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### From given cross-cultural difference to a new interculture: a sino-german example

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# Ein Quantum Kompetenz Interkulturalität zwischen Ost und West

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## From Given Cross-Cultural Difference to a New Interculture: A Sino-German Example

[Von bestehenden Kulturunterschieden zu einer neuen Interkultur: Ein Chinesisch-Deutsches Fallbeispiel]

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### Abstract [English]

This paper shows for a specific Sino-German case how a new intercultural emerges in cross-cultural settings. It is based on participant observation in a Sino-German company. Culture is conceptualized as intersubjective sensemaking. Emic and etic perspectives on culture are differentiated.

The study asked to what extent given cross-cultural difference based on large-scale cultural constructs determine behavior and to what extent employees in a Sino-German service company create a new *inter*-culture when interacting with each other. In our Sino-German case, employees bridged cultural difference via a new concept of 'practicality'.

The main implication is: Cross-cultural dimensions merely describe initial cross-cultural difference, but not the nature and the outcome of *Intercultural Creation*. These findings encourage interculturalists to rethink their cultural practice.

Hence, we implement a paradigmatic shift towards an *inter*-cultural understanding of emic cultural meanings instead of focusing on *cross*-cultural difference based on predefined cross-cultural dimensions.

Keywords: emic, culture, cross-culture, cross-cultural dimensions, Interculture, social identity, GLOBE

### Abstract [Deutsch]

Der vorliegende Beitrag zeigt die Entstehung einer neuen *Inter*-Kultur für eine konkrete deutsch-chinesische Unternehmenskooperation auf. Die Daten wurden mittels teilnehmender Beobachtung erhoben. Kultur wird in diesem Kontext als intersubjektive Bedeutungsherstellung verstanden. Es wird zwischen emischen und etischen Perspektiven auf Kultur unterschieden.

Die Kernfrage bestand darin herauszufinden, inwieweit bestehende kulturelle Unterschiede, die auf sozio- und nationalkulturellen Dimensionen basieren, kontextualisiertes Verhalten determinieren und inwieweit MitarbeiterInnen eines chinesisch-deutschen Dienstleistungsunternehmens in der Interaktion miteinander eine neue *Inter*-Kultur erschaffen. In dem hier diskutierten Fall geschieht dies durch den kollektiven Gebrauch eines Umdeutung von „Praktikabilität“ (*practicality*).

Der Hauptbeitrag dieser Artikels ist folgende Erkenntnis: Kulturdimensionen beschreiben lediglich anfängliche kulturelle Unterschiede, sagen jedoch nichts aus über den von uns identifizierten Prozess kultureller Neuschöpfung, den wir als

*Intercultural Creation* benennen. Diese Erkenntnis soll Interkulturalisten Denkanstöße für die Praxis liefern.

Mit unserem Beitrag verlassen wir den Fokus auf kulturvergleichende, durch Kulturdimensionen vorgegebene Unterschiede (im Englischen als *cross-cultural* benannt). Wir implementieren einen paradigmatischen Wandel hin zu einem *inter*-kulturellen Verständnis emischer Prozesse des kulturellen Sinnmachens.

Stichworte: Emisch, Kultur, Interkulturell, Kulturdimensionen, Interkultur, Soziale Identität, GLOBE

## 1. Introduction

Current cultural research is conducted based on various paradigms. We will classify them into two major perspectives. We will call them the *given cross-cultural difference* or *Given Culture* perspective and the *Intercultural Creation* perspective. We intend to show how they differ with regard to the relation between culture and individual, the concept of culture, their research paradigm and methods, and their presentation of culture.

In contrast to mainstream comparative cross-cultural research, we conceptualize culture as a process of intersubjective sensemaking (based on Geertz 1973, e.g. Van Maanen 1998). This means: (1) Culture is a shared process of sensemaking; (2) Individuals are not the victims of given national culture but the creators of cultural meanings; (3) borders between cultures are not static but fluid. Our argument is: As creators of culture, individuals might overcome initial cross-cultural difference through the creation of new intercultural. We call this a state of *Intercultural Creation* and research upon it qualitatively.

Our research setting is a Sino-German service company, the employees of which interact across national cultural borders. We show that Chinese and German employees create a new intercultural when interacting with each other that goes beyond initial cross-cultural difference. The contribution of our study is to suggest a shift towards the management of emergent intercultural meanings instead of focusing on management of given cross-cultural difference. Only then will intercultural practice help to bridge the national cultural divide.

Our paper is structured as follows: First, we define our research problem and question. Second, we review existing literature and show the significance of our study. Third, we introduce research setting and methods, and our means of data collection. Next, we present our findings which will be discussed afterwards. Finally, we draw conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical background

A large bulk of cultural research compares national or societal cultures. It is therefore called cross-cultural. Comparative cross-cultural theory and practice of such kind is based on the assumption that aggregated national/societal cultures differ from each. This means: "Who I am" and how I interpret the world is to a large extent pre-shaped and limited by external cultural influences. In cross-cultural management literature, this perspective has been called the contingency hypothesis (overview in Thomas 2008). As McSweeney (2010: 933-937) has pointed out, comparative cross-cultural studies implicitly assume the contingency hypothesis to be correct; they are based on the paradigm that cross-cultural difference is an external given and that individuals are contingent upon this cultural imprint. We name this perspective the *Given Culture* perspective.

The most prominent cross-cultural studies based on the *Given Culture* perspective are those by Hall (1976) and Hall and Hall (1990), Hofstede (1980, 2003, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), and House et al. (2004). An extensive literature review of comparative cross-cultural studies can be found in Dorfman and House (2004:51-73). This review shall not be repeated here. The reason for this is the fact that the specific *content* of these comparative cross-cultural studies does not matter for our purpose. What matters, is their *perspective* on culture and the cross-cultural border. This perspective is shared. The following dimensions are well established with regard to Sino-German cultural difference.

<i>dimension</i>	<i>definition / source</i>	<i>GER</i>	<i>PRC</i>
institutional collectivism	Degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action (House et al. 2004)	lower	higher
In-group collectivism	Degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families (House et al. 2004)	lower	higher
Humane orientation	Degree to which a collective encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring, and kind to others (House et al. 2004)	lower	higher
Assertiveness	Degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their relationship with others (House et al. 2004)	higher	lower
high context vs. low context	Degree to which communication is direct and verbal vs. indirect and implicit; high context also implies differentiation between in-group and out-group (Hall and Hall 1990)	low context	high context
specific vs. diffuse relationship	Personal and public sphere overlap vs. private sphere is reserved for close friends (Hall and Hall 1990; Trompenaars / Hampden-Turner)	specific	diffuse
neutral vs. affective	Low vs. high degree to which emotionality is shown (Trompenaars / Hampden-Turner 1997)	neutral	affective (if in-group)

Exh. 1: Relevant cultural dimensions for Sino-German cooperation

Source: own figure, based on Hall and Hall (1990: 6-12), Trompenaars / Hampden-Turner (1997: 70, 83), House / Javidan (2004:11-14), Javidan / House / Dorfman (2004:30), Brodbeck / Frese (2007:162), Fu / Wu / Yang / Ye (2007:887)

These dimensions refer to communication (assertiveness, high vs. low-context); the nature of relationship (specific vs. diffuse, neutral vs. affective); and the relationship dimension in work practice (collectivism, humane orientation). Following the *Given Culture* perspective, cross-cultural difference with regard to these dimensions is to be expected in a Sino-German setting.

On the other hand, individuals constantly ask themselves "Who am I?", thereby creating concepts of the self. Some answers to the question "Who am I?" will include concepts of the self that are derived from group membership of various kinds (see overview in Stelzl / Seligman 2009). This means "Who I am" as a social being is constructed through sense-making processes in interaction with others. We call this

perspective the *Cultural Creation* perspective. In contrast to the *Given Culture* perspective, the *Cultural Creation* perspective researches upon the intra-cultural, i.e. the shared meanings that individuals create and negotiate through social interaction (e.g. Stelzl / Seligman 2009). We assume: If such a creation of new meanings takes place between and amongst individuals from different national or societal cultural backgrounds, it can be conceptualized as *inter-cultural* creation. It results in a new *inter-culture*.

The cultural scope of the *Given Culture* perspective and the *Cultural Creation* perspective differs. The *Given Culture* perspective mostly focuses on the nation or the society. The *Cultural Creation* perspective mostly focuses on small-scale cultural settings, e.g. organizations which are called cultural fields (overview in Martin 2003).

*Given Culture* and *Cultural Creation* lead to different concepts of culture. Following the *Given Culture* perspective, culture and cultural borders exist "as such" and can be defined objectively. The cultural border is given; hence, it is cross-cultural. Yet, following the *Cultural Creation* perspective, culture is a process of collective sense-making (based on Berger / Luckmann 1966). This means: Culture and cultural borders cannot be defined "as such"; they do not exist objectively. Rather, one has to differentiate between two different sense-making perspectives, namely the inside, "emic", perspective and the outside, "etic", perspective (overview in Martin 2003). Only the emic perspective will deliver the cultural meanings that groups of people give to themselves and to the world. The minimum of emic meaning that is needed in order to signify a state of *Cultural Creation* is a shared understanding of "who we are" as opposed to "who we are not" (based on Geertz 1973, Ricoeur 1992). In this way, individuals enact 'same-ness' and 'other-ness' in order to position themselves in relation to each other (based on Ricoeur 1992). The result is perceived difference between perceived groups of self and other (Ricoeur 1992). The cultural border created is fluid and can be bridged; hence, it is inter-cultural. In summary, the *Cultural Creation* perspective focuses on the hermeneutical process of creating and constructing categories of collective self and other (Hatch / Yanov 2003). Institutions, structure and cultural artifacts are seen as secondary to this hermeneutical process (Hatch / Yanov 2003). Therefore, our study does not focus upon these structural elements of culture.

Based on these different concepts of culture, cultural research methods differ as well: If culture exists objectively, then it can be aggregated and measured, and researched upon and interpreted independently from the researcher. Therefore, the

*Given Culture* perspective favors quantitative methods that compare large-scale cultures. Yet, if culture is an intersubjective process that is based on perspective, then it can only be approximated through deep interpretation (based on Geertz 1973) of emic sensemaking. Therefore, the *Cultural Creation* perspective requires deductive qualitative research of small-scale cultural fields (for details see Martin 2003 and McSweeney 2010). During research, the researcher herself/himself becomes part of emic sense-making and is therefore an integral part of data collection and interpretation (e.g. Czarniawska 2008).

Throughout our article, we will use the word “culture” as consistent with the *Cultural Creation* paradigm. We define it as a process of making and remaking collective sense under changing boundary conditions, the goal of which is to provide a sense of collective belonging (own definition based on Geertz 1973). Following the thought that the border of the collective self is not pre-defined, we will use the term “culture” and “social / collective identity” interchangeably. We will call the organizational setting a “cultural field” and refer to members of this setting as “cultural actors” or simply “actors”. We name their ability to create culture “cultural agency” (for agency see Martin 2003).

The previous lines have briefly sketched the difference between *Given Culture* and *Cultural Creation*. It is summarized in the following table:



	<i>Given Culture</i>	<i>Cultural Creation</i>
<i>theoretical paradigm</i>	objectivist reality	reality is constructed socially
<i>main assumption</i>	individuals are victims of their cultural imprint	individuals are agents and creators of culture
<i>scope of culture</i>	large-scale (nation or society)	small-scale: social or collective identity in a specific cultural field
<i>layers of culture</i>	single culture	multiple cultures
<i>perspective</i>	not considered	emic vs. etic cultural meanings
<i>cultural difference</i>	exists "as such"	is created
<i>cultural border</i>	given: cross-cultural	blurred or fluid: inter-cultural
<i>research method</i>	quantitative / comparative	qualitative / deductive
<i>cultural data</i>	exists "as such"	created inter-subjectively through researcher-field relationship
<i>intended results</i>	aggregated relative difference between nations or societies	deep interpretation of emic sense-making in single fields

Exh. 2: Conceptual differences between *Given Culture* and *Cultural Creation*

As exhibit 2 shows, each cultural perspective influences how culture is conceptualized, researched upon and interpreted. When trying to integrate both perspectives, the main problem lies in conceptualizing to what extent individuals are free creators of culture and to what extent external national cultural difference limits their sense-making possibilities.

We propose that this problem can be best researched upon at a given and perceived cultural border. We do so because we assume that it will be at the cultural border where the cross-cultural and the cultural in-between (which we call inter-cultural) meet, and where the construction and negotiation of collective self and other takes place. We hypothesize the following: If cross-cultural difference remains and is perceived as such, then cultural actors are indeed limited by the given cross-cultural border. If the cultural border is bridged through the creation of new emic concepts of the collective self, then intercultural actors indeed shape new cultural meanings. We call this process *Intercultural Creation*. With the word "intercultural" we intend to stress the potential emergence of new integrative meanings beyond initial cross-cultural difference. The result will be a new interculture.

So far, the term “intercultural” has mainly been used as an adjective in English language studies on culture. It is almost exclusively used to describe bi-cultural individuals’ specific cultural imprint or competencies; sometimes, it also refers to a perceived need to go beyond comparative (cross-) cultural training that acknowledges the emergence of hybrid, so called “third”, cultures (see Szkudlarek 2009). We use “interculture” as a noun and in its etymological origin as an “in-between” culture as conceptualized from a *Cultural Creation* perspective. Thereby, we give it a new meaning which is linked to the idea of “third” cultures.

The major methodological issue when researching upon *Cultural Creation* is the extent to which emic cultural meaning is shared by cultural actors (overview in Hatch / Yanov 2003). For *Cultural Creation* it is both, homogenous / unifying and heterogenous / dispersing, resulting in shared and contested cultural meanings. Some cultural meanings will be more homogenous than others.

For the state of *Intercultural Creation* as defined previously, we assume the same, namely that some aspects of a new interculture are homogeneous and unifying, others are heterogeneous and dispersing. Following the anthropological paradigm that culture gives a group of people perceived collective identity as opposed to another group of people, we furthermore assume that the minimum of unification that is needed for a shared culture / collective identity is a shared understanding “who we are” and “who we are not” in a specific context. We next assume that this meaning needs to be exchanged intersubjectively through symbolic language or symbolic interaction (Jones 1996). Otherwise, these categorizations of collective self and other could not be meaningful categories for making collective sense out of social reality (Jones 1996). Therefore, we hypothesize that a similar symbolism must exist for the case of *Intercultural Creation*. Hence, we intend to look for cultural symbols that signify those “who used to be part of the collective other but are now part of the collective self” and those “who used to be part of the collective other and still are”. When looking for these symbols, we focus on the shared, homogenous and unifying part of cultural meaning. Therefore, we do not mean to say that there is no cultural variance within the field: We simply do not focus on this variance in this paper.

### 3. Field and field methods

#### 3.1 Details to the field

We studied culture in a field in which assumed given etic national cultural difference and emic *Cultural Creation* at the border between collective self and other met. Our field was a Sino-German service company that provides consulting and support to German small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from technical industries which intend to enter the Chinese market or have already done so. For this purpose, Chinese employees at a site in the PRC and German employees at the German headquarters constantly work together across national cultural borders.

These conditions made the research setting ideal for our purposes due to three reasons: Firstly, the service industry requires frequent external interactions with external clients, partners, and suppliers across organizational and national cultural borders. This demands for collective identity work by those acting at and across these borders (Swann / Russell / Bosson 2009), involving national cultural dimensions. Secondly, the organization itself spans different national and societal cultures, having sites in both the P.R. China and in Germany. Therefore, we can investigate into potential emic intercultures that bridge assumed etic national/societal cultural differences.

China Service Ltd. was founded in 1996 with 31 employees during the time of research. It provides consulting and support to German small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from technical industries which intended to enter the Chinese market. The company also manages and administers customer and supplier relationships for clients who have already entered the market. Furthermore, it conducts market research and quality control, and searches for potential Chinese partners on behalf of its corporate clients. For customer service, German employees at the German headquarters and Chinese employees in an office in the People's Republic of China (PRC) cooperate and interact across national borders. Chinese employees in the PRC are assigned to German corporate clients, sometimes exclusively, and act on behalf of the client while still being employed by China Service Ltd. Yet, with Chinese partners, suppliers, and customers, and with governmental institutions, they present themselves as representatives of the clients.

During the time of research in 2009, 15 of such employees worked at the Chinese office, all of them being ethnic Chi-

nese. They represented 46 German SMEs. Employees at both sites were between 30 and 46 years old; managers being slightly older. About one quarter of staff was female; the percentage was lower among management at both sites.

Taking care of German clients on the Chinese market demanded frequent and regular communications between Chinese and German employees. Most of the time, management did not interfere into project-based communications. The main channels used were e-mail and telephone. Even though most Chinese employees had visited German headquarters at least once, none of them had worked in Germany for longer than one month at a time. All of them spoke German and/or English fluently through previous university education. Language abilities were a major criterion for recruitment.

One of the authors entered this field in the role of an intern who was to assist staff in purchasing and sales of engineering goods, in quality control and in negotiations. As the researcher has an academic background in international industrial engineering with a focus on sales and purchasing, this role was welcomed by the field. The interactions observed and the conversations held depended on the researcher role: As in every holistic participant observation that intends to deduct emic meanings, the researcher did not steer interaction but took in those interactions that happened to him (Bate 1997, Martin 2003, Van Maanen 2006). In this way, the researcher is guided through the field by cultural actors themselves. Basically, the researcher reflects upon what happens to her/him, while acting in a certain role in the field.

The researcher is a native German who is fluent in the English language, yet does not speak Mandarin Chinese. It was the researcher's first visit to China and his first work-experience outside Germany. This condition made him experience significant cultural difference in the beginning which he later categorized as a higher humane orientation and collectivism, a higher degree of relationship, and less assertiveness when compared to the German cultural norm (based on House / Javidan 2004). Furthermore, he experienced relationships to be more diffuse and affective, and context-orientation to be higher (see exhibit 2). This experience made him aware of his own cultural imprint (Bennett 1986) and encouraged Chinese employees to 'teach' cultural practice to him. This proved to be a major means of access for uncovering what was considered to be 'normal' work-practice and behavior in this specific field.

### 3.2 Data collection and interpretation

Data was gathered through a four-month period of full-time participant observation that was conducted by one of the authors at China Service Ltd. between February and June 2009. The initial two weeks were spent at the German headquarters; three and a half months were spent at the China operations, including visits to partners, suppliers and customers.

While in the field, the researcher put observations, accounts of conversations, his daily-routines and reflections upon himself and the field into a field-diary. Entries were made either directly after a social interaction or every evening at the latest. Every week, the researcher re-read, re-interpreted and re-categorized his entries, thereby densifying his interpretation. Next, interpretations were correlated and triangulated with internal field data and external comparative cultural constructs and further literature.

Throughout the research process, the researcher exchanged his interpretations with actors in the field, either verbally or through social interaction. This process is called “mirroring” (Marcus 1998) and intends to make sure that research interpretations are inter-subjectively meaningful from an emic perspective. Through this process, cultural patterns were identified. Exhibit 3 provides an overview of the data collection methods employed:

<i>data collection technique</i>	<i>German headquarters</i>	<i>Chinese operations</i>
participant observation	2 weeks	3 ½ months
formal interviews	No	No
informal interviews	5	37
meeting attendance	4	15
informal interaction in the field	Yes / high	Yes / high
social activity beyond the field	Yes / low	Yes / high
documents, websites, reports	Yes	Yes
total duration of research	2 weeks	3 ½ months

Exh. 3: Data collection and interpretation techniques

### 3.3 Interpretative process

As has been stated, the *Cultural Creation* assumes that actors construct culture and identity through discourse and embodied action, thereby creating intersubjective emic meanings. This process can only be deduced qualitatively (Bate 1997, Van Maanen 2006).

As we assumed the potential creation of a new inter-culture to be a highly contextualized process that might be embodied, emotional, tacit or otherwise non-verbal and pre-reflexive, we chose participant observation as our main tool of research. We employed it over four months, both at the German and at the PRC site of China Service Ltd. (for multi-sited participant observation see Hine 2007).

Participant observation makes the researcher the main tool of research (Van Maanen 2006). As common in qualitative research, we approached the field holistically and deduced research questions from the field.

In an interactive process of sensemaking with the field, the researcher observes, experiences, learns, enacts, and voices emic meanings herself/himself, thereby uncovering categories of what is considered 'normal' and 'not normal' in the field (Van Maanen 2006). For doing so, participant observation provides two options: Either the researcher learns and applies accepted behavior and discourses to the field, or she/he consciously violates accepted behavior and discourses, thereby locating the boundary of the cultural norm (Marcus 1998, Van Maanen 2006). Through this process, cultural norms and "patterns" (Geertz 1973) become visible.

In the case of virtual cross-site interaction which takes place virtually, the researcher is limited by the fact that such communication cannot be observed directly (Hine 2007). In this case, the researcher has to largely rely on the verbal sense that cultural actors make of their doings through symbolic language.

Critical voices have argued that participant observation results in an "invention" of the field by the researcher (Bate 1997) mainly due to two arguments. Firstly, it has been argued that cultural meaning in the field itself is subjective. However, cultural actors are never free in constructing their own meaning of the world (based on Berger / Luckmann 1966, overview in Hatch / Yanov 2003). Rather, their scope of interpretation is limited by context, social norms, power relations, and many more influencing factors (Hatch / Yanov 2003). These boundary conditions will result in inter-subjective meaning which can be learned as cultural patterns, norms and rules by the participant observer (based on Geertz 1973). Secondly, it has

been argued that the researcher is subjective herself/himself. And indeed, participant observation can never deliver findings beyond the researcher's own limitations. The task for the researcher is to make her/his findings inter-subjective through conscious interaction with and reflection upon the field (Marcus 1998, Van Maanen 2006).

Hence, we argue that participant observation has to meet processual criteria of excellence to be sure of the meaning it produces and to possess rigor. We define them as oscillation and densification (Mahadevan 2011b). With oscillation, we mean the researcher's constant self-reflexive and systematic re-positioning between insider and outsider perspective, between participation and observation, and between inner and outer view. With densification, we mean the systematic circular process of (1) data collection, (2) data interpretation, (3) identification of cultural patterns, (4) application or conscious violation of cultural patterns by the researcher, (5) interpretation of field-researcher interaction, which is used for new data generation and leads back to (1).

Through oscillation and densification, internal validity in the sense of intersubjectivity and processual rigor will be guaranteed. The participative researcher can also employ oscillation and densification when observing virtual interaction, namely by telling the same stories and employing the same narrative patterns in the same contexts or by consciously doing otherwise, thereby violating cultural norms.

In retrospect, the research question with regard to this paper was to find out whether employees in a Sino-German service company, named China Service Ltd., create a new interculture when interacting with each other.

#### **4. Elements of a new interculture: the integrative concept of practicality**

Holistic participant observation deduces cultural patterns from the field through oscillation and densification. In this way, data is generated and interpreted in a circular process. It was not our purpose to analyze the field diary and lived researcher-field interaction on the level of linguistic discourse. Rather, the aim was to identify cultural patterns as represented through communication that signify unifying elements of a potential new inter-culture that bridges assumed given national cultural difference. For doing so, we looked for key dichotomies in the field diary that might signify constructs of collective self and collective other. We did so during research; the researcher mirrored our interpretations back to the field.

Early in this process, we discovered a frequent use of the words “practical person” vs. “impractical person” in the English language and “praktischer Mensch” vs. “unpraktischer Mensch” in the German language when Chinese employees spoke about their German counterparts. This dichotomy turned out to be the characterization of German counterparts by Chinese employees that was verbalized towards the researcher the most frequently. We therefore conceptualized it as a verbal expression that signifies broader cultural meaning beyond its immediate wording. As we have stated, any culture / collective identity needs to have a shared understanding of “who we are” as opposed to “who we are not”, i.e. a minimum of unified cultural meaning. Therefore, we assume that the categories of collective self and collective other in a cultural field are rather homogenous and unified throughout the field. Yet, we only make this claim for this cultural element. We do not assume that all cultural meanings in the field are equally unified.

With regard to the key dichotomy of “practical vs. impractical person”, we will present five examples that are typical in certain aspects; we classify them as quote types 1-5.

Quote 1: “I am a huge fan of Peter! Since he has been with the company, everything has been working out just fine. He is a practical person.”

*(Chinese employee, male, aged 34, describing a German employee)*

Quote 2: “I have daily telephone conversations with Klaus, funny person. He is always joking. We work together well. We always help each other when working together. (...) Klaus owns a beautiful house. Last time, I was at his home. He always buys computer games for his children here in China. When I was at his home, we played games together. He is a very practical person.”

*(Chinese employee, male, 36, describing a ‘practical’ German colleague)*

Quote 3: “The visit to company X was very nice. During my last visit, we drank a lot of beer. I can show a picture to you! The boss will come back to China as well; he is going to attend a trade fair in May. (...) He is a very practical person.”

*(Chinese employee, male 32, describing the visit to a client in Germany)*

Quote 4: “Next, you have to send [this template, the authors] back to Germany, and they will clean it up a little bit, and then I can continue working on it (...). You know, [my German counterpart, the authors] is a very practical person.”

*(Chinese employee, telling the researcher what to do with a certain template)*

Quote 5: “I don’t know exactly what their [the German client’s, the authors] intentions are, but I filled in this list [of potential partners, the authors] for them. I also don’t know them [the German client, the authors]. He [the German client’s representative, the author]



has never been to China. Why not just go to a trade fair together and have it done? This would be practical. Still, I have to do something; he is the client, after all. (...) But this is very difficult, if the client is such an impractical person."

*(Chinese employee commenting on a German client's request to acquire new partners via telephone)*

Based on these quote types, we identified key characteristics of how to identify whether someone is a "practical" and "impractical person" to work with. We classified these cultural meanings into major categories as defined by cultural dimensions, namely work-practice, relationship and communication. They are summarized in exhibit 4 below:

category	Practical Person (quotes 1-4)	Impractical Person (quote 5)
relationship dimension in work practice	things work out well (quote 1) working together well (quote 2) helping each other (quote 2) cleaning up work (quote 4) working interdependently (quote 4) going to trade fair together (quotes 3 and 5)	Making me feel that "I don't know what they want"
nature of relationship	Making me "a huge fan of..." (quote 1) Is always joking (quote 2) I have visited them (quotes 2 and 3) Inviting me to his home (quote 2) Coming to China (quote 5)	Making me feel that "I don't know them"
communication	Daily phone conversations (quote 2)	Lack thereof

Exh. 4: Cultural meanings of a 'practical' and 'impractical' person

The researcher mirrored them back to the field in informal interaction and through norm-oriented or norm-violating behavior. Based on this process, we summarized practical work practice as interdependent; a practical relationship as emotional, affective and close; and practical communication as frequent interactions. We interpreted impractical work practice as cooperation lacking interdependency, relationship, affectivity, and interaction (based on exhibit 2).

These characteristics will be analyzed with regard to their significance for *Intercultural Creation* in the following section.

## 5. Interpretation and discussion of findings

### 5.1 The *Given Culture* interpretation

Following GLOBE, the Chinese cultural norm compared to Germany is characterized by a much higher tendency towards collectivism and humane orientation, and by much lower assertiveness. These assumptions are associated with high-context orientation (exhibit 2).

Indeed, German employees are referred to with personal detail (quote 2). Having been welcomed into a colleague's home or having met a client in an informal setting is highly valued (quotes 2 and 3). A lack of personal relationship is said to impact work outcome (quote 5). This could signify higher humane orientation (GLOBE) and a higher orientation towards affective and diffuse relationship (exhibit 2). The deduction of a more affective relationship is supported by another employee's statement who concedes to being "a huge fan of" a German employee (quote 1).

In summary, quotes 1-3 link a "practical person" to descriptions of good relationship and being in a type of personal contact which also involves emotions. Quote 4, however, links "practicality" to interdependency and a helping each other out. One could interpret all these aspects with the help of specifically Chinese cultural standards. In contrast to comparative cross-cultural dimensions that describe relative difference between societal/national cultures, cultural standards describe norms within societal/national cultures from the *Given Culture* perspective. For greater China, harmonious interpersonal relationships governed by *guanxi* (interpersonal relations), human-centred obligations and reciprocity have been identified (Warner 2010). Quotes 1-4 might signify these standards; quote 5 might signify the lack thereof.

In summary, the German cultural norm in relation to the Chinese cultural norm is characterized by a much lower tendency towards collectivism and humane orientation and by much higher assertiveness. These dimensions are associated with low-context and task-oriented communication at work (based on Hall and Hall 1990) and with specific and sober relationships (based on Trompenaars / Hampdon-Turner 1997). The term "practicality" fits these norms. Therefore, it could signify specifically Chinese cultural dimensions and standards.

## 5.2 The *Cultural Creation* interpretation

From a *Cultural Creation* perspective, however, one has to ask *why* the specific term “practical person” emerged in this cross-cultural field to signify a person who belongs to the collective we from Chinese perspective. If the concept were to denote specifically Chinese concepts, why not call it *guanxi* (relationship) or *renqing* (human-centered obligations)?

When only the immediate (denotative) meaning is considered, “practicality” does seem to denote a neutral and sober relationship and a high task-orientation. If this be the symbolic meaning of this expression, then a “practical person” would be an indicator of German cultural norms.

Yet, as has been said, the broader (connotative) narrative explanations to “practicality” as visible through the given quotes also signify a combination of good personal relationship and interdependency (quote 1-4). Therefore, a “practical person” might represent the Chinese cultural norms of high humane orientation, high in-group collectivism and low assertiveness (GLOBE), diffuse relationship (Hall 1976, Trompenaars / Hampden-Turner 1997), affectivity (Trompenaars / Hampden-Turner 1997), and harmonious interpersonal relationships (Warner 2010).

This combination between immediate wording and broader meaning makes the term “practicality” an ideal term to bridge given national cultural difference. In summary, the broader meaning of a “practical person” and their behavior reflects Chinese cultural norms, whereas the immediate wording of “practicality” reflects German cultural norms. Due to this ambiguity, this expression ‘makes sense’ from both a Chinese and German perspective. Therefore, it has the power to transport *inter*-cultural meaning and can therefore symbolize a new interculture.

The German counterparts’ strategy to invite Chinese business partners and colleagues into their own private sphere can be interpreted as a first appropriation of the Chinese cultural norm. The use of the term “practicality” by Chinese employees could be interpreted in the same way. Following Bennett (1986), this signifies intercultural learning through adaptation and integration. Following our previous definition, this signifies a state of *Intercultural Creation*.

“Practicality” could also be conceptualized as a cultural “ante-narrative” (Boje 2008). According to Boje, ante-narratives are not yet finite processes of verbal sense-making that integrate previously unrelated cultural elements. The inherent ambiguity of “practicality” can be interpreted along

these lines: It serves to integrate previously unrelated cultural concepts.

In the future, the inherent contradiction between the broader (connotative) and immediate (denotative) meaning of "practicality" might either remain an asset or might lead to interpretative conflict. In any case, the key dichotomy of "practical" vs. "impractical person" indicates an emergent process of *Intercultural Creation* and might preclude a shift in collective identity. It does not yet signify a finite intercultural.

### 5.3 Implications

For interculturalists, the *Intercultural Creation* perspective has three consequences for their practice: (1) be aware that cultural meaning cannot be prescribed; (2) acknowledge that intended etic sense-giving can be interpreted in many ways; (3) constantly aim to uncover emic categories of collective self and other. The first two require a shift in cultural paradigm. The third aspect requires interpretative action. We suggest the following approach for uncovering emic meanings in small intercultural fields:

(1) First try to identify symbols that might signify *Intercultural Creation*. In our study, a new dichotomy of collective self and other beyond German versus Chinese was indicated by the verbal expressions of "practical person" and "impractical person".

(2) Investigate into the meanings that are given to these new categories and classify them into (a) given difference based on initial cross-cultural dimensions and cultural standards and (b) into new emic meanings.

(3) Assess whether these new meanings have the power of bridging given cross-cultural difference. If so, design and implement a strategy and action that strengthens the unifying elements of *Intercultural Creation*, e.g. through reflexivity in work-practice and joint team-development activities.

(4) Investigate into the emic sense that is made out of your action. Revise strategy and action, if necessary.

### 5.4 Limitations

Two limiting issues have to be reflected upon in order to judge quality and nature of access and of researcher-field relationship, namely language and power.

Firstly, the researcher did not speak Chinese. Therefore, he was limited to German and English language conversations. Due to his background, he was categorized as German by actors in the field. Therefore, he was not the right person to

uncover emic intra-cultural elements of Chinese culture. Yet, we were interested in how the given Sino-German border is bridged through inter-cultural strategies. In our research setting, this had to be done in either German or English as no German employee spoke Chinese. Towards a German researcher, Chinese employees would most likely use the same bridging strategies they would use with any other German employee. Therefore, for the purpose of our research, we considered this researcher's cultural identity more an asset than a liability.

Secondly, the researcher was most likely categorized as representative of German headquarters by Chinese employees. German headquarters is dominant towards them, as it prescribes corporate language and establishes contact to the client. Combined with the fact that the researcher did not speak Chinese, this made it very unlikely for him to gain access to patterns of resistance towards German headquarters. Therefore, we could only focus on the unifying elements of a potential inter-culture and not on potential dispersing resistance towards German headquarters. The fact that we did not include potential issues of power and resistance is solely due to the stated limitations of our access and not due to our neglect of unequal power relations in modern business. In fact, we advocate that more cultural research be conducted from this perspective and have done so in other cases (Mahadevan 2011a).

To summarize the limitations of our study: Due to the language barrier, we could not deliver insights on intra-cultural emic meanings at the Chinese site. Due to specific power relations, we could not focus upon the dispersing elements and the heterogeneity of emic cultures.

With regard to the research problem, these limitations mean: We could find proof for the existence of unifying elements of emic intercultural, yet, we could not counterweigh it with uncovering dispersing elements under the condition of asymmetric power relations.

## 6. Conclusion

Our study contributed to intercultural research and practice by providing an example of how cultural actors in a cross-cultural field create new emic meanings beyond given national cultural dimensions. We have called this state *Intercultural Creation* and have researched upon it qualitatively.

It was not our argument that the state of *Intercultural Creation* implies that given cross-cultural difference as defined by cultural dimensions does not exist initially in a cross-cultural

field. For the researcher as a new arrival to the field, cross-cultural dimensions helped to conceptualize own experiences of cross-cultural difference. Rather, it is our argument that cross-cultural dimensions and large-scale cultural standards are too simplified and deterministic in order to explain which emic sense intercultural actors will make out of initial difference. Furthermore, cross-cultural dimensions cannot foresee to which degree cultural actors have the cultural agency to bridge them through *Intercultural Creation*.

We argued that such processes of *Intercultural Creation* can be identified through symbolic meanings that integrate previous difference of collective self and collective other. In our study, the symbol that integrated previously unrelated cultural meanings was the verbal construct of a "practical person". We have uncovered difference between the immediate wording and the broader meaning of "practical person": Whereas the immediate wording seems to indicate German cultural norms, the broader cultural narrative seems to signify Chinese cultural norms. Through this ambiguity, given cultural difference is linked.

Due to the qualitative nature of our study, our generalizable contribution is the perspective and not the actual findings. To increase practitioners' and researchers' understanding of interculturalities in various fields, further qualitative and explorative longitudinal research has to be conducted in different organizational settings. Special attention should be given to emergent processes of intercultural and not to finite and given cross-culturalities. As our study has shown, the latter are merely the initial conditions of emic sensemaking but by no means its outcome. Hence, we propose a paradigmatic shift towards an integrative intercultural management of emic cultural meanings instead of focusing on comparative cross-cultural management based on predefined cross-cultural dimensions.

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