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# Cooperative Struggle: Re-framing Intercultural Conflict in the Management of Sino-American Joint Ventures

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## Abstract

Sino-American economic joint ventures are most often studied through a lens of technical rationality that typically emphasizes organizational efficiency, reduces culture to a manageable resource, and views conflict as discrete disruptions requiring efficient handling. Here, we conceptualize Sino-American business partnerships as sites of struggle where co-managers' accounts of intercultural disagreements reveal friction around action, voice, interests, and identity. We propose cooperative struggle as a critical management practice for working creatively with the multiple forms of difference that arise in this organizational form.

**Keywords:** Sino-American Joint Ventures, Intercultural Conflict, Power and Resistance, Cooperative Struggle

International corporate partnerships have a long history of creating and attempting to impose large-scale economic forces from the global North on the South (Ritzer, 2010). Research into this phenomenon often operates within a lens of technical/ instrumental rationality, emphasizing organizational effectiveness and the ways in which cultural differences, though recognized, might be used for corporate purposes, rather than how local groups might push back against these pressures (Stohl & Ganesh, 2013). Theoretical developments in “cultural intelligence” and its systematic deployment as a transnational management strategy are but one recent illustration of the tendency to

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instrumentalize culture and discipline managerial use of cultural knowledge in multinational corporations (Earley & Ang, 2003). Reducing culture to a business or management resource favors globalization-from-above and hides the ways in which these approaches privilege Western logics (Dutta & Dutta, 2013).

Rather than viewing international partnerships and their respective cultures as politically neutral backgrounds for the negotiation of business interests, we approach them as dynamic systems where a full range of social, cultural, and political differences are expressed and contested (Kwok-bun & Douw, 2006; Martin, 1997). We adopt a critical lens to conceptualize international corporate partnerships as sites of struggle where the need to work cooperatively toward corporate goals co-exists with the need to maintain important differences arising not just from within the corporation but between the corporation and the larger society (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). We focus on corporate joint ventures between China and the United States to better understand how those who manage them characterize and negotiate cultural disagreements as they struggle to meet the challenges of working cooperatively toward organizational goals without necessarily becoming the same. In highlighting managerial struggles around the meanings and expressions of cultural differences we hope to continue challenging the West's problematic relationship with diversity (see, for example, Allen, 2004; Dutta & Dutta, 2013; Munshi, 2005) and contribute to more polysemic and socially responsible understandings of difference and intercultural communication (Bardhan & Orbe, 2012).

Sino-American partnerships present a rich case for our project because they operate within a complex and dynamic context of difference. One of the world's oldest continuing civilizations, with a history spanning close to 4,000 years (Spence, 1990), China is keenly aware that the cultivation of "a sense of the Chinese people as a unit ... must be mobilized for its own survival" (Spence, 1990, p. 231). Appeals to such nationalist feelings arise as the country's leaders hold firm to traditional values while also guiding considerable economic change (Spence, 1990). China's rapid economic development and participation in the global economy does not neatly fit the Western pattern of economic development and modernization (Boisot & Child, 1996; Kang, 1998; Shenkar, 2005; Tyers, 2012; Walder, 1995), and its transformation into a capitalist world economy has occurred without significant political change (Kang, 1998; Lippit et al., 2011). This presents "a formidable challenge to the homogeneity of Western capitalist modernity" (Ban, Sastry & Dutta, 2013, p. 15). Forecast to pass the United States as the world's largest economy before 2030 (Lippit et al, 2011), the Chinese economy has continued to expand, largely on its own terms, despite political crises (e.g., pro-democracy activism and the Tiananmen Square tragedy), environmental crises (e.g., air and water pollution) and potentially catastrophic public health crises (e.g., avian flu). In light of China's growing economic power and its ability to succeed, in part, by ignoring the advice of prominent advisors from the West, China's state-run economy and approach to capitalism is likely to remain different from the model of free-market capitalism guiding the United States and many other Western economies (Dodson, 2012; Shenkar, 2005).

Thus, while business partnerships between China and the United States require cooperation, they also straddle deep ideological differences, and are increasingly shaped by China's considerable capacity to resist and challenge a de-valuing of those differences (e.g., Shome, 2006). The next section further explores the tensions underpinning Sino-American international business partnerships.

### **Sino-American Joint Ventures as Sites of Struggle**

A series of economic reforms initiated by the Chinese government in 1979 intensified the formation of international joint ventures with foreign firms, structuring them in ways that allow Chinese investors access to foreign capital, advanced technology, and technical managerial expertise while maintaining some degree of control over how these various investments will be used (Child, 1994). By the mid-1990s, the government had approved at least 37,000 international joint ventures involving approximately \$26.7 billion worth of foreign investment (Chen, 1995) and by the late-1990s had approved another 21,000 ventures involving an additional \$61.5 billion. Formed as legal partnerships between two parent companies, both sides enter into these agreements expecting to share control, to participate in strategic decision-making, and to share some business advantage (Yan, 2000). In reality, the balance sometimes diverges with the Chinese partner bearing the greater onus and responsibility for maintaining relationships with local businesses and the government to help monitor the need for policy change within the company (Chen, 2000; Krone, Chen, Sloan & Gallant, 1997), and the Western partner providing business and financial expertise, frequently within a formal contract that legally favors their side (Wels, 1996).

Sino-American joint ventures are hybrid organizational forms, complicated by multiple differences, with success dependent upon understanding and working well with these differences (Ashcraft, 2001; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). While all organizations can be conceptualized as tension-filled and producing struggle around which meanings gain traction or advantage over time (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004), Sino-American joint ventures manifest particularly complex forms of difference which come into play as managers work to promote the corporation's interests while protecting each side's interests.

In their earliest years, these ventures tended to impose Western cultural and economic values on the Chinese partner, creating concerns around the foreign exploitation of workers and the potentially corrupting influence of the West on Chinese society (Hutton & Giddens, 2000; Luttwak, 1999). More recent Sino-American joint ventures, however, operate according to equally large-scale, but different economic and political forces. More than ever before, the experience of co-managing these corporate partnerships involves navigating a range of cultural, political, and economic differences. For example, Western managers may take for granted the principles of free-market capitalism and assume that their Chinese counterparts are willing students of these principles. However, a 2013 Chinese Communist Party publication presented the most recent global financial crisis

as evidence of the failure of “Western Market Fundamentalism” and as an opening for the ascendance of Marxist economic principles (Yu Zurao, 2012). The routine managerial work of representing interests and taking action in Sino-American joint ventures is complicated by the potential of such differences to disrupt assumptions and animate interpretive struggles around how businesses should operate in a global economy.

As hybrid organizational forms, Sino-American business ventures have the potential to enhance understanding of each partner’s country’s politics and approach to business and culture, but doing so depends upon the ability to articulate multiple differences and to understand the tensions among them. Unlike many domestic organizations where differing interests are often left unstated or suppressed (Deetz, 1992), tensions routinely arise and are often made explicit in the management of Sino-American joint ventures. Our project attempts to better understand these processes by locating communication about differences within a larger context of struggle over how managers from both sides work out ways to cooperate while also maintaining important distinctions.

Business researchers have often framed questions of working with differences in the context of international corporate partnerships as studies of intercultural conflict or processes of managing interpersonal communication between managers from different countries and national cultures (see Wang, Kwok-bun & Luk, 2006 for a review). Such studies typically assume a Western business management perspective and a normative lens that simplifies intercultural conflict in order to subdue and handle it more effectively. The ability to work well with intercultural conflict is reduced to awareness of general group-based differences in interpersonal conflict styles between Westerners and the Chinese, without attending to differences within groups or the larger political or economic context. These studies, then, risk oversimplifying intercultural conflict, inadvertently reinforcing cultural stereotypes (see, for example, Kirkbride, Tang, & Westwood, 1991; Wang, Lin, Chan, & Shi, 2005; Xie, Song, & Stringfellow, 1998). Using these models to train expatriate managers can perpetuate the West’s self-serving representations of the East, rather than facilitating critical awareness of such representations and strengthening the capacity to challenge them (Viswanathan, 2001). For example, while Chinese respondents may report using an avoiding conflict style more frequently than Westerners, for at least some Chinese managers, avoiding is understood as “a proactive retreat for the purpose of advancing,” or as “pursuing by making a detour,” rather than deliberately avoiding dealing with the conflict altogether (Ding, 1996, p. 48). Here, we hope to contribute to more polysemic understandings of intercultural conflict by highlighting the ways managers of Sino-American joint ventures articulate disagreements with their counterparts without referencing Westernized pre-understandings of conflict styles (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007).

Communication scholars have produced increasingly nuanced theoretical accounts of intercultural communication including third-culture building (Casmir, 1993), intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), and how cultural values operate unevenly in organizational communication (Lindsley & Braithwaite, 2008). At the same time, these models tend to foreground relational approaches to cultural differences while overlooking the

potentially complex relational dynamics arising from the co-presence of political and economic differences. Thus, we locate Sino-American joint ventures and intercultural conflict within this larger context, and view culture itself as a site of struggle (Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Shome & Hegde, 2002) where the majority of intercultural interactions are highly asymmetrical (Cooks, 2001). We downplay these organizations as ideal sites where Chinese and American managers can synthesize cultural differences into a transcendent unity, especially when managers are expected to represent and protect their distinctive interests. Instead, we recognize them as sites of struggle (Deetz, 1992; Mumby & Clair, 1997) where conflict plays out even among high-level managers. For example, management of multinational corporations such as Sino-American joint ventures has been characterized as both masculinizing and feminizing, at least for U.S. managers, who are called to succeed in a hypercompetitive global environment, but to do so while remaining socially sensitive and working on someone else's ground (Calas & Smircich, 1993). Such tensions can be managed in ways that create more or less space for questioning technical/ instrumental understandings of organizational effectiveness and for finding creative alternatives. Thus, we recognize the organizational, political, and economic forces that make culture a site of contested meanings (Martin & Nakayama, 1999) and the struggles that ensue over which meanings will take hold and prevail at particular points in time. In the next section, we sketch out the contours of these dynamics as *cooperative struggle*.

### **Cooperative Struggle as an Alternative Lens**

As discussed, studies of intercultural conflict in Sino-American joint ventures that adopt a lens of technical/instrumental rationality tend to reduce culture to categorical differences, and conflict to interpersonal style choices and discrete episodes that can be handled and managed. We propose the concept of cooperative struggle as an alternative lens through which to explore the subject of intercultural conflict among partners of Sino-American joint ventures. Working from Fleming and Spicer (2007), struggle is constitutive of self-consciousness, identity, and social arrangements rather than simply expressive of pre-existing states. Rather than blocking communication, struggle occurs mainly through communicative action, which includes social categorization processes and the production of social relations not just between, but also within groups. In contrast to more conventional understandings of conflict management where discrete episodes of conflict arise and are handled, struggle is best understood as an on-going communicative process of negotiating identities and social arrangements (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). We adopt the interpretive lens of struggle here to move beyond technical/rational understandings of intercultural conflict and to better understand how such struggles identify and deal with differences, including those that cannot be negotiated or resolved. While managers of Sino-American joint ventures need to operate within institutional constraints related to the corporation's economic performance, the partners

also are able to access and draw upon their respective material and symbolic resources to both influence and resist each other over time (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Hence struggle is an ongoing form of social engagement in which both power and resistance are actively in play (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Re-interpreting Chinese and American managers' accounts of intercultural conflict as expressions of struggle around differences in interests, action, voice, and identity (Fleming & Spicer, 2007), we explore the concept of *cooperative struggle* as an alternative way of understanding intercultural conflict in the co-management of Sino-American joint ventures.

## Method

Our interest in challenging and reframing more conventional representations of intercultural conflict required a critical research approach. Critical research is designed in such a way to produce insight, critique, and transformative redefinition (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Here, the production of insight involves turning something self-evident or taken-for-granted into something more complex and open; the production of critique involves highlighting the privileging of certain meanings or discourses over others; and the production of transformative redefinition involves producing new concepts or practices that enhance social life for multiple stakeholders (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Our research material consisted primarily of conflict accounts gained via research interviews conducted with managers of Sino-American corporate partnerships located in Beijing. Under the first author's supervision, a native Chinese man—a former doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and employed at the time by the Office of International Relations at Peking University—used personal and professional connections to locate organizations and managers to participate in this research. Because he was fluent in Chinese (Mandarin) and in English he was able to conduct all research interviews in each participant's preferred language. His direct involvement in the data collection process was crucial to minimizing Western-style representations and other orientalist tendencies in the research process (Said, 1978). In particular, his life experience and expertise helped ease the expression of intercultural conflict experiences among Chinese managers and increased the likelihood that they would characterize their experience on their own terms rather than through Western-style pre-understandings of the Chinese.

Ten Chinese, one British, and six American managers working in six joint ventures and two wholly owned U.S. subsidiaries agreed to participate in the research. Among the joint ventures, two had ownership evenly distributed between the sides, while the remaining four favored one party over the other. All of the joint venture partnerships were formed between previously existing Chinese organizations (i.e., state-owned enterprises) and well-established corporations from the United States. The joint ventures produced large boiler systems, various types of industrial gases, advanced medical systems for hospitals, automotive systems for cars and light trucks, a range of industrial chemicals, and detergents. The two wholly owned companies are widely known in the United States for their production of electronics and computer systems.

In order to encourage rich accounts of intercultural conflict experience and to minimize the influence of our own pre-understandings, we deployed a semistructured interview process (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Interviews began with each manager being asked for descriptions of a disagreement they had had while working with their co-manager. If several disagreements came to mind, we asked them to select the one that was of greatest importance. We then asked what they said or did during the disagreement and why they chose to handle the situation the way they did. Next we asked what their co-manager said in response to them, followed by whether there was anything they would have liked to have said during the disagreement, but didn't. Finally, we asked for metaphorical depictions of what the experience of disagreeing with their counterpart was like and for any advice they would give others on how to handle these kinds of disagreements.

Of the 17 managers interviewed, all but four were male. The sample of Western managers was ethnically diverse including one Vietnamese American and two Chinese Americans (originally from Hong Kong). Three of the American respondents had previously managed companies in Europe, South America, Africa, Japan, Malaysia, India, or Thailand. The British manager had likewise previously managed several international companies. The inclusion of multiple Western partners with hyphenated ethnic identities helped enable a more polysemic interpretation of the research materials. Several of the Chinese managers had previously managed state-owned enterprises, and while none of the Chinese managers had international management experience, one reported having visited the joint venture corporate headquarters in the United States. In order to protect their privacy, managers were given pseudonyms. Because of the varied national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds of our participants, we chose these from the public registries of common names in the United States and China.

The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two hours, and were audio-recorded and mailed to the United States for transcription. The English interview tapes were reviewed by the lead author and then professionally transcribed, resulting in 57 pages of typed, single-spaced pages of text. The Chinese interview tapes were sent to colleagues at Hong Kong Baptist University where a graduate student in communication translated them to English and transcribed them, resulting in 65 pages of text.

Following Lindlof and Taylor (2002), but with a critical edge, we began a careful process of familiarizing ourselves with the data while also remaining curious and open to ways in which conventional concepts of intercultural conflict were being called into question (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Both authors read and re-read the written transcripts and the first author also listened to the audio-taped interviews conducted with American managers to gain additional insights. Throughout the initial analysis we focused on identifying and characterizing managers' accounts of intercultural conflict. As we compared our initial findings with previous research on intercultural conflict in joint ventures, we were struck by how culture was but one form of difference arising in these accounts. Instead, as these managers talked, their descriptions of intercultural disagreements were layered with references to other forms of difference including



nationality and race/ethnicity. To gain additional insight and refine our analysis, we re-framed intercultural conflict as an expression of political struggle. Guided by the sensitizing concepts of struggle over action, voice, interests, and identity, each author then closely re-read the interview transcripts and noted ways in which various forms of struggle appeared to arise in these conflict accounts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We then used thematic analysis techniques (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Owen, 1984) to select those accounts that best illustrated experiences with struggle. Through a series of independent analyses and collaborative data sessions, both authors generated interpretations of the data.

### **Interpreting Accounts of Intercultural Conflict as Struggle**

Managers described disagreements emerging around a diverse set of issues including employee promotions, employee layoffs, compensation, accounting practices, product naming, and orientations to customer service. Guided by Fleming and Spicer (2007) we analyzed their accounts for the ways in which they animated the overlapping processes of coercion and refusal, manipulation and voice, domination and escape, and subjectification, and creation.

#### *Struggles of Coercion and Refusal*

Struggles of coercion and refusal arise around *action* and involve the interplay of force and blockage which occur when one person is directed to do something different from what he or she would have chosen to do (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). In our sample, power and resistance became evident in accounts of simple refusals to follow a counterpart's orders, or of more interactive responses to pressures to act differently than preferred. For example, when asked to describe a disagreement with his Western partner, Sheng detailed a conflict over product naming. While his American boss told him "we must do this," Sheng and his colleagues thought "that if we do this, it will cause us many troubles. We can only put it aside and not do it ... We said "ok" but in fact, we did not do it." Sheng doubted whether his American boss understood or cared about what he characterized as the "historical reasons" for refusing to follow the order. Sheng acknowledged that although the process of naming products may change in China it will take time, and in his experience, Western managers are prone to push for rapid change and then move on, without bothering to learn much about the Chinese context. Simply refusing to obey the Western boss made sense in the absence of longer term opportunities to make differences in product naming practices in China more meaningful.

In another example, Michael characterized his Chinese partners as having "disobeyed" him. Before departing on a work trip he had "left specific instructions on what to do regarding the business" and was upset to learn upon his return that "his instructions had not been carried out" as he had directed. Michael said he "could have lived with" the decision his Chinese partners made, but instead he chose to "back it up and

say, 'we can't do that.'" If Michael wondered why his Chinese partners acted in opposition to his orders, he did not say so during the interview, nor did he describe steps he might have taken to better understand their reasons for resisting his directive.

As both these accounts suggest, Western managers struggled to adapt their expectations of operating autonomously with little government intervention, to China's business environment. Several Chinese partners spoke of this issue, with Yuan succinctly describing how his Western counterpart "may be free doing things in other countries. In China, he cannot be that free. In the free market, he can use his method. In China it is not like this." Long, a Vietnamese-American manager talked about how his company does a lot of construction in China, and how in North America they "just go, find the vendor and we follow our procedure, bid the job and make a decision ourselves," but that in China local law requires the government to be a part of the decision. His initial reaction was "this is *our* company, we bid *our* company money, and there's nothing that we need *them* to do for us." But through conversations with his Chinese partner, Long came to understand the importance of working more closely with the government:

We had many lengthy discussions clarifying our position of how do we best meet the local government requirements and best not violate the guidelines of the company. So we, *I* finally worked it out, came up with something that *I* could support.

Feeling constrained by Chinese law, but unable or unwilling to simply refuse to comply, Long entered into a lengthy negotiation of differences with his Chinese counterpart. At the same time, the change in frame from "we" worked it out to "I" worked it out, makes it clear that Long positions himself as not simply or easily giving in to the demands his Chinese partner placed on him.

These accounts of intercultural conflict illustrate the interplay between coercion and refusal arising around managerial action in Sino-American joint ventures. They also illustrate different communicative responses to pressures for managers to do what they normally would not have done under similar circumstances in a different context. The willingness to slow the communication process down so as to work more cooperatively with the Chinese government, despite preferences to the contrary, stands in communicative contrast to simpler interaction cycles of issuing orders, refusing orders, and re-issuing orders. In this way, refusal is not about refusing orders as such, but about refusing to obey certain instructions because of the absence of an opportunity to explain the Chinese context or to have a more extended discussion of differences.

### *Struggles of Manipulation and Voice*

Struggles of manipulation and *voice* involve the ways in which certain actions are positioned as impossible and the extent to which this can be questioned (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). This was most evident as managers described what they would have liked to have said, but did not, during disagreements with their counterparts. It was most pronounced for Chinese managers and involved differences in the value placed on data

and money to justify decisions, and the possibility that racial and cultural bias influenced the way their American counterparts related to and treated the Chinese.

Differences arose over the importance placed on data to influence or justify decisions. For American managers this seemed to be a taken-for-granted feature of the decision-making process, while for the Chinese, it seemed more a matter of political expediency. For example, Ying indicated that when she and her Western counterpart disagree, she “generally would look for some documents to persuade him” because, based on her experience:

if you want to explain our differences to him, he would not bother if you don't have documents. He then would be quite stubborn and insist on his opinion. If you cannot show him documents, you will not be able to persuade him.

Similarly, Jun, a Chinese-American manager dealing with tensions over salary differences between Shanghai and Beijing described how he provided his Chinese co-manager with data from salary surveys, assuming that this would help him convince his own Chinese employees of the need for higher salaries in Shanghai than in other parts of China for the same job. He added, “having this salary survey information, you know, quantitative information helps very much. It's something that he can take back to his management and use as evidence.” His Chinese partner can say “here it is; this is what the market is. In order to get qualified people this is what we have to pay.” While a cooperative gesture, at least on the surface, Jun assumed that data alone would be sufficient to help his Chinese partner explain or defend a decision that still may be experienced as unfair.

Throughout the interviews, many American managers said that they wished their Chinese counterparts would be more direct in expressing disagreements with them. For instance, Mei, a Chinese manager (originally from Singapore) described herself as someone who encourages the local Chinese staff to speak up, “because in America, now, they speak out ... I think we [the Chinese] should speak out more.” Yet, Mei grew concerned that she might have offended her boss by speaking up as she did. She went on to wonder:

if you handle the Americans, you know, it's like you have to be more aggressive. Otherwise, I think sometimes that, especially Americans ... take advantage when you become too timid or you don't speak up, you know? ... if you speak up they will know, oh, this person cannot be bullied or things like that. But there have been cases, I'm not saying all Americans, but they sometimes for racial reasons, I find, in fact, yeah, there is definitely some discrimination in terms of races.

As this account suggests, voice depends upon matching the communicative aggressiveness of Americans, but even then, racial or cultural bias can prevent the Chinese voice from being heard.

The theme of cultural bias was also apparent in Ying's account of intercultural conflict in which she perceived that Western managers discriminated against the Chinese in the promotion process. During her interview, she struggled to share her concern that:

being a Chinese, we should not count solely on the person's English proficiency or the relationship with the boss in deciding one's promotion. I think many people don't like to speak, yet they are competent and are doing a good job.

Concerned that her counterpart was under-valuing the contributions of Chinese employees who could not speak English, her comments explicitly confront the racial politics of promotion:

if that person is to be promoted, this other and that other should be promoted, as we should take into account the issue of overall balance. We can't just be like those foreign companies, promoting whoever you want to ... it's better to promote someone who is well-respected. You can't promote those that would talk to you more. The impact would then be too great. I think the Americans don't understand this. That's why I have to think of a way to tell him the Chinese way of seeing things.

Accounts of intercultural conflict involving poor treatment due to racial or cultural bias were much more likely to be offered by managers from the Chinese side with Ying commenting that while her "current partner is fine; he can listen to your opinion and respect your opinion ... the former financial manager gave me the impression that he looked down on the Chinese. He did not listen to you. He did not understand." Another person, Li, commented on being aware of bias, noting that while "it's best to be direct" with his American partner, "it depends on what kind of person you are talking with. Our second general manager is an easy-going guy, even though he is an American. He accepts others' opinions. The other two [American managers] were not this way."

Struggles of voice manifested around perceived obstacles to questioning taken-for-granted business practices. Chinese partners considered the possibility of dismissive responses or culturally or racially biased treatment when deciding whether to speak up. Based on these accounts, intercultural conflicts with Western counterparts are constructed at least partially as struggles for social equality.

### *Struggles of Domination and Escape*

Struggles of domination and escape involved conflict around *interests* and the ways in which groups tried to change company goals (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Given the hybrid design of Sino-American joint ventures, struggles around interests were embedded in the everyday lives of managers from both sides. Here, managers' accounts seemed to routinize intercultural conflict, framing it as a natural and necessary feature of working together in this context. As Hao, a Chinese partner put it, "People with different cultural backgrounds and different values will have different views ... it is natural to have these processes when people of different cultural backgrounds and values get together." Jun, a Chinese-American manager, seemed to share this view, commenting that:

the relationship is not adversarial in that I say white and he says black. It's just not like that because we're both focused on making the company successful ... so we want to do what's best for the company, for the joint venture, so from that standpoint, when

we have a disagreement, it's not really disagreeing, we are discussing how best to do what needs to be done for the best interests of the company.

At the same time, framing cultural differences as natural did not prevent conflicts around interests from unfolding. For instance, Hao explained:

Sometimes Chinese do not care much about money. They care more about face. Western managers do not think like this. If you want to do this, I pay you and that's it. It is so simple. The Chinese may think, for doing this, even if you give me some money, I will not do it. I am afraid of losing my face.

Huang, a Chinese-American manager framed the problem this way:

the Chinese problem, seems to me that the focus is not the same; they focus on the people, they want to keep the people, pay the payroll and that's the main thing and the profitability of the company is not the main objective of the company so there is probably a major disagreement. Of course, we agree that we should take care of the people better ... but it is not the first priority. For example, we found we got too many employees and it's not efficient enough so we have to lay off, that is for the profitability [of the company] we have to make money to survive and to pay the employees. On the Chinese side when you look at it, the profitability is not the most important thing. You know, it seems to be that they would rather have a loss for a few years.

The differences between Chinese and American interests expressed in these examples exemplify concerns that routinely came up as sources of intercultural conflict. While both sides articulated an awareness of such differences, their accounts also suggested some unevenness in the communicative work required to construct a meaningful understanding of those differences. For example, Li found balancing the pursuit of long-term corporate development goals (e.g., investment in product development, personnel training, and quality enhancement) with stockholders' interests in profit, all within the Chinese context, exhausting. He summarized that he and his Western counterpart "have different perspectives, difference priorities, different backgrounds and different interests, and therefore I am very exhausted ... I have the responsibility to assert as well as to protect the Chinese side's interests, while, more importantly running the corporation well." Despite his exhaustion, this manager said that he "still has to go on" for if he failed to adequately represent the Chinese interests, he "would feel very tired, even if we can make profits."

For their part, American managers were more often positioned to educate and advocate on behalf of business principles proven to work successfully in the West. For example, Jun, an Asian-American human resources manager, felt:

that in order to hire the best people you need to pay fair compensation ... that's from *our* perspective ... the Chinese side comes from a background where more things have to be equal and has to be fair to everyone so that if this one person who might be in sales ... a sales person in Shanghai uh, he or she joins us, uh he or she expects a salary and we will probably have to give them a salary that's a lot higher than what we are paying in Beijing for similar jobs. And it's purely because of supply and demand, and that's where I think my co-manager has difficulty dealing with that.

These accounts suggest a routinization of conflicts over interests, with American managers trying to run the business as they would in the West and Chinese managers questioning the suitability of Western practices to the Chinese context. Framed this way, American managers selectively and temporarily accommodated the interests of their Chinese partners. Doing so, however, rarely called into question the values underlying a Western business model. In this context, intercultural conflict does not produce a transcendent and lasting synthesis of different interests, but produces a series of ongoing, temporary negotiations of differences between a relatively fixed Western business model and a Chinese model that is still being worked out.

### *Struggles of Subjectification and Creation*

Struggles of subjectification and creation highlight *identity* and focus on the politics arising from attempts to control identity construction (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). The everyday experience of sharing control over the management of Sino-American joint ventures provoked identity struggles around what it means to be an effective manager in this context. In their accounts of intercultural conflict, managers deployed different discursive resources as they struggled to negotiate the other side's demands on their performance as managers. Chinese managers tended to draw upon a discourse of "staying Chinese" while American managers struggled to both modify and defend a managerial identity grounded in abstract, technical expertise.

As illustrated earlier, several Chinese managers drew upon a nationalistic discourse to recount their conflict experiences and did so in such a way that the process of "staying Chinese" appeared to serve as a strategic resource in their disagreements (Hardy, Palmer & Phillips, 2000). For example, Ying characterized the capitalistic market economy as "a battlefield" and said that while cooperating with an American company is useful, he could not "compromise my principles, forget that I am Chinese." For him, the ultimate goal of any Sino-American joint venture was to "build an enterprise culture that is suitable for Chinese society" to which he added that "this is very important [because to] depend on American culture does not work." Constructing a managerial identity in China is more complex than simply learning about what works for managers from other countries. Rather it requires a constant process of "staying Chinese" or carefully appropriating foreign practices and principles to the Chinese context.

To be sure, the Chinese partners wanted Western managerial expertise, as Michael, an American manager noted, "I have shared with them Western ideas of how to look at the market and they have adopted most of those ideas." Yuan, a Chinese manager, confirmed this, noting that "in the management aspect, Western people have better experiences. We should pay attention to it." Furthermore he said, "The reform needs not only technology and capital, but also management. ... they [Western managers] have done it and succeeded ... we must learn from them."

At the same time, when describing how they handled conflict, Chinese managers frequently distanced themselves from their American partners by drawing unfavorable

comparisons that implicitly constructed a preferred managerial identity. For instance, Sheng acknowledged that while the personalities of some foreigners are more open than others, more generally “foreigners do not understand the actual situations in China.” He went on to characterize foreigners as hard to deal with saying “to a Chinese you just need to say one or two sentences, he will know what you mean,” while a foreign manager “may not understand even though you spent half a day explaining it to him.” Yuan, who had earlier acknowledged the need for Western managerial expertise, also drew clear distinctions, framing the Chinese as more patient in correcting employee performance. If a poorly performing employee did not understand “we may talk to you many times. They may not have such patience. They do not act like us.” Piao also pointed out that “there is no group concept among American managers” and wanted “foreign managers to understand this collective concept.” He characterized this as “a kind of process involving cooperating, communicating, and discussing together,” rather than just “simply passing on messages,” and felt that the Chinese staff may “think they [American managers] lack a human touch” because they do not pay enough attention to relationships. Articulating social distinctions such as these expands the nationalistic discourse of “staying Chinese” to include what they frame as culturally unique relational processes. Doing so amplifies value differences between groups and perhaps strengthens the capacity of the “staying Chinese” discourse to withstand the universalizing tendencies of American managerial discourse.

For their part, American managers routinely referred to their technical expertise while also recognizing the need to adapt their managerial style to the local context. That some managers compared the experience of working with their Chinese partners to “international diplomacy” or to “helping my children with their homework” illustrated adjustments in their identity and performance as managers. In addition, while they recognized the need to adapt their managerial expertise to the local context, the conflict accounts of other managers constructed this process as a struggle between operating as business experts and cultural outsiders. Alluding to this tension, Michael began by recounting advice he had received from his predecessor who had told him: “You’ll do okay as long as you remember *you’re* a visitor in China.” For this manager:

I have to remember that *I’m* the visitor here and *I* should be the one that’s making adjustments, uh, that *they* shouldn’t really. At the same time there’s a *reason* that they want ex-pats here and *that’s* to make some improvements, and so we need to be able to make those improvements along the way.

Speaking from a similar perspective, David spoke to how the status of “visiting manager” required greater cultural sensitivity than managers like himself were used to or, as he put it, to succeed Western companies had to:

be more sensitive ... [if] a Western company is gonna participate in China’s success in the future, they’re gonna have to be able to be sensitive to the Chinese way and learn to work within that, rather than think that you can make the Chinese change to your way.

As he continued, David re-framed cultural sensitivity as a managerial strength:

if you're culturally sensitive, that doesn't mean you're weak, it means that you're tapping in to the energy of China and going along with it rather than trying to push back almost 1.3 billion people. It's not gonna happen for you if you do.

And as Michael put it, cultural sensitivity required the additional work of adjusting his normal managerial style in light of what he considered the heightened interpersonal sensitivity of the Chinese:

We have to be considerate of their culture. In the United States or in Canada where I've worked before you can be angry at people and you can say things that are very harsh to people one minute and five minutes later you can be patten' the guy on the back and it's acceptable. And probably the wounds take longer to heal in China you know because they feel so deeply uh about different things.

Re-framing cultural sensitivity as a managerial strength makes it possible to continue drawing upon a taken-for-granted managerial discourse as a resource in contexts that disrupt its generalizability and potentially expose its fragility.

Positioning oneself as a short-term visitor could also defend against identity threats that can arise when managing on someone else's ground. As David outlined:

I wish I spoke Chinese, although I don't think it's necessary. What people *want* is the knowledge and help I can bring. Some Western companies, to an extent my own, think that by hiring a Chinese person who grew up in the U.S. and was educated, and making him a manager, he's a Chinese manager. I keep saying 'no he's not.' If all he does is speak English and doesn't know [the company] and doesn't know the technology, he's worse than nothing. What China *doesn't* need is more Chinese.

He went on to explain that his presence and expertise allowed the Chinese to make better decisions about how they will progress in the future. As for him:

being here is a great adventure; to be in China at this time of change is uh, an exciting thing for me. I can't imagine a better place to be than to work here. My agreement with my company is that I'll work here as long as I'm having a good time and enjoy it. Then I'll leave.

Based on these accounts of intercultural disagreements, the need to adapt Western managerial knowledge and practice to the Chinese context is necessary, but potentially threatening to managerial identity. In response, American managers assert the need for cultural sensitivity while also re-asserting the value of Western managerial expertise. Trying new communication behaviors such as cultural sensitivity and managing on someone else's ground co-exist with the discourse of "staying Chinese," animating some degree of struggle in the construction of Sino- American managerial identity.

### **Re-framing Intercultural Conflict as Cooperative Struggle**

Sino-American joint ventures bring together different nations and cultures, creating space in which a variety of foreign and domestic interests meet, merge, and sometimes



clash. In our study, we have attempted to move beyond categorical approaches to understanding intercultural conflict and the negotiation of business interests in favor of developing more politically sensitive understandings. In particular, our results illustrate differences in the nature of conflict accounts *within* cultural groups, not just between them. Attending to the ways in which current partners not only converge with but also diverge from previous partners seems to produce more nuanced and socially sophisticated accounts of intercultural relationships and conflict, and greater appreciation for the relational dynamics associated with more and less satisfying relationships with partners. In addition, our results illuminate how national cultural frequently intersected with gender, race, or political/ economic systems to complicate these managers' accounts of intercultural conflict. For example, feminizing portrayals of partners as highly or overly sensitive calls into question the credibility of their experience and its legitimate contribution to co-managing the joint venture. Reducing cultural differences to national culture masks the ways in which multiple forms of difference contribute to disagreements and subverts a fuller exploration and understanding of differences. Finally, our results highlight the strategic deployment of national cultural discourse and how it can operate to construct and account for disagreements. The discourse of "staying Chinese" may say less about the nature of a single, unified Chinese national culture than it does about a struggle for control, especially when pitted against a universalizing managerial discourse that positions itself as largely culture-free. Viewed through the lens of struggle, discrete episodes of intercultural conflict become understood as part of an endless, sometimes strategic, engagement of multiple forms of difference that partners struggle to make meaningful. In the process, differences in interests appear to be interwoven with struggles around voice, action, and managerial identity.

Our analysis confirms that engaging in such struggles can become destructive, resentful, or loving. According to Fleming and Spicer (2007), struggle becomes destructive when actors seek to destroy each other, resentful when actors display their unhappiness at being dominated, and loving when actors recognize the other's right to exist and affirm the other by calling him/her into question. Based on these conflict accounts, the potential for destructive struggle arose when managers framed the other as incapable of understanding or learning about differences either in managerial practices or in culture. While not necessarily an active attempt to destroy the other, such framing practices legitimized attempts to avoid interacting, thus reproducing the other as "learning disabled" and constraining the creation of new understandings of themselves and each other over time. The potential for resentful struggle arose when partners simply refused the demands of the other side. The discourse of "staying Chinese" drew attention to the incompatibilities between American managerial practices and the two discourses sometimes clashed without producing new understandings of either side. And finally, the potential for loving struggle arose when co-managers acknowledged differences and attempted, in good faith, to learn more about and work with those differences. When Chinese managers agreed to try American management practices to see if they would work in China, and American

managers agreed to adjust their practices to the demands of the local situation, both sides were affirming the other's differences as deserving of consideration and a force to be reckoned with.

Based on our re-interpretation of intercultural conflict in the context of Sino-American joint ventures, we propose building upon the idea of struggle to include the critical management practice of *cooperative struggle*. Following Spicer, Alvesson, and Karreman (2009), we position *cooperative struggle* as a critical managerial performance designed to challenge conventional managerial discourse and contribute to progressive management practice. As a critical management practice, cooperative struggle calls into question the assumed political neutrality of managerial discourse, considering its potential to privilege white, European-American, masculine values. It recognizes the politics of the discourse of "staying Chinese" and puts it more directly in conversation with the technical discourse of managerial expertise promoted by foreign managers. This will not prevent struggles over action, voice, interests, or identity, but it should help produce a more open discursive space in which to engage multiple struggles more fully and creatively. Articulating the experience of struggling to "stay Chinese" or of struggling to direct business processes and outcomes while working on someone else's ground could become starting points for conversations capable of producing creative, hybrid models of management that draw upon a plurality of voices and values.

We believe the historical, political, and economic context of China informs and animates struggles around action, voice, interests, and identity in the management of Sino-American joint ventures. While the legal conditions of ownership may favor the Western partner and provide it with a formal advantage (Wels, 1996), the overall success of the corporation still depends, in part, on identifying differences that can and cannot be negotiated. Tension between values embedded in the practices of free market capitalism and those guiding China's long-term economic development may be among the differences most difficult to negotiate. Grounded in the values of free market capitalism, Western managers' technical expertise is less conditioned by government intervention or the need to manage on behalf of an individual country's long-term economic development. Refusals to follow Western managerial advice thus may be rooted in attempts to maintain and protect differences related to the role of Sino-American joint ventures in China's state-guided, transitional economy. Differences in these comparatively narrower and broader frames of reference may help explain the interplay between coercion and refusal, manipulation and voice, domination and escape, and subjectification, and creation that we observed in managers' accounts of intercultural conflict. The need to understand and make differences between these frames of reference meaningful, contributes to the production of struggles around action, voice, interests, and identity. A progressive management practice, then, would involve attempts to equalize struggles around action, voice, interests, and identity over time so that both sides share in the on-going work of making such differences meaningful. Rather than attempting a simple transfer of business principles to the Chinese context or relying on the Chinese side to do the work of appropriating these principles to the Chinese context, cooperative

struggle would involve a day-to-day process of contextualizing Western management principles and practices together. Engaged in this way, cooperative struggle might disrupt some of the assumptions of free market capitalism and create more interesting conversations about the European-American business model, helping Western managers to learn from their Chinese partners as well as to instruct them. As a critical management practice, cooperative struggle would affirm the contradictions between Chinese socialism and free market capitalism and allow these differences to circulate more evenly throughout the organization. In this way, contradictions can become the basis for routine communication and collaborative decision-making or the foundation of more respectful understandings of value differences that cannot be negotiated.

While equalizing struggles around action, voice, interests, and identity all seem important to the progressive management of Sino-American joint ventures, the capacity to cooperate in struggles around voice may be foundational. Since voice is an interactive process capable of producing reflection on the ways in which certain actions become normalized while others are made impossible, the presence of racial and/or cultural bias can restrict such interaction so that the struggle for voice becomes one-sided. Approaching the struggle for voice as cooperative requires managers from both sides to interact in ways that provoke a thoughtful consideration of differences in what may seem normal. Cooperative struggle then entails the production of discordant interaction capable of disrupting and calling into question the presence of cultural or racial bias in decision-making. In this way, struggles for voice might intersect positively with struggles around interests so that discussions of what would be practical in the local context receive greater consideration in relation to what might be more profitable on a global scale. Voice becomes less of an individual struggle for influence than a sometimes antagonistic, but still cooperative interactive accomplishment among managers from both sides.

The results of our project confirm that understandings of communication and intercultural conflict in international business contexts will be well-served by embedding the study of conflict episodes in a larger context of struggle. Social actors who manage to provide responsible leadership in international settings are enabled and constrained by a range of cultural, political, and economic forces. Identifying the contours of the critical management practice of cooperative struggle is an attempt to assist those committed to working with the social complexity produced by the interaction among these forces.

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