The Effect of Situational and Relational Factors on Conflict Styles

Rui Zhang
University of Alberta, Canada

In the attempt to investigate Chinese psychology and characterize Chinese culture, relationalism, or relational orientation, has become the centerpiece in indigenous research as opposed to the Individualism/Collectivism dichotomy. If such indigenous concern proves valid, inquiries into Chinese perceptions of *Guanxi* should shed light on the cross-cultural studies of conflict management styles, which seem to be impoverished by their heavy reliance on overarching, context-free cultural dimensions. Thus, this study is conducted to link the indigenous conception of relationship with its corresponding behaviors in conflict situations and test the effect of situational and relational factors on the preference of conflict styles. A scenario-based questionnaire is designed and administered to over 200 university students in Shanghai, in which 5 hypothetical conflict scenarios involving different role relationships (roommate, teacher, classmate, parent, and stranger) are presented. Results gathered from this post-80s generational group are then compared to the stereotypical view of Chinese as avoiding or being non-confrontational in conflicts. Subsequent in-depth interviews are conducted to aid in clarifying the subjective explanations behind each scenario of conflict management decision making.

The seminal work done by Geert Hofstede, epitomized in his *Culture's Consequences* (1980; 2001) has generated a plethora of multi-disciplinary literature to unpackage cultural differences which classical modernization theory (e.g. Inkeles, 1966; Wittrock, 2000), championing the idea of convergence, fails to predict. Of Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability (originally four, later five with Confucian Dynamism added), the Individualism/Collectivism constructs have been widely used to account for psychological and communication processes that differ between cultures (see Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002, for a meta-analysis). While reliance on such an overarching framework as Individualism/Collectivism can serve as a theoretical springboard to embark upon the journey of contrasts, the constructs are also critiqued by scholars as a) a catch-all variable for any observed difference between cultures and hence impoverished in content (Ratner & Hui, 2003), b) an amalgamation of distinct types of autonomy and sociality (Fiske, 2002), and c) too broad-based to predict individual behavior (Singelis & Brown, 1995). These critical issues call for readjustment of the overgeneralizations linking the Individualism/Collectivism dimension with communication styles. Hall's (1976) high/low context has been typically correlated with Individualism/Collectivism in such a way that it is generally believed, with corroboration from research, that members of individualistic cultures predominantly use low-context communication and tend to communicate in a direct fashion, and members of collectivistic cultures predominantly use high-context messages when in-group harmony is important and tend to communicate in an indirect fashion (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p. 69). This translates directly into a similar assumption in research of conflict management, which is of interest here, that members of individualist cultures prefer a confrontational and problem-

solving style, while members of collectivist cultures are more inclined to be obliging and avoiding, but often with mixed results in empirical studies.

Conflict Style Differences between the Chinese and Westerners

Conflict communication styles refer to the general behavioral tendencies used during the actual conflict negotiation process (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 74). The dual concern model is the prevalent approach used in the West to conceptualize conflict styles. Originally conceptualized by Blake and Mouton (1964) and refined through Kilmann and Thomas's MODE (1977), Putnam and Wilson's OCCI (1982), and Rahim's ROCI-II (1983), this approach focuses on five classic styles or predispositions for managing conflict, based on two dimensions of concern for self and for others: dominating, avoiding, obliging, integrating, and compromising.

The above-mentioned problems confronting Individualism/Collectivism constructs are also latent in conflict management research contrasting the Chinese with Westerners when differences based on the constructs are assumed rather than measured. In other words, the observed differences, if any, of conflict style are applied back to validate or invalidate the individualist/collectivist cultural values without measuring them in the first place. If the differences are in the expected direction, then this points to the correctness of Hofstede's index; otherwise, cultural change is factored into account for what can not be predicted by the index. In a meta-analysis of organizational conflict, Holt and DeVore (2005) reached the conclusion that individualistic cultures choose forcing as a conflict style more than collectivistic cultures, while collectivistic cultures prefer the styles of withdrawing, compromising, and problem-solving more than individualistic cultures. However, the study's validity is eclipsed by its incorporation in the meta-analysis of data that fails to measure Ind/Col in the first place, so we can not confirm if those sampled really hold individualist or collectivist values as manifested in Hofstede's cultural index. To focus on Chinese-American comparisons, Knutson et al. (2002), using work-related conflict scenarios, failed to report a consistent pattern of differences between Taiwanese and American samples. While in two scenarios a higher percentage of the former preferred a more indirect and obliging style, the dominating style was also frequently chosen by both samples. In one of the rare cases using the dual concern model in a non-organizational setting, Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, and Lin (1991) revealed differences between Taiwanese and American subjects in terms of four of the five conflict styles. While these differences were in line with the meta-analysis above, no difference was found in the dominating style. However, in one comparative study by He et al. (2002) of Western employees of Sino-American and Sino-French (used as reference groups), and Chinese employees of state-owned and foreign-invested enterprises in China, where individual-level Ind/Col was measured beforehand, the results were discouraging to those espousing the Ind/Col dichotomy: cultural values are not very strong predictors of conflict resolution styles. Likewise, Brew and Cairns's (2004) study of Anglo and Chinese groups concluded that simple predictions based on only cultural dichotomies might have reduced power due to some influence by workplace role perceptions. The insights gained from Brew and Cairns, coupled with He et al., support the existing criticism mounted against Ind/Col constructs insofar as they are distal and decontextualized so as to be confounded with individual-level variables (like the extent to which one is subject to modernization) and

situational norms (like role expectation in the workplace). This should lead to the awareness of going beyond generalized contrasts to heed context specificity, characteristics of target samples, and any nuanced meanings attached.

Some Determinants of Chinese Conflict Management

To contextualize the explanatory utility of Ind/Col constructs in Chinese conflict management, the first broad context to encounter is Chinese culture. To ensconce Chinese culture on the polar end of the Ind/Col continuum simply because of its "otherness" and without understanding it from an emic point of view falls prey to what John Berry (1989) calls an imposed etic. Amidst the heated discussions over the characteristics of Chinese societies in indigenous psychology (Yang, 1991a), consensus has been gradually formed to depict Chinese culture as relationally oriented rather than simply collective (see Ho, 1998; Hwang, 1987; Yang, 1993). Ho (1998) even advocates "methodological relationalism" as a conceptual framework for not only generating knowledge about social behavior in Confucian heritage cultures but also the analysis of human thought and action in general. Therefore, to deepen our understanding of Chinese conflict management necessitates an explication of what is meant by relational orientation and its impact on the manner in which Chinese subjects handle interpersonal conflict. While the following overview is by no means all-encompassing, it serves to delimit the main thread that runs through Chinese conflict management, *especially* in the context of a modern China ever-increasingly engaged in exchange with the outside world.

The Holistic Worldview

One way in which Chinese culture fundamentally differs from Western culture lies in how the world is perceived (Nisbett, 2003). *Yin-yang*, the sign of the Tao, epitomizes the Chinese way. It is an expression of a world in flux, consisting of contradictory yet interpenetrating elements, as opposed to the Grecian world of discrete, mutually exclusive particles, which characterizes the Western worldview (Nisbett, 2003, p. 12-14). Also in contrast to Hegelian dialectics, in which thesis and antithesis is overcome in the final by synthesis, Chinese holism sees to it that equilibrium is properly maintained. This perception of interconnectedness translates into the inseparability of people from nature in Taoism and people from other people in Confucianism, both of which (the latter in particular) have significant ramifications in the social behavior of the Chinese. Specifically, the holistic worldview is manifested in Chinese language and thinking patterns (Chen & Starosta, 1997), emphasis on harmony, and relational orientation.

Harmony. Given the holistic worldview and Confucian mandate that sees the human world as a closely knit whole, harmony has been considered the cardinal value of Chinese culture, and a harmonious relationship is the end of human communication, while conflict is treated as a deviation from harmony (Chen, 2002). With the inclination to pursue conflict-free communication and lay an overriding emphasis on maintaining a harmonious relationship, it is natural to link the cultural value of harmony with an accommodating, avoiding, or indirect approach to interpersonal conflict as it inevitably arises. Those conflict-mitigating strategies have been cited as hallmarks of Chinese styles of handling conflict. However, there are two

important modifications for which I would like to make a case.

The first concerns the separation of *structural* from *cultural* constraints of harmony. As some research has informed us (e.g. Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002), harmony does not equate conformity in Confucian philosophy, and the Chinese conflict-avoidance approach can not be explained solely by Confucianism. As a matter of fact, classical Confucianism does encourage diversity of views, especially on the part of *Junzi* (gentlemen), other than emphasizing harmony:

> The Master said, "The gentleman agrees with others without being an echo. The small man echoes without being in agreement."

Implicit in this Confucian dictum is the paradoxical view that, unlike petty-minded men who endorse harmony for the mere sake of harmony, real gentlemen should feel no scruples to demonstrate a more proactive approach to disagreement in their pursuit of self-cultivation and morality. This belies a streak of elitist Confucianism, namely Confucianism for scholars, as opposed to Confucianism for ordinary people, distinguished by Hwang (1995). Both the life stories of Confucius and the period of "hundreds of school" from 600 to 200 B. C., in which Confucius lived, attest to the argumentative and diplomatic debating style adopted by broad-minded gentlemen. For them, in order to practice the Way of Humanity, harmony is the end-state value rather than what is only superficially maintained. For ordinary people, given the agricultural and collective *structure* of ancient Chinese society, harmony is instrumental to their collective survival rather than value-driven. The group cohesiveness so indispensable to sustenance in a society of this sort compels its members to take harmony at its face value and attempt superficial maintenance of group harmony (family, in most cases), which can be easily linked to the conflict-mitigating approach covered extensively in the literature of Chinese conflict management. Thus, I argue that, while a harmony-based approach to conflict can be an ideal complement to its Western counterpart, more attention should be paid to the manner in which self-interests are satisfied under the semblance of harmony when studying the conflict management of common people. Rather than assume that the Chinese automatically adopt the cultural ideal of harmony, we should instead investigate the nuanced motivation and meanings embedded in Chinese society.

The second qualification is that harmony does not denote that Chinese society is conflict-free and that harmony has its own boundary. Chinese people's antagonism toward outgroups has been well documented. For example, it was found that the Chinese were more likely to sue a stranger, but less likely to sue a friend when compared to Americans (Leung, 1988). Also, while the Chinese generally prefer high-context communication, low-context messages can be frequently exchanged in close relationships, which implies being proactive in handling interpersonal conflict. Such context-sensitive mindfulness has to do with the Chinese perception of *Guanxi*.

Guanxi The holistic worldview calls for a self-conception of people-in-relation, rather than the Enlightenment-based Western view of bounded, self-contained individuals. It results in flexibility and the variability of outward behavior and attitudes displayed in different relations or situations. Because one's behavior depends to a large extent on the location of the other party in one's web of relationships, to couch the phenomenon in terms of collectivism is too broad to capture the shades of meaning embedded in *guanxi*. Even if Triandis (1995)

correctly indicates the greater distinction made by collectivistic cultures between ingroup and outgroup than that made by individualistic cultures, such a conceptualization still seems too removed from real-life Chinese social networking. Chinese sociologist Fei (1948) should be credited with employing the most apt analogy of *guanxi*. To liken the Chinese web of relationships to diffusing ripples of disturbed water, he perspicaciously reveals the defining features of *guanxi* that can be derived from the water analogy: continuous, flexible, and permeable. Imputing dynamism to *guanxi* interaction, Fei's concept of hierarchical differentiation (*cha xu ge ju*) accounts for the contradictory depictions of Chinese people as being either collectivists or individualists by scholars in modern Chinese history. Since the Chinese self has to be defined by the other party with whom one is interacting, whether one turns out to be individualist or collectivist is contingent. This renders the emic concept of *guanxi* rather paradoxical, if not incomprehensible. On the one hand, Chinese persons are required to subject themselves to the collectivity known as the great self, giving face (*mianzi*), and showing human affection (*renqing*). On the other hand, the unappreciated self-interest, known as the small self, has to be satisfied only under the canopy of human relationships. The latter should be of special interest, not only because it almost goes unnoticed in much cross-cultural research contrasting the Chinese with Westerners, but it provides clues as to how *guanxi* is manipulated by common Chinese.

The Chinese perception of *guanxi* has been associated with research on the operation and development of *guanxi* (Yang, 2000) and on resource allocation (Zhang & Yang, 1998). However, Hwang's recent work represents one of the few academic attempts to construct an indigenous theoretical framework of *guanxi* and explicate Chinese conflict management on the basis of the framework. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory, Hwang classifies *guanxi* bases into three prototypes – namely, expressive ties, mixed ties (expressive/instrumental), and instrumental ties – and uses it as a scheme to identify 12 categories of conflict modes according to four aspects of consideration: does she or he want to maintain interpersonal harmony, does she or he insist on attaining a personal goal, what are the interactants' ways of coordination, and what is the dominant response (Hwang, 1997). While the last aspect of dominant response is similar to one's general orientation to managing conflict as affected by variables like Ind/Col, it is apparent that Hwang expands the repertoire of Chinese conflict modes by considering the specific circumstances.

Reciprocity. While recognized as a universal norm (Gouldner, 1960), reciprocity takes a unique form in the context of Chinese culture. Because the achievement of harmony demands mutual dependency and responsibility in fulfilling each other's needs in human relationships (Chen, 2002), it has been idealistically regarded as both face-giving and demonstrative of human sentiments (the core elements of a harmonious relationship), and thus differs from its Western counterpart in its nature of obligation and long-term indebtedness. Again, how reciprocity is realized in Chinese daily life should be noted, given the ethical discrepancy between Confucianism for scholars and Confucianism for ordinary people. As a matter of fact, the normative, purely expressive nature of reciprocity is ill-fitted to explain the mundane phenomenon of having one's self-interest fulfilled by its instrumental use of obligating others to return the favor with what one needs. While it seems right that expressive reciprocity can not be disentangled from instrumental reciprocity in real life, their distinction should be made salient for conceptual and analytical reasons. I reiterate the importance of analyzing the

manner in which emic elements are manipulated in Chinese societies, because it is Confucianism for ordinary people that exerts the most profound influence on Chinese daily interaction. The instrumental utilization of reciprocity is evidenced by Yamagishi et al. (1998), who challenge the generally-held view that members of a collective culture psychologically *like* to maintain harmony and cooperate toward a group goal. In a series of experimental studies, they find that in-group favoritism is practiced not because subjects share the same social/group identity (namely, collective values), but because generalized reciprocity is expected of group members rather than outsiders. To put it differently, it is not that collectivists do not value personal goals, but that these are achieved through the unnoticeable vehicle of generalized reciprocity. While the results from experimental studies may have limited generalizability, they lead to an intriguing question about conflict research: Will Chinese subjects, especially those living in developed urban areas, prefer a conflict-avoidance approach because they can acquire something in return in the foreseeable future rather than for the reasons stereotypically assumed?

Research Questions

The primary purpose of my study is to test stylistic preference among Shanghai university students when confronted with conflict scenarios in which different situational and relational factors are presented and to explore the degree to which perceived relationships with others influence the selection of preferred conflict styles. As indicated above, this study is aimed at going beyond the simplistic Individualism/Collectivism dichotomy to situate conflict management in the immediate contexts which are more nuanced and layered than the dichotomy can predict. Thus, this study focuses on the manner in which individual meanings are embedded in conflict episodes and the reviewed emic constructs are manipulated in real life. To be specific, I propose three research questions this study aims to investigate:

1. In general, how do university students of the post-80s generation in Shanghai prioritize their styles of managing hypothetical conflict scenarios that are pertinent to their real campus life?
2. Does any discernible difference of stylistic preference exist between these hypothetical conflict scenarios and, if so, how are the relational and situational factors built into the scenarios perceived and considered so that differences in conflict styles can be accounted for?
3. How do the research findings with special attention to relationships and contextual constraints compare to the context-free, stereotypical view of the Chinese as being non-confrontational and avoiding conflicts, and how can these emically derived findings generate more valid ideas about the collective nature of Chinese culture in context and flux?
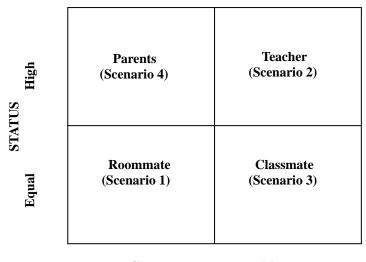
Method

Participants

A total of 278 university students from one medium-sized and two large-sized universities located in Shanghai participated in the study. Two-hundred-forty-four of them

(112 males, 130 females, 2 unstated) finished the questionnaire as required and were included for subsequent analysis. Mostly freshmen and sophomores, the subjects have an average age of 19.2 (SD .944), with 2 subjects failing to report their age. The majors of the sampled students range from liberal arts (such as language and literature), to finance and economics, and to science (such as physics and chemistry). Like the majority of universities in Shanghai, the three universities from which the sample comes recruit students nationwide, so subjects were asked to choose if their birthplace was a city, town, or village; 61.5 % chose city, 23.8% chose town, and 13.5% chose village. Another background variable is whether the subject has siblings. Because of the implementation of the one-child policy in China, the number of only-children (75.8%) outweighs expectedly that of those with siblings (23.4%) by over three to one. Since the variations within the sample are not the main concern of the study, only results worthy of further research are reported.

Design

In order to test the effects of relational and situational factors, repeated measures were employed. Subjects were asked to respond to five hypothetical scenarios, four of which vary along two dimensions of relational closeness and status (the fifth one, which involves conflict with strangers, was excluded from the dimensional grid). So a 2×2 factorial design was used with relational closeness and status as independent variables.

Figure 1
Dimensional grid of relational closeness and status

Scenarios

Five hypothetical scenarios were designed to capture a spectrum of conflicts that pertain to university life as much as possible. Their appropriateness was determined in a prior discussion with a group of university students who were asked to select from two or three conflict episodes each scenario they found most relevant to them. In terms of the dimensional grid, the four scenarios represent, in succession, conflict with a roommate of close relationship and equal status, an instructor teaching a one-semester course of remote relationship and high status, a project classmate of remote relationship and equal status, and parents of close relationship and high status. The fifth scenario, as indicated above, involves conflict with strangers. It was excluded from the grid because one's relative position vis-à-vis strangers, is ambiguous and un-established.

To be specific, the roommate scenario is presented as a conflict in sleeping habits, in which the subject is disturbed by the roommate's habitual "burning the midnight oil." The teacher scenario involves the issue of continuation of tutoring that the subject has been doing for the teacher's child. While the teacher takes continued tutoring for granted, the subject won't have time to keep up and wants to withdraw. The classmate scenario involves a teamwork-based project, and the grades of the subject, as group leader, and the team depend on the satisfactory completion of the project. In contrast to the subject's eagerness to bring off the project and receive a high grade, one group member does not seem to be cooperative and is indifferent to his/her assigned task. The scenario with parents describes a divergence of opinions over which courses count for the subject's future and should be taken in the next semester. Against the background of a train ride, the subject in the scenario with strangers can not concentrate on an urgent piece of work because of the uproarious passengers nearby, who are drinking, smoking, and playing cards.

The use of hypothetical conflicts makes the participants subject to the same prescribed situations, while recalled conflict, also commonly used in similar research, can not control for factors other than the independent variables of interest, relational closeness, and power distance in this case. The former may be especially advantageous in monocultural studies, because of the relative consensus over how each conflict episode is perceived within one culture, thus enabling inferences about questions of *why* (why they behave the way they do) as well as of *what* (the way they behave).[1] Thus, the rich and concrete meanings one builds around each conflict episode can be analyzed with the design of hypothetical conflicts.

Measures

To measure conflict styles, Rahim's ROCI-II inventory was drawn upon to adapt to the university-related conflict scenarios. However, two important modifications were made to make it compatible with what is of interest in this study. Although the five conflict styles (dominating, obliging, compromising, avoiding, and integrating) were invariably invoked, obliging and avoiding styles had to be reconceptualized with caveat from Asian scholars against the Western biases built into the dual concern model. For example, Kim and Leung (2000) contended that the interdependents' tendency to avoid the conflict should be explained by their desire to preserve relational harmony and their motivation to save others' face rather than show low concern for others as well as self. Cai and Fink's (2002) study went further by

concluding that the meaning of all five styles, except dominating style, is interpreted differently by individualists and collectivists. While this study does not statistically address the metric equivalence of conflict styles between the Chinese and Westerners, it will be interesting to discover what meaning university students assign to these styles. The reconceptualization was followed by the addition of indirect style as emically derived, thus making a total of six styles.

There are six specially worded, Likert-type items for each of the five conflict scenarios representing six conflict styles. Subjects were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree). Admittedly, this makes it impossible to employ the internal reliabilities calculation, but the method helps lessen the mind overload for subjects responding to five different scenarios and makes the otherwise context-free styles concrete.

Results

Data were analyzed by using general linear model (GLM) procedures with relational closeness and power distance as repeated measures using SPSS version 13. An alpha level of .05 was considered an appropriate type I error rate for all tests. Before the two main independent variables were analyzed, the demographic variables, i.e. gender and siblings, were first examined for each of the six conflict styles. Gender was found to have a small significant effect on compromising and integrating styles, with female students being inclined to prefer the two styles in the expected direction. Because of the discrepancy between sampled only-children and non-only children in number (over 3 to 1), which reflects more or less the situation in Chinese mainland, a crude mean comparison shows only-children are slightly more dominating and less obliging than non-only children.[2] In-depth interviews were conducted among 14 subjects drawn from the pool of the original 244 subjects after the quantitative part of research concluded. The qualitative data was to qualify and complement the quantitative results and to provide clues to the meanings they assign to each of the conflict scenarios and styles.

The First Research Question

To answer research question A about how university students in Shanghai prioritize their conflict styles across the scenarios, the sums of the means for each of the six conflict styles across the five scenarios were figured up and are presented as overall means in Table 1. The most preferred styles across scenarios are integrating (M= 3.55, SD=1.081) and compromising (M= 3.5, SD=1.024), showing the holistic view of considering both sides (Nisbett, 2003, p. 177-178) and the cultural tendency to maintain mutual-face (J. Oetzel et al., 2001). They are followed by dominating style (M= 2.98, SD=1.334) quite unexpectedly; indirect (M= 2.60, SD=1.277), obliging (M= 2.50, SD=1.195), and avoiding (M= 2.33, SD=1.333) are found surprisingly to be least preferred. Taking standard deviation into account, it seems that not only are compromising and integrating styles with relatively small SD most preferred, but the preference is fairly consistent across scenarios. In contrast, both dominating and avoiding styles have relatively large SD, which indicates that their preference is more subject to situational variations. Overall, Table 1 depicts a general picture of

Table 1: Overall Means across Scenarios

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dominating	2.98	1.334
Obliging	2.50	1.195
Compromising	3.50	1.024
Avoiding	2.33	1.333
Integrating	3.55	1.081
Indirect	2.60	1.277

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for each of the five scenarios and *F*-values and effect sizes for personal closeness, status, and the personal-closeness × status interaction

	Dominating	Obliging	Compromising	Avoiding	Integrating	Indirect
Roommate	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Scenario	2.67 (1.334)	2.32 (1.200)	3.80 (0.931)	1.55 (0.986)	3.84 (1.090)	3.24 (1.207)
Teacher	2.80 (1.288)	2.31 (1.041)	3.67 (0.950)	2.18 (1.146)	3.55 (1.055)	2.70 (1.279)
Classmate	3.36 (1.202)	2.70 (1.254)	3.55 (1.021)	1.69 (0.910)	3.59 (1.042)	2.12 (1.033)
Parents	3.72 (1.235)	2.10 (1.071)	3.42 (1.048)	2.45 (1.279)	3.41 (1.090)	2.20 (1.268)
Strangers	2.33 (1.133)	3.06 (1.161)	3.11 (1.001)	3.78 (0.995)	3.33 (1.080)	2.80 (1.239)
Closeness						
F-value	ns	18.88***	Ns	Ns	ns	22.90***
Partial Eta sq		0.072				0.086
Status						
F-value	10.51**	20.33***	Ns	99.25***	12.53***	12.85***
Partial Eta sq	0.042	0.077		0.297	0.050	0.050
C×S *F*-value Partial Eta sq	138.85*** 0.365	ns	18.36*** 0.072	9.64** 0.039	9.57** 0.039	125.52*** 0.342

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p< .001

university students that prefer to pursue a middle ground, not to the extreme of accommodating others and not uneasy about self-assertion under certain conditions.

The Second Research Question

To answer research question B about stylistic differences between scenarios, GLM was carried out for each of the six conflict styles, with the model personal closeness + status, and the interaction closeness×status (excluding the scenario with strangers). Table 2 shows the breakdown of means and standard deviations for the five scenarios, as well as *F*-values, their significance levels, and partial eta squares for the two main effects and their interaction.

Relational Closeness

The effect of relational closeness, which groups the four scenarios into roommate/parents and teacher/classmate, is significant for only two conflict styles: obliging and indirect. A close examination of Table 2 shows that obliging style is preferred during conflicts with the remote group compared to the close group, and that subjects are more inclined to be indirect with the close group than with the remote group. The significant effect of closeness on indirect style needs further clarification in that the disparity is mainly due to the high rating in the roommate (close) scenario and the low rating in the classmate (remote) scenario.

Status

There is a significant effect of status, which groups the four scenarios into roommate/classmate and teacher/parents, on every conflict style except compromising. As is commonly expected, subjects prefer to take a more avoiding approach toward the group of high status than that of equal status. The finding of interest is that subjects tend to be more dominating and less obliging with the group of high status than that of equal status. This seems to run counter to the Chinese cultural norm of showing respect and giving face to people of higher status or seniority.

Interaction and Scenario-based Differences

As Table 2 shows, the significance of interaction of closeness × status (except for obliging) is characterized by its relatively large effect size, especially for dominating and indirect styles. This seems to demonstrate that relational closeness coupled with status accounts for more variance in at least five conflict styles and has more explanatory power, than closeness or status alone. So far, the scenario with strangers has not been included in this analysis. Scenario-based repeated measures (i.e. scenario as the within-subject factor) were employed on each of the six conflict styles. The results were surprising, with even larger effect size for each style. In multivariate tests, the Wilks Lambada F and p-values and affect sizes for each style are as follows: for dominating, $F=68.72$, $p< .001$, Eta Sq=0.539; for obliging, $F= 33.2$, $p<.001$, Eta Sq= 0.361; for compromising, $F=18.75$, $p<.001$, Eta Sq=0.248; for avoiding, $F= 173.04$, $p< .001$, Eta Sq=0.752; for integrating, $F= 9.62$, $p<.001$, Eta Sq= 0.143; for indirect, $F= 46.56$, $p< .001$, Eta Sq= 0.441. The results seem to indicate that, although differences in terms of conflict styles can be basically explained by the interaction of closeness and status, some scenarios do not necessarily follow the expected direction. To further understand these "anomalies," *post hoc* pariwise comparisons were also conducted.

The subjects were found to be most dominating toward parents and least dominating toward strangers, thus explaining the reversed direction for the effect of status (see above). The scenario with strangers stands out as the one in which obliging style is most preferred, followed by the classmate scenario in which subjects are, contradictorily, most dominating at the same time.[3] The subjects' preference for compromising and integrating styles is relatively consistent, except that dominating style replaces them as the most preferred in the scenario with parents, and avoiding style is the most preferred in the scenario with strangers. While subjects are more avoidance-prone while in conflict with those of high status than those of equal status as indicated above, their preference for avoidance with strangers is significantly higher than in the rest of the scenarios. Finally, while the subjects' overall preference for indirect style is relatively low, it is more desirable in the roommate scenario and the scenario with strangers than in the rest of the scenarios.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate how university students in Shanghai prioritize their conflict styles in hypothetical conflicts pertinent to university life and whether there exist any discernible differences among the five conflict scenarios. The student sample was of course not representative of the Chinese population and probably not of university students in general. It was collected in universities of one of the biggest cities in the Chinese mainland, because it served as a fertile land for examining both the extent to which university students maintain what characterizes Chinese culture and areas of communication in which they are impacted by modernization. The major findings of the current study are as follows: (a) across scenarios, compromising and integrating styles were the two most preferred styles, followed by dominating; indirect, obliging, and avoiding were the three least preferred styles; (b) relational closeness or status alone is not a strong predictor of conflict styles; (c) closeness and status combine to have a relatively strong effect on conflict styles; (d) the findings in the scenarios with parents and strangers, in particular, contradict the conventional wisdom in the research of Chinese conflict management. For the constraint of space, the following discussion revolves mainly around dominating, obliging, and avoiding styles, which are deemed by the author as the most illuminating from the current study. In addition, the following points were mostly confirmed by the qualitative data from the subsequent in-depth interviews.

Dominating Style

Reasons why the overall mean of dominating style ranks third, and subjects are found to be more dominating toward people of high status, lie in its endorsement of the classmate scenario and the scenario with parents. Recall that the former scenario involves a group project in which the subject assumes group leadership and aims for a high grade. The key to this scenario is how leadership is understood and how this situational norm impacts the subjects' response. The leadership question was asked of the 14 subjects in the follow-up interview. Most of them described it as the role of monitoring the project and ensuring that every member finishes his/her assigned work in a timely fashion. In case of non-compliance on the part of one member, the group leader is charged with the task of talking openly and

directly to the member and even pressuring him/her into immediate action. Of course, self-interest is also a contributory factor. The one with the intent of achieving a high grade is more motivated to try all means than one who is indifferent about getting his/her message across to the non-productive member. This is more so, after the motivated group leader interprets the "social loafing" behavior as undermining the otherwise cooperative nature of the project and norm of fair distribution of work. In this sense, relational closeness is only secondary in importance. Under the situational norm, it does not make much difference whether the non-compliant member is an unfamiliar classmate with whom one has no interaction out of the classroom, someone that one knows quite well, or even a close friend, for that matter. Therefore, in terms of independent/interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), subjects can be "primed" as becoming quite independent in such a group-project or work-related situation, even if they may lean toward interdependent self-construal in general situations. This finding is in line with one of the conclusions drawn in Brew and Cairns (2004), in which a "role perception" or "workplace norm" schema rather than a cultural schema can be cued in some situations. In the classmate scenario, there is good reason to believe that subjects are more inclined to act according to the modern definition of teamwork and the theory of competition and cooperation, which proves to be more or less universal (Tjosvold, Poon, & Yu, 2005), rather than to circumvent or express indirectly, as predicated by cultural norms.

While research holding a native perspective admits the existence of confrontational strategy adopted by the Chinese (Yu, 1997), the results of the current study concerning the family scenario are nonetheless surprising. The fact that dominating style is most preferred seems to challenge the Chinese conventional wisdom that harmony of the family is the basis of prosperity of all things. But attributing the phenomena to modernization and the surge of individualism borders on no explanation at all and misses the opportunity to explore the interplay of cultural tradition and modernization. Fortunately, Chu and Ju (1993), in their first empirical study of Chinese culture in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, have provided an archive database which can be used as a benchmark for comparison. One of the most significant findings is that while family survived the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, parental dominance and the strict enforcement of discipline that characterize the traditional family structure reflected in Confucianism's *wulun,* were mostly gone (pp. 79-85). This seems to indicate that the demise of normative familialism and ethical mandates does not prophesize the demise of family itself but is paralleled by a shift to the emotionally supportive and interdependent dimension of family in China. This emerging concept of family has been evidenced by political scientist Ronald Inglehart's world values survey[4], a grand attempt to document cultural changes related to modernity issues, and has been established in the field of social psychology as the third family model known as psychological interdependence (Kaġitcibaşi, 1990). In view of these past studies, I propose four tentative explanations for the results from the conflict scenario with parents:

1. To borrow from Barnlund's distinction between public and private self (Barnlund, 1975), I consider university students' progressive strategies to be acts of unbosoming the inner self before parents. Given the emotional interdependence and mutual trust between children and parents, family may be one of the few settings where self-expression can be natural. As a matter of fact, most of the student interviewees admitted to me that they normally are not afraid of arguing with their parents because

the emotional ties, which are based on sanguinity, won't be severed merely because of the negativity arising from conflicts with parents. Also, almost every student interviewed pointed out that filial piety is not equal to obedience of parental orders. This substantively transformed concept of filial piety further substantiates the embodiment of new meanings rather than the withering away of cultural tradition such as filial piety.

2. One corollary of the first explanation is the mutual interests children feel they share with their parents. Since they see no incompatible interests with their parents in the long run, or "all parents want things for their children's good," as one of the interviewees put it, it is just a matter of letting the other know what is the best available as conflicts arise. All means to the commonly shared end of deriving the best for children are accepted without having to solicit negative emotion or to escalate into fights. Once the children understand that their relationship with their parents is rooted in mutual trust and mutual concern for their well-being rather than pure exercise of parental control, this psychological relatedness legitimizes open debate of disagreements.

3. Argumentative or confrontational style may not be frowned upon as in the traditional discourse of maintaining the semblance of harmony. As alluded to in the above discussion, the structural coercion placed by the agricultural economy in Chinese history may have disentangled in the current context of modernized China, so that it is no longer necessary in terms of livelihood to take an instrumental attitude toward harmony in family. Rather, harmony can be viewed as the end in and of itself. As Leung's (2002) dual model of harmony has shown, when it is adopted as the end-state value, open disagreement and debate may well take a positive connotation and be viewed as the appropriate step toward harmony as the end result.

4. Such democratization of family communication (Zhong, 2002) seems to have a broader socio-cultural background than the effect of the widely discussed implementation of the one-child policy (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, & McBride-Chang, 2003). While only children have been found to receive excessive attention from their parents, family socialization for non-only children does not seem to differ much. With the decentralization of parental roles in the decision-making of their adult children, the emphasis is being shifted to the fostering of autonomy and equality. Accordingly, no significant differences were found to exist in the dominating or obliging style adopted by only and non-only children toward their parents.

In sum, with the pervasive changes wrought by China's deepening modernization and urbanization, the shift from kinship-based, extended family to closely knit, nuclear family type seems to have resulted in the growing emotional interdependence between family members rather than its disintegration. But it has revealed distinctively modern characteristics, ramified in terms of conflict styles within family, showing the adult children's activation of independent self-construal in the presence of their parents. It is paradoxical that, given the emotional interdependence within the nuclear family, family is also the venue to nurture children's awareness of independence.

Obliging Style

In view of the distinction between harmony as instrument and harmony as the end-state value discussed above, special attention was paid to how subjects make sense of this distinction and how the harmony-enhancing styles are manipulated in real-life interactions.

The finding that, although dominating style is preferred in the classmate scenario, its polar opposite of obliging style is also rated relatively high (only second to obliging style in the scenario with strangers) led to questions in this regard asked of the students in the follow-up interview. Two reasons can be generalized from the interviews. Firstly, while students have been found to accept a modern concept of teamwork, it is by no means applicable to everyone. Students are somewhat divided over whether a group leader's responsibility is to facilitate involvement of every member's effort and fair assignment of the project, or to take charge of the unfinished work by the non-contributing member. Out of this arises the variation within university students of how conflicts of this sort should be managed. Secondly, dominating and obliging styles may not be mutually exclusive because, when communication is understood as a transactional process, one's behavior depends to some extent on how the other party responds. Some subjects who endorse dominating style may also tend to accept obliging style, because they consider the possibility that the conflicting member may be doggedly uncooperative and dominating style may not work out as a result. Then, to commit the unfinished work to the hands of the leader or to the concerted efforts of other members would be, although undesirable, necessary to the goal of getting the project done and getting a satisfactory grade. Thus, harmony is not the concern, and it accounts for why avoiding and indirect styles are rated so lowly in this scenario.

In *Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game*, Hwang (1987) elaborated on the mechanism by which *guanxi* is established or pulled to obligate the other party with which one has mixed or instrumental ties, to return the favor one has initiated. To understand it in the context of conflict communication, I asked in the interview whether subjects may shift their response if the teacher scenario is converted into the one in which the subject is connected to the teacher in the long run, well into the later years of university life. They either thought personally or inferred that other students believe that these two kinds of teachers seem to make a difference. Because there will be much more interaction with a teacher who, say, directs one's major study than the one who teaches a one-semester course, discretion goes beyond consideration of the unfolding conflict, and students may tend to be more obliging, as the informants told me, to the former type of teacher. More importantly, students may act the way they do, not merely because harmony maintenance is obligatory with a teacher who commands respect from a cultural point of view, but because the act of accommodation can make the teacher indebted and hence more likely to allocate resources for the student as his/her needs arise. It is because of the prevalence of the reciprocity norm which is binding and interminable that interaction between people of unequal status can be manipulated to the advantage of the inferior, and reciprocity can be weighed in its instrumental utility.[5] Therefore, work on face (*mianzi*) involves the strategic attempts to manipulate degrees of relationship to augment one's social resources (Chang & Holt, 1994). This finding makes salient the fact stated above: that members of a collective culture adopt collective values (like harmony), does not equate their *personal* preference of these values or their *willingness* to sacrifice any individual interests.

Avoiding Style

The most striking finding about the use of avoiding style is the subjects' disinclination to adopt it in every scenario except the one with strangers, which contradicts research documenting both the Chinese conflict-avoidance approach and aggressive hostility toward out-groups. The interview notes show that, consistent with its overall means at the bottom of Table 1, student interviewees dismissed avoiding style as generally unable to address or improve the conflict at hand, although conflict itself is negatively viewed. That means that the negativity of conflict does not entail the tendency to avoid as it occurs; rather, avoidance may even intensify the pent-up tension. The general picture seems to be that the typical Chinese way of conflict management is rejected by contemporary university students.

But one glaring exception needs to be clarified. The scenario with strangers involves a conflict with some boisterous passengers during one's train ride. The most preferred conflict style rated by the subjects is the avoiding style. Drawing upon what I gained from the follow-up interview, I offer the following explanations:

1. There is a conceptual gap between what is meant by "stranger" and "outgroup" to the subjects. "Outgroup" seems to include concrete people with whom one has interaction in the past but loathes having future interaction with because of divergent values, personalities, or interests. But "stranger" is a more abstract term, encompassing anyone with whom one has not interacted before. Presumably because of this mental representation of stranger as someone so unfamiliar and hard to describe, the students are generally vigilant and shun as much communication, conflict included, as possible with the "mystique" stranger. Therefore, while "outgroup" solicits feelings of frustration and hostility, "stranger" tends to make the subjects cautious.

2. The fact that the conflict is set in a public train compartment renders the subjects less responsive and assertive than they would be inwardly. Also, the presence of more than one noisy passenger may further deter them from expressing their discontent publicly. Given the situational constraints, it is relatively easy to avoid the open confrontation or to leave the dispute to the mediation of a train attendant, as captured by the indirect style.

3. Hostility toward strangers may be correlated with one's educational level. The more educated and cultivated, the more appropriate and broad-minded one will be in deportment (Yu, 1997). But because only university students are sampled in this study, the explanation cannot be directly confirmed.

Implication and Limitation

The third research question remains to be answered. To characterize Chinese conflict management as conflict-mitigation and indirect communication, and explain it using Individualism/Collectivism constructs not only minimizes relational and situational effects but also disregards the nuanced and contextual meanings of conflict styles. To overcome the overgeneralization of Ind/Col and understand the relational self in modern context, a scenario-based study was conducted among university students in Shanghai. Firstly, with each scenario

of different relational and situational factors, subjects' self-reports differ substantially and seem to be based on an integrated consideration of all related factors. While relatively consistent priority is given to compromising and integrating styles across scenarios, dominating and avoiding styles demonstrate the most significant variations. With regard to the impact of modernization, the family conflict and work-related conflict are the venues that are experiencing cultural change. University students tend to activate independent self-construals in the two contexts and do not refrain from arguing with or even confronting the other party, which attests to the situational, rather than stable, pattern of self-construals (Gudykunst et al., 1996). However, modernization does not denote simply Westernization but transformation and reevaluation of cultural tradition, as shown in the growing emotional interdependence between family members. Thirdly, the meanings university students assign to conflict management styles call attention to a distinction that should be made between cultural ideals and their manipulation by ordinary people. Obliging and avoiding styles can show a whole spectrum of other concern, mutual concern, and self concern, depending on how one perceives the conflict and what one wants to gain from it. Cross-cultural comparison would be rendered meaningless, if the equivalence of meaning of conflict styles was not ensured (Cai & Fink, 2000).

The current study suffers from the following limitations which make the findings exploratory and inconclusive. Firstly, the dual concern model is not comprehensive and concrete enough to conceptualize Chinese conflict management, and how these conflict styles are understood by the Chinese varies from the dimension predicted by the model. Leung et al.'s (2002) dualistic model of harmony and Oetzel et al.'s (2000) typology of facework are promising substitutes. Secondly, findings concerning self-construals are derived *post hoc* rather than hypothesized *a priori* and measured *in situ*. Future research is needed to test the situational pattern of self-construals. Thirdly, because self-construals are not measured, the individual-level variations within student samples (e.g. relatively large standard deviations for conflict styles) cannot be known, and the extent to which modernization impacts students can not be tested but only inferred. Fourthly, this research is also weakened by the use of hypothetical scenarios rather than naturally occurring conflicts. But given the advantages and disadvantages of hypothetical and recalled conflicts, a new research design is needed to incorporate the strengths of both.

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[1] Using the same hypothetical situations may be problematic in cross-cultural research, not only because of the difficulty in tapping shared experience (one kind of conflict in one culture may not be meaningful in another), but because of the marked differences that may exist in terms of meaning and intensity of the perceived conflict. Attributing the differences, then, to the generalized cultural values without analyzing how the conflict is perceived may fail to capture the essence (e.g. Wiseman et al., 1995). Please note that by cross-cultural conflict research I do not mean the growing conflict research in a multicultural context.

[2] Statistical calculation was also run, after 57 out of 184 only children were randomly selected to meet the requirement of equal sample size. It yielded similar results. None of the differences reached the level of significance, although the direction seemed consistent with the literature on only children in China.

[3] As a matter of fact, the classmate scenario clusters with the scenario with parents as the subset in which dominating style is most preferred.

[4] When asked about whether respect and love should be shown for parents, most of the Chinese were in favor and, more importantly, the endorsement shot from 75.4% in 1990 to 94.5% in 2001. When it comes to parents' responsibilities to their children, 60.8% of Chinese in 1990 and 67.4% of Chinese in 2001 reported that parents should do their best for their children. Both show a clear trend toward emotional interdependence between children and parents.

[5] The emphasis here on the instrumental side of reciprocity does not necessarily deny the existence of its emotional and expressive side. As a matter of fact, the emotional and instrumental components of social exchange can not be separated in most human interaction.