

PART 3: CASES OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS;

CHAPTER 8: THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS ACROSS CULTURES: CHINESE OFFICIALS IN AMERICA

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This meticulously detailed description and its analysis require almost no introduction, effectively they speak for themselves; and the case study is relevant to all business and government cross-cultural meetings.

It has always been advisable to understand the cultural factors in international negotiations and Richard Lewis,¹ for example, is only one of many writers who have been arguing for decades that negotiation is becoming a science, dominated by the USA. Lewis writes that anyone who has mediated, for instance, at a Japanese-US joint venture knows that the moment intercultural factors enter the equation, the landscape can change utterly.

In the current international climate (in which, for example, the leaders of Germany, France and Russia are holding talks to help end the conflict in eastern Ukraine²) appreciating cultural bias is essential. Lewis suggests that three key reasons are:

- A tendency to assert cultural values more powerfully when negotiating parties are under pressure;
- Under globalisation, Westerners are being forced into understanding different negotiation mind-sets;
- Relationship skills – including negotiation – are overtaking linear task-oriented skills (like production, logistics and IT) as the main driver of competitive edge.

As the case study illustrates, cultural preparation to understand different worlds is central to successful international strategy and tactics. Perhaps also it is worth noting that the authors' analysis relies most heavily on the work of two theorists, Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner,³ and on the writings of Harry Triandis.⁴

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner classified cultures along a mix of behavioural and value patterns; and their research focuses on the cultural dimensions of business executives. They identified seven culture-based value orientations:

- Universalism versus particularism (Rules should be the same for everybody vs circumstances alter cases);
- Communitarianism versus individualism ('we' vs 'I');
- Neutral versus emotional (outward control of emotional display vs show feelings freely);
- Defuse versus specific (direct vs implicit);

- Achievement versus ascription (what you are vs who you are);
- Human-time relationship: synchronous vs sequential (more than one activity at a time vs one thing at a time);
- Human-nature relationship: internal versus external control (self-reliance vs external constraints);

Wang and Spencer-Oatey refer to the Chinese officials in their case study as owning a particularist (relationship-based) preference; whereas their US counterparts were more universalist (rule-based) in general.

Thus it seems that business representatives and government officials from universalistic cultures negotiating with their Chinese counterparts must recognize that relationships matter and take time to develop; they form the basis of trust that is necessary to do business. In a particularistic culture, contracts are only a rough guideline or approximation.

In 1999⁵ Triandis discussed some of the limitations of social psychology research. Based on his previous studies he argued that much of the focus of research by social psychologists reflects Euro-American concerns, and are therefore of limited generality. He suggested such limitations would be remedied by increased attention to cross-cultural studies, because many of the key constructs of the discipline, such as self, and conformity, are culture-bound. This is one of the reasons why the following case study is so useful with its cultural insights to Chinese interactions with westerners.

THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS ACROSS CULTURES: A CASE STUDY OF HOSTING CHINESE OFFICIALS IN AMERICA

ABSTRACT

This case study explores the ways in which Chinese government officials interpreted American professionals' hosting behaviours during a 3-week delegation visit to the United States of America.

Drawing on video recordings of the delegation's intercultural interactions and spontaneous comments made during evening reflection and planning meetings, the study describes a number of incidents that the delegates experienced as surprising or annoying in some way, and the key strategies they used for handling them. Also the study examines the types of hosting behaviour to which the delegation members were particularly 'face sensitive'; and notes that, interestingly, the Chinese and American officials often had different interpretations of the same interactions.

KEY WORDS:

Government officials, professional relations, Chinese, American, hosting

INTRODUCTION

Professional communication across cultures is of growing importance in today's globalising world and this entails the management of professional relations. Cultural guidebooks may provide lists of dos and don'ts or try to describe concepts that are particularly important to a given cultural group. However, such accounts tend to be superficial and generalized while case

studies can provide rich and nuanced insights.

This case study examines how members of a Chinese ministerial delegation built and managed relations with their American hosts during a three-week official visit to the United States of America. It focuses particularly on hosting issues. This kind of professional interaction, which involved government officials from both the USA and China, has rarely been studied before, not least because it is so difficult to gain access to examples. Moreover, this longitudinal study illuminates how the Chinese officials adjusted their relevant perceptions, behaviours and strategies over time.

Readers will be able to obtain valuable insights from the analysis of this authentic case, helping raise their awareness of the complex factors and multiple perspectives involved in building professional relations across cultures through managing hosting arrangements.

CASE PRESENTATION

The Chinese Ministry of X⁶ has a long-term relationship with its American counterpart, the US Department of X (American Government Department, abbreviated as AGD). Both sides had agreed on the schedule in advance.

The delegation visited six major American cities during their three-week visit, and the Chinese officials had twenty-six meetings with twenty-three American organisations (see Table 8.1 below). The overall host was the American Government Department (AGD). Among these exchanges, seventeen meetings were video recorded completely, four meetings and one banquet were video recorded in part with supplementary audio recordings, and at five meetings recordings were not allowed due to the nature of the American government organisations.

Table 8.1 American hosting agencies (Source: authors' own)

No	American organisations	Abbreviations
1	University	
2	Federal Organisation 1 (national, equivalent to central)	FO1
3	Federal Government Organisation 1	FGO1
4	Federal Government Organisation 2	FGO2
5	Non-Profit NGO 1	NGO1
6	Federal Organisation 2	FO2
7	Private Firm	
8	Federal Government Organisation 3	FGO3
9	State Government Organisation 1	SGO1
10	Non-Profit NGO 2	NGO2
11	Professional Association 1	PA1
12	State Government Organisation 2	SGO2
13	Federal Government Organisation 4	FGO4
14	Federal Government Organisation 5	FGO5
15	Volunteering Organisation 1	VO1

No	American organisations	Abbreviations
16	Professional Association 2	PA2
17	Division A, the American Government Department (AGD)	
18	Division B, the American Government Department (AGD)	
19	Federal Organisation 3	FO3
20	Division C, the American Government Department (AGD)	
21	Federal Organisation 4	FO4
22	Federal Organisation 5	FO5
23	Professional Association 3	PA3

Typically, members of high-level official delegations, usually leaders from various departments, do not have much contact with each other before their trips. After returning home, they frequently only hold one formal internal meeting to summarise and reflect on their intercultural experiences, though during their trip they might discuss informally some matters that arise.

This delegation differed from most others in this regard. The head of the delegation (HOD) was already a leader of the other delegates in their daily work, and perhaps because of this he formally dedicated a considerable amount of time during the trip to an internal meeting in the evening of every working day after and/or before special events. The evening reflection and planning meetings aimed to report, share and understand in a timely and efficient manner any issues arising in their intercultural contact with their American counterparts.

Hosting emerged as a central theme in the Chinese officials' relational reflections and planning, and four aspects of hosting were regularly commented on: welcomes, opening of formal meetings, rescheduling, and banquets and entertainment.

Welcome for the visiting officials

The officials were welcomed in a similar way most of the time. They were greeted by the Americans from the hosting agency at the gate of the building and then escorted all the way to the meeting room. Interestingly, they had problems with how they were treated at the security checks and this issue caused heated discussion at the evening meetings.

At almost all the government buildings, the delegation had to go through security checks. While these procedures might vary from place to place due to the nature of the organisations, they were particularly upset by the strict security checks when they visited two federal government organisations (FGO1 and FGO2) in the afternoon of Day 4.

The delegation felt that they lost face when asked to take off their belts at the checkpoint. As a matter of fact, the Chinese officials went through similarly stringent procedures at the airports, but they did not feel uncomfortable because their identity at that time was temporary, as passengers. Like everybody else at an airport, they took off their shoes and removed their belts. However, when they had to pass through the same procedures at the entrance to the government buildings, all the Chinese delegates, in suits and ties, were extremely annoyed at having to hold

their trousers by hand to pass through the security gate. They saw themselves as visiting officials and they complained to each other in Chinese in the presence of the Americans.

In the evening, the HOD drew attention to this incident, asking the group not to associate it with strong feelings of face loss.

Data extract 1: EM Comment

When visiting a government agency like this afternoon, we must abide by their regulations, such as removing belts and not bringing any electronic devices into the X government organisations. Don't feel a huge loss of face when being asked to remove the belts according to their requirements. Pay attention to our image.⁷

The HOD's pacification seemed to work, as the group did not complain about the security check any more in the following evening meetings.

Opening a formal meeting

In addition to how they were welcomed, the ways in which the Americans opened the meetings also drew these officials' attention. On most occasions, it was the first time for the Americans to meet with the Chinese visitors. The majority of the American hosts, especially officials, opened the meeting very formally, by, for example, giving a welcome speech and asking the delegation to give a return speech. Yet one American professional, Professional 7 (P7), director of a federal project, surprised the group by mentioning his grandchildren.

At the beginning of the morning meeting, the chairperson Director Jackson introduced P7 by reading out his bio, "P7 is...to work on the X project here and across the nation and to spend time with his grandchildren", and to bring in a personalised connection, added that his grandchildren were lovely. P7 then started the meeting by talking about his grandchildren.

Data extract 2: Video recording

1 P7: It is a great honour for me to be here and to be able to talk to
2 a group of officials...who are working on the issues of X in
3 China. To further emphasize Director Jackson's comments
4 on the last sentence of my bio, it was an honour enough for
→ 5 me to leave my two grandchildren in City B⁸ so that I can be
6 with you today to do this. My wife and I just brought them
7 back with us from State J for a visit, a four-year grandson
8 who is very energetic (2) and an eight-year granddaughter.
9 Anyway, thank you very much for inviting me. If you don't
10 mind, I'm actually gonna take off my jacket to join you in
11 greater comfort. Welcome to the State I weather!

P7 made a straightforward informal request to take off his jacket (see lines 10-11). It was extremely hot in early August in this state. Although the air conditioner was working on full power in the meeting room, P7 was still sweating. He seemed to be trying to pitch the supposedly formal meeting as an informal interaction. He started smiling as soon as he mentioned his grandchildren, but the Chinese officials did not give any reaction.

If we take these officials' non-reaction (as captured in the video data) at its face value, it suggests that such a style for opening a meeting did not work its magic. However, P7's opening strategy, in fact, stimulated heated discussion at the evening meeting among the delegates who seemed to have hidden their feelings by keeping silent and showing blank faces at the daytime meeting. The group were actually "surprised" (DHOD, EM comment) or even "shocked" (HOD, EM comment) by his openness, as DHOD commented in detail below.

Data extract 3: EM Comment

...I was shocked because we will never use our family members as an opening for a formal meeting with people we don't know or foreign guests. Yes, I talk about my grandson all day long, but I only talk about it to you. I would not talk to Americans about that.⁹

The DHOD's remarks explained the group's experiences and reactions: they would never use their families as an opening of such formal intercultural meetings.

Nevertheless, this breach of expectations was not interpreted negatively. In fact, P7's mentioning of family drew the distance closer and the delegation believed that it had contributed to a closer relationship between the Chinese delegation and the American professional. This implies that "Do in Rome as Romans do" might not be the golden rule that prevails in all contexts. Additionally, this episode also sheds some light on the dynamic balance between formality and informality. While a meeting might be deemed as formal, certain elements of informality can contribute to the relational atmosphere of the event.

Rescheduling

As the schedule was agreed by both sides in advance, the Chinese officials normally followed it. On Day 14 the delegation left City A for City C early on a Friday morning. They had two blocks of meetings that day. In the morning, they went to a powerful professional association (Professional Association 2, PA2) to meet with several divisions of that organisation. In the afternoon, they went to an influential volunteering organisation (Volunteering Organisation 1, VO1).

When they arrived in City C after more than two hours' drive from City A in the morning, they felt very tired because they went to visit PA2 straightaway. Therefore, at the end of the first meeting with PA2, the HOD made a request to reschedule the remaining meetings with the other divisions of PA2, "Can you rearrange the rest of today's meetings?" To the Chinese group's shock, the American director categorically refused the request by saying "No, we can't because it is at such short notice". In the Chinese delegation's eyes, the American's manner of refusal led to a plunge in relationship quality and a big loss of face for the Chinese group.

While the Chinese officials were upset by the relational slump, they did try to make sense of the American's "blunt" refusal.

Data extract 4: EM Comment

HOD: ...I asked the director of PA2 to change the schedule for the rest of the meetings with the other divisions. She was not very

- polite to refuse us directly.
- D10: We were shocked at that moment. She didn't ask the other divisions and just refused our request abruptly. "No, we can't because it is at such short notice".
- D15: It was a dramatic turn. The first meeting with the international division went very well. We had built good relations. A smooth meeting plus a carefully chosen gift increased both sides' face. We also joked about the iced beer they offered. The atmosphere, like our face, had gradually climbed up to a higher level, reaching the climax when she joked about the iced beer. Till that moment, I rated PA2 as the best individual hosting agency. However, she suddenly refused our request so firmly. Everything began to fall down. All the efforts that morning till that moment were almost in vain. Our relations fell down to the level at the starting point.
- D3: That's true. They were definitely impolite. She didn't want to know our reason for rescheduling at all. She didn't ask, did she?
- D4: No. We just asked tentatively because we did not want to put pressure on them. Nor did we expect that she would respond without any leeway. At least she should say, "OK. I'm afraid that I have to ask the other divisions you are going to meet" and it would be an ideal opportunity for her to show the host's care for the guests by asking us why we wanted to change the schedule.
- DHOD: That's correct. We didn't give her the compelling reason that we were so exhausted. We were only making a tentative request whilst withholding the strong argument. It was already a concession and we were putting ourselves in their shoes. Otherwise, we would tell her about our long journey and previous intensive activities. If I were the host, I would put the guest's needs first. The primary goal of us hosting foreign visitors at home is to meet their needs as much as possible. We won't refuse such a request. Moreover, we'll do our utmost to make the arrangement before giving them a definite answer "no"...
- HOD: We had also lost a bit of our face...¹⁰

As the above extract shows, the group viewed their head's bald-on-record request to reschedule the other meetings without presenting the reasons as considerate, and interpreted the American director's refusal negatively. Clearly, the way in which the American director dealt with the officials' request for rescheduling had a far-reaching implication on the Chinese relational interpretations.

Banquets and entertainment

Interestingly, banquets and entertainment played an equally, if not more important role in the

Chinese officials' face and relational efforts and evaluations than the meetings did. Their interpretations of banquets and social dinners offered some illuminating insights.

Overall, they thought that the banquets hosted by the Americans were not as successful as a social dinner in City A, because the relational atmosphere was relatively cold, whereas at the social dinner, everything seemed to have fallen into place. This dinner was initiated by the Chinese officials and it took place in a popular Taiwan restaurant. The whole dinner was filled with enthusiastic toasts and lively chat, ending up in a happy mood.

Data extract 5: EM Comment by the DHOD

[The Americans] seemed to enjoy the Chinese dinner with forks and spoons and of course our good liquor. The two young Americans were the target of our toasts so they were almost drunk with red face in the end, but they enjoyed it. It was interesting. Originally the HOD and I were thinking of asking them to drink a little bit at first, but the two young men finished the liquor in one shot. They were so straightforward. We appreciated their warm response. Then every one of us began to propose more toasts to them. For the ladies we were much softer. I think everyone had a good time at the dinner. The food was delicious. The Chinese liquor was wonderful. And we chatted with each other animatedly. Although there was no separate room in the restaurant, the screen helped us to have a private space with three tables close enough to liven things up.

This absolutely showed our heartfelt personal thanks to the American officers who accompany us every day. So we prepared special gifts for them all – delicately carved combs made of peach wood for the ladies and silk ties for the men. They loved them so much. In addition to the deepening relations with the American side in general, we succeeded in pushing our personal relations with the individual American officials who serve us up to a new height. Director Jackson said he would really like to see us again in future and our delegates all warmly invited them to China. This dinner worked better than daily business activities for us to have closer relations. A dinner like this enables us to understand each other more deeply than seeing each other at the meetings for ten days.¹¹

As can be seen from the comment above, the Chinese officials' relational concerns went well beyond meetings. The key terms here are toasts and social talk, which may have contributed to their relations with the Americans in the banquet context. Contrary to their preferred emotional concealment in the meeting contexts, they seemed to favour emotional display at the banquets and social dinners. Conviviality was perceived as the key.

In short, the Chinese officials were face-sensitive to various aspects of how they were hosted during their delegation visit. The aspects that they touched upon included the ways in which they were welcomed, the opening of formal meetings, rescheduling, and banquets and entertainment. The Americans' hosting behaviours became a prominent theme in their interpretations with regards to building professional relations across cultures.

OUTCOMES

The Americans' hosting behaviour to which the Chinese officials were particularly 'face sensitive' in this trip yielded both positive and problematic outcomes for the building of professional relations across cultures.

Problematic outcomes

The Chinese participants noted that the Americans' hosting behaviour as regards welcomes, rescheduling and banquets had a comparatively problematic impact on relations.

Welcomes for the visiting officials

As can be seen from the security check incident, the group reckoned that, as senior visiting foreign officials, they could have skipped some of the procedures such as removing their belts in the reception halls of the federal government buildings. From their perspectives, the American hosts' failure to simplify the security check processes for them was regarded as synonymous with failing to respect and play out the hierarchical difference between them as senior visiting officials and the other visitors in general. This was probably why they felt so negative about the hosting behaviour which made them lose face and thereby impeded relations as the lack of distinction in treatment was equated with a lack of status differentiation. Echoing Bond and Hwang's¹² essence of Chinese society, i.e., "harmony-within-hierarchy", this again manifested the importance of hierarchy. Reflection of hierarchy seemed to be taken as the principal norm by the Chinese officials in hosting contexts.

From another perspective, it seems that the Chinese and the American officials had different expectations concerning the treatment of visiting foreign officials. Consistent with previous studies of business people,¹³ the Chinese officials had a particularist (relationship-based) preference whereas their American counterparts were more universalist (rule-based) in general.

Chinese delegations tend to expect special treatment "based on a logic of the heart and human friendship".¹⁴ In other words, the host's consideration (or considerateness) carries greater weight than conforming to the rules in such circumstances. For most Chinese, there is a tradition of adding a human touch to reason and law in the legal system¹⁵ whereby laws and rules could be modified in particular situations. This is reflected in the word order in the popular Chinese saying "emotion, reason and law" [情、理、法].¹⁶ For the Americans, however, the reverse order seemed to be true, i.e., "law, reason and emotion" [法、理、情]. Such divergence might be traced back to the relative particularist orientation of Confucianism¹⁷ and the ideal of universalism upheld by Plato and Aristotle.

There are pros and cons for both particularists and universalists. While people may think their ways of doing things are the best, we could not simply assume that one orientation is necessarily superior to the other. The universalist American officials' strictly enforcing the procedures ensured equality and equity, but implied a lack of flexibility and consideration for the guests. The particularist Chinese officials, however, might break the rules for visiting foreign counterparts, which demonstrates their flexibility and thoughtfulness as hosts, yet at the expense of equality for all.

This dilemma is not easy to solve. In the business contexts, Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner¹⁸ suggest keeping improving universal rules to cover more particular situations and making them more humane. In official intercultural interaction, this is not highly relevant, yet as the authors have said, particularism and universalism are actually a matter of degree. It is worthwhile to open our minds to understand and learn from the other side.

Rescheduling

As can be seen from the delegates' extended discussions regarding the request for rescheduling, the American host's response to the Chinese delegation's request marked a plunge in relations. While making and handling such a request in intercultural contexts can be a minefield for a host, this may become "an ideal opportunity" for the host to show his or her "concern for the guests by asking why" (D4, EM comment). The host may draw closer to the guests, if the request is managed properly by taking into account both the sociolinguistic and pragmatic differences and the different norms of hosting which professionals are often unaware of. The main norm in the requesting contexts for the Chinese officials seemed to be considerateness.

In this case, the HOD's bald-on-record request and the American director's direct refusal may reveal some conventionalised sociolinguistic and pragmatic differences as regards requests and rejections. First, the group viewed their head's request without any justification/explanation as considerate by "not presenting the compelling reasons" (DHOD, EM comment) to "put pressure" (D4, EM comment) on the American host. Consistent with Lee-Wong's¹⁹ findings of the Chinese preference for bald-on-record requests, this interpretation at the first glance seemingly violates the general tendency described in the Chinese cultural script of requesting: off-record hinting.²⁰

However, this longitudinal study helps reveal that the Chinese had been avoiding making any request²¹ to the Americans, direct or indirect. This request was, in fact, the only formal one they made during their entire stay in the US. The "deviant" case could be explained by the exceptional situation whereby the Chinese did not have the luxury of time to hint implicitly. In other words, this is consistent with the other researchers' generalisations that Chinese people probably are less direct and explicit than Westerners,²² so they usually avoid making any verbal requests. It is just that when "squeezed", they may bounce to being equally or even more direct than Americans. This confirms the necessity of studying politeness as a social phenomenon²³ and beyond lexico-grammatical²⁴ forms.

Second, the American director's refusal of this request gave rise to the group's strong reaction, even though it followed the standard Anglo-American script, i.e., direct refusal plus an excuse. It indeed sounded "offensively" blunt to Chinese ears,²⁵ because the delegation did not "expect that she would respond without any leeway" and they assumed that she should at least say "OK, I'm afraid that I have to ask the other divisions you are going to meet" (D4, EM comment). This supports the general warning of "never say no" to Chinese.²⁶ As this case shows, it may lead to dangerous misunderstanding.

Banquets

The group reiterated the relational significance of banquets hosted by the Americans in the evening meetings and they spent considerable time on planning and reflection before and after each of the events. For example, the first farewell banquet took place in the banquet hall of a business Golf Club when their stay in City A came to an end. Present at the formal banquet were the heads of the American agencies, governmental and non-governmental, whom they had visited in the first two weeks. The evening before the banquet, the HOD explicitly highlighted its relational implication:

Our stay in City A is coming to an end. Therefore at tomorrow's lunch banquet, we must push our relations to a new climax. We already knew all the leaders. Propose more toasts and enliven the atmosphere. This lunch banquet marks the closing of the first phase of our trip, and its significance is self-evident. Propose more toasts and develop our relations with the American side. (EM comment)²⁷

Clearly, the Chinese officials took the banquet seriously because of its huge relational significance. Proposing “more toasts” to the hosts and “enliven[ing] the atmosphere” to develop relations with the Americans were repeated over and over again in the group’s strategic planning of this kind of events.

Despite their careful planning, nearly all the formal banquets held by the Americans seemed to fall short of the group’s expectations. The main reasons seemed to be that as hosts, the Americans did not play their ‘due’ role in lifting the relational atmosphere.

Let us take the reflection on the first farewell banquet as an example. All the participants sat at tables of six to seven and there were six tables altogether, three on each side of the aisle which led to the podium at the front of the hall. So every Chinese delegate was sitting next to at least one American leader and since additional interpreters were provided, each table had at least one interpreter. On behalf of all the hosting agencies in the first two weeks, the American Director of the International Office, Director Jackson, kicked off the banquet by making a brief speech and proposing a toast, but he did not go to other tables for further toasting. Feeling obliged not to outperform the hosts, the HOD also did not go beyond doing what Director Jackson did, so there were no toasts back and forth that could have quickly lifted the atmosphere. The group believed that the banquet could have been better with things like liquor and more toasts, but since the Americans were the hosts, the Chinese could hardly do anything to improve it.

This was true with the other banquets. The group expected the official farewell banquet to be a jolly, warm and exciting event where people talked animatedly, celebrating the conclusion of the trip and looking into the future, and so on and so forth. Conviviality emerged as the principal norm in the banquet contexts for the Chinese officials.

In short, the problematic outcomes revealed that the Chinese officials and the American hosts had different norms and expectations, with different conventions applied in different contexts.

Positive outcomes

Despite all these problems, there were aspects of hosting that had a positive impact on relations which the Chinese officials regularly commented on: opening of formal meetings and social dinners.

Opening of formal meetings

As can be seen from Data extract 2, although the American director P7’s mentioning of his grandchildren breached the Chinese norms of opening a formal meeting, i.e. do not mention family in formal meetings, the Chinese delegates spoke highly of this strategy, because “[s]incerity and warmth are the most important” for bilateral relations and “[a]nything else is

secondary” (DHOD, EM comment). So the host speaking in this way signalled that ‘we are treating you as very important people’ and highlighted the importance of the principle of warmth in meeting contexts for positive Chinese evaluations.

Social dinner

Unlike the formal banquets hosted by the Americans, the social dinner at a local Taiwanese restaurant to which the Chinese officials invited some of the Americans yielded positive relational outcomes, because as hosts of this particular event, the Chinese officials successfully lifted the relational atmosphere through dining, wining and talking. Conviviality was achieved. Clearly, concerns over banquets and entertainment were embedded in the building of professional relations. The findings suggest that the Chinese officials attached equal or even greater importance to banquets than to meetings. The banquets and the social dinner were held in consistently high regard by the Chinese officials. In professional intercultural interaction, Chinese professionals at large tend to place great emphasis on social events.²⁸ While emotional display in the presence of intercultural interactants is discouraged, the banquet can be a formalised event for showing emotions. The key Chinese elements of a good banquet and/or social dinner include wining, talking and an animated atmosphere. To make these events successful, the Chinese may expect the hosts to have toasts and go around from table to table, which might be less common in the West.

In conclusion, despite all the details of arranging practicalities, as we can see from above, the Chinese officials had different expectations of hosting behaviour, and there were different norms applied to different contexts.

What could have been done differently and why

While these aspects of hosting seemed to be trivial, their relational implications could be huge. In this case study, both sides only talked about the overall schedule before the visit (e.g. Day 1 noon. Welcome banquet), more detailed practical arrangements could have been communicated. If the hosts could have provided more details such as “warnings” about the essential security check processes at certain government buildings, on the one hand, the Chinese officials may have interpreted this as a sign that ‘the hosts are very considerate’ and ‘they are treating us as very important people’; on the other hand, this could have better prepared the Chinese officials for the trip as well.

How to tackle such problems in the future

If you are going to host Chinese officials, there are several things that you can take away from this case study. First, given the impact of hosting behaviour on professional relationships, it is advisable to provide the visiting Chinese officials in advance with more details of the practical arrangements, and if necessary, discuss them with the Chinese side before the trip.

Second, you need to be aware that you may have different norms and expectations for hosting. Even though you do not necessarily have to change your behaviour, it will be helpful if you can tell the visiting officials that you are aware of their norms and explain the differences to help them to foresee the differences or even the ‘difficulties’ they might meet. Such pre-warnings may minimise or even turn around the negative impact unexpected events may have on the building of professional relations across cultures.

We have learned that in professional intercultural interaction with Chinese, it is important for non-Chinese not to underestimate the value of social activities and to be aware of the potential differences in this area. For some Chinese professionals, a host's handling of banquets can be a significant aspect of a guest's relational evaluation of hosting. For example, if you are hosting a banquet for visiting Chinese officials, it might be useful if you, as the host, could acknowledge the differences by just adding a few more sentences when proposing the toast to all the guests at the beginning of the banquet: "I know in China a good host should have toasts and go around. Actually, I was rather impressed when I was in China. Yet I'm afraid it is less common here, so please bear with us." By doing so, you may reverse the impact of having a 'cold' start, and if the visiting officials have a laugh at what you have said, this could make a 'warm' start and contribute to the relational atmosphere.

Conclusion

In intercultural interaction, a good understanding of the other side's norms and principles can be extremely useful for avoiding misunderstanding and miscommunication, and although different principles tend to be stressed in different contexts by different cultural groups, contexts can actually become an integral part of the conventionalised formulae.²⁹ For example, the Chinese officials seemed to prefer emotional concealment in the presence of their intercultural interactants in intercultural meeting contexts. Conversely, conviviality and emotional display in banquet settings were stressed. Overall, both the broader hosting principles such as warmth, conviviality and considerateness as well as the specific contexts need to be taken into account. Since the normative differences in hosting are often highlighted in the handling of details, a host in intercultural encounters may follow the advice of thinking globally and acting locally, and keep in mind that hosting can be hugely significant for the guest's relational evaluation of the host and for the building of professional relations across cultures.

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¹ Richard D Lewis, 1996, *When cultures collide: Managing successfully across cultures*; National Book Network

² Nick Allen, Jessica Winch, 06 Feb 2015, "Ukraine crisis: Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande fly to Russia for peace talks"; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

³ Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, 2005, *Riding the waves of culture: Understanding cultural diversity in business*; Nicholas Brealey Publishing

⁴ Harry Triandis, 2001, Individualism and collectivism: Past, present, and future. In D. R. Matsumoto (Ed.), *The handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 35-50); Oxford University Press

⁵ Harry C. Triandis, 1999, "Cross-cultural psychology", *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 1999, Vol.2, 127-143

⁶ The name of the ministry has been anonymised.

⁷ 拜访政府机构，必须遵守对方的规定，像今天下午X政府机构安检，解腰带、不要把电子设备带入X政府机构大楼，不要觉得解腰带就特丢脸，注意我们的形象。

⁸ The states and cities have been anonymised by giving each an alphabet code.

⁹ 我挺吃惊的，因为我们开正式会议，不认识对方或者对方是外宾，从来不会用家人作为开场白。对，我是老提我孙子，可是也就和大家说一说，不会跟美国人去讲。

¹⁰ HOD: ……我要求PA2的主任改日程，调整一下和其它部门会谈的时间，但是她就直接拒绝了，不是特别礼貌。D10: 我们那时候都特震惊，她也没去问其它部门的意见，就断然拒绝。“不行，通知时间太短。” D15: 就是一个戏剧性的转折，我们和国际部开会挺顺利，关系弄得也不错，会议顺利、外加我们精心挑选的礼物，双方都长脸了。我们还拿他们准备的冰啤酒开玩笑。整个气氛，就跟我们面子一样，逐渐提升到一个高度，她开完冰啤酒的玩笑以后，就达到一个新的高度，到那一刻，我还觉得PA2是所有美方接待单位里面最好的一家。结果突然她这么坚定地拒绝了我们的要求，所有一切开始下滑，上午开会直到那一刻所有的努力几乎白费了，我们的关系又落回了原点。D3: 没错，他们太不礼貌了。她也没问我们为什么要调整日程，对吧？D4: 没问，我们是试探性的问一下，就是不想给他们压力，但也没想到她回答的毫无余地。最起码，她应该说一句：“恐怕我还要问问其它部门。”这其实是她表现主人关心客人的最好的时机，就问问我们为什么想改日程。DHOD: 这才对。我们都没提出来，我们累到筋疲力尽，就试探性的问一句，没把这理由摆出来，这已经是让步了，替他们考虑好。要不我们就直接说来C城市路上特别远，之前公务活动安排又紧。如果我们接待单位，就会把访客的需求放在第一位，我们招待外宾的首要目的就是要尽量满足对方的需要，就不会拒绝这样的要求，而且我们还会先尽量安排，实在不行再肯定得告诉对方不行……HOD: 我们也有点丢脸……

¹¹ (美方他们)用得是叉子和勺子，吃得也很尽兴，当然喝好酒也喝得尽兴。这两个美国小伙子就是我们敬酒的目标，最后喝的脸都红了，都快醉了，但是还挺高兴的。特别有意思的是，团长和我本来就像让他俩先少喝一点，他俩一上来就干了，特豪爽，我们也很高兴，之后大家每个人都给他们敬酒。我们对女士就温和多了。我觉得大家每个人今天晚饭都尽兴了。美食美酒，大家聊得很热闹，虽然饭店里没有包间，但是有了隔断，我们三桌都凑得很近，热热闹闹。这就表达

了我们个人对美方工作人员真诚的谢意，他们天天都陪着我们。所以我们给他们都准备的特别的礼物，女士是雕刻精美的桃木梳，男士是丝绸领带，他们特别喜欢我们送的礼物。我们除了加深和美方的关系以外，还把和为我们服务的美方工作人员的个人关系推向了一个新高度。Jackson主任说他特别希望再见到我们，我们团员也都热情欢迎他们来中国。今天晚上这顿饭增进了我们之间的友谊，比每天的公务活动都强。像今天晚上这样吃上一顿晚饭，比我们在一起开会10天还要了解得多。

¹² Michael Harris Bond and Hwang, Kwang-Kuo, 1986, *The psychology of the Chinese people*; Oxford University Press

¹³ Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, 2005, *Riding the waves of culture: Understanding cultural diversity in business*; Nicholas Brealey Publishing

¹⁴ Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, 2005

¹⁵ Xianbi Huang, 2008, Guanxi networks and job searches in China's emerging labour market: a qualitative investigation; *Work, Employment & Society*, 22(3), 467-484.

¹⁶ Brook Ziporyn, 2008, Form, Principle, Pattern, or Coherence? Li in Chinese Philosophy; *Philosophy Compass*, 3(3), 401-422.

¹⁷ June Ock Yum, 1988, The impact of Confucianism on interpersonal relationships and communication patterns in East Asia. In L. A. Samovar & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (8th ed., Vol. 55, pp. 374-388); Wadsworth Publishing Company

¹⁸ Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, 2005

¹⁹ Song Mei Lee-Wong, 1994, Imperatives in requests: Direct or impolite-Observations from Chinese; *Pragmatics*, 4(4).

²⁰ Anna Wierzbicka, 1996, Contrastive sociolinguistics and the theory of "cultural scripts": Chinese vs English. In M. Hellinger & U. Ammon (Eds.), *Contributions to the Sociology of Language* (Vol. 71, pp. 313-344); Mouton de Gruyter

²¹ Grahame Tony Bilbow, 1995, Requesting strategies in the cross-cultural business meeting; *Pragmatics*, 5(1), 45-56.

²² See for example:

Ge Gao and Stella Ting-Toomey, 1998, *Communicating effectively with the Chinese*; Sage

Harry Triandis, 2001, Individualism and collectivism: Past, present, and future. In D. R. Matsumoto (Ed.), *The handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 35-50); Oxford University Press

²³ Grahame Tony Bilbow, 1995

²⁴ Jonathan Culpeper, 2011, *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*; Cambridge University Press

²⁵ Anna Wierzbicka, 1996

²⁶ Tony Fang, 2012, Yin Yang: A new perspective on culture; *Management and Organization Review*, 8(1), 25-50.

²⁷ HOD: 我们这次在A城市的日程明天就告一段落了，所以明天午宴，我们要把和美方的关系推向一个新的高潮。我们都认识那些领导了，多敬酒，把气氛搞得活跃些，这顿午宴标志着我们在美国第一阶段的访问结束了，午宴有多重要，就不说了吧，多敬酒，增进和美方的关系。

²⁸ Hong Seng Woo and Celine Prud'homme, 1999, Cultural characteristics prevalent in the Chinese negotiation process; *European Business Review*, 99(5), 313-322.

²⁹ Jonathan Culpeper, 2012, (Im)politeness: Three issues; *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(9), 1128-1133.