

## **Intersection Between Culture and Leadership: An Analysis of Chinese Leadership Assumptions in an American Study Group**

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This paper is an analysis of Chinese students' leadership assumptions in an American study group. In contrast to the harmony-oriented Chinese communication context, the other-orientation makes it an imperative for a Chinese leader to understand how he or she is related to the others in his or her group. An emphasis on role relationships prompts the Chinese leader to seek the perfect timing for action to live up to the principle of "doing the proper things with the right people in the appropriate relationships." In their actions, they are guided by the principle of avoiding conflicts and preserving harmony. In this context, Chinese students tend to see themselves as representatives of their home country, and the urge to create a positive image (and to avoid a negative image) of their home country underlies their cautiousness in taking initiatives to assume leadership (exercise influence or intervention). Furthermore, emphasis on the timing of leadership assumption tends to hold the Chinese students back in their exercise of influence, and uncertainty about the intervention outcome and about whether the intervention would destroy group harmony deters the Chinese students from exercising their intervention.

The author spent two years (2005-2007) in the United States working and studying with American students at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. Working with groups of American students in the Leadership and Group Communication class gave the author an authentic context to observe leadership assumption on the part of the Chinese students (in this case, the author herself) in a non-Chinese group (in this case, a group of Americans). A distinct difference in leadership assumption between the author and her American group-mates lies in their readiness to assume their leadership roles. While her American group-mates exhibited more willingness to communicate and took more initiatives in directing the group process, the author was more hesitant in assuming leadership roles, especially towards the beginning of the group life. As the author observes, this reservation in leadership assumption was shared by five other Chinese students working with their American group mates.

This paper inquires into how Chinese cultural assumptions and expectations of leadership tend to hold the Chinese students back in their leadership assumption while working with their American group mates. The purpose is to give a rationalization through the author's personal experience of the Chinese students' reservation in their classroom discussions in the hope that American professors and students can be on a better footing when working with Chinese students.

The paper first contextualizes the Chinese communication with a review of the Chinese perception of interpersonal relations that nurtures the Chinese cultural assumptions and expectations of leadership. Within this context, the paper examines how these assumptions and expectations elicit the Chinese students' "reserved" assumption of leadership roles

throughout the group life when they work with a group of American students: how they try to impress their American group mates toward the beginning of the group life, how they interact with their group mates to exercise their influence, and how they intervene in the group process.

#### Chinese Perception of Interpersonal Relations: A Context

As Hackman and Johnson (2004) maintain, "Leadership is best understood from a communication standpoint" (p. 2). An understanding of Chinese leadership should begin with an understanding of Chinese communication. As Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) point out, the primary functions of communication in the Chinese culture are "to maintain existing interpersonal relations, to reinforce role relationships, and to preserve harmony within the group" (p. 6). In this context, a leader's imperatives would necessarily entail an understanding of oneself in relation to others, appropriate fulfillment of one's roles according to one's status, and an ability to preserve harmony within the group.

#### *An Other-Oriented Chinese Self*

According to Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), maintaining relationships is an integral part of Chinese communication as the Chinese believe that one "exists through, and is defined by, his or her relationship to others" (p. 6). Confucianism, whose essential aspect is the notion of human relatedness (Ng, 2000), defines the true self in terms of social and ethical responsibilities, shaping the perception of the Chinese self (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). In this context, Chinese see themselves in terms of others. The Chinese self needs to be "recognized, defined, and completed by others" (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 10). In this context, Chinese communication exhibits an other-orientation and "others' interpretations and perceptions often define the meaning of an event" (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 10). A Chinese leader in this context has to be able to understand how he/she is related to others in his/her group and needs to be "recognized, defined, and completed by others," according to Gao and Ting-Toomey's terms.

#### *Appropriate Action with Appropriate People in Appropriate Situations*

Another dimension of the Chinese self-definition is to relate the self to hierarchy and role relationships. In a hierarchical Chinese culture, behaviors are guided by the principle of "doing the proper things with the right people in the appropriate relationships" (Bond & Hwang, 1986, as cited in Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 6). Indeed, "as Liu and Allinson (1988) suggest, 'the Confucian conception of Tao is precisely the conception of a total order in which everything and every person under heaven has its proper place in the proper time'" (Ng, 2000, p. 45).

The Taoist's "action through no action" has an echo here. In fact, Confucius contends that "when things and persons fall into proper places, they become related to each other in such supportive manner that harmony will result" (Ng, 2000, p. 45). Leadership assumption in this context is expected not to go against the tide in asserting one's influence. Chinese tend to believe that deliberate efforts to impose external forces would create unbalance or chaos.

Leadership assumption is expected to be a natural matter of course when the leader sizes himself or herself, observes, understands how he/she is related to the others in the group, and waits for the right time.

### *Preservation of Harmony as the Ultimate Goal of Communication*

Chinese are “inspired to live in harmony with family, to be on good terms with neighbors, and to make peace with other nations” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 7). Seeking and preserving harmony thus becomes the ultimate goal of a leader’s communication.

In the Chinese hierarchical culture, preservation of harmony is achieved when each individual maintains his/her role relationships in a group. In this context, one tends to avoid assumption of leadership in influencing the group process if one is not in a commonly acknowledged position to lead. Trying to play the role as a leader while not in the position to lead would appear to be an open challenge to the credibility of the leader and would be considered detrimental to the harmony of the group. An approach at this time could be an indirect one. The follower can make suggestions in a manner that prompts the leader to take initiatives to change the group process that the follower thinks good for the group. Taking the place of the leader is not regarded as a wise practice because of its great potential to destroy group harmony.

### “Reserved” Chinese Students in a Group of American Students

When Chinese students come to the United States and work with their American group mates, they have to face the challenges of a new communication context. They may experience what J. Bennett (1977) termed as a “transition shock” when they lose their “familiar frame of reference in an intercultural encounter” (as cited in Kim, 2001, p. 18) with their American group mates. However, their communication patterns still stay with them. As Davis (2001) points out, when a group is forming, members expect the new group to be like their previous group experiences. In the Chinese interpersonal communication context, they had a comfortable knowledge of how to see themselves in relation to others, how to fulfill their roles according to their status in their groups, and how to preserve harmony within the group. Now in the new groups, these habits of the heart find their new expressions in the Chinese students’ impression management, exercise of influence, and intervention in their group process.

### *Impression Management*

As discussed above, Chinese see themselves in terms of others and the Chinese self is defined and completed by others. An implication is that when Chinese enter a new group, they are likely to see themselves as representatives of their old group which defines and completes their identity. Davis (2001) observes the tendency of a collectivist to see him or herself as a representative of his or her important in-groups. To Chinese students in the United States, that important in-group is their home country as that is what defines them and identifies them apart from their American group mates. Davis (2001) notes that a collectivist may be participating in another group on behalf of his/her old group. In the case of the

Chinese students in question here, that old group still is their home country. An interesting consequence is that in the intercultural encounters with their American group mates, Chinese students tend to make an effort to impress their American group mates as a “model” Chinese, and an underlying wish is that the American group mates can somehow have good impressions of China because of them.

From her own experience and talks with and observations of the Chinese students here, the author detected an image-building effort, conscious or unconscious, on the part of the Chinese students to create a favorable impression of China in their encounters with their American group mates. This is first found in their proclamation of their Chinese identity. The author chose to wear a T-shirt with Chinese characters on her first day of class as a declaration of her Chinese identity. It seems the author wanted to be identified by her American group mates first and foremost as a Chinese rather than just an individual. Other efforts are illustrated in the Chinese students’ particular eagerness to “sell” their country to their American group mates. The author felt an urge to contribute Chinese perspectives to class discussions and never hesitated to share in her management classes cases of the Chinese management practices. In teaching Chinese language classes, the author would often chip in with Chinese cultural background information and introduction of Chinese social life. An American classmate from the author’s other classes commented on a Chinese friend’s efforts to “sell” Beijing: “She really wanted me to agree that Beijing is the most beautiful place in the world!”

It can be concluded that setting up a positive image of their in-group, their home country, underlies the Chinese students’ impression-management efforts. An implication is that the Chinese students may think it a loss of face of their country when they do not do well enough. As a result, they are cautious in taking initiatives; unless they are sure of a positive outcome, Chinese students are unlikely to take risks and instead wait for the right time to assert themselves. The author’s Chinese friends also agree that they do not feel like taking initiatives in class discussions unless they are sure that what they say can impress their classmates and/or professors as something that matters. In waiting for the “right time,” the Chinese students exhibit great “reservation” in taking initiatives. Such reservation, which is associated with the wisdom of timing, is in line with the Chinese students’ image-building efforts to impress their American group mates.

### *Exercise of Influence*

A theme of leadership is the exercise of influence (Hackman & Johnson, 2004). Chinese students tend to exhibit reservations in taking the initiative to exercise their influence in their groups.

The reason for reservation partly lies in the fact that Chinese students are working with people outside their culture systems (their American group mates) and therefore are at a loss, especially at the beginning of the group life, as to how to approach them to effectively exercise their influence. Another factor at work is again this notion of “appropriate action with appropriate people in appropriate situations.” As discussed above, leadership assumption in the Chinese culture is expected to be a natural matter of course when the leader sizes himself or herself, observes, understands how he/she is related to the others in the group, and waits for the right time. It follows that to effectively exercise their influence on their

American group mates, Chinese students have to learn about their group mates well enough before they can identify the “appropriate situations” to exercise “appropriate influence.” The “appropriateness” is largely based on the extent to which the group harmony is maintained while the group goal is met.

The author was very hesitant in taking initiatives to talk in her Leadership and Group Communication class discussions, especially towards the beginning of the class. This resulted from her uncertainty about how she could effectively exercise influence on her American group mates about whom she had not yet learned enough. Uncertain about how she was related to the others in her group, the author chose to step back, observe, and wait for an appropriate time. About one-third of the way into the semester, the author began to be familiar with her group mates’ personalities, had a clearer idea about what they wanted from the group, and began to feel comfortable about working with her American group mates. It was then that the author began to find her voice and share her insights with her group. Chinese culture emphasizes the timing of leadership assumption. “From watching the movements of water, the leader has learned that in acting, timing is everything” (Heider, 1985, p. 15).

In short, the author held back in her class discussions until she was sure what she said was going to matter to the group. To determine what matters required time to learn about her audience (her American group mates) and that again fostered the author’s reservation in taking initiatives in her exercise of influence.

### *Intervention*

When it comes to intervention in the group process, the Chinese students again exhibit a reservation in taking initiatives.

As discussed above, Chinese see preservation of harmony as the ultimate goal of their communication. An implication is an almost natural abhorrence of conflict. When they foresee a potential conflict likely to arise from some event, they would try to prevent it from happening or simply stay away from it. In this context, it is not difficult to understand why the author seldom intervened when she found her American group mates went off track in their discussions. On the one hand, as a non-native speaker of English, the author was unsure about what rhetoric to use to bring them back on track without embarrassing them. On the other hand, the author found that such a reminder was itself potentially embarrassing and saying it in front of the entire group would imply a loss of face on the part of the “off-trackers.” Therefore, the author refrained from intervening, especially toward the beginning of the class when she did not know her group mates well enough, and the aim was to avoid a possible disturbance of the group harmony.

This does not mean that Chinese students never take initiatives to intervene. They actually do, especially when they feel reasonably sure of a positive outcome of their intervention and when the intervention approach tends to be an indirect one.

A third of the way into a class period, the author exercised her intervention for the first time in her group. In that particular session, every group in the class was supposed to come up with an agenda. The author’s group was going nowhere in the first 10-15 minutes. A few group members were engaged in small talk. Feeling an urge to get the group back on track, the author approached her group mates in a very indirect way. The author asked her group

mates what they were supposed to do in this session. Group members answered that they were supposed to come up with a group purpose and an agenda. The author then pursued, “Then what is our purpose?” Now the group began to discuss their purpose. It is worth noticing that the intervention took place only after one third of the group period had passed. By then, the author had already enough knowledge of her group mates to enable her to evaluate the possible outcome of her intervention. Observation of her group mates from previous class interactions convinced her that her intervention in this manner would be likely to produce desirable results. In a sense, the author found a way to use an “invisible hand” that pushed her group mates to do what they were supposed to do without being noticed—and therefore without causing embarrassment. Harmony was maintained.

### Conclusion

The Chinese perception of interpersonal relations underlies the Chinese assumption and expectation of leadership assumption. The other-orientation makes it an imperative for a Chinese leader to understand how he or she is related to the others in his or her group. An emphasis on role relationships prompts the Chinese leader to seek the perfect timing for action to live up to the principle of “doing the proper things with the right people in the appropriate relationships.” In their actions, they are guided by the principle of avoiding conflicts and preserving harmony.

In this context, Chinese students working with their American group mates tend to see themselves as representatives of their home country and an urge to create a positive image (and to avoid a negative image) of their home country underlies their cautiousness in taking initiatives to assume leadership (by exercising influence or intervention). An emphasis on the timing of leadership assumption tends to hold Chinese students back in their exercise of influence. An uncertainty about the intervention outcome and about whether the intervention would destroy group harmony deters Chinese students from exercising their intervention.

### Limitations and Recommendations

This paper, in trying to rationalize Chinese students’ reservation in their leadership assumption when working with their American group mates, is largely based on the author’s own personal experience. Readers, especially those who are unfamiliar with Chinese communication, may have doubts about its limited application. The author wanted to point out that the analysis applies not only to herself alone but also to other Chinese students the author knows. In writing this paper, the author’s primary goal is to contribute to the understanding, rather than the prediction, of Chinese students’ communication behaviors in working with their American group mates, and therefore drew largely on the author’s own personal experiences.

American students who want to benefit from having Chinese students in their groups and therefore benefit from their perspectives may want to work on how to elicit their Chinese group mates’ ideas. Given Chinese students’ reservations and concerns about face, many would rather keep their opinions to themselves unless consulted. In this respect, American students may want to take more initiative in consulting their Chinese group mates about their ideas.

Chinese students who want to be more effective when working with their American group mates may want to be more proactive in their leadership assumption. Being proactive should involve being proactive in learning about the American group mates' ways of communication so as to facilitate the search for effective ways to approach them. Although most Chinese students in the United States are short-term sojourners and therefore may feel a reluctance to adapt to the "American way," it should be noted that an open-minded acceptance of the host environment would turn out to be beneficial to the Chinese students' individual growth. After all, as Kim (1988, p. 173) points out:

[A]daptive individuals find sooner or later that, in the most frustrating moments of change arises new awareness and growth. The darker the frustration, the more shining the realization of the opening of "the third eye" with a newly emerging formation of self that transcends both old and new contingencies, and deeper and more acute sensibilities for understanding and participating in the ever-changing experiences of life.

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