

Negotiation : Lessons from Behind the Bamboo Curtain

by

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The Chinese are generally thought to be good negotiators. As China opens itself to Western business, despite Tiananmen Square, Westerners must learn to cope with their negotiating style. What can Western negotiators learn from the different styles of their Chinese counterparts? What behaviours contribute to the success of the Chinese negotiators? What is the role of 'face'? Despite some obvious differences, this paper suggests that there may be much more in common with Western styles than is often thought.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was, under Mao Tse-tung, a relatively closed society from 1949 until 1976. The death of Mao and the overthrow of the 'Gang of Four' led to a more open leadership under Hua Guo-feng, and later Deng Xia-ping. China increasingly opened its doors to tourists, foreign businessmen and joint-venture partners. One of the results of the 'Four modernisations' (of industry, service and technology, agriculture and national defence), as articulated in the 1978 'Ten-Year Economic Plan' and the 'Ten Principles' of Premier Zhao Ziyang in 1981, was an increase in business, finance and trade links with the rest of the world. An example of these increasing links is provided by the expansion of joint ventures. As Li Kui-wai [1] has noted, the PRC 'undertook 169 projects in 1981 in co-operation with foreign companies, absorbing a total of US 1,435 million dollars in foreign investment'. Similarly Pye has noted that 'in the first nine months of 1985, US companies formed more than 800 joint ventures with state enterprises in the People's Republic of China' [2]. This trend was temporarily halted by the events in China (including the Tiananmen Square incident) during the summer of 1989 which resulted in

the exodus of foreign businessmen and investors. However it appears that most are returning or have returned and the current Chinese leadership under Li Peng are still stressing the importance of their business links with the Western world.

In view of these trends and such figures it is not surprising to find that the last few years have seen a sudden upsurge in interest in China by Westerners. In particular, there has been an extensive interest in the processes of negotiation with the Chinese. Some of the literature deals with the general aspects of trading and business practices in such a different culture [3], while some deals more specifically with cross-cultural aspects of negotiation and the Chinese negotiating style [4]. There seems to be a consensus in the literature that, despite their isolation for many years and their lack of business experience, the Chinese in the PRC are very good negotiators. For example, Pye [5] argues that 'the Chinese may be less developed in technology and industrial organisation than we are, but for centuries they have known few peers in the subtle art of negotiating. When measured against the effort and skill the Chinese bring to the bargaining table, American executives fall short'. Similarly, Warrington and McCall [6] take the view, '... endorsed by those who have had dealings with China - that the Chinese are tough, shrewd, tenacious negotiators'.

We would not necessarily support the assertion of negotiation superiority but we would suggest that certain aspects of Chinese negotiation style are very different to Western approaches. This creates problems for the cross-cultural negotiator. As Pye [7] has concluded, 'unquestionably the largest and possibly the most intractable category of problems in Sino-American business negotiations can be traced to the cultural differences between the two countries'. We would, however, take a more optimistic view and instead seek to focus on positive aspects in terms of what Western negotiators can learn from the different styles of their Chinese counterparts. What behaviours contribute to the success of Chinese negotiators and what lessons can Western negotiators learn from them?

Characteristics of Successful Negotiators and Chinese Styles

There is, of course, a massive literature in the West dealing with negotiation. It ranges from the popular bookstall level [8] through the managerial [9] to the academic. Here one finds a host of different approaches from political science [10], social psychology [11], organisations [12], industrial relations [13], and management theory [14]. In addition, one can refer to the specially designed training packages in audio visual or video formats [15].

It is not possible to review this literature here but we can extract from it a set of common 'key injunctions' or rules for successful negotiation.

These are:-

- Always set explicit limits or ranges for the negotiation process.
- Always seek to establish general 'principles' early in the negotiation.
- Always focus on potential areas of agreement and seek to expand them.
- Avoid taking the negotiation issues in sequence.
- Avoid excessive hostility, confrontation and emotion.
- Always give the other party something to 'take home'.
- Always prepare to negotiate as a team.

One of the most fascinating things for us about such a list of bargaining rules is how closely they parallel natural Chinese negotiation styles which are themselves influenced by wider Chinese values. In simple terms, one of the advantages possessed by Chinese negotiators is that they do these things fairly naturally.

Bargaining Ranges

The negotiation literature is replete with advice on the need to set bargaining ranges. For example, Lewicki and Litterer [16] suggest that, 'negotiation is the process of establishing an agreement somewhere between two resistance points within a positive settlement range' and, therefore, a key part of the planning process is to be able to 'specifically define an objective (target point) and a 'bottom line' (resistance point)'. A common failing of Western negotiators is setting the resistance point (or fall back position) too close to the target point and thus retaining very little room for the necessary process of movement during the negotiation process.

This is a fault less common among Chinese negotiators and is a result of their general preference for compromising as a method of conflict resolution [17]. It may be suggested that parties who expect to reach compromise solutions in the bargaining process will correspondingly give themselves greater room for manoeuvre and movement by setting higher and more extreme initial demands and offers. This would contrast with those (such as Westerners) who might prefer confrontational styles and retain greater expectations of resolving the conflict on or near their own terms. In such situations the negotiator might have an initial demand or offer which is nearer to the potential compromise [18].

Principles

One well known industrial relations negotiation training package [19] lays great stress on the need to establish central principles early in the negotiation. These are labelled 'key commitments' and defined as 'the fundamental element which underpins each crucial settlement point. In other words

it is the principle or point of argument which, if accepted, means that the settlement point will almost certainly be yours'. They are seen as useful in determining your strategy, concentrating discussion on your own side of the negotiation, and extending the potential area of agreement or 'common ground' between the parties. Thus they are things which need to be achieved in the early stages of the negotiation process. These commitments have to be achieved by processes of persuasion and argument. They are, therefore, represented in the negotiation process by the use of 'legitimising principles' [20] which are articulated on the level of rhetoric [21]. Thus effort needs to be directed at getting as much agreement as possible on these 'commitments' or 'principles' before launching into your detailed proposals, as general agreement by the other side at this stage can serve to bind them at a later one. As the training package [22] puts it, 'as you achieve your commitments and deny him his, the basis of the final settlement moves in your favour'.

Many observers of negotiations in the PRC [23] have noted that Chinese negotiators, at the early stages of the negotiation, often 'seek agreement on generalities, dwelling on overall considerations, and avoiding specific details as much as possible, leaving, as they like to say, 'concrete arrangements' to later negotiations'. To some extent this form of behaviour may be culturally influenced in that it avoids or postpones direct conflict and confrontation over specific and substantive items [24]. However, as Frankenstein [25] points out, often 'much of what transpires at this stage is mistakenly regarded by the non-Chinese side as mere rhetoric' and unimportant. But for the Chinese side, these declarations are an important step; they establish a framework for the negotiations and provide ammunition should the foreign negotiators go beyond the boundaries. In fact, this general tactic of focusing on general principles has several advantages. These include the fact that the very wording of such principles can often make it possible to extract movement from the other party later. Also, as Pye [26] has noted, 'a second advantage for the Chinese is that they can, at times, quickly turn an agreement on principles into an agreement on goals and then insist that all discussion on concrete arrangements must foster those agreed-upon-goals'.

Common Ground

Many negotiation handbooks stress the need to focus more on what unites the parties than on what divides them. For example, Hawver [27] advises negotiators to 'take pains to build firmly on the foundation of common ground before moving on to confront differences between the parties'. From the results of their study of 'skilled' and average negotiators, Rackham and Carlisle [28] report that 'the skilled negotiators gave over three times as much attention to common ground areas as did average negotia-

tors'. Thus the skilled process of negotiation can be seen as the progressive expansion of common ground until agreement is reached. As another training package [29] notes, 'it is useful in negotiation to think of common ground in terms of position and in terms of people'. Negotiators should return to common ground if negotiations appear to be stalled or in order to launch any new proposal.

A study of Chinese negotiating behaviour reveals several ways in which this particular injunction is followed. Firstly, we have already referred to the Chinese habit of seeking agreement on general principles early in the negotiation which can be seen as an attempt to establish a form of 'macro-level' common ground. Secondly, the natural Chinese preference for compromise as a conflict resolution mechanism [30] points to a greater willingness to focus on areas of potential agreement.

However, we need to be aware of the precise meaning of compromise in relation to Chinese negotiation. In the West compromise is generally seen as a process of horse-trading, trade-offs, give and take, and mutual concessions. It represents therefore, not a win-win solution (as provided by collaboration) but a half win-half win situation. However, the Chinese, as Pye [31] notes, 'apparently see less inherent merit than Americans do in the concept of compromise ... Instead, the Chinese prefer to hold up for praise ideals of mutual interests, of joint endeavours, and of commonality of purpose'. The effect is that the Chinese will set high opening positions and be willing to move to a compromise position (as with all negotiators) but 'when they reach the point of settlement they prefer to play down the fact of retreat by both sides and play up the idea that all along both sides have mutual interests that have finally been recognized'. Thus for Westerners, compromise is acknowledged as a necessary but sub-optimal solution where concessions are articulated and justified by identifiable concessions from the other side. For Chinese compromise is acknowledged as the reconciliation of mutual interests through a commonality of purpose and thus an optimal solution.

Sequential Versus Holistic Bargaining

Rackham and Carlisle [32] discuss the difference between what they term 'Sequence Planning' and 'Issue Planning'. Sequence planning refers to the process where the negotiator plans and attempts to discuss and negotiate a series of linked issues in a pre-determined logical sequence. Issue planning instead refers to the alternative process of dealing with issues independently and not in any pre-determined sequence. From their detailed research, they found that 'skilled negotiators tended to plan around each individual issue in a way which was independent of any sequence. They would consider issue C, for example, as if issues A, B and D didn't exist.

Compared with the average negotiators they were careful not to draw sequence links between a series of issues'. However, not all Westerner negotiators are as skilled as the better ones in this study. Indeed the general tendency is to prefer sequential negotiation and the fragmentation of issues. As Graham and Herberger [33] have observed, 'Americans usually attack a complex negotiation task sequentially - that is, they separate the issues and settle them one at a time.... Thus, in an American negotiation, the final agreement is a sum of the several concessions made on individual issues, and progress can easily be measured.... In other countries, particularly Far Eastern cultures, however, concessions may come only at the end of a negotiation. All issues are discussed with a holistic approach - settling nothing until the end'.

We can trace this difference to two aspects of Chinese psychology which come together to provide a distinct natural advantage. Firstly, it has been noted that Chinese people tend to have a holistic proclivity [34]. As Yang [35] has argued, 'Chinese people, especially adults, tend to display a cognitive style of seeing things or phenomena in wholes rather than in parts while Westerners tend to do the reverse. This proclivity may, in turn, be related back to traditional Chinese values and thus 'regarded as an application of the Chinese spirit or principle of harmony in the realm of the intellect. In this spirit, the Chinese will try to synthesize the constituent parts into a whole so that all parts blend into a harmonious relationship at this higher level of perceptual organisation' [36]. Secondly, there is the relatively high tolerance for uncertainty in Asian countries noted by Hofstede [37]. Together these tendencies lead to a holistic approach to negotiation and bargaining.

Confrontation

A corollary of our earlier injunction about common ground is that the negotiator should not seek to unnecessarily and excessively confront the other side to the detriment of achieving the goals of the negotiation process. Rackham and Carlisle [38] found from detailed research that their skillful negotiators generally avoided the use of both 'irritators' and 'defend/attack' spirals. Irritators are statements or words which upset or irritate the other side and thus serve to further divide the parties rather than unite them in agreement. This would include, for example, the gratuitous use of the term 'reasonable' to refer to one's own position and 'irrational' to refer to the other party. Defending/attacking behaviours refer to the use of emotional language to attack the other party or defend one's own position. This usually results in reciprocation and escalation which only serves to make future agreement more difficult. Our own research [39] would suggest that Western negotiators tend to adopt more aggressive, competitive and confrontational styles than their Chinese counterparts.

This can be partly explained by the differences in cultural traditions and heritage. There are a number of 'key' cultural values in Chinese society which reinforce a less confrontational approach to conflict resolution. The Confucian notions of 'Li' and 'Jen' together lead to conformity being a central value in Chinese society [40]. This conformity, together with its associated collectivist orientation [41] leads individuals to consider the relationship between themselves and the other party as one of the crucial factors in any conflict or negotiation situation. Thus there is a tendency for the Chinese to avoid confrontation for fear of disturbing these relationships and their mutual dependence. Similarly, the Confucianist concept of 'Chung Yung' from the Doctrine of the Mean asks individuals to adapt themselves to their collectivity; to control their emotions; and to avoid conflict and competition. In such a culture the disturbance of these inter-personal relationships gives rise to powerful feelings of 'shame' [42]. As a result of these cultural values the Chinese generally exhibit lower levels of assertiveness and confrontation. They thus tend to engage in less extreme verbal posturing, less emotive language, and in generally lower levels of verbal interaction. In terms of negotiation this is represented by less open argumentation and debate. This phenomenon has been traced back by Becker [43] who suggests that the Chinese avoidance of open argumentation and debate is a function of geo-demographic factors, socio-linguistic roots and philosophical traditions.

Face

It is generally recognised in most negotiating manuals that in many situations the parties may negotiate together in the future. For this reason alone there is a need to ensure that the other negotiator is able to gain something from the negotiation in order to maintain 'face'. Thus a training package on negotiation [44] lists as a convention of bargaining that 'a means of saving face should be preserved in defeat'. Or, as Vic Feather (ex-General Secretary of the TUC) used to say rather more vividly, 'always leave the other fellow with the bus fare home!'

Goffman [45] defined face in his classic article as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineation in terms of approved social attitudes'. The face mechanism operates to influence a person to behave in a certain way that reinforces his social position as well as others. The influence of face in social interactions is universal but is particularly important to the Chinese [46]. Hu [47] subdivided face into two dimensions - 'Lien' and 'Mien-tzu'. The former one is normally ascribed while the latter is more achieved than ascribed. A person is socially condemned if he has no 'Lien' and is seen to be unsuccessful and low in status if he has no 'Mien-tzu'. They are externally mediated and people

interact with a purpose to add, give, take, compete, exchange or borrow 'face'. In negotiating situations, aggressive behaviour from either party can easily injure the 'face' of the other party. As not giving face to a person is perceived as denying the person's pride and dignity, Chinese will hesitate to engage in such aggressive actions under normal circumstances. In addition, the adoption of face-giving or face-saving behaviour in conflict situations is valued as a means of maintaining group harmony.

Teamwork

Many negotiations are conducted by teams rather than individuals. In such situations there is the potential for chaos and conflict resulting from different approaches being pursued by the different individuals. It is not surprising therefore, that many negotiation manuals stress the importance of good team organisation. They usually stress the need for the team members to play different roles (such as Negotiator, Recorder and Analyst) and to provide empathetic support for each other. They also stress the need for team discipline. For example, 'members of the team should discipline themselves so that the team is united and purposeful' [48]. The fact that such advice is necessary perhaps signals that such behaviour is unusual. We would argue that it is unusual because it runs counter to the core Western value of 'individualism'. Hofstede [49] has argued that the presence of this value results in a preference for individual decisions and desires for independent and autonomous expression.

In contrast Chinese societies are characterised by collectivism, and thus co-operation and collaboration in teams is a more natural form of behaviour. For example, Hofstede has noted that collectivism appears to be related positively to a preference for group decisions and negatively to the use of individual initiative [50]. In respect of negotiation in the PRC, Pye [51] has noted that 'at the substantive sessions the Chinese negotiating teams are almost always larger than American or even Japanese teams'. However, size is not the only difference. Pye has also noted that there is a paradoxical contrast in the character of typical Chinese and American negotiating teams. In the preliminary stages, it is the Chinese who stress personal interaction and friendship; when serious negotiating begins the Chinese side usually becomes highly bureaucratized, requiring co-ordination with layers of hierarchical committees and senior officials. Americans at the early stages may use elaborate teams in making technical presentations, but when serious negotiating begins the American instinct is to move toward a one-to-one relationship [52].

Conclusion

We have tried to suggest in this paper that Chinese negotiators, because of their cultural background, generally adopt and practice some of the desired negotiating behaviours derived from our negotiation injunctions. Thus we would suggest that there is much that Western negotiators could usefully learn from their Chinese counterparts. This is not to say, of course, that all Chinese are 'good' negotiators. We are not asserting that *all* Chinese negotiators behave in these culturally influenced ways, as culture is only one mediating variable on negotiation style. Differences between cultures are differences of degree and one can always find exceptions to the general rule. The events in the summer of 1989 in China can be taken to illustrate both the cultural underpinnings of some of the key negotiation injunctions that we have identified and the fact that some (less experienced) Chinese negotiators do transgress these injunctions.

On 18 May 1989, as Gorbachev was leaving Shanghai for Moscow at the end of his historic but disrupted state visit, Li Peng, the Chinese Prime Minister, finally, and at his own instigation, agreed to meet representatives of the students camped in Tianenmen Square in an attempt to end the demonstration. The student leaders agreed and came to press their demands for apologies for a People's Daily editorial, recognition of their independent student 'union', and dialogue with the authorities. The 'negotiation', broadcast by state television, was unsuccessful and, two days later, martial law in Beijing was announced.

The chances of these negotiations being successful were, of course, slim in any event. But the behaviour of the student representatives soon ensured that a breakdown would occur. They failed to focus on common ground, appeared to adopt an 'all-or-nothing' approach, and were extremely confrontational. In a Chinese sense they failed to give 'face' to the other side. Even their style of dress appeared designed to irritate. Wu'er Kaixi arrived in a pair of striped pajamas while Wang Dan appeared in a leather jacket and a red headband scrawled with slogans. Li Peng began with a conciliatory tone apologising for the lateness of the meeting, but was soon interrupted by Wu'er Kaixi. 'This meeting is not only a little late but it is too late.... The topic of discussion should be decided by us' [53].

He went on to directly challenge deep seated cultural values. '...to solve the present problem, the government should forget 'face' and associated matters... should admit its own mistakes... we have some opinions about Li Peng, not a personal criticism... we have some opinions about you because you are the government leader' [54]. The conflict swiftly escalated and Li Peng began to reply in a similar manner. 'There is complete chaos in Beijing. Moreover, the turmoil has spread throughout the country... I can

state that during the past few days, Beijing has been in a state of anarchy. I don't want to blame Wu'er Kaixi and Wang Dan but...' [55]. What is interesting in this example is the way in which counter-cultural behaviours serve to surface the deep cultural roots of 'normal' Chinese negotiating behaviour.

We are also not seeking to assert that the Chinese are 'super' negotiators, because there are, in fact, aspects of 'good' negotiating practice which run counter to Chinese culture. For example, the findings of Rackham and Carlisle [56] which suggest that 'skilled' negotiators use extensive behaviour 'labelling' and display of feelings, runs counter to Chinese culture which favours lower levels of verbal interaction, less direct signalling of intentions, and less sharing of feelings or information [57]. As Pye notes, historically, 'Chinese diplomats have preferred to play their cards very close to their chests and suggest inflexibility until the moment of accommodation' [58].

As a final point, it is interesting to note that much negotiation training in the West is really concerned with modifying certain culturally influenced behaviours. Similarly the implication is that similar training in Chinese societies would involve seeking to change certain Chinese culturally determined behaviours. We have certainly found from our joint experience in running negotiation training seminars for large organisations in Hong Kong, that one has to stress rather different skills and phases of the negotiation process in the Chinese case than one would in the West. In short there is no one culture which provides the ideal 'recipe' for negotiation. All cultures have certain strengths but have much to learn from others.

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