Assessing Chinese Conflict Management Styles in Joint Ventures

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Abstract

The nationwide economic reform in China has increased the opportunities for the study of intercultural understanding. However, currently very few studies examine the issue from conflict management perspective. It was the purpose of this study to apply existing literature on conflict management to assess Chinese conflict behaviors in joint ventures. The results indicated that Chinese managers and employees tended to adopt collaboration strategy more frequently than control strategy, and control strategy more frequently than non-confrontation strategies. The findings as well revealed that status and gender have a significant impact on the choice of conflict strategies. Implications and limitations were also discussed.

Introduction

During the past two decades of the nationwide economic reform, China has succeeded in attracting foreign investments. Joint ventures accounted for approximately one-third of the country's total direct foreign investment (Chen, 1995). By the end of 1993, more than 140,000 joint ventures contracts had been signed with a total committed investment exceeding US$160 billion. Given the intercultural business setting, intercultural communication has become a must. The growth in intercultural communication increases the opportunities for both understanding and conflicts (Yu, 1995). The pervasiveness of conflicts and the importance of managing them constructively make the study of conflict management in intercultural business settings of great significance.

Conflict refers to disagreements that arise from or can lead to incompatible goals, values, and behaviors (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Communication is the means by which conflicts get socially defined and the instrument through which influence is exercised (Simons, 1974). Thus, conflict styles are actually communication behaviors. As culture acts as guides and predictors of communication behaviors, conflict in intercultural settings need to be viewed in terms of culture and communication. Previous research on conflict management indicates that culture has its impact on the way conflicts are perceived and resolved (Ting-Toomey, 1994). A lack of cultural awareness and proper ways to address cultural differences will result in unrealistic expectations, frustrations, and failure in establishing friendly interpersonal relationships (Dodd, 1998). However, very few studies have been devoted to intercultural issues in organizational settings, especially from the conflict management and resolution perspective. It is then the purpose of this study to explore Chinese conflict management styles in joint ventures in China.

Cultural Context

The operation of joint ventures in China affects and is affected by the larger cultural milieu. Chinese culture places emphasis on family. The Chinese word for family is *jia*. A group is a big family (*da jia*). The country is referred to as national family (*guo jia*). One slogan for people working in China is to regard whatever organization one works for as a symbolic family. Co-workers address each other as Brother Zhang or Sister Li. One implication of the family metaphor is group-orientation. The Confucian teachings maintain that a human being is not primarily an individual, but rather a member of a family (Tsen, 1986). The individual per se is less important compared with the family. Through the family, Chinese children learn to restrain their individuality and maintain harmony (Lockett, 1988). Thus, a strong sense of group identification is fostered from an early age. The social order of the family then serves as the prototype for conduct in Chinese organizations (Chen & Chung, 1994).

Group orientation is an important aspect of the Chinese culture which attempts to cultivate an interconnected sense of self (Krone, Chen, & Xia, 1997). Over time, individuals continue to subordinate themselves to the group to sustain a social order and stability. Success for Chinese tends to be a group enterprise rather than a striking out on an individual path of self-discovery (Lockett, 1988). Hence, individual achievement is a source of group honor whereas individual misconduct is a source of group shame. The espoused

Chinese political ideology also reinforces the cultural value of group-orientation. A good citizen is supposed to be concerned with the welfare of the whole country, not with personal loss or gain (Krone, Garrett, & Chen, 1992).

The deep cultural forces that cultivate the interdependent sense of self also construct a social order based on hierarchy (Kim, 1991). Hierarchy can also be traced to the family value. Being a member of the family, one has one's assigned place in the hierarchical structure. Confucianism believes that human relationships should be regulated by five cardinal relationships (*wu lun*) based on differentiated order among individuals (Chen & Chung, 1994). Specifically, they are sincerity between father and son, righteousness between ruler and subjects, separate functions between husband and wife, order between elder brothers and younger brothers, and faithfulness among friends. The application of *wu lun* to organizational life requires supervisors and subordinates behave in accordance with distinctive roles they hold respectively. Leadership has authority the same way the father of the family has power. Provided that both subordinates and supervisors stick to their respective roles and abide by the explicit and implicit rules of proper behavior, order and stability is assured in this hierarchical structure. The Chinese emphasis of particularistic relationships, i.e., inter-relation (*guanxi*) leads to an establishment of a clear boundary between ingroup and outgroup members (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8). *Guanxi,* in Chinese society, is the acquisition of a set of specific communication rules and patterns that guide Chinese to avoid embarrassing conflicts in social interactions on the one hand. On the other hand, *Guangxi* is used as a tool of persuasion, influence, and control in the process of conflict management (Chang & Holt, 1991; Hwang, 1988; Jocobs, 1979; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987)

Chinese people attach great importance to maintaining harmony among group members. They believe that only harmony among group members can produce fortune (Chen, 1998; Chen & Chung, 1994). Therefore, it is to the advantage of the worker to foster a good interpersonal relationship with his or her immediate supervisor as well as with a co-worker. Whenever conflicts occur, harmony is the guiding principle to resolve problems because the Chinese saying is that harmony is valuable (*yi he wei gui*). The belief is that harmony makes the family prosper (*jia he wan shi xing*) (Huang, forthcoming).

Social harmony depends not only on the maintenance of correct relationships among individuals but also on the protection of an individual's face or one's dignity, self-respect, and prestige. Therefore, social interactions

should be conducted in a way that nobody's face is lost. Face can also be given, when due respect is paid to someone else (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Hu, 1944; Hwang, 1997-8). The concept of face is tied closely to the need people have to a claimed sense of self-respect in any social interactive situations (Ting-Toomey, 1985). However, how we manage face and how we negotiate face loss and face gain in a conflict situation varies from culture to culture (Chen & Starosta, 1998).

In addition to harmony, face saving, and inter-relation, Chen and Starosta (1997-8) as well specified power as another factor greatly influencing Chinese conflict management and resolution. In the Chinese society power is embedded in seniority and authority. In other words, those who are male, elders, higher ranked employees, and having longer working experience tend to be considered as being more knowledgeable and powerful in the process of conflict (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Cai & Gonzales, 1997-8; Chung, 1996). In sum, harmony, facing saving, inter-relation, and power represent the main cultural factors that form the framework of Chinese conflict management and resolution.

Conceptual Framework

Literature has indicated that conceptualizations of conflict management have evolved from Blake and Mouton's (1964) two-dimensional managerial grid, including concern for self and concern for others. When the two dimensions were graphed onto a matrix, they yielded five conflict resolution styles: avoidance, competition, accommodation, compromise, and collaboration (Miller, 1995). Avoidance is physical withdrawal or refusal to discuss the conflict. Competition, resulted from production-oriented managers, is linked to the use of power in satisfying one's position, even if it means ignoring the needs of the opponent. Accommodation refers to behaviors that conceal or play down differences by emphasizing common interests. Compromising behaviors aim at finding a midpoint between the opposing viewpoints. Collaboration consists of facing a conflict directly and examining possible solutions.

Although much research has aimed to identify which ones were most effective, most constructive, and most important to an organization, the framework of this five conflict resolution styles also generated debates about how organizational conflicts should best be studied (Miller, 1995; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Two major problems that limit the usefulness of the "grid" approach to organizational conflicts are relevant to this study. First, the assumption of the grid approach that individuals have a characteristic mode of

conflict management behavior downplays the extent to which individuals change their tactics across a variety of conflict situations. Second, the tools used to measure conflict resolution styles are not sufficient. For example, issues other than concern for others, such as political implications and cultural norms, might also influence conflict interaction.

In order to deal with the shortcomings of the grid model, Putnam and Wilson (1982) developed the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) to assess conflict resolution styles and assumed that "conflict strategies are those communicative behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, that provide a means for handling conflict" (p. 633). In this sense, conflict strategies represent the behavioral choices that people make based on their goals, rather than a person's personality style. The decision to use a particular conflict strategy is, then, largely governed by situational rather than personal constraints, particularly by such variables as the nature of the conflict, the relationship between participants, organizational structure, and environmental factors (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Putnam and Wilson (1982) argued that there is no major formula or best way to handle a conflict. Collaboration, for instance, while deemed constructive and effective in previous studies, may not be a beneficial strategy when the conflict is less significant.

Putnam and Wilson (1982) found that OCCI is comprised of three factors: non-confrontation (avoidance and accommodation), solution-orientation (direct confrontation, open discussion of alternatives, and acceptance of compromise and collaboration), and control (direct confrontation that leads to persistent argument and nonverbal forcing). The authors aimed to identify factors that affect decisions to use particular strategies and to test the evaluation of these strategies across conflict episodes. The OCCI has generated a great deal of research on organizational conflict that examines the impact of person and situation on conflict strategies, and in programs involving conflict management skills (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987; Putnam, & Wilson, 1982; Temkin & Cummings, 1985; Ting-Toomey, 1986). Unfortunately, the OCCI was seldom applied to assess conflict management styles in intercultural business settings.

As a number of studies have suggested that culture has a significant impact on perception of conflict and potential ways of resolving conflicts (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1986), and as cultural specific studies examining cultural variations on conflict management styles have demonstrated that the probable cause of conflict is intercultural rather than individual personality differences, it is important to test the OCCI model in different cultural contexts. The first

task of this study is then to test the feasibility of the OCCI model in an intercultural context, i.e., in the Chinese join-ventured companies. Thus, a research question can be generated:

R1: Is OOCI valid in the Chinese join-ventured context?

In addition to testing the feasibility the validity of OOCI in different cultural context, based on the OOCI model and cultural factors that influence Chinese conflict management and resolution, three hypotheses about Chinese conflict behaviors are proposed in this study:

H1: Non-confrontation strategies would be used more frequently than solution-oriented strategies.

H2: Solution-oriented strategies would be used more frequently than control strategies.

H3: The frequency of applying control strategies would increase with the increase in age, status, education and the years of working experience.

Method

Participants

Participants were from four large joint venture companies in northern China. As the purpose of this study was to examine conflict management styles in conflict situation with foreign employees, staff and managers who had experience in interpersonal communication with foreigners were selected. One hundred and ten questionnaires were distributed and 82 were filled and returned, making a response rate of approximately 75 percent. The 82 participants ranged in age from 20 to 55, and 84 percent of them were below 40 years of age. Forty-eight subjects were male and 34 were female. Approximately 65 percent of the subjects were with university education. As the majority of joint ventures in China were established during and after the 1980s, employees working in joint ventures have relatively fewer years of working experience than those working in state-owned enterprises. In this study, about 79 percent of the subjects had a working experience of nine years or less.

Procedures

The OCCI, Form B was adopted as basic instrument for this study. The original questionnaire was double back translated into Chinese by two graduate students and two faculties in the English department of a university in China. In addition, modifications were made to the OCCI. First, Instructions were modified so as to facilitate comprehension of the Chinese participants. Second, the original 7-point scale was modified into 5-point

scale as the Chinese language does not make similar subtle distinction in degree of frequencies. Third, the direction of the scale was reversed, with 1 standing for "never" and 5 standing for "always." Fourth, the original OCCI addresses conflict between supervisors and subordinates. As the focus of this study is Chinese conflict management styles in dealing with conflicts between Chinese and foreign employees in joint ventures, the word "supervisor" was replaced by "foreign colleague." Finally, in order to obtain further information to explain Chinese conflict management styles, five demographic questions were attached to the 30-item questionnaire, making a total of 35 items. Questionnaires were distributed with the help of one staff working in each company.

Results

Principal component analyses were employed to discover underlying dimensions of the 30 strategies. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is 0.86, hence, justifying factoring. The initial factor analysis with varimax rotation suggested a five-factor solution, accounting for approximately 75 percent of the common variance. Although this five-factor solution was desirable to support Blake and Mouton's model, it resulted in multiple low-level loadings on the fourth and the fifth factor. The scree test suggested a four factor solution and latent root also indicated that four factors should be considered as significant (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995). After examining three different factor structures (3-5 factor structure), decision was made to accept a three-factor extraction because the solution best achieved representativeness and parsimony. The three factors accounted for 66 percent of the total variance.

Factor 1, accounting for about 36.9 percent of the variance with eigenvalue 11.1, was the most diversified constellation. The factor contained 18 items. Among them, 12 items were from the category of avoidance and accommodation, four items from compromise, one item from collaboration, and one item with the lowest loading in this dimension was from control strategy. Since the majority of the items were from the category of avoidance and accommodation as indirect strategies to deal with conflict, this factor was labeled as Non-confrontation.

Factor 2, accounting for 17.4 percent of the total variance with the eigenvalue 5.2, consisted of 6 items from the category of control strategy. These items suggested direct confrontation that led to persistent argument or forcing the opponent to accept the viewpoint. Thus, factor 2 was labeled as Control.

The 6 items in factor 3, accounting for 11.5 percent of the variance with the eigenvalue 3.4, all were from the category of collaboration strategy, with one exception from compromise. Items contained in this factor suggested open discussion of the problems with an intention of reaching an integrative solution. Hence, this factor was labeled as Solution-Orientation. Conceptually, these three factors paralleled Putnam and Wilson's (1982) typology. However, a close examination revealed that the structuring of the factors was different. The original dimension of non-confrontation consisted of 12 items. Moreover, compromise was grouped with collaboration under solution-oriented strategies, rather than with non-confrontation as the case in this study. Nevertheless, the items contained in control dimension were similar to Putnam and Wilson's solution. Table 1 lists the items, the factor loadings, the eigenvalues, and common variance for the three factors.

Table 1. Factor Analysis of the Adapted OCCI (Chinese Version)

Item Category	Non-confrontation	Solution-Orientation	Control
Q15 accommodation	**.899**	-.001	-.063
Q25 accommodation	**.898**	-.049	-.082
Q29 accommodation	**.895**	-.034	.166
Q27 accommodation	**.888**	-.016	-.026
Q14 accommodation	**.884**	-.014	.144
Q6 compromise	**.801**	-.078	-.087
Q2 avoidance	**.797**	-.378	-.121
Q16 compromise	**.765**	-.127	-.030
Q5 avoidance	**.747**	-.361	-.295
Q7 avoidance	**.727**	-.318	-.156
Q13 compromise	**.719**	-.253	.129
Q28 avoidance	**.714**	-.394	-.306
Q12 avoidance	**.667**	-.533	-.254
Q24 avoidance	**.631**	-.469	-.339
Q23 avoidance	**.627**	-.354	-.212
Q20 collaboration	**.618**	-.067	.592
Q9 compromise	**.600**	-.510	-.100
Q10 control	**.577**	.384	-.215
Q22 control	-.175	**.794**	-.079
Q30 control	-.235	**.788**	-.007
Q17 control	-.008	**.777**	.196
Q18 control	-.348	**.723**	-.009
Q3 control	-.219	**.697**	.219
Q26 control	.419	**.650**	-.183
Q21 compromise	-.263	-.043	**.730**
Q4 collaboration	.221	.230	**.716**
Q1 collaboration	-.100	.111	**.628**
Q19 collaboration	-.293	-.097	**.605**

Q11 collaboration	.261	.404	**.560**
Q8 collaboration	.300	-.134	**.505**
% of common variance	36.9	17.4	11.5
Eigenvalues	11.1	5.2	3.4

Note. Factor loading at or above .5 is considered as significant.

Interitem correlations and factor analyses demonstrated that accommodation, avoidance, and compromise were similar types of communication, the first two represented an escape from conflict and an absence of direct confrontation, and for the last, the solution emerged from concessions made by both parties. The three factors were then constructed into scales. Table 2 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, range, and numbers of subjects in each of the three dimensions.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Dimensions of Conflict Strategies

Conflict Strategy	Subjects	items	Mean	Mode	SD
Non-confrontation	50	18	2.71	23.00	14.93
Collaboration	15	6	3.73	25.00	3.16
Control	17	6	3.29	19.00	4.13

Note. The scales were scored with 1= never and 5 = always.

The results indicated that the non-confrontation dimension was used by much more subjects than were the other two dimensions, while the mean scores showed that participants tend to use collaboration strategies more often than non-confrontation and control. Intercorrelations between the three scales yielded nonsignificant coefficient between collaboration and control ($r = .15$), but negative significant coefficient between control and non-confrontation ($r = -.33$). Since the two scales were conceptually discrete, it was easy to accept that the person who adopted an avoidance strategy would not choose to persistently argue with the opposing party.

Analyses were run to test the relations among the five demographic questions and the three dimensions of conflict strategies. As the total number of subjects in each category was not very large, the original four categories of four demographic items (excluding gender) were recoded into two categories to achieve more reliable results. Tables 3-7 report the results.

Table 3. Two–tailed t-test for Gender Difference regarding Conflict Strategy Dimensions

Conflict Strategy	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t
Non-confrontation	F	34	55.62	8.71	4.13**
	M	48	44.00	16.54	
Collaboration	F	34	21.41	3.27	-2.41*
	M	48	23.10	2.92	
Control	F	34	18.65	3.91	-2.04
	M	48	20.48	4.15	

Note. N = 82, df = 80. *p < .05, **p < .01

Table 4. Two–tailed t-test for Age Difference Regarding Conflict Strategy Dimensions

Conflict Strategy	Age	N	Mean	SD	t
Non-confrontation	39 and under	69	48.42	15.47	-.658
	40 and above	13	50.92	11.97	
Collaboration	39 and under	69	22.13	3.10	.092
	40 and above	13	23.85	3.18	
Control	39 and under	69	19.57	4.09	-.738
	40 and above	13	20.54	4.41	

Note. N = 82, df = 80. *p < .05, **p < .01

Table 5. Two–tailed T-test for Managers and Staff Regarding Conflict Strategy Dimensions

Conflict Strategy	Title	N	Mean	SD	t
Non-confrontation	Staff	60	49.10	16.08	.744
	Manager	22	48.05	11.50	
Collaboration	Staff	60	22.20	2.94	-.858
	Manager	22	22.95	3.72	
Control	Staff	60	18.78	3.78	-3.53**
	Manager	22	22.27	4.04	

Note. N = 82, df = 80. **p < .01

Table 6. Two–tailed T-test for Education Groups Regarding Conflict Strategy Dimensions

Conflict Strategy	Education	N	Mean	SD	t
Non-confrontation	Tech school	29	47.72	17.96	-.446
	Univ. and above	53	49.42	13.13	
Collaboration	Tech school	29	21.86	2.34	-1.29
	Univ. and above	53	22.70	3.52	

Control	Tech school	29	18.79	3.86	-1.56
	Univ. and above	53	20.23	4.22	

Note. N = 82, df = 80.

Results from Tables 3-7 indicated that significant differences only exist in position and gender regarding the application of three conflict strategy dimensions. Females used non-confrontation strategies more frequently than males ($t = 4.13$, $p < .01$), while males tended to use collaboration strategies more frequently than females ($t = -2.41$, $p < .05$). With respect to positions, managers tended to use control strategies more frequently than staff ($t = -3.53$, $p < .01$). There was no significant difference between age, education, and years of working experience.

Table 7. Two–tailed T-test for Working Experience Regarding Conflict Strategy Dimensions

Conflict Strategy	N of years	N	Mean	SD	t	
Non-confrontation	9 and under	65	48.09	15.64	-1.01	
	10 and above	17	51.59	11.83		
Collaboration	9 and under	65	22.18	3.04	-1.11	
	10 and above	17	23.24	3.59		
Control	9 and under	65	19.25	3.93	-1.91	
	10 and above	17	21.53	4.49		

Note. N = 82, df = 80.

Discussion and Implications

This study reports the test of OCCI, a scale developed from communicative-based items designed to tap the five conflict styles proposed by Blake and Mouton (1964), in intercultural business settings. Results revealed a 3-factor, instead of a 5-dimension, structure: (1) Non-confrontation - choice to avoid direct contact by withdrawing from a disagreement or downplaying differences; (2) control - direct communication about the disagreement by arguing or advocating one's position; and (3) solution-orientation - direct communication about the conflict for the purpose of integrating the opinions of both parties into a solution.

Principal component analyses indicated that avoidance, accommodation, and compromise loaded on one dimension, hence representing overlapping behaviors. The diversity of the items contained in one dimension suggested that there might exist subtle differences within each dimension. For example, factor 1, which was the most diversified

constellation, contained items from all five categories of strategies. The difference between the original grouping of the items and the one in this study demonstrated that theoretical constructs developed in one culture may not have the same cultural validity when used cross culturally (Ding, 1993). Meanings are interpreted differently by people from different cultures. Thus, culture specific data will provide intercultural practitioners with valuable information concerning intercultural conflict management. Moreover, the significant difference between male and female participants and between managers and employees in the application of conflict strategies reinforced the argument that strategy choice is a joint function of persons in situation (Wilson & Waltman, 1988).

The results also indicated that of the three dimensions identified "non-confrontation" accounted for the biggest percentage of common variance. The dimension contained items from avoidance, accommodation, and compromise. Avoidance is an attempt not to address the conflict or step aside from it. Avoiding in the Chinese sense is not necessarily equivalent to unassertive or passive approach to conflict, but may be similar to proactive approach. For example, the Chinese often describe marketplace as a battlefield (*shang chang ru zhan chang*). *The Art of War*, allegedly written by Sun Tzu in the 4th century BC, emphasized the importance of avoiding bloody conflicts as much as possible (Chen, 1995). To conquer the enemy without resorting to war was considered as the highest form of generalship. Thus, withdrawal or avoidance in Chinese conflicts may be a reflection of Sun Tzu's tactics which suggested retreating for the purpose of advancing, and pursuing by making detour (*yi tui wei jin, yu hui jin ji*). In this sense, avoidance strategies in the Chinese context are not exactly the same as a lose-lose situation described by Wilson and Putnam (1982)

The five items from accommodation contained in "non-confrontation" were concerned with reducing disagreements by making them appear less significant. Accommodation as part of non-confrontation dimension did not necessarily mean neglecting one's own concerns to satisfy the needs of the other party, as suggested in Blake and Mouton's term. The family aspect of the company enabled the Chinese partners in joint ventures to place high values on long-term cooperation. Consequently, conflict management behaviors were influenced by this long-term perspective Chinese partners held to foreign investment. In other words, to the Chinese, accommodating was for the purpose of maintaining a good partner relationship. Based on the principle of reciprocity, Chinese managers and employees regarded accommodation as a favor offered to the other party and expected to have returns in the future

(Chen & Xiao, 1993). Sacrificing certain needs in order to obtain long-term returns was taking the totality into account (*gu quan da ju*). In Chinese culture, priorities are given to the interest of the company or group rather than to individuals.

The four items from compromise were concerned with each party giving in half way. This is another way to gloss over disagreement to maintain group relationship. Maintenance of appropriate relationship depends on the protection of individual's face. The more face one has, the easier it will be for Chinese to establish and develop interpersonal relationship (Jia, 1997-8). Yu (1995) indicated that in the Chinese society face losing is shameful not only for an individual but also for the group the individual is affiliated. Individuals are therefore expected to be concerned with the consequences of their behaviors on group members. In the process of conflict management this collective orientation requires Chinese to give face to the opponent by yielding half way, if the opponent is willing to make some concession.

The results further indicated that managers adopted control strategies more frequently than staff ($t = 3.53$, $p < .01$). The control strategy, defined by Blake and Mouton (1964), was a power-oriented mode in which an individual pursued his or her own concerns at the other person's expense. As a hierarchical society, Chinese social systems are constituted by networks of graded relationships that pattern and are patterned by communication behaviors (Stohl, 1995). Managers possess power in the company like fathers in the family. They are addressed by their title and last name – a way to distinguish the hierarchical order in the organization. The need to show respect for hierarchy results in mutual acceptance of the differentiated roles of managers and employees. Compliance and conformity to authority is then expected. Thus, lower rank employees must cautiously express different opinions because the right to correct mistakes is vested in hierarchy (Stohl, 1995). The party discipline of lower rank obeying the higher rank and all party members obeying the central party committee (*xia ji fu cong shang ji, quan dang fu cong zhong yang*) reinforces the concept of hierarchy. If disagreement occurs between Chinese and foreign partners and neither side is willing to make reconciliation, the conflict usually could be resolved by the mediation of the higher positions. The finding in this study that "control" was used less frequently than "collaboration" illustrated that if confrontation is inevitable, reconciliation is preferred to competition, because the latter may damage the harmonious relationship of the two parties in the long run.

In addition, collaboration has the highest mean score among the three conflict strategy dimensions. Collaborating involves open discussion of the

problem on a friendly term. It is an attempt to work with the opponent in an effort to find an integrative solution that would satisfy both sides (Miller, 1995). The result indicated that "collaboration" seems to be the most attractive approach to conflict management in this study. The Chinese terms of mutual benefits and cooperation (*hu hui he zuo*) explain this approach which leads to the outcome of harmonious relationship and task completion. Harmony, as an essential element of Confucianism, is oriented toward the achievement of great peace which can only be obtained when things and people are structured into smoothly operating order of human relations and moral norms (Yang, 1959). Traditionally, Chinese consider heaven, earth, and human beings as an organic whole. Human beings should live in harmony with rather than conquering nature. Thus, the achievement of success depends upon appropriate time in accordance to heaven, favorable conditions provided by earth, and harmonious interpersonal relationships among people (*tian shi di li ren he*). For business, harmony is important in that it brings fortune (*he qi sheng cai*). Therefore, collaboration, as a means to reach harmony in the process of conflict management strategies, is much favored by the Chinese managers and workers. This may explain why H1 was not confirmed.

A plausible explanation for why seniority (including age and years working in the company) did not show impact on the choice of conflict resolution strategies is that join-ventured business in China is still a new phenomenon with a history of only less than two decades. The demographic data of this study showed that about 79 percent of the participants have less than nice years working experience and the average age of them is below 40. The young age and short working experiences may not be able to reflect the influence of seniority.

Finally, there are several suggestions for future research. First, future research may address whether styles are relatively stable or whether they vary across situations by using more participants. A large number of participants will make the results of factor analyses more meaningful and reliable. Second, intercultural communication scholars can extend the study to examine the relationship between strategy choice and the persons involved at different stages of conflict situations. Third, by using the technique of self-report questionnaire for this line of research it is suggested to include a conflict scenario to uncover the nature of conflict interactions (Knapp, Putnam, & Davis, 1988). Lastly, as conflict is defined, expressed, and experienced through communication behaviors, communication researchers need to ascertain how conflicts contribute to and are shaped by the interaction among individual, cultural, social, political, and organizational factors. In this sense,

communication researchers can play a significant role in identifying the impact of these factors on communication strategies in different conflict situations and discovering effective ways to handle organizational conflicts.

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