Cross-Cultural Conflict Management in an Age of Globalisation

Bee Chen Goh

School of Law and Justice, Southern Cross University (Gold Coast Campus, Locked Mail Bag 4, Coolangatta 4225, Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT

The Twenty-first Century is often hailed as the Pacific Century. In economic and trade terms, it is already evident with the rise of China and India as major players. Conflicts are inevitable in commonplace human interactions. The crucial question as we move towards an age of globalisation is to ask ourselves if we are competently prepared to manage cross-cultural conflicts given the diversity of habits that occupy our respective words, thoughts and deeds in multicultural environments. This paper seeks to examine the major cultural paradigms that underpin East-West behaviours in the context of conflicts. It will demonstrate, for example, how the primarily collectivist East will perceive and manage conflicts vastly different to Western individualistic ways. It will then conclude that cross-cultural conflict management skill is an essential acquisition to meet contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Cross-cultural values, sino-western conflict resolution, mediation

INTRODUCTION

It is now trite to say that the advent of technology has impacted the world in unimaginable ways. Certainly, it has globalised the world, making it borderless in cyberspace and, at the same time, shrinking our physical world. Inter-dependence has become a fundamental and key feature in the conduct of international relations, trade and

commerce, and environmental management. More than ever before, technocrats in an age of globalisation need to re-think and re-train in communication skills and strategies, particularly in handling and managing conflicts. A globalised environment cuts across the diversity of cultures. In the context of conflict management, technocrats in the age of globalisation will require to be cognisant of, and equipped with a new understanding of cross-cultural awareness and competency (Hofstede, 1994). Challenges abound as, very often,

culture is described as the unconscious and silent communicator (Hall, 1959; Goh, 1999).

This paper focuses on the cross-cultural, essentially the divergent Asian (mainly ethnic Chinese) and Western (mainly of Anglo-Saxon background) cultural values and how they impact on communication, which will in turn influence disputing behaviour. It is to be noted, for instance in Asia, that the Chinese and the Indians share fundamentally similar cultural values based on collectivism. However, for the purpose of this paper, Chinese cultural observations are mainly be drawn upon to contrast with Western ways. The reference here to the 'Chinese' bears an ethnological reference rather than a political or nationalistic one (Goh, 1996, 2002). A reference to the 'Western' focuses primarily on the persons of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic background who subscribe predominantly to individualistic ideals (Triandis, 1990; Gudykunst, 1994; Goh, 1996). An analysis in cross-cultural (i.e. Sino-Western) conflict management is both relevant and necessary as we increasingly move towards the Pacific or the Asian Century and as we move about in the age of globalisation.

As a useful starting point, conflicts are an inevitable part of everyday life. In the West, they are not necessarily considered as a bad thing (Goh, 1996; Jia, 2002; Boulle, 2011). The positive aspects of conflicts can lead to creative generation and innovation of ideas, as can be seen in hotly-debated issues on contemporary topics like climate change. That said, the general perception of conflicts

bears negative connotations. More so, such a negative perception of conflicts is more prevalent in Asian collectivist cultures like the Chinese, for example (Jia, 2002).

This paper is premised on the idea that the context of conflicts finds shifting grounds in accordance with one's embedded culture. How the participants of one culture engage in conflicts can be vastly different from the participants of another culture. For instance, in broad terms, the Chinese culture may prefer to avoid conflicts, especially inter-personal conflicts, as far as possible. The Chinese culture is generally perceived of as litigation-averse (Goh, 2002). Indeed, the highpoint in the Chinese culture is conflict dissolution rather than conflict resolution, with the former preventative and the latter remedial in nature (Goh, 2001). By way of contrast, generally speaking, the Western culture views conflict confrontation as normal and not something to be shunned. On the contrary, as a general observation, the Western individualist culture may seem to thrive on conflicts (Goh, 2002; Boulle, 2011). As such, open debate and confrontationist behaviour become their cultural norms. Although face-saving element is present in the Western culture, it does not attain the same cultural imperative as in collectivist cultures, a point to be dealt with below. Indeed, in the words of Boulle (2011):

> *People from individualistic, egalitarian and low-context cultures, such as many Australians, tend to be confrontational in conflict situations and to favour*

direct negotiation with the other side. People from collectivist, hierarchical and high-context cultures such as many Aboriginal Australians and some recent migrants tend to avoid confrontation in conflict situations and to favour indirect forms of negotiation (p. 104).

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

At this juncture, it is appropriate to ask the question: What is culture? Simply put, culture can be construed as 'the habits of our ways' (Goh, 1996, p. 18). Culture propels and drives our thinking and our actions in unconscious ways (Hall, 1990; Goh, 1996). Indeed, culture can help or hinder communication, depending on one's cultural fluency in a given cross-cultural environment. The following simple and true social case scenario highlights this point. A recent migrant to Australia will be surprised and will experience culture-shock when asked to 'bring a plate' to an informal, social function like the barbeque. Many migrants have interpreted this request quite literally, and have often wondered why the local hosts concerned would invite guests and yet be short on crockery. In fact, the Australian bring-a-plate is for the guest to bring something to share with other guests. Although this little cross-cultural scenario may appear insignificant, it no doubt demonstrates that culture plays a part in communication. A lack of appropriate awareness can result in misunderstandings.

In turn, such misunderstandings may potentially give rise to unintended conflicts. Naturally, such a lack of communication can be a fertile bed for misunderstandings and conflicts to arise, leading to the development of ill feelings between parties due to cultural ignorance. Very often, cross-cultural participants fail to identify the cultural traps at stake on account of ignorance, or fear of appearing silly for asking 'obvious' questions. Hence, conflicts, or potential conflicts, are likely to abound.

In conflict management, even in a mono-cultural setting, we often find that conflicts are generated out of unspoken triggers founded upon assumptions, expectations, misguided or unarticulated perceptions. Furthermore, what is spoken may be misinterpreted, misheard or misunderstood by the listener. Unwittingly, conflicts can occur as a result. Transposed to the cross-cultural conflict context, these issues are compounded by the embedded and often unconscious cross-cultural rules at play. As a natural consequence, misunderstandings can easily arise. One has to be ever so mindful, conscious and vigilant of one's thoughts, actions and words lest they unwittingly cause cross-cultural blunders leading to unnecessary conflicts.

As an example, Professor Roger Fisher of Harvard Law School recounted the following personal experience to me when I met him in 1993 (see Goh, 1996, p. 18-19). A number of years ago, Professor Roger Fisher was in Pakistan to set up an official meeting with a minister. He met the minister at a separate event and approached him

with this meeting request. To his pleasant surprise, he received a positive response of 'Anytime'. He took this quite literally and turned up at the Pakistani minister's office the next morning only to be turned away as the minister was otherwise engaged. An embarrassed and frustrated Professor Fisher learnt a cross-cultural lesson the hard way (Goh, 1996).

Below is an overview of the major dimensions in cross-cultural paradigms which can play a pivotal role in understanding social behaviour pertaining to conflicts. As a starting point, it is important to note that the collectivism-individualism paradigm does exist in both cultures; it is the degree to which it may pre-dominate. In the words of Gudykunst (1994):

> *Individualism and collectivism both exist in every culture, but one tends to pre-dominate. Cultures in which individualism tends to pre-dominate include, but are not limited to: Australia, Great Britain, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States. Cultures in which collectivism tends to pre-dominate include, but are not limited to: Argentina, Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, Guatemala, India, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Panama, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela. Generally, most Arab, African, Asian, and Latin cultures are collectivists (p. 43).*

The statement above further suggests that although generalizations can be beneficial in providing glimpses into particular nationalistic cultures, we still need to avoid stereo-typing or to become too rigid with our culturally pre-disposed views. Eventually, we must take the persons as we find them (Goh, 1996).

COLLECTIVISM AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Collectivists, as the term suggests, share fundamentally a group-oriented culture. Collectivism prevails among Asian and African societies, and some major characteristics of such group or family-oriented culture can be seen in Italian or Greek cultures although these latter cultures pre-dominate towards individualism. Collectivism essentially negates the self, and views the group as its central functionary. Evidently, such a culture promotes 'We' instead of 'I' (Triandis, 1990; Gudykunst, 1994; Goh, 1996, 2002).

Membership of the group is further differentiated by whether one belongs to the in-group or the out-group (Triandis, 1990; Gudykunst, 1994; Goh, 1996, 2002). Often, the characteristics that move one into the in-group or out-group can be traced by one's immediate associations with the work group, education or a particular social group like the Chinese village clan. However, such differentiation may be perceptual. By this is meant that an out-group person may become the member of an in-group as a result of a change in the social tie or network. More importantly, an in-group culture shares

certain common values and its members become privy to privileges enjoyed by the in-group (Goh, 1996).

In the field of conflict management, it is important to recognise particular communicative styles. Collectivists tend to profess a relational style of communication (Goh, 1996). The emphasis of this particular style is on relationship-building (Chen, 2001). Hence, trust is a critical element in building successful relationships and maintaining communication. As a corollary, trust is also highly important in managing conflicts. In the event of a dispute, a collectivist feels comfortable if the dispute-resolver is someone she or he could trust (Goh, 2002).

Collectivists are prone to high-context communication (Hall, 1976; Goh, 1996). In high-context communication, much that is meant is hidden or embedded within the context of the speech. It is then up to the listener to decipher the real meaning of the exchange of conversation. That is what makes it hard, for it is very likely for miscommunication, misinterpretation or mistakes to happen. As collectivists are pre-occupied with preserving harmony, and ever anxious about face-saving behaviour, engaging in high-context communication serves these ends and purposes. High-context communication is indirect, and as such, it promotes face-saving by the speaker being able to circumvent blunt remarks.

Face-saving behaviour is regarded as important to the collectivists. For the collectivists, face-saving behaviour contains two aspects: one is self-related and the other one is other-related (Goh, 1996). The former is associated with saving one's own face, while the latter deals with saving the face of another. In the collectivist cultures, the concern for other people's welfare is ever present and regarded, at times, more important than saving one's own face. Hence, it is critical that one is vigilant about avoiding making remarks that may cause another to lose face. In individualist cultures, although face-saving behaviour is also present, it is in reference to saving one's own face than another person's. Indeed, in egocentrism, one cares little about the face of another (Goh, 1996, 2006).

Harmony is particularly crucial to collectivists. This is because in group behaviour, nothing is really personal and almost every aspect bears a communal nature. This is similar with conflicts. For example, a family dispute is not just limited to the disputing couple in question. The extended families and the community at large all see to it that inter-personal harmony is eventually restored. As a consequence, compromises are a valid outcome of disputes involving collectivists. In fact, the hallmark of a collectivist behaviour is the maintenance of harmony. See, for instance:

> *"The most eminent influence of Chinese belief on establishing a harmonious relationship in human communication is the effort to avoid being involved in conflict" (Chen, 2002, p. 8).*

"Collectivist cultures place a premium on the maintenance of harmony and the absence of discord" (Barkai, 2008, p. 70).

INDIVIDUALISM AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

By way of contrast, individualism places emphasis on the 'individual'. In other words, the self is the primary actor. This also means that its trademark is self-centredness or egocentrism (Triandis, 1990; Gudykunst, 1991; Goh, 1996). In the Western culture, individualism is pre-dominant among people with an Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic background. By and large, individualists cherish personal freedom, independence, autonomy and individual justice. What is highly valued is creativity and change. They uphold the principles of equity, equality and opportunity. Tradition and stability are regarded with suspicion in individualist cultures.

Quite naturally, individualists tend to prefer a transactional style of communication (Goh, 1996). By this, it means that the transaction, i.e. the matter at hand, gains primacy over the people involved. This also means that in their communicative behaviour, they seek transparency and efficiency. A paper-centred approach is desired. This does not mean to say that relationships are not valued in individualist cultures. Relationship-building is important, too, but only in a secondary manner to deal-closing. Relationships in the individualist culture also tend to be characterised by being short-term, and purposeful. A social

injunction, 'out of sight, out of mind' illustrates this point.

When conflicts arise, individualists will not think twice about being confrontational. They tackle the differences by directly approaching the parties concerned, and are not afraid to yell at them if necessary (Bedi, 1991). They regard such behaviour as normal, and required in sorting out inter-personal differences. In contrast, such a behaviour is normally shunned by the collectivists who tend to refrain from direct confrontation and value inter-personal harmony (Bedi, 1991; Zhang & Baker, 2008). Consequently for individualists, adversarial justice in the form of litigation is a natural and logical choice. It also concords with their tendency to be confrontational and to readily engage in open debate. The notion of justice, therefore, bears particular significance for the individualists. In the resolution of disputes, individual justice takes precedence over group harmony. For individualists, the idea of group harmony is of little consequence since the very thing about egocentrism necessarily precludes its relevance (Goh, 2002).

Generally speaking, individualists engage in low-context communication (Hall, 1969, 1976; Goh, 1996). Low-context communication places little on the context, and emphasizes on the content of communication. Communication is, therefore, direct, explicit, with content delivery largely verbal. Little concern is placed on whether matters under discussion can be of a personally sensitive nature. Social injunctions such as 'Go straight to

the point', 'Say what you mean' and 'Don't beat about the bush' bear testimony to this communication tendency.

CROSS-CULTURAL VALUES AND MEDIATION HALLMARKS

There are several approaches to conflict management. Inter-personal negotiation, mediation, arbitration and litigation are some possible avenues (Menkel-Meadow, 2001; Spencer & Brogan, 2006; Spencer & Hardy, 2006; Condliffe, 2008; Tillett & French, 2010; Spencer, 2011). For effective cross-cultural conflict management in the age of globalisation, as exemplified in this section of inquiry by mediation, the role of the cross-cultural mediator as well as mainstream Western mediation hallmarks require some scrutiny and critique (Goh, 2010).

One would find that even though we use the same word 'mediation', its meaning differs in the Chinese mediation as contrasted with the Western mediation. A Chinese saying sums this up, 'We may share the same bed but we dream different dreams' (Goh, 2002). Further, as Jia puts it, 'Chinese mediation aims not only to respond to a conflict when it breaks out, but also to prevent it from happening' (Jia, 2002, p. 289). The idea of prevention is a strong element in the Chinese conflict management, concordant with collectivist ideals (Goh, 2005). Appropriately, one may observe the Chinese-style mediation more in the nature of conflict dissolution, rather than conflict resolution which is after-the-event (Goh, 2002).

As a preliminary point, it is important to deal with the concept of trust in cross-cultural conflict management. For individualist-disputants, trust is important but its relevance is to do with process. In the Western mediation, they need to trust the process, especially its transparency. They care little, if at all, about the idea of personal trust vis-à-vis the mediator. In fact, as their communicative style is transactional, their main preoccupation is to get the matter resolved as expeditiously as possible. Consequently, what they value highly is the mediator's competence. Ultimately, their goal is justice.

For collectivist-disputants, on the other hand, trust is highly significant but in relation to the person of the mediator (Goh, 2002). Collectivist-disputants need to be able to trust the mediator in order for them to have confidence in the mediation process. Being relational people, they need to feel comfortable with the person entrusted to manage and resolve their disputes. Trust here is seen as personal. They know that so long as they are able to trust their mediator, he or she will be seen as doing the right thing by them. Consequently, they can trust and have faith in the mediation process. Bearing in mind that although their dispute may be personal in nature, it is almost always communal in character, given that there are often wider social implications. Individual justice is, as such, made secondary to the attainment of group or communal harmony. A mediated outcome, which may be a compromise solution for these disputants, will simultaneously serve the communal

goal of keeping the peace. As Jia states (2002):

> To compare with the West, a Chinese mediator plays a role that combines the functions of counsellor, educator, pacifier, unifier, problem solver, arbitrator, negotiator, litigant, therapist, and consultant. In contrast, the primary job of a Western mediator is to ensure peaceful, constructive, and proactive communication through which disputants are expected to work their own solutions to the conflict. The Western mediator is not supposed to teach disputants or make suggestions for how to resolve the conflict. However, a Chinese mediator serves as an active agent to shape and cultivate members of the society to turn into junzi (gentle personhood), which is stipulated by Confucianism (p. 290).

As a further point, a Western mediator will be guided by the principles and norms of a principally Western-style mediation. Such a style views matters like confidentiality, neutrality, voluntariness and award enforcement, just to name some, in culturally divergent ways as compared to the collectivist mediator. These comparisons will be undertaken below.

Confidentiality

For the Western individualist-disputants, the preservation of confidentiality is crucial (Goh, 2002; Boulle, 2011). This is hardly surprising. For individualists, a consequential trait of self-centredness is the protection of privacy. Individual disputes belong to them and them alone. The common social injunction, 'This is none of your business', is testament to this point.

Conversely, for the collectivist-disputants, culturally speaking, there is no such thing as an 'individual' dispute. A dispute almost always bears a communal dimension (Goh, 2002). Take, for instance, a family dispute in a village. A couple proposing a divorce there will find that their problem is shared by the extended family at large, which naturally filters through to the immediate village community. Parents, grandparents, aunties and uncles all take an interest in the dispute – a facet of collectivist behaviour. Like it or not, the extended family members will interfere, whether or not the couple has invited such intervention. A so-called personal dispute easily escalates to communal proportions, inviting the community to solve the problem in the interest of overall group harmony (Goh, 2002; Jia, 2002). Given such a context, a cross-cultural mediator, who is ignorant of the collectivist-disputant tendencies, may be appalled when the 'private' mediation attracts relatives in attendance. The culturally non-sensitive mediator can do worse than dismissing the gathering crowd.

Neutrality

In Western-style mediation, quite typically, the idea of mediator neutrality is seen as a cornerstone of Western mediation practice

(Boulle, 2011). Neutrality means that a Western or Western-trained mediator must act with complete impartiality. It would be taboo if any suggestion of bias is present. As such, if a potential mediator can trace links to the dispute at hand, any prior involvement pertaining to the dispute, personal knowledge or relationship with the disputant, the mediator would be required to decline to mediate in the interests of preserving mediator neutrality. By way of contrast, the collectivist-disputant perceives no such problem. In fact, one would go farther by asserting that collectivist-disputants would prefer that some measure of mediator connectedness be present (Honeyman, Goh, & Kelly, 2004). In the words of Barkai below, when referring to the Japanese as collectivist-disputants:

> *In Japan, the next best thing to having a mutual friend as a mediator is having a person who knows one of the parties well, even if they do not know the other person at all… I know one negotiator who once purposely selected as a mediator a lawyer who represented his opponent. This negotiator was counting on the fact that the mediator would be able to influence and persuade the opposing party because of their past relationship (p. 71).*

Voluntariness

In Western individualism, we have seen from the foregoing that the free exercise of individual will is an important element. Personal liberty entails free choice. In the area of conflict resolution, Western individualistic persons will need to consent to submit to mediation. After all, in the Western mainstream mediation, voluntariness is a hallmark (Goh, 2002; Boulle, 2011). There should be no compulsion or external forces compelling them to mediate their disputes. In contrast, such behaviour is almost absent in the collectivist cultures. If we refer back to our example of the collectivist village, we would recall that a dispute always bears a social dimension, irrespective of the origin of the dispute being personal in nature. Villagers claim certain ownership of the personal dispute, particularly in the sense of wanting a harmonious group outcome. As such, the idea of voluntariness is illusory in the collectivist context of conflict resolution. Collectivist-disputants will be drawn to mediating their disputes, even if it is against their personally declared will of dismissing mediation as a method of settling their disputes. They will literally be compelled by their group goals to suppress their personal desires, submit the dispute to village mediation in the hope of obtaining a socially harmonious result (Goh, 2002).

Award Enforcement

Concordant with individualism, the mediated award is regarded as consensual (Boulle, 2011). Parties enter into the process of mediation in good faith and with the idea of settling their differences. Inevitably, when the mediated award is concluded, it is likely that even if they have purportedly

reached agreement, usually in the form of a compromise, a party may regard the outcome as unsatisfactory. In such a case, it is probable that the disgruntled party may be reluctant to abide by the award. Furthermore, a compromise award runs counter to the belief in justice by individualists as they naturally cherish a zero-sum approach to conflict resolution (Goh 2002). In the Western individualistic culture, a mediated award can suffer the fate of non-enforcement as a result.

By way of contrast, in a collectivist culture, a mediated award is more likely to be implemented due to the compelling social rule at play (Goh, 2001). A strong social sanction is the concept of face. As raised earlier, the concept of trust, tied to face-saving behaviour, is highly important for the collectivists in placing their confidence in mediation. Significantly, in trusting the person of the mediator to mediate the dispute, the Chinese-style mediation is inextricably bound to giving and preserving the mediator's face (Goh, 2002). As Jia describes (2002), it has been known in the Chinese mediation that a mediator may admonish the fighting disputants by telling them, 'For the sake of my face, stop it' (p. 291). Consequently, a mediated award is enforced for fear of making the mediator lose face, which has far wider implications for the community, and in the case of China, the state as well (Jia, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Needless to say, cross-cultural conflict management in the age of globalisation poses many challenges to us all, whether or not we are technocrats. It is, therefore, essential to be aware and to recognise that, first of all, acquiring cross-cultural competency in managing conflicts is an indispensable skill. There is no longer any defence in pleading cultural ignorance in our inter-dependent world.

As we have seen from the foregoing, generally speaking, the paradigmatic collectivists and individualists think and act differently, which are usually motivated by unconscious cultural factors that can then unwittingly lead to misinterpretations, misguided assumptions and, therefore, to unintended conflicts. And because participants carry their cultural baggage in ignorance, cross-cultural competency acquisition must first begin with cultivating awareness that there are differences in behaviour which we must heed. Otherwise, conflicts can unwittingly ensue.

Human communication can definitely be enhanced when participants are aware of underlying cross-cultural differences, and be more discerning. In such small yet significant ways, inter-personal communication can be vastly improved and conflicts can be minimised. After all, acquiring cross-cultural literacy and competency in managing conflicts will better serve human understanding and good relations.

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