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Article Title: Sino-British Interaction in Professional Contexts

Year of publication: 2009

Link to published version:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/globalpeople/resourcebank/gppublications/sino-uk.pdf

Publisher statement: None

Sino-British Interaction in Professional Contexts



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Sino-British Interaction in Professional Contexts

Warwick Occasional Papers in Applied Linguistics #6

Authors: Stefanie Stadler and Helen Spencer-Oatey

Publication Date: February 2009

Published by The Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick

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The Global People project was funded by the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE) as part of the Sino-UK e-Learning Programme (eChina-UK) and supported by the Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick. The authors are grateful for their support.

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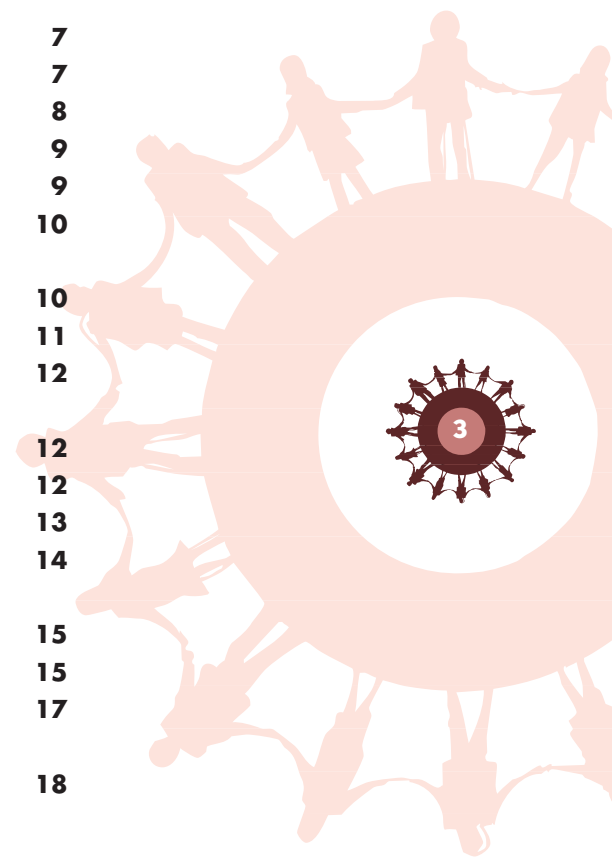
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1. Overview

This paper consists of two main sections. Section 2 provides a brief overview of and background to basic aspects of communication in a Chinese context. It provides some introductory information on the Chinese language, on naming patterns and on forms of address in the Chinese culture. It thus helps the reader gain some useful background information on Chinese communication, some of which applies to the interactional differences addressed in Section 3.

The second section forms the largest part of the paper and discusses issues that members of the eChina-UK Programme (<http://www.echinauk.org/>) found particularly salient. It draws on case study examples, including recordings of project meetings, in order to exemplify communication issues that can impact on mutual understanding. We hope that these materials will help people with little experience of interacting with members of the Chinese culture to grasp some of the communication differences they may encounter. However, we strongly encourage the reader to refrain from forming immutable expectations of what communication with Chinese partners will be like. Rather, our aim is to increase sensitivity to the Chinese context and to raise awareness of the differences in interactional norms and principles that people may experience.



2. Background Information

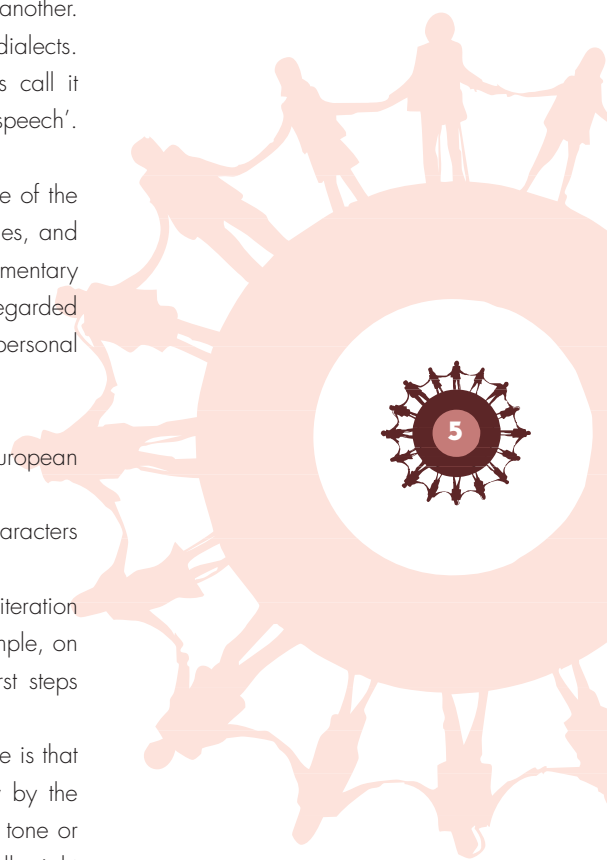
2.1 Introduction to the Chinese Language

The Chinese language is made up of a very large number of dialects, which are often so different from each other that speakers of one dialect cannot understand speakers of another. The official dialect of China is based on Northern Chinese or Mandarin dialects. Technically, it is referred to as Modern Standard Chinese, but most Westerners call it Mandarin, and in China, it is known as *putonghua*, which literally means 'common speech'.

Internationally, *putonghua* is gaining significantly in status and importance. It is one of the official and working languages of the United Nations and other international bodies, and an increasing number of people are learning it. There is no doubt that even a rudimentary knowledge of *putonghua*, such as an ability to use a few appropriate phrases, is regarded very favourably in China. Combined with cultural sensitivity, it can help establish a personal rapport which is vital for effective long-term partnerships in China.

It is useful to be aware that Chinese differs from English (and many other European languages) in a number of significant ways:

- There is no alphabet in Chinese; instead, syllables are depicted by Chinese characters which can be combined in different ways to convey meaning.
- The pronunciation of Chinese characters/syllables is represented by a transliteration system known as *pinyin*. This system is used extremely widely in China (for example, on public signs, on business name cards, in dictionaries), and so one of the first steps towards mastering Chinese pronunciation is to become familiar with *pinyin*.
- A very important difference between the pronunciation of English and of Chinese is that Chinese is a tonal language. This means that meaning is conveyed not only by the various combinations of vowels and consonants (as in English), but also by the tone or pitch with which a syllable is spoken. For example, the words for buy and sell might initially seem identical to an English speaker in that they are both pronounced mai. However, the word for sell is pronounced with a falling (or 4th) tone, and the word for buy is pronounced with a falling-rising (or 3rd) tone.
- In certain respects, Chinese grammar is easier than the grammar of European languages because it has no cases, no gender (for nouns), and virtually no tenses.
- Numbers are difficult to translate between English and Chinese when they reach 10,000 or higher. This is because the units for counting are different after a thousand. In English we use 'thousand' and 'million' as units; in Chinese they use 'thousand', 'wan' (= ten thousand) and 'yi' (= 100 million) as units. So twenty thousand is two wan, one hundred thousand is ten wan, and one million is one hundred wan. This can be very awkward for interpreters if they have to interpret numbers quickly during a meeting.



2.2 Chinese Names and Forms of Address

Names are an integral part of people's identity and it is important to know how to use them appropriately.

Chinese names are written with the surname first, the given name second and the title last, as illustrated below:

	Surname	Given Name	Title		Title	Given Name	Surname
Chinese	WANG	Jianyu	Xiansheng (Mr.)	English	Mr.	Martin	SPENCER

However, some Chinese, particularly those who have lived abroad or who interact regularly with Westerners, reverse their name order so that it conforms to the Western sequence. How, then, can non-Chinese speakers know whether they have done this or not?

There is no foolproof way of doing this, but there is a rule of thumb that can be useful. Nearly all Chinese surnames just have one syllable, and many Chinese given names have two syllables. So if one part of a Chinese name has two syllables and the other part has one syllable, it is almost certain that the single syllable word is the surname. However, a small minority of Chinese surnames have two syllables, and an increasing number of given names have just one syllable. So this rule of thumb can only be used as a rough guide.

In Chinese there is a much greater number of official titles and formal address forms than in English, and it is particularly common to use people's occupational titles, such as Teacher Zhang or Director Liu. Using such titles is a form of respect, and in fact a popular way of 'giving face' to someone is to use a title that is one higher than their actual one; for example, to refer to the Deputy Director as Director.

Given names in Chinese are usually only used among family members or very close friends, so people may feel uncomfortable if overseas colleagues use their given name, especially if the Chinese person is older or in a senior position. However, many are now used to naming practices in English, and may be happy to be called by their given name. The safest option is to use a formal title, and only use the given name (or an English given name they may have chosen) if specifically invited to do so.



3. Chinese Interactional Principles in Business Meetings

3.1 Hierarchy

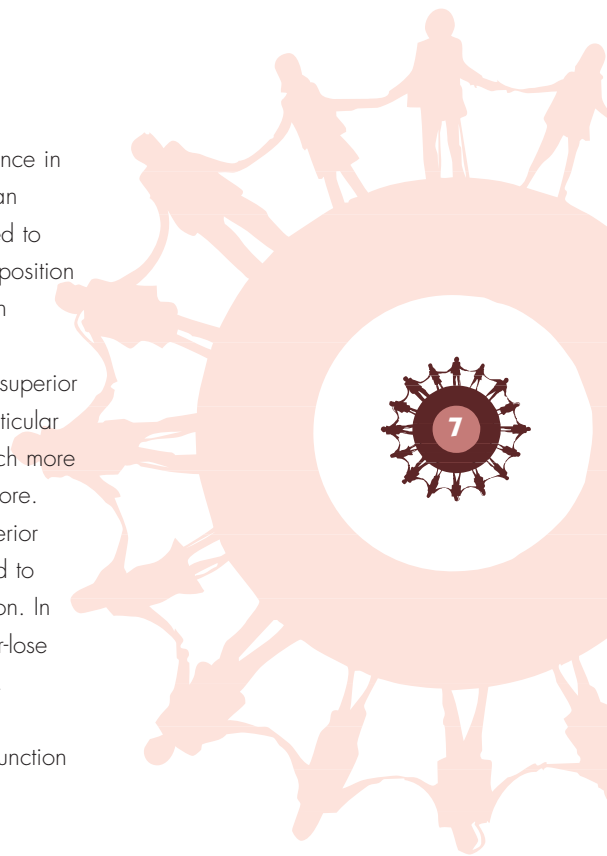
Status, power and the due acknowledgement of authority are of the utmost importance in Chinese society. Modern Chinese role relationships still strongly adhere to Confucian principles, which are largely based on seniority and inequality. People are expected to act within the constraints of those types of relationships. The person in the superior position is obliged to be fair and caring towards his/her subordinates, to provide them with guidance and advice but also to be strict with them. The person in the subordinate position is obliged to be submissive and subservient, but can expect to rely on the superior for support in all areas of life. Such role relations are by no means restricted to particular spheres, such as work or home. In Chinese society, different spheres of life are much more intertwined than in most Western countries and relationships tend to span two or more. While the subordinate is expected to show the utmost respect towards his/her superior and should never question the superior's decisions, in return the superior is expected to provide employees with medical care, housing, education for the children and so on. In this sense, as Pan (2000) points out, hierarchical relationships do not hold a win-or-lose connotation, but are to be understood as more of a give-and-take type relationship.

These relationship rules are meant to promote a harmonious society, but they only function well if each individual in the society acts within the constraints of their roles. As a consequence, infringements of one's role relations and role obligations are rarely tolerated. While concessions may be made towards foreigners, insufficient respect for senior members will do the collaborative relationship no favours and people intending to embark on collaborative projects with Chinese partners may want to consider carefully the following issues relating to hierarchical relationships.

Seating Arrangements

Hierarchical relationships are expressed in a range of ways, and one of the most important is in seating arrangements, both in meetings at work and in social contexts..

In British workplaces, it is usually quite flexible as to who sits where unless the meeting is extremely formal; in China, however, people are usually seated according to their status and authority. In intercultural meetings, it is important to convey the notion of equality by



seating the most senior persons from each country or organisation opposite each other in the centre of the table. The further away from the central seats one goes, the lower the status of the person. When receiving Chinese visitors, it is extremely important, therefore, not to seat people according to practicality (e.g. putting the British chairperson at the head of the table so he can be seen and heard more easily by others) but rather to seat them by status.

Visitors to China are frequently invited to banquets and the seating arrangements are also important there. Tables are usually round, and the most senior host is seated facing the door. The guest of honour is placed on his/her right hand side, and the next most senior guest to his/her left. Other people (both guests and visitors) are seated progressively further away, according to rank.

Introductions

In both British and Chinese societies, introductions in meetings are typically rather formulaic and scripted affairs, yet the ways in which they are conducted differs vastly. British meetings tend to be fairly informal, and it is customary for each participant to introduce him/herself, usually according to the (random) seating order. In Chinese society, on the other hand, meetings are traditionally opened by the person who is highest in rank and that person introduces his/her team, usually in rank order, starting with the most senior person and introducing the most junior member last.

Case Study Example 1: Introductions

This example is taken from a video-conference meeting between one of the British project teams with their Chinese project partners. After having established that, on a technical level, the video connection was working well, and that all of the meeting's participants were present, introductions took place.

British Chair: *Perhaps we introduce ourselves?* (starts to introduce herself, followed by all other British participants introducing themselves)

However, when the Chair asked the most senior Chinese Professor to introduce himself, he proceeded to introduce the entire Chinese team to the British.

In this example, the British clearly adopted their own customs for introductions, where each member of a team introduces him/herself. The chairperson subsequently requested the same introductory behaviour from the Chinese counterparts. However, British and Chinese norms for this are different and so when the most senior Chinese staff member was asked to introduce himself, he kept to the Chinese practice in which the most senior person introduces all of his team.



Speaking Rights and Turn-Taking

Differences in the right to speak and in turn-taking practices are also strongly tied to hierarchical relations. Most British workplace meetings are relatively informal affairs, with speaking rights not clearly assigned or prescribed. Usually the person with the most expertise in a particular area takes the floor (regardless of his/her hierarchical position). Chinese workplace meetings, on the other hand, tend to be more formal and structured. Speakers are typically assigned a speaking slot, which tends not to be used for discussion, but for giving a formal speech.

This type of pattern was observable in the eChina-UK project meetings in China, in that senior members of staff were allocated lengthy turns, some of them extending up to half an hour. These long turns gave each speaker the opportunity to put forward his/her viewpoints, but it made it very difficult for the addressees to initiate discussions and negotiate on particular aspects, because each lengthy turn contained a vast number of points for discussion. Interruptions would have constituted a serious breach of etiquette and were therefore out of the question. As Pan (2000: 84) points out, if a subordinate speaks at the wrong moment, it is considered “improper and impolite”.

In our meeting data the British speakers frequently asked the Chinese visitors some questions, leaving lengthy pauses in which they were clearly waiting for the Chinese to respond. Instead of responding, however, the Chinese waited patiently for the British speaker to continue his/her turn. In one instance, where the Chinese did not respond during pauses made by the senior British speaker chairing and hosting the (rather informal) meeting, the British participant ended up speaking for a full-hour uninterrupted. While the Chinese waited for him to finish his speech, the British speaker felt uncomfortable with the silences and felt pressed to fill pauses by elaborating on his points.

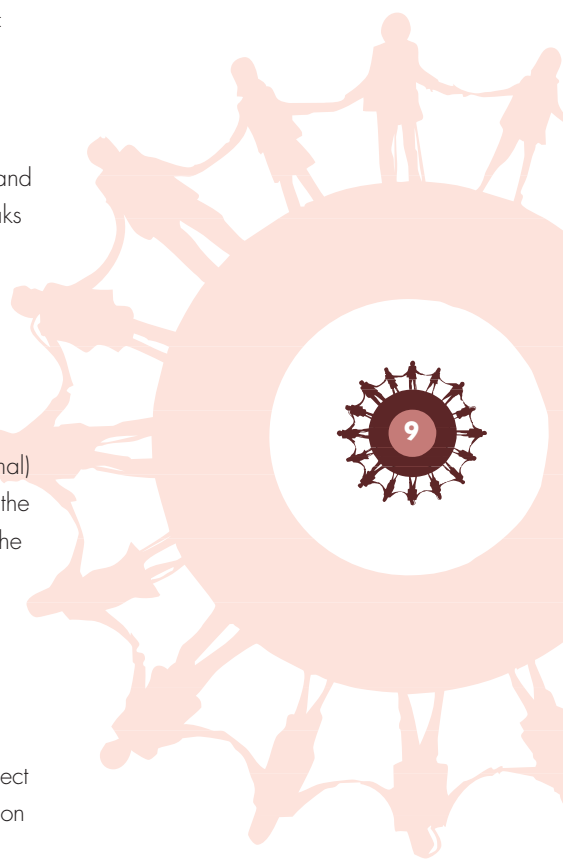
Distributing Information

Issues such as how information should be distributed may initially seem to be of minor importance, but in fact this can have a major impact on relationships. The eChina-UK project members discovered that they needed, when sending out information, to pay closer attention to hierarchy than they had initially anticipated. As the following example demonstrates, failing to acknowledge status when sending out emails was highly problematic.

Case Study Example 2: Emailing conventions

The British members relied particularly heavily on email, and tended to include in the distribution list everyone for whom that email was relevant. Yet after a number of months, one of the Chinese project managers fed back the following comment:

Sending mass emails is a good way. But when we send such emails, it will infringe Chinese principles. If I send such an email to a person in a higher position, s/he will feel offended. Nowadays we send various materials by email, but Chinese are special, superiors will feel particularly insulted. ... Sending emails to superiors is not a good way, because it shows no regard for status differences between people. Some superiors dislike equality, so the best way to communicate with them is to submit a report, either in written or oral form.



Acknowledgements

In all societies it is important to thank the other group and to acknowledge their efforts, work, contributions and hospitality, but in Chinese society this appears to be particularly expected and valued. For example, during a Beijing workshop, not only did the Chinese give elaborate thanking speeches as part of their contributions, they also seemed very responsive to acknowledgements from the British side. Case study example 3 (which is typical of many Chinese and British words of acknowledgement in our data) illustrates the difference in style between British and Chinese speakers at the workshop, and in the amount of time they each devote to thanking and acknowledging others.

Case Study Example 3: Acknowledgements in speeches

Translation of one of the Chinese speakers:

And last Professor X would like to take the opportunity to express his heartfelt appreciation for the support from different parts. First appreciation to Mrs Y and Mr Z from MoE of China. Second from Dr. A and also other colleagues from HEFCE. And third from colleagues of [name of British university] and [name of British university]. Thank you very much for your support and collaboration. Thank you.

British speaker:

Ok I look forward to speaking to you more about these materials tomorrow, but that's all folks. Thank you.

3.2 Face-Sensitivity

In virtually every culture in the world, people are concerned about face. Many fear losing face (especially in a public setting) and no one likes feeling embarrassed. However, the concept of face in China is particularly strong. Face is connected not just with an individual's sense of pride and integrity, but also with the whole extended family-clan if not the wider community, and so the consequences of loss of face are severe.

In Western cultures, a loss of face may make the individual feel uncomfortable, but it only occasionally has serious consequences beyond the current speech event and rarely affects other people. However, loss of face in China takes on a whole different dimension, in that it tends to be taken much more seriously, brings shame to the entire family/institution/community, and is much harder to recover from. In China, face-sensitivity is not just linked to social embarrassment; rather, it is reputation and social standing that is at stake. According to Graham and Lam (2003), causing the Chinese embarrassment or loss of composure – be it intentional or not – can be disastrous for meetings and negotiations. The authors assert that a display of anger, frustration, impatience or aggression causes a loss of face to both parties, making it hard – if not impossible – to recover from.

Verbal Enhancement of Face

Making sure that other people do not lose face publicly is not the only aspect of face that needs to be attended to. Face can not only be lost, but can also be gained, and in China people tend to engage frequently in face-enhancing practices. According to Graham and Lam (2003), face in Chinese society resembles money in that it can be earned, lost, given or taken away. This can be achieved by emphasising someone's achievements, status or impact. The following example demonstrates such face-enhancing practices.

Case Study Example 4: Face enhancement

During a visit of members of their Chinese partners' team, the Head of Department of the UK institution engaged in positive face-giving practices to the Chinese professor who was attending the project meeting. This practice showed good-will, appreciation for the partners' status and authority and created a basis for maintaining relationships.

The discussion had revolved around the need to pilot the material the teams were jointly developing, when the senior Chinese project member mentioned the difficulties and costs the Chinese team would face if the material was to be piloted at the Chinese partner institution.

UK4: *We have many international students, some of whom will be Chinese who will love to do additional work.*

Some: *(Laughter)*

UK4: *No, they will, when they get another course free, which they will be, in a subject area that is relevant to them, so this will be a big plus xxx Especially when they know that [name of the senior Chinese project member] is involved, famous Professor from Beijing.*

Senior Chinese Project Member:

(lowers his head and cups his hands over his head in a shielding and humbling manner)

UK4: *So this will be great [...] this will be a big tick [...] we can really build that up into a big plus. We'll be carefully selecting volunteers because we know we'll have so many.*

In this example the Head of Department of the UK institution implied that, while students are often reluctant to participate in piloting, students will want to participate eagerly because of the involvement of the said professor. She also implied that, instead of having to attract and lure participants with rewards, the involvement of the Chinese Professor will ensure there will be so many willing participants that they will have to turn some of them down and only select the most suitable candidates.

This face-enhancing practice was accompanied by self-deprecating non-verbal behaviour by the Professor to whom the praise is addressed. This is also a common Chinese practice. Humble behaviour is both expected and appreciated, but by no means implies that the positive message is not appreciated. Quite to the contrary, despite the display of modesty, the Chinese Professor looked positively pleased about the laudatory remarks.

Face-Giving Customs

The importance of *guanxi*, the building and maintaining of relationships, cannot be overestimated in Chinese society. Aspects of relationship building include verbalising words of friendship and showing interest and concern towards others (in other words, acts of face-giving) (Blackman, 1997). Another customary way of building relationships is through giving gifts, which demonstrate that one values the relationship. Mostly, these are small tokens, such as a gift of fresh Chinese tea given to foreigners on a business visit. According to Blackman (1997), gift-giving is important in China as a way of expressing both friendliness and concern.

Case Study Example 5: Gift giving

At the end of the Chinese visitors' stay in the UK, with the words "oh that reminds me, an appreciation for [name of person] from our institute", the most senior Chinese participant hands a small gift on behalf of his institution to one of the project participants. He then goes on to acknowledge each of the project members and hands each of them a gift as a token of appreciation, in adherence with Chinese face-enhancement principles.

This customary practice of giving face through the exchange of small gifts shows that one values the relationship and makes them gain face, as one shows appreciation for the other.

3.3 Formality

As Graham and Lam (2003) point out, casualness is not appreciated in a country that values obedience and deference to superiors. The formality that is applied to hierarchical relationships also affects other areas of interaction with the Chinese, including room décor and speech style.

Setting of Meetings

We have already discussed the importance of seating arrangements in meetings in China. Related to this is the set up of the room as a whole.

Naturally, in both countries, meetings can vary significantly in their level of formality, and this is reflected in the set-up of the rooms. However, there is a tendency in China towards greater formality and in Britain towards greater informality, and this means that the décor of the meeting rooms is often different. The following case study, which compares the two cross-project workshops that were held during the eChina-UK Programme, illustrates this difference.



Case Study Example 6: Décor at workshops

The first cross-project workshop was hosted by a British university about one year after the start of the eChina-UK Programme. It was attended by Chinese and British project members, a Chinese vice-president and a number of British e-learning specialists. The workshop was held in a regular university classroom that is usually used for seminars: tables were arranged in a rectangle, there was a screen for data projection at one end, and there were just enough chairs for everyone to be seated.

The second cross-project workshop was hosted by a Chinese university near the end of the first set of projects. It was attended by Chinese and British project members, stakeholders from the Chinese Ministry of Education and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and a British member of an e-learning delegation to China. The workshop was held in a large boardroom-style room in the university's publishing press building. Banners were erected outside the building and in the meeting room itself. At the front of the room, there was a podium which was decked with bouquets of flowers, and there were large polished wooden tables arranged in a U-shape. There was a name place for each seat, and these were arranged according to people's hierarchy. The British project members were initially dismayed when they saw the arrangement of the room, because they wanted the desks to be movable so that small group discussions would be easier to arrange. However, this was not practical, and the whole 3-day workshop was held in plenary style.

Introductions to Speeches

In Britain, when people are giving a presentation, the introductory words tend to be brief. They frequently include expressions of gratitude to the organisers for the invitation to give a talk or thanks to the hosts for handling practical arrangements. However, these are usually dealt with in a sentence or two, and tend to serve as bridging devices before one 'gets down to business'.

In China, introductions to presentations are often more formal, and typically include many face-enhancing words for the hosts and/or the audience. The following case study example illustrates this.



Case Study Example 7: Introductions to speeches

During the second cross-project workshop (which was attended by Chinese and British project members, stakeholders from the Chinese Ministry of Education and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and a British member of an e-learning delegation to China), a stakeholder from the Chinese Ministry of Education gave a presentation on e-learning policy in China. She started with the following words:

Ch2: *Our distinguished President [Chinese name], Mr. [Chinese name], Dr. [British name], Dr. [British name] (at this point the PowerPoint Presentation switches to a slide with the words: Congratulations and Gratitude), professors and experts from China and UK universities, representatives from the government organisations. Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning. I feel privileged to speak here today. First, please allow me – on behalf of Professor [Chinese name], general director of the department of higher education in the MoE and of the distance and continuous education division – to extend my congratulations on the commencement of this workshop. And my warm welcome to friends home and abroad. I would also like to give my sincere gratitude to professors and experts from China and UK universities and in particular staff from [name of the hosting institution] who have done a great deal to make this workshop a reality.*

These introductory words illustrate four different aspects of interactional style that the eChina-UK project members found to be widespread in professional contexts in China:

- attendance to hierarchical relations (by acknowledging the most senior members);
- use of a formal presentation style;
- engagement in face-enhancing practices (e.g. by lauding the organisers' efforts);
- self-deprecatory style of speech.

Stylistic Formality

Stylistic differences were not only found in the introductions to the presentations. A comparison of the British and Chinese presentations at the cross-project workshop showed differences throughout the speeches, as the following case study example describes.



Case Study Example 8: Formality of speeches

Differences in the level of formality of the speech style of British and Chinese speakers were particularly prominent during a workshop conducted in Beijing.

The Chinese speakers' speeches mostly started with elaborate words of gratitude (targeting specific people), conveying a sense that they felt honoured to have been invited as a speaker at the workshop. Their style tended to be factual, impersonal and with *gravitas*. Their language use was highly formulaic and formal throughout. The British speakers' speeches, in contrast, mostly involved only brief, generalised expressions of thanks (mostly brief utterances, such as 'thanks' or 'thank you') and sometimes included comments that the person was pleased (rather than honoured) to attend the workshop. The British tended to be informal and content-focused, and were sometimes quite personal. They often included jokes to try and engage the audience, and many of them spoke in a jocular and casual manner. One of the British speakers, for example, drew on a personal example involving her daughter, and another included mild swear words such as 'hell' and 'bloody'.

The Chinese, on the other hand adopted a very formal style. Their presentations were usually heavily scripted, and there were no casual expressions, jokes or any form of personal anecdotes. Their presentations stood in stark contrast to those of British colleagues.

3.4 Other

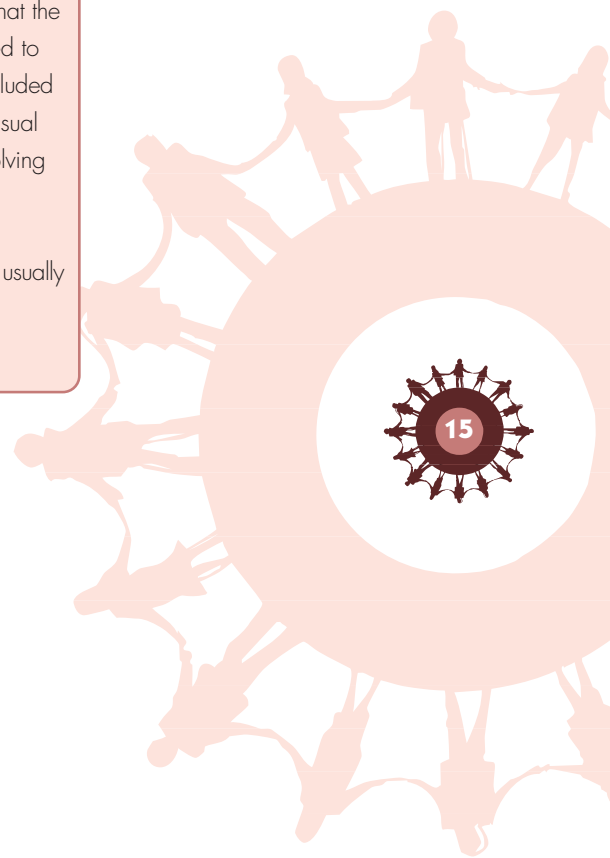
Behavioural norms and conventions give rise to further differences in interactional behaviour in professional contexts.

Etiquette

Judgements as to how appropriate a given type of behaviour is are highly context-dependent and culture-bound.

Mobile phone calls

One difference in British and Chinese etiquette that the eChina-UK project members noticed was handling of mobile phone calls, as the following case study illustrates.



Case Study Example 9: Mobile phone calls

In British society, it is usually considered both interruptive and inappropriate to accept mobile phone calls during formal meetings. In Chinese society, however, it appears to be commonplace to accept calls, even if they hold up the meeting process.

In the video recordings of eChina-UK meetings, Chinese members are frequently seen accepting calls in the middle of the meetings. Although the calls were relatively short, they nevertheless disrupted the meeting. The British participants of the meeting seemed to find it bothersome, yet the Chinese members who accepted the calls offered no apologies and showed no signs of feeling that their actions might have been considered inappropriate by their British partners.

Hospitality during Meetings

Another difference in etiquette relates to hospitality in meetings, as the following case study example illustrates.

Case Study Example 10: Hospitality

In Chinese society, hospitality plays a vital part in the formation and maintenance of relationships, and hence to successful partnerships. While hospitality is also customary in British society, the extent to which hospitality is engaged in and the ways in which hospitality is shown is rather different.

During all of the eChina-UK project meetings held in China, Chinese tea was served throughout the duration of the meetings. Mostly, a Chinese person responsible for refreshments regularly entered the room, checking cups and giving refills where appropriate. During eChina-UK meetings held in the UK, however, hot and cold beverages were placed on a buffet-style table, which were often ignored by the British team members until a suitable break in the meeting was arrived at. In one meeting, rather embarrassingly, no one stood up to serve the Chinese tea, and eventually, a junior member of the Chinese delegation got up and served tea to all of the British and Chinese project members.

Such practices obviously didn't pass unnoticed by British participants, as several of the British team members commented in interviews on the differences in Chinese and British hospitality. One team member stated that he was 'struck by their hospitality', another questioned British hospitality, saying that the experience of working with the Chinese helped her 'get to grips with why we're so bad at hospitality'.

These examples show that customs cannot be assumed to be shared and that both perceptiveness and a willingness to change are needed to achieve reciprocity in customs and habits. That is, if one notices, for example, that tea is regularly offered to participants during a meeting in the partners' cultural context, then one could try to accommodate this habit by offering Chinese partners tea in meetings during their visit.

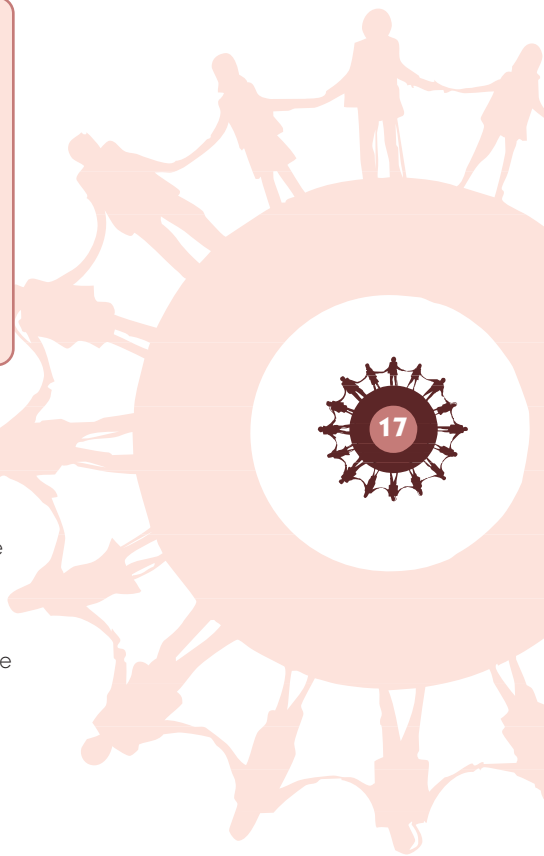
Silence

In Chinese society, being a good listener is considered good manners, and one way of showing humility (especially for young and junior people) is to listen much and to speak little (Hu and Grove, 1999). Not everyone is entitled to speak, as a “spoken voice is equated with seniority, authority, experience, knowledge and expertise” (Gao, 1998: 173). Consequently, people usually only voice their opinions when they are invited to do so; thus a junior team member will almost certainly remain silent throughout the duration of a meeting, unless explicitly requested to speak by a superior.

Case Study Example 11: Silence of junior team members

During a visit to their UK partner institution, a Chinese professor and his more junior colleague attended a number of project meetings. During those meetings, the junior member was silent throughout all of the meetings, while her more senior colleague led the discussions. At one point, a British member explicitly asked her opinion. She looked surprised and looked at the Chinese professor, seemingly to seek guidance. The professor then gave her instructions on what topic area he wanted her to report to the British team.

In the video recordings of the eChina-UK project meetings, it was quite common for there to be prolonged periods of silence (sometimes of 10 seconds or more). At such times, it seemed as though the British were often either impatient, somewhat irritated or uncomfortable with those silences and it was mostly the British who broke the silence. The Chinese, on the other hand, seemed to have a higher tolerance for silence. In one meeting, for example, the most senior Chinese participant took plenty of time to take notes, even though it meant that the discussion had to come to a halt while he did so. The British, on the other hand, appeared a little uncomfortable with this.



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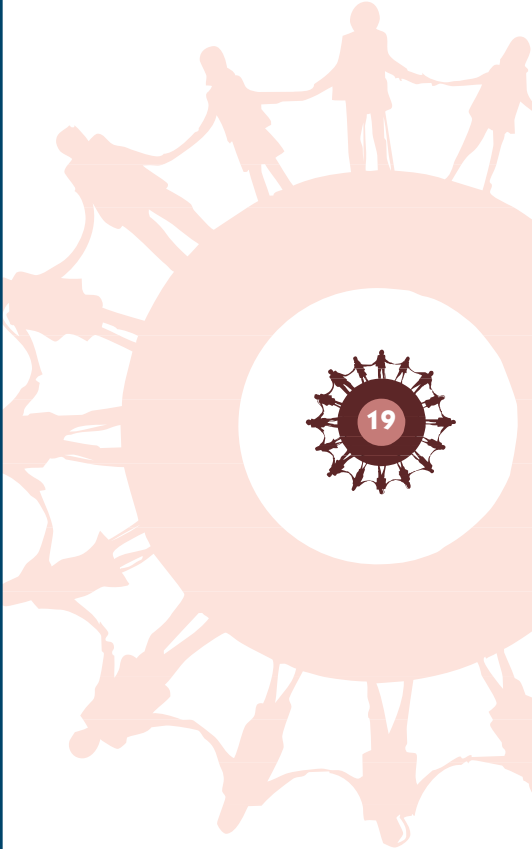
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Notes:

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