

RUNNING HEAD: Under Harmony and Cooperation

Under Harmony and Cooperation:
An Interview Study of Conflict and Competition in Hong Kong Organizations

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Abstract

In general, studies looking at conflict management in China indicate that work relationships should generally be expected to be congenial, cooperative and conflict-avoidant. Writers point to collectivistic cultural values and the influence of Confucian philosophy as the origin of these traits. Nonetheless, data drawn from an ethnographic study of organizational relationships in Hong Kong indicates that such claims are overly simplistic. Interviews conducted with Hong Kong businesspeople clearly indicate that while the conflict avoidance and cooperation reported in many studies was acknowledged, informants also consistently pointed to underlying currents of conflict and competition. Hence, this paper argues that while the cultural influences of collectivism and Confucianism are undeniable, much of the harmony practiced in organizations is instrumental in nature, and conflict and competition are still an expected part of Hong Kong business world. Hence, western academics and businesspeople should broaden their perspective to understand the unique ways that conflict is expressed, addressed and dealt with in Hong Kong.

(In collectivistic societies) “self-serving behavior is unlikely because people are not motivated by self-interest.” (Doney, Cannon & Mullen, 1998, p. 610)

“All of this is just clichés as far as I am concerned, okay? You don’t think they (we Chinese) compete? Like hell! ... They are very competitive!” (Excerpted from an interview with an ethnic Chinese Hong Kong businessman, 2001).

In general, studies looking at conflict management in China indicate that work relationships should generally be expected to be congenial, cooperative and conflict-avoidant. Writers point to collectivistic cultural values and the influence of Confucian philosophy as the origin of these traits. A study published in the *Academy of Management Review* concludes that in China “self-serving behavior is unlikely because people are not motivated by self-interest” (Doney, Cannon & Mullen, 1998, p. 10). Nonetheless, we believe that a look at interactions in the Hong Kong business world demonstrates that such claims are overly simplistic. Interviews conducted in Hong clearly indicate that conflict, competition and self-interest are also strong motivating factors in organizational life. Hence, this paper argues that while the cultural influences of collectivism and Confucianism are undeniable, a great deal of conflict still exists in the Chinese business world and academics and businesspeople should broaden their perspectives to better understand and address such conflict.

Our interest in this topic stem from the personal experiences in Asia and the US. In the mid-1990s, while living in Taiwan, one author attended a workshop organized by the local branch of an international business club. Two Westerners gave an interactive presentation on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and their relationship to organizational behavior. While working through the exercises with mostly Taiwanese co-participants, many of them grumbled about what they called not very accurate stereotypes of Chinese behavior. Most found the acquiescent, cooperative and conflict-avoidant Chinese stereotype insulting, even when framed quite positively by the workshop presenters. While some admitted that the cultural values research presented might explain some differences in East-West behavior, they also argued it was far from an adequate picture. Interviews with business people living in Hong Kong also indicate that many Chinese do not buy into these descriptions. Hence we became intrigued by a discrepancy between these stereotypes found in the academic literature and local people’s perceptions of organizational realities.

Literature Review

Harmony is an important concept underlying East Asian relationships (e.g., Boisot and Child, 1996; Chen, G. M., 2001; 2002; Chen, G. M. and Chung, 1994; Chen, G. M. and Starosta, 1997; Hwang, 1988, 1997-8; Kirkbride, Tang and Westwood, 1991; Knutson, Hwang and Deng, 2000). The basic tenet is that Confucius emphasized the role of harmony in interpersonal relationships, and that these teachings have created cultures that emphasize conflict avoidance tactics and cooperation with others in order to achieve the group’s goals. Hwang (1997-8) wrote that the Confucian emphasis on harmony leads to forbearance and the suppression of personal goals in favor of maintaining a harmonious relationship. M. Chen and Pan (1993) concur that *all* other goals are subordinate to the Confucian interpersonal harmony imperative. Harmony is argued to lead to high levels of cooperation. Chen (1993, cited in Chen, 2002) adds that

“harmony is not only the end rather than the means of human interaction, but also dictates that human interaction is a process in which the interactants continuously adapt and relocate themselves towards interdependence and cooperation by a sincere display of whole-hearted concern between each other.”

Research in individualism and collectivism overlaps with theorizing based on traditional Confucian values. The finding that collectivism and individualism influence people’s behaviors is very robust. Among the typical findings are that collective societies emphasize group goals (e.g., Ali, Taqi & Krishnan, 1997); focus more on group harmony (e.g. Chen & Pan, 1994) and assign rewards in a more egalitarian manner (e.g., Bond, Leung & Wan, 1982). Cooperation is motivated by outcomes that benefit the group. In individualistic societies, on the other hand, individuals presumably place more emphasis on self-interest and independence and seek to maximize individual goals (e.g., Wagner & Moch, 1986).

In other research, Diaz-Guerrero (1984) wrote that collectivists emphasize the value of cooperation, whereas individualists emphasize competition. Earley (1989) found that Chinese collectivists did not exhibit social loafing under situations of high or low accountability, compared to American subjects who did “loaf” under conditions of low accountability. Cox, Lobel and McLeod (1991) found that people from collectivistic ethnic groups cooperated more and that groups composed of mixed individualists and collectivists made more cooperative choices than those composed solely of individualists. Wagner’s 1995 research further supports these findings that collectivism influences cooperative behaviors, while Chatman and Barsade (1995) found that individualists were more competitive than collectivists regardless of the nature of the task they were assigned. In an article focusing trust, Doney, Cannon & Mullen wrote that in collectivistic societies “self-serving behavior is unlikely because people are not motivated by self-interest” (1998, p. 610), while Kirkman & Shapiro (2001, p. 612) claimed that collectivistic teams are “more productive, cooperative, and empowered.”

Thus, studies looking at differences in individualism and collectivism indicate East Asians such as the Chinese are more cooperative, prefer conflict avoidance, stress the needs of the group, and engage in more indirect and passive communication (Jehn & Weldon, 1997; Morris, Williams, Leung, et al., 1998; Ohbuchi, Fukushima & Tedeschi, 1999; Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey & Lin, 1991). Specifically, collectivism is associated with avoiding and obliging styles of handling conflict, emphasis on passive communication and relational maintenance as well as a strong dislike of open disagreement.

A Counterpoint

Although accepting the contribution of such research, the existence of conflict and competition in Chinese society and business should nonetheless be acknowledged. In fact, it is probable that a great degree of conflict and competition still exists beneath a deceptively placid surface. As anyone who has done business in the Chinese world knows, relationships may at times be incredibly competitive and confrontational and those entering it expecting the harmony and cooperation emphasized by so much academic research may find their preconceptions quickly shattered (e.g., McGregor, 2005). Chang (2000) writes that Chinese culture “should not be assumed, but must be identified by studying the normal everyday practices of the participants.” While one may talk of the Confucian collectivistic values, how these values are manipulated and enacted by ordinary people needs to be considered. This is the “culture that is relevant to these people” (p.130). A closer look at “harmony,” for example, reveals underlying motivations for behavior that may have little to do with self-abnegation stemming from

collectivist or Confucian values but instead emanate from a self-protective instrumental focus (Leung, Koch & Lin, 2002)

In related research, Yamagishi, Jin and Miller (1998) presented an intriguing thesis that the differences between relationships in collectivistic and individualistic societies are based not on different values that people hold, but instead upon differing relational structures. In collectivistic societies informal mutual monitoring and sanctioning systems ensure cooperation and harmony among members (Yamagishi, Cook & Watabe, 1998). When members are removed from these systems, their behaviors are no more harmonious or cooperative than those from Western, individualistic societies (Yamagishi, 1988). Yamagishi and colleagues stress that these behaviors are instrumental rather than value driven.

Hence, while it is clear that differences in cultural values and organizational behaviors do exist, the expectation that little conflict and interpersonal competition exist in Chinese organizations is probably fallacious. This research seeks to look at these behaviors.

Research Questions

Since this is a qualitative study and not a controlled experiment, we do not seek to test hypotheses, but instead set out several research questions.

RQ1 To what extent do informant responses support the standard harmony oriented relationship orientation expressed in much of the literature?

RQ2 To what extent do informants indicate that self-interest underlies conflict avoidant behaviors?

RQ3 To what extent do informants indicate that conflict and competition are expected, ordinary aspects of organizational life?

Methods

Forty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with Hong Kong business people. All interviews started with a core set of questions, but as the interviews progressed interesting themes were followed up as they appeared. The majority of interviewees were recruited through contacts with an international business association. Thirty eight interviewees were Chinese, three were Western expatriates who had lived and worked in Hong Kong for several years, and one was an Indian who had lived in Hong Kong since age six. All were conversational in English, the language in which the interviews were conducted. Informants ranged from several owners/managers of small local organizations with four to 30 employees to the personnel director of a multi-national organization with 600 plus employees in the Hong Kong office. Fourteen were women and twenty-eight were men. The average interview lasted slightly over one hour.

Most interviews were conducted in informal settings outside of the office. While drinking coffee or having a light snack, we chatted about work experiences, in particular focusing on how they or others in their organizations dealt with “problem situations.” Most interviewees seemed fairly comfortable chatting. If informants seemed to evidence discomfort talking about their current job, questions were directed to refer to their previous employment, particularly if the person had recently changed jobs.

Data Analysis

Initial data analysis was conducted immediately after the interviews, when interview notes were typed and observations recorded. More in-depth analysis was conducted as time allowed, including transcription of the interviews, coding of transcripts for themes and problem cases, writing of initial memos and notes, and follow-up analysis as unexpected themes and

viewpoints came up (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti was used to aid in the coding, linking, and in-depth analysis of the interview data.

Data Analysis

RQ1: Harmony and Conflict Avoidance

Research Question One asked to what extent informant responses supported the standard harmony oriented relationship orientation expressed in much of the literature. Traditional accounts of the influence of collectivism and Confucianism on Chinese organizational behavior assume that Chinese work relationships are harmonious and familial. Employers are to take care of their employees in that same manner that the family patriarch is to care for his family members, while employees should be devoted and loyal to the employer. Co-workers are assumed to be oriented toward the good of the group rather than to personal success. In this family-like situation, conflict is avoided and cooperation is stressed.

Cultural Explanations for Behavior

In analyzing the interview data, we thus began by looking for accounts that supported these traditional views and in fact, found many such explanations that did seem to support conventional descriptions given of Chinese culture and its underlying values. A few informants even made direct connections with Confucian teachings:

Participant 9 (P9): (I need to encourage them to talk about) the problem. Make them speak about the issue. Very difficult step because of Confucian teachings. People want to keep personal problems to themselves. They only talk to close friends.

Participant 40 (P40): The Confucian philosophy is remarkable. If you show respect to other people then you respect yourself.

Others commented on the close relationships between people in the workplace. For example, one informant commented on the caring, familial atmosphere in a past job:

P10: That job was better in the sense that those people cared more about you. [Pause] A little bit more Chinese style. If you're sick, they ask me, 'Oh, are you all right?' That firm is a little bit of Chinese family touch.

Yet another added, "All the staff is like 65 years old. At least 50. [Pause] But I enjoy it because they just take care of me like their kids" (P1), while a third, a manager in a small insurance office, said "I think the culture of our company is mainly on the family atmosphere" (P21).

When asked respondents to explain conflict avoidance behaviors, a number of informants responded that their origin was in Chinese culture and its supporting values. Among the behaviors explained in this way were the proverbial "yes for no" (Ma, 1996), conflict avoidance, and indirect communication.

Yes for No

Agreeing to do something but then failing to follow through was a theme in several interviews. A native Hong Kong resident added that her underlings would often tell her they were able to finish a project only to have her find out later they were not able to do so:

P1: There is a tedious thing, every day, just like, for example the client ask for the proposal and they want to have an English and Chinese one and I call up them [her colleagues] and ask "Do you need any help and they say "No, it's fine." And at the end of the day, the deadline, and they say, "Oh, the Chinese version, have you done it?" And I say, "You say you don't need help!" (laugh). Something like that, every day happen, every [pause] yeah.

Another man added:

P20: There was this designer, at the charity project, and he had his ideas, but they weren't appropriate for a dentist clinic. I have worked in dentist clinics, and designed several—I know what they need. But he didn't want to listen, he would just say yes, and then do what he wanted to.

Conflict Avoidance

Conflict avoidance is a major theme in the Chinese organizational behavior literature and many of the informants agreed that Hong Kongnese did not like to have disagreements. They made general comments as well as supplied specific examples. One manager talked about an employee whom he had to confront about a problem:

Interviewer: What did he say?

P7: He responds very accommodatingly. There is no disagreement. He won't say no. Here in Hong Kong, people sometimes disagree, but it is very rare.

This same person added:

P7: Chinese people are not by nature too outspoken. Normally they will stand it as much as they can and wait until they can't really stand it any longer and then they look for help. And by then the problem is really bad. She (a middle-level manager) doesn't normally come to me until the problem is very serious.

When asked if Hong Kong people would be comfortable talking about problems another informant clearly stated “No” and that this was due to “more a cultural aspect” (P26). Another informant also made comments that closely adhered to the traditional line.

P29: But the culture is such that people won't ask during the in-house training. Because there is not initiation. And so people, so sitting all around the table, they won't ask questions. They feel not comfortable because they are sitting with their manager.

Afterwards, she elaborated in her own example that she would not be comfortable talking directly with superiors because it was not accepted “in my culture or from the teaching of my family, I won't talk to the director of this company. I think it is not useful and there is no need” (P29). Other informants concurred with this view. “Chinese people, they always keep it underneath, they don't want to talk about it” (P37) and “Chinese people [pause] most of them [pause] tend to be less direct, more reserved (P32).

Indirect Communication

As indicated by the last example, indirect communication thought to show politeness and deference were also found in the interviews. P10 commented on his own behavior when upset at how some colleagues were treating him:

I kind of uh [pause] I kind of say something in front of some partners so that they know I am not feeling happy.

Interviewer: You just said it so they could hear you?

P10: It wasn't directly to them.

P19 had a similar example: “If I complain to my boss You don't know what he will say. So I will do something in an indirect way to see how he would respond.”

One businessman provided a very traditional example of indirect communication with a major investor in his business:

P3: This guy is not interested in running the day to day company, but he wants to keep informed so I give him a monthly report. How much I spend, what the salaries are. The most convenient way to communicate is to play Mahjong. It helps to build the relationship. We play every one to two weeks. I always lose. He has an accounting

background. He knows numbers and so plays very well. So I tell him piece by piece about the business while playing. He is patient and knows we must wait [for profit]. In order to make him know what is happening we play Mahjong. "We have a guy" "He can do this" blah blah blah. "Oh, I don't care about that. You take care of it" So I check with him, but not too openly. I get the feedback I need without asking openly.

Summary

From these comments it is clear that a number of informants engaged in indirect communication, avoided conflict, and did not like to give negative information. Several informants even accounted for these aspects of organizational relationships in terms of Confucian and collectivistic values as often described in the academic literature.

RQ 2: Instrumental Harmony

Research Question two asked to what extent informants indicated that self-interest underlies conflict avoidant behaviors. Numerous accounts supplied by informants appeared to have an instrumental underlying focus. For example, one informant began, "Hong Kong people is always very shy," but then added, "they just uh, stand the problem. They always complain the problem but not to their boss. The boss is very high and he should maintain a serious image. And if you say something the boss doesn't like, maybe he doesn't punish you now, but you are always afraid someday he will do something to you" (P19). Thus, his succeeding elaboration indicated it was fear of the boss that influenced behavior, rather than cultural values emphasizing harmony and cooperation.

The above statements appear to fit a modified collectivistic picture (Leung et al., 2002) that argues an instrumental, self-directed focus underlies many conflict avoidant behaviors. This underlying explanation needs to be clearly stated as it diverges greatly from the "good of the group" accounts generally proffered in the literature. In the interviews, this instrumental theme was readily apparent. As one interviewee said, "It is important to be on good terms with people because you may find yourself, uh, maybe in another you may [need to] cooperate" (P10).

Employees were careful about what was said openly to others, but not so much because of a value placed on the relationship or respect for the other's face, but because they assumed word might get back to those in power and those people would then retaliate. In addition, several informants were very clear that much griping took place behind the scenes:

Interviewer: Did you ever talk with him or anybody else about him?

P10: Well, of course we all like behind the boss, say bad things about him, he's a [pause] I know of colleagues who talked to him, even talked to the partners, the top boss, but, uh, I didn't do it. Especially that person, I don't think he will take it graciously.

Interviewer: So you were worried about him doing something back to you?

P10: Definitely, he would do that. I know of incidences from those experiences other people have. I wouldn't get anywhere.

A lawyer commented on what she saw as the prevailing attitude at her company:

P14: We have an idea in my previous company in China that is managed by a huge conglomerate in Hong Kong that if you, if you do a lot of things you will have committed a lot of mistakes and that if you do only a few things you will commit a few mistakes and if you do nothing you will commit no mistakes! So people are not ready to take up responsibility. They do everything to push away any blame to the other.

In the interviews, informants stressed that surface harmony behaviors were enacted for multiple reasons. Several stressed that underlying goals were particularly prevalent when there

were status differences in the relationship. In one session, an informant commented: “In lower levels, they are more likely to do, you know, that kind of shoeshine, shoeshine” (P17). When asked why, he responded that it was to get into the other person’s “good graces. They don't mind conflict. Whoever says that Chinese is inscrutable and not going to face each other, that’s wrong” (P17). Another added that he was careful to avoid conflict and wasn’t open with his opinions to avoid getting into trouble. Office politics and the existence of competing “parties” were taken for granted:

P19: If you say something wrong, then you cannot join the party. You get expelled from some people. I am always careful of my work. But I see some people [laugh] have done something wrong and then [pause] they are not in a really good situation.

Harmony is chosen not only to protect the relationship, but to avoid potential negative consequences to an employee’s career. Yet a third informant told an account of how a woman in his organization craftily pursued a strategy of non-confrontation until she had gathered enough information about her opponent to deliver a killing blow. His narrative also included interesting commentary on the interaction of social class, conflict, and competition:

P2: At the junior level it is more simple—nine to five. If friends after work you go for drinks and mahjong [a traditional game played for fun and for gambling]. So, if there is no competition, or chance of promotion, you can become good friends. How do people compete? At the lowest level, they quarrel. You show it on the surface. People will see you fighting for your own interests. This, however, is naïve and low class. At the middle level, insiders know what is happening, but there is surface cooperation. You would build upon your own team in the organization. At the highest level, once I was involved. I know a woman in this situation. Even her competitors didn't know what was happening. She told me. She made it seem everything is for the company. But she wrote memos, talked with her boss, collected information and charges against her competitor. Once she had the chance, she reported it to her boss—not just with a report, but she gave advice, who to watch. In this way she got rid of the other person.

Thus, while indicating that harmony in relationships was a sought-after value, respondents also indicated that there were often other underlying goals to these harmonious behaviors that must be acknowledged in order to understand the why and how of people’s actions. An instrumental focus was a clear theme running through most stories of competition and conflict and other areas of organizational life. In particular, hierarchical relationships were dealt with very cautiously as power differences were highly salient to all interviewers with most commenting that the boss should never be directly confronted out of fear for personal repercussions.

As P20 said:

Of course I would say nothing. He's the boss. He can fire you. You have to do what he says. I would just make the changes, even if I don't agree.

And yet another:

P23: We don't dare speak openly because we are afraid of being fired, and getting into trouble. The boss doesn't want to hear bad news or complaining. Complaining to the boss is a big problem.

This fear of the repercussions and personalization of conflict was often reiterated:

P31: So if we are not happy with our job, we can always apply for a transfer, to other firms or to the head office in central. But, uh, I think people are reluctant to do that. Especially Chinese people.

Interviewer: Why?

P31: Um, they think it will become personal.

Another informant who worked for a public organization thought that conflict was secretive in his organization, but that in private ones where people had more employment options, conflict was more open:

P40: Here, people will not switch jobs. In a commercial firm, people walk with their feet. Here they won't do that. They tend to be more aware that there are repercussions if they fight back, so they tend to write anonymous letters. In a commercial firm, nobody gives a damn about this. They are not happy, they talk about it, if nothing change they just leave. But here people they don't do that.

Thus, when people made comments about culture and its influence on interpersonal relations in the workplace, while many comments did fit general patterns of conflict avoidance and harmony in relationships, probing for underlying explanations gave a different picture than that presented in much research. People often avoided conflict, not simply because of harmony but also because of realistic concerns. For many informants interviewed, the influence of harmony was perhaps more of a cultural slogan rather than something applicable in reality.

RQ3: Conflict and Competition in the Organization Research question three asked to what extent informants indicate that conflict and competition are expected, ordinary aspects of organizational life. In general, while conflict avoidance and cooperation were commented upon, it was also clear these were not necessarily expected behaviors in all offices. One informant commented that in his job he was fearful to ask for help. Rather than helping, he said, his more experienced co-workers would ridicule him and ask, "Why don't you know such an easy question?" (P19).

Competition

Many informants talked about how competition was an expected part of organizational life. While not all informants related egregious examples, competition still underlined many of their comments. In one early interview, an informant even responded somewhat angrily to what he saw as stereotyping by Western researchers who described Chinese as non-competitive, meek, and indirect in their conflict. We tried to paraphrase his comments at one point and asked: "Am I summarizing right what you are saying? That in a lot of these situations where people talk about, let's say 'Chinese don't compete with each other because they want to be nice' that its more of a surface sort of thing?" He answered: "Very much of a surface thing. They are very competitive, much more than you Americans or whatever, okay" (P17). This man, now an independent businessperson, had worked with both Westerners and Chinese during his career, and described the Chinese as more strategically competitive than their Western colleagues. He said that he and others often used the "harmonious Easterners" stereotype to gain an edge over their Western competitors in negotiations and business deals.

Yet another informant was crudely blunt in his self-assessment of this surface harmony and underlying competition theme:

P5: They [Hong Kongnese] are too competitive. They have to fight for their lives.... (At work) you can be acquaintances with them, but not friends. People don't trust each other. They are always competing, looking for advantages. Like dogs, sniffing each other's butt. Family is their only friend. After high school they don't make friends. That cooperative stuff is only on the surface—they aren't cooperative, they are more reserved. People do what society says. We were told when we were kids—only tell 30% of what you know to others. Keep the rest for yourself.

Some informants commented that they did form good relationships with their colleagues, but added they were careful to make sure they didn't let colleagues know information that could be used to gain an edge over them. As one explained, the workplace was "very, very competitive. So it is difficult to establish a very trusting relation" (P14).

Another informant commented that interpersonal competition was common. When asked for an example, she said:

P24: How should I put it. Well, maybe the example is uh, is uh, a very big corporation which I used to work in. We had execs coming into China to expand the China market. Obviously at that time the economy was quite good, the U.S. market was quite good. Uh, uh, there's uh, another person who is in charge of regional marketing, he is thinking he can do quite well in China. So, uh, you know, he tried [asked me all sorts of questions about my duties]. [For example] "What do you do?" "The China market?" And things. There's, you know, it is difficult for me to explain the whole things. But it depends on what people ask you, "What do you do?" "What is your background?" Kind of like getting [pause].

Interviewer: Okay, so you thought he was asking for all of this information so he can get a competitive advantage over you?

P24: Yeah, that's right.

Another informant was somewhat angry at what he called naive Western stereotypes of Asian non-confrontational behavior, saying, "Well, it's not a matter of confronting and all that. People here in Hong Kong or in Asia are a lot more devious" (P17)

Conflict

While indirect conflicts seemed to be more common than direct conflicts, a number of incidents of overt conflict were reported. P11 contributed this incident:

P11: Even just here, a small company, we are very, uh, one secretary doesn't like one manager, then she will tell all secretaries 'Just don't talk to that person.' And then we even have some birthday party, blah blah blah, here, internally [at the office]. . . . [The secretary will say], "Just ignore him" [Don't tell him about the party]. I think it is very rude.

She later clarified that she believed those in higher positions were more likely to openly engage in conflict:

P11: I saw what she [the secretary] did, she complained with another lady, but not really direct with her boss. That is the way they [lower levels] will deal with the problem. They will just swallow it, and then complain, not really to the right person, but just mumbling among friends. But when I hear I will try to help her. But she still very afraid. Because I am just going to call the Shanghai office to shout back to them and "You should appreciate my secretary, da da da."

Another informant talked about a conflict between his boss and the secretary and how it was spreading through the office as other employees began to take sides:

P5: But recently, B has a problem with his secretary. Maybe he thinks to let her go. The others think she's okay. All the girls are distressed right now. They want to help her, so they are starting to take sides. They are upset. But that is just starting. B was screaming at her today. So people know about it.

Yet another commented on the fact that your confidence in your position determined the actions you could take when you were upset. If other jobs were available, you did not need to worry, or if your job was secure you could get away with more open conflict. For example, one

said that the conflict he would engage in “depends on the job. If you don't care you can scream and yell. If you do care, maybe you had better think first” (P5).

The fact that conflicts were not obvious did not mean that they did not exist. In fact informants commented that some of the worst conflicts existed under a harmonious surface. One woman reported:

P19: I just want to say it [conflict] is not obvious in their face. They will not show it in the work. But the staff is know [laugh] they have problem. But their subordinate knows they are just not friends. But they will show they are friends at work. They will say to some colleagues, that guy, I don't like them. Then their co-subordinate will spread news to [loud laugh] to other subordinates. And so we know that they are not have a good relationship.

Another said the rumor mill was a prevalent tool used to indirectly undermine others while the combatants continued a presumably good relationship on the surface:

P17: [They] do it to undermine the other. I have seen it happen. I have seen it happen even in social life. Find out what each other and come up "Oh, did you know?" Sort of drop a hint. People come to you and make sure that you know. [To their face] they pretend to be best buddies or whatever. They go out drinking or whatever and find out that you've screwed around with somebody or whatever, then drop a hint, make rumors around. It happens all the time.

A final informant talked about these underlying tensions in a more politic manner, saying that he believed most competition and conflict was hidden underneath a deceptively peaceful surface.

P37: Everybody fight for the same position. But in Asia, I do believe in most experience I got, is that they will keep very peaceful at the surface, at a certain level. So this is what we call professional ethics. You still show the courtesy. You go out to lunch, but underlying a lot of struggling and different things happening, is like fighting for control of different areas, fighting for projects.

Discussion

In looking back at the research questions, it is clear that many of the answers the respondents provided were not consistent with the traditional paradigm of Chinese organizational behavior. People talked about conflict and competition in the organization as common. While there was a substantial amount of conflict avoidance, the main origins of this conflict avoidance were instrumental in nature. People avoided conflict because of the potential negative repercussions rather than any particular value placed on cooperation and harmony. This conflict avoidance is for the sake of one's own interest, not the consequence of "being nice" or "supporting others" or "putting the team first" as assumed by many researchers who ascribe to the traditional Confucian collectivist paradigm.

While responses to conflict were sometimes indirect, direct moves also took place. Competition, both covert and overt, was also seen as common. Some of the accounts provided were very devious in nature, consisting of multiple moves before they come out into the open. At lower levels of the organization, subordinates seemed very mindful of their superior's power and were concerned about negative repercussions. At higher levels of the organization, however, open competition and conflict seemed more prevalent.

Last, while some cooperation was talked about, particularly in the smaller family-run companies, cooperation was not expected by many informants. Part of this appeared connected to the fact that trust in organizational members was low. In fact, people seemed to expect the

opposite of trust in their relationships with colleagues, believing that others would take advantage of them if openings were left for this to happen. Trust was reserved for long-term relationships and close friendships, such as family members and school classmates. It is possible that most relationships within Hong Kong organizations do not fall into these categories.

Thus, the accounts provided by informants, while providing some support for the classic view, offer evidence that also conflict with that view. Clearly something different is happening in Hong Kong organizations than what would be expected if Confucian and collectivist values prevailed in organizational relationships: Not all people reported incidents of conflict or competition, but a significant number did indicate that these types of actions were common and to be expected in the work world.

Is it possible that some of these differences may be accounted for by a failure to consider the influence of group membership in organizational studies looking at conflict in organizations (Koch & Koch, 2007). According to Trandis (1995), in-groups are characterized by similarity and the sense of “common fate,” while out-groups are people who do not share the common values with or are in conflict with “us.” Traditionally, research on organizational relationships in the Chinese world has considered organizational relationships as “in-group” (e.g., Francesco & Chen, 2004, Guzley, Araki & Chalmers, 1993; Hofstede, 1991) and hence subject to the enhanced cooperation and conflict avoidance predicted by collectivistic values. Nonetheless, in light of the tremendous changes in the Chinese world over the past several decades, this assumption might need re-evaluation. Thompson and Phua (2005), for example, found that senior level Chinese employees reported less identification with their firm than a comparable sample of Australian employees. While small organizations mainly comprised of members having tight networks may be likely to reflect the values of a collectivist ingroup (Peng, 2004), this might not be true in larger organizations or those whose members do not have pre-existing relationships. Furthermore, scholars also found that the in-group/out-group boundaries can be very elastic when context changes (e.g., Buchan, et al. 2002). Therefore, in certain situations, such as, when there are not enough resources to share within an organization, in-group can become out-group, thus conflict occur either openly or underhand.

It is also possible that we need to better examine how collective values and societal structures work together to influence behavior. Yamagishi’s research (Yamagishi, 1988, Yamagishi, Jin & Miller, 1998) appears to indicate that when collectivists work outside of traditionally collective structures where there is tight monitoring of behavior, collectivistic values have less influence. These monitoring structures might have less influence in Hong Kong organizations and hence organizational members feel relatively free to engage in more conflict and competition.

Conclusion

Rather than starting from the assumption that conflict and competition does not happen because harmony and cooperation are valued, we need to start from the assumption that conflict and competition **do** take place even if harmony and cooperation are strong cultural values. Chang (2001) provides a humorous yet biting commentary on how harmony and conflict co-exist in interpersonal relationships in Taiwan as cultural members engage in conflict yet at the same time defer to cultural values. It is probable that these same forces are also at work in organizational relationships and should be accounted for.

This is not to say, however, that there are no substantive differences between Chinese and Western forms of conflict or the norms and values that influence those forms of conflict.

Nonetheless, claims that in Chinese society “self-serving behavior is unlikely because people are not motivated by self-interest,” (Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998, p. 610) are clearly problematic. Self-serving behavior is readily apparent in many interactions when one looks beneath the surface. The Hong Kong informants indicated such behavior was common, to be expected, and must be guarded against.

In keeping with the qualitative nature of this study where we attempt to let informants’ voices be heard, we would like to end with the following comment from an expatriate business owner:

P41: It’s an aggressive culture. People are constantly striving and the focus of it . . . [is] about being better than your parents, succeeding more each generation, succeeding more than other people around you. It’s a constant drive. So that reason, they will always be extremely aggressive, no matter what they are doing. Cause it’s not some vision of becoming a big shot in the corporation, its about the whole of your life. It’s not a context of succeeding in a certain sector, it’s the whole of your life being successful. . . . Because in this part of the world, business, family, social [pause] there are no walls between them. And that’s a difficult thing for Westerners to understand. . . . They have the Confucian philosophy which is remarkable. If you show respect to other people then you respect yourself. It epitomizes it, is Sun Tzu, you know *The Art of War*. And again the main thing is if you get into fighting you are destroying resources you may need afterwards. And that permeates everything that goes on.

From insight gained over 20 years in Hong Kong, he argued that Chinese society was both collective **and** competitive, harmonious **and** aggressive, cherishing relationships **and** at the same time instrumental. In a similar vein, Lin, a scholar who has lived in both the United States and Taiwan, and thus has understanding of both Chinese and American cultures, described Chinese philosophy as very “down-to-earth” (1977, p.7). Hence, the underlying instrumental nature of harmony in Chinese culture should not be extremely surprising.

Finally, Hong Kong is just one part of China with a very particular history of British colonization and rule and although dominated by Chinese, includes multiple cultures due to its unique position as a free trade harbor in the world. Future research could examine whether a similar discrepancy exists between Confucius collectivistic ideals and the reality of the business world in mainland China as well as in other places such as Singapore and Taiwan. Notwithstanding such possible differences, however, we encourage researchers to look beneath cultural platitudes and attempt to better understand organizational interactions and how they are embedded in the day to day understandings of the people who enact them.

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