaller number of participants is recommended in the literature, with around ten participants being suggested (Morse, 2000). As a second step, the methodology literature was examined regarding the acknowledgement of sub-groups when preparing participants for recruitment in interpretive research. Sub-groups in this research include Chinese and German team members (see 'sub-groups' in chapter 2, section 'Distribution of nationalities within one

group’). Kuzel (1999) states that the existence of sub-groups has to be considered for determining the participant group size. The literature review had already identified a negative influence on research outcomes in research on multinational teams arising from the unequal distribution of nationalities. Kuzel (1999) suggests 5-6 participants equally per sub-group. This would mean a total participant group size of 10-12 people, which is nearly in line with the recommendations of the narrative research field (Lapum, 2009) and the overall methodological literature regarding the methods to be employed in this type of study. In the end, due to the lack of recommendations regarding the number of participants in narrative inquiry I recruited 6 Chinese and 6 German individuals to be included in the study.

### ***Participant recruitment***

A ‘purposefully selected participant group’ (or as it is called in modernist research a ‘purposefully selected sample’) was employed in this study with regards to ensuring a selection of participants that would adequately enrich the understanding of the phenomenon (Morse & Richards, 2002). ‘Purposive’ means carefully seeking out participants who have experienced aspects of the phenomenon of interest (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007; Silverman, 2010). In addition, from an affirmative postmodernist perspective ‘mini-narratives’, in the form of first person accounts of the communication interferences experienced within Sino-German teamwork, may emerge from this participant group in order that we can hear the voices of Chinese and German individuals who have been methodologically silenced. This method of participant selection was used in three ways:

- 1) Recruitment of participants who have worked extensively in Sino-German working groups (rather than German managers working mainly with German nationals in China) for at least one year

- 2) Recruitment of equal numbers of Chinese and German nationals, based on the identified negative influence of the unequal distribution of nationalities on research outcomes from multinational teamwork. The selection was by nationality and not ethnicity as described in the literature review (see 'research results on ethnically culturally diverse groups' in chapter 2, section 'Group diversity')
- 3) Involving only individuals that meet the inclusion criteria (see section 'Inclusion and exclusion criteria' in this chapter).

In winter 2010, I made the initial contacts with prospective participants that met the inclusion criteria in order to ask them for referrals after briefly explaining the study and asking whether they would be willing to participate in the research project. In line with the Research Ethics Handbook of the University of Gloucestershire all these people had received an email or telephone call in which I explained the purpose, expectations of participation, voluntary nature, potential benefits, nature of research (including the use of a video camera to record interviews), confidentiality and the anonymity clauses of the study. This last also included a confirmation that any results will be disseminated with no reference to the participants (instead of participant names the numbers 1 to 12 were used) and that their names and research data (such as video records) would be kept confidential and secure with only one copy existing, located at the researcher's home. It was also promised that all the names of people and companies they mentioned in interviews would be altered, including their own company name. After that, sufficient time was given for individuals to ask me questions and discuss the participation in the study with their company/supervisor et cetera. The recruitment process for each individual was considered completed when they confirmed their participation, although participants were still able to refuse participation at any time after confirmation. The recruitment period finished in

summer 2011. Most of the participants worked in Sino-German joint ventures. The members of the next group worked in wholly owned German subsidiaries. The other participants worked in official positions at the German Consulate General of the Council for the Promotion of International Trade in Shanghai. All the participants recruited worked directly or at least indirectly in some form of economic cooperation in China. Currently, the German participants have been resident in China for between one and twenty years.

This participant selection, which generated participants from diverse backgrounds, has also strengthened the study through recognising differences in experience, an important facet of postmodern research, that may occur for Chinese and Germans working in Sino-German teams. In the following tables the participants are described in relation to their core characteristics.

**Table 11**

*Description of participants 1 to 6 (German nationals)*

Part- icipant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Current occup- ation	Sales Manager	Senior Sales Engineer	General Manager	IT specialist	Dept. Manager	Lawyer
Regular- ity in Sino- German team-	At teams at his Chinese employer in China	Currently at Sino- German Joint- Venture in	1 year at Sino- German Joint- Venture	At German Consulate General in Shanghai	At Sino- German Joint- Venture in China	At wholly- owned lawyer's office in

work given?		China	(ended at the time of interview) in China			China with Chinese staff
Duration of stay in China	20 years	Several years	1 year	> 3 years	Nearly 2 years	> 1 year
Chinese Language skills	Good Chinese language skills	Basic knowledge of Chinese language	Basic knowledge of Chinese language	No basic knowledge / just a few words	No basic knowledge / just a few words	No basic knowledge / just a few words
Business language used	English / Chinese	English	English	English / German	English / German / Chinese	English / Chinese
Preparation for Sino-German teamwork	4 hours per day Chinese language course for 5 months before relocation to China	No	Not clearly mentioned	2 weeks intensive language and culture course	No	Several part-time (evening) language courses before and after relocation to China

**Table 12***Description of participants 7 to 12 (Chinese nationals)*

Part- icipant	7	8	9	10	11	12
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Current occup- ation	Manager	Dept. head	General Manager	Manager	Account- ant	Sales Manager
Regular- ity in Sino- German teamwor k given?	At Sino- German Joint- Venture in China (same company like participant 5)	Currently at Sino- German Joint- Venture in China	Currently at Sino- German Joint- Venture in China	Currently at Sino- German Joint- Venture in China	At wholly- German- owned enterprise in China	At wholly- German- owned enterprise in China
Duration of stay in above company	Several years	Several years	More than 5 years	More than 10 years	3 years	Nearly 4 years
Foreign lang- uage	Basic knowledge of English	English: No basic knowledge	English: No basic knowledge	English	English / German	English / German



skills	language	/ just a few	/ just a few			
		words	words			
Business	Chinese /	Chinese /	Chinese /	English /	English /	English /
language	English	English	English	German	Chinese	German
used						
Preparat-	No	No	No	No	No	No
ion for	specific	specific	specific	specific	specific	specific
Sino-						
German						
team-						
work						

### *Data Generation Method*

#### *Interviews*

**General.** In general, the face-to-face interviews with Chinese and German team members were video-recorded and point form notes taken during the interviews as preliminary field notes. I decided to video-tape the interviews using a small ‘Sony Handycam’ to allow me to concentrate more closely on the information given during each interview and also to have a better voice and ‘setting’ record for the interview (Gill, et al., 2010). However, before the start of each interview I asked participants whether they wanted to refuse the use of the video camera. The interviews were conducted in German with German participants and Chinese with Chinese participants (as I speak Chinese fluently). For this thesis the interviews have been translated into English, which was also used as an argument in participant recruitment as a further way of protecting the identities of participants.

Interviews are a common and beneficial data generation method (Bryman & Bell, 2007) and they have already been used successfully in a number of cases to explore multinational teamwork experiences (see 'qualitative' research, chapter 2, section 'Literature scoping'). In this study regarding a specific type of multinational teamwork the data generation through interviews consisted of narrative interviews in that participants were encouraged to tell several stories recounting experiences in relation to communication interferences within the context of Sino-German teamwork. The focus was to explore these intercultural communication interferences by researching the storytelling of Chinese and German participants (Webster & Mertova, 2007). From a postmodern perspective the boundaries of the roles of participant and researcher may become blurred in such an engagement. When generating field texts in narrative inquiry the researcher not only helps his/her participant to reflect on the meaning by drawing attention to certain facets of stories and exploring these facets, but may also consciously and unconsciously co-construct it. We must also acknowledge that these stories are already 'storied' as socio-cultural interpretations of experience that the researcher consciously and unconsciously co-constructs (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

From an affirmative postmodernist perspective traditional relationships like those in 'scientific' research do not bring forward silent voices, but exploring these was the aim of the interviews in this study. This is in line with the tradition of postmodern writing that favours a reflexive and dialogical stance. The object of understanding and theorising is the dialogical process of communication, which means accounts of social life that are jointly constructed by conversation (Schwandt, 2001). By saying this I am expressing my belief that the interactions between researcher and participant flow in both directions. For example, in interviews the wording of questions and comments will affect the answers I get from the participants (Mishler, 1986). The responses of the participants will then also

affect my following comments and questions. Therefore, I am *in* the process of data generation.

More generally, dialogical narrative interviews involve a negotiated conversation between the researcher and the participant regarding what is to be talked about (Mishler, 1986). Based on my research philosophy, I begin interpreting and theorising about a participant's stories during such a conversation. I share my interpretations with the participants and involve them in reflecting on these. This means that I implicitly and explicitly co-construct the data generation. However, although I am the researcher I do not assume the resultant construction to be a balanced construction where the researcher and the participant have contributed entirely equally to the process. Since I have a particular objective for the conversation by following a rough interview guide while interpreting and somewhat systematically co-constructing the conversation in addition to determining the direction of the conversation I am not behaving in the same way as the participants. This means that a fully balanced construction of the stories and conversation is not assumed.

Depending on researcher and participant's particular roles during the conversation, I assume that the data obtained is co-constructed from the experiences of the researcher **and** the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2006), because narrative inquiry does not solely engage with participant stories. Webster and Mertova (2007, p. 88) argue that "merely listening, recording and fostering participant stories, while ignoring the researcher's stories, is both impossible and unsatisfying".

As mentioned before, I believe that local truths, which are situational and contextual, can be explored through narrative inquiry and that some of these may resonate for others who identify with this experience. I am fully aware that this can also include my own experiences. Frank (1998) argues that narrative inquiry is a reciprocal and moral relationship to be entered into and not just a bare method, because it also involves a

process that he describes as ‘resonance’. Resonance involves sharing in a participant’s story while at the same time sharing the researcher’s own story of certain communication interferences within Sino-German teamwork (Conle, 1996). In other words, resonance “is a way of seeing one experience in terms of another” (Conle, 1996, p. 229) or more specifically, for this research project, in terms of my own stories since I have also been working in Sino-German teams for a long time as mentioned in Introduction of this thesis. I have personally experienced the intercultural communication difficulties of Chinese and German nationals. . This not only allows me to have a certain sensitivity for, as well as understanding of and interest in, the communication interferences of those involved, but also to compare the opinions and experiences of members of other Sino-German teams with my own.

Such comparing of one story with another is a common human phenomenon which may become apparent to us when we think or say “Oh, that reminds me of ...” (Conle, 1996, p. 303). Conle (1996) describes this human function as a structure in our thinking that allows for connections in pools of experiential knowledge. This includes the ability to link events and connect feelings over time and across the stories of different people. In other words, in each participant’s story there might be a set of narratively connected elements that correspond to a similar set of elements in my story/stories and vice versa (Conle, 1996) and vice versa.

However, resonance does not assume that these are identical elements, that they correspond exactly in the two stories or that they are objectively similar (Conle, 1996). Besides, such linking is not governed by logical rules but by “a very personally devised, yet sharable, metaphorical kinship among images, events, and stories” (Conle, 1996, p. 321). Even one word or sentence in a story can create a ‘response’ in us because of an underlying image or event. Such a narrative element in a story may evoke another story in

us like an echo, “making us resonate with metaphorical connections, as we echo the response” (Conle, 1996, p. 305). Conle (1996), who discovered this phenomenon in pre-service teacher inquiry, defined it as ‘resonance’. However, he argues further in the same paper that researchers need to be sufficiently ‘open’ in order to connect with another’s story of experiences. The researcher may involve himself authentically, emotionally and dialogically with participants (Bochner, 2001).

This implies that I need to listen empathically, identify with the participants and show respect for their opinions. By doing so, multiple interpretations from the participants and the researcher are more likely to be valued. Therefore, it is important to develop a relationship based on trust because narrative inquiry is interested in a personal and subjective phenomenon (Lapum, 2009). Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that by creating situations of trust, stories are told that recall the experience and understanding. Besides, the trust between researcher and participant and the depth of insight given each other into their own stories may influence the degree to which meaningful stories emerge and genuine responses are given.

Therefore, I honestly share my own experiences of Sino-German teamwork and the relevant communication interferences, for example, when their experience reminds me of one of my own and I hope that this encourages the participants to share their opinions, thoughts and interferences with me with less hesitation. Therefore, narrative inquiry can be seen as a reciprocal and moral relationship between researcher and participant. As a result of the ‘resonance process’, the meaning of past and current situations or events previously given separately by participants and researcher in their stories may change for both researcher and participant during this process as the stories come together and interact with each other. This process of resonance can be seen as a negotiated construction of new meaning from a past situation or event or even a merger of the researcher’s and

participant's stories which form new stories that are collaborative in nature (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

In summary, the stories in this narrative inquiry are the results of the relationships between myself and each participant (Gergen, 1991). Therefore, narrative-based interviews can be similar to conversations in that the dialogue focuses on interpretive talk, which means that the researcher and the participant may reach a mutual understanding, for example about intercultural communication interferences, through the conversation (Conle, 2004). In other words, both researcher and participant are involved *in* the dialogue and reconstruct the storyteller's experience with communication interferences in Sino-German teams by negotiating mutual understanding (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The effect can be, according to Helkkula (2010, p. 51), "that they both create and learn something new together and are able to make tacit knowledge explicit", which the stories told may implicitly enclose. In line with this vested interest of narrative inquiry, such a negotiated mutual understanding should help me to elicit social and cultural intangibility implicitly and with more clarity as well as to understand why a particular story is told and why in a certain way.

***Reflexivity.*** What was stated above implies that my personal and professional experience affected the interviews as well as the analysis of the interviews. Therefore, it is important to know how to place that experience (Morse & Richards, 2002) instead of trying to be 'objective'. Etherington (2004, p. 37) suggests that being a 'reflexive' researcher "opens up a space between subjectivity and objectivity". Reflexivity includes being aware of how the researcher shapes the research process but is also an exploration of the interaction between the researcher, the research participants and the data. This is based on the notion of being self-reflective (Macbeth, 2001), which means that the researcher

engages in a self-aware analysis of his/her research process in order to be conscious of how he/she plays a part in the construction of meaning.

In other words, how the researcher influences the research and how research influences the researcher. The idea behind this is to acknowledge and examine what the researcher brings to the interview and use that knowledge to help to understand what the participant is trying to tell the researcher. Such an examination is conducted at each stage of the research process. Therefore, a researcher should ask self-reflexive questions throughout the whole research processes such as “How did I come to this knowledge?” and “What is the relationship between me and what is known?”. This also includes issues like the participant’s responses to the interviewer, the way in which data is made and how both researcher and participant form their interpretations in terms of the dialogical exchange and the accounts that are jointly constructed by conversation. By doing this I can understand how my personal responses and the context that I live in affects the way I conduct and interpret my research and the social world I am trying to represent (Etherington, 2004). However, it may also lead to alterations regarding the design and conduct of the research.

This awareness does not move in the direction of ‘objectivity’ but rather acknowledges that I am *in* the process of data generation as well as *in* the analysis. This also fits well with the assumptions of my literature review where I applied thematic analysis in order to synthesise the outcomes of ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ research instead of the input data these studies used prior to their findings/ outcomes. In this study I was actively engaged in the process of thematic analysis (identification of prominent themes, summarising of the findings under thematic headings, development of higher order categories) guided by my ideas and pre-defined categories. I engaged actively in a conversation with the participant and brought my own reality along with me, which influenced and shaped the opinions shared, the stories designed and the meanings created.

In being a reflexive researcher I try to make visible the beliefs and values of my reality that I use consciously and unconsciously, which shape the interpretations of the participant's stories – or in other words, the jointly owned stories. Reflexivity is especially evident in this study in the detailed and clear audit trail of the research process and its underlying assumptions through explanations of my research philosophy and self-aware analysis in the research process, which includes a detailed description in the analysis part of this thesis of my knowledge and experience gained from theory and practice, which influence both data generation and analysis.

*Outline.* One interview per participant was conducted at the participant's workplace or at a public place (restaurant or coffee shop for example) and all the interviews were scheduled for one hour to allow an in-depth investigation. Most of the questions were open-ended and the answer options were not pre-determined. This means that the participant was not given set answers and he/she could talk freely about what he/she considered important with regards to a certain topic. I did not use a rigid list of questions. Questions and topics were freely chosen in accordance with the participant's situation. Working in this way a negotiated conversation about what is to be talked about (Mishler, 1986) was possible. This narrative type of interview allowed the participants to tell their own stories and to speak about the experiences and conclusions drawn from them that were not only conducive but also necessary for the analysis and interpretation. During the conversation, topics were also discussed that were not directly related to the object under examination but were of significance or interest to the participant in his/her work or life such as, for example, the company's economic situation, environmental pollution or the loneliness of working abroad. This allowed not only for the gathering of personal information but also important situational context information to be gained that could be related to the analysis of the team member's stories.



However, to promote a certain ‘resonance’ between each participant’s stories and my own stories as well as to encourage storytelling on their part a rough set of interview guidelines, general questions and topics was developed:

1. Explanation of the research and its objectives and assurance of anonymity
2. Questions regarding tasks and occupation of the participants
3. Questions regarding period of residence and foreign language proficiency of the participants
4. Questions regarding prior knowledge about China / Germany
5. Questions regarding preparatory measures and training for participants who are going to work abroad
6. Questions regarding general experience, concrete conflicts and problems of cooperation
7. Questions regarding the participant’s assessment of other team members – positive and negative
8. Questions regarding everyday experiences

As a consequence of these interview guidelines the participants were steered towards certain questions but on the whole it was up to each participant in what way, to what degree and how concretely they wanted to talk about something. This allowed me to be able to listen empathetically by identifying with the participants and showing respect for their opinions and what they wanted to talk about. That is why I asked general opening questions at the beginning of the interview. These provided the context so it could be identified which topics or questions were relevant for the participant and which topics could be skipped completely. This format left room for dialogue and unanticipated ‘directions’ according to the participant’s accounts (Morse & Richards, 2002). This means that many questions may have emerged in the course of the participant’s storytelling

(Lapum, 2009). Morse and Richards (2002) state that in the context of ‘qualitative’ research the interviewer should be careful about guiding the interview and avoid leading the responses of the participants. This does not mean that the researcher is *out* of the process of data generation but rather that it is important not to limit the interview with apriori categorisations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This follows the logic of the procedure used for narrative interviews that allows for stories to come about inductively and implies accepting that the stories should not be altered in any way, while at the same time acknowledging the ‘suffering’ that may be a part of the process of telling a story and helps the storyteller to reflect on the stories he/she is telling (Frank, 1998). The interview guidelines can provide assistance that may be necessary when the participant struggles to describe teamwork experiences with a straight description and might encourage the participant to make sense of his/her teamwork experience by using a story form (Webster & Mertova, 2007). **By encouraging reflection and a dialogical approach to interviewing in this study, both participant and researcher engage in the interpretive nature of understanding** (Lapum, 2009).

### *Transcription of conversations*

I transcribed all the interview videos as soon as possible after the end of the interview. Transcription here means that the oral data from my video files was rendered into a written representation (Sandelowski, 1994). The transcription was in ‘standard’ language form because it was the contents that were important, not the pronunciation. The oral characteristics of the spoken language such as pauses, intonation, slips of the tongue or utterances that were incomprehensible were not taken into account for transcription. I did not correct the grammatical categories or syntactical structures. Apart from laughing, paralinguistic phenomena like intonation, prolongation of words, pauses and other non-verbal communicative actions were not mentioned in the transcription.

**Table 8***Explanation of transcription**notation*


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,	Punctuation marks that structure the utterance
/	Cut-off after a word or construction
(?)	Words that the transcriber was unable to hear because they were distorted or inaudible
(is)	Presumed wording due to uncertainty regarding what was heard
[...]	Omission in the transcription
[and]	Transcriber's own additions to the transcription

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In the analysis, quotes from parts of the interviews occur in italics. For the Chinese interviews a literal English translation is provided in order to keep as closely to the original as possible. When translating from Chinese into English subjects and conjunctions quite often needed to be added that do not occur in Chinese.

***Data analysis******General***

In a similar manner as with the methodological outline for narrative inquiry there is no single analytic approach for the analysis of stories but rather a multitude of different ways to engage with narrative data (Elliott, 2005). Different theoretical perspectives may suggest different analysis techniques, reflecting what Mishler (as cited in Elliott, 2005, p. 36) calls a "state of near anarchy in the field". However, postmodern analysis requires that

the researcher understands how the participants make sense of experiences instead of letting algorithms or ‘scientific’ methods represent subjective experience (Elliott, 2005). For every individual their experiences are different so it is very difficult to make a quantitative evaluation of the data in this study. Besides, striking individual cases, the contexts of individual text components and everything else (such as latent structures of meaning) that are not in the text, are not taken into account by ‘quantitative’ analysis. As explained in the preceding chapter, every communication is an interaction that needs to be understood in itself as an interactive process. Communication, being a social action, is always tinged with subjective meaning, which can only be extrapolated by means of interpretation.

The aim of my analysis was therefore to analyse the object under examination from *inside* because the same observed action could have an entirely different meaning for different observers. Thus, in this study, the participants’ subjective experiences, insider views and introspections were illustrated based on the stories’ text components. Then I tried to determine correlations between these components followed by my own interpretation and analysis of the data. However, interpretation had already started during the interviews. I began to interpret and theorise about participants’ stories during each interview.

I also shared my interpretations with the participants and involved them in reflecting on them. The interpretation that could be considered as more or less ‘final’ was determined by the following questions:

- What kind of meanings can be identified in the participants’ stories?
- In what ways could the identified communication interferences be explained?
- What could be the reasons or factors for the interferences in the narrations?

Based on this outline I would argue that not all approaches to analysis fit with this

postmodern study. Besides, not all so called ‘narrative analysis’ methods are seen as helpful, because many publications about ‘narrative analysis’ refer to the methodology of narrative inquiry rather than to a specific and clearly outlined approach to the analysis of data gathered from storytelling.

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) who developed several of such approaches described the existing wide variations of narrative analysis using two dimensions in order to try to classify them (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Elliott, 2005). According to the first, such analysis methods can be characterised as to whether they examine the *content* or *form* of stories (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Elliott, 2005; Lapum, 2009).

This reflects there being approaches to analysis that focus on the explicit content of stories, for example what happened and why, while there are other approaches that pay less attention to the content and concentrate on the literary structures of the stories, for example, the process of narrative emplotment (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Elliott, 2005). Whereas analysis of the content focuses on the substance of a story from the perspective of the narrator which “includes the who, what, when, where, and why of the story as well as the meaning, motives and symbols the person chooses to share” (Nelham, 2005, p. 55), the analysis of the form focuses on the organisation of the plot with a certain sequencing of events, style, choice of voice and the overall coherence of the story (Nelham, 2005). The second dimension is reflected in approaches that seek to preserve a story in its entirety and understand it *holistically* as a complete entity.

There are also approaches which can be described as *categorical* analysis in that short sections of the story are extracted, classified and sorted into categories for analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Elliott, 2005). Holistic approaches try to understand sections of the text in the context of other parts of the story in order to understand and interpret the story as a whole whereas categorical approaches do not try to preserve the integrity of the whole

story (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Elliott, 2005; Nelham, 2005). Lieblich et al. (1998) argue that these two dimensions intersect and result in four different approaches to story analysis: holistic-form, holistic-content, categorical-content and categorical-form (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Nelham, 2005).

In this study I analysed the content of the stories about the experience of communication interferences within Sino-German teamwork rather than their form or structure because, in order to analyse the underlying insights and social and cultural assumptions that the story illustrates, it was necessary to go beyond the use of story as a rhetorical structure (Webster & Mertova, 2007) (see 'the importance of language from a postmodern perspective' in this chapter).

However, as a postmodernist, I share with Lieblich et al. (1998) the concern that focusing solely on a categorical rather than on a holistic perspective may be problematic, because extracting parts of the story from the whole disregards the story context. Therefore, an approach to analysis should also try to take into account the holistic and story contextual factors (Lieblich, et al., 1998). However, in view of the extensive volume of material that was obtained in this study due to the depth of experience revealed in the participants' stories I suggest classifying the participants' statements into evaluation categories in the analysis. By categorising the statements the reader is able to identify commonalities in the participants' experiences.

However, with regards to categorising the data a lot of important information is either not fully taken into account or completely ignored, such as the particular situations, the complexity of individual cases, changes of opinion and introspections by the participants. Therefore, the statements should, according to my postmodern perspective, also be depicted and interpreted with regards to their contexts. The context includes the immediate surrounding text as well as the information that goes beyond the text such as,

for example, the situation that a problem originated from, the prior knowledge of the individual concerned and such like. Therefore, this study included both categorisation and contextualisation. In my opinion, categorisation and contextualisation are like two different convex mirrors for contemplating an object. One cannot replace the other and they cannot merge to become a third mirror. They can complement each other and by employing these two different convex mirrors I obtain a more complete picture.

Such an approach to analysis could be categorised as a ‘categorical-content perspective’ as it still focuses on those portions of the story (a conversation may even include several stories) relevant to the question under investigation. This is often aligned with content analysis in the methodological literature and can be seen as the most traditional analysis method of narrative inquiry in the fields of psychology, sociology and education (Riessman, 1993; Lieblich, et al., 1998). Such a perspective ‘processes’ stories analytically, by breaking their “text into relatively small units of content and submitting them to either descriptive or statistical treatment” (Lieblich, et al., 1998, p. 112). However, approaches to content analysis may vary based on the purpose of the study and the nature of the ‘story material’ (Lieblich, et al., 1998). As mentioned above, I also wanted to present and interpret the text units in their context to give a holistic perspective. Therefore, as shown later in this study, in practice a clear and simplified allocation of content analysis to a ‘categorical-content’ perspective might not be possible because the distinctions between types of analyses are less clear-cut (Nelham, 2005). However, since I agree with Lieblich et al. (1998) the major steps in most of the variations of content analysis, including the ones used in this study, can be characterised as following:

Firstly, on the basis of research questions, all the relevant sections of one story (the text) are marked and combined into a new file (‘subtext’) which acts as the source for the area to be studied (Lieblich, et al., 1998). This means that these selected sections are

‘withdrawn’ from the total body of the story and are treated independently (Lieblich, et al., 1998). However, if an interview type is used that helps the storyteller to focus on the ‘relevant’ material rather than one which ‘collects’ the whole life story, all the text collected, which may include several stories, can be taken as the basis for analysis (Lieblich, et al., 1998). The outlined narrative interview style of this study can be seen as an interview type that helps the storyteller to focus, at least to some degree, on their Sino-German teamwork experience as the ‘relevant material’ of this study. This type of interview prompts a person to think of experiences in relation to Sino-German teamwork in the course of their professional practice and encourages their reflection and recall of the communication interferences experienced (as shown for example in the complete sample conversation in Appendix 3). Therefore, this step did not need to be taken in this study when applying content analysis to the participant’s stories, which means that parts of the text that were not related to the object under examination and the central questions of my study were not ‘deleted’ in the text. However, they were the focus of the following categorisation.

Secondly, ‘content categories’ are defined, which are various themes or perspectives that according to Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 113) “cut across the selected subtext and provide a means of classifying its units – whether word, sentences or groups of sentences”. Such categories can be predefined by a theory (Lieblich, et al., 1998) or by the text. In this study **each** participant’s story, as mentioned above, was read ‘openly’ in order to define major content categories that emerged from the reading (Lieblich, et al., 1998). The reason is that the interpretation of the communication interferences by the participants was in fact the starting-point of the analysis. However, both inductive and deductive categorisation involve a circular process that includes re-reading, generating new categories or refining old ones (Lieblich, et al., 1998; Nelham, 2005). However, from a



postmodernist viewpoint and also as shown in the thematic analysis of the systematic literature review, the approach that uses categories which are predefined based on theory is not as different as it may seem from an 'open approach' because researchers bring their theoretical and social assumptions and subjective worldview to the analysis of the text anyhow. Lieblich et al. (1998, p. 113) even argue that this is "unavoidable". Therefore, there are always some unconscious predefined categories in my mind (see 'reflexivity' in this chapter, section 'Reflexivity').

Thirdly, parts, such as sentences or utterances, of the subtext are sorted into the defined, revised or established relevant categories. For example, the category 'Communication interferences due to the lack of foreign language proficiency of Chinese and German team members' was established in the analysis of the German data in chapter 5 'German Communication Experiences with Chinese Team Members within Sino-German Teams' (Lieblich, et al., 1998) and lastly, the sentences in each category "can be used descriptively to formulate a picture of the content universe in certain groups of people", such as Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams, in order to draw interpretations from it. The researcher can also compare his/her prior assumptions and evaluate his/her research questions at this stage (Lieblich, et al., 1998). Lieblich et al. (1998) also argue that an alternative approach to such sentences in each category can also be to subject them to various statistical computations, such as counting their frequency of occurrence in one or all stories of the participants. Riessman (2002) who has developed a more 'holistic-form perspective' of narrative analysis argues that the use of 'quantitative' analysis, reflected in Lieblich et al.'s (1998) 'alternative' use of statistical computations, is not only an alternative but rather can be combined with the 'non-quantitative' analysis steps. From a postmodern point of view such an additional statistical description can reflect

multiple representations rather than single representations and has, therefore, also been considered in the content analysis for this study.

***Outline of my content analysis method***

For the analysis of the interviews I used ‘qualitative’ *content analysis* according to Mayring (1989). Mayring (1989, 2000b, 2000a) developed a ‘qualitative’ content analysis method that is a social science text analysis tool for the analysis and interpretation of complex linguistic material presented in a fixed format (for example transcribed interviews). Mayring (1989, 2000a, 2000b) defines ‘qualitative’ analysis generally to be, unlike ‘quantitative’ analysis, an analysis that uses non-metric terms and has an understanding and interpretive approach to the complexity of an individual case. Mayring (1989, p. 188) therefore argues that his content analysis method does not aim at mere text analysis or content analysis “but is a conclusion derived from material that reflects social reality”, as required by a postmodern perspective.

In other words, with his method of analysis Mayring pleads in favour of an ‘ascertainment’ of social realities, which can better be extrapolated by means of interpreting the latent content of a text than being identified through topics and thoughts in the primary content (Mayring, 2000a, 2000b). The application of his ‘qualitative’ content analysis method allows for “regard of latent structures of meaning since meaning is not objectively or lexically determined. The ideological contents of texts would be a good example of this” (Mayring, 2000b, p. 190; 2000a). Mayring (2000a, p. 5) summarises his approach to content analysis rather “as an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification”.

Mayring’s (1989, 2000b, 2000a) content analysis was developed to be an ‘understanding’ approach that takes the individual aspects as a starting point and from

there tries to arrive at an understanding of the context, whereas the explanatory approach of a 'quantitative' analysis rather uses general principles and rules from a modernist perspective and aims at analysing the causal connections. Mayring (1989, 2000b, 2000a) shares my opinion that such 'quantitative' methods alone cannot provide a comprehensive approach for understanding and interpreting linguistic material. With his method "he shows consideration for individual cases since less common or individual text components can be of more significance than the common ones" (Mayring, 1989, p. 190), that are particularly emphasised in 'quantitative' methods.

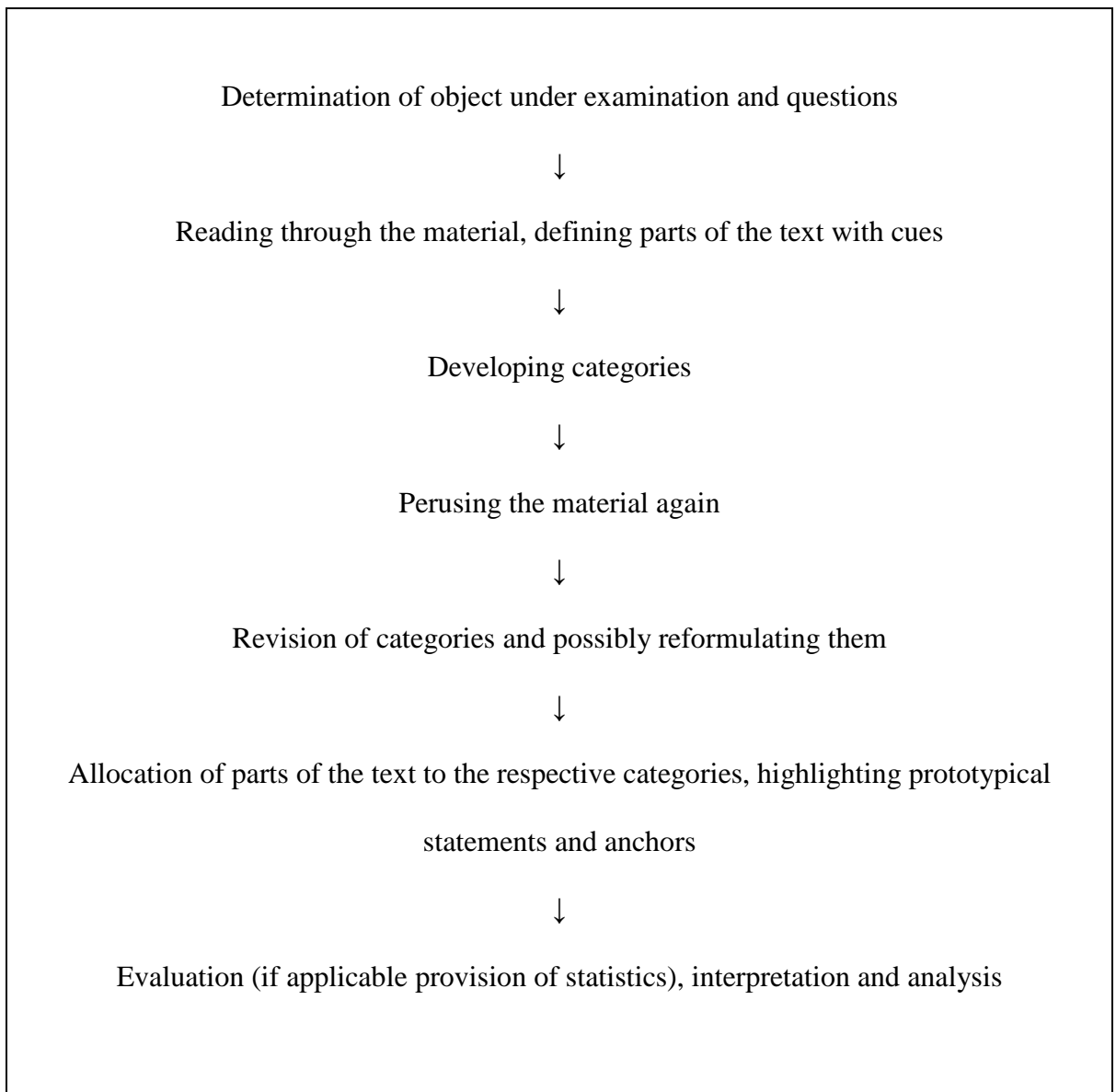
However, he warns against a strict separation between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' analyses, which I used in my systematic literature review (see chapter 2, for example, section 'Summary of my literature review methodology') in accordance with Lewin's (1981) argument that such a separation is based on a false opposition. Mayring's analysis method can therefore be aligned with 'qualitative' analysis, although the use of such a term may not be clear-cut. However, I argue that his analysis method and its process are strongly aligned with my postmodern theoretical framework.

The practical way of setting up categories according to Mayring (1989, 2000b, 2000a) that I used in my study is similar to the 'usual' course of action regarding content analyses introduced by Lieblich (1998) and can be described as follows. After determining the object under examination and the central questions, the data is read. Parts of the text related to the object under examination and the central questions of the analysis are highlighted. However, parts of the text not related to the object under examination and the central questions are taken into account as context for interpretation at a later time. Then the highlighted material is read again and at the same time these parts of the text (in other words, the statements) are, section-by-section, defined by a cue according to the content of the problem raised. As mentioned before, I myself select the analysis categories from the

material. By means of this inductive method categories are defined with the aid of these cues. Then the highlighted material is read again, at the same time checking whether the categories match the object under examination and the central questions of the analysis.

After revising the categories the highlighted material is checked again. This time the highlighted parts of the text are allocated to the relevant categories and prototypical statements and anchors for the respective categories are marked. Only then do the final evaluation, interpretation and analysis of the material take place. However, with Mayring's (1989) method, which I adhere to, the respective part of the text is not considered separately, as is the case with most content analyses, but always embedded in the context and can therefore be analysed and interpreted while taking into account such context. Applying Mayring's (1989, p. 190) 'qualitative' content analysis allows for "taking into account the context of text elements since identical text elements within different contexts can have different meanings."

As a postmodernist I do in fact assume that the stories are only particularistic and that those things that are not being said are as important as those things that are being said. This also includes "taking into account the presence and absence of certain parts of a text since this (for example, the systematic blanking out of certain topics) often says more than the frequency of occurrence" (Mayring, 1989, p. 190). This is in compliance with my postmodern requirement that a content analysis needs to take the holistic perspective into account (see 'gaps in the text' in chapter 3, section 'Being an affirmative postmodern researcher').



**Figure 6.** Process of establishing categories based on Mayring (2000)<sup>5</sup>.

The process described above shows a linear procedure for establishing categories. In practice, however, this procedure was repeated until I came to a final decision with regards to the categories to be used in this study. In this study, the Chinese and German interviews were analysed separately since the communication behaviour demonstrated by

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<sup>5</sup> From “Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse” by P. Mayring, 2000, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [Online journal], Copyright 2000 by the Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research

the Chinese and German participants, as also the style of conversation, was assumed to be very different making the establishment of common categories difficult. For example, Germans preferred to express themselves directly and explicitly with precision and accuracy while the Chinese favoured hinting at things and using suggestive wording. This difference was appreciated from my side and led to a different interview flow or even style for Chinese and German participants. This makes allocation of parts of the text to one uniform Sino-German category difficult since implicit expressions would be analysed together with explicit expressions so that one or other would suffer in the analysis.

In addition, since the contexts of the parts of the text are considered for interpretation, the analyses were conducted separately since the social and cultural context of Chinese and German participants were different and could not be taken into consideration by combining both Chinese and German data into one analysis. This would not fit with my narrative inquiry approach that focuses on exploring individual experiences inside wider cultural and social structures. In other words, a combined analysis of Chinese and German data would not focus on seeing the participant's relating of his/her experience as using social and cultural patterns of communication.

***Analytical synthesis: presentation, interpretation and explanation***

The first step of the analysis consists in the presentation and classification of the participants' statements according to the individual categories. Here, the participants have the opportunity to speak. It is verified whether the experience or opinion of one of the participants is shared by other participants, or whether participants' statements with regards to a phenomenon or problem are contradictory and what kind of different opinions there are amongst the participants. The second step comprises the 'final' interpretation and data analysis (since interpretation begins during the conversation). Here, the participants' statements are compared or connected with my personal experiences and the findings of

other researchers. Then the causal interpretation of the communication behaviours and problems is carried out. While the participants' explanations and their interpretations of the problems are considered, they do not interpret and analyse the communication interferences based solely on the understanding of the situation and neither do I. In addition, the findings of other linguistic studies and research comparing cultures are used to identify linguistic and socio-cultural factors influencing communication behaviour and causing interferences.

***Alternative analysis of the speech behaviours of Chinese and German participants when appraising team colleagues or partners***

My postmodern perspective reflects that multiple representations are desired and privileged over single representations. Therefore, I suggest that a second separate analysis of the interviews should be conducted. Thus, the analysis of the interviews in this study consisted of the above-described content analysis and an additional analysis of the speech behaviours of Chinese and German participants when appraising their colleagues/partners. However, the content analysis is the central part of the interview analysis since the alternative analysis only aims at demonstrating the differences in Chinese and German speech behaviours during the conversations with me and whether the different preferences with regards to certain communicative habits and communicative strategies stated by the participants in the interviews can also be observed in their own speech. This alternative analysis does not use a specific method but simply compares differences in communication behaviours identified in the content analysis with my own experiences gathered in conversations with Chinese and German individuals. It is therefore a comparison between my personal interview experiences and the participants' experiences made in similar conversation situations during their teamwork in Sino-German teams. Therefore, the main analysis in my study is the content analysis. However, by means of the analysis of the

speech behaviours and communicative habits of the Chinese and German individuals interviewed with regards to appraising their colleagues/partners I am able to compare the understanding gained from the interview conversations with my personal interpretation of the interview itself. This alternative analysis method was used because it treats the text in a very different way. The aim was to gain different meanings and to interpret what this difference means (Savage, 2000).

The adding of the second analysis of the speech behaviours of Chinese and German participants when appraising their colleagues/partners in this thesis in order to gain multiple interpretations from the interviews was informed by Butler's (1993) work on the use of both 'doing it' and 'troubling it'. Butler (1993) argues for this "both/and move" because she recognises the limits of producing a single interpretation in postmodern research, which is in itself in contrast to the aim of a postmodern study (Lather, 2007). The reason is that a postmodern study should also explore the multiple views and voices available in any analysis of any facet of realities (Cheek, 2000) as described in the outline of my research philosophy. As Savage (2000) has found there have recently been more postmodern researchers applying more than one approach to analysis in order to explore multiple voices or perspectives. In addition, other researchers (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) have also expressed concerns about applying only one single analysis method in a postmodern research context and argue for the use of diverse approaches to analysis, which was implemented in this study by undertaking the alternative analysis mentioned. Some of the narrative research methodology literature also suggests a dual approach to analysis because stories may appear in several formats influenced by various cognitive and communicate activities (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

However, there has been little attention as to how and to what extent approaches to data analysis can really deal with multivocality, meaning the varied perspectives and



inflections (for example, what is not said in participants' stories regarding what is assumed to be shared knowledge) that may be present in the texts or stories of individuals (Savage, 2000). However, with the 'both/and move' they all at least try to attempt to reach a thicker explanation of the largely unknown phenomena (Lather, 2007). This intention is in line with the perspective of an affirmative postmodern researcher, because I admit the understandings created through single interpretations while at the same time troubling the limits of that knowledge. Furthermore, I challenge this knowledge through the use of an alternative approach in order to enrich interpretations through a lens that provides differences and attends to the multiplicity of voices.

By conducting an alternative analysis on the same text, findings may, rather than necessarily leading to distinctively different interpretations, offer different layers of understanding and different emphases on the meanings in the participants' experiences (Savage, 2000). However, each interpretation is seen as meaningful (Savage, 2000). Also overlaps between the findings of both analytic approaches are analysed in terms of how these can interact and combine to establish the intertextuality of meanings. By doing so in this study I did not intend to create an aggregated or singular representation out of the two analyses but rather a rich and complex interpretation of the same research text (the interviews) produced from multiple and differing perspectives (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This analysis approach aims to expose various views of the participants' experiences that may be hidden when only one analysis method is used. Although these two approaches to analysis treat the data differently they may according to Savage (2000, p. 1499) "be more usefully understood as dialectical or mutually informing".

### ***Validity and reliability***

Reliability and validity are concepts that are often used to evaluate the 'quality' of 'qualitative' research (Silverman, 2010). Silverman (2010) argues from a modernist stance

that 'validity' is another word for 'truth', whereas 'reliability' "refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different researchers or by the same observer on different occasions" (Silverman, 2010, p. 210). As previously discussed, the philosophical tenets of postmodern research, which espouse a dialogical notion of negotiated realities, as well as an overt adoption of pre-understanding as the starting point for analysis, does not lend itself to the objectivistic criteria of evaluation, which is predicated in the reliability and validity of research findings. Besides, narrative inquiry focuses on individual interpretations of human-centred events, for example, intercultural communication interferences, which represent the storyteller's subjective worldview regarding a specific event in a certain context.

Therefore, narrative inquiry elicits individual truths of the events rather than the exact descriptions of what happened that could be seen as generalisable and repeatable occurrences. Also, in this postmodern study, I seek to explore and investigate the storyteller's individual interpretation of his/her thoughts and feelings surrounding the experiences of Sino-German teamwork and communication interferences that she/he encountered during it. Therefore, this narrative inquiry is opposed to a modernist characterisation of validity and reliability as used in 'scientific research'. Narrative researchers argue that both terms need to be re-defined in relation to narrative inquiry as it clearly appears unsatisfactory to apply these traditional measurements to narrative inquiry techniques (Polkinghorne, 1988; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Webster and Mertova (2007, p. 89) argue that "there is a consensus in the literature on narrative research that it should not be judged by the same criteria as those that are applied to more traditional and broadly accepted 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' research methods".

Drawing on Polkinghorne (1988) and Webster and Mertova's (2007) critique of the traditional criteria of validity, validity in narrative research should be more closely

associated with meaningful analysis that is well-grounded and supported by the data generated than with consequences. In contrast, a modernist definition would refer to conclusions based on certainty, generalisable truths and an exact record of what really happened as described by the storyteller which can, from a modernist view, prescribe how things are or ought to be (Webster & Mertova, 2007). However, from a postmodern view a finding is significant if it is important (Polkinghorne, 1988; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Since the results of a narrative inquiry based on personal stories cannot claim to correspond exactly to what has actually happened, I cannot claim that my research results in this study are 'true' in the sense that they exactly correspond to one reality. Additionally, even my own interpretations of a participant's stories are themselves located in particular discourses (Riessman, 1993). This leads to the conclusion that narrative inquiry does not make efforts "for validity in representing something "out there" in the world, or even in expressing one's logically reasoned notions of how things "out there" ought to work" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 91).

Regarding reliability, Polkinghorne (1988), Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that in narrative research it usually refers to the dependability of the data achieved on the basis of the trustworthiness of the transcripts. From a modernist point of view reliability refers to the stability of the measuring instruments that return similar or same results when applied to different samples (Webster & Mertova, 2007). From a postmodern view I rather emphasise the individual experiences of realities and the impact on the participants' understanding (for example, the impact of communication interferences). Therefore I do not expect that the outcomes from one story or several stories will consistently return the same views or outcomes (Webster & Mertova, 2007) rather differences between individuals are expected and valued. In other words, a modernist view is concerned with a result that is applicable across samples, whereas reliability in a narrative study refers to the

subjective experience of individuals (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Reliability could then be 'measured' in a postmodern narrative study by the accuracy and accessibility of the data that allows the reader to find the relevant part of the text that the interpretations were based on (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In other words, reliability means that the data is persuasive and coherent. Riessman (1993) argues that persuasiveness is strongest when interpretations are supported with evidence from the participant's accounts.

I agree with Polkinghorne (1988) and Webster and Mertova (2007) that both reliability and validity are not suitable for application in postmodern narrative research. However, the traditional concepts of validity and reliability discussed here and the considerations as to how these could be applied to narrative research help to construct a more postmodern narrative-oriented framework for validity and reliability. Based on a critique of the traditional criteria of a modernist view, Webster and Mertova (2007), referring to Huberman (as cited in Webster & Mertova, 2007), have developed more narrative-oriented measures for validity and reliability by using these new criteria of validity and reliability in their own application of narrative inquiry (Mertova, 2008): access, trustworthiness and transferability. These three criteria are all used in my research.

### *Access*

Access can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, the research should be accessible to the readers of the study. This means that readers should be able to understand the participant's social and cultural context and the process of the construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participant in the study (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this thesis this is provided to the reader by the detailed audit trail of the interview and analysis choices. In addition, I have made explicit how my philosophical position affects the interpretive process and how my pre-understanding, in the form of my own experiences and knowledge (described in the following analysis part of this thesis) has enriched the analysis of the

participants' stories. I have made explicit the interpretive stance of my research as being rooted in an affirmative postmodern position. Additionally, I have acknowledged my role in the interpretive process as the 'co-author' of a participant's stories resulting in intersubjectively-negotiated realities. Secondly, the research data on which the researcher has based his/her findings should be available to the audience (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this thesis this is achieved by showing to the reader all the parts of the transcriptions that were used for the analysis and interpretation; this means the parts of stories that were assigned to each category in the analysis.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Trustworthiness can also be viewed in two ways. Firstly, the research and reporting of stories and the communication interferences mentioned in them should resonate to some degree with the experience of the researcher. Similarly, the researcher's experience should resonate with the experience of the storyteller. The reader's experiences may also resonate with the research and reporting of stories. A story described in this thesis may sound true either because it reminds the reader about something that has also happened to him or her or because it "opens a new window to the reader" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 99). It may even lead to a new understanding of his/her own experience. Secondly, the reporting should appear to have a level of plausibility (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In Webster and Mertova's (2007) view plausibility means here that what is reported in my thesis is in fact realistic and not subject to being 'smoothed out' or 'polished up', such as, for example, with the 'Hollywood effect' where the researcher distorts one or more stories in order to provide a 'happy ending' so that "it all worked out well in the end" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 20).

### *Transferability*

Transferability refers to the researcher providing a sufficient base, or concrete tools, to permit a researcher contemplating a similar study to conduct a comparable narrative inquiry (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Webster and Mertova (2007) argue that this is only possible by strictly following their proposed detailed outlined narrative inquiry approach. Their approach, published in their book, is accessible to the academic community. However, since I have developed my own approach, the detailed description of the research methodology in this chapter, combined with an explanation of my theoretical assumptions as well as the analysis and discussion of the findings, may allow other inquirers to carry out an analogous study.

### *Ethics*

Because of the nature of my postmodern narrative inquiry it is to be expected that certain ethical issues may arise (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Some were already addressed during participant recruitment (such as confidentiality, anonymity et cetera). This included a further confirmation from my side during the recruitment process that any results will be disseminated with no reference to the participants. In addition to this, it was promised that all the names of people and companies mentioned during the interviews, including their own company name, would be altered. Each participant was allocated a number to act as a pseudonym in order to maintain anonymity and the confidentiality of information gained through the interview. This confirmation also included that their names and related information (video records and transcripts of the interviews) would be kept confidential and secure with only one copy existing, located at the researcher's home. The participants' real names only appear on a master list of names. This master list of participants' names and numbers is kept separate from all the data. The data is kept in a locked filing cabinet

and will be kept for five years following the completion of the study, when it will be destroyed.

However, ethical considerations were not only for during the recruitment and data generation processes but more of an ongoing process throughout the whole research project. Narrative inquiry in the context of this study involved developing a close relationship with the Chinese and German team members in that they revealed personal, emotional and company internal stories. Participants were informed of their right to stop the interview at any time and they were guaranteed that even if they agreed to participate and provide informed consent, they were still able to refuse participation at any time with no consequences. In this case, their video records and other related data would be deleted.

The following two chapters analyse the interview conversations, which include stories from the Chinese and German participants about their communication experiences while working within Sino-German teams. Since these stories are considered from my postmodern standpoint as being an interpretation of their experiences using social and cultural patterns, their utterances are not seen as 'objective' representations of what happened but instead as purely subjective meanings of the experiences from their perspective. However, as I am interested in understanding these experiences in their social and cultural context the experiences will be described in the following from the perspective of the participants and subsequently analysed by taking the previously mentioned macro (socio-cultural knowledge and context) and micro (concrete use of language) levels of communication into account.

## **5 German Communication Experiences with Chinese Team Members within Sino-German Teams**

The illustration of the theoretical framework of this thesis in the preceding chapters is now followed by the stories of the German participants about their communication experiences within Sino-German teams. In order for the reader to get an idea of my analysis style a complete interview conversation is first of all summarised and analysed. Then the statements, that is to say, parts of the stories of the German participants are allocated into individual categories. The most striking communication interferences for German individuals and the factors relating to interferences are then identified, at the same time including my personal experiences and socio-cultural knowledge as well as the findings of other researchers. Since the analysis starts with the German data, relevant findings of other researchers are presented and included in this chapter, making this chapter larger than the chapter on the Chinese data. However, these findings are also the basis for the following chapter on the Chinese communication experiences with German team members.

### *An example analysis*

The following analysis is based on an example of the conversations that I held with my participants. This is an attempt to summarise the participant's experiences regarding communication with Chinese people and to analyse both the problems raised and their influencing factors. At first sight there were hardly any severe communication interferences amongst German participants working in a team with Chinese colleagues. This participant was, amongst the Germans interviewed by me, in many ways an exemplary German working together with Chinese colleagues in a team, even though other participants did not always give similar statements or share his opinions. For reasons of anonymity (as described in relation to 'anonymity' in chapter 4, section 'Ethics') his name



was changed to Mr. Six. In this example analysis and thereafter this German participant is always referred to as 'participant 6'. The complete conversation can be found in Appendix

3. Here is some background data regarding the interview:

1. Person: Mr. Six, lawyer
2. Interview date: 26 September 2011
3. Location: participant's lawyer's office in Shanghai

Like the majority of Germans interviewed Mr. Six spoke very little Chinese. He generally used the English language for communicating with Chinese people. At work he dealt mainly with English speaking Chinese. He hardly ever communicated with Chinese people who did not speak English and if he did it was by means of an interpreter. He reported that he did not have any communication interferences with regards to his Chinese colleagues in the office who were all either "*influenced by the West*" or their "*English was excellent*". He could also "*work with Chinese lawyers completely normally*". Therefore, he concluded: "*The main problem is the language not the difference in culture*". He did not "*place great importance on this concept of saving face*" (see in this chapter, section 'Excursion: the Chinese concept of saving face') and so far he "*did alright*". He believed that "*if the Chinese show a certain openness and flexibility*" it was not necessary "*to explore the subtleties of the Chinese psyche*" in order to "*communicate with the Chinese in a normal way*".

However, he admitted that speaking Chinese is necessary on the one hand for work situations where, for example, joint venture negotiations or negotiations with authorities were concerned and on the other hand for integrating into China. Since "*there are only very few of the Chinese who speak sufficient English to have a normal conversation*" he did not have any Chinese friends. He was certain that he would have integrated better into Chinese society if he spoke Chinese. He confirmed that he was not familiar with the

Chinese mentality and that his insight into Chinese behaviour patterns was “*limited*”. He also had “*great difficulty in understanding Chinese people*”. He believed that communication interferences could be caused by cultural differences especially in situations where the Chinese “*are shut up in their Chinese world and expect that you are playing according to their rules, rules that you don’t know*”. However, he had heard from other Germans “*of a lot of bad experiences they’ve had*”, especially from those who had had a lot of direct dealings with Chinese people who spoke neither English nor German. He himself had experienced that the Chinese said “yes” even if they did not understand what was being asked of them or were not willing to do something. In this respect he felt that he had experienced communication interferences with Chinese people.

In my opinion Mr. Six addressed three significant factors influencing communication in his answers (sorted without judgement about the importance he assigned to them):

1. Language (also language proficiency)
2. Culture
3. Differences in communication conventions

A prerequisite for Mr. Six to communicate effectively with some Chinese people and thereby fulfil his task in China was a common means of communication, which was the English language. In his office, where he had had almost only positive experiences, all his communication partners clearly followed Western cultural norms, but it is not clear whether these Western cultural norms were German, British or American norms.

Therefore, in his case it seemed that as long as the Chinese and German team members could communicate by means of a common language, cooperation was possible. It could therefore be assumed that for Germans Chinese language proficiency is not indispensable for working in teams together with Chinese people. Conversely, speaking German is also

not absolutely necessary for Chinese people when working with Germans. However, this statement should by no means be taken as a judgement regarding the significance of language proficiency for communication within Sino-German teams. On the basis of the entire data of this thesis I have tried to shine a light on the role of language and language proficiency in relation to the communication problems between the Chinese and German participants working in teams from my own point of view and their perspectives.

In addition, the case of Mr. Six also demonstrates that communication between Chinese and German individuals, which is based on a third language spoken by both communication partners seems to be limited and can create communication interferences. This kind of communication is normally restricted to the business level, meaning that, in this sense, both partners actually only use a common business language. Having no knowledge of the Chinese language Mr. Six had had hardly any opportunity to communicate with Chinese people apart from those Chinese colleagues working in his office and his business partners. Mr. Six explained that this was, on the one hand, due to the fact that very few Chinese people speak English very well and, on the other hand, that English was also only his second language. He thought *“when it really comes down to having a private conversation you can resort to German because you feel so much safer with German”*. Because of this he was, so to speak, living in a small ‘Western world’ and there could be no talk of ‘integration’. Therefore, he only had a very limited insight into the Chinese culture. From this I concluded that he felt insecure when communicating with Chinese individuals that he did not know very well and that he had *“great difficulty in understanding Chinese people.”* Even if a Chinese person was communicating with him in English it might not have been obvious what kind of cultural norm was applicable in that situation. His problem with the Chinese “yes” is exemplary for the phenomenon that one can understand a word literally and still not get the gist of its real meaning or function.

According to my experience such situations arise very often in intercultural communication with Chinese people. Some studies (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993) of factors influencing the communication in multinational teams in the systematic literature review show that it seems to be the case that non-linguistic socio-cultural knowledge is as significant as linguistic knowledge for communication (see chapter 2, section ‘Knowledge about cultural background’).

Mr. Six’s problem with the Chinese “yes” is based on the Chinese cultural norm where a direct verbal refusal of a request, that is uttered instead of the Chinese “yes”, is generally considered to be rude behaviour and means losing face for both communication / interaction partners. A Chinese person would very rarely give a direct “no”, especially not to those with whom he/she wishes to maintain a relationship in the sense of *guanxi* (the Chinese concept of saving face and the socio-cultural meaning of the term *guanxi* is described in the following sections). It was evident from his statements that Mr. Six had experienced the different language use of “yes” and “no” by Chinese and German individuals as communication interference. However, it remained unclear whether he discerned this culturally related difference in communication strategies as actually being a cultural difference. His statement that “*the main problem is the language not the difference in culture*” indicated, however, that he did not consider the cultural influence on communication to be a **significant** factor although he mentioned that cultural influence might cause communication interferences.

Whether Mr. Six experienced communication interferences with Chinese people or not was, according to him, dependent “*on the Chinese person*” he was communicating with. In his opinion, he did not have any such problems with his Chinese colleagues in his office in Shanghai. The main reason for this was that he was only dealing “*with highly qualified, very intelligent people*” with a good command of the English language.

However, he assumed that not all of his compatriots in China were so 'fortunate'. In what follows, the communication experiences of the 'less lucky' Germans working in Sino-German teams were discussed and analysed.

Since all the German participants, due to their professions or positions as managers, department heads or the like, had had experiences in giving or sharing views there was not any noticeable reluctance to talk about their opinions. All German participants were open and cooperative when interviewed. For the German material two main categories were established.

1. Communication interferences due to the lack of foreign language proficiency of Chinese and German team members
2. Communication interferences that, according to the German participants, were caused by the 'typical Chinese characteristics' of their communication partners

The second category above was subdivided into the following subcategories:

- a) Chinese people are reluctant to answer directly with "yes" or "no"
- b) The Chinese concept of saving face means something different to the German concept of it
- c) In a conflict situation Chinese people often behave differently to Germans
- d) Informal communication plays an important role in working in teams with Chinese people
- e) The Chinese do not like to get straight to the point

***Communication interferences due to the lack of foreign language proficiency of Chinese and German team members***

Since it is not possible within the framework of this thesis to completely depict each individual conversation with the participants on their communication experiences in Sino-German teams I have outlined in the following the most distinct communication

interferences or factors relating to interferences between Chinese and German participants from their perspective and subsequently analysed them.

***Statistical overview of the German participants' Chinese language proficiency***

The majority of the German participants mentioned that the language barrier was the key obstacle when communicating with the Chinese members of their teams, rather than the cultural differences. Half of the German participants did not speak Chinese at all (or only a few words) and only a third had a basic knowledge of the Chinese language.

**Table 9**

*German participants' Chinese language proficiency*

	Number of people
Good language proficiency	1
Some basic knowledge	2
No basic knowledge / only a few words	3

The following statistics on the business language used by the German participants corresponds to the ratio of language proficiency. Since some of the participants mentioned several business languages the number of occurrences is stated instead of the number of people:

**Table 10**

*Business languages used by the six German participants in the study*

	Number of persons
Chinese	3
German	2
English	6

These numbers suggest that for the German participants Chinese language proficiency was not necessarily a prerequisite for working in teams in China. However, this does not mean that foreign language proficiency is not significant for intercultural business cooperation. In my opinion, it has mainly to do with the fact that most of the German participants worked in wholly owned German subsidiaries or Sino-German Joint

Ventures. These statistics therefore only illustrate the situation of these German participants.

Since almost all German participants remarked on the significance of language or language skills light was shed, first of all, on the question regarding the importance of language and language proficiency for communication interferences between Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams on the basis of an analysis of the entire data generated.

### ***Significance of language and language proficiency in Sino-German teams***

In order to assess the significance of language and language proficiency in Sino-German teams I tried, first of all, to arrive at answers to the following three questions:

- 1) Why do so few Germans have a command of the language of the country they are working in?
- 2) What are the concrete problems that people face who do not speak Chinese?
- 3) Is it worth learning Chinese for Germans working in Sino-German teams?

***Why do so few of the Germans have a command of the language of the country they are working in?*** During the interviews the participants stated both ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ reasons for not learning the Chinese language. The ‘objective’ reasons were:

- a) They did not have time to learn the language before starting their work in China. Generally, there were only a few months between the decision to work in China and the participant’s arrival in China. One participant had only two weeks to prepare for the move to China. During this time all the formalities in connection with the assignment abroad had to be completed as well as the move organised. It goes without saying that most of the participants were therefore not able to learn the language before the start of their assignment in China.

- b) The company did not offer their employees the opportunity to attend a language course. Amongst the participants there were only two who had had the opportunity to attend an intensive Chinese language course before starting their work in China. One participant's company offered him the opportunity to attend a three-week English course in England.
- c) They had no energy left for learning Chinese in the evenings after work. The German participants claimed that they had minimal leisure time during their assignment in China. They were either under time pressure, pressure to succeed or their operational processes were dependent on their parent company in Germany (due to the time difference they always had to stay in the office after work if they wanted to get information from their German colleagues). Therefore, they had hardly any time available to learn the language.

Typical statements were:

*"You just don't have the time. In the evenings you're simply not up to doing anything; your head is just clogged up with work"* (participant 2)

*"...but as I said, in everyday life where you are a stressed computer expert, and then in the evenings learn the language, it's very difficult. To work and learn the language, that's something only very few accomplish"* (participant 4)

But principally the participants disliked the idea of learning Chinese for 'subjective' reasons even though they also stated 'objective' reasons. They believed that the Chinese language was simply too difficult, that it would *"take too many years to learn it"* (participant 3) and it was not worthwhile doing it for the sake of an assignment abroad that would last on average three years, since it was possible to get by with English:

**Oliver:** *Are you under the impression that it is useful to be able to speak the language when coming here to China?*

**Participant 3:** *Yes.*

**Oliver:** *So, would you advise someone to learn Chinese before coming here?*

**Participant 3:** *Then they would never come here. If you say that you want to learn Chinese, beforehand, then the job is no longer available. You either learn it at university or you learn it somehow on the side. In addition, you also need some special training for something in order to be able to come here. Just to be able to*



*...speak Chinese is not sufficient. Then you can't do much apart from working as an interpreter and that's too expensive. There are far too many of the Chinese who have learned to speak German, English or even French. I wouldn't advise someone to learn Chinese beforehand. If you can speak the language it's very good but I wouldn't recommend learning it. It's far too time consuming. It takes too many years to learn it. You should learn to speak English very well instead.*

An excerpt from another interview conducted with participant 4:

**Oliver:** *Would you say that one should learn Chinese?*

**Participant 4:** *Well, it is not necessary for my position. It is, as I mentioned before, nice to be able to speak Chinese, in any case for daily life. Also for the Chinese it forms a certain degree of appreciation that you have been there for a long time. It also takes quite an effort to have a command of the language; and then there is just the question whether it's worthwhile for a three years stay. Things are different with English, for example, but regarding Chinese, well, for me personally I have avoided it.*

These two statements show that even those who decided not to learn the language admitted that language proficiency was useful in several respects.

Another reason for not learning the language was that the participants assumed that language proficiency was not the decisive factor for success in China: “*professional competence should come first and then language competence*” (participant 6). They said that there were numerous foreigners in China who did not speak the language but were very successful and that there were “*also foreigners who speak the language but are struggling to cope in China*” (participant 5). In addition, this participant was of the opinion that even with language proficiency it was no easier to understand the Chinese way of thinking.

**Oliver:** *Do you speak Chinese?*

**Participant 5:** *No, not at all.*

**Oliver:** *Language proficiency might help you to better understand the Chinese way of thinking.*

**Participant 5:** *It might help to understand Chinese people better, simply verbally, but I don't think that it would help me to understand their way of thinking. I don't have a problem with the culture, just with the different way of thinking. The whole mental structure, the logic is constructed differently to the way we think in the west.*

Although half of the German participants did not speak Chinese and most of the participants used English as their business language three out of six German participants

considered language proficiency as being useful for their work. One participant even thought that Chinese language proficiency was indispensable for working in China. Only two participants assumed that language proficiency was not necessary for their work. All of the German participants agreed unanimously that Chinese language proficiency was definitely useful for leisure time. The reason that there were amongst the German participants only a few who spoke Chinese was therefore not that the participants did not consider Chinese language proficiency as useful but that the majority of them believed that they could get by to a certain degree with the help of an interpreter or by speaking English. And, as the following participant said, they did not have the opportunity to learn the language:

*Oliver: Is it [the command of the Chinese language] necessary for your work?*

*Participant 2: It is very necessary. You just don't get the opportunity to prepare yourself sufficiently. You are always dependent on having a reliable and confidential Chinese employee who can translate and explain, also with respect to the links between politics and economy.*

***What are the concrete problems that German participants without Chinese language proficiency experienced in China? Problems experienced at work.*** The German participants with no Chinese language proficiency communicated with Chinese people with either the help of a German or English speaking interpreter or, if they had a command of the English language, by speaking English. There was only one case where a German was able to communicate in German with Chinese team members. The following three excerpts from interviews demonstrate that communication at work by means of a third language or using an interpreter is not straightforward:

Participant 2:

*Oliver: What kind of difficulties did you have at the beginning?*

*Participant 2: At the beginning, I would say the communication. The problem is that I have only a few colleagues who speak English well and the rest only speak Chinese. And when you have to talk about highly technical things then it becomes difficult since my English is also not very good, actually it is only the English I learnt at school. So, I speak to a Chinese person who also doesn't speak English*

*very well and then you end up with something entirely different. But it gets better with practice.*

Participant 5:

*Oliver: And your business language is English or...?*

*Participant 5: Yes. English and Chinese, I mean both are business languages.*

*Oliver: And if in doubt Chinese counts most or both languages?*

*Participant 5: Well, as far as contracts are concerned both languages rank equally, but if there is a dispute then Chinese is decisive.*

*Oliver: In case of a dispute.*

*Participant 5: Yes, it is mainly the case, yes, but that's normal. We are in China and not somewhere else. That's completely clear. I mean, it is definitely a topic, I simply take this opportunity to say it, that when we bring in some experts, then these are experts and not sinologists, yes, sinologists can help with communication, but the experts actually only speak English. And that is why we have to expect that our Chinese employees in a JV learn English. And at department head meetings and such things English is spoken. And the other side is also more and more capable to take that in. Apart from that we get by with the help of interpreters. This, of course, slows things down. Someone talks for ten minutes and then this has to be translated for another ten minutes. In cases where there is some ambiguity it might end up being fifteen minutes because the interpreter is not sufficiently qualified. And then you have to get an idea from the expressions on the faces of those on the other side whether the interpreter has actually got the sense across correctly. You know that if you made a joke and on the other side / their face is completely deadpan then you know that the interpreter has probably got something wrong.*

Participant 3:

*"Yes, the secretary plays an important role as well. Firstly, a secretary is much more than just an interpreter. That's also a major problem in our company. We had an English course running for a year that cost us a lot of money. The aim was, of course, to enable the department heads to talk to each other. Madam Liu, head of sales, is not able to speak English due to her intellectual limitations. My partner refuses it for reasons of status; whether he is capable intellectually I am not in a position to judge but have some doubts. If he really set his mind to it he might be able to manage it. In other words, I cannot talk directly to the management, the Chinese management that is. I always need an interpreter who, of course, has a foot in each camp. Yes, and if something goes wrong then, of course, the interpreter is to blame. That means, the girl didn't cope at all with all the stress from both sides. So, that we actually made up our minds, if the company had carried on, we would have got someone else in, a Hong Kong-Chinese who didn't have any connections with the mainland."*

Even if many German participants without command of the Chinese language could communicate with their Chinese colleagues in English or German they still needed the Chinese language when dealing with Chinese customers or authorities:

*“There are authorities here that for reasons of principle [do not speak English], which might sound something like: “You are foreigners here and you are in China, so let us kindly speak Chinese”, they have a problem of principle and, in addition, a lot of them are simply not capable of speaking English because they never learnt the language”* (participant 2).

Two participants (participants 2 and 4) said in their interviews that, since either they did not have any or hardly any command of the Chinese language, they were entirely dependent on their interpreters when meeting their clients. However, if their interpreters were not loyal to them or if they had to communicate with the assistance of their negotiation partner’s interpreter then they could not be certain whether they were deceived or not.

My German participants mentioned repeatedly that there are very few Chinese people who have command of a third language that they could communicate with them in. Although from the perspective of many readers of this thesis English is not a third language but a native or second language, from the Chinese or German perspective it is a possible third option beyond the two native languages of the team members. They said that many Chinese people had only learnt basic English grammar and therefore had inhibitions and were reluctant to speak English. Three of the participants (participants 2, 3 and 4) said in their interviews that the interpreters often lacked technical knowledge and, therefore, information quite often got ‘lost in translation’. However, good interpreters were, according to the participants, extremely expensive.

A conversation translated by an interpreter was often experienced as being *“tedious”, “a waste of time”* or *“dragging on”* (participants 2, 3 and 4). One participant talked about his experiences with interpreters in negotiations as follows: *“If things get difficult in terms of content then very often discussions arise and everything gets very inaccurate, also very tough, so that you don’t feel like negotiating anymore”* (participant 2).

The following example demonstrates that it is very hard for people who do not speak Chinese to solve problems or to defend themselves in difficult situations: when the conflict between the Joint Venture partners escalated the German side decided to terminate their activities in China. The Chinese partner told the employees that the problems being experienced were solely down to the European company. The German participant (participant 3), who was a manager, commented: *“It would, of course, be easy, you go to see the employees and explain the whole thing (...) but how was I, being a European, supposed to defend myself? I hardly speak the language and it is arduous to have something like that translated, and it is ridiculous; I don’t do it.”* On the other hand his interpreter *“never wanted to translate any disputes or discussions”*. Another participant (participant 1) mentioned during the interview that the majority of Chinese interpreters, out of courtesy or due to their cultural mentality, shy away from translating the content of a dispute.

Another problem mentioned by German participants who do not speak Chinese was the difficulty of gaining the trust of Chinese people. Establishing trust is, to my mind, a secure basis for a successful business in China. In my opinion, it is hardly possible to arrive at a direct exchange of views without language proficiency and it is also not possible to establish the personal relationships that are very important for doing business in China. Both German and Chinese participants mentioned that Chinese people prefer to do business with *“old friends”* (participant 9). A German participant (participant 1) who had been learning Chinese for five months (private classes, four hours a day) spoke about what he had observed:

*“You have to be extremely open-minded when working in China. You need to be able to listen and to respond to people, to establish friendships and to have a chat over a meal. That’s why the language is so important. If somebody comes here and is over-proud of being German they will not achieve anything here. I also notice this with other foreigners and I have also seen it in the past. Whilst they [Chinese*

*people] respect them and are prepared to have fun socially with them the Chinese won't do any business with them."*

German participants without Chinese language proficiency not only experienced concrete communication interferences at work but also in their leisure time.

***What are the concrete problems that German participants without Chinese language proficiency experienced in China? Problems during leisure time.*** During the interviews the German participants described many problems they experienced living in China without language proficiency. Whilst at work it seemed to be possible to get by using English or an interpreter the participants expressed the view that it seems to be impossible to get access to Chinese people during leisure time "*unless the Chinese person speaks English*" (participant 5). Unfortunately, there are "*far too few Chinese who speak a third language [English] well enough to establish real friendships*" (participant 2). By no means could there be integration into China.

Recreation opportunities for participants without Chinese language proficiency were reported to be very restricted. Being unable to read the newspapers they often lacked relevant information. "*You live in a vacuum*" (participant 3). One participant reported that a German orchestra was giving a performance in the city but he missed it. "*Of course, it was in the newspapers but you can't read them*" (participant 4). Participants reported that since language proficiency is necessary for participation in cultural life, the leisure activities of people not speaking Chinese are almost entirely restricted to going to pubs or sports events. They could not read the newspapers and did not understand Chinese television programmes. The value of leisure time "*quickly approaches zero if you are not interested in Chinese things*" (participant 2). This participant stated that even after more than two years in China he was still illiterate as far as Chinese was concerned.

German participants who were not able to speak Chinese often needed someone to help them in their leisure time with private and official matters. One participant said: "*If I*

*was out and about with my family, we were four people, and with a driver five people, and on top of that an interpreter, then we were six people in one car”* (participant 3).

***Is it worthwhile for Germans working in Sino-German teams to learn Chinese?***

German participants who were not able to speak Chinese faced many problems while two-thirds of the German participants rated Chinese language proficiency as being helpful or necessary. Based on this, I think that the question whether it is worthwhile for Germans working in Sino-German teams to learn Chinese should be looked at by taking into account the perspectives of all those affected by a decision either way.

All the German participants speaking Chinese (those with language proficiency and those with a basic knowledge of Chinese) considered their language proficiency to be of positive value in their work. For them it was a particular advantage that they could, to varying degrees, communicate directly with Chinese people. One participant said during the interview: *“Language is often the key you need to establish personal contact with a customer, with a business partner, to be able to do any business at all in China”* (participant 1). It was mentioned that particularly with regards to contract negotiations or Chinese banquets in China it was quite often the case that they had to deal with decision-makers or clients who did not have a command of the English language. In these situations it was helpful for them to be able to have a conversation in Chinese even if it was not possible to conduct the negotiations or business discussions in Chinese.

Another advantage was, according to the participants, that someone speaking Chinese is much more likely to be accepted by the Chinese than someone who does not speak the language. Participant 6 who did not speak Chinese thought that he would have been able to compensate for this if he looked more senior by having grey hair. *“If you don’t speak the language then it is easier to go down well with a partner if you have grey hair”* (participant 6). In addition, Germans who speak Chinese explained that the Chinese

welcome the idea of Germans acquiring basic skills in Chinese and consider this to show that Germans are interested in Chinese people and their culture.

Germans who learnt some basic Chinese language skills before moving to China thought this was very useful and would recommend it. One participant (participant 2), who stated that he was over sixty and regretted not having attended a prolonged Chinese language course before being sent to China, said that before he came to China he and his wife only attended an intensive three-week Chinese language course. His wife who did not take up any employment in China attended further language courses in China. He worked in a Joint Venture in the province of Jiangxi where, according to him, nobody spoke English. In the beginning he had to work with the assistance of an interpreter. At the time of the interview, however, he was able to work “*using gestures and hand signs as well as combining nouns and the fractions of Chinese that I had learnt and picked up*” and “*it works*” (participant 2). This indicates that for those who frequently have to work together with Chinese people who have no command of English it is definitely worthwhile learning some basic language skills. One participant aptly expressed this by saying: “*It is a bad thing if you don’t speak the language. You cannot even have a simple get-together with Chinese people without an interpreter*” (participant 1). The following are exemplary statements with regards to the necessity of attending language courses before working in China:

**Oliver:** *Now, I assume that you don’t speak Chinese?*

**Participant 1:** *Yes, I do. I learnt the language when my company said that I had to go to China. It was in April when they said that that person also had to have some basic Chinese language skills although English is spoken as well. Each day I had private lessons for four hours, which was quite intense. I am quite grateful for that and I can only recommend everyone to do this. Everyone going to China should sit down for a quarter of a year or half a year and learn Chinese intensively. This won’t be any of the Chinese used in business negotiations but it provides a basis. You know the basic rules and I was actually very grateful to have done that. With this it is possible to live [in China] and it can also carry you a bit further and it works more or less. In daily life I can get by now. I would recommend this [an intensive language course] to everyone. It is very difficult if you come here and you*



*don't know a single word of Chinese. [...] Of course, we [human beings] don't remember everything we learn but you remember what you need. As far as you need them [words] in everyday life they stay in your memory [...] as time goes on there will certainly be many 'long noses' [foreigners] who can speak Chinese.*

**Oliver:** *You find this very useful, also for business? I think it is nice to greet a Chinese partner in Chinese.*

**Participant 2:** *Yes, quite. I can't negotiate in Chinese. I lack the technical knowledge for doing that. It's possible to learn this but they just speak too fast. But that is just as well, as I said, in China a lot 'goes through the stomach' and over a Chinese banquet only Chinese is spoken. And if you can understand at least a bit then that is already useful. You know, otherwise you are sitting there at the table for two hours and don't understand a word. That really is frustrating, then every Chinese banquet has its limits [...] what I am missing is, I would have liked to have had the opportunity to learn more Chinese than just the basics. My wife had lessons here and it's amazing how quickly she learnt and how well she is getting along here [...]. For the next job in another country I will most certainly learn certain basic language skills.*

Even though not all the German participants agreed with this view the majority of them were of the opinion that it was worthwhile and desirable to learn the language despite stating 'subjective' and 'objective' reasons why they did not do it. Their experiences showed that the extent to which the language was learnt (only reading and writing in transliteration, for example, instead of Chinese characters) was actually of secondary importance. What was important was Germans being given the opportunity to have some time off work in order to study the language intensively before they started work in China. The majority of the participants were of the opinion that "*only very few were able to work and learn the language*" (participant 4). Therefore, I believe, on the basis of these conversations and from my own personal experience, that it is worthwhile for a German working in a Sino-German team to learn Chinese. There is certainly no need to learn the language for years but just to a certain degree in accordance with the task and the period of residence in China. Learning, in my opinion, should concentrate on speaking and understanding the spoken language (not necessarily the Chinese characters). Only two participants said in their interviews that they would not recommend learning Chinese before starting work in China.

### ***Conclusion***

Stated above are communication experiences that were influenced by the German participants' lack of foreign language proficiency. I am therefore of the opinion that linguistic problems play a significant role with regards to the whole issue of Sino-German business communications between Chinese and German individuals working in teams. However, the statements made by the participants and the statistics in this study show that so far the more or less self-evident result was either not properly recognised or completely ignored by companies that send their employees abroad. Being able to speak the local language facilitates everyday life and the practical benefits in professional life can hardly be denied. What follows shows other communication experiences mentioned by the German participants.

#### ***Chinese people avoid answering with a direct "yes" or "no"***

##### ***Description of the problem***

One participant (5) told me in the interview:

*"What annoys me, nobody says the truth, ever! Nobody can say "yes", nobody can say "no". And we can't handle this. Someone who is Chinese and grew up here can handle it because they have learnt it from early childhood. We can't handle it"* (participant 5).

Other participants also had this experience. Similar statements are as follows:

*"It is sometimes very difficult to get to know a Chinese person because they are sometimes hiding behind a façade; they are not really showing what they really think"* (participant 3).

*"It's always very difficult, it takes a very long time until you get to hear, I would say, employees expressing their opinions openly"* (participant 4).

The experience that Chinese people do not speak openly about what they think and feel was a major problem for the German participants when communicating with Chinese individuals and the Chinese avoidance of answering with a direct "yes" or "no" is only seen as a specific example. The participants gave many concrete examples for this: even if

a foreigner makes an obvious mistake nobody would say: “*No, we don’t do that. That’s wrong*” (participant 4). He mentioned that during a staff meeting a different opinion was very seldom uttered such as: “*I have different information. That can’t be done like that*” or “*Mr. [...] I don’t understand your decision*” (participant 4). Even if they are unsure, a lot of Chinese people will not ask clarification questions, as I know from my own experience. Therefore, it is often the case that it remains uncertain whether one was understood or not. Sometimes you think that you were understood only to find later on that the Chinese communication partner did not understand after all. “*Chinese people don’t like to say “no”*” (participant 2) they often say “yes” but secretly they do “*everything the way that they see fit*” (participant 5). The participants mentioned that there was very seldom a clear response from the Chinese party in a discussion, often leaving the decision-making to the German side.

The German participants perceived this ‘Chinese idiosyncrasy’ in different ways. Due to bad experiences, some of the participants arrived at the conclusion that Chinese people are dishonest or incapable or unwilling to take on responsibility. One German put it even more emphatically in the interview by saying: “*You can’t believe anything a Chinese person says*” because the Chinese “*always present only half the truth or a different truth*” (participant 5). Therefore, he did not trust any Chinese person.

The majority of Germans considered this ‘Chinese idiosyncrasy’ as being due to their different Chinese mentality and culture. One German (participant 1) had the following experience: it took at least six months for the Chinese to overcome their reluctance to ask questions or to approach a foreigner to ask for help because “*Chinese people consider it as being impolite to ask questions*” (participant 1). Therefore, asking for confirmation whether one was understood or not was suggested by the German participants. Another German participant believed that after only a short time in China he

had already learnt to read the faces of the Chinese and to find out by their body language what his Chinese communication partners thought. Even when he saw that sometimes the Chinese communication partner did not want to tell the truth he did not feel deceived. *“The Chinese were often a bit evasive but if you waited a bit then they would get back to that point”* (participant 1).

Although other German participants recognised that there were differences in the communication behaviours of Chinese and German team members they did not know how to handle the communication interferences arising from those differences. This is demonstrated by the utterance of the following participant:

*“It is important to get to know their ways of thinking a little bit. If you invite a Chinese person for dinner, for instance, you have to ask him four times. Three times he will say “no” and the fourth time he will answer “yes”. This is actually unthinkable for us. Normally, a German says: “Yes, I would love to come”. And a Chinese person says three times “no”. You know better why it is like that. But this is what I mean. And there are, in all sincerity, there are actually huge problems between the Chinese and Germans. It’s simply the way it is. Because, in my opinion, there is no understanding. The way of thinking is fundamentally different. We have a current case where we want to introduce a new product here and we want the existing factory to take on this task. We Germans, my dealer and I, are trying to convince the Chinese that they have to do this and they simply don’t want to do it. I have no idea why. There may be a lot behind it, that they won’t earn a lot of money from it. I don’t know. Chinese people very seldom speak their minds. They always try to use a side stage and try to argue or to discuss there. They never get to the main point. That is my experience anyway”* (participant 5).

Later on when I spoke to the Chinese manager (Chinese participant 7) of the company in the interview and asked about the reasons for the rejection of the new product he told me that the reasons for the Chinese side’s refusal was that the German side had not discussed the product with the Chinese side beforehand and that they had conducted the market research on their own. *“Now, they want to force us to introduce the product. We don’t know at all whether the product will be well received on the Chinese market”* (Chinese participant 7). Based on my personal experiences I am of the opinion that the Chinese partner felt offended because he had not been involved in the decision-making and

he also had doubts about the results of the market research. The Chinese manager said that the Chinese side was not obliged to reveal these two reasons to the German side since they should know for themselves why the Chinese were unwilling to join in. When I asked the Chinese manager later about existing differences of opinion within the company he told me: *“It is not necessary to say certain things too directly, on the contrary, if you say them too directly it makes things worse”* (participant 7).

Three German participants, however, said during the interview conversations that they prepared for such situations by finding a Chinese confidant amongst the team members who would provide open opinions and experiences and whom they could ask for advice. This person should be preferably of the same age and ideally *“not have too many friends or too many enemies”* (participant 1). This can be seen as a ‘coping strategy’ by these participants.

### ***Problem analysis***

The German participants noticed that particularly amongst older, and more traditionally-minded, Chinese people there exists a ‘Chinese idiosyncrasy’ of being reluctant to say “no” and of speaking their minds in critical situations. Many of the German participants judged this communication behaviour as being a sign of dishonesty, lack of openness and reluctance to take on responsibility. A particular cultural background for this Chinese communication behaviour was not perceived. Only one of the participants thought that the reason why Chinese people were unwilling to say: *“No, we don’t do that. That’s wrong”* (participant 4) was that they considered this to be a way of losing face.

During interview conversations with Chinese participants I asked for the reason why they did not speak their opinions directly to German colleagues or team members. Three reasons were given. Firstly, it was considered to be unnecessary to say everything directly since being adults the German participants should certainly be able to understand

the indirectly expressed opinions of Chinese team partners. Secondly, according to their experiences German participants were often convinced that their own opinions were justified and therefore there was no point in uttering a different opinion. One Chinese participant said in the interview that after having experienced a suggestion or opinion not being accepted by the German side three times he did not want to try a fourth time (Chinese participant 8). Thirdly, it was mentioned that Chinese and German ways of thinking were completely different. Chinese people often assumed that foreigners do not understand their opinions anyway and therefore they simply did not speak their minds or agreed with the foreigners while secretly doing what they themselves thought was the right thing to do. The Chinese thought that in this way open confrontations could be avoided. For the most part the Chinese tried to avoid either party losing face so that harmony, being a strong desideratum from their side, was maintained whilst the Germans tended to see such behaviour as negative and not conducive to maintaining harmony.

I would like to demonstrate the fact that Chinese people prefer an indirect verbal style of communication in a situation where Germans would speak their minds in order to avoid either of the communication partners involved losing face with the following two examples:

Example 1:

One Sunday afternoon a close Chinese friend of my Chinese wife and I rang our doorbell. We asked him politely to come inside without asking the reason for his unexpected visit. First we made small talk. Then we asked him how things were with him. He replied that he had bought a new computer a few days ago. When we asked him whether he was happy with his new computer he said that he had not completed the installation of the programmes yet. However, after this reply he changed topics. After an hour I still did not know why he had come to see us. My

intuition told me, however, that his visit was not without a reason since he was very busy working on his thesis at that time. Finally, my wife said to him: “*If you should have any problems installing the programmes on your computer I am happy to help.*” He replied: “*Yes, I am a little apprehensive as to whether I get everything right. If you have the time I’d like to ask you, if you don’t mind, to come to my study. My computer is in my study.*” Later on he and my wife went together to his flat and she installed some programmes for him.

In my opinion, a German person, in the same situation, would have asked directly whether we had time to help him. As I know from personal experience a Chinese person, however, assumes that a direct question for help is impolite since the possibility exists that the person asked might not be able or might be unwilling to help and therefore would have to say “no” which would mean losing face for both parties. The communication partner who says “no” causes the other communication partner to lose face and the person saying “no” also loses face (see later section in this chapter ‘Excursion: the Chinese concept of saving face’). In order to avoid this risk a Chinese person prefers expressing his/her intention indirectly in such a situation. A Chinese person even accepts that his/her intention will not be recognised. However, this is highly unlikely since a Chinese individual who grew up in a Chinese cultural environment learns to ‘hear’ things that were not said through the context from an early age.

The anthropologist Hall distinguishes between *low-context* and *high-context* communication in human interactions (Hall, 1989). In low-context communication intentions and opinions are clearly and explicitly expressed using verbal messages whereas in high-context communication the emphasis is on expressing intentions and opinions, where possible, by means of context and non-verbal channels. According to his study both China and Japan are so-called *high-context cultures* while Germany, Switzerland and the

USA could be classified as *low-context cultures*. The following table taken from Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 101) summarises the main characteristics of low-context and high-context communications:

**Table 13**

***Low-Context Communication (LCC) and High-Context Communication (HCC)***

LCC Characteristics		HCC Characteristics	
Individualistic values		Group-oriented values	
Self-face concern		Mutual-face concern	
Linear logic		Spiral logic	
Direct style		Indirect style	
Person-oriented style		Status-oriented style	
Self-enhancement style		Self-effacement style	
Speaker-oriented style		Listener-oriented style	
Verbal-based understanding		Context-based understanding	
LCC examples		HCC examples	
Germany	United States	Saudi Arabia	Japan
Switzerland	Canada	Kuwait	China
Denmark	Australia	Mexico	South Korea
Sweden	United Kingdom	Nigeria	Vietnam

*Note.* From “Communicating Across Cultures” by S. Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 101

Example 2:

When one of my wife’s acquaintances, Tingting from Shanghai, got her driving license we offered to give her a lift to a car dealer if she wanted to visit one. After one and a half months she phoned us. What follows is an excerpt from the telephone call between my wife Jiahong (J) and Tingting (T). The likely thoughts of the speakers are stated in brackets:

**T:** ... *by the way, do you have the telephone number for Mrs. F at the Toyota car dealer?*

[I hope that she will offer to take me there.]

**J:** *Yes, sure, wait a minute; I only have the number of the Toyota sales centre. You can ask them for the number. Do you have the sales centre’s number?* [She could find the number in the phone directory. What she really wants is for me to give her a lift to the dealer. But I have something else to do today.]

**T:** *You could tell me the number.* [That means that she doesn’t want to give me a lift otherwise she wouldn’t give me the phone number.]

**J:** *The number is...* [She will certainly understand that I don’t want to take her there today.]



**T:** *Thanks for that, talk to you later.* [So, she didn't want to give me a lift today. Just as well that I didn't ask her directly otherwise it would have been embarrassing for both of us.]

A month later T phoned again:

**T:** *... ehm, could you tell me how to get to the Toyota sales centre by bus?* [She definitely realises that I really need her help. The car dealer is so far away and today is Saturday. There is only a bus every hour. I hope that this time she will offer to give me a lift.]

**J:** *I am not sure which bus to take but I could give you a lift.* [She needs help because she could easily find out from the city map which bus to take. If I don't offer to take her there today then this will mean that she'll lose face and I'll also lose face and this could jeopardise our relationship. I've got time today therefore I'll give her a lift to the dealer.]

**T:** *That's too much inconvenience for you. You are always busy.* [Initially, I should reject her offer otherwise I would be being impolite.]

**J:** *It's not inconvenient at all. I've got time today. When would you like to go there?* [What she said are polite flowery phrases. I shouldn't make her lose face and therefore my reply should also be polite.]

**T:** *When would it suit you?*

**J:** *I am just having lunch. I will be with you within half an hour.*

**T:** *That's really far too inconvenient for you, thank you, thank you.*

**J:** *Don't speak such nonsense. It's not inconvenient at all.*

T did not raise the matter or her reasons for phoning during either of the phone calls. A German person, in the same situation, would have asked frankly whether J was able or willing to give her a lift to the dealer. Even if J had answered: "No, that's not possible today" there would not have been any serious consequences for either of the communication partners. Neither the request for help nor the negative response would result in such a simultaneous loss of face for both communication partners. On the contrary, amongst acquaintances and friends, openness, frankness and honesty are appreciated. To go about the matter in such an indirect way would have been superfluous for T and J if they had been Germans but being Chinese they had to use this necessary avoidance strategy. A direct question could trigger the risk of losing face for both communication partners. T would, according to Chinese understanding, be behaving tactlessly since J would have to answer with a direct "yes" or "no". However, I should

mention here that both J and T belong, more or less, to the more traditionally-minded subgroup of Chinese society.

I did not experience the following two episodes in China, but in Germany. The first took place in 2010 and the second in 2011. From these two examples it is obvious that even if Chinese people have been living abroad for many years and have had a lot of contact with foreigners they often stick to their typical Chinese communication behaviour. The findings of a language-analysis-based study conducted by the linguist Günther (1993) on the discourse styles of Chinese and German individuals showed that Chinese individuals with German language proficiency may stick to their Chinese discourse style when having a conversation with Germans. From my personal experiences with friends and acquaintances I can certainly acknowledge this. Although my wife, for example, has been living in Germany for five years, has been speaking German for four years and maintains contact with Germans, she still has difficulty saying “no”. And even though she is familiar with the German language use of “no” she still feels uncomfortable if she gets a direct “no” from her communication partner. She told me the following example that she can still remember today:

(My wife J met a German woman in a corridor)

J: *Do you have a moment, Mrs. X?*

[Can I ask you something?]

X: *No, I have to rush.*

[She wants to talk to me but I don't have time at the moment and I have to tell her that.]

Since nobody would say “no” (*meiyou*) in such a situation in China she felt very uncomfortable at first when the woman replied with “no” although she knew very well that the woman simply behaved in accordance with German communication conventions:

firstly, she gave an unambiguous answer to a question followed by an explanation of the reason. However, my wife did not really want to know whether Mrs. X had some time to spare. She only wanted to find out whether she could discuss something with her or not. If Mrs. X had been a Chinese person this short conversation would have gone, according to my personal experience, as follows:

*J: Do you have a moment, Mrs. X?*

[Can I ask you something?]

*X: I am really sorry, but I do have to rush. What is it?*

[She wants to talk to me about something but I don't have the time at the moment and I have to tell her why.]

*J: Never mind. We'll talk about it another time.*

For a Chinese person like my wife a direct “no” in this situation means ignoring what the communication partner wanted to discuss and by doing so causing the communication partner to lose face and thereby jeopardising the relationship between the two communicating persons. Therefore, saying “no” is avoided.

With the examples and analysis above I want to demonstrate that the ‘Chinese idiosyncrasy’ mentioned by German participants at the beginning of the section that comprises ‘not speaking the truth’, ‘hiding behind a façade’ and ‘being unable to reply with “yes” or “no” to a question’ is not caused by the Chinese being dishonest people who do not want to accept responsibility. The reason is more because Chinese individuals, due to their communication conventions, prefer a communication strategy that is different to the German one. However, it was obvious from the interviews conducted with German participants that only a small percentage of them were able to recognise and handle this.

During the interviews I was able to observe and feel the German participants’ discontent, annoyance and despair with regards to this ‘Chinese idiosyncrasy’. On the one

hand I quite understand the German participants' feelings but on the other hand I feel sorry that, apart from the *stereotypical* assignment of characteristics, they did not learn anything from their negative experiences. I have often encountered strange idiosyncrasies and different behaviours in intercultural communications. I frequently experienced these being applied, without thinking and without differentiation, to all the individuals in a group, which is called stereotyping (Barres, 1974).

Stereotyping is a phenomenon that is quite often expressed when a large number of people speak from their imaginations about certain attitudinal objects (Barres, 1974).

Stereotypes are often linked to categories like nationality, race or ethnic groups. In intercultural communication I have often noticed that many stereotypes are not based on observations but are expressions of *ethnocentric* value representation or prejudice. They are on no account congruent with 'reality'. For this reason some sociologists consider stereotypes to be "the language of prejudice" (Ehrlich, 1973, p. 21). It is not always possible to distinguish between prejudice and stereotype. In both linguistics and literary studies the term "stereotype" is often used in connection with discussions about prejudiced utterances. In this thesis I do the same. What follows is an excerpt from an interview with a German participant, which is exemplary for prejudiced utterances about Chinese team colleagues:

**Oliver:** *Are Chinese people honest?*

**Participant 5:** *No, a clear "no". There are some employees I can trust.*

*Unfortunately, my experience is that this trust is not reciprocated. In Europe you'll always get feedback if you give an order, whether it will be carried out or "No, that's not possible". Here you don't get any feedback. As time goes on it really does your head in. You have to go to the people and ask has this been done, has that been done. And this in addition results in the employees feeling controlled and believing that I don't trust them. But this is not the case.*

Participant (5) had the experience that he rarely got a "yes" or "no" for an answer but he did not know how to deal with this fact. His utterance demonstrated his complete lack of knowledge regarding the situation. He deployed the German approach by always

asking his employees directly whether a task or job had been completed. However, his experience shows that this was in vain. There is no use in trying to apply the German style of communication when communicating with Chinese team colleagues in China. In my opinion, this participant should try to become more familiar with the Chinese way of communicating and by adapting to this communication style he could look for new procedural methods. With some sensitivity he should certainly be able to find out, in an indirect way, whether his employees have fulfilled their tasks or not without giving them the impression that they are being controlled.

In the preceding section ‘Communication interferences due to the lack of foreign language proficiency of Chinese and German team members’ the significance of language proficiency was pointed out. Many of the German participants assumed that language was the main problem when communicating with Chinese people and not the difference in culture. However, some of the examples stated in this section show that although language can be helpful in understanding what is being said and what is understood by a communication partner it can still be a reason for misunderstandings between them if there is a lack of knowledge of the socio-cultural backgrounds and the relevant communication conventions associated with them. The following scene, which occurred during an interview, demonstrates that even for Germans who are able to communicate in Chinese (or German, in fact) with their Chinese team members, it is still necessary to know Chinese communication strategies and conventions in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts:

During an interview conversation with a Chinese manager (participant 9) the German general manager of the company entered the room. He said that he did not want to disturb us but he had just seen something in the workshop that he would like to tell us. Purely by chance he had seen an employee change a light bulb while seven or eight

employees watched what he was doing. He was concerned and said to the Chinese manager “*if this carries on*” then the factory will have to close down soon. The Chinese manager reassured him saying: “*I will deal with this*”. The German manager said that in future he would have a camera on him and take photos of such events, which he would then display for all the employees to see. His facial expression showed that he was delighted with his idea. The Chinese manager smiled and replied: “*We will see. Maybe there is a better solution*”.

After the German manager had left the Chinese manager explained to me that at least 80% of the employees were hard working. Events like the one the German manager had just talked about only occurred because the company, which was still in its early stages, did not have sufficient orders yet to keep all the employees busy. He was of the opinion that a company should treat its employees as carefully as a state treats its soldiers: “*The troops are maintained over many years in order to be deployed within one hour*”. He said that all the employees in the department mentioned were qualified specialists and specialists like them were hard to find. Therefore, he considered that the method the German manager wanted to use was not suitable. In his opinion, it would hurt the employees ‘feelings’ and their ‘face’.

The Chinese manager intended to talk to the respective head of department about the matter and let him find a solution. Maybe it was possible to deploy those employees in other departments for the time being. Although the Chinese manager (participant 9) said to the German manager: “*We will see. Maybe there is a better solution*” what he really meant was: “No, that is not a good solution.” The word “maybe” was only used out of politeness. If the German manager were to consider his Chinese colleague’s answer as merely a slight disagreement and put his idea into operation then a conflict would most likely occur.

*The Chinese concept of saving face has a different meaning to the  
German concept*

*Description of the problem*

In his book “Chinese Characteristics” the American missionary Smith (1984) refers to the crucial significance of the Chinese concept of saving face. ‘Face’ is the key for understanding many important Chinese characteristics (Smith, 1984). The cue ‘face’ can be found generated during conversations throughout my German data. Four German participants mentioned that it is vital when communicating with a Chinese person that neither of the communication partners loses face. Only two participants said that there is no need to have consideration for the Chinese concept of losing face since it is only a ‘myth’ and the maxim ‘avoid anyone losing face’ is only a Chinese “sales” or “negotiation ploy” (participants 5 and 6). One of the four participants who considered the concept of losing face as being important mentioned that in Sino-German teamwork the ‘collective face’ of the Chinese played a more significant role in the past than at present (participant 3). According to this participant Chinese team members, however, were generally more afraid of losing face than German members. He also said that it was often not easy for Germans to recognise where and when it was necessary to save face and what was meant by ‘face’ in each case. Here are two examples:

*“Each of these gentlemen is afraid to lose face because they follow a proposal made by a Westerner and the idea wasn’t their own idea. So, commitment to the proposals will only be made if the Chinese side submits it. Therefore, you, more or less, have to talk the Chinese into thinking that an idea is their idea. You mustn’t have the idea yourself” (participant 1).*

*“I explained to a Chinese engineer what he had to do regarding the installation of equipment and how he had to do it. But he didn’t do anything. I thought that he didn’t want to get his hands dirty and I was quite annoyed. Later on he came to see me and explained that he, in his position as an engineer, would lose both his authority and his face if, in front of his people, he was to work in accordance with the instructions given by a low-level foreign technician. He asked for my appreciation and said that he would do it if I were to show him later when we were alone. I accepted and then I explained things to him alone or I explained things in*

*front of his employees but then let his employees do what I had explained in accordance with the instructions he gave them. By doing so everything was rosy and everybody was happy again” (participant 2).*

### ***Problem analysis***

These two participants’ experiences are definitely true for some members of Sino-German teams and also reflect my own experiences. According to the Chinese concept of saving face as described by many researchers (see later in this chapter: ‘Excursion: the Chinese concept of saving face’) a person’s ‘face’ (*mianzi*) is linked to his/her social status. The higher the level of education and status of a person the more he/she is concerned about losing face. For an older or well-educated Chinese person a situation where a younger, equal-ranking person or a person with a lower social status imparts knowledge to him/her constitutes a threat of losing face since this would challenge his/her competence. At the same time he/she would assume that this younger or lower-ranking person will not ‘give him/her face’.

Therefore, an older German participant (participant 2) recommended avoiding lecturing a Chinese team colleague one is working with. One should rather try to convince the Chinese colleague by endeavouring to integrate the Chinese colleague’s ideas into the final solution (participant 2). In other words, one should make sure of giving the Chinese partner face. Although this advice might sound pedantic the data demonstrates that, based on the German participants’ experiences, it appears that Germans take little care about giving their Chinese colleagues and team members face. Both German and Chinese team members considered the German know-it-all attitude as being a typical German mistake in Sino-German teams. Here are some examples of this critique:

***Oliver:*** *What is it that you should be prepared for? What would you say?*

***Participant 4:*** *I believe, most of the mistakes, and here I must admit that I have to criticise my own people, the Germans, namely, they make the mistake of not dealing with the country and they tend to think that they can simply criticise and present themselves as on a higher level than the host, for instance. And one should really get it into one’s head that we are guests here. And one should also realise that one*



*is a foreigner here, yes, and not the king. In Germany we also don't tolerate foreigners behaving like kings. That means you need to scale down your expectations and keep your feet on the ground. And you also have to respect the hospitality. And what is really important is that you mustn't consider other views as being stupid and tedious; you have to listen to other views, to evaluate them and then make a decision; not simply come to the foregone conclusion: Oh well, what the Chinese say is stupid. This is a really daft approach that, unfortunately, you hear time and time again.*

**Oliver:** *What would you say is the biggest mistake that a German working in a team in China could make?*

**Participant 3:** *Unfortunately, I have experienced some who said we are the master race; we are from a different planet or the other way round. And they behaved accordingly. They treated the Chinese, if I may say so, as if they were third-class people, treated them condescendingly, looking down their noses at them. And there we have it / well, I have experienced such people. We experienced this at the hotel in Beijing where they behaved like that. There was a fair and at first I really wanted to get up and straighten them out, my compatriots from Germany, well, that was disgusting, well, and also the Chinese staff there, they also looked peeved. What did we do? We paid and left. And also the know-it-all attitude, that you know more than the Chinese and you are arrogant about it; that's also the biggest mistake that you can make. Even if we do know more, this can be expressed in a different way.*

The data shows that most of the German participants did not recognise how the concept of saving face is entrenched in action norms even though the importance of this concept was mentioned by some of them. The Chinese concept of saving face was often considered to be a “*typical Chinese problem*” or “*old Chinese thinking*” (participants 3 and 4) that according to German understanding should not play any role in business life (participant 6). It was mentioned that it was not such a big deal if Chinese people “*lose face once in a while*” (participant 5). The following excerpt from an interview reflects this attitude held by some Germans:

**Oliver:** *Apart from this language proficiency what else should be learned? You mentioned earlier about what is in the heads of Chinese people...*

**Participant 5:** *To lose face, for instance, I cannot lose face. If you lose face and you look in a mirror, can't you see it in the mirror anymore?*

**Oliver:** *But 'face' means something different here.*

**Participant 5:** *What is it in Germany? What does it mean to you 'to lose face'?*

**Oliver:** *To me?*

**Participant 5:** *Yes, what does it mean to you as a China specialist? People keep saying: you mustn't do this or he will lose face. For goodness' sake!*

**Oliver:** *Some people easily lose face when they feel offended.*

**Participant 5:** *If someone is offended?*

*Oliver: Yes.*

*Participant 5: That's the Chinese mentality. If someone is offended then he is offended, what's the big deal? In Germany everyone is allowed to be offended. In China everyone is allowed to be offended.*

*Oliver: If there is a third person present who is a witness that's not really great...*

*Participant 5: And? And? What are the consequences? For me as a European this doesn't cause any consequences. I can have an argument with everyone sitting around a table then I'll get up and then I'll go home. The next day I return and then everything is over and it starts all over again. That has nothing to do with 'losing face'.*

My participants' utterances show that even when the Germans are familiar with the concept of 'face' and the striving to save face, as well as the fear of losing face, seem to be universal phenomena, it is still not straightforward in intercultural communications to recognise situations that impose a risk of losing face.

With regards to being a universal phenomenon Brown and Levinson (1987) assume a universal face-concept in their book "Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage". They distinguish between 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Whilst an individual's 'positive face' consists of recognition, sympathy and respect for others, 'negative face' refers to a person's autonomy in decision-making and action. While self-humiliation jeopardises an individual's 'positive face', asking for help, making requests or asking for advice endangers an individual's 'negative face' since this limits his/her freedom of action. One counter-argument to this universal face-concept is, for example, that hardly any Chinese person rooted in their country's tradition would consider jeopardising the 'negative face' of someone else by insisting on an invitation after the person invited has declined the invitation since this, according to my experience, is part of polite behaviour amongst the Chinese. This behaviour only means giving the other person 'face'.

In Chinese culture self-humiliation is considered to be modesty and a sign of cultivation and therefore a means of gaining face (Liang, 1992). In addition, self-humiliation means to give the communication partner face. The utterance "No, I don't understand", which amongst Germans does not cause either of the two communication

partners to lose face is for many of the Chinese, whom I know personally, a reason for both the speaker and the communication partner to lose face. The reason is that the speaker demonstrates his/her ignorance and the lack of pedagogic ability on the part of the communication partner becomes apparent at the same time.

These examples demonstrate the different meanings of the concept 'face' in the respective cultures. In addition, an important factor from a postmodern perspective is that the way in which someone keeps and protects his/her face and the reasons for losing face are dependent on the social norms and conventions of a culture. To clarify this, the Chinese concept of saving face is described in more detail in the following section. As mentioned before, it is not intended to provide an abstract overall presentation of culture but only to understand specific ways of thinking, standards and conventions that can have an impact on the stories of the participants as well as on communication behaviour and communication interferences generally in Sino-German teams.

***Excursion: the Chinese concept of saving face***

***The cultural meaning of 'face' in China.*** The Chinese term *mianzi* is often translated as 'face' into English or 'Gesicht' into German (German equivalent of 'face'). However, in Chinese culture *mianzi* has a completely different meaning to the English or German term 'face'. *Mianzi* does not denote the physical face that is reflected in the bathroom mirror but something abstract (Luo, 2007). The Chinese term for the front of the human head from chin to hairline (Drosdowski, 1980) is *lian* or *mian*. Generally, the word denoting the physical face in modern Chinese language is *lian*. The term *mian* is used as a morpheme in modern Chinese language. Only in classical Chinese language is it used as a stand-alone word (Luo, 2007). In addition to this, the words *lian* and *mian* as well as the compound word *lianmian* have a figurative meaning.

The term 'face' also has some abstract meanings in the German language. This finds expression in the phrases 'to save face' and 'to lose face'. According to the German standard dictionary "Duden" (Drosdowski, 1980, p. 1018) the phrase 'to save face' means "to keep up appearances; to pretend that everything is fine". And the meaning of 'to lose face' is, according to "Duden" (Drosdowski, 1980, p. 1018), "to be belittled; to sink in people's estimation". "Duden" (Drosdowski, 1980, p. 1018) indicates that these two phrases stem from the English ("to save one's face" and "to lose one's face") and that the phrase 'to lose face' actually originates in East Asia and according to Drosdowski means "losing one's dignified attitude and composed expression" (Drosdowski, 1980, p. 1018). However, the meaning of the Chinese 'saving face' or 'losing face' does not coincide with these meanings since the range of meanings for the Chinese term *mianzi* is much more extensive than the meaning of the English or German term 'face'.

Almost eighty years ago Lin (1937) wrote that the Chinese word *mianzi* can neither be translated nor defined. How is it possible to understand *mianzi*? To find the answer to this question an excursion into the Chinese language might be helpful. The sinologist Granet (2000) thought that the Chinese language was not designed to record definitions, to analyse thoughts or to logically expose certain teachings or doctrines. Rather, this language is entirely cut out for conveying deeper emotional attitudes, suggesting a certain behaviour and for convincing and proselytising (Granet, 2000).

Not everyone will agree with this bold statement but in my opinion it points in the right direction. It can be assumed that the word *mianzi*, as well as *yin*, *yang* and numerous other Chinese words, do not constitute terms where the contents can be precisely linguistically described. These terms are always about suggesting certain behaviour and to make people aware of a number of ideas and associations. Therefore, the term *mianzi* is not defined by Chinese people but rather used to describe people's social behaviour and to

influence it (Luo, 2007). Chinese dictionaries indicate that *mianzi* is the exterior of an object. Where human beings are concerned *mianzi* is first of all their 'exterior' in an abstract sense, something like their social value (Luo, 2007). At the same time *mianzi* is also a psychological quantity and therefore resembles terms like dignity, reputation, honour and prestige without being entirely identical with them. The 'face' in the sense of *mianzi* comes under a person's social capital. It can be gained by exquisiteness or success. A Chinese person can have a 'big face' or a 'small face'. The higher a person's social status or position the bigger is his/her *mianzi*. Generally, a famous person or a person with many excellent relations has a big *mianzi*. In social interactions everyone is keen to save face in order to maintain their image, dignity, reputation or honour in public and thereby earn respect from others (Luo, 2007). In other words, an 'intact face' warrants being accepted as an ethical person. For a Chinese person losing face means losing your value as a human being so 'face' is therefore valued as the ultimate good.

According to Lin (1937) this ultimate good is not governed by reason but by social agreement. Someone with a big *mianzi* is often even beyond and above the law. *Mianzi* is a measure for every aspect of social life in China (Lin, 1937). Everybody needs *mianzi*, not only to face other people but also to ascertain one's own identity and integrity. Therefore, it plays an important role in Chinese social life. People with a big *mianzi* have the potential to achieve their aspirations. However, to lose one's *mianzi* by making a mistake, violating the rules of etiquette or being involved in a scandal not only means compromising one's honour, reputation, dignity or prestige but can have even more serious consequences. Losing all power and competence his/her morality will also be called into question. This person is no longer treated as an equal and even later on nobody will give him/her the opportunity to regain *mianzi*. Someone who loses face is in total social isolation. Therefore, every Chinese person tries to save face and at the same time tries to avoid

violating the face of another person. In addition, the Chinese will always give as much face as possible to persons who can be useful to them. For Chinese people saving face or *mianzi* is a fundamental part of the general code of conduct (Lin, 1937).

Due to the fact that in Chinese social life the *mianzi*-principle is omnipresent there are a number of figures of speech around 'face' that are outlined in the following. They shine a light on different aspects of *mianzi* and together they provide an overview of the phenomenon's content and meaning taking many significant points into account.

**'Talking about face'**. The phrase 'talking about face' is not meant literally. It means that in China at every opportunity 'face' is taken into consideration. This is demonstrated by the fact that Chinese people always pay close attention to age differences and differences in status. When communicating, each party is always keen to know what the relationship is between oneself and the communication partner. An important task of *li* (etiquette, custom or politeness) is to provide criteria that allow for the correct treatment of a person in accordance with the size of his/her *mianzi*. 'Form over content' is a distinctive characteristic of Chinese interpersonal relations. Persons with a big *mianzi* are not only treated with respect but they are also granted privileges. Since appearance also falls under *mianzi* Chinese people are very concerned about the impression they make on others. Therefore, it is not important what someone thinks about himself/herself but what others think about him/her.

**'Loving the face'**. The proverb "A tree needs its bark and humans need their face" is well known in China. In this proverb 'face' is translated as *lian*. This also shows that Chinese people have a different cultural understanding of 'face' to Europeans. (If the word 'face' is mentioned in relation to any Chinese person in the following, it means 'face' in the Chinese way of understanding it, namely *mianzi* or *lian*). Unlike *lian* that mainly covers a person's external appearance in the form of reputation, prestige or image the word

*mianzi* also includes a person's moral values. According to Chinese culture a person not taking care of his/her face is not a fully-fledged human being because such a person is lacking morals and a sense of shame. Nobody wants to associate with these people and they are expelled from society. Therefore, saying to a Chinese person "You don't want to have a face" is considered to be one of the worst insults and one that will deeply hurt a Chinese individual. The Chinese equivalent of having 'thick skin' is having 'thick facial skin' and people with 'thin facial skin' are delicate and shy. It is part of the Chinese national character to love and protect one's face.

From a Chinese point of view it can be a necessity to 'sacrifice' certain things in order to protect one's *mianzi*. Since criticism is always detrimental to *mianzi* conflicts are avoided wherever possible, even where only factual questions are concerned. Therefore, Germans working in Sino-German teams often get the impression that Chinese people shy away from conflict. Since Chinese individuals love their own *mianzi* they do not risk jeopardising the *mianzi* of their fellow men. Most of the German participants (participants 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) complained that their Chinese colleagues never spoke their minds. Even if they disagreed with plans or decisions the Chinese never said this directly. A German participant (participant 5) asked me during the interview: "*Why don't the Chinese speak their minds? I wouldn't mind if they were to criticise or contradict me if they had a different opinion. My face will still be there when I look in the mirror!*" Obviously, he did not understand the Chinese concept of saving face and expected Chinese people in China to behave like Germans.

In Chinese society a communication partner being silent or not making eye contact during a conversation indicates that the person disagrees with what is being said. A forty year old Chinese head of department in a Sino-German Joint Venture answered my question as to whether he directly addressed mistakes made by Germans in his team as

follows: “*If we notice that a German has made a mistake we drop a hint. Normally, he should get that. If we drop a hint three times and he doesn’t react accordingly then it means that he doesn’t want to understand. What would be the point in telling him to his face? That would be detrimental for both sides*” (participant 8). It is obvious that these are two completely different concepts of ‘face’ and ways of thinking. These kinds of interferences may disrupt intercultural communication. Therefore, in my opinion, it would be advisable to become more sensitive to cultural differences and when working in a team with Chinese colleagues one should always be aware of the significance of *mianzi*.

**‘Giving face and giving face as a gift’.** This is another figure of speech in China. *Mianzi* is not only given or acquired but it can also be given as a gift to someone. Since the Chinese love *mianzi* it is also the most precious and most popular gift. Senior officials, celebrities and noble figures consider nothing more precious than *mianzi*. There are two different ways to give *mianzi* to someone. On the one hand, *mianzi* can be given as a gift by showing respect, paying compliments or tribute, giving praise, showing sympathy, accommodating somebody’s wishes and giving gifts or invitations, which is called ‘positive face’ in English literature (Brown & Levinson, 1987). On the other hand, not pointing out a person’s mistakes or incompetence in front of third parties or in public and therefore not causing any embarrassment can spare a person’s *mianzi*. Even if someone actually did make a mistake pointing this out to him/her should be avoided and instead let him/her know that there are other ways of doing it. In China, to reject someone directly means not giving that person any *mianzi*. Therefore, Chinese people have a problem with replying with a clear-cut “no”. However, this only applies to interactions between acquaintances. People one has to deal with only once are often not given any *mianzi*. However, unlike Westerners, Chinese people have, according to my personal experience, a ‘very long memory’ regarding ‘good’ or ‘bad’ deeds, especially in connection with *mianzi*.



Even though in the West we also emphasise that a partner's loss of face is to be avoided, the idea of giving a communication partner 'positive face' is not as developed as in China. Therefore, foreigners in China often do not know how to 'give' *mianzi* and are therefore quickly considered to be arrogant as Chinese individuals told me in the interviews and on other occasions. The following is a typical example from my own professional life:

A Chinese manager went by train from Cologne to Munich to attend a meeting with a German manager. The negotiation went on for almost three hours. After the meeting the German manager immediately took the Chinese manager to the train station so that he could catch the next train back to Cologne. He knew that the Chinese manager intended to fly from Cologne to France the next day. The Chinese manager, who had been on the road from 8 am to 4 pm, complained about the German's behaviour to me later on: "*He didn't give me any mianzi whatsoever*".

The German manager had violated the Chinese 'commandment' to invite somebody out for a meal at mealtimes. Therefore, the Chinese manager considered himself to be insulted.

Just as I did myself during my first stay in China, many Europeans confuse *mianzi* with politeness. However, *mianzi* is far beyond the scope of simple politeness. It is always a matter of 'face' when a Chinese person lets a guest go first or even hands a small business card to somebody with both hands. The Chinese learn this attention to *mianzi* from early childhood. Many German language teachers I met who teach German in China complained that the Chinese students do not ask any questions during language classes even when they obviously do not understand what has been said. These teachers believed that the reason for this was the Chinese fear of losing face. It is possible, however, that the Chinese students wanted to give *mianzi* to their teacher since from their point of view it is

due to a teacher's didactic incompetence that students do not understand what he/she is teaching. In order to save the teacher's face Chinese students even accepted that they did not understand the content of the teaching because, from their point of view, nothing could be worse than causing the erudite teacher to lose *mianzi* in front of his/her students.

Another possibility to give *mianzi* is to 'extend' a person's *mianzi*. This can be achieved in many ways like, for instance, praising someone in public or in front of a third party, emphasising a person's title or capabilities and giving attention to someone's suggestions despite the fact that one does not actually think much of these suggestions. Even if one has to reject a request this can be done in a way that still gives *mianzi* to the person concerned. That is, one does not reject the request directly but indirectly by changing the subject or failing to hear the request, which indicates that one, at least at the moment, does not want to address the topic. In Germany such behaviour patterns are not considered polite but they are acceptable reactions for the Chinese (Tang & Reisch, 1995).

The following anecdote from the Zhou-dynasty (1045 BC - 770 BC) is an example for applying the *mianzi*-principle, which demonstrates how *mianzi* can still be given even in a critical situation. A Zhou-dynasty emperor learned that one of his ministers often accepted bribes in the form of silk. However, since the emperor needed the minister's services he did not want to dismiss him. The emperor found a solution, which was to give the minister a vast amount of silk. When the minister came to the emperor to thank him for this surprise gift the emperor said: "I have heard that you like this kind of gift. Therefore, I thought that you would enjoy receiving such a gift from me as well" (MacGowan, 1912, p. 307). The minister realised immediately that his corruption had been discovered. However, even though he was reprimanded by the emperor it had been done in a way that still gave the minister *mianzi* (MacGowan, 1912).

*'Losing face'*. Europeans are generally more inclined to candidly admit their mistakes, to show remorse and to apologise whereas Chinese people tend to cover up their faults and shortcomings since admitting or making a mistake is detrimental to their *mianzi*. For a Chinese person *mianzi* is virtually unimpeachable and its loss is irreparable. Therefore, it is not advisable to place a Chinese individual in an 'unbearable' situation where he/she would lose *mianzi*. It is always better to offer a Chinese individual an opportunity to wriggle out of it without loss of *mianzi*, which means to give him/her *mianzi*.

Since *mianzi* is connected to a person's social status, individuals with a higher status risk losing more than others. Someone with a higher education and better upbringing is therefore more afraid to lose *mianzi*, which explains why intellectuals are very sensitive in this respect. The extent to which *mianzi* is lost is dependent on the number of witnesses. As soon as a third person is present in a *mianzi*-threatening situation the loss of *mianzi* becomes public. Therefore, in China asking difficult questions in public is avoided since a person unable to answer such a question has his/her competence disparaged and therefore loses *mianzi*. In addition, the further away (both in society or business) the communication partners are from one another hierarchically the more severe the loss of *mianzi* is. This is not only true for individuals but also for the group to which a person belongs. In China every individual belongs to a group and is subordinate to such a group. Therefore, an individual's loss of *mianzi* means loss of *mianzi* for the whole group this person belongs to. The other group members are ashamed of their member's loss of *mianzi* and consider this also to be detrimental to their own *mianzi*. Even nowadays a divorce, for instance, is still considered a threat for the 'face' of the whole family. In such a case the phrase "losing face for someone" is commonly applicable, as I learned from my wife's family.

Every conflict, like a divorce for example, is a *mianzi*-threatening situation and since direct confrontation and clarification would mean loss of face for at least one of the conflicting sides Chinese people prefer to call in an arbitrator or intermediary. In China people openly demonstrating their anger or frustration are at the same time demonstrating that they are no longer in control of themselves. This kind of ‘uncontrolled’ behaviour is interpreted as the person in question being no longer inclined to give *mianzi* to the communication partner. However, in this case both interacting partners lose face since a person unable to control his/her feelings is acting in a way that is beneath him/her. If a superior demonstrates such behaviour then, in the opinion of many Chinese people, he is considered to be an incompetent boss. This superior is undermining his/her face, power and kudos (Thomas, 1996).

In summary, I believe that due to the fear of losing face or causing the loss of face the Chinese shy away from talking to authority figures and expressing their own opinions because this could imply contradicting the communication partner. Direct criticism is hardly ever uttered and at best is expressed implicitly. Therefore, socio-cultural signals in the communication between the Chinese and Germans are particularly important.

**‘Looking at face’.** Due to the size of their respective *mianzis* Chinese people are often treated differently. However, it is possible for a person with a small *mianzi* to ‘borrow’ *mianzi* from someone with a bigger one to achieve an objective that necessarily requires a big *mianzi* (for example, to influence political decisions). This means that someone with a small *mianzi* can take advantage of his/her relations with a person with a big *mianzi*. One of my previous Chinese employer’s (Joint Venture) employees, for example, who was due to be dismissed owing to not having sufficient qualifications, retained his employment because his father was a famous party secretary. Another possible example is, for instance, a student who wants to meet a scientist. Afraid of being

rejected due to his small *mianzi* he will approach his professor who will then express the student's wish to the scientist. Due to the professor's *mianzi* the scientist may meet this wish.

*Mianzi* is often used pragmatically as a strategy. During a banquet celebrating a business deal the mayor of a town in the province of Nanning once told me proudly how he successfully deployed the *mianzi*-strategy. In order to create more jobs and galvanise the economy the town intended to build an aluminium rolling mill. A project like this required countless approvals from different authorities or otherwise, as he put it: one risked "being beaten black and blue". Understandably, the mayor wanted to spare his subordinates this 'hassle'. He sent someone to Beijing who was to stay there until he found a "leading cadre at the highest level" who was prepared to write the signs "X-X Aluminium Centre" in Chinese calligraphy. A month later he found someone. An elderly gentleman, Mr. Y, who was a member of the Chinese Political Consultative Conference, was willing to write the Chinese calligraphy for the aluminium production centre. The man returned with this calligraphy and due to Mr. Y's big *mianzi* the green light for the project was given. After the District Council had carried out an inspection in the municipality and commented positively on the concept of aluminium production the local newspaper immediately published an article with photos. This article was submitted to the Land Administration Authority and to the Chamber of Commerce. Due to the District Chairman's *mianzi* nobody put any obstacles in their way. Finally, the mayor said that with regards to bribes or gifts no one knows exactly what it is any respective senior official might like but one thing is for sure: all officials love their *mianzi*. Therefore, to give *mianzi* was exactly the right thing to do. The mayor was sure that without both Mr. Y's *mianzi* and the *mianzi* of the District Chairman the aluminium production mill would not have been established even ten years later.

To sum up, the phrase 'looking at face' is often used in colloquial language if someone wants to coerce somebody into doing something, for example, to accept something or to bring a dispute to an end. If face is concerned then, from the point of view of Chinese people, right or wrong no longer play a role. Face has clear priority over objectivity.

*'Shredding the face'*. Whilst criticism, contradiction or rejection violates a person's face, insults, slander, disparagement and revilement will 'shred' someone's face. At the same time the person who shreds the face also loses face. In social interactions amongst Chinese people 'shredding the face' happens only in exceptional situations like, for example, when the interaction partners confront each other with hostile feelings and intend to terminate their relations.

*The differences between the Chinese and German concepts of saving face.* I believe that every human being needs respect and recognition from others as well as self-esteem. In most cultures the term 'face' has a metaphoric connotation. However, the above explanations show that the meaning of the word 'face' and the strategies for saving face are, to a certain extent, dependent on culture. What follows is a brief outline of the significant differences between the Chinese and German concepts of saving face:

Whereas for Germans 'face' is something individual for Chinese people it is a collective matter. A Chinese person's loss or receipt of face will always affect the family and the group this person belongs to. Whilst in German culture a person is responsible for his/her image or prestige in Chinese culture 'face' is predominantly given by others. In China it is generally expected that people give priority to the face of their fellow men, in other words, that they give as much face as they can to others or 'extend' their face. Making positive remarks about yourself does not give you face as I know from my own experience. The high degree of modesty demanded in Chinese culture is in German culture

considered to verge almost on self-humiliation. Chinese hosts will always say to their guests: “There will be nothing good to eat”, which will sound quite confusing for a German guest, who is not familiar with the Chinese requirement for modesty.

Researchers who have tried to classify the Chinese and German cultures also highlight these differences. Hall (1989) distinguishes, for example, between low-context cultures and high-context cultures. Germany belongs to the low-context cultures whereas China is amongst the high-context cultures. In low-context cultures social interactions are characterised by directness, individual orientation and a linear way of thinking whilst high-context cultures are characterised by vicariousness, collective orientation and a spiral way of thinking (Ting-Toomey, 1988). These differences in thinking are also reflected in the concepts of saving face and the respective ways of behaving. Saving, giving and maintaining face, for example, have absolute priority over practicality and honesty in China. Whilst the Chinese way of thinking is relationship-oriented the German way of thinking is results-oriented. In Germany it is possible to gain a high reputation by being assertive, proactively defending one’s opinion and being able to skilfully attack opponents. On the other hand, the Chinese strive “to recognise commonalities and to accept differences” in negotiations or discussions. Therefore, Germans are often more self-confident than Chinese people and do not shy away from conflicts. They are less anxious about losing face than Chinese individuals since in Germany ‘face’ relates mainly to values like image or prestige. In China, however, ‘face’ is closely related to dignity, respect, reputation and morality and the loss of face has therefore far worse consequences than in Germany. Losing face implies public condemnation. The person concerned loses the trust of society since his/her capabilities and integrity will always be questioned.

Reciprocity plays an important role in the Chinese concept of saving face since causing someone’s loss of face will at the same time result in losing face oneself.

According to the same logic one will gain face by giving face to someone else. Therefore, it is important to give face to each other and, if possible, give 'more' face to a partner.

These aspects of the Chinese concept of saving face are unknown to most Germans and that can cause serious difficulties in the intercultural communications taking place in Sino-German teams giving rise to misunderstandings and prejudices in team interactions. The direct and factual communication style of German individuals can be interpreted by Chinese colleagues as 'not giving face', being aggressive, presumptuous and impolite whilst the Chinese communication behaviour and strategies of giving face can be misinterpreted as flattery or dishonesty by their German colleagues.

*In conflict situations Chinese people often behave differently to Germans*

*Description of the problem*

My data contains two cases where German participants had major conflicts with their respective Chinese Joint Venture partners. At the time of the relevant interviews the cooperation between the Joint Venture partners was either already terminated or the termination was planned. What follows is a presentation of these two conflicts and an outline of the communication behaviours of the Chinese and German partners during the conflict as well as while trying to find a solution to the conflict:

First case (participant 3):

The joint venture was established two years ago. The German participant interviewed (a 38 year old) had been assigned the position of General Manager in China a year ago. His task was to "*increase production and quality*" and by his own account he achieved this objective. However, there were many things that led him to be very dissatisfied with his Chinese Joint Venture partner. The participant explained that it all started when the Chinese side provided a female employee who was supposed to work for him as an interpreter and secretary. She was "*very friendly but incapable of speaking English*" and she was "*far too shy to conduct a discussion, an argument.*" "*The lady never wanted to translate any arguments or discussions.*" Despite the Chinese partner's reluctance he managed, however, to acquire a young man from outside the company for translation purposes. The German participant said that his Chinese partner was in breach of their contractual agreements, did not comply with their purchase obligations and only sold two thirds of the agreed quantities. He explained that the Chinese side started discussions



about the contractually stipulated prices and even brought their influence to bear on market prices falling in one case. In addition, he thought that the Chinese partner was neither capable of approaching new customers nor advertising their products. Although the German participant admitted that it was normal for projects like this to take “ten” or “at least six or seven years” before money was made he suggested to his superiors that the cooperation should be terminated. According to his calculations the German Joint Venture partner would “*not earn money even in ten years time.*”

*At first the Chinese side considered this to be “only an empty threat. They couldn’t really believe that we were giving up after only two years. And it was decided to make new calculations. And the Chinese side made a new calculation. That’s typical Chinese. This calculation was so optimistic, ridiculous. That was simply absolutely ridiculous. The result was that the Chinese – mainly because of this calculation – lost, of course, their face completely. And then they tried to prove that their calculation was realistic. They did it by forging things, forging documents and so on. And things got worse ... but by the time that we were ready our Chinese partner was no longer willing to talk to us because they knew very well that they had run out of arguments. None of the arguments they came up with was convincing. They could all be rebutted. Therefore, the reaction was typical of the Chinese: we don’t talk to you anymore. That means that we don’t have any contact; since mid June we haven’t had any contact whatsoever. How am I, as a General Manager, supposed to run a company when my Chairman of Support gives me appointments that he never attends and the other Board Director lets me know that he doesn’t want to talk to me? That’s a joke, isn’t it?”*

The day on which I had the interview with this German manager was his last but one day in China. Although he contributed largely to the decision made to terminate the cooperation he regretted that he had to leave his post and China after only one year (he had a contract for two years). He said that he would have liked to have worked and lived in China for three years. His wife and his two children had benefited from their stay in China. “*It’s a shame for me; it’s a shame for my family. The kids learnt English very, very quickly. They also learnt a bit of Chinese. It was quite sad when the decision was made that we will stop now.*”

At the time we had this conversation the Joint Venture had not been dissolved completely. It was assumed that at a later date another German could be sent to China to have concrete discussions with the Chinese Joint Venture partner with regards to dissolving the enterprise.

Second case (participant 5):

In this case the Joint Venture was already declared to have failed for the time being after 19 months. The German participant also complained that their Chinese partner was “*completely incompetent*” and thought that the objective of acquiring Chinese customers through the Chinese partner had not been achieved due to this incompetence. Furthermore, the participant said the German partner had not succeeded in implementing German standards in the Joint Venture. Instead the Chinese partner insisted “*on handling orders the Chinese way*” whilst the German side assumed that it was necessary to apply “*the international standard as a benchmark*” since the company also served international markets. During the third month after taking up his duties as General Manager the German participant tried to change the Joint Venture’s signature policy. He explained that he, according to the old regulations, always required the Chinese Vice General Manager’s signature to recruit or dismiss employees and to sign orders. However, since his Chinese partner often “*did not follow suit*” the German participant tried to “*push through*” the withdrawal of the Chinese Vice General Manager’s signatory rights at a Supervisory Board meeting in Germany. This soured the relations between the partners. Nobody greeted the German participant for “*three, four weeks*”. The German participant said that following this one thing after another happened. And after the participant informed the Chinese workforce that he needed to lay off employees it was like “*real war*”. “*Fortunately*”, a change of board members took place in Germany and only then did concrete discussions between the Joint Venture partners take place.

***Problem analysis***

In both cases the Germans had similar experiences: after the Chinese partners realised that there was an obvious conflict between them and their German partners and considered that cooperation was no longer possible they simply stopped talking to their German partners. For Germans such behaviour was “*a joke*” (according to participant 3) since this would not resolve the problem. According to German understanding, the way I understood it, a conflict should be dealt with in a factual way. It was necessary to talk about it and discuss it even if such a discussion could lead to a dispute. The conflicting parties should discuss their differences openly and only by doing so would it be possible to quickly find a constructive solution or draw conclusions from it. Otherwise one would be stuck with an unresolved problem.

The two German participants’ Chinese partners, however, did not want to communicate directly with their respective conflicting party anymore. According to my personal experience this is a typical reaction to a conflict in China, particularly, if there is no compromise in sight. Whilst Germans in the context of a conflict situation strive to make a division between factual and personal problems most of the Chinese are convinced that a conflict exists not only on a material level but at the same time also on an interpersonal level. The first approach to resolving a conflict for Chinese people is always on the personal level. However, if reconciliation is no longer an option or if it is assumed that both parties will not reach a compromise as in our first case scenario then direct communication with the opponent is avoided. This is done either to avoid unpleasant direct confrontations and a further loss of face for both parties or to no longer give the other side any face. However, this does not mean that the Chinese partner is no longer interested in a resolution or a result. I believe that the Chinese partner in the first case scenario definitely had the feeling, due to the unyielding behaviour of their opponent, that the German side

did not give them any face. And, according to Chinese understanding, it is out of the question to speak to people who do not consider their communication partner's face since otherwise one will suffer loss of face oneself. In my opinion, the conflicting partners will in such a situation only communicate indirectly by means of a third party or an arbitrator. This arbitrator does not necessarily have to belong to a third, neutral party. He/she can be a member of one of the conflicting parties who has not been directly involved in the confrontations so far. As far as I know from my own experience this arbitrator should ideally be someone from a higher level within the hierarchy than the conflicting partners; since such a person generally has a 'bigger' *mianzi* it would be necessary to talk to him/her. Also, talking to such an arbitrator does not involve the risk of losing face, as I know from personal experience. This person is supposed to forward information or decisions to the other party and can find an impartial solution for the problem at hand. If the German side had recognised this Chinese communication convention early on and had replaced (in the case of participant 3) the respondent with another person in time then the participant's last four "*unpleasant*" and inconclusive months in China would probably have been spared and possibly a solution found or conclusions drawn earlier.

In the second case scenario the Chinese Vice General Manager certainly considered the withdrawal of his signatory rights as a disempowerment and loss of face. According to the German participant (participant 5) the Chinese manager took revenge by "*stirring up*" the employees "*not to take part in the staff meeting*". That means that not only he himself was not supposed to talk to the German participant anymore but also his Chinese colleagues as well. "*Fortunately*", a change of board members in Germany took place and only then did concrete discussions between the two conflicting Joint Venture partners take place. It seems as if the Chinese partner considered that their face was partially saved by

this change of board members and that this also provided a “*convenient*” moment to resume communication with their opponent without losing face.

The utterances and experiences of these two German participants demonstrate the difference between Chinese and German communication behaviours in a conflict situation. Whilst the German participants preferred a direct, matter-of-fact communication style in their respective conflict situations their Chinese partners chose an indirect, person-oriented way of communicating. These differences in Chinese and German communication behaviours can be seen in the table below from Ting-Toomey (1999) showing the typical strategies that are used in the so-called ‘collectivistic’ and ‘individualistic’ societies for resolving problems:

**Table 14**

*Individualistic and Collectivistic Conflict Lenses*

Individualistic conflict lens	Collectivistic conflict lens
Outcome focused	Process focused
Emphasis on factual details	Emphasis on holistic pictures
Content goal oriented	Relational goal oriented
Emphasis on tangible resources	Emphasis on intangible resources
Work at monochronic pace	Work at polychronic pace
Use of personal equity norms	Use of communal or status-based norms
Reliance on linear inductive or deductive reasoning	Reliance on spiral and metaphorical reasoning
Facts and evidence are most important data	Intuition and experience are most important data
Competitive / controlling behaviours	Avoiding/accommodating behaviours
Direct conflict styles	Indirect conflict styles
Self-face concern	Other-face concern
Emphasis on conflict effectiveness	Emphasis on conflict appropriateness

*Note.* From “Communicating Across Cultures”, by S. Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 210

According to Hofstede (1980, p. 223) who studied the behavioural differences of forty different cultures from a more positivistic perspective, China can be classified as a “collectivistic” society (as reflected in the table by “indirect communication style”) whilst Germany can be classified as an “individualistic” society (as reflected in the table by “direct conflict styles”). Due to my participants’ utterances, however, I cannot

acknowledge all of the differences in the perceptions of conflict and conflict resolution stated in this table. However, the theoretical differentiation between collectivism and individualism helps to understand the different social contexts of Chinese and German nationals as found in culture-comparative research based on Hofstede's (1980) research. As a postmodernist, I would not aim at such a sharp distinction like Hofstede (1980) anyway, since this study's statements and results are only based on the participants' utterances and my understanding of them although there are, of course, overlaps with the table which will be used in the following to explain Chinese and German communication behaviour.

To discuss which communication behaviour, or which conflict resolution strategy, is the right one or would be best for the conflicts outlined above would completely miss the point of my study. What follows is the opinion of a German participant:

*"They [the Chinese] are much calmer and try to resolve problems in a harmonious way. However, you have to accept that the Chinese solutions are a bit different from ours. We should not underestimate, however, that in the end they also get to where we want to get to, only that they get there in a different way"* (participant 1).

It is also certainly not a task of this study to judge which of the Joint Venture partners was responsible for the failure of the cooperation. It can only be assumed that their cooperation might not have failed so quickly if the Chinese and German Joint Venture partners in both the cases stated above had recognised the differences in communication behaviours in a conflict situation at the beginning and had been able to accept their respective authorities.

However, my data also suggests that the majority of German participants had already recognised the difference in Chinese and German communication behaviours in conflict situations and during the course of conflict management. What follows are some utterances in this regard from the interviews conducted:

*“You cannot behave in a German way. You cannot turn up and say that we will do this now the way we do things in Germany, that we have a meeting now and that we will talk quite frankly about what we want and we will have a tough discussion about it. And we might also get into arguments and actually nobody means any harm. And then we’ll determine how we go about it. If you were to behave like that with Chinese people, and that’s not meant to be disparaging in any way, then there will never be a positive outcome since that’s not the Chinese style of working”* (participant 1).

*“If you came here as a very young person and you hadn’t gathered any life experiences in Germany then you would probably be struggling here and you’d best stock up on literature that deals particularly with the typical behaviour of the people here. And also with regards to typical behaviour, in a way, that here in the Far East saving face plays a major role and our way of placing the facts on the table and getting straight to the point isn’t considered very polite here”* (participant 2).

**Oliver:** *What would you say, what is the typical mistake made by a German in the beginning?*

**Participant 4:** *Well, maybe he approaches the Chinese too directly, yes, let’s say putting the conceptual approach to a problem on the table and then solving it / I could envisage, who is responsible for the problem now, is there any way / this genuine, clear [German] trait can make things difficult at the beginning.*

While one of the participants (participant 6) did not place any great importance on the Chinese concept of saving face he still pointed out in the interview that if there was a disagreement it was not advisable to get angry or to shout otherwise a Chinese person will “shut off” very quickly. In this context the German participants emphasised the patience and willingness to compromise required of the people involved. *“Simply having patience, being able to accept something that you don’t understand straightaway and saying: there is a reason for it”* (participant 2). Another participant said that it was only after four years that the Chinese and German partners of his Joint Venture got used to one another. On that account one Chinese participant described the cooperation process as being a *“process of getting to know each other”* (participant 10).

*Informal communication plays an important role in teamwork with Chinese colleagues**Description of the problem*

German participants also talked about the great importance of informal communication in teamwork with Chinese people. This experience corresponds to my personal experience. The meaning of the term ‘informal’ here is in accordance with Weber (1984, p. 112) “spontaneous, rarely planned, private or not public”. According to Weber (1984) leisure time communication is informal whereas conversations held in business (in companies) or with authorities are formal. However, I do not commit myself to this definition since, in my opinion, a clear-cut definition is not possible.

According to my German participants, informal communication was also reflected in the minimal flow of information in China. They said that compared to Germany it was much more difficult to receive current and reliable information. On the one hand, it was more difficult to access ‘sound scientific data’ than in Germany and on the other hand, information and statistics were quickly rendered obsolete due to the rapid pace of economic development in China. The participants mentioned that they quite often came across officials unwilling to supply information and some official decisions were inscrutable. In addition, it was quite often only possible to receive information by means of proper personal connections. During the interviews half of the German participants mentioned the importance of personal connections in China. What follows are some relevant excerpts from the interviews:

*Oliver: Would you say that you need personal connections in China?*

*Participant 2: Yes, definitely. Personal connections make life easier. It is generally said that if you meet someone for the third time you will notice that they start to open up a bit more, they come to trust you. It is not like this when you meet for the first or second time. That’s specific to China or Asia. Personal contact is important.*

*Oliver: How do you make these personal connections?*

*Participant 2: The good old German term ‘knocking on doors’, well, that’s what you have to do; this is where you have to go. It is not true to say that people don’t want to see you since they are also curious about what it is you have to offer. You*



*just have to make an effort somehow. You want to sell something and they are the customers. I mean when proceeding like this you have to work your way through it until you get to the right person. Partially we do this via our office, via our partner in the provincial government; being in technical sales most of the time I have a chance to make contact with the right people. And after I have met them two, three times then I can also phone them privately and then it is also actually possible to talk about everything.*

**Oliver:** *Are you under the impression that you need personal connections in China?*

**Participant 1:** *You can't do without. If you don't have any guanxi then a 'no' stays a 'no' but if you do have guanxi it is possible that a 'no' can turn into a 'perhaps'. You can always find a middle way.*

**Oliver:** *How do you make personal connections?*

**Participant 1:** *Through personal contacts with the leaders starting with Mrs. Yan, mayor Li, the mayor who, unfortunately, suffered a fatal accident recently. Yes, and then also with colliery directors, you've to drive there personally; it is necessary to party with them, it is necessary to booze with them. That's why I can only see with one eye now because I drank too much schnapps; they adulterate spirits and I suppose I must have caught some of that. It is only through these personal connections / driving there, involving them in your personal considerations, also asking for advice, well, all these things are necessary to establish contacts.*

**Oliver:** *Are you of the opinion that you need personal connections in China?*

**Participant 4:** *Yes, more than anything else.*

**Oliver:** *And how do you make personal connections?*

**Participant 4:** *If you know one, then you know them all. That's quite simple, you only need to get to know one person and they will know someone else and that person will recommend you to someone else. But establishing this network of connections is very, very time-consuming. In Germany you work 37 or 40 hours but here you work 70 or 80 hours. You don't work 5 days a week but 7 days a week. That's the standard here.*

The above examples demonstrate that personal connections are mainly established through 'informal' communication channels in China rather than through 'official' communication channels. The most frequently mentioned form of 'informal' communication taking place between German participants and Chinese people was the so-called 'Chinese banquet' (business dinner). According to my personal experience a Chinese banquet primarily serves the purpose of providing a harmonious atmosphere that allows private conversations, getting to know each other and the building of mutual trust amongst the people involved. The following example that I myself experienced illustrates

how Chinese business people consider the Chinese banquet, 'informal' communications and the exchange of personal information as self-evident components of a business:

One day a German manager of my current employer phoned and asked me to accompany him to a meeting with a Chinese manager. As soon as the Chinese manager had taken his seat the German manager started negotiating prices. After agreeing on pricing for all the products the German asked the Chinese manager whether he had some further questions or whether there was anything else he wanted to discuss. The Chinese manager said to me that all the other things could be discussed over dinner. I pointed out to him that it was not certain that the German would have a meal with him later on and if he had some further questions it would be better to ask them now. The Chinese manager replied that he did not have any other questions. After this the German manager mentioned that he could take the Chinese manager to the station straightaway. At the station the Chinese manager said that he would like to invite the German manager to a meal. The German manager replied that there were no restaurants open at three o'clock in the afternoon. I reminded the German manager that the restaurant in the railway station was open around the clock. We all had a soup in the restaurant. During the meal the Chinese manager asked the German manager several questions: "How long have you had business relations with Chinese people?", "Have you been to China?", "When was your last visit to China?" et cetera. It seemed, however, that the German manager was not very interested in such a conversation. As soon as the three of us had finished our soups the German manager took his leave explaining that he still had a lot of important things to do.

To myself, as a passive participant, the different attitudes of the German and Chinese managers with regards to business communication were very evident. For the German businessman the communication only served the purpose of exchanging information regarding the prices and technical data of the various products. He did not want to waste any 'valuable' time with other topics that were irrelevant and unrelated to the business at hand. For the Chinese manager, however, exchanging personal information was part of the business communication procedure that did not necessarily have to take place officially in an office.

### ***Problem analysis***

In my opinion the importance of 'informal' communication for business in China has a socio-cultural background. For Chinese business people it is not the contract but personal relationships and trust that are considered to be a sound and secure basis for

business as I know from my own experience as a commercial project manager who often had to negotiate contracts in China. According to the Chinese understanding of a contract it is merely a piece of paper based on mistrust rather than trust. All business matters can easily be sorted out on the basis of good interpersonal relationships. The Chinese term for 'personal connections' is *guanxi* (Luo, 2007). The ethnosemantic meaning of the Chinese word *guanxi* differs from its German equivalent. *Guanxi* comprises direct and indirect social connections that are characterised by the mutual, unconditional commitments and expectations of those involved to give face, provide assistance and grant favours (Luo, 2007). There exists between the *guanxi*-partners a kind of agreement. If one of the partners does not comply with the rule of reciprocity then the *guanxi* will not continue to exist in the long run (Heberer & Wegmann, 1991; Yang, 1994). From the Chinese point of view *guanxi* is different from corruption since the use of *guanxi* does not cause any harm to the state or society and does not violate the law (Heberer & Wegmann, 1991; Yang, 1994).

Research on Chinese social interactions stresses the vital importance of these *guanxi* relationships in China. A leading Chinese philosopher of the twentieth century claimed that Chinese society is a *guanxi*-society (Liang, 1990). Persons involved in *guanxi* treat each other as their 'own people'. Luo claims that the Chinese are very open and receptive to 'own people' and there exists a moral obligation to provide 'own people' with information and support (Luo, 2007). Foreigners are generally considered to be 'outsiders'. However, the German participants' experiences show that by means of 'informal' communication "7 days a week", "knocking on doors" and if you "party with them" (participants 3, 2 and 1) it is also possible for foreigners to establish good relationships with Chinese people, gain their trust and by achieving this enter the Chinese *guanxi*-network.

***Excursion: socio-cultural background of the importance of guanxi and renqing***

As a social term, *guanxi* is generally understood to mean human or social relationships (Luo, 2007; Gu, Hung, & Tse, 2008). Since the early eighties *guanxi* has been studied by many sociologists and anthropologists (Luo, 2007). According to the results of different studies it appears that *guanxi* is a decisive factor for the success of individuals and companies in China as well as in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The anthropologist Yang (1994, p. 1) explains *guanxi* as follows:

“The word *guanxi* [...] literally means ‘a relationship’ between objects, forces, or persons. When it is used to refer to relationships between people, not only can it be applied to husband-wife, kinship and friendship relationships, it can also have the sense of ‘social connections’, dyadic relationships that are based implicitly (rather than explicitly) on mutual interest and benefit. Once *guanxi* is established between two people, each can ask a favour of the other with the expectation that the debt incurred will be repaid sometime in the future.”

The word *guanxi* applies not only to the human relationships that exist in every society but also to relationships in different terms and with certain attributes. *Guanxi* denotes those social relationships that are closely linked with mutual interests and advantages. *Guanxi* can be applied to direct connections between people or indirect connections arranged by third parties. *Guanxi* is distinguished from general human relations by the mutual commitments and expectations between the *guanxi*-partners. The Chinese term *renqing* is applied to these general human relations. *Renqing* can be translated as “social obligations” (Luo, 2007, p. 9). It also means humanity, relationship, benevolence, favour and gift (Luo, 2007). *Renqing* are social commitments towards members of the inner circle. They demand absolute loyalty and solidarity (Luo, 2007). If relatives, friends, neighbours and other acquaintances in China ask for help, support or a favour then one should meet their desire;

otherwise one will be criticised for being someone who does not understand *renqing* or does not give it meaning. Such a person's behaviour is considered to be anti-social and insensitive. The connotations of the word *renqing* are mainly positive including, for example, warmth and solidarity (Luo, 2007). In the context of *guanxi* people are mainly concerned about the purpose and benefit of a relationship. Nonetheless, *renqing* and *guanxi* are, in my opinion, two sides of the same coin.

The importance of *guanxi* and *renqing* in Chinese society is part of the Confucian heritage (Luo, 2007). Unlike Western cultures where the main concern is normally about the law, moral obligations take priority for Chinese people. Providing and receiving assistance and favours between relatives, friends and acquaintances are, according to the Chinese way of thinking, a self-evident fulfilment of a duty, that warrants social inclusion and therefore cannot be questioned (Luo, 2007; Gu, et al., 2008).

As described above, openness for 'own people' and exclusion of 'outsiders' are dominant factors with regards to the Chinese attitude towards their fellow men. Selflessness and devotion seem to determine interpersonal relations in the 'inner circle'. In China people who have a *guanxi* relationship will treat one another with politeness and courtesy and will support each other as best as they can. Fellow men, however, who do not belong to one's own group, are treated with indifference. The unequal treatment between people belonging to the 'inner circle' or the 'outer circle' appears to be intended to impress on the 'own people' all the more the advantages offered by belonging to a group, as I, for example, experienced with regards to my own Chinese relatives.

*Guanxi* is, however, not only important for individuals but also for companies. In China companies need *guanxi* for dealing with the Chinese bureaucracy for example. One German participant reported his experiences in China as follows: "*If you don't have any guanxi then a 'no' stays a 'no' but if you do have guanxi it is possible that a 'no' can turn*

into a 'perhaps'. You can always find a middle way" (participant 1). The *guanxi*-network doubles as an information network. The Chinese seem to fear the discontinuity of politics and statutory regulations. Therefore, most Chinese businessmen do not rely entirely on economic policy. They build up *guanxi* relationships with major decision-makers in order to be informed about possible political or legal changes early on so that they can make timely adaptations with regards to their businesses or products (Luo, 2007; Gu, et al., 2008).

On that account, building up *guanxi* can be considered to be a part of strategic company management. An integral ingredient of the competitive mix of Chinese companies is ascribed to functioning business relations (Luo, 2007; Gu, et al., 2008). I think that if a company's *guanxi*-network is larger than that of its competitors it will also have more access to information, which in turn may result in higher turnover and profit. According to my own working experiences in China, *guanxi* is often more crucial than the price of goods or services. Relationships that were cultivated over many years are considered to be some kind of investment, which secures a company's access to necessary resources like material goods, services, information or know-how. By means of *guanxi* resources from other network companies can also be mobilised. Therefore, particular emphasis is put on the importance and necessity of contacts in China. Some companies even have so-called 'relationship managers' whose specific tasks involve the cultivation of contacts with other companies. Generally, these 'relationship managers' are not people with a specific expert knowledge but individuals with a great *guanxi*-network.

In concrete terms this means that *guanxi* between two companies is mainly built up by means of contacts. On the basis of personal relations trust is built that is necessary for allowing the taking on of more risk and being more flexible in business or in cooperation. With this kind of 'glue' between two companies it is possible that their cooperation can

function even without any explicit rules right down to the very last detail. Perhaps it is for precisely this reason that the Chinese prefer to do business with ‘old friends’. In this sense, a ‘friend’ is not a friend in the Western sense of the word but a person or a company with *guanxi*.

In summary it can be said that for Chinese businessmen it seems as if in doing business with Germans it is not a contract but personal trust that is the secure basis for cooperation.

***Chinese people do not like to get straight to the point***

***Description of the problem***

Another ‘Chinese idiosyncrasy’ with regards to communication behaviour reported by German participants was that in a conversation or discussion Chinese people often “*don’t get to the point*” (participant 4). The German participants had the experience that their Chinese communication partners preferred to create a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere first, give as much background information as possible and only then gradually address the central topic. The participants said that Germans, faced with such behaviour, easily begin to despair since they do not really know what is going on. My participants also mentioned that, because of this, team meetings took much longer than meetings in Germany, which meant that topics that could be discussed within minutes in Germany took hours of discussion in China. What follows are some examples of utterances from the interviews:

*“If they don’t really know you and try to explain the state of affairs to you then a Chinese person is always 100% didactic. They start off with Adam and Eve, God and the world, talk about the general situation and go on and on until the end. Sometimes this can be shorter, sometimes it takes ages, and it would be rude to interrupt. In Germany if you say “yes, I understand what you mean” it is considered to be an indication that you follow what is being said and then they will certainly get to the point or so. That shouldn’t be done here”* (participant 1).

*“Disadvantages of Chinese people: They don’t get to the point. They talk a lot; they talk for a long time. You talk for two hours and it could all have been said and done*

*within ten minutes. But this is also to do with the Chinese mentality where first of all you praise each other and everything possible and so on” (participant 4).*

*“All these endless discussions, this arguing in a circle! What takes five minutes in Germany takes five hours here” (participant 5).*

In interviews with Chinese participants I myself had the experience that my Chinese conversation partners did not like to give direct answers to my questions regarding the concrete problems experienced when working with Germans in teams. Instead, they always started, first of all, talking about the Joint Venture, the negotiation process, the balance of power between Chinese and German members on the board of directors and suchlike. This background information was probably important for understanding the communication interferences in Sino-German teams. German participants, however, generally delivered this kind of information later on as additional information in connection with the concrete interferences.

### ***Problem analysis***

The analysis of conversations with Chinese individuals speaking English conducted by Young (1994) indicates that the Chinese tend to ‘gradually unwrap’ their information. Young (1994) argues that the main thesis is often presented very late in the conversation. When analysing the differences in Chinese and German styles of discourse Günthner (1993, p. 170) also concluded that when ‘packaging information’ Chinese people prefer to use an indirect approach. Both the English data collected by Young (1994) and the German data collected by Günthner (1993) demonstrate that Chinese speakers, according to these two researchers, directly transfer their Chinese syntactical structures and conversation strategies into English or German. As I myself learnt: the syntactical structure of the causal clause used most in Chinese is: *yinwei (since)... suoyi (therefore)*... That means that initially the cause or reason is mentioned and then the effect or result. A concrete example for this is:



*Yinwei tianqi bu hao, suoyi feiji wan dian le.*

Since the weather was not good (therefore) the flight was delayed.

The same sentence translated into English (and similarly for German) is:

*The flight was delayed due to bad weather.*

The preferred Chinese order of ‘first stating the cause and then the effect’ on the sentence level can also be observed on the level of discourse in China. Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 96) mentions that: “In the Chinese language, in order to explain one event, individuals must first consider all the other conditions that are contextually connected to it.” The following example was given by Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 96): “It was raining, the parking lot was full, the post office was crowded with a long queue and closing time was near, therefore I did not get a chance to mail the package.”

In the German language it is probably also possible that the cause or the logical reason for a statement is given first before the actual event is mentioned. However, in German rhetoric there is a strong tendency to “initially formulate a claim and subsequently deliver reasons for such a claim together with the respective justifications and relevant evidence” (Günthner, 1993, p. 133). Chinese people probably also use this conversation strategy occasionally. However, since in Chinese rhetoric “the focus is on the social relationships of interacting people, the principle of harmony and saving one’s own face as well as the other person’s face” in a conversation the speakers make an effort to “initially establish a mutual framework of main information before getting to the actual main point” (Günthner, 1993, p. 132).

What follows is an excerpt from an interview conversation I had with a Chinese manager (participant 10). The conversation was held in Chinese and this is a literal translation. The words occurring in brackets do not exist in the Chinese version of this excerpt:

*Oliver: How would you assess the Germans in your team?*

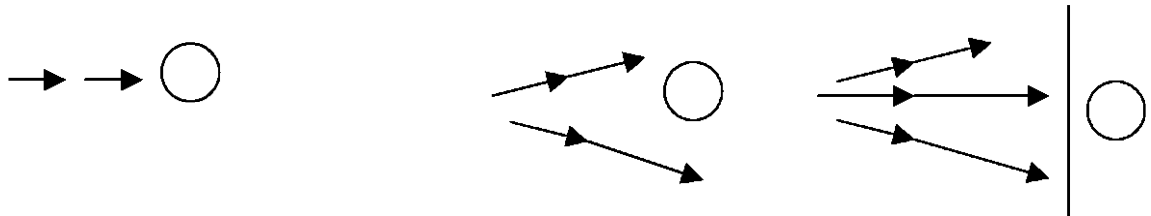
*Participant 10: We experienced two General Managers. The previous General Manager knew quite a lot about China. [He] was quick on the uptake. [He] was generous. He had been working abroad as a businessman for a long time, [he] was also very generous. He had the conviction that he could build up [...] Ltd. to be a first class enterprise. He said that only if everybody else was content he could be content as well. Everything he did was according to that high standard. [One] should say this person is quite good. He is German but he has been living abroad in the USA and Canada for a long time, he speaks English without any accent. If there was something I didn't understand he knew how to explain it to me in other words. He was very nice to me. He knew the Chinese situation and Chinese customs very well. He also studied the economic background and the cultural background. He was very adaptable. In addition, he was very concerned about his reputation amongst the employees and his image. If a member of our team told him something, even if it was a personal problem, he took care of it, intensively... He also knew the situation in Beijing very well. He employed a few people in the representative office in Beijing with connections to the government, [thereby] laying the foundation for [...] Ltd., with the result that the Joint Venture received orders even before it started trading. Because of that [one] should say that as a founder he was very successful. In addition, the historical conditions [...]. (At this point the conversation was interrupted due to the unexpected arrival of the current German General Manager.)*

The Chinese participant's answer comprised two key statements: 1. The previous General Manager was a good person. 2. As founder of the Joint Venture he was very successful. Before uttering these two key statements the Chinese participant presented a number of facts and other information. While these facts and the additional information circled around the topic they did not provide a direct answer to the question. It was only at the end of his utterance that he answered the question. This style corresponds with an observation made by Kaplan (1966, p. 11) when analysing English essays written by Chinese and Korean Students in the USA: "The concluding paragraph-sentence presents, in the guise of a summary logically derived from previously posited ideas, a conclusion which is in fact partially a topic sentence [...]. The Paper arrives where it should have started."

Over sixty years ago Abegg (1949) explained the different communication behaviour of Chinese people as due to the difference in the way that 'East Asians' and 'Europeans' think. In the context of Western thinking one is able to recognise, according to

Abegg (1949), a distinct development, a progressive chain of thought. It is a straightforward and target-driven way of thinking that can be represented graphically as follows:

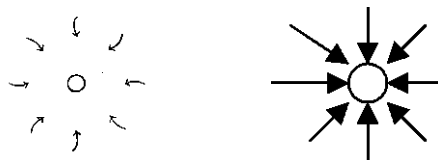
**Figure 7.** Linear and target-driven way of thinking according to Abegg (1946, p. 47)<sup>6</sup>.



In the context of a linear way of thinking a distinct causality is recognisable.

However, as demonstrated by the figures above this kind of mindset bears the risk that this linear thinking misses the mark or is obstructed by something. In the context of the Chinese way of thinking, according to Abegg (1949), there is initially very often only a mysterious construct of random and aimless flying ‘arrows’ recognisable only in that they turn towards a certain centre, which is the aim or the result of that thought, when they start to sense that centre. This way of thinking could be depicted as follows:

**Figure 8.** Chinese way of thinking according to Abegg (1946, p. 48)<sup>7</sup>.



However, for Germans like me, this way of thinking might result in the likelihood of a communication partner getting the impression of rambling at the beginning and only later on knowing more or less what the conversation was about.

According to my own experience with regards to communications with Chinese individuals this strategy, namely presenting all the background information in connection

<sup>6</sup> From “Ostasien denkt anders”, by L. Abegg, 1949, p. 47, Copyright 1949 Atlantis Publishing.

<sup>7</sup> From “Ostasien denkt anders”, by L. Abegg, 1949, p. 48, Copyright 1949 Atlantis Publishing.

with the main topic before getting to this key point, is often deployed by Chinese people when performing the following speech acts: answering, discussing, explaining problems, narrating, describing, arguing, justifying and elucidating. Chinese people very probably also know how to say something quite straightforwardly. However, in a communication situation where the speaker is not sure whether his communication partner has sufficient prior knowledge of the topic concerned the tendency can be observed that the speaker will prefer the aforementioned strategy with regards to organising and presenting the information. When communicating with a partner from another culture Chinese team colleagues tend, in my opinion, to start the conversation with “*Adam and Eve*” (participant 1) due to underestimating the foreign partner’s background knowledge.

This kind of organising and presenting of information was considered to be a “*disadvantage*” (participant 4) of Chinese people and an indication that Chinese individuals “*cannot think logically*” (participant 3) by some of the German participants. It was also perceived as a waste of time (participant 5) and therefore assessed negatively. This is an example of the fact that without knowledge about the differences in communication conventions and ways of thinking one easily runs the risk in intercultural communication of considering and interpreting different communication behaviours from an ethnocentric perspective. *Ethnocentrism* is described as the unconscious tendency to consider strangers from the perspective of one’s own group and to apply one’s own customs and norms as a benchmark for all judgments (Maletzke, 1996).

According to my own experience, in intercultural communications between Chinese and German individuals many people are often not aware of the fact that perceptions and values can be characterised by one’s own culture and that members of other cultures can have an entirely different perspective and working method. From this ethnocentric point of view everything deviating from one’s own norms, values and habits is considered as

suspect and one thinks to find the reason for such deviations in the communication partner's personality or mentality. However, in view of the above, it is clearly demonstrated that the so-called 'Chinese idiosyncrasy' that Chinese people "*don't get to the point*" (participant 4) is a different rhetorical style and a different communication strategy.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter the communication experiences that German participants had with Chinese colleagues in Sino-German teams were presented. Two types of communication interferences were addressed: interferences with regards to language and interferences in connection with the communication partner's different or strange communication strategies. It became apparent that a large proportion of the German participants were neither able to communicate in their mother tongue nor fluently in the language of their Chinese team colleagues. In the majority of cases Chinese and German participants communicated by means of a third language (English) or via a third party. Generally, this third party was an English speaking Chinese interpreter. It goes without saying that by communicating in this way, comprehension interferences and misunderstandings were inevitable. In other words, communication interferences due to a lack of language proficiency were obvious. As long as the cause of an interference is known, it should be possible to work on finding a solution. I am of the opinion that it would be sensible for Germans to attend an intensive Chinese language course before starting an assignment in China in order to improve verbal communication with Chinese people.

However, during their teamwork with Chinese colleagues German participants also experienced other communication problems that were, according to their utterances, not due to a lack of language proficiency but were based on typical 'Chinese idiosyncrasies'. What follows are the 'Chinese idiosyncrasies' explained to me by my German participants:

1. Chinese individuals avoid the verbal expression of things that, from a German perspective, could and should be uttered directly. Owing to this behaviour German participants often experienced communication interferences when working with Chinese colleagues in teams since their Chinese colleagues' opinions were unknown to them.
2. In cases of conflict Chinese individuals avoid direct communication with their German opponents. However, if there is no communication taking place between cooperating partners in a conflict situation then, from the German perspective, the conflict cannot be resolved.
3. Official or business communications in situations where it comes down to accepting advice or suggestions and asking questions that, from a German perspective do not pose any risk of losing face since only factual matters are concerned, are considered by Chinese partners or Chinese team colleagues as being a potential threat to their face.
4. Informal communication (communication during leisure time or outside the business environment) in China is more important for cooperation than in Germany.
5. Whilst Germans generally prefer to use a direct, forthright communication style when dealing with their team colleagues, Chinese people favour starting conversations with all sorts of related background information and only then gradually getting to the point. The speaker's actual opinion on a matter is often only presented at the end of his utterances.

The 'Chinese idiosyncrasies' mentioned by the German participants correspond to my own experiences and partially overlap with the findings of other researchers. In addition, my study shows that these 'Chinese idiosyncrasies' can constitute barriers for

communication between Chinese and German team members. In the interviews German participants mentioned some other ‘Chinese idiosyncrasies’, for example, a lack of keeping a “*polite distance*” (participant 5), being “*spontaneous*” (participant 2) or “*cordial*” (participant 1) et cetera. However, these idiosyncrasies have not been addressed here since, according to the participants, they did not cause any communication interferences.

Apart from presenting the utterances in this chapter I have tried to analyse these ‘Chinese idiosyncrasies’ and the communication interferences caused by them. It became apparent that these ‘Chinese idiosyncrasies’ mentioned by the German participants are, actually, Chinese communication conventions and strategies that differ from the ones deployed by Germans. Due to the fact that only one third of the German participants had been prepared for their assignment in China by attending an intercultural preparatory course and half of them did not have any Chinese language proficiency or only spoke a few words of Chinese this may have resulted in ignorance regarding Chinese communication conventions and the socio-cultural background pertaining to them.

Thus, the participants often considered the differing Chinese communication behaviour as a norm violation and therefore interpreted this behaviour negatively. Communication interferences and misunderstandings were logical consequences. However, whether the outline and approach of such an intercultural preparatory course is able to provide the ground for a German to properly understand Chinese communication conventions along with the socio-cultural background and take them fully into account in their communication with their Chinese communication partners cannot be answered at this stage.

The aim of this study is not to try and find a guilty party but to illustrate the communication interferences existing between Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams in the context of the participants’ experiences. Thus, it is not my

intention to criticise the German participants with the aforementioned statements.

Communication between Chinese and German team members is often a special communication situation where both communication partners communicate by means of a third language. I believe that the deployment of a lingua franca in intercultural communication between Chinese and German individuals does not eliminate fundamental communication barriers. It makes it, in a sense, even more difficult for the respective communication partners to recognise the real reasons behind the communication interferences experienced.

In this study on intercultural communication between Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams it was often the case that by speaking English the German participants did understand their Chinese team colleagues verbally or literally. However, they were still not able to properly grasp the real meaning of what was being said by their Chinese colleagues. On the other hand, the German participants often thought that their Chinese partners had understood what they had said when in reality the Chinese colleagues had not comprehended what it was that the Germans had tried to convey.

As pointed out in the systematic literature review, communication is a complex phenomenon and communication interferences are rarely monocausal. My analysis in this chapter also illustrates that the reason for intercultural communication interferences between Chinese and German team members in Sino-German teams is not always linguistic since communication behaviours and communication conventions are not purely linguistic phenomena. Given this I deployed my own experiences and my socio-cultural background knowledge as well as the findings of other researchers from various disciplines (for example socio-psychological and anthropological theses on collectivistic and individualistic as well as high-context and low-context cultures) when analysing the communication interferences reported by German participants. However, from a



postmodern perspective my analysis does not claim to be exhaustive. Many other aspects, for example the asymmetric distribution of roles and the differences in interests amongst the communication partners et cetera, which could also have an influence on communication behaviour, have not been taken into account, since they are dependent on individual cases and would be beyond the scope of this study. Due to the nature of the existing data it was also not possible for me to analyse communication interferences between Chinese and German members of Sino-German teams on the micro level of the conversations since in order to do this a recording of conversations taking place between Chinese and German team members whilst working in a team or my own participation in their teamwork would have been required.

In the next chapter, however, the experiences of Chinese participants communicating with Germans that, in my opinion, provide an insight into the communication interferences between Chinese and German nationals working in Sino-German teams from another perspective are considered.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that even though I do believe in the situational and contextual existence of the 'typical Chinese' communication behaviour mentioned by my German participants I do not assume that it is out of the question that Germans occasionally demonstrate this 'Chinese communication behaviour', meaning that both Chinese and German individuals could sometimes demonstrate the same communication patterns. Since the 'direct and indirect styles of communication' always need to be understood in a relative sense the aforementioned 'typical national' characteristics of communication behaviour are only to be considered as a tendency and preference observed from the point of view of the participants and myself and are not intended to be taken as stereotypes.

In a particular communication situation between a Chinese individual and a

German individual, differences in age, gender and social status can have a stronger influence than the difference in culture. Thus, it is possible that the differences between two Chinese persons or two German persons can be more significant than the differences between a Chinese person and a German person. In the light of the fact that only one out of my six German participants reported an ultimate failure in Sino-German cooperation it can be assumed that, despite the differences in communication behaviours and communication conventions, Chinese and German partners in Sino-German teams reaching an understanding is possible.

## **6 Chinese Experiences regarding Communication with German Team Members**

My impression was that my Chinese participants demonstrated openness and calmness during my conversations with them. However, it is not clear whether their behaviour would have been even more open and relaxed if a Chinese interviewer had interviewed them. The Chinese data was divided into three categories:

1. Positive experiences when communicating with German team members.
2. Negative experiences when communicating with German team members.
3. Perceived differences between Chinese and German communication behaviours. Overall, the differences can be allocated to five subcategories:
  - a) Directness versus vicariousness
  - b) Explicit versus implicit
  - c) Issue-oriented and content-oriented versus person-oriented and relationship-oriented
  - d) Differences in presenting and organising information
  - e) Written communication versus oral or personal communication.

### ***Positive experiences when communicating with German team members***

If asked about their communication experiences with Germans in Sino-German teams one of the most frequently given answers by my Chinese participants was that Germans are more direct and more open compared to Chinese people. “*They speak their minds*” (participant 11). The Chinese participants thought that in this respect Germans were relatively easy to deal with. Most of the Chinese participants confirmed in the interviews that when communicating with Germans they would adapt to the direct style of German communication. This may indicate that differing styles of communication amongst communication partners in intercultural communications may not always cause communication interferences.

Another positive experience the Chinese participants uttered was that Germans were strictly factual. They reported that, in contrast to dealing with their Chinese team colleagues and other Chinese individuals, it was possible for them to utter a different opinion openly and frankly. They added however that such behaviour was impolite and face threatening for a Chinese person. According to the Chinese participants Germans were also willing to admit their own mistakes. What follows are two illustrative excerpts from the interviews:

*Oliver: Can you raise objections with him [the German manager]?*

*Participant 12: It is possible to raise objections. But they are generally very self-confident. Only if your arguments are really compelling will they accept your objection. But they are actually willing to admit their own mistakes. Generally, they won't behave like the Chinese where you seem to have accepted [a different opinion] but in your heart of hearts you didn't.*

*Oliver: What are your experiences regarding communication with Germans?*

*Participant 10: Overall it is relatively easy to communicate with each other. Although the Germans are relatively stubborn and rarely change their minds with regards to some questions, possibly due to their national character, overall I got the impression that if [a] German thinks that what you say makes sense they will accept it. [They are] tenacious, but if you can justify your opinion they will accept your objection. However, sometimes it is very difficult to prove that I am right.*

According to the Chinese participants the Germans, on the whole, have a good reputation in China. In addition to the above-mentioned positive German characteristics, namely directness, openness and practicality, the Chinese participants also mentioned the Germans' politeness, reliability and systematic thinking (participants 12, 10, 11).

#### *Negative experiences when communicating with German team members*

##### *Presentation of the utterances*

One experience the Chinese participants saw as negative when communicating with Germans in Sino-German teams was that the majority of the Germans did not speak Chinese. The Chinese participants said that the contact with German team members was

almost entirely limited to working hours<sup>8</sup> because of that and there was hardly any exchange of ideas between Chinese and German colleagues. This was well-expressed by an utterance from one of the interviews:

*“All those who have been sent here by German companies don’t understand Chinese and that’s a shame, unlike the expatriates of American companies where even some of the General Managers understand the local language. In this respect [Germans] have a disadvantage. If [they] don’t understand the Chinese language then [they] don’t know the Chinese cultural background very well. That’s a deficit”* (participant 9).

In addition, the Chinese participants reported that in communications with Germans, due to a lack of vocabulary, facts were quite often not expressed with the necessary accuracy, or certain topics were, due to linguistic insecurity, barely discussed or not addressed at all. The Chinese participants assumed that a German partner could get an impression of low competence on the part of their Chinese partners because of that. According to the participants, some of the Chinese team members felt underestimated by their German team colleagues due to linguistic deficiencies and they believed that their skills and performance were not sufficiently recognised by their German colleagues. On the other hand, German team members sometimes overestimated the technical competences of some of the Chinese employees because of their linguistic skills (English or German), which I often experienced myself in China.

Another interference when communicating with Germans was, according to my Chinese participants, that Germans often did not recognise the true intention of their Chinese communication partners. One participant expressed his experience as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> When conducting an interview in a Joint Venture in Shanghai I made the following observation in a canteen: During lunch the German participant (participant 5) who I had interviewed was sitting at a table on his own. However, his Chinese colleagues, many of them of the same age as him, were having lunch in groups of three or four and were talking over their meals. I asked one of the employees why nobody joined the German. Her answer was that during lunch break everybody wanted to relax and that it was arduous to talk to their German colleague in English. I had similar experiences during my work in China and sometimes I behaved in the same way. The fact that German expatriates did not join their Chinese colleagues over lunch either could be due to the same reason: while eating they did not want to talk in a foreign language and on top of that they could not understand the Chinese conversations anyway.

*“It happened very often that I wanted to say something but he didn’t understand me. There is a lot that [we] cannot express directly, [we] can only hint at; [but] some foreigners don’t get the hints”* (participant 8).

Another participant who spoke English fluently and did not experience any communication interferences when talking to his German team colleagues said that he was under the impression that his German team colleagues often interpreted his politeness as flattery:

*“He believes that you are flattering him all the time but this is actually Chinese custom. For us it is politeness”* (participant 11).

One Chinese participant who, according to her utterance, did not have any linguistic communication interferences with her German team leader, due to his Chinese language proficiency and her having studied German complained in the interview:

*“Germans don’t have any human feelings; [they] are very direct. That’s the way they are. You ask after his children and he would reply that it is none of your business”* (participant 12).

The following negative stereotypical characteristics occurred time and again during interviews with Chinese participants:

- Germans are relatively stubborn, arrogant and self-opinionated
- Many Germans working in China are not sufficient prepared and they are ignorant with regards to China and its customs and conventions
- Germans are often too serious and take words at face value
- Germans get impatient very quickly

Due to the nature of my data it is very difficult to assess to what extent these statements are more than subjective interpretations by the Chinese participants. However, a general assessment of these subjective characteristics as expressed by the Chinese participants would be in contradiction to both the objectives and postmodern research philosophy of the current study. On the other hand, these statements appear to be very stereotypical so the following section analyses the above mentioned communication

interferences in greater detail and attempts to find possible explanations for the stereotypical attributions made by the Chinese participants. The utterances of the Chinese participants indicate that some of these stereotypes can be attributed to German communication behaviour.

### *Problem analysis*

During my interview conversations with Chinese participants two types of communication interferences experienced in Sino-German teams were discussed:

1. Communication interferences due to insufficient foreign language proficiency on the part of both communication partners
2. Communication interferences due to the German communication partner's lack of knowledge regarding Chinese communication conventions

From the interviews it is clear that both Chinese and German participants lacked foreign language proficiency: German participants lacked Chinese language proficiency and the foreign language proficiency (in terms of the working language in Sino-German teams) of their Chinese colleagues was also often insufficient. The experiences of the Chinese participants indicate that the lack of foreign language proficiency on the part of the cooperation partners not only resulted in avoiding or reducing communication but was also a cause for misunderstandings and prejudices that in turn resulted in adverse impacts on social relationships.

According to the Chinese participants an example of this was the Chinese professionals who, owing to a lack of foreign language proficiency, were not able to engage in in-depth technical discussions with their foreign colleagues and since they could not verbally express their expertise their skills were underestimated. Two Chinese participants (participants 8 and 9) reported that, due to their insufficient foreign language proficiency, the Germans in their Joint Venture initially underestimated the Chinese

engineers. It was only later on that their skills were recognised by their German colleagues. Another good example is, in my opinion, the impression mentioned by Chinese participants that Germans are ‘arrogant’, which was created because the Germans rarely exchanged ideas with their Chinese employees. The probable reason for this behaviour, namely that they were incapable of having a proper conversation due to their lack of Chinese language skills, could have been overlooked by the respective Chinese participants.

I think that the second type of communication interference is due to a lack of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ on the part of both communication partners. ‘Intercultural communicative competence’ is meant here to be the capability of recognising culture-specific differences in communication strategies and conventions when communicating with foreigners and the ability to react accordingly.

In the various interview conversations Chinese participants deplored, on the one hand, their German colleagues’ lack of understanding of their vicariousness and on the other hand German participants complained that their Chinese colleagues often did not tell the truth or did not speak their minds. The mutual ‘accusations’ illustrate that there was a certain lack of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ on the part of both the Chinese and German participants.

According to my personal experience this is a typical example of intercultural misunderstandings where one rule on one side was violated by another rule on the other side. Whilst the Chinese followed their maxim ‘the more vicariously an opinion is uttered the more polite it is’ the Germans saw this as a violation of their percept of ‘being honest and giving an opinion plainly and clearly’. It seems that both the Chinese and German participants were unaware that the reason for their misunderstanding was due to their



interpretation of the conversation partner's communication behaviour according to their own cultural norms and perspectives.

Based on 'intercultural communicative competence', I would argue that Chinese people who are dissatisfied with Germans not understanding their hints could try to express their opinions more clearly while Germans could be more aware of Chinese communication conventions. Empty phrases such as 'we can discuss it later' or 'we will reconsider this' could be interpreted as indirect refusals. According to my experience Chinese individuals like to use words such as "maybe", "approximately", "relative" or suchlike in their utterances even though they are a hundred percent certain about the respective facts and circumstances. In most cases these words have no semantic meaning, merely a pragmatic one. They are used to tone down an utterance since in China expressing something assertively is often considered as impolite and violates the 'politeness maxim' of modesty (Liang, 1992).

According to studies carried out by Young (1994) and Günthner (1993) Chinese individuals often translate Chinese linguistic conventions into a foreign language without thinking. At the end of interviews with Chinese participants I frequently heard them say: "I don't know whether what I said is correct". This utterance is, in my opinion, a ritualised form of self-degradation as part of being polite. However, this can be very disconcerting for Germans since it creates for them the impression that this Chinese speaker is insecure or has no views on the matter if they are not aware of this Chinese communication behaviour.

In my opinion another important aspect of communication behaviour is addressed here: differences in expressing politeness. As is apparent from the example above, something can be considered polite in one culture that is impolite in another. Another example for this is the utterance by one Chinese participant (participant 4), that his

German team colleague interpreted his politeness as flattery. It is part of the Chinese politeness convention to accentuate differences in age or status, to enhance the rank and efficiency of conversation partners and, if possible, to exaggerate when talking about third parties in conversations with colleagues or higher ranking team members (Liang, 1992).

What follows are two other examples of misunderstandings between Chinese and Germans due to different politeness conventions that I also experienced myself:

A German woman paid my wife a compliment by saying: “Your skirt is very nice.” My wife replied: “No, it is a really old and cheap skirt.” Later on the German woman told my wife that she felt offended by such an answer. However, my wife’s answer was in compliance with the Chinese politeness maxim to reject a compliment instead of accepting it gladly. For a German, on the other hand, rejecting a compliment in this way is considered impolite.

I initially thought that my Chinese mother in law was impolite since she rarely said “please” or “thank you” to her daughter or myself. But my wife explained to me that it was almost unpleasant for her mother to thank me. The reason for the mutual misunderstanding was that in China the phrases “thank you” and “please” are conventionally reserved for dealing with strangers and using them when dealing with family members or close friends is deemed inappropriate.

On this account it is perfectly justifiable to say that ignorance with respect to different politeness conventions, apart from giving rise to misunderstandings and prejudices in intercultural communication, can also have an adverse effect on relationships with communication partners. One of my Chinese participants (participant 12), for example, had the experience that asking after her German conversation partner’s children, which is a typical Chinese question when trying to get to know someone, was misunderstood as an intrusion into his privacy. The Chinese participant, on the other hand,

interpreted her German colleague's directness as an indication that Germans "*don't have any human feelings*". One of the most commonly known 'stereotypes' for Chinese people is that they are curious, as I have myself experienced. Even in the first few minutes of making the acquaintance of a Chinese person questions relating to one's social and personal status, such as "What do you do for a living?" and "Do you have any children?" will be asked. When meeting Chinese acquaintances Germans are often asked "Where are you heading?" or "What's been on your mind recently?" For German individuals questions like these often sound intrusively curious. However, these are not actually real questions but rather polite phrases. And although requiring an answer the answers, however, do not need to be based on real facts.

In contrast, Chinese people consider the German behaviour of saying "Good day" or "Hello" when greeting people generally or acquaintances as cool and distant, as it is impersonal compared to the Chinese behaviour when greeting others. The most commonly known Chinese salutation *nihao* (literally translated: you are well), which can be used as a salutation or as a response to a greeting is strictly speaking not very 'Chinese'; since this salutation is actually mainly used when greeting strangers. In China acquaintances are generally greeted with a question that varies according to the situation. Questions such as "Have you had something to eat?" or "Where are you heading?" are often an indication of sympathy or heartfelt caring (*guanxin*). They also serve the purpose of fostering relations (Luo, 2007).

Questions concerning age, marital status, social status, educational background and the like at the beginning of a conversation with a stranger are often interpreted as impertinence and intrusion into one's privacy by Germans. For a Chinese individual, however, these kinds of questions mean demonstrating an interest in the other person. In addition, Chinese people assume, as was explained to me several times, that they can only

behave in a polite and socially correct manner towards a communication partner if they know this partner's personal and social status (Luo, 2007; Gu, et al., 2008).

The foregoing shows that many of the stereotypes and misunderstandings in communications between Chinese and German individuals working in teams were generated through different views and conventions with regards to communication behaviour. Therefore, it can be assumed that 'intercultural communicative competence' is as important for intercultural communication as foreign language competence. Chinese participants with German or English language proficiency emphasised during the interviews that communication problems and misunderstandings between Chinese and German individuals were mainly due to social and cultural differences between the two countries involved.

In view of the fact that 3 out of 6 Chinese participants were not able to communicate at all in German or English, or were not very fluent in English, it is worth noting that only one participant considered language as a barrier for communication and that even Chinese participants with good foreign language proficiency mentioned social and cultural difference as a reason for communication interferences. It can therefore be assumed that the language barrier was considered implicit by most of the Chinese participants.

In my opinion, knowledge about these differences in the communication conventions of different cultures and cultural differences in communication behaviour are part of 'intercultural communicative competence'. In other words, they can be considered as prerequisites for intercultural understanding. What follows is an outline of the differences in Chinese and German communication behaviours as perceived by my Chinese participants.

*Perceived differences between Chinese and German communication behaviours**Directness versus vicariousness*

According to the Chinese participants one of the most significant differences in Chinese and German communication behaviours was the preferred use of an indirect communication style on the part of the Chinese people and a direct communication style on the part of the Germans. Particularly when working in teams, Germans communicate more directly and openly than Chinese individuals. What follows is a typical utterance from the interviews:

*“There are certain things that Chinese people don’t like to say directly. They [Germans], however, would say anything directly. If there are differences in opinion then Chinese people use a method of dropping hints. They drop a hint here and there” (participant 11).*

The Chinese participants were aware that the Chinese preference of using an indirect communication style could cause communication interferences for Germans in Sino-German teams. A Chinese participant who frequently participated as an interpreter in negotiations between the Chinese and the Germans reported the following:

*“They asked a question and [the Chinese] just didn’t answer directly but beat about the bush and didn’t get to the point. Indeed, some questions can be answered in one or two sentences. Some projects like the underground, for example, [where you could simply say:] “Currently we have no intention but in the future we might plan to do it”. But something like this didn’t happen and so the new German General Manager didn’t understand and asked the same question over and over again and went around in circles”(participant 10).*

Another Chinese participant (participant 9) reported the following experience:

*“It quite often happened that one of my German colleagues wanted to go on a business trip to China and asked his Chinese client whether the date suited them. The Chinese answer was always: “You are welcome to come.” Then the German went to China and the Chinese wined and dined him. They showed him the sights and so on. But with regards to business he had hardly any results to show for it. A Chinese answer is in fact quite often only polite and not meant to be taken literally. For a Chinese manager it is actually very difficult to give a direct ‘no’ [to the German side] or to reject them. You have to sense from his tone whether he is really interested in the German’s visiting or not” (participant 9).*

One Chinese participant (participant 12) perceived that German team members in Sales often had difficulties when dealing with Chinese customers due to the Chinese vicariousness:

*“Although the customer only talks in a very vague manner, for instance, it is already clear that he doesn’t want to buy our product. If you carry on asking / it’s only a waste of time” (participant 12).*

According to one Chinese participant this vicariousness can also be perceived in written communication. He described the difference as follows:

*“If you write a letter, for instance, in the West you’ll generally get straight down to business. As far as our letters are concerned the other side often hasn’t got a clue what it is that [we] actually want; [they] might think that all we want to do is send some greetings. But actually we want to establish contact with them” (participant 8).*

In the interviews the Chinese participants emphasised that this indirect Chinese communication behaviour is not an indication of dishonesty but is based on their culture.

What follows is a typical utterance:

*“Due to the kind of upbringing under oriental culture, the way that Chinese people express problems is different to that of Westerners. This has to be clearly recognised” (participant 7).*

The German preference for a direct communication style is also illustrated in a contrastive socio-linguistic study conducted by House (1996). At this point, however, it is also important to stress that on the basis of the participants’ subjective narratives directness and vicariousness have to be considered as relative values by taking into consideration the socio-cultural environment of communication.

### ***Explicit versus implicit***

Closely tied to the difference in preference regarding directness and vicariousness is the difference in preference with respect to explicit and implicit forms of expression.

Persons expressing themselves directly generally express their thoughts explicitly.

According to my Chinese participants the Chinese tend to express information implicitly.

To that end the utterance of a respondent:

*“Chinese people express themselves relatively vaguely. [They] often use the words ‘probably’, ‘approximately’ and ‘basically’. [They] don’t attach great importance to objectivity [but] strive after formalities” (participant 10).*

Two Chinese participants (participants 11 and 12) explained that Chinese people prefer implicit forms of expression since in Chinese culture these are considered to be signs of being more reserved and modest and are rewarded accordingly. A direct and explicit form of expression, however, is regarded as impolite.

When I first went out with my Chinese wife (who was my girlfriend at that time) the following misunderstanding happened: during a meal I asked her whether she would like more food or drink and she replied: *“A little bit.”* I took this literally and only gave her a little bit more food or poured only half a glass of wine. Whereupon she protested and explained: *“I don’t really mean a ‘little bit’.”* The ‘correct’ behaviour would have been to carry on giving her food or drink until she had said: *“That’s enough.”* This tendency of preference can also be perceived with regards to the syntax in each language. In the German language, apart from imperative sentences, a sentence always contains a subject. The subjects in Chinese sentences are generally omitted so that the listener has to find out from the context what the predicate relates to. In addition, conjunctions, relative pronouns and relative participles that mark the logical connection between sentences or subordinate clauses are also very often omitted.

The comparative dimension ‘explicit versus implicit’ corresponds to the dichotomy of *low-context versus high-context* cultures (Hall, 1989). In the so-called *low-context* cultures explicit verbal expressions are of a higher significance than in so-called *high-context* cultures (Hall, 1989). In a *high-context* culture like China less attention is conventionally paid to what is said but more to what is meant. The English-German

bilingual researcher House (1996, p. 356) formulated the difference between Germans and Americans regarding the preference for directness or vicariousness as, “*Americans suggest what they want. Germans say what they want.*” Based on this way of expressing it, I would say with regards to the explicitness and implicitness preferences of my Chinese and German participants, “Chinese people hint at what they mean. Germans speak their minds.”

***Issue-oriented and content-oriented versus person-oriented and relationship-oriented***

Chinese participants mentioned another significant difference between Chinese and German communication behaviours and conventions. According to them Germans were more issue-oriented and content-oriented whereas Chinese people were more person-oriented and relationship-oriented, meaning that discussions, debates and arguments about case and content are less problematic for Germans than for Chinese individuals. They said that attacking an opinion, even if it is in the course of a factual discussion or discussion on content, was often considered to be a personal attack in China. A Chinese participant (participant 9) put it like this: “*In China disagreements are often emotive.*” Concerning this there is an utterance by another Chinese participant:

*“The Chinese are not as open as Germans. [They] wouldn’t quibble over mistakes somebody made [or] criticise them openly. Chinese people put great emphasis on harmony, harmony with the surroundings. [They] wouldn’t insist so stubbornly on their personal opinion. It is seldom that [they] argue about a problem until one of the parties goes red in the face [or] until they openly exchange their opinions. [They] don’t like debating. If somebody debates with you then they hold something against you personally” (participant 7).*

Since in China a disagreement on the issue or content level is often associated with a conflict on the personal level it is therefore largely avoided in public discussions or argumentations. I can confirm this based on my own experience. During the interview one of the Chinese participants said the following:



*“I would never argue with somebody in public. That’s a matter of mutual respect. And of course I do hope that if there were a shortcoming on my part it would be discussed with me in private” (participant 8).*

A female participant (participant 12) believed that she was suppressing her own feelings or her personal opinion when communicating with others in order to maintain a harmonious relationship with them. She emphasised that in this respect the Chinese were similar to Japanese people. She also said that Germans should not, however, think that Chinese individuals do not have an opinion and that they are indiscriminating and lacking the ability to judge. From her point of view, not uttering an opinion or not giving consent is automatically understood as a disagreement and at the same time recognised as a friendly endeavour to maintain harmony by Chinese communication partners.

Contrastive studies on differences in communication behaviour between Germans and Finns (Tiittula, 1995) or Americans (Byrnes, 1986; Kotthoff, 1989) show similar differences to those between Chinese and German nationals. The German focus on content and facts contrasts with the American and Finnish focus on friendly communication and maintaining relationships. Particularly, in argumentative conversations Germans uttered disagreements more directly and engaged in controversial arguments more than Americans or Finns.

I still remember how surprised and impressed my Chinese wife was when she attended a university lecture in Germany for the first time and heard the questions and fierce debates during the professor’s lecture. She said it was almost impossible in China to have disagreements uttered so directly and impolitely in the way she experienced it in Germany without the parties involved considering this to be a personal attack and it having an adverse effect on their relationships. It seemed to me as if a distinction between issue/content and person/relationship in such situations is not possible for Chinese people. Liang (1992) also stated in his contrastive study on Chinese and German communication

behaviours that in the context of scientific discussions in Germany, disagreement and diversity of opinion is emphasised and sometimes even artificially accentuated. Since Chinese individuals prioritise interpersonal relations they generally try to avoid public disagreements and if a public disagreement is inevitable then it is expressed very gently and guardedly. It is rare that someone fiercely stresses a personal opinion in a public discussion to prove that the opponent is wrong. Particularly, when working in teams or dealing with colleagues such behaviour is considered to be rude (Liang, 1992).

After completing her studies at university, my wife made a comparison between German and Chinese students. She found that German students immediately asked questions during class if something was not clear to them whereas Chinese students tended to ask their questions after class due to their consideration for the teacher's face. According to my wife, a situation in which the teacher is not able to answer a question straightaway is a threat to the teacher's face so Chinese students prefer to ask the teacher afterwards in a one-to-one conversation.

This difference in the tendency towards issue/content orientation by Germans and person/relationship orientation by Chinese people can also be found in various research review texts. The contrastive study conducted by Liang (1991) on Chinese and German research recensions shows that in German recensions the emphasis is mainly on critically analysing the content while in Chinese recensions the focus is mainly on honouring the reviewed author's publication and work and critical remarks occur almost always at the very end of the review and in almost all cases each critical reflection or negative remark is subsequently relativised in a positive spirit.

According to the Chinese participants the German tendency of issue/content orientation and the Chinese tendency of person/relationship orientation also reflected the fact that in China informal communication, which serves the purpose of cultivating the

relationship between the communication partners, is much more important than in Germany. As an example of this, two participants (participants 10 and 11) mentioned a typical phenomenon in China that before beginning a conversation the conversation partner is offered a cigarette. The time it takes to smoke the cigarette serves the purpose of relaxing the atmosphere. Only after that does the conversation gradually focus on the topic at hand. Three of the Chinese participants explained that it was a Chinese custom to become friends first and then do business (participants 7, 9 and 12). They said that for Germans, however, 'business is business' and is generally strictly separated from private relations. The Chinese participants emphasised that Germans who want to be successful in China should honour 'human feelings' (*renqing*) and not belittle or neglect the significance of informal communication.

#### ***Differences in presenting and organising information***

Another difference regarding Chinese and German communication conventions mentioned by the Chinese participants was the way Chinese and German individuals present and organise information. Instead of presenting the main issue or important information at the beginning, Chinese individuals prefer to get to these later on or even right at the end of their utterance. "*The issue raised at the end is often the most important point*" (participant 8). Germans, however, tend to get straight to the point according to the Chinese participants who considered this to be a cultural difference.

I can attest to this from my personal experience. If I get a phone call from a Chinese person then I almost always have to wait until the end of the conversation to find out the reason for the call since it is part of Chinese politeness to first of all enquire after the conversation partner's wellbeing, his/her life and work as well as family (Liang, 1992). Talking about one's own concern straightaway without first expressing heartfelt care (*guanxin*) and showing concern for the communication partner is deemed to be unrefined

or even egotistical. Since, from a Chinese point of view, persons and relationships are always considered to be more important than the subject matter itself the human aspects are dealt with first and then the factual aspects are approached.

German callers, however, generally move on to the factual aspects relatively quickly. Although a German may sometimes ask after the wellbeing of his/her conversation partner at the beginning the reason for a call is generally discussed first and only afterwards does the conversation deal with personal matters relating to work, studies, health et cetera.

Hence, one can say that in different cultures different communication strategies are used or preferred, which may lead to communication interferences. When asked how she perceives the aforementioned different Chinese and German communication strategies my Chinese wife explained:

*“The Chinese approach where one first of all asks after the conversation partner’s wellbeing, thereby showing an interest in the other person, and only afterwards asks a favour could most probably be interpreted by a German as being an exploitation strategy.”*

My Chinese participants also mentioned the following difference between Chinese and German team members in the way they present and organise information. In team meetings, Chinese team members tend to start from the macro level by firstly talking about the general situation and conditions and only consequently get to the micro level by talking about the subject matter generally, whereas German team members get straight down to the micro problems experienced by the team. The Germans either stay with the micro topic for the whole conversation or make some general comments based on the actual topic at the end. The different customs of Chinese and German individuals in team meetings were described as follows:

*“Germans generally talk about some relatively concrete problems in team meetings. The Chinese side, however, is generally used to talking about the general situation. A lot of things that don’t belong to the real subject are addressed.”*

*However, it is not that Chinese members deliberately beat about the bush, it is just their usual way of thinking” (participant 9).*

*“The way that German and Chinese people think is different. The Chinese like to talk about general things first and then get to the concrete [topic]. Germans address the concrete [topic] first and then they summarise [the concrete things] or they restrict themselves to the concrete topic” (participant 10).*

The utterances above are only observations and impressions that the Chinese participants had. An idea would be to have some recordings of team meetings available that could be analysed. Such sources are, however, extremely difficult to obtain and were not available for the purposes of this study because they often contain trade secrets or other confidential commercial information.

Further examples of these different Chinese and German preferences or tendencies (starting a conversation on the macro or micro level) can also be observed, in my opinion, in many other forms of expression. An example for this is that when stating name, date, address and nationality a Chinese person will always start on the macro level (broader information) and advance to the micro level (precise information), which is the other way round to Germany. In China, when stating a name it is as follows: surname + first name, or stating the date: year + month + day or address details: state + town + (district) + street + street number + recipient’s name.

In my opinion, the way this information is presented and organised is certainly down to the way of thinking. Whilst stating the name, date and address et cetera is conventionalised in every culture the differences in communication strategies are not static. Thus, there are hardly any communication strategies that are exclusively used by Chinese individuals and are completely unknown to Germans. It is therefore more a question of differences in the preferences regarding which communication strategy is used.

***Written communication versus oral or personal communication***

Chinese participants also addressed the topic of preference with regards to using written or oral communication in different situations. In their opinion, Chinese individuals prefer to use oral communication for internal company communications, such as communications between departments, which they consider to be faster and more effective whilst Germans prefer to do everything in writing. According to the Chinese participants, this German practice often wastes time, even though it could provide the possibility of a quick identification of the person responsible for a mistake in the chain of events. A participant working in a Sino-German Joint Venture described this difference in preference as follows:

*“Everything has to be written down / in black and white. This is unlike the Chinese, where one often conveys messages orally: “Hello Wang Wei [or] Weng Hanxue, can you do this for me [please].” [And] you say: “No problem.” Here, when something needs to be done a memo is sent, which is then approved by the next higher level and sent back to the originating department. The manager will then have a look at it and if there is no problem the relevant person will be given [the task at hand]. After a circuitous procedure like that the day is over. From this point of view state-owned enterprises are most probably far more effective than Joint Ventures. But this kind of management can prevent mistakes. If somebody who was responsible [for a certain task] didn’t do [their job] properly then it is possible to find this person immediately. It is obvious, [if everything] is written down in black and white you won’t forget” (participant 10).*

It can certainly be disputed whether verbal communication is always faster or more effective than written communication. However, the reason why Germans prefer to have everything in writing could be that written arrangements or agreements are more binding than oral ones and a kind of avoidance in terms of self-protection. According to my personal experiences, written agreements between persons or business partners who know each other well are deemed to be essentially superfluous in China. Whilst it is expected in Germany that instructions between superiors and subordinates are given in writing this is interpreted as a sign of lack of trust between these parties in China.

The Chinese participants also perceived the aforementioned tendency in the preferences shown during communications aimed at establishing business relationships. Whilst Germans prefer to exchange a lot of information and opinions with a potential business partner by means of written communication before entering into a business relationship the Chinese side, according to the Chinese participants, often said to their potential foreign partner: “*First you come here and then we’ll talk together*” (participant 12). In a study conducted by Tiittula (1995) on German-Finnish cultural differences in business communication the German and Finnish business people interviewed reported similar differences between Germans and Finns as those experienced between the Chinese and Germans. Whilst in Germany “*only the written word is valid*” in Finland as well as Scandinavia many things are still “*agreed on a handshake*” (Tiittula, 1995, p. 251).

I am of the opinion that the preference for personal communication on the part of the Chinese has a lot to do with the aforementioned Chinese tendency of person-orientation and relationship-orientation. In China, written communication is generally restricted to factual issues and it is only by means of personal conversations that it can be established whether it is possible to get on well with a potential business partner on a human basis, which, from a Chinese perspective, is a prerequisite for long-term cooperation. I do not think that good interpersonal relationships have no significance whatsoever for German business people, but for Germans it is more likely that these interpersonal relationships will develop on the basis of good business cooperation.

### ***Conclusion***

In this chapter six Chinese communication experiences with German team members were described. According to the Chinese participants it was possible for them to understand their German colleagues relatively well due to the Germans’ strong tendency towards directness, openness and practicality. They thought that their interferences in

communication with Germans were mainly based on German communication partners frequently not understanding or misunderstanding them.

The main reasons for this were, according to the Chinese participants, the differences between Chinese and German communication behaviours and conventions. These differences mentioned by Chinese participants were divided into five sub-categories. In no way do I make a claim to exhaustiveness since some of the Chinese participants' utterances were stereotypical and reflected their own interpretations of experiences they had had. However, they provide a specific insight into the different communication interferences experienced in Sino-German teams. Since these experiences are subjective concepts that in some ways I helped to construct due to my involvement in the conversations, reflections on their 'truthfulness' or 'correctness' are, from a postmodern perspective, out of the question.

In addition to presenting the utterances, in this chapter I therefore attempted to identify possible explanations from a linguistic perspective for the communication interferences and stereotypical attributions made by the participants. The analysis shows that the Chinese participants' communication interferences based on them not being understood properly or being misunderstood were partially due to their lack of foreign language proficiency and partially owing to their lack of 'intercultural communicative competence'. In concrete terms, that means that they were unable to express themselves (correctly) or to state their opinions in a way that was adequate to the respective intercultural communication situation, which resulted in their communication partners' incomprehension or misunderstanding of what was being said due to their lack of knowledge about Chinese communication conventions.

Statements made by Chinese participants able to communicate with Germans directly by means of German or English while still reporting comprehension



communication interferences and misunderstandings show that foreign language proficiency does not equal 'intercultural communicative competence'. The risk of misunderstandings or stereotyping between intercultural communication partners being able to communicate directly can actually be larger than between communication partners communicating by means of an interpreter.

Whereas the two preceding chapters presented differences between Chinese and German communication behaviours as described by the participants, in the following chapter a comparison is made, on the basis of the interview data, between the speech behaviours, communicative strategies and habits applied by Chinese and German participants when appraising team colleagues or partners.

## **7 Alternative Analysis of the Speech Behaviours of Chinese and German participants when appraising Team Colleagues or Partners**

This alternative analysis is based on the interviews conducted with my six Chinese and six German participants that were already used for the content analysis. Using two alternative perspectives in analysis seeks to add to existing literature, whilst also providing alternate representations: categories out of the content analysis have been illuminated and a series of lessons from an analysis of the speech behaviour of Chinese and Germans participants will be produced in the following. Together, these two alternative analyses aim to provide rich and diverse understandings of communication in Sino-German teams. In this way, there is potential that Chinese and German team members, whose needs have not been served adequately, are to be more fully acknowledged and attended to by the management community.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the purpose of using two alternative analytic approaches in this study is not to produce a singular or aggregated representation of participants' experience (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Rather, this idea seeks to provide a thicker explanation of a largely unknown phenomenon through interpretations produced from multiple and differing perspectives. As Lather (1997) argues, this will be done in recognition of the limits of representation. Such a repetition therefore subverts and displaces that which has enabled the repetition.

Yet, in the subversive repetition, there are also commonalities to be found. In the spaces between the categorical findings from the first phase of analysis, and the interpretations of the speech behaviour of Chinese and German from this second phase, intertextuality may be seen. Meanings of experience may meet and mingle, overlap, illuminate and emphasise varied aspects of what it means to work in Sino-German teams. I agree, as has Savage (2000), that rather than always leading to competing interpretations,

using alternative analytical lenses through which to analyse text may result in a diffuseness in the boundaries between such understandings, and may illuminate a kaleidoscope of meanings. Through the content analysis and then through an interpretive lens on speech behaviour, both interpretations may provide meanings that illuminate the participants' experiences.

In the following alternative analysis the way in which my questions were posed and my discussions with the participants were held (which I understand as being an interpretative process) are seen as significant for the course of the conversations and they are therefore included, where applicable, in the analysis. Numbers are used in place of the names of the participants (see 'Anonymity' Chapter 4, section 'Ethics').

***Positive appraisal and praise for team members and partners***

***In the German corpus***

In the German corpus there were hardly any positive appraisals of Chinese team colleagues or partners (for example business partners). Whilst there were a few passages containing the odd positive statement these statements did not serve, however, as a positive appraisal in the overall context. What follows are two examples for this:

Participant 3

***Oliver:*** *How do you feel with regards to everyday life in China?*

***Three:*** *When I am walking in the streets there is little / well, I haven't seen it yet / there is no crime.*

***Oliver:*** *There is no crime here?*

***Three:*** *No, no crime. As a foreigner I feel completely safe here.*

***Oliver:*** *Yes, as a foreigner.*

***Three:*** *This is only possible because of the very, very strict punishments here / has nothing to do with the death penalty. If somebody does something that is prohibited, if you do an evil deed then you have to pay thousands of Renminbi or you have to go to prison for ten years. That's why only very, very few people do it [...] Obedience to authority. What is said is done.*

Although at first sight Mr. Three's statements that "there is no crime" and that he feels "completely safe here" seem to be positive remarks regarding the city of Shanghai.

The fact that he did not deny my utterance “*as a foreigner*” limits the positive connotation of his statement. Thus, there remains the unresolved question whether a Chinese person would also feel so unreservedly safe in Shanghai. However, the positive element ‘security’ was not thematised in this part of the conversation. Mr. Three perceived this ‘security’ as only being a result of “*very, very strict punishments*” and the people’s “*obedience to authority*”. While there were positive remarks in Mr. Three’s utterance these remarks were, in the overall context, not positive evaluations.

#### Participant 4

In the preceding part of the conversation Mr. Four criticised the Chinese people’s reckless behaviour in road traffic, which was followed by this utterance:

**Four:** *[...] we are alone in the world? What I think is really good is the custom to eat together. I think that this is really great and we have done it a lot of times here [...] the Chinese food, okay, just like everywhere else in the world there are really good things and there are really disgusting things. So, some of the food I like and I don’t like the rest. On the other hand, this is also a Chinese trait. We try to be polite and say that everything tastes really nice or fantastic even if it is not really fantastic, but it happened several times when we invited Chinese people to a European meal that, when they were polite, they said that they preferred Chinese food. I have experienced it; they said that it didn’t taste good at all. Therefore I think that it is not really necessary to always say that it all tastes nice when you drink the blood of a turtle or eat the bile of a snake. It doesn’t taste nice at all.*

Although the custom of eating together was at first assessed positively by Mr. Four it was neutralised later on by his statement and criticism such as “*there are really disgusting things*”. Viewed in context, there is not much left of the positive assessment.

The next example also shows that when a positive remark was made it was immediately curtailed by another statement:

#### Participant 5

**Oliver:** *Yes, and what are the impressions that you got in that short time?*

**Five:** *Well, I can really only report about the impressions I got in Shanghai and Shanghai is not really typical for China. Shanghai is a very westernised city*

*where you can speak a lot of English everywhere, where the people are very open with regards to Western culture. I don't think that Shanghai or the region around Shanghai are typical for / for China; but since I haven't seen anything else apart from Shanghai so far I cannot say anything else with regards to this.*

Both, before and after his remark that people living in Shanghai are very open Mr. Five emphasised that Shanghai and the region around Shanghai were not typical for China.

Although in the following example Mr. Six praised his Chinese team colleagues before that praise he pointed out that he had “*heard of a lot of bad experiences*”. As in the previous example the relatively positive remarks about China and Chinese people were made in the context of Chinese people being open to Western culture or having reached a Western level:

Participant 6

**Oliver:** *Are there any misunderstandings with regards to your Chinese colleagues because you have a German cultural background and they have a Chinese cultural background?*

**Six:** *No, I personally haven't had any bad experiences but through my contact with Germans, Europeans and Americans who are working here I have heard of a lot of bad experiences they've had. The reason that we don't have any problems here is most probably that we are dealing with highly qualified, very intelligent people. Two of my female Chinese colleagues have spent many years abroad; they are already influenced by the West. They know that we are different. But also the two female colleagues that we have here, who have never been abroad, their English is excellent and they are both very open and flexible. That's why we don't have any misunderstandings at all.*

German participants considered it as being positive when Chinese individuals were under Western influence, had been living abroad for a long time, could speak English fluently and were open with regards to foreigners. In contrast, a German with alleged ‘Chinese idiosyncrasies’ was rated negatively:

Participant 3

This text part immediately follows on from that part of the interview conducted with participant 3 that is stated at the beginning of this chapter where I asked him how he felt with regards to everyday life in China.

**Three:** *Everyday life is quite difficult for us here / not that we are badly off, we are doing alright, really alright, but we also feel low sometimes; where we really say that we would really like to go home although we are actually not this type of people. It's because life is / everyday life varies all the time. A colleague, he has been here for eight years, for eight years, he likes it here, he is Chinese, half a Chinese / what I don't do today I will do tomorrow, and what I don't do tomorrow I will do next week [laughs ironically].*

**Oliver:** *Does he work in a German company?*

**Three:** *In the same company / in my company. However, he is married to a Chinese woman.*

**Oliver:** *But what I mean is, does he help the Germans enter into the market here?*

**Three:** *Yes, yes, yes, yes [laughs ironically].*

**Oliver:** *He makes a contribution to positive figures?*

**Three:** *He says he does, but he doesn't create a job opportunity / he is alone, he sells things from Germany. While he has three / five Chinese employees he hasn't got any people who produce something for us in China.*

After saying that he was homesick sometimes because everyday life varied all the time despite the fact that he was doing “*alright*” in China on the whole Mr. Three mentioned, as a counter-example, a German colleague who was happy in China. He described him as being Chinese or half Chinese since he was behaving like a Chinese individual “*what I don't do today I will do tomorrow, and what I don't do tomorrow I will do next week*”. I believe that his ironic laughter indicated his critical opinion with regards to his “sinified” colleague. Even though he had to admit later on that this German colleague contributed to the company's positive figures he nevertheless stressed the fact that his colleague did not “*create a job opportunity*” for the German company since he only employed three or five Chinese employees.

When considering the text parts that contain a tendency towards a positive appraisal (participants 5 and 6, for example) it is apparent that they always relate explicitly to either a concrete person or a concrete group of persons. For example, it was emphasised that “*my colleague X is as ambitious as Germans are*” (participant 2) or “*the employees in our department are no worse than those in a German company*” (participant 1).

However, none of the participants in the German corpus ever praised the Chinese in general or mentioned positive Chinese idiosyncrasies apart from the custom of eating together stated above. On the basis of the data generated I can say that my German participants generally concentrated on critical attitudes towards their respective partners when appraising their colleagues and it seemed as if the value of a positive appraisal appeared to be insignificant to them.

The fact that the Germans thematised the negative idiosyncrasies of their Chinese team colleagues and partners does not mean, however, that they considered their cooperation with their Chinese partners as negative overall. Among the six German participants there were three Germans who replied to my question “*What do you think of the cooperation with your Chinese team members?*” or similar by using words such as “*satisfying*” or “*very good*”. I did not ask this question to two of the participants. A German participant who only criticised the Chinese most of the time during our interview conversation admitted of his own accord at the end of our conversation: “*My cooperation with my Chinese employees is good. I have far fewer problems than others*” (participant 5). Therefore, the German participants’ speech behaviours during the interpretative conversations, namely not making any positive appraisals and primarily focusing on negatively perceived aspects, is, in my opinion, due to the German participants considering the negative critical aspects more significant and constructive than the positive aspects.

When reporting my research results to a German colleague and explaining to him that, although at least half of the German participants considered their cooperation with their Chinese team colleagues and partner as being satisfying or even very good, there were hardly any positive statements or praises in their utterances, my colleague said the following:

*“Thematising positive things in institutional or official conversations is considered to be banal and superficial by Germans. In Germany there is the belief that*

*constructive criticism is more successful. It is always assumed that if you criticise something then the criticised person will make an effort to do better. There is only very little praise given because one is afraid that the person being praised might rest on their laurels."*

My research results seem to confirm this statement.

### ***In the Chinese corpus***

In the Chinese corpus many more positive appraisals of German team colleagues could be noted. Throughout the interview conversations Chinese participants praised their German colleagues and partners. Their statements not only referred specifically to their German team colleagues but also to Germans in general.

#### Participant 11

***Oliver:*** *What are your impressions of Germans?*

***Eleven:*** *I think, as far as their working style is concerned / in practical terms, their way of working is relatively methodical, they are relatively orderly and normally they keep their word / you can always believe what they say, they will keep their promises eventually [laughs]. In addition, with regards to the relation between the individual and the society, they have a relatively good sense of right and wrong / they have a relatively strong sense of right and wrong.*

These general, stereotypical and sometimes clichéd statements about Germans: that they are matter-of-fact, polite, tidy, honest, diligent, straightforward and direct, can be found in almost all conversations held with Chinese participants. It was not uncommon for Chinese participants to dwell on the fact that their German colleagues made an effort to do their jobs well and so on. Some concrete examples were given:

#### Participant 10

***Oliver:*** *What are your impressions since you started to work with Germans? Had you had any contact with Germans before establishing the Joint Venture?*

***Ten:*** *I have been working in imports for more than ten years. Of course, I am in contact with different foreigners. After my first contacts with [...] I had the impression that Germans are very haughty and think very little of Chinese people. This was my impression at the beginning. I thought that they always emphasised how terribly smart the Germanic people are. But after working with them for some time I noted that they also rate you in accordance with the actual facts. If you / if they could see from the cooperation that you are*



*really capable or if your thoughts / opinions were convincing, I believe, they would accept you, wouldn't they? And in addition, they changed their opinion about us. They don't really have prejudices, that they always disdain us or think that we are inferior. After some time of working together they venerated me, didn't they? They thought that I, as a Chinese representative, was qualified for this position and not only making a living, didn't they? Therefore, at this point / that is why I believe if they did have prejudices about us then that is quite normal since they didn't know China. But after they have been in China for two, three years they gradually change their opinions about us. Well, that's my opinion about Germans. Secondly, I think that not all Germans are the same. A lot of Germans have already come here. The Financial Manager, Mr. Michael [...], for example, he was in charge of finances. Now he has already returned home. Let's say, for example, when the facilities arrived, since we had very little staff in the initial stages, after the containers arrived we didn't have any staff to haul the facilities. He climbed into the truck and unloaded it himself. Therefore, I thought that things like that have also helped to change our views of foreigners, huh? As a matter of fact, both sides considered the Joint Venture as being their own thing. It is very difficult for a European to do that. That's why I think that the process of working together is for both sides...*

**Oliver:** ... a process of getting to know each other.

**Ten:** A process of getting to know each other. That's why I think that I have also learnt a lot from them by working with them [...]

Mr. Ten narrated verbosely about his change of mind with regards to Germans.

While initially he had a rather bad impression of the German employees of the company [...], thinking that they were arrogant, by working with them he realised that his German team colleagues gradually changed their opinions about China and they also made laudable efforts regarding the Joint Venture. For this Mr. Ten gave the example of Mr. Michael [...]. In another part of the text that is not stated in this thesis he also praised the previous General Manager, Mr. [...], who constantly argued with the German parent company over Joint Venture interests. In addition, he mentioned three previous German colleagues who had come to China without their families and who “*considered the company as if it were their own family*“.

In other interview conversations the Chinese participants interviewed expressed their appreciation for their German team colleagues' efforts to overcome the discrimination of the Chinese in order to treat them as equal partners. In addition, the

qualifications of German team members were praised. A Chinese woman praised the fact that the Germans substantially supported their Chinese colleagues in their work and she stated concrete examples for this:

Participant 12

*Twelve:* [...] you see, for instance, there are some customers / since communication technology evolves continuously / if customers had requests that deviated from industry standards, I think our German boss gave us a lot of support. We worked overtime. Generally, a company has regulations / there are normally regulations regarding overtime but they considered their customers' distress as their own. For non-standard products / for them [...] AG products mustn't be technically altered inconsiderately since one is afraid that the brand could be wrecked [by doing so]; but they made compromises. Such products that didn't comply with applicable standards and our monitoring system, we developed it ourselves / there is a software-development group / you could say that they supported us tremendously [...].

During our interview conversations my Chinese participants often compared Germans with other foreigners such as Americans, French or Japanese people where they always emphasised the positive German idiosyncrasies:

Participant 8

*Eight:* Germans work very diligently, they are much more conscientious than other Europeans, the French and the Italians, for instance, and they are fairly rigid; you cannot say that they are smart but they are very hardworking.

In the conversations with Chinese participants Germans were also compared with Chinese people. Whilst the Germans were praised the Chinese participants criticised their own people: for example that the Chinese are not too strict about contracts:

Participant 7

*Oliver:* Do Germans adhere to the provisions of contracts?

*Seven:* As far as adhering to contracts is concerned Germans are very aware of contractual obligations whereas the Chinese always want to negotiate [laughs].

## Participant 9

*Nine: They [the Germans] seem to be very polite. The Chinese don't pay particular attention to decorum because during the years of the Cultural Revolution culture was neglected [...].*

When comparing the Chinese with the Germans Mr. Nine attributed the positive aspect of being “*polite*” to the Germans whilst criticising the Chinese.

However, positive remarks were not only made with respect to German team colleagues or business partners. One of the participants (participant 11) also praised, for example, the wives of his German colleagues. He reported that they looked after Chinese orphans and that they made an effort to learn the Chinese language. Another Chinese participant (participant 12) mentioned that her former German manager liked China and the Chinese better than the Chinese did themselves.

However, despite the numerous positive statements about German colleagues and partners it turned out when probing a bit deeper that only one of the six Chinese participants considered cooperation with Germans as ‘very good’. All the remaining Chinese participants admitted that their cooperation with Germans so far had not been very satisfactory since the Chinese side did not benefit a great deal from such cooperation. Unlike the German participants it seemed to be important for the Chinese participants to highlight their German colleagues’ positive idiosyncrasies. In each conversation the Chinese participants made positive remarks about Germans. Positive appraisals of Germans were made either at the beginning of a conversation or within the first half of a conversation. The Chinese initially emphasised the positive traits of their German colleagues before they uttered some criticism or accused their colleagues of something. It was only after mentioning positive characteristics that they gradually started to address the problem areas:

## Participant 12

*Twelve: Germans are very strict and conscientious. They work very methodically. My assumption that they are very steady has been confirmed. The strong orderliness is of course good for work but it is also time-consuming. I think that they are not as flexible as the Chinese / of course you cannot mention both of them in the same breath. There are also disadvantages if you plan some things too exactly; then it is relatively difficult to get things done. For example, they want to plan certain things in great detail but the customers don't wait for you. For some things the pace of work is too slow.*

Initially, Mrs. Twelve praised Germans for being *conscientious*, strict and working diligently and methodically. Before she cautiously criticised the Germans' lack of flexibility she emphasised, however, that their orderliness was good for work.

### **Conclusion**

Although the Chinese participants were on the whole less happy with their Sino-German cooperation than the German participants the Chinese appraisals of German colleagues/partners were much more positive than those of the Germans. It seems that it was much more important for Chinese participants to point out positive characteristics than it was for the Germans. In almost every conversation I had with Chinese participants there were positive statements and praise whilst they hardly ever occurred in the German corpus. These positive appraisals were often complemented by various concrete examples made by the Chinese participants. This phenomenon did not occur in conversations with Germans. In my opinion, this difference can be explained by the fact that the thinking of Chinese individuals is more relationship-oriented and that they are more concerned with giving their partners 'face' than the Germans are (see chapter 5, section 'Excursion: the Chinese concept of saving face').

The Chinese participants often made generally positive appraisals of Germans while there was no general positive appraisal of the Chinese in the German corpus. In the few text parts where a German participant assessed a Chinese team colleague positively the German was always referring explicitly to either one concrete person or a certain number

of colleagues. I think that this difference between the speech behaviours reflects the aforementioned Chinese way of thinking (for example, initially providing main background information, focusing on the social relations of interacting conversation partners and on harmony as well as saving each other's face, preferring vicariousness et cetera) and the German issue-orientation (see chapter 5, section 'Chinese people do not like to get straight to the point' and chapter 6, section 'Differences in presenting and organising information').

### *Negative appraisal and criticism of the partner*

#### *In the German corpus*

Whilst there were hardly any positive appraisals of and praise for Chinese team colleagues and partners, numerous negative appraisals and a lot of criticism were to be found in the German corpus. The criticism was with regards to Chinese behaviour, their lack of openness, lack of management skills and the environmental pollution. The criticism was characterised by openness and straightforwardness:

#### Participant 4

**Four:** [ ... ] *Everywhere, where things don't function as they do in Germany you'll find a Chinese majority [ ... ] All the things, for which the Chinese are responsible / it just doesn't work because the Chinese don't want responsibility / someone who has got to fulfil a task / he is supposed to do such or such but he doesn't do it; nothing happens.*

Openness and straightforwardness can be found both in terms of content and in terms of expression. Participant 4 used particles such as "everywhere" and "nothing" the functions of which are both generalising and strengthening. Instead of "some Chinese people" or "my Chinese colleagues" he used the generalisation "the Chinese don't want responsibility". In terms of context he criticised the Chinese without any restrictions and put the full blame on the Chinese without any ifs or buts. The following example also shows such open and straightforward criticism:

Participant 5

*Oliver: What is it that bothers you about China now that you live and work here?*

*Five: A lot.*

*Oliver: The traffic?*

*Five: The dirt, the traffic /I've got two children. I am exposed to the traffic problem each and every day. I do know, of course, that China has got this problem and I needn't get upset about it every day. What bothers me is the poor infrastructure, the poor air and water quality, that there is very little in terms of leisure (opportunities) available [...] the many people / yes, Shanghai's supply problems / the buses are packed, the water is bad, the air is bad. These are things that, of course, have an impact on us; it is, however, not a reason not to come to China.*

In two of the interview conversations with German participants they started criticising the Chinese side right at the beginning of the interview. When talking to Mr. One he immediately interrupted me before I could finish my first question and criticised the tough way the Chinese deal with their compatriots:

Participant 1

*Oliver: I would like to find out more about some concrete problems. Generally, people say: You can get good food here; people are very friendly to foreigners*

*One: Yes, to foreigners but not to their compatriots. They are very tough when dealing with their fellow countrymen.*

*Oliver: What kinds of problems are there within a team?*

*One: [...]*

It is interesting that Chinese participants generally only stated examples for positive appraisals of Germans and hardly mentioned any concrete cases when appraising Germans negatively whilst German participants always gave examples when criticising something about the Chinese. In the following text part the German Mr. Two criticised the lack of motivation of people working in Chinese state institutions. He reported a concrete situation he had experienced recently:

Participant 2

*Oliver: Is there something that bothers you in day-to-day living? When you are out in the streets what kind of feelings do you have and what do you like here?*

*Two: The only thing that bothers me / particularly, when you have to go to a purely Chinese bank or authority that the people don't have any work*

*motivation whatsoever / that they don't have what we call 'service demeanour' in Germany. The other day I was in the Bank of China that closes at 12.00 o'clock. At half past eleven only two bank counters were staffed and behind these counters there were 15 people talking to each other / in front of the counters there was a massive queue but the people were not interested in serving them at all.*

Owing to the concrete examples for the things they criticised one does not get the impression that the German participants' criticism was made up out of thin air. I think that this speech behaviour is due to the aforementioned German issue-orientation. It seems as if it is always necessary to deliver facts and evidence for each reproach or criticism uttered.

One other thing that struck me was the frequent use of words such as *everyone, all, no one, never, nobody, nobody at all, nothing, absolutely, absolutely no, no... whatsoever* and the like occurring in the negative appraisals or criticisms of Germans:

#### Participant 5

**Five:** *[...] yes, one of my fundamental experiences in my occupation is that you have to be very careful with Chinese people. **Every** Chinese person thinks that they are better than I and doesn't actually understand why there are so many expatriates around. That is a mentality and the culture [...].*

#### Participant 3

**Oliver:** *It's generally said that the Chinese partner plays an important role within the cooperation.*

**Three:** *You can **absolutely** forget about that. In my opinion, the Chinese partner is **absolutely** unimportant. Most of the time the Joint Venture partners have **no** experience **whatsoever** / they've **never** set up a Joint Venture / they don't have the necessary connections to the relevant authorities. With our company I had the experience that with **all** the things that are new, whether you have, for instance, to change a loan into RMB / the Chinese are too fearful and too disinterested to do that / the Chinese have **no** clue **whatsoever** when it comes to acquiring new customers / they have **no** experience **whatsoever** when it comes to advertising because previously the customers were there and they bought **everything**, / they are not used to it / they have **absolutely no** understanding of the fact that you want to sell good quality goods to your customers / for the most part the customer also doesn't pay [... .] on which subject I have to say that our experience proved that our Chinese partner was **absolutely** useless. My view on this matter is that one should **only** set up a wholly foreign owned enterprise without any Chinese participation; then you have the opportunity to steer the matter in the right direction, in a way you think fit [...].*

Some communication researchers consider words such as *all, no... whatsoever, absolutely no, never* and the like to be “generalising quantifiers” (Schwitalla, 1995, p. 103). In my opinion these words not only have a generalising but also a strengthening function as can be seen from my examples above.

However, the aforementioned quantifiers not only occurred in negative appraisals they were also frequently used by German participants in neutral or positive utterances:

Participant 1

*Oliver: Could you imagine working as a German employee in China in the long term?*

*One: No problem **whatsoever** [...] when I first came to China **everything** was exactly the way I imagined it to be.*

*Oliver: You haven't changed your mind at all?*

*One: Not at all!*

Participant 2

*Two: [...] and basically, **everything** is different here. When you write something then you should say that first of all **everything** is different in China and in China **everything** is so much faster than anywhere else [...]*

### ***In the Chinese corpus***

As a Chinese participant said in an interview, Chinese individuals find it difficult to criticise someone:

Participant 11

*Eleven: Chinese people wouldn't normally criticise Germans; at the most they would give them some advice. However, if Chinese people do give advice then the whole thing is already bad enough. That's why Germans should take suggestions made by Chinese persons seriously.*

With this utterance the Chinese participant intended to express that ‘face-to-face’ criticism is very rare in China and even in those rare cases criticism is only made in the form of advice. Another Chinese participant mentioned the following in our interview conversation:



*“If a Chinese person does criticise someone directly then you can take it that they are definitely at the end of their tether and they are prepared to risk a break-off of relations”* (participant 12).

However, there are still criticisms of Germans to be found in the interview conversations conducted with Chinese participants. The Chinese were, however, much more reserved and cautious with regards to their criticism than the Germans I interviewed.

Participant 7

*Seven: [...] I used to work in a foreign company. **Possibly**, they [laughs] have prejudices against Chinese people. **Some** foreigners got some impressions of some Chinese people and then they generalised them; that’s **not quite right**.*

In my opinion, this is a very typical example of the Chinese speech behaviour when criticising. In this short utterance the Chinese speaker used several means to mitigate his criticism: his laughing, modification by means of adverbs, a subjective explanation of the possible reasons of the criticised phenomenon and others. Mr. Seven laughed before uttering the criticism that foreigners possibly *“have prejudices against Chinese people”*. This could mean that he did not take these prejudices entirely seriously or did not consider them as upsetting. By laughing he took the edge off his criticism and by using the adverb *“possibly”* his utterance was not an open accusation but rather a personal impression. Then he even tried to find a reason for these prejudices: *“some”* foreigners generalised their impressions of certain Chinese individuals. His understanding of the cause of the prejudices could be deemed as a kind of forgiveness. He finished his criticism with the restriction *“that’s not quite right”* thereby watering-down his criticism even further.

In the Chinese corpus laughing was often used when saying something negative about Germans:

Participant 9

*Oliver: Do you think that Germans are arrogant?*  
*Nine: Yes, a little bit [laughs].*

In the German corpus laughing or smiling was not used a single time as a means of taking the edge off criticism made regarding the Chinese. I think that Germans generally do not laugh or smile when criticising someone or something since for them criticism is a ‘serious matter’.

In the Chinese corpus negative appraisals or criticism were almost always embedded in positive appraisals or praises. A continuous change between praise and criticism (or positive and negative appraisals) could be observed in every conversation conducted with Chinese participants. In the following example the Chinese manager Mr. Eight initially praised the Germans for being diligent and hardworking then later on he criticised them for being unduly diligent and precise:

Participant 8

***Eight:** Germans work very diligently, [they] are much more conscientious than other Europeans, the French and the Italians, for instance, and they are fairly rigid; you cannot say that they are smart but they are very hardworking [...]. Germans have one disadvantage: they believe too much in themselves and they are too diligent. To be diligent is sometimes necessary, isn't it? Sometimes they [the Germans] don't trust other people a great deal.*

When criticising the Germans Mr. Eight initially said that they had one disadvantage. He mentioned, however, three disadvantages (too self-confident, unduly diligent and lack of trust in Chinese people). In his utterance he did not pay attention to flawless logic but only to pragmatism. What he classified as advantages in the beginning were disadvantages by the end of his utterance. After criticising Germans for being “*too diligent*” he immediately added that diligence was “*sometimes necessary*”. When criticising Germans for not trusting Chinese people he used adverbs such as “*sometimes*” and “*a great deal*” to water-down his criticism.

The reason for the Chinese participants’ frequent use of adverbs to tone down their criticism is, in my opinion, not only the intention to take the edge off their criticisms but

also not to appear to be a person who is too assertive. In Chinese society a self-confident and assertive individual is deemed to be a person who is not modest, as I can attest from personal experience. In most cases the adjective ‘self-confident’ has a more negative connotation in China (as can be seen from the utterance of participant 8 above). In China it is a commonly heard criticism that a person is too self-confident. This may be due to the influencing factor of Confucianism on Chinese society that calls for a modest and unobtrusive behaviour on the part of Chinese people (Luo, 2007). The following Chinese speech behaviour of exercising self-criticism when criticising someone else, employed when criticising German partners, is closely associated with this cultural standard.

Participant 9

*Nine: I think that Chinese people are very vain, [...], really awful; they think very little of foreigners and like to be derogative about them: “They don’t understand matters and they are ludicrous.” On the other hand, however, Westerners consider themselves to be something special and superior.*

First of all, participant 9 criticised his own compatriots for being vain without expressly distancing himself from his fellow countrymen before pointing out that Westerners were arrogant.

In Chinese culture self-criticism is an important indicator for modesty which in turn is deemed to be a sign of politeness and good education (Liang, 1992). In China a lecturer quite often starts a presentation by saying: *“I do apologise but I am not properly prepared. I am not very good at talking”* as I have experienced myself. If a Chinese person wants to appear as particularly modest he/she can talk about himself/herself as *“my humble self”* or can call himself *“your stupid brother”* in a letter and for European individuals such self-depreciation and self-blame sound quite absurd. In the Chinese culture, however, they are deemed to be a sign of sophistication (Liang, 1992).

In the conversations conducted with Germans there was no mention of any negative ‘German idiosyncrasies’. When asking my German participant Two whether he thinks that there is a typical ‘German mentality’ at all he replied:

Participant 2

**Two:** *Yes, generally the Germans are actually self-opinionated. They always know how everything should be and if something doesn't go according to their plans then the 'others' are to blame.*

**Oliver:** *Can this cause trouble at work?*

**Two:** *It just attracts attention when Germans are abroad.*

It is apparent from this conversation excerpt that the adjective “*self-opinionated*” that normally has a negative connotation was not considered to be a disturbing factor regarding cooperation by participant Two. In his opinion, it only “*attracts attention*”. Therefore, his utterance is not to be interpreted as criticism / self-criticism.

The following example also demonstrates that, in general, the interviewed Germans did not want to utter anything negative about themselves:

Participant 1

**Oliver:** *Don't you think that Germans are self-opinionated?*

**One:** *That's right /that's a problem /a conflict between Germans and Chinese people; but I don't think that I am considerably affected by this problem since I have been in China for a long time. And I have also been working with Chinese people long enough to know now how I can work together with the Chinese [...]*

While the German characteristic of being “*self-opinionated*” was confirmed by the German participant One he emphasised, however, that he himself was not “*considerably affected by this problem*”.

In the entire German data generated there is no real criticism with regards to Germans and on the few occasions where something negative was mentioned in connection with Germans, the German participants always emphasised that they themselves were not affected by it. Therefore, I assume that self-criticism is not customary in the German (manager-) culture. I think that a German would normally not criticise

himself/herself. If a German practices self-criticism then it is only in the context of an apology since for Germans self-criticism is a sign of weakness and lack of self-esteem. However, it is also possible that the German participants did not want to be self-critical and put themselves in a vulnerable position in the presence of a German ‘expert’ on China.

In summary, it can be said that while the German participants did not utter anything negative about themselves, which I think was probably to avoid being in a vulnerable position, it seemed as if the Chinese participants considered it their duty to practice self-criticism in compensation for criticising their German partners.

In addition, there are a number of examples in the conversations with Chinese participants where the interviewees voiced their opinions only implicitly:

Participant 12

*Twelve: [...] the Germans / in fact they have a lot of opinions regarding Chinese people, how can I put it / previously they didn't have any contact whatsoever with Chinese people and didn't know China at all. And if somebody initially dealt with some bad people then, of course, they are left with some bad impressions.*

Instead of explicitly saying that Germans have prejudices against Chinese people Mrs. Twelve chose the neutral formulation “*they have a lot of opinions regarding Chinese people*”. I think that her utterance “*how can I put it*” shows that she had difficulties talking in greater detail about these “*opinions*” or commenting on them. Without explaining any of these “*opinions*” she tried to explain the possible reasons for them.

### ***Conclusion***

The Chinese and German participants’ speech behaviours when criticising partners differed in many ways. Generally, German participants criticised their Chinese partners more openly and directly. This difference is basically in accordance with the observations they had made (see chapter 5, section ‘*Communication problems due to the lack of foreign language proficiency of Chinese and German team members*’ and chapter 6, section

*'Directness versus vicariousness'*). Whilst negative assessments and criticism on the part of the Chinese participants were uttered very cautiously and were always watered-down, German speakers used many generalising and enhancing adverbs in their critical utterances (see chapter 6, section *'Explicit versus implicit'*). Chinese criticism was most of the time embedded in positive appraisals. This phenomenon could not be found in the German corpus.

### *Summary of differences*

The alternative analysis above shows significant differences between Chinese and German speech behaviours when appraising team colleagues and partners. Despite the fact that the majority of German participants considered their cooperation with Chinese team colleagues as good or very good whilst most of the Chinese participants deemed cooperation in teams with Germans as mediocre or not entirely satisfying there were much more positive statements about partners in the Chinese corpus than in the German corpus. All the conversations conducted with Chinese individuals contained elaborate eulogies about partners. It seems, therefore, that speaking positively about their partners is much more important for Chinese people than for Germans. There was considerably more criticism and negative appraisals regarding partners in conversations held with Germans. Positive aspects of partners were hardly taken into account by German participants. The few positive remarks made by Germans always referred explicitly to one or a number of specific individuals. Overall, negative appraisals were preferred in the German interview conversations and positive appraisals in the Chinese interview conversations. In my opinion, the Chinese speech behaviour corresponds with the Chinese relationship-oriented way of thinking as well as the Chinese concept of politeness to give as much 'face' to a partner as possible.

The phenomenon of self-criticism found in conversations with Chinese participants did not occur in the German conversations. According to the Chinese communication convention self-criticism is a sign of modesty and generally to be understood as an understatement (Liang, 1992). This self-criticism is practiced to tone down their criticism if somebody else or something else is criticised. In my opinion, misunderstandings occur if Germans interpret these Chinese understatements and self-criticisms according to German norms.

The different tendencies stated in chapters five and six, namely directness, explicitness and issue-orientation found in German communication behaviour and vicariousness, implicitness and person-/relationship-orientation characteristic for Chinese communication behaviour, can be observed in this alternative analysis regarding speech behaviour. I think that this might also be a possible explanation for the aforementioned communication interferences between Chinese and German participants. Since Germans generally exercise more criticism in their appraisals of colleagues and partners and normally do not use any self-criticism it is possible for a Chinese communication partner to get the impression that Germans are arrogant and haughty. In addition, the fact that Germans do not tend to tone down their criticism but rather use generalising and enhancing adverbs when criticising others can also result in Chinese individuals getting the impression that Germans are aggressive and not as cultivated as Chinese people. On the other hand, German communication partners could misunderstand the Chinese tendency of embedding criticism in positive statements and using several means of toning down their negative appraisals (for example, laughing when uttering criticism) since these behaviours are generally uncommon for Germans.

In the context of this speech behaviour analysis, gender specific differences were not taken into account. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, out of my twelve interview

partners eleven were men and secondly, I did not notice any significant differences between male and female speech behaviours during the interviews. This is probably due to women with senior positions in commercial organisations gradually adapting to the male linguistic style. However, in the context of other speech situations or language uses it is possible that the gender category plays a relevant role after all. Whether and to what extent the speech behaviours of Chinese and German business people in different communication situations will differ from that presented in this thesis remains to be clarified in further studies.

Lastly, it should be pointed out that when I use the undifferentiated manner of saying ‘the Chinese’ or ‘the Germans’ in my study then this is not meant to indicate that all German and all Chinese individuals would demonstrate the same speech behaviours as the ones illustrated in this study. The simplification is just meant to illustrate different tendencies that might exist. There are certainly regional, group-specific and individual differences within the Chinese or German language communities. These differences always need to be taken into account in every particular communication situation in order to avoid prejudices. The comparison between communication behaviours allows one, to some extent, to be more aware of one’s personal communication behaviour and to create the conditions that will allow one not to assess and interpret the communication behaviour of others in accordance with one’s own cultural norms and conventions.



## **8 Summary of My Research Results**

In this study the communication experiences that Chinese and German participants have talked about were analysed. Narrative inquiry, as represented by this analysis, is a systematic epistemological way to understand subjective experiences by exploring the stories of Chinese and German participants that are themselves experiences structured and recalled inside wider cultural and social contexts (Kirkman, 2002; Webster & Mertova, 2007). The socio-cultural contexts were woven into the language used by Chinese and German participants to explain their experiences and signify the meanings of these experiences. However, Chinese and Germans not only differed with regards to language and language variety, but also with respect to their patterns of usage and how meaning was generated in interactive situations on the basis of socio-cultural knowledge. Therefore, my narrative inquiry took into account both linguistic and socio-cultural aspects and addressed the relations between interactive communication strategies and larger social and cultural phenomena. This aimed to provide a thicker explanation of communication interferences in intercultural communication, where theoretical attempts have so far remained rather fragmented, and to contribute findings from different perspectives on what has traditionally been viewed from a positivistic standpoint.

The findings of this study provide also an opportunity for this silent, and silenced, group to be recognised and supported in managing the experience of communicating in Sino-German teams. The lessons that have been learned from the communication experiences of these team members provide a rich and potentially instructive way forward for other team members and managers that cannot, from my point of view, be provided by 'objectivist' approaches. Besides contributing to the 'research gap' in understanding communication interferences in multinational teams generally and specifically in Sino-German teams, understanding the transformative power of stories had the potential to

contribute to positive and hopeful futures for Chinese and Germans working together in teams.

To uncover this potential, this study has explored the meanings derived from the experiences of twelve such team members. The lived experiences of a participant gain significance by giving memory to them (van Manen, 1990). Through conversation, meaning was assigned to phenomena that have occurred in their everyday life (van Manen, 1990). This being-in-the-world was grounded in temporality, and so to determine the meaning of such experiences was to understand them as occurring over time (Heidegger, 1982). In this study, participants described their communication experiences when working in Sino-German teams from their initial participation in such teams through to their present-day experiences. Through sharing these lived experiences of working and communicating with Chinese and Germans and vice versa, a number of linguistic and socio-cultural factors influencing communication behaviour and causing interferences were uncovered. The factors identified from the study resonate with a number of factors previously established and whilst others contributed new information that adds to the understandings of the meanings that may be made from such experience of communication interferences.

In other words, the major strength of this study is its emphasis on understanding experience through stories. In using narrative inquiry from an affirmative postmodern standpoint, the researcher's story adds to understandings of the use of story as a methodological approach, and illuminates the value of story as a vehicle for understanding previously hidden cultural and social issues. In these ways, the role of the researcher in this 'qualitative' inquiry may be viewed as synonymous to that of the team members. Both 'parties' are attempting to use their selves – their thoughts, feelings, understandings and experiences, to work in partnership with others so that further understandings and

meanings of the lived experience may be understood and, the lives of the ‘others’ in particular, enriched.

As a consequence I have purposefully chosen to use subjective writing to represent my personal voice alongside the use of the more conventional formal ‘scholarly’ expression, because this thesis used the methodology of narrative inquiry, which is explained simply by Clandinin and Connelly as being “stories lived and told” (2000, p.18). Therefore, my personal account was used to interrogate a broader social issue such as the experience of being a member in a Sino-German team (Cole & Knowles, 2001), where my experiences are presented as narratives of the self that seek to extend understanding of the issues raised (Sparkes, 2000). There is support within the literature for a departure from more traditional ‘academic’ writing, and compelling arguments have been put forward for its use. Foley (2002), for example, has argued persuasively for the use of ‘ordinary’ writing and a ‘highly personal’ voice within ‘academic’ work. For him this represents a conscious breaking away from formal academic writing in an effort to narrate and interpret events with a style that makes knowledge more accessible. My writing used in this thesis therefore values ordinary language over scientific language (Foley, 2002). This is an idea that resonates particularly for postmodern researchers such as myself, who are interested in personal, local and alternative ways of knowing (Abma, 2002), and reflects the ‘narrative turn’ taken this century, where researchers are learning how to locate themselves personally within their writing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). My writing in a personal style also provided an opportunity to reclaim voices that may have existed on the boundaries of ‘academic’ writing and research, such as the voices of members of Sino-German teams. Richardson (1994), an advocate of experimental writing, argues that in writing evocatively on personal experience, ‘academic’ research becomes more accessible to a wider public audience than that of the ‘academic’ world. This idea chimes well with the tenets of my

affirmative postmodern standpoint, where Richardson's concepts may be seen as analogous to that of seeking to empower team members through equitable provision of access to current knowledge and practices in the field of intercultural teamwork.

For these reasons, as a regular member of Sino-German teams, who has explored the experiences of other team members in such teams, the choice of narrative inquiry as the research methodology, within a postmodern theoretical framework, may be seen to combine synchronous personal, professional and research values and concepts, which formed the underlying theoretical and philosophical constructs for this research and thesis. In this study, narrative inquiry has been a powerful medium for conveying the richness and diversity of participants' experiences and I thoroughly recommend its use as innovative methodological approach of value for future research into the experiences of team members in multinational organisations or more broad in intercultural related research.

In attending to the voices in the margins for the first time, and using literary device and stories rather than units of text, new possibilities for interpretation became available. As evident in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, some of the same field texts were used to illustrate meanings derived from two different interpretive lenses. This dual analytic approach was informed by the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative studies on intercultural teamwork in multinational teams in the literature review. The alternative lenses applied to the analysis of field text have uncovered multiple perspectives on the meanings some Chinese and German team members have made of their communication experiences. This has added to, and developed, understandings from previous studies. This methodological approach allowed for diverse insights to be gained from the participants' experiences. The categories resulting from the content analysis in the first phase of analysis and interpretation have been compared with those of previous studies and have therefore built upon and developed understandings that have been absent from the literature to date. The

development of an analysis of the speech behaviour of Chinese and Germans in the second phase of the study has added a new methodological approach to the issue, and resulted in fresh and alternative perspectives on a topic often viewed as 'difficult'. This has added new understandings to current perspectives on the communication experiences of members of Sino-German teams.

The participant selection, which generated participants from diverse backgrounds, has also strengthened the study through recognising differences in experience, an important facet of postmodern research, that may occur for Chinese and Germans working in Sino-German teams. The breadth of range in background has combined to form a diversity of experience that has also previously been lacking in some research.

Through narrative inquiry, the inclusion of myself in the joint construction of the participants' stories - so that insider as well as outsider perspectives enriched the analysis - has strengthened the interpretive process. Given the lack of publication of some of the previous research on communication in intercultural teams and groups, it is also anticipated that knowledge gained from the findings of this study will greatly enhance the wider understanding of the experiences of intercultural communication in Sino-German teams and may be of significant benefit to organisations relying on Chinese and German employees.

The findings appear to be that these experiences were not satisfying for them. Both sides brought up complaints. Utterances such as "*They will never be able to understand Chinese people*" (participant 8) and "*Foreigners will never really understand the Chinese*" (participant 7) demonstrate the disappointment and despair experienced by some of the Chinese participants and point to the communication interferences experienced by Chinese and German members of Sino-German teams.

When comparing the Chinese and German utterances about these communication interferences experienced in Sino-German teams a consensus could be noted. Whilst the broad interference of not being able to understand their Chinese colleagues prevailed on the German side the Chinese often felt that the Germans did not understand them. In the interviews the German participants ‘confirmed’ that they had problems in understanding Chinese people. From a postmodern standpoint I argue that the German participants hold a common perception on communication interferences when communicating with the Chinese, which can be seen as common view at least for this group. However, this common view is better seen as a resonance between the experiences of the German participants, since many of the interpretations of these experiences by the participants were not identical. The resonance is seen in terms of what they saw as certain communication interferences that lead to not understanding Chinese people. The Chinese participants also told me that they experienced communication interferences when working with Germans and this also reflects a resonance within their group. The consensus shown in the communication interferences that arose was that one side (Germans) does not understand the other side (Chinese) and both sides described this situation from their own perspective situated in their respective social and cultural context. In other words, Germans had difficulties understanding their Chinese colleagues (but not vice versa). In the following section the research questions “What communication interferences do Chinese and Germans experience in their teamwork?” looking at the detailed communication interferences and “What are the factors relating to these communication interferences?”, which were also found to apply to some extent for multinational teams in the literature review conducted beforehand, are answered.

*Language skills*

The German side's problem in understanding Chinese team colleagues is strongly connected from their viewpoint with the lack of foreign language skills on the part of Chinese people. This difficulty was also argued for in the literature review on multinational teams in situations where none of the team members are able to use their mother tongue and language skills in a third working language are therefore required for all team members (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Staples & Zhao, 2006). On this view the lack of foreign language proficiency by the Chinese was considered by Germans to be one of the main reasons for their lack of understanding of the Chinese team members and therefore a factor related to communication interferences. The German participants stressed the fact that, according to their experiences, there were not enough Chinese people who were able to speak German or English fluently in order to communicate easily with foreigners in teams. And since only a small number of the German participants had a command of the Chinese language (three participants did not speak Chinese, two had a basic knowledge of the language and only one spoke Chinese) the language barrier between Chinese and German participants was reported as being a distinctive factor relating to the communication interferences experienced by Germans working in Sino-German teams in China. Reflecting on these communication interferences and considering how best to handle them, assuming they could be handled, by tackling the language barrier from their side, three of the German participants considered Chinese language proficiency to be helpful, one thought that it was necessary and only two participants believed that being able to speak the Chinese language was unnecessary for their assignment in China.

From the Chinese perspective, the Chinese participants deplored the fact that the majority of Germans did not even have basic Chinese language skills. Three out of the six

Chinese participants were able to communicate directly in German or English with their German team colleagues and the remaining three had at least some basic knowledge of the German or English language. However, on this account the majority of the Chinese participants considered the linguistic problem, meaning that Germans did not understand them due to their lack of Chinese language skills, to be more on the German side. Although none of the Chinese participants expected a German to speak Chinese fluently they thought it was particularly desirable that German employees assigned to work in China should learn the language of their host country. The command of the Chinese language or at least learning some basic language skills was, according to Chinese participants, helpful for both communication and cooperation and a factor that could help to avoid communication interferences.

When combining the perspectives from both sides, the related experiences of Chinese and German participants reflect that a lack of language proficiency, either in the working language of the team or the language of the host country, can cause communication interferences. The negative effect on team communication of no or insufficient language skills in the working language of teams as identified in the literature review (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Staples & Zhao, 2006) was also recognised in the misunderstandings between Chinese and German nationals as related by the participants. The language barrier can be seen as a subsequent factor leading to communication interferences when language skills are not sufficient for mutual understanding. This was also identified in the literature review where a similarity in mother tongues could be seen to result in fewer misunderstandings (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Staples & Zhao, 2006). Unfortunately, since there is a huge difference between the Chinese and German languages the language barrier will be stronger and may cause the opposite effect.



*Subsequent factors when language skills are not sufficient*

I found that when language skills are not sufficient on both the Chinese and German sides additional subsequent factors leading to communication interferences based on the specific context of Sino-German teamwork arose when compared to the results of the literature review (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Staples & Zhao, 2006).

On the one hand, a reason for problems in understanding due to the lack of foreign language proficiency in the view of both Chinese and German participants is that the communication between Chinese and German individuals in today's Sino-German teams depends heavily on interpreters, so that the quality of communication was often decisively influenced by the respective interpreter's qualifications and can therefore be seen as a factor relating to communication interferences. Whereas the majority of the German participants explained that they did not trust the interpreters provided by the Chinese side since in cases of dispute they would stay loyal to the Chinese side due to their own interests, both Chinese and German participants consciously expressed that there was still a shortage of technically or interculturally qualified interpreters.

On the other hand both sides agreed that Germans had difficulties in getting access to information in China due to linguistic deficiencies in the Chinese language that lead to communication interferences. Both Chinese and German participants mentioned that Germans working in Sino-German teams and not speaking Chinese only had access to information that was translated for them. They were not able to check whether they had received a complete translation or whether something had been omitted or concealed from them. Without direct communication there was also no possibility for Germans and team members only speaking Chinese to exchange opinions. Both sides pointed out that Chinese language proficiency was not so important from a work-related point of view for Germans

(to give work instructions, for example) since a corporate interpreter generally took care of this (even if with lower trust from the German side). Germans needed Chinese language skills more in order to establish the contacts, relationships and trust that are indispensable to Chinese business life and sometimes the only means for gaining access to information. This reflects that in the context of Sino-German teamwork both agreed that the Germans who lack Chinese language skills cannot follow the Chinese cultural ‘rules of the game’ (for example *guanxi*) that make access to information possible and this leads to problems in establishing contacts, relationships and trust and therefore also produces communication interferences. This is also because some essential information, which can often only be accessed by means of informal communication, generally only appears when contacts, relationships and trust have all been established. It has to be noted that the literature review also reports ‘trust’ as a factor positively influencing team communication (DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993), which I see as an important factor in Sino-German teams too. However, the participants’ views were more concerned with the prior steps involved in building trust, meaning informal communication, which is generally only possible using Chinese language skills and definitely not in cases where interpreters are involved nor when trying to communicate with Chinese team members who have no German or English language skills.

The specific research question “What role do language and language skills play in the communication interferences experienced by Chinese and German team members?” is, from my point of view, answered within the specific context of Sino-German teams.

### ***Communication behaviour***

Apart from communication interferences resulting in misunderstandings due to a lack of language skills, the Chinese participants interpreted their experiences, using their own cultural patterns of communication, such that they considered a particular reason for

communication interferences to be the Germans being ignorant of Chinese communication conventions and customs. The majority of Chinese participants criticised their German colleagues' lack of understanding of Chinese communication practices and customs. They often felt that their German communication partners did not understand them when they did not get their indirectly formulated messages and when politeness was misinterpreted variously as flattery, curiosity or invasion of privacy. According to the Chinese participants' perception of their experiences the reason was that Chinese communication behaviour differs in many ways from the communication behaviour of Germans. For example, during team meetings Germans preferred to express themselves directly and explicitly with precision and accuracy while the Chinese favoured hinting at things and using suggestive wording. This particular aspect of communication behaviour (communication style) was also recognised in the literature review on multinational teams in terms of how an open communication style can influence team communication positively whereas a more reserved or indirect style does not (Cramer, 2007; DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Podsiadlowski, 2002). When simply applying the finding of the literature review this means that in the Sino-German case the Chinese communication style leads to communication interferences when communicating with Germans. However, the reviewed literature does not comment specifically on the Sino-German case. It deals with more facets of communication behaviour than style and generally reflects the advantages of an open communication style when various national cultures are involved.

The idea of communication behaviour as a source for communication interferences is supported from the German perspective where the majority of German participants pointed out that the communication interferences were exclusively due to the incomprehensible Chinese communication behaviour that was sometimes a very closed

style of communication that was foreign to them and deviated from 'normal' German or other western communication conventions. In other words, the German participants deemed the otherness of Chinese communication behaviour to be another significant factor relating to the communication interferences they experienced. My interview conversations showed that the German participants considered the traditional Chinese style of presenting information, namely initially stating all the relevant background information before getting to the main point, as a waste of time and arguing in a circle. This resulted in the German communication partners often considering the Chinese as being dishonest or unqualified. In addition, where Germans expected a clear and definite answer the Chinese responded in a vague or evasive way; where Germans expected directness and openness the Chinese beat about the bush; where Germans expected an objective discussion the Chinese withdrew and did not express their opinions. Here the particular aspect of open communication, in terms of shared opinions, interpretations and problem explanations shared within the group, was also not present leading to communication interferences when working with Germans. In summary, for German participants, their Chinese team colleagues' communication behaviour was often inappropriate for the situation.

When comparing the themed differences between Chinese and German communication behaviours narrated by the participants no contradictions can be found, the 'Chinese idiosyncrasy' that Chinese people generally do not openly express their opinions and thoughts (see chapter 5, section 'Chinese people avoid answering with a direct "yes" or "no"') mentioned by my German participants complies with the Chinese statement that Chinese individuals prefer using an indirect and implicit turn of phrase (see chapter 6, sections 'Directness versus vicariousness' and 'Explicit versus implicit'). On the other hand, the Chinese participants mentioned in the interviews that Germans generally expressed themselves more directly and openly than Chinese people (see chapter 6, section

‘Positive experiences and problems when communicating with German team members’). The alternative analysis in chapter seven regarding Chinese and German speech behaviours when appraising team colleagues and partners also shows the same considerable differences in speech behaviours. Whilst the German participants criticised their Chinese team colleagues or partners very directly and always emphasised their partner’s negative characteristics in the interviews the Chinese participants always embedded their criticism in positive appraisals. In addition, the Chinese used linguistic means and self-criticism to tone down their criticism that were missing in the critical utterances made by Germans. Misunderstandings may occur if Germans interpret these Chinese understatement and self-criticism according to German norms and misunderstand them because they are uncommon amongst Germans. Since Germans generally exercise more criticism in their appraisals of colleagues and partners and normally do not use any self-criticism it is possible for a Chinese communication partner to get the impression that Germans are arrogant and haughty. In addition, the fact that Germans do not tend to tone down their criticism but rather use generalising and enhancing adverbs when criticising others this can also result in Chinese individuals getting the impression that Germans are aggressive and not as cultivated as Chinese people.

However, the Chinese communication behaviour caused more comprehension interferences than the Germans’ behaviour in their intercultural communication as shown by the Chinese and German participants’ narrated perceptions of their experiences. Chinese and German participants both noted that in team meetings Germans preferred to use a forthright communication style and got straight to the point whereas the Chinese favoured getting to the point gradually. Whilst many Germans considered this Chinese approach as being a negative ‘Chinese idiosyncrasy’ the Chinese participants explained that they were simply using a different strategy for presenting and organising information (see chapter 5,

section 'Chinese people do not like to get straight to the point' and chapter 6, section 'Differences in presenting and organising information') and the German communication behaviour was not viewed by Chinese team members in a negative light, but even rather positively. In other words, the experiences of both Chinese and German participants reflected the fact that the communication behaviour of Chinese people can cause communication interferences. The negative effect on team communication, as to some extent identified in the literature review, is shown in the reserved communication style of the Chinese who do not share their opinions within the Sino-German team. As was found in the literature review on multinational teams (Cramer, 2007; DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Podsiadlowski, 2002), because differing opinions were not shared within in the group and no open discussion was initiated from the Chinese side the team communication as a whole was interfered with. For this particular aspect (communication style) it can be argued that both multinational teams generally, as well as Sino-German teams specifically, are negatively influenced by a communication style such as that used by the Chinese team members in this study.

Besides the German team members' lack of understanding of Chinese communication behaviour, the Chinese participants also mentioned that the issue-orientation and content-orientation of Germans differs from the person-orientation and relationship-orientation of the Chinese which also leads to communication interferences (see chapter 6, section 'Issue-oriented and content-oriented versus person-oriented and relationship-oriented'). The 'German idiosyncrasy' that Germans are issue-oriented was negatively interpreted by some Chinese participants as 'inhuman coldness' and lacking 'human feelings' (see chapter 5, section 'Negative experiences and problems when communicating with German team members'). Germans not having a focus on relationship-oriented interaction leads to communication interferences with Chinese team

members. Having not a focus on relationship-orientation leads to communication interferences as also recognised in the literature review (Cramer, 2007; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Hofner Saphiere, 1996) on the broader scale of teams with multiple nationalities including nationality types that demonstrate communication behaviours similar to the Chinese and German participants in this study with more or less issue-orientation and content-orientation on the one side and more or less person-orientation and relationship-orientation on the other.

Whereas it can be assumed as found in the literature review that multinational teams show more relational interactions than nationally homogenous teams (Cramer, 2007; Watson, et al., 1993), Germans preferred to get straight to the point and avoided anything extraneous when communicating with business partners whilst informal exchange of information and personal relationship details were very important for Chinese employees and Chinese business partners. Generally, a Chinese individual spares no effort to get to know a colleague or business partner better. This reflects a similar view of relational interaction as identified in the literature review, where it is seen as a focus on interpersonal relationships among group members to improve team communication (Cramer, 2007; Watson, et al., 1993). Good interpersonal relations and informal conversations between team members or business partners have a greater significance in China than in Germany (for example also shown in Liang, 1990; Heberer & Wegmann, 1991; Yang, 1994; Hirn, 2005; Zinzius, 2007; Kuan & Häring-Kuan, 2008). Whereas relational interaction is seen in the literature review as an enabler for the social integration of each team member and as a means of identifying each team member in the group (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Watson, et al., 1993), personal contacts, cultivating relationships and get-togethers are seen in the Chinese cultural context as indispensable for both individual business people and whole companies in China to ensure access to resources such as material goods,

services, information and know-how (see chapter 5, section ‘Informal communication plays an important role in teamwork with Chinese colleagues’). This aspect is only reflected in a few studies on multinational teamwork where it was found that relational interaction in the form of building relationships is a precondition for solving problems and finishing tasks in teams and that informal communication is therefore a specific form of relational interaction that appears in such teams.

However, I found there was an additional view on the effect of communication behaviour on communication compared to the results of the literature review that was based on the specific context of Sino-German teamwork. Whilst Germans endeavour to distinguish between factual and personal problems in conflict situations most Chinese individuals are convinced that a conflict exists not only on a factual level but also on a personal level. And while Germans prefer addressing problems directly and discuss areas of disagreement in an open manner Chinese people generally try to avoid dealing with problems directly. In the first instance, they try to find a solution on the personal level by psychologically influencing the communication partner with a view to solving the problem indirectly (see chapter 5, section ‘In conflict situations Chinese people often behave differently to Germans’). When communicating or interacting in teams Chinese people attach more importance to saving each other’s face than Germans. Also, in business where, from a German perspective, factual arguments and objective discussions should take priority, Chinese individuals prioritise the Chinese culture specific concept of saving face which leads to communication interferences (see chapter 5, section ‘The Chinese concept of saving face has a different meaning to the German concept’).

The research question “What differences in communication behaviour are recognised by Chinese and German team members?” is from my point of view answered by the conversations with the participants detailed above. However, as already indicated



with the Chinese concept of face, it is not the communication behaviour on its own that should therefore be considered as possible factors in relation to communication interferences but rather the culture specific social conventions and norms that regulate the communication behaviour.

### *Culture-specific conventions and norms*

Culture specific social conventions and norms that regulate the communication behaviour can be recognised in the German participants' understanding of their experiences which demonstrate that intercultural communication partners do not always enter into the communication with stereotypes already in place since stereotypes can also be subconsciously developed during the communication encounters due to culture-specific communication behaviours (Barres, 1974). This also reflects what is found in the literature review for any multinational team, that both observable differences and not directly observable differences in teams can be found, with the latter 'invisible' factors consisting of skills, information, knowledge, values, cognitive processes and embedded experiences the impact of which are only seen during teamwork (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993). The culture specific conventions and norms, in other words the cultural knowledge, based on these 'invisible' factors, which are also referred to as internal differentiation characteristics, are found to have a negative impact on team communication if team members do not have the internal cultural knowledge regarding other team members. This leads German participants, due to their ignorance of foreign cultural communication conventions, to interpret the foreign Chinese communication behaviour using norms from their own culture and therefore from their own perspective (Barres, 1974). As a result of this ethnocentric perspective, unexpected communication behaviour during intercultural cooperation not only results in communication interferences but also in stereotyping and 'national' prejudices against

communication partners from other cultures. This was also predicted in the literature review on multinational teams where such internal differentiation characteristics were seen to influence team member thinking and communication behaviour (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993). If team members are not aware of the different characteristics in the culture(s) of other team members it may cause prejudice against team members of other cultural groups.

However, the analysis in this study illustrates that it is necessary to be familiar with some culture-specific social conventions and norms regulating Chinese behaviour in day-to-day communication and interactions in order to avoid communication interferences. This study explored two key terms that play a critical role in understanding Chinese behaviour and these are considered as factors relating to communication interferences, namely *mianzi* and *guanxi*.

*Mianzi*, the Chinese concept of saving face differs distinctively from the German concept. For Chinese individuals it is, for example, considered to be a threat of losing face if an offer or an invitation is accepted straightaway with a “yes” or if differences of opinion or failures to understand are indicated clearly with a “no” or if a clear position is adopted in a controversial issue. Therefore, from a German perspective, Chinese communication behaviour is often confusing, incomprehensible and irrational. From the participants’ interview utterances it is apparent that in conflict situations the ‘irrational’ Chinese communication behaviour could result in Germans assuming that their Chinese colleagues or business partners were unqualified, inscrutable, dishonest and hypocritical and were consciously trying to conceal information. From the analysis in this study it can be seen that many of the so-called ‘Chinese idiosyncrasies’ causing communication interferences for German participants can be explained by the Chinese concept of saving

face (*mianzi*). The preference of vicariousness, vagueness and ambiguity in Chinese language use in many situations is closely linked to this Chinese *mianzi* concept.

*Guanxi*, the Chinese term for social bonds and relationships is another important key to understanding Chinese communication behaviour. According to the *guanxi* principle the Chinese divide their fellow men into two categories: 'own people' and 'outsiders'. In China one is obliged, as attested by my personal experience and by my Chinese relatives, to help people one is linked to by means of *guanxi* and to grant them favours and provide advantages. From a Chinese perspective this is morally justifiable. Persons outside a *guanxi* relationship are not important and are treated with indifference. The important role that informal and personal communications play in business in China, mentioned by both Chinese and German participants, can be explained by the importance of *guanxi* in Chinese society. It seems that informal and personal contacts are the best and most effective ways to establish *guanxi*. The Chinese person-oriented and relationship-oriented communication style mentioned by my Chinese participants can also be explained by the important role *guanxi* plays in China.

My study therefore shows that, due to a lack of knowledge about cultural differences, communication partners often subjectively reinterpret culturally related communication interferences and ascribe them to their partner's personality (for example a lack of motivation on the part of a Chinese colleague or arrogance on the part of a German superior); or they are over-generalised and explained as being the generally accepted national characteristics of a partner (for example, the dishonesty of Chinese individuals and the impatience of Germans). There are particular situations where the actual words spoken by a communication partner seem to have been understood (by means of a mutually spoken third language for example) where conceptual differences and different patterns of orientation are often ignored.

Since culturally-related communication interferences generally have negative consequences for both the relationship and the cooperation of the communication partners some participants suggested solving these problems by means of intercultural preparation as also suggested in the literature reviewed (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Watson, et al., 1993). As far as intercultural preparation is concerned the number of German advocates of preparation was slightly larger than those who did not support this idea. Out of the German participants with whom I spoke about this topic there were two who believed that intercultural preparation was unnecessary for the communication and cooperation with Chinese colleagues, two rated it as being helpful and one considered it to be necessary. The reasons cited for rejecting the preparation were (a) not wanting to be influenced by someone else's opinion and (b) rumours that the subject matter taught in these intercultural seminars completely bypassed reality and that it was pointless to attend a general seminar since the actual situations differed significantly from region to region. In the words of one German participant: "*What is valid in Beijing is invalid in Shanghai and what is valid in Shanghai is invalid in Nanjing or Harbin*" (participant 5). However, the assessment of participants 2 and 3 who had attended intercultural seminars was more positive than that of the others. They considered these seminars to be informative. They indicated, however, that some of the information conveyed in the seminars was outdated whilst some of the other information was simply false.

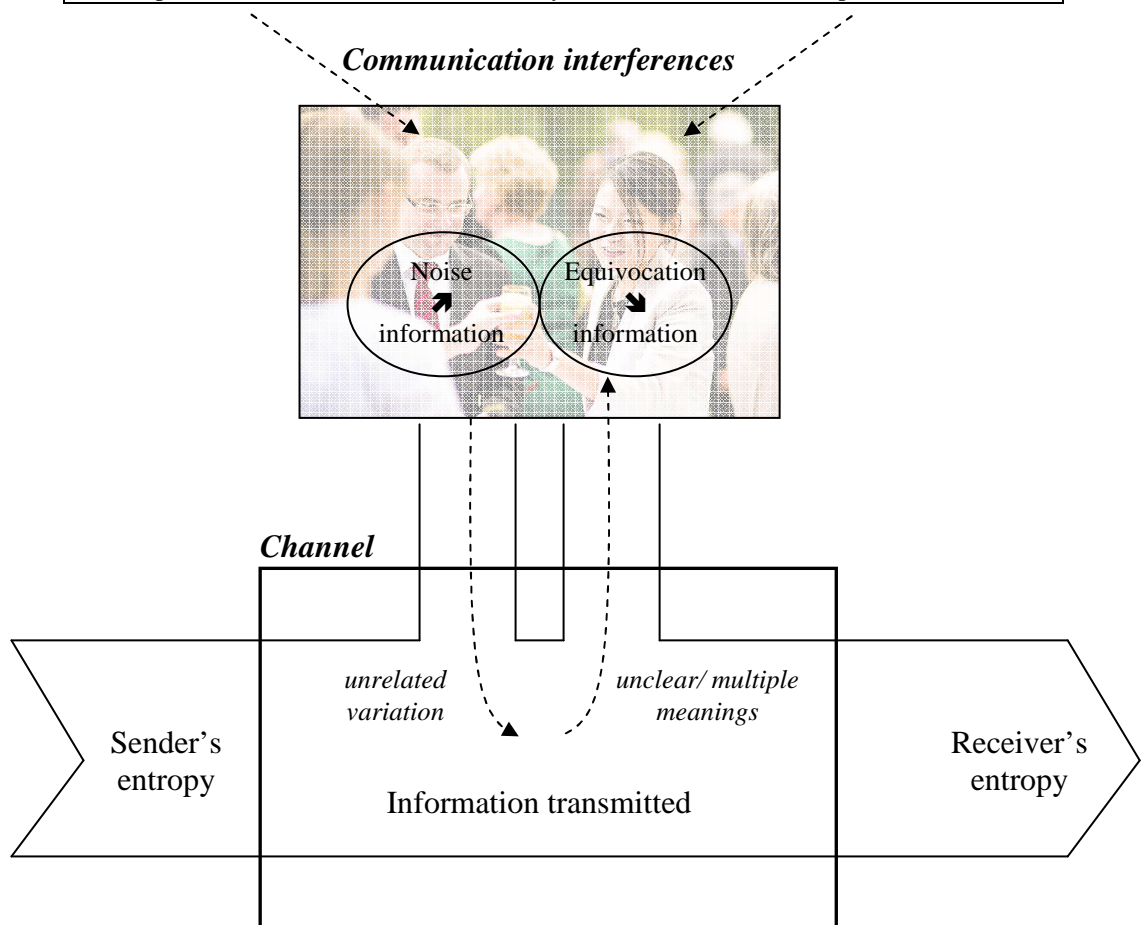
The Chinese participants, on the other hand, broadly endorsed the need for intercultural preparation. They were all of the opinion that it was important for Germans working in China to learn something about Chinese culture before starting their assignment in China. They thought that without any knowledge about and understanding of Chinese communication conventions and behaviour Germans working in teams with Chinese

colleagues were bound to experience interferences in communication and cooperation. However, only two Chinese participants (participants 10 and 11) commented on the idea of intercultural preparation for Chinese individuals. Both pointed out that despite their wish to improve their knowledge about intercultural differences between Chinese and Germans and the German way of thinking they did not have any opportunity to do so since, unlike in Germany, there were no intercultural seminars available in China. The remaining Chinese participants did not comment upon intercultural preparation. They stressed, however, that they were aware of existing cultural differences and that they accepted the otherness of German behaviour. According to the Chinese participants it goes without saying that Germans working in China should accept or at least respect Chinese customs, norms and conventions. One reason for the fact that the majority of Chinese participants did not express their opinion on their own intercultural preparation could be that they were not explicitly asked to comment on this. In addition, my initial description of the aim of the conversation might have suggested to them that they should only narrate about their German colleagues working in Sino-German teams. Whether the Chinese participants' stance on intercultural preparation reflects a sinocentric way of thinking remains to be seen.

The factors identified above relating to interferences in communication, which both Chinese and German participants experienced and interpreted from their own social and cultural contexts, show a consensus. This consensus can be integrated with the visualisation of communication in multinational teams of the literature review.

**Factors relating to communication interferences in Sino-German teams**

Language skills	Communication behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language proficiency of Chinese and Germans</li> <li>• Language barrier between Chinese and German</li> <li>• Qualification of Chinese interpreter</li> <li>• Ability of Germans to follow Chinese cultural 'rules of the game'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese communication behaviour</li> <li>• Issue-/content-orientation of Germans vs. person-/relationship-orientation of Chinese</li> <li>• Chinese face-concept (mianzi)</li> </ul>
Knowledge about cultural background/ culture-specific conventions and norms	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mianzi (Chinese concept of saving face)</li> <li>• Importance of Guanxi in Chinese society (social bonds/ relationships)</li> </ul>	



**Figure 9.** Visualisation of communication in Sino-German teams based on my research results.

The diagram above (Figure 9) does not divide the factors relative to communication interferences into team member and group factors as was done in the literature review since such a differentiation was not narrated by the participants and all these factors can best be seen on an individual team member level. Apart from the factors influencing

communication that were identified in the literature review, the time devoted by each team member towards developing good team communication in terms of exploring low-lying diversity characteristic and building relationships as well as indications about how nationalities should be distributed within one team and which type of task should be allocated to a particular team were not identified in the participants' narrated experiences and therefore not included in my analysis.

### *Limitations and future research*

The study is limited in that the inclusion of twelve participant voices means that many more, and possibly differing, perspectives were not included. The findings are therefore limited to this particular group of team members although they may resonate for other team members of Sino-German teams.

Yet I fully acknowledge that the research thesis is always an interpretation of such experiences and processes, and no matter how much I aim to represent the stories, the final result is inevitably an incomplete and constructed representation of the research undertaken. Due to the subjective nature of interpretation employed in narrative inquiry, an 'objective' recounting of another's story is also not possible, and as Koch (1998) has argued, this form of interpretive inquiry brings with it a number of challenges. In addition, the seeming directness of a narrative may actually be indirect and contain multiple layers. Stories may therefore be liable to misinterpretation on the part of the researcher, or contain contradictions on the part of the narrator. A narrator may also neglect relevant structural factors that may have affected their life or present them in a biased manner (Denzin, 1989; Poirier & Ayres, 1997).

In narrative inquiry, stories are 'simply' interpretations, and the stories people tell are selfstories. All stories may be considered as fictions (Denzin, 1989; Poirier & Ayres, 1997). Thus, narrative inquiry has been criticised for not representing the 'truth' of

participants' experiences, which highlights the difficulty of 'accurate' representation of a person's life (Denzin, 1989). Whilst narratives do not produce generalisable findings in the statistical sense, they can be generative. The researcher may also be accused of 'manufacturing' stories, which of course they do as the story is in part their interpretation. Narrative inquiry has further been criticised for being more 'art' than research, as it can be viewed as being based on talent and intuition, defying clear order, and being difficult to teach (Lieblich et al., 1998). Such issues may also be considered strengths depending, on the perspective from which they are viewed. Given the perspectives taken in this research, these elements are indeed viewed in this vein and are seen as benefits and not deficiencies that need to be redressed.

I also have to admit that the polarisation of Chinese and German communication behaviours in the analysis tends towards a certain schematic in the way of looking at things. From the perspective of an 'affirmative postmodernist' it has to be stressed at this point that the description of the communication behaviours in this study merely serves the purpose of illustrating a tendency that should not be generalised. Even within a language community there are of course significant differences between the communication behaviour used by individuals. There are certainly Chinese individuals who express their opinions directly and openly and Germans who in certain situations prefer giving indirect and evasive answers instead of a straightforward "yes" or "no". However, the individual differences should not be confused with cultural imprints. Just as there are similarities between individuals from northern and southern Germany that are based on a common cultural heritage there are also some characteristics that are shared by all Chinese people. Knowledge of the fundamental cultural differences can help to distinguish individual personal idiosyncrasies from cultural imprints in intercultural communication.



Last but not least, the historicity of the study results should be made clear at this point. This study, which is based on conversations conducted primarily in 2011, takes into account communication interferences in Sino-German teams reported by Chinese and German participants but these are merely those participants' experiences and opinions at the time before and during the interviews. It is not the aim of this study to identify universally applicable rules for the phenomenon of Sino-German intercultural communication. From a postmodern perspective and as already indicated in the literature review (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Watson, et al., 1993), culture is not a static value and the interferences experienced in Sino-German intercultural communication within teams are subject to changes resulting from social, political, economic and cultural developments in both societies. Further opening of the Chinese society and the on-going globalisation of the world economy will inevitably result in a rapprochement of the Chinese and Western cultures. Speaking from my own experience, an increasing 'westernisation' in terms of lifestyle and behaviour can be observed in Chinese cities particularly amongst younger people. With the increase of international communication experiences on the part of the Chinese and the Germans as well as the strengthening of intercultural contacts, a better understanding between Chinese and German nationals is probably within reach. However, superficial internationalisation easily clouds the issue regarding cultural divergences. I think that from an anthropological perspective cultural differences will remain despite contacts and conversations between peoples.

For that reason the communication interferences and observed differences in the communication behaviours of Chinese and German individuals mentioned by the participants should be compared with the results of future research as well as research conducted on communication problems between Chinese and German colleagues,

managers or scientists in order to also recognise the identified resonances in other contexts or to perhaps find, depending on the context, some differences. Particular attention should be given to the increasing importance of teams in Chinese enterprises or joint ventures in Germany, which probably constitute a different context to “traditional” German enterprises in China. In addition, the question arises whether and how sex, age, social status, education, regional origin, dialect and other factors apart from cultural influences have an influence on Sino-German intercultural communication.

Since intercultural communication is a learning process for the people involved, a long-term study by means of a field research study in a Sino-German joint venture could produce results relating to whether and how communication problems change during the course of the cooperation between Chinese and German colleagues as well as whether both sides adjust their communication behaviours and what kind of consequences the communication interferences have on the cooperation in the long-term.

Research could be carried out through the medium of recorded interviews to find out which concrete communication situations and speech acts are particularly susceptible to misunderstandings and communication problems in Sino-German communication. In my opinion, an in-depth analysis of the culture-specific meaning of individual speech acts in German and Chinese is also necessary as well as analysing the different expectations that Chinese and German communication partners have in concrete communication situations; these analyses could include situational contexts such as when arguing, complimenting, criticising, asking for help, adopting a position, uttering differences of opinion etc. in order to improve communication between Chinese and German individuals.

#### *Suggestions from my German perspective*

However, the results of my study can also already assist in the understanding of current and future communication interferences experienced in Sino-German teams, as

well as supporting the suggestions that I give from my German point of view as provided in the following section. These suggestions additionally reflect the knowledge and understanding that helps me, as a German, try to avoid communication interferences in Sino-German teamwork.

### *Linguistic preparation*

One result of this study is that both German and Chinese participants indicated that they would welcome the opportunity for language training - if their employer provided it. Whilst the majority of the German participants wanted to learn some basic Chinese language skills (and some of them actually had) the Chinese participants mainly hoped to have an opportunity to improve their ability to speak a foreign language. The majority of the German interviewees considered it useful to learn the basics of the Chinese language. According to them it was not only desirable but also necessary to attend a three month language course before starting a period of employment in China lasting longer than a year. Speaking from my own experience, I would say that for those who are not sent to a major city, a three month language course is indeed vital. It is obvious from the German participants' experiences that, although it is not possible to speak Chinese fluently after a three months of language training, people participating in such language training learned the basics of the Chinese language and they could build on this basic foundation later on depending on the need and opportunity.

I feel that the linguistic preparation for Germans who are going to work in Sino-German teams in China should be goal-oriented. According to my personal experience the language training should focus on speaking and understanding Chinese rather than reading and writing the language. To quickly learn how to speak using commonly-used vocabulary including greetings and other Chinese expressions it is advisable to start by learning *pinyin*, which is an official system, used to transcribe Chinese characters into Latin script, as I did

myself. Learners can then decide in accordance with their needs and interests how much time and energy they are prepared to invest in learning Chinese characters. If it is not necessary for individuals to read Chinese texts and documents then, I suggest, it will suffice to be able to recognise a few Chinese characters. Based on my personal experience it is not necessary for Germans working in Sino-German teams to learn how to write Chinese characters since, on the one hand, it is possible to use software programs for writing Chinese and on the other hand it is fairly unlikely that it would be expected of Germans working in Sino-German teams in China to have this skill.

As I experienced myself, having some basic language skills can be very helpful for Germans with regards to mastering their day-to-day life in China, which in turn has a positive effect on one's work. In addition, language skills indicate the willingness of a foreigner to gear himself/herself up for China, which is enthusiastically appreciated by Chinese people. Dealing with the foreign language also introduces the learner to cultural differences since the linguistic "otherness" enhances the motivation to get to know the norms, ways of thinking and communication conventions of the foreign culture.

The language training for Germans working in Sino-German teams should, in my opinion, be cultural-oriented, since in intercultural communication more is expected from those with language skills than from those without. A German team member learning Chinese, for example, should be aware of the cultural differences when learning the Chinese greeting "nihao" (saying 'hello' to somebody) between addressing and greeting someone in China compared to in Germany. He/she needs to know that "nihao" is only used for greeting strangers and unfamiliar individuals. Friends, family members and acquaintances are generally greeted with a question in China that varies according to the situation. At mealtimes a popular question, for example, is "Did you have something to eat?" When meeting somebody in the street a commonly used question is "Where are you

heading?” or “Are you going shopping?” If two individuals have not seen each other for a long time then “What’s been on your mind recently?” is a commonly asked question. The original meaning of the Chinese word for “greeting” (*wenhou*) is “asking about the state of affairs”. Asking a person about his/her professional situation is an expression of sympathy and “heartfelt caring” (*guanxin*). Although these “greeting questions” require a reply this reply does not need to correspond to any particular facts, since the question is not a real question but more of an elaborated polite phrase. The knowledge that these Chinese “greeting questions” are not a sign of curiosity or intrusiveness on the part of a Chinese person was always helpful to me.

When learning the Chinese language it was at the same time helpful for me to learn to distinguish between utterances and intentions. Questions regarding personal and social biography during the phase of getting to know each other have the function of opening a conversation. By means of such “questions aimed at getting to know someone” the person asking these questions wants to demonstrate his/her interest in the other person and his/her desire to build a personal relationship with the other person. In addition, a Chinese individual is convinced that it is only possible to behave in a socially appropriate manner if one knows the other person’s age, marital status, social status, educational level and the group(s) to which the person belongs. This need for a nuanced understanding of the ‘whole’ person to enable effective communication is a central tenant of the Chinese communication psyche.

Understatement is also a part of Chinese politeness and social norms. If a German is invited by a Chinese person to attend “a meal consisting of whatever we happen to have at the moment” then he/she should be prepared to be served a meal with several courses or even a banquet. The German invitation “to come for a glass of wine”, however, can be taken more literally (Oksaar, 1991, p. 22).

In order for Germans who are going to work in Sino-German teams to learn the required foreign language skills in a very short time it is necessary, in my opinion, not only to consider that these German candidates are technically qualified for the task at hand but also that they have the linguistic skills necessary and an interest in learning Chinese. No matter how professionally qualified a person is for a task in China if he/she lacks the skills for communicating effectively with foreign partners then, in my opinion, this individual is not suited for deployment abroad.

From my personal experience I can say that apart from foreign language proficiency, gaining linguistic engagement enables the acquisition and appreciation of the culture associated with the language. Therefore, I think that this will also be of help to Germans who are going to work in Sino-German teams in China – providing a foundation but also a level of cultural as well as linguistic sensitization that assists in intercultural competence.

### ***Intercultural preparation***

My analysis shows that, due to a lack of intercultural competence and knowledge about cultural differences, communication partners often subjectively reinterpret culturally-related communication interferences and ascribe them to their partner's personality; or they over-generalise and explain them as being the generally accepted national characteristics of a partner. In situations where the words spoken by a partner are understood it is particularly noticeable that conceptual differences and different patterns of orientation are ignored. Since culturally-related communication interferences generally have negative consequences for both the relationship and the cooperation of communication partners, intercultural preparation is foundational for Germans who want to work successfully in Sino-German teams.

The type of intercultural preparation most mentioned by participants during interviews was attending an intercultural seminar. Although, in general, the majority of participants who attended an intercultural seminar evaluated these seminars positively, they also pointed out problems that they experienced. Some of the information was outdated or simply 'wrong'. One participant reported, for example, that during a seminar the trainees were told "*not to wear a tie with a flower design*" in China (participant 2) and that someone with a double-barrelled name "*should insist that this name didn't stem from the wife but has been in the family for five generations*" (participant 2). Another participant was of the opinion that some seminars were more of a hindrance than a help because later on the trainees struggled to live in accordance with the rules they learned during seminars and just "*met with incomprehension on the part of the Chinese*" (participant 3).

Intercultural seminars purely based on 'details' can set Germans who are supposed to work in Sino-German teams on the wrong track. Let us suppose for a moment that a German was told that Chinese people generally refuse an invitation to a meal three times before accepting it. Later on in China this German then applies this rule mechanically and is surprised that his/her Chinese partner does not repeat the invitation after his/her third refusal. Intercultural preparation should therefore not aim at providing Germans assigned to China to work in Sino-German teams with an "etiquette manual" according to which they should wear a tie with a diagonal stripe in preference to a flower design or to say "yes" or "no" in certain situations. The purpose of intercultural preparation should be to enhance the awareness and sensitivity of Germans going to work in Sino-German teams regarding cultural differences and to develop the capability of distancing for themselves, from their own ethnocentric views, and accepting foreign and incomprehensible behaviour instead of considering it as being bad, nonsensical or meaningless (Oksaar, 1991).

Since intercultural communication requires very complex cultural knowledge and communication strategies, as well as the capability to understand and interpret, intercultural preparation for Germans assigned to work in Sino-German teams should not only entail culture-specific differences in communication behaviour and instructions regarding what to do and what not to do. Intercultural preparation should also convey socio-cultural background knowledge and premises for communication behaviour in order to enable German team members to understand why Chinese individuals behave differently to Germans in certain communication situations. Germans working in Sino-German teams who simply follow rigidly presented rules when communicating with Chinese partners are more likely to fail than to be successful. Judging by my personal experience, many intercultural seminars for Germans assigned to work in Sino-German teams try to convey “How The Chinese Do Things”. From the participants’ experiences it is, however, apparent that it is of not much use to realise how different foreigners are when communicating with members of a different culture. It is much more important to possess the skills to interpret and ‘translate’ the specific communication behaviours of a foreign partner and be able to deal with a foreign partner’s different perceptions.

In practical terms, this means that it is important for Germans assigned to work in Sino-German teams to learn how to interpret ‘typical’ Chinese behaviour and how to react to it as well as to be aware of how they themselves view the Chinese and which stereotypes they will encounter in China. Last but not least, intercultural preparation is also about reflecting on how one’s own behaviour might affect Chinese communication partners.

In order for Germans assigned to work in Sino-German teams to experience real communication interferences and to learn how to solve these problems during their intercultural preparation it is, I suggest, useful to involve the Chinese partner in these preparations. By means of role play and simulated negotiations and meetings it is possible



for the future communication partners to identify and discuss foreign cultural influencing factors, different cultural orientations and behaviours, to reflect on one's own behaviour and to find solutions. In this way Germans can learn about the cultural concepts underlying the foreign behaviour and at the same time become aware of how the foreign partner perceives and interprets their German (foreign) behaviour.

Reading books on Chinese history is also advisable as part of the private preparation of Germans assigned to work in Sino-German teams in China. As without this knowledge it is not possible to understand China today and its people. It is necessary to know what happened during the Cultural Revolution, its magnitude and its aftermath to better understand Chinese colleagues who are older than fifty. Older Chinese individuals very rarely utter their thoughts and opinions openly as some had bad experiences during the Cultural Revolution and some remain afraid that sometime in the future the same severe authoritarian control could be imposed again.

### *Conclusion*

The overarching objective of this research was to describe the intercultural communication experiences of members of Sino-German teams and to analyse factors relating to interferences in this communication, to provide approaches as to how this communication could be improved and, most importantly, as a prerequisite for actions of any kind to achieve improvements, to draw the attention of German employees and team members to the relevance of communication when working with their Chinese colleagues and vice versa. In order to do this, the current research on multinational teamwork was analysed first in order to identify factors influencing communication in multinational teams. This analysis highlighted a 'research gap' with regards to communication interferences in both intercultural communication generally and Sino-German teams in particular (since we can for the most part ignore previous studies concerned solely with Sino-German teamwork because researchers have generally ignored the communication aspect completely, let alone given it a real focus in their work).

Both topics have very seldom been explored by other researchers in terms of the experiences of individuals involved in such teamwork. In other words, no focus has been given to analysing what effects such experiences have had on team members who have lived through that experience, nor was any attention given to the perceptions they had or the conclusions they drew from them. For this reason, my analysis of the conversations conducted with twelve Chinese and German members of Sino-German teams examined the communication experiences they had in their daily business intercultural interactions and collaborations. Comparing the experiences related by Chinese participants with those related by German participants showed a substantial consensus with regards to the communication interferences experienced in Sino-German teams and the factors relating to these interferences, as well as observable differences in communication behaviours.

The lack of foreign language proficiency on the side of both Chinese and German individuals was stated as being a major factor for communication interferences that was further enhanced through the strong linguistic barrier between these two languages. Good language proficiency minimises the occurrence of misunderstandings and miscommunications. It allows better personal contact between the team members since it better enables people to establish personal contacts and relationships, as well as to use an interlinked communication structure that allows informal communication and therefore compliance with the Chinese cultural 'rules of the game'. The German participants' common problem of not getting access to information in China could therefore be solved if the Germans had sufficient Chinese language proficiency and/or the Chinese individuals had sufficient foreign language proficiency. Since this is confirmed by numerous results from classical research approaches to intercultural communication, in my opinion, no further attention is required on this issue. However, it is all the more surprising that according to the participants' experiences companies still do not sufficiently appreciate the need for language skills and the need to provide language training for employees prior to assignments abroad. The participants did not consider the use of qualified interpreters to provide a solution since using interpreters did not allow direct or 'sufficiently personal' communication.

However, foreign language proficiency alone is not a guarantee for successful intercultural communication in Sino-German teams. This study also analysed, in addition to the practical and theoretical significance of language and language skills, the cultural influences on the communication between Chinese and German team members. Many participants were either unaware (especially on the German side) or only partially aware of the fact that differences in communication behaviour are based on different culture-specific communication conventions and strategies. For example, whilst many Chinese participants

were aware of the existing differences in communication behaviour they still used their own customs and norms as benchmarks for their judgements.

It was found that intercultural awareness on the part of individuals in a team, meaning the knowledge and awareness of culture-specific conventions and norms had a positive influence on communication within the team. Knowledge of the meaning of the two key terms *mianzi* and *guanxi* plays an important role in Sino-German teams. On the other hand, an ethnocentric perspective on either one or both sides inevitably results in mutual negative attributions. The positive effect on communication within teams provided by intercultural competency, meaning the knowledge about the cultural background of the other team member, has been confirmed by numerous results from research on diversity and also by my study, which has provided insight on the specifics at play in Sino-German teams.

From the consensus that both Chinese and German team members perceived the same communication interferences three basic points can be inferred:

- These communication interferences exist
- The communication interferences are obvious to the individuals involved
- Other Sino-German teams probably have very similar experiences.

In accordance with my postmodern perspective I believe that the participants' local truths predominantly overlapped in this study, so that the recommendations given in this study can be applied to other Sino-German teams. As to the different views arising from the different social groups that occurred in this study, I acknowledge that local truths are certainly not identical for all Sino-German teams and that the recommendations could be interpreted in contexts differently or applied where other measures might serve better. However, the present thesis can, as a starting point, show the profitable potential of Sino-German teams when operating under favourable conditions (that is, the more favourable

communication characteristics of the factors relating to a reduction in communication interferences examined in this study). In the context of continuing globalisation and China's increasing importance to the German economy, the concern is no longer about the existence of intercultural Sino-German teams, but rather about optimum framework conditions for these teams. Even if individuals are accorded a special central position when focussing on communication issues in communication research (as well as in this study) it is still necessary that the prerequisites for successful Sino-German teamwork are also taken into account on the country level (for example, by providing cultural education), the company level (for example, in personnel selection) and the group level (for example, handling and communication). Only when all three are considered will a platform be created for effective intercultural communication in organisational teams.

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**Appendix 1: Tables****Table 1***Search terms for bibliographic databases*

Source	Search terms
Business Source Premier, IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences), PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES (all via EBSCO)	<p>(team* OR group* OR collaborat* OR working group* OR task group* OR global business team*)</p> <p><b>and</b></p> <p>(multinational* OR multicultural* OR intercultur* OR interethnic* OR divers* OR heterogen* OR cross culture* OR ethnic* OR cultural* OR national* OR race* OR individual difference* OR individual dissimilar*)</p> <p><b>and</b></p> <p>(account OR accounts OR action research OR measure* point OR task* OR problem* OR solv* OR case study OR content analysis OR discourse* OR ethnograph* OR ethnological OR experience* OR explor* OR findings OR focus group* OR experiment OR interview* OR life experience OR lived experience OR longitudinal OR meaning* OR narrative* OR observation* OR participant observ*)</p>

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	<p><i>OR</i> participat* <i>OR</i> path analysis <i>OR</i>  perception* <i>OR</i> perspective* <i>OR</i>  phenomenolog* <i>OR</i> purpos* sampl* <i>OR</i>  ‘qualitative’ <i>OR</i> questionnaire* <i>OR</i>  survey* <i>OR</i> talking <i>OR</i> theoretical sample  <i>OR</i> understanding* <i>OR</i> vignette*)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>and</b></p> <p>subject terms (intercultural <i>OR</i>  multinational <i>OR</i> multicultural <i>OR</i>  diversity)</p>
Zetoc Conference	<p>1 general: multinational team (5)  2 general: multicultural team (5)  3 general: intercultural team (9)  4 general: diversity team (42)</p>
Google Scholar / Google Books incl. Emerald (subject terms only due to the limited number (32) of search words)	<p>With all of the words: multinational <i>OR</i>  multicultural <i>OR</i> intercultural <i>OR</i>  interethnic <i>OR</i> “cross culture” <i>OR</i>  diversity</p> <p>With at least one of the words: team <i>OR</i>  group</p> <p>Search only in: Business, Administration,  Finance, and Economics / Social Sciences,  Arts, and Humanities</p>

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**Table 2***Search results and numbers extracted*

Database	Date searched	Hits	Title or abstract	Extract no.	Filename
Business Source Premier	30.05.2009	667	Both	29	Literature_ Review__DBA.enl
IBSS	30.05.2009	505	Both	1	Literature_ Review__DBA.enl
PsycINFO	24.05.2009	1.284	Both	14	Literature_ Review__DBA.enl
PsycARTICLES	24.05.2009	119	Both	1	Literature_ Review__DBA.enl
Zetoc	18.06.2009	61	All fields	0	
Google Books/ Google Scholar (incl. Emerald)	01.06.2009	1.410	Title	9	Literature_ Review__DBA.enl
Total		4.046		54	

**Table 3***Inclusion/exclusion criteria*

Parameters	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Group diversity	Multinational diverse groups (multiple nationalities)	Bi-national and bi-culturally diverse groups Ethnically and culturally diverse groups Mix of several types of diversity within one group research project (for example gender or age or education or experience AND nationality)
Time frame	Studies published from 1990 onwards	Studies published before 1990
Population	Studies which focus only on real existing teams	Studies which focus only on virtual teams
Outcome	Studies concerned with the processes and <u>results</u> of multinational teamwork that differ from nationally homogenous teams	Studies which do not report on the processes and results of multinational teamwork
Study type	Primary research	Book reviews, literature reviews, opinion pieces

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Studies containing findings which are based on 'quantitative' and/or 'qualitative' methods (data collection and analysis)	Studies which do not state which methods were applied (unclear methodology) for data collection and analysis
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**Table 4***Sources for the studies meeting the inclusion criteria*

Database	No. of studies meeting the inclusion criteria
Business Source	7
Premier	
IBSS	1
PsycINFO	5
Google Books/ Google Scholar	5
Total	18



**Table 5***Details of the studies meeting the inclusion criteria*

No	Authors	Title	Source / Database	Samples' environ- ment	Main research method	ILL or purchase request
1	Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson (1993)	Cultural diversity's impact on interaction process and performance:  Comparing homogeneous and diverse task groups	Psyc- INFO	University	Quan.	No
2	Bochner, S., & Hesketh, B. (1994)	Power distance, individualism/colle ctivism, and job- related attitudes in a culturally diverse work group	Psyc- INFO	Company	Quan.	Yes
3	Hofner Saphiere (1996)	Productive behaviours of global business teams	Psyc- INFO	Company	Qual.	Yes
4	Thomas, Ravlin, & Wallace	Effect of Cultural Diversity in Work Groups	Google Books	University	Quan.	Yes

No	Authors	Title	Source / Database	Samples' environ- ment	Main research method	ILL or purchase request
	(1996)					
5	Elron, E. (1997)	Top management teams within multinational corporations: Effects of cultural heterogeneity	Business Source Premier	Company	Quan.	No
6	Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale (1998)	Being Different Yet Feeling Similar: The Influence of Demographic Composition and Organisational Culture on Work Processes and Outcomes	Business Source Premier	University	Quan.	No
7	Watson, W. E., Johnson, L., & Merritt, D. (1998).	Team Orientation, Self-Orientation, and Diversity in Task Groups	Business Source Premier	University	Quan.	Yes
8	David C.	Cultural diversity	Psyc- University	University	Quan.	Yes

No	Authors	Title	Source / Database	Samples' environ- ment	Main research method	ILL or purchase request
	Thomas (1999)	and work group effectiveness: An experimental study	INFO			
9	Earley & Mosakowski (2000)	Creating Hybrid team cultures: An empirical test of transnational team functioning	Business Source Premier	Company	Qual.	No
10	Chatman & Flynn (2001)	The influence of demographic heterogeneity on the emergence and consequences of cooperative norms in work teams	Business Source Premier	University	Quan.	No
11	Podsiadlowski (2002)	Multikulturelle Arbeitsgruppen in Unternehmen: Bedingungen für erfolgreiche Zusammenarbeit am Beispiel	Google Books	Company	Quan. / Qual.	Yes

No	Authors	Title	Source / Database	Samples' environ- ment	Main research method	ILL or purchase request
		deutscher Unternehmen in Südostasien				
12	Shaw (2004)	A fair Go for all? The impact of intragroup diversity and diversity- management skills on student experiences and outcomes in team- based projects	Business Source Premier	University	Quan.	Yes
13	van der Zee, K., Atsma, N., & Brodbeck, F. (2004)	The Influence of Social Identity and Personality on Outcomes of Cultural Diversity in Teams	Psyc- INFO	University	Quan.	Yes
14	DeSanctis & Lu (2005)	Communication and the Learning Effectiveness of multinational	Google Books	University	Quan.	Yes

No	Authors	Title	Source / Database	Samples' environ- ment	Main research method	ILL or purchase request
Teams						
15	Dahlin, Weingart, & Hinds (2005)	Team diversity and information use	Business Source Premier	University	Quan.	No
16	Staples & Zhao (2006)	The effects of cultural diversity in virtual teams versus face-to-face teams	IBSS	University	Quan.	Yes
17	Cramer (2007)	Interkulturelle Zusammenarbeit in multinationalen Teams	Google Books	Company	Quan. / Qual.	Yes
18	Nam, Lyons, Hwang, & Kim (2009)	The process of team communication in multi-cultural contexts: An empirical study using Bales' interaction process analysis (IPA)	Google Scholar	University	Quan.	No

**Table 6***Team member factors that influence communication in multinational teams*


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<b>Themes and specific findings</b>
<p><b>Knowledge of the individual</b></p> <hr/> <p><u>Language skills</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language skills in the work language of the multinational team can positively or negatively affect team communication in terms of helping to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; Staples &amp; Zhao, 2006)</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><u>Knowledge about cultural background</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team members whose cultural knowledge about other team members in multinational teams is based on external differentiation characteristics (ethnicity or race for example) may have prejudices against them (Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993) and therefore</li> <li>• Knowledge about internal (“deeper”) differentiation characteristics and knowledge of other cultures typically supports better team communication and leads to less conflicts (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Watson, et al., 1993)</li> </ul> <hr/> <p><b>Process focus of the individual</b></p> <hr/> <p><u>Time allocation/ time devoted by team members</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team members in multinational teams will generally take more time to develop a good team communication than national homogenous teams due to the following identified reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ low-lying diversity characteristics may need time to be explored (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Watson, et al., 1998; Watson, et al., 1993)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

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- the process of getting to know each other and building relationships is unlikely to be as short as in nationally homogenous teams (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Podsiadlowski, 2002)
  - less conflicts will arise only after a certain period of executed teamwork (Staples & Zhao, 2006; Watson, et al., 1993)
  - There are conflicting research results regarding whether any time is needed and, if needed, what length of time is needed for multinational teams to communicate equally well or better than nationally homogenous teams (David C. Thomas, 1999; David C Thomas, et al., 1996)

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#### Relational interaction versus task-oriented interaction

- Multinational teams may only solve tasks after relationships are established (Cramer, 2007; Watson, et al., 1993)
  - A higher level of relational interaction at the beginning of the teamwork may increase the social integration of each team member and identification with the team as a whole (Cramer, 2007; Podsiadlowski, 2002; Watson, et al., 1993)
  - Multinational teams generally show more relational interactions compared to task-oriented interactions than nationally homogenous teams (Cramer, 2007; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Hofner Saphiere, 1996)
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**Table 7***Group factors that influence the communication in multinational teams*


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<b>Themes and specific findings</b>
<b>'Internal' to the team's 'control'</b>
<u>Communication style and type</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team communication in multinational teams is significantly improved when different opinions are shared within the group (Cramer, 2007; DeSanctis &amp; Lu, 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996; Podsiadlowski, 2002)</li> <li>• Face-to-face communication is typically essential for multinational teams at the beginning of the teamwork (Chatman &amp; Flynn, 2001; DeSanctis &amp; Lu, 2005; Hofner Saphiere, 1996)</li> </ul>
<u>Reflection and feedback</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The presence of sufficient feedback in multinational teams and taking measures based on it may have a positive impact on team communication and vice versa (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Watson, et al., 1998; Watson, et al., 1993)</li> </ul>
<u>Trust development</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within a multinational team prejudices are more likely due to external differentiation characteristics (for example ethnicity or nationality) that hinder the development of trust. The existence or non-existence of trust may be an important factor positively or negatively influencing the communication in multinational teams (DeSanctis &amp; Lu, 2005; Nam, et al., 2009; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993)</li> </ul>
<b>'External' to the team's 'control'</b>
<u>Distribution of nationalities within one group</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are conflicting research results regarding whether high national diversity may</li> </ul>

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lead to better or worse team communication (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Elron, 1997; Nam, et al., 2009; Staples & Zhao, 2006).

- With high national diversity a wider variety of opinions may appear (Chatman & Flynn, 2001; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Elron, 1997)
- Subgroups within multinational teams that are relatively more homogenous than the whole team may polarise group processes but there are conflicting research findings regarding the negative or positive impact of such subgroups on team communication (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994; Dahlin, et al., 2005; DeSanctis & Lu, 2005; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Shaw, 2004)
- There are also conflicting research findings regarding good team communication as a significant result in very diverse teams (Podsiadlowski, 2002; Shaw, 2004; van der Zee, et al., 2004)

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Type of task

- The advantages of multinational teams in performing tasks and problem solving have been identified as arising from the increased number of points of view, more ideas and better solutions for non-routine tasks (for example due to more creativity) (Cramer, 2007; Dahlin, et al., 2005; Shaw, 2004; Watson, et al., 1993)
-

**Table 8***Explanation of transcription**notation*

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,	Punctuation marks that structure the utterance
/	Cut-off after a word or construction
(?)	Words that the transcriber was unable to hear because they were distorted or inaudible
(is)	Presumed wording due to uncertainty regarding what was heard
[...]	Omission in the transcription

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**Table 9***German participants' Chinese language proficiency*

	Number of persons
Good Chinese language skills	1
Basic knowledge of Chinese language	2
No basic knowledge / just a few words	3

**Table 10***Business languages used by German participants in China*

	Number of persons
Chinese	3
German	2
English	6

**Table 11***Description of participants 1 to 6 (German nationals)*

Part- icipant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Current occup- ation	Sales Manager	Senior Sales Engineer	General Manager	IT specialist	Dept. Manager	Lawyer
Regular- ity in Sino- German team- work given?	At teams at his Chinese employer in China	Currently at Sino- German Joint- Venture in China	1 year at Sino- German Joint- Venture (ended at the time of interview) in China	At wholly- German- owned enterprise with Chinese teams in China	At Sino- German Joint- Venture in China	At wholly- German- owned lawyer's office in China with Chinese staff
Duration of stay in China	Several years	Several years	1 year	> 3 years	Nearly 2 years	> 1 year
Chinese Lang- uage skills	Good Chinese language skills	Basic knowledge of Chinese language	Basic knowledge of Chinese language	No basic knowledge / just a few words	No basic knowledge / just a few words	No basic knowledge / just a few words
Business	English /	English	English	English /	English /	English /

language used	Chinese			German	German / Chinese	Chinese
Preparation for Sino-German team-work	4 hours per day Chinese language course for 5 months before relocation to China	No	Not clearly mentioned	2 weeks intensive language and culture course	No	Several part-time (evening) language courses before and after relocation to China

**Table 12***Description of participants 7 to 12 (Chinese nationals)*

Participant	7	8	9	10	11	12
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Current occupation	Manager	Dept. head	General Manager	Manager	Accountant	Sales Manager
Regularity in Sino-German teamwork given?	At Sino-German Joint-Venture in China (same company like participant 5)	Currently at Sino-German Joint-Venture in China	Currently at Sino-German Joint-Venture in China	Currently at Sino-German Joint-Venture in China	At wholly-German-owned enterprise in China	At wholly-German-owned enterprise in China
Duration of stay in above company	Several years	Several years	More than 5 years	More than 10 years	3 years	Nearly 4 years
Foreign language	Basic knowledge of English	English: No basic knowledge	English: No basic knowledge	English	English / German	English / German

skills	language	/ just a few	/ just a few			
		words	words			
Business	Chinese /	Chinese /	Chinese /	English /	English /	English /
language	English	English	English	German	Chinese	German
used						
Preparat-	No	No	No	No	No	No
ion for	specific	specific	specific	specific	specific	specific
Sino-						
German						
team-						
work						



**Table 13***The Low-Context Communication (LCC) and High-Context Communication (HCC)*

LCC Characteristics		HCC	
Individualistic values		Group-oriented values	
Self-face concern		Mutual-face concern	
Linear logic		Spiral logic	
Direct style		Indirect style	
Person-oriented style		Status-oriented style	
Self-enhancement style		Self-effacement style	
Speaker-oriented style		Listener-oriented style	
Verbal-based understanding		Context-based understanding	
LCC examples		HCC examples	
Germany	United States	Saudi Arabia	Japan
Switzerland	Canada	Kuwait	China
Denmark	Australia	Mexico	South Korea
Sweden	United Kingdom	Nigeria	Vietnam

*Note.* From "Communicating Across Cultures", by S. Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 101

**Table 14***Individualistic and Collectivistic Conflict Lenses*

Individualistic conflict lens	Collectivistic conflict lens
Outcome focused	Process focused
Emphasis on factual details	Emphasis on holistic picture
Content goal oriented	Relational goal oriented
Emphasis on tangible resources	Emphasis on intangible resources
Work at monochronic pace	Work at polychronic pace
Use of personal equity norms	Use of communal or status-based norms
Reliance on linear inductive or deductive reasoning	Reliance on spiral and metaphorical reasoning
Facts and evidence are most important data	Intuition and experience are most important data
Competitive / controlling behaviours	Avoiding/accommodating behaviours
Direct conflict styles	Indirect conflict styles
Self-face concern	Other-face concern
Emphasis on conflict effectiveness	Emphasis on conflict appropriateness

*Note.* From "Communicating Across Cultures", by S. Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 210

**Appendix 2: Figures**

### Figure Captions

**Figure 1.** Basic stages of a systematic review approach based on my understanding.

**Figure 2.** Detailed stages of a systematic review in management research based on Tranfield et al. (2003)<sup>9</sup>.

**Figure 3.** Communication model of Shannon and Weaver (1949)<sup>10</sup>.

**Figure 4.** Krippendorff's (1986) model of information transmission<sup>11</sup>.

**Figure 5.** Visualisations of systematic literature review results based on my understanding.

**Figure 6** Process of establishing categories based on Mayring (2000)<sup>12</sup>.

**Figure 7.** Linear and target-driven way of thinking according to Abegg (1946, p. 47)<sup>13</sup>.

**Figure 8.** Chinese way of thinking according to Abegg (1946, p. 48)<sup>14</sup>.

**Figure 9.** Visualisation of communication in Sino-German teams based on my research results.

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<sup>9</sup> From "Towards a Methodology for Developing Evidence-Informed Management Knowledge by Means of Systematic Review," by D. Tranfield, D. Denyer and P. Smart, 2003, *British Journal of Management*, p. 210, Copyright 2003 Blackwell Publishing Limited.

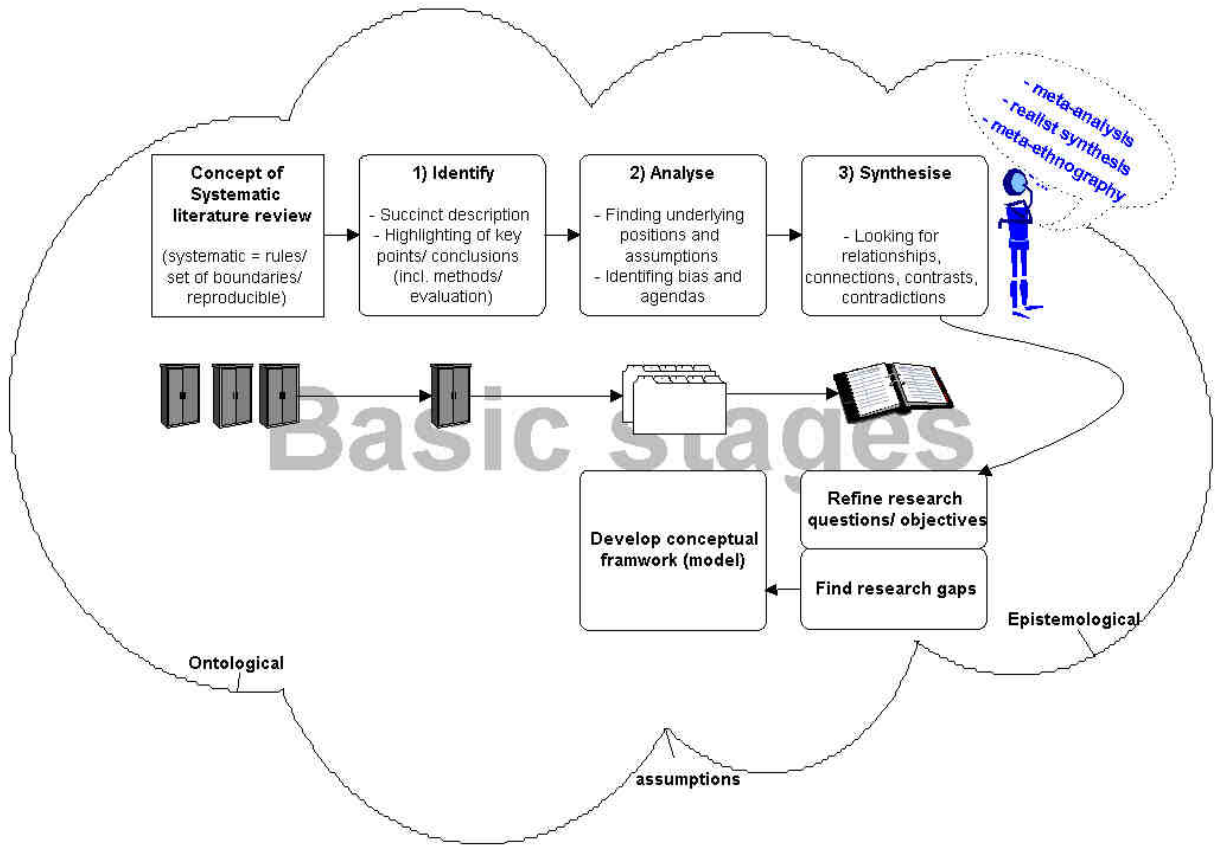
<sup>10</sup> From "The Mathematical Theory of Communication", by C. Shannon and W. Weaver, 1949, p. 9, Copyright 1949 University of Illinois Press.

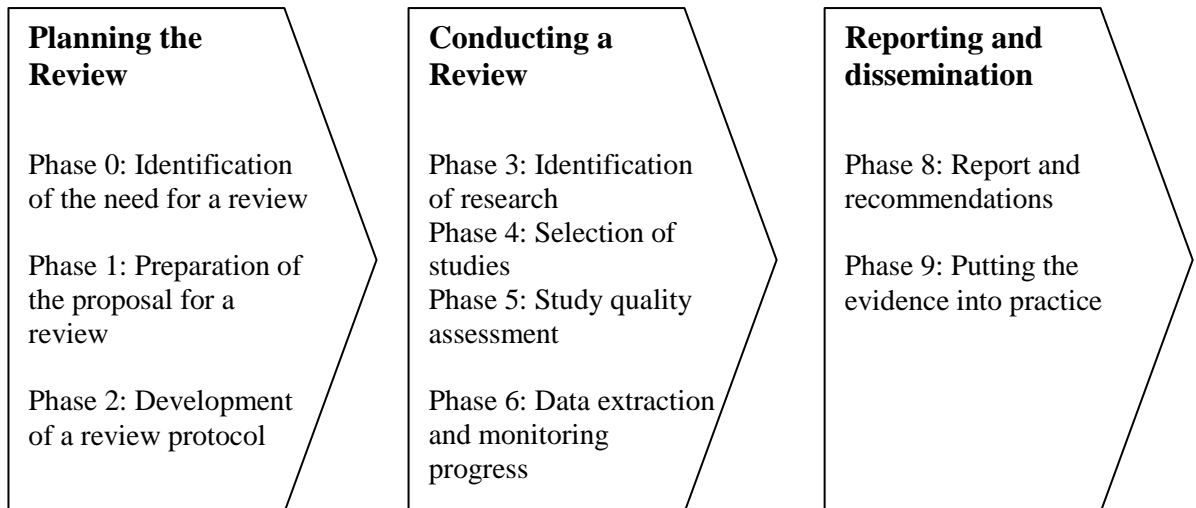
<sup>11</sup> From "Information Theory. Structural models for qualitative data", by K. Krippendorff, 1986, p. 25, Copyright Sage Publishing.

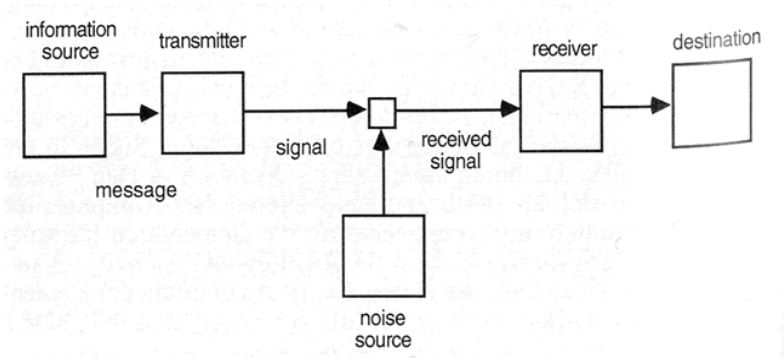
<sup>12</sup> From "Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse" by P. Mayring, 2000, *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [Online journal], Copyright 2000 by the Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research

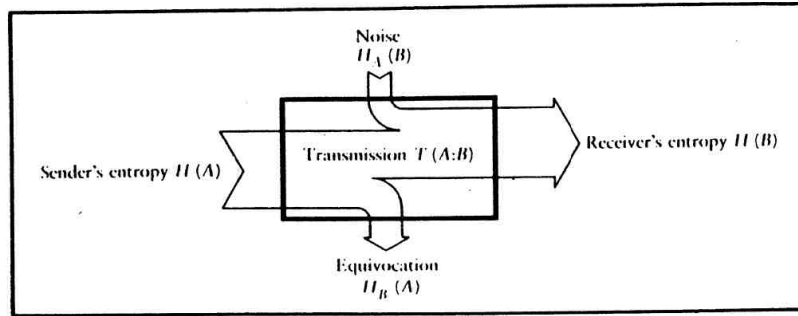
<sup>13</sup> From "Ostasien denkt anders", by L. Abegg, 1949, p. 47, Copyright 1949 Atlantis Publishing.

<sup>14</sup> From "Ostasien denkt anders", by L. Abegg, 1949, p. 48, Copyright 1949 Atlantis Publishing.









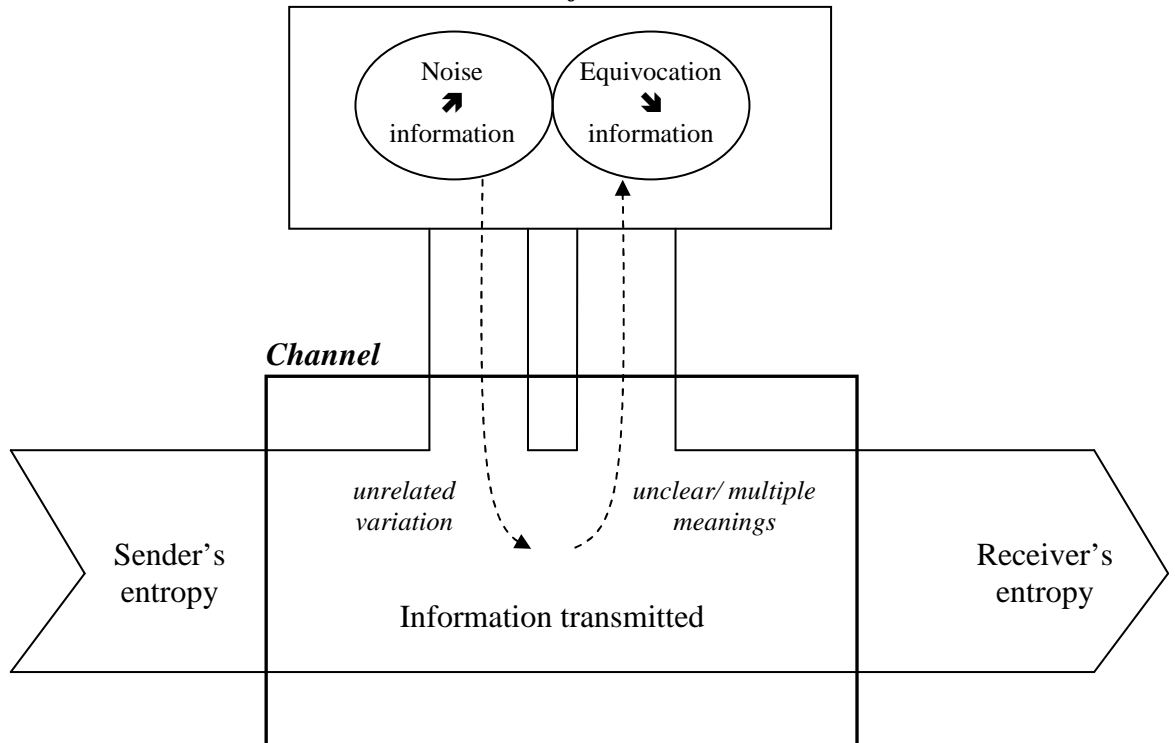


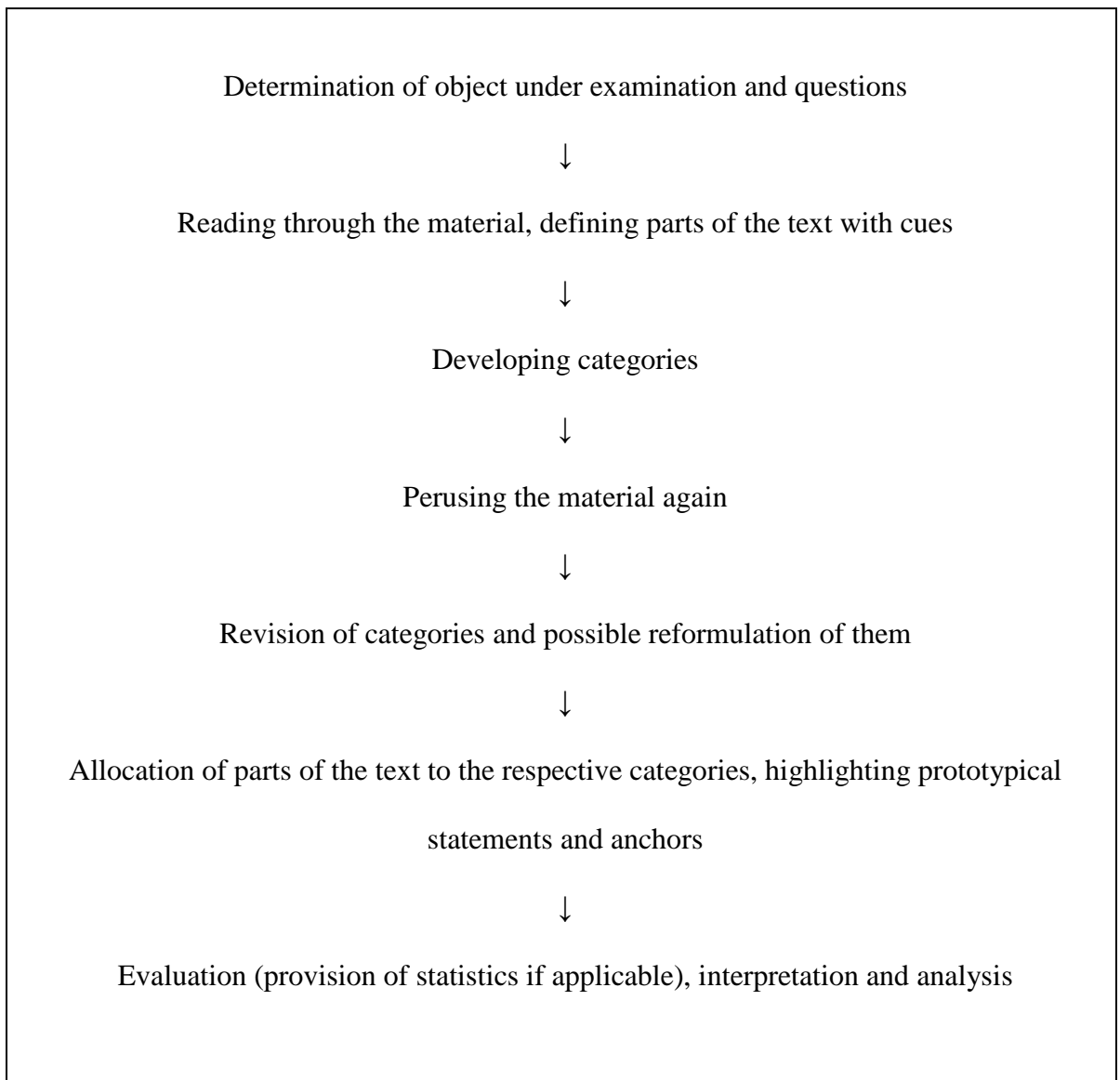
***Factors influencing communication in multinational teams***

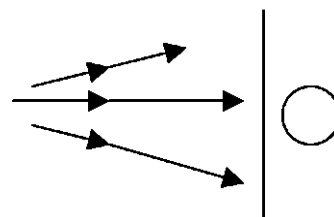
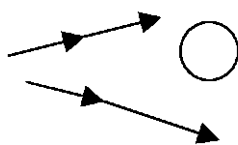
<b>Team member level</b>	<b>Group level</b>
<b>Knowledge of the individual:</b> - Language skills - Knowledge about cultural background	<b>'Internal' to the team's 'control':</b> - Communication style and type - Reflection and feedback - Trust development
<b>Process focus of the individual:</b> - Time allocation/ time devotion - Relational interaction versus task-oriented interaction	<b>'External to the team's 'control':</b> - Distribution of nationalities - Type of task

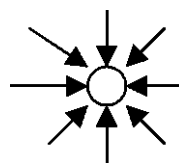
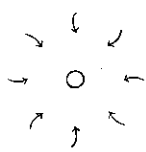
*Factor has negative realisation*

***Communication interferences***



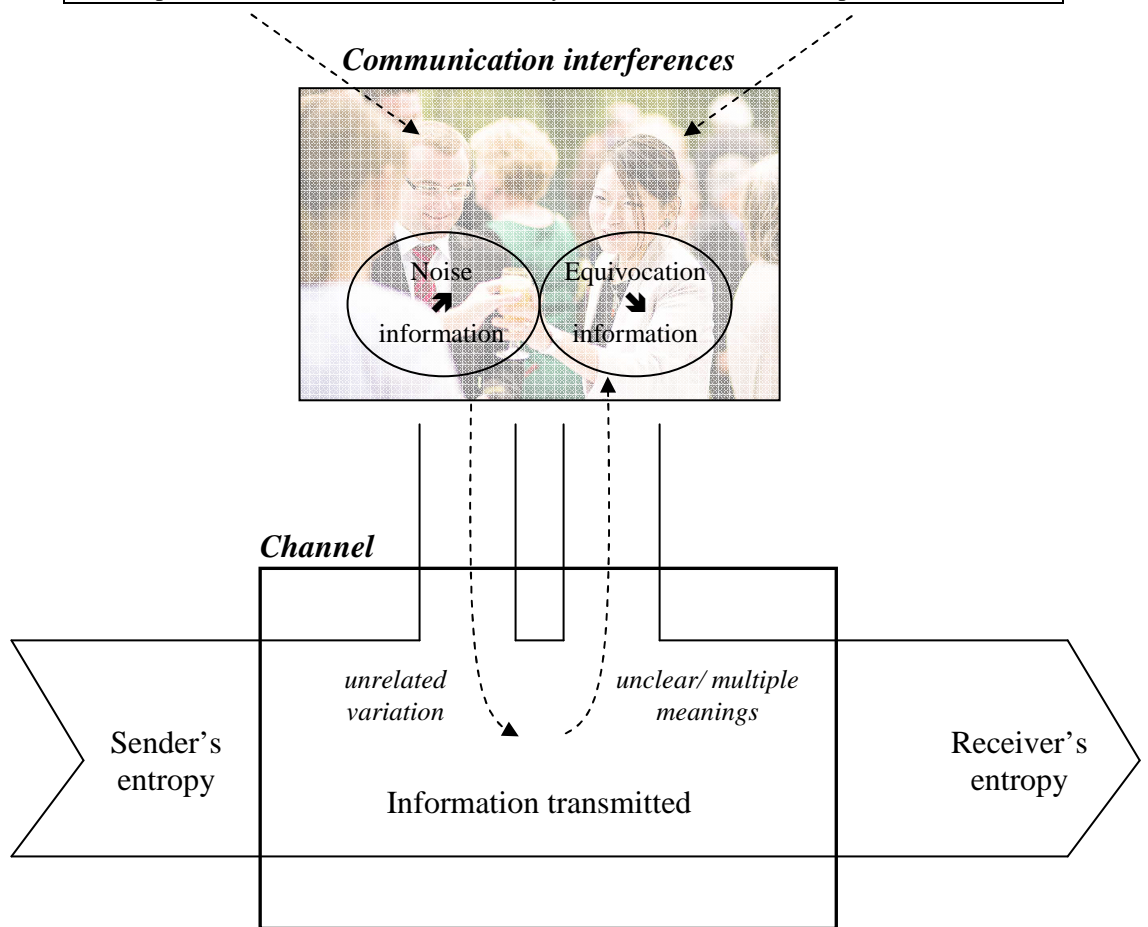






**Factors relating to communication interferences in Sino-German teams**

Language skills	Communication behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language proficiency of Chinese and Germans</li> <li>• Language barrier between Chinese and German</li> <li>• Qualification of Chinese interpreter</li> <li>• Ability of Germans to follow Chinese cultural 'rules of the game'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese communication behaviour</li> <li>• Issue-/content-orientation of Germans vs. person-/relationship-orientation of Chinese</li> <li>• Chinese face-concept (mianzi)</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge about cultural background/ culture-specific conventions and norms</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mianzi (Chinese concept of saving face)</li> <li>• Importance of Guanxi in Chinese society (social bonds/ relationships)</li> </ul>	



### Appendix 3: Example conversation with Mr. Six

After a short mutual introduction and the exchange of business cards I introduced my research project to Mr. Six. During our telephone conversation I had already explained the objective of the interview, expectations regarding participation, voluntary nature, potential benefits and nature of research, confidentiality and assumed anonymity. Before the start of the interview I explained once more that I wanted to make a video of our conversation. I pointed out that he could still refuse to participate. He consented to both his participation and the video recording and I promised that his statements were made in confidence.

*Oliver: Do you speak Chinese?*

*Six: No, I did attend a few courses, Chinese / but I came here rather unprepared and then attended some further courses here. However, due to the workload I gave up.*

*Oliver: Actually, what are your tasks in China?*

*Six: I am here to set up the office. There had never been anything like it before and I came here together with a female Chinese colleague and we set up this office.*

*Oliver: That means you have been given the task by your parent company?*

*Six: By our lawyer's office.*

*Oliver: What are the main types of cases you are handling?*

*Six: Being German lawyers we primarily consult with German enterprises that intend to invest here. We assist in establishing Joint Ventures or wholly owned subsidiaries. We assist them in drafting all sorts of contracts, technology licence agreements and contracts of employment. We provide consulting services for German banks with regards to loan agreements.*

*Oliver: Do you believe that language plays a minor role?*

*Six: It depends on whatever it is that you are doing. When revising a loan agreement you don't need Chinese since the contract is worded in English so you need to know English, most of the time it is not even governed by Chinese law but by English law or German law. It could just as well be done in Frankfurt or in London or in New York, it doesn't matter at all. Eh, if you have Joint Venture negotiations, however, or if you have to negotiate with authorities then you need the Chinese language of course.*

*Oliver: But does it play a role that you don't speak Chinese, for instance, in everyday life?*

*Six: Yes, it does play a role. I cannot integrate myself [into the society] here as I could if I were speaking Chinese. There are only very few Chinese people who*

*... speak sufficient English to have a normal conversation, therefore, most of my acquaintances are foreigners. It also has something to do with my profession. We don't offer our services to Chinese enterprises in the first place since Chinese companies turn to Chinese lawyers. We offer our services in particular to German enterprises but also to other European companies. And therefore I mainly keep in touch with German people. And when it really comes down to having a private conversation you can resort to German because you feel so much safer with German.*

**Oliver:** *Did you make friends here?*

**Six:** *Yes, yes, I do have friends but not amongst the Chinese only amongst expatriates.*

**Oliver:** *Being in China for a year, what kind of impression have you gained? Maybe you consider the traffic to be really bad?*

**Six:** *Yes, that doesn't bother me too much. So, if you raise the matter of traffic it is possible to get round this. You have to set off a bit earlier in the morning and you will get to the office with hardly any problems. And in the evening I leave the office so late that I don't have any problem either. Eh, if I have to go somewhere during the day I just have to take into account that it won't take me half an hour but an hour. But this is possible. That is not the biggest problem. What really bothers me personally is the environmental pollution.*

**Oliver:** *Yes, the air.*

**Six:** *The air, yes, you get used to that, too, but I still have a bad feeling to have to breathe this bad air. And what is a bit depressing, you can also see it today, is that you hardly see a blue sky. Most of the time you see this white soup out there and that, of course, doesn't exactly have a stimulating effect on your mood.*

**Oliver:** *What do you think when you get outside and the traffic is so chaotic?*

**Six:** *Oh, I don't find it that chaotic.*

**Oliver:** *Where do you come from, Berlin or ...?*

**Six:** *From Stuttgart.*

**Oliver:** *Also a big city.*

**Six:** *Compared to Shanghai it is only a village, merely 500,000 inhabitants, and I got used to that. Regarding road transport, eh, there, you have to be prepared that customs are different here, that's obvious. But firstly, I don't drive myself, I go by taxi, and we have a very good taxi driver who can go along with it perfectly, and / well, I don't have any problems regarding this. And the other thing, that some Germans might criticise, is that the Chinese, when forming a queue, simply jump the queue. That gets also on my nerves (laughing) I must admit.*

**Oliver:** *The distance between people is smaller here.*

**Six:** *It is small, yes, quite, yes; you have to prepare yourself a bit for this. Germans don't like it when somebody is getting too close. One prefers a bit of distance.*

**Oliver:** *Did you work abroad before you came to China?*

**Six:** *Yes, yes, I was abroad a lot. I was working in the USA, in Geneva and in Brussels before, yes.*

**Oliver:** *Is this very helpful, I mean...?*

**Six:** *Yes, of course, of course. If you have been somewhere else before, you can adapt to new situations more swiftly, handle them better. You know that not everything functions the way it does in Germany, that things are different in other countries, and you are a bit more flexible.*

**Oliver:** *What are the differences between China and other countries?*

**Six:** *That's difficult to say. Well, my personal working conditions, I create them for myself. We moved in here, set up the office according to our needs, eh, we have our computer system and we have our own office management, I mean, that is not a great deal different to what I did before in Brussels or Berlin or anywhere else. Of course, if you have to deal with other people outside of the office there can be, of course, great disparities. This is due to my area. I am from Germany with a legal system that has been relatively highly developed for a hundred years, where everything is regulated and you can simply refer to a book to find out what is right and what isn't right. And here in China you have to deal with an incredibly swift development. Only a few years ago the legal system merely existed in a rudimentary form. This is not yet in itself a rule of law in that context. But it is developing very fast in the direction of a rule of law, eh, you have to deal constantly with a lot of new profound amendments to the law. And you can't be sure that these laws are actually applied, rather there is also the institutional practice and this is a different kettle of fish. And that is difficult for us to understand but this doesn't mean that there is complete chaos here. It is possible to get to know the rules that govern this system and then you have to adjust yourself to them and learn how to deal with this system.*

**Oliver:** *Do you have some experience with authorities?*

**Six:** *Yes, yes.*

**Oliver:** *Does, for instance, the concept of saving face play a role?*

**Six:** *I don't place great importance on this concept of saving face. I think that it is quite often exaggerated. Eh, it can, perhaps, be observed when eating together at lunchtime, where the not so important Chinese person doesn't say anything at all and is not available for a conversation and you only pay attention to the most important one. This diverges a bit from our behavioural patterns. Eh, but if you want something from the authorities, if you negotiate with them then the concept of saving face doesn't play a role and it shouldn't really. I think that this concept is used quite cunningly by the Chinese; it is a kind of negotiation trick that one is not allowed to make certain concessions in negotiations since otherwise you would lose face. Eh, I don't have any regard for it and so far I did alright. Okay, if there are disagreements it is not advisable to shout furiously since otherwise the Chinese will shut off very quickly.*

**Oliver:** *But maybe connections play a role?*

**Six:** *What kind of connections?*

**Oliver:** *I mean the network.*

**Six:** *Yes, of course, yes, yes.*

**Oliver:** *Did you have to set up a network since you have been working here?*

**Six:** *I would say that this is also exaggerated. You know, usually we don't want anything from the authorities. Eh, we submit our applications. If the applications are okay you will get an approval, then I don't need any pengyou [translated into English: friends] in any authority, eh, so that I get approvals. It might be possible*



*that a few years ago you could only submit an application if you had, within that authority, someone you knew. That's completely different today. Therefore, I don't have a problem with that. The only ones having a problem are my Chinese colleagues who need information from Chinese authorities and quite often have a representative of an authority on the phone who is not eager to provide any information. In these cases it would help if you knew someone in the Bank of China or the Employment Authority or so.*

**Oliver:** *Do Germans in China actually need fewer connections within China?*

**Six:** *Yes, no, I only spoke with regards to myself. If, of course, you want to run a business and you want to sell machines to Chinese enterprises then you will, of course, need connections to Chinese buyers. And if the Italian company has better connections then the cards are obviously stacked against you. I mean, I see this through the eyes of a lawyer. Where you need connections or where you can achieve something through connections is / eh, if you want a particular approval that is otherwise difficult to get / ehm, but there I have to warn you, there simply are authorities that will do you a favour once and grant an approval that is at odds with the law. But this approval doesn't hold later on, it is illegal and as a lawyer I can only warn you about this. Also, you get led astray. I achieved everything here without any powerful friends, completely without any corruption. It is not necessary, at least not necessary in my profession. I don't have any idea how this is for other people. Also, I never got a hint from an official that he would like a bribe, this doesn't happen, in my field this doesn't happen.*

**Oliver:** *Are there any misunderstandings with regards to your Chinese colleagues because you have a German cultural background and they have a Chinese cultural background?*

**Six:** *No, I personally haven't had any bad experiences but through my contact with Germans, Europeans and Americans who are working here I have heard of a lot of bad experiences they've had. The reason that we don't have any problems here is most probably that we are dealing with highly qualified, very intelligent people. Two of my female Chinese colleagues have spent many years abroad; they are already influenced by the West. They know that we are different. But also the two female colleagues that we have here, who have never been abroad, their English is excellent and they are both very open and flexible. That's why we don't have any misunderstandings at all. We speak completely openly and straightforwardly. Nobody has left us yet because they didn't like it here. It is obviously working alright and the mood is good.*

**Oliver:** *What kind of picture of China did you have previously from the media or books?*

**Six:** *Eh, only a very hazy picture. Actually, I didn't have a real idea at all. Also, everything happened too quickly. Things weren't prepared well in advance when I came here. All of a sudden it was clear that we were to get the licence for setting up an office here and I decided overnight that I would do my bit for it. And before I knew it I was in China. I wasn't really interested in China. It was too far away. I was interested in the US and also in Japan, I must admit, but not in China. Now I am here and I am very interested in China. And today I read everything related to China and I like being here.*

**Oliver:** *For how long will you stay here?*

**Six:** *That is still open. Maybe another two or three years.*

**Oliver:** *What would you tell your family, your friends in Germany about China? I am sure that you write a lot of emails or 'skype' with them.*

**Six:** *Unfortunately, I don't have the time to write [laughs] long emails. I tell them about the rapid development in China, about the construction boom here in Shanghai. I tell them that despite this many things are still lagging behind. The shopping facilities and other consumer opportunities are not as highly developed as they are, for instance, in the US or in Europe. I tell them about the environmental pollution and of course about the traffic problems. And I talk about the political system that naturally has its idiosyncrasies.*

**Oliver:** *You mentioned the restricted consumer opportunities. In Shanghai you can actually get everything that you need for everyday life. What do you mean?*

**Six:** *Well, what you need you can get, that's for sure. Also what you would like to buy as a European, food for example, that is not a problem, but a decent suit for people who are a bit stouter or something like this; that is what is still missing.*

**Oliver:** *What about nightlife?*

**Six:** *That is of course very comprehensive and varied in Shanghai, a city with 15 million residents.*

**Oliver:** *In what way do the Chinese differ from Germans, the behaviour patterns?*

**Six:** *Well, my insight is of course limited. I hear a lot of extremely bad stories. But I can only speak from my own experience. My experience is that the Chinese don't really apply their energies to their jobs. Admittedly, they do their work, sometimes they do it very well, but they don't take any initiative in addition to that. However, there are also exceptions. But above all I get the impression that the people / that you have to tell them what they have to do. And if you explain to them exactly how to do it then it works. It always depends who, and how they do it. For example, we have a female accountant who works completely independently. I don't have anything to do with it and she has been virtually doing it since the day she started.*

**Oliver:** *What do you think of the cooperation with your Chinese team members?*

**Six:** *Very good, very good, I don't have any problems whatsoever in this respect.*

**Oliver:** *Do you like chatting with Chinese people in your spare time?*

**Six:** *[Laughs] That depends on the Chinese person. The Chinese who are working here in the office and with whom I get on well and with whom I sometimes have a meal out in the evenings or do something together with them I like to spend time with; or we have a meal here at lunch time. That's also very interesting, what they talk about. But of course there are people who you only know a little bit but that is not much different than with Westerners. There are also people you like and some you don't like so much.*

**Oliver:** *Do you think that there are communication problems due to cultural differences?*

**Six:** *I think so. People who are not familiar with foreigners and are shut up in their Chinese world and expect that you are playing according to their rules, rules that you don't know, / of course that will go wrong. That can't work.*

**Oliver:** *Did you experience some typical misunderstandings with Chinese people?*  
**Six:** *No, there is no such thing as a typical misunderstanding. Of course, time and again misunderstandings arise. But I am not under the impression that they are something extraordinary. The main problem is the language not the difference in culture. That means I can work with Chinese lawyers completely normally just like with a French lawyer or an Italian one.*

**Oliver:** *Do you understand the Chinese mentality?*

**Six:** *No, I don't think so.*

**Oliver:** *But you are still able to work well together with Chinese people?*

**Six:** *Yes, I think so. But I don't feel that I need to explore the subtleties of the Chinese psyche in order to communicate with Chinese people in a normal way. If the Chinese show a certain openness and flexibility then it should be possible. So far I haven't had a problem. In Germany they have some kind of cultural training where a lot of people, who haven't got a clue, are earning a lot of money. Well, I don't think that it is wrong to deal with it but I think it is wrong to overemphasise it. If you behave reasonably here / you mustn't behave like an arrogant Westerner, like a colonial master or play some other strange role. If you behave like an ordinary businessman who respects the Chinese and deals with them in a friendly way then you won't have any difficulties. But I don't need to understand the Chinese psyche in its deepest depths. I am under the impression that some books and training spoil the people more than anything, that they try desperately to live according to these rules and meet with incomprehension on the part of the Chinese. The Chinese initially assume that a foreigner behaves like a foreigner and not like a Chinese person. And if I come here and try to be the best Chinese citizen, to behave more Chinese than the Chinese themselves then I will only meet with their incomprehension.*

**Oliver:** *Do you have problems with Chinese politeness?*

**Six:** *Normally it works quite well with this politeness. People who expect something from you and want to do business with you, they are very polite. It starts with the taxi driver and ends with the head of a development zone. People who don't want anything from you can be quite rude and very dismissive, representatives of authorities for example, or if you ask someone in the street. Sometimes they don't even observe the slightest rules of courtesy. But this is not aimed at foreigners.*

**Oliver:** *In what way is the involvement with China rewarding?*

**Six:** *For me?*

**Oliver:** *Yes.*

**Six:** *For me personally it is an enormously interesting experience to be here in this foreign country, to deal with these different people and still find out that it works. That's great. And personally I am very much challenged by my task because I have to set up this office. That is difficult. It is a big challenge for a young man like me.*

**Oliver:** *Did you come here without your family?*

**Six:** *Yes. Basically, I think it is better to come here together with your family, and also with children. Of course, it is boring for women who can't find a job here. They don't have anything to do. There are a few exceptions, they keep themselves perfectly busy, but the majority suffer from loneliness.*

**Oliver:** *Do you have any problems with Chinese people due to your young age?*

**Six:** *No. I didn't experience any disadvantages so far. If you don't speak the language then it is easier to go down well with a partner if you have grey hair. It would probably be an advantage if I was twenty years older. It could help. I would probably have more persuasive powers. However, this is completely normal; it's also the case in Germany.*

**Oliver:** *Are sinologists the right people for China?*

**Six:** *Well, I think professional competence should come first and then language competence. Sinology, however, is not just the language but the whole culture. I can see here that sinologists are quite often made general managers; that can only go wrong; they don't know how to manage a company. They don't know the crux of the matter. The only thing they know is the language and that is not enough. If you look at the successful foreign enterprises here, most of their general managers don't speak a single word of Chinese.*

**Oliver:** *We have talked about the involvement with China, now, not with regards to you personally, but regarding the German economy, German companies, is it sensible to come to China?*

**Six:** *It makes sense when you make a profit and a lot of companies don't make a profit. Therefore it's quite right to ask this question. I think that a truly international, globally operating company has to go to China; there is no way around it. Everybody has to try to gain a foothold, has to establish a presence here, to be prepared for the market's future development that still hasn't taken place sufficiently yet but is to be expected since China is developing very rapidly, and so to be able to be involved in this development. It is not just a short-term involvement with China that you hope to make a lot of profit from within a few years, that's bound to go wrong, but if you make a strategic investment to participate in the future development that's definitely a sensible thing to do. And then it also depends on your products. We have enterprises here that came here and within three weeks they earned money; and we have companies that don't earn any money even after five years. You also need to have the right product to come here. This is completely independent of the size of your company and depends solely on the product offered. Regardless of company size you will find a competitor. A small company can also come to China and, with certain products that are in demand here, be very successful.*

**Oliver:** *What competences are necessary to work here?*

**Six:** *Flexibility and tolerance are the most important ones. You cannot come here and expect to find everything the way it is in Germany. If people are not prepared to engage in something new, to try something new then they will have problems here. If someone says I only eat German food, I want to go for a jog through the forest every morning otherwise I don't enjoy my life then they are certainly in the wrong place here. You have to be prepared to swap a jog in the morning with the gym located in the compound since / a certain flexibility is necessary. If someone cannot stand it that the traffic is different here than in Germany, if they would love nothing better than reporting these people to the police or shooting them when they overtake them then they are also in the wrong place here. There has to be a certain tolerant attitude. You have to say to yourself that the Chinese behave differently; their behaviour is just contrary to our rules. That's the way they are, then I simply accept it.*

**Oliver:** *What should one bear in mind when wanting to talk to Chinese people? Is it advisable to warm up the atmosphere at first and not get down to brass tacks too soon?*

**Six:** *Yes, it depends who you are talking to. If I talk to a negotiating partner representing another company and I am after a particular thing then I perhaps need to warm up the whole matter a bit. You have a little chat and then you get to the point. But of course you can also have completely different conversation partners who have other appointments to go to; then you get down to business straight away. It depends on the situation.*

**Oliver:** *Do you understand Chinese people?*

**Six:** *No. Alright, I have had different experiences. I have some employees who speak their minds but I also have other employees where, after long-winded explanations, I still don't know what they want to say. Or I don't know at all when I ask someone, that could be in the office, to do something and they say yes, and I can't be sure at all that they have understood what I meant and that they will act accordingly / it is possible that they say "yes" and didn't understand at all and don't do anything and you rely on them doing what they are supposed to do. A German person would say: "What did you say?" "Can you please explain it again." or you might say: "No, I won't do that." But this is not always the case in China. It is sometimes very difficult to judge a Chinese person because they sometimes conceal their emotions beneath a façade without showing their real thoughts. I have great difficulty in understanding Chinese people. And here, the people I work with, I know them well. I know exactly how accurately I have to explain something or if someone needs some further explanations.*

**Oliver:** *Do you know people who really have a lot of problems with Chinese people?*

**Six:** *Yes, a lot, there are a lot [laughs]. You should give my friend a ring. He is the one in the German community who has had the most interesting things to say about his experiences with Chinese people. He works as an engineer for the [...] AG company. He has had completely different experiences to me. He has been here for two years now and has had a lot of dealings with Chinese people. The view of those who don't normally work directly with Chinese colleagues in daily life might be a bit more relaxed. A lot of problems actually don't exist. But if you are standing together with twenty Chinese people on the factory floor and they simply don't do things as you expect them to and are listless then tensions occur. [End of recording]*