

**IACCM 10th Annual Conference and 3rd CEMS CCM / IACCM Doctoral
Workshop, University of Ruse, Bulgaria – 2011
CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION:
Cometences and Capabilities**

**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE FOURTH KIND. THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL
AND LINGUISTIC BARRIERS ON COMMUNICATION AND COOPERATION, THE
EMERGENCE OF IDENTITARIAN NETWORKS AND THE NEED FOR
“TRANSLATION” IN THE ITALIAN SUBSIDIARY OF A CHINESE
MULTINATIONAL COMPANY**

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The study of intercultural relationships between Chinese and westerners is one of the emergent topics in cross-cultural studies. This paper is aimed to explore the relationship among cultural differences, managerial practices and intercultural relationship in Chinese MNCs. The paper is divided in three parts.

The focus of the first part of the paper is on the theoretical framework of the study. The review is focused on: a) the critical discussion (McSweeney 2009) of the “taxonomical” approach (Hofstede 2001) to cultural studies; b) the analysis of the dynamic nature of intercultural relations, that can be explained either in terms of cultural divergence (cultural differences) either in terms of cultural interaction (conflict, integration and hybridization); c) the connection between culture and identity; d) the critical role played by culture (and therefore knowledge) translation (Holden 2002, Holden and Glisby 2010).

The second part of the paper reports and discusses some findings of an exploratory field research. The case study investigates the Italian subsidiary of a Chinese high-tech company. The Italian branch is actually a bi-cultural workplace, that employs a Chinese management and a workforce composed of Chinese and Italian workers. The company is a leading Chinese multinational firm that operates in the sector of communication and internet technologies, either in the BtB and BtC sectors. The research adopted a qualitative methodology. Twenty open-ended interviews were conducted. The sample was composed of 10 Chinese workers (5 male and 5 female) and 10 Italian workers (5 male and 5 female). All interviewees are key people. The outcomes of interviews have been analyzed using the content analysis methodology. The outcomes of the research has been interpreted and discussed. The main outcomes of the field research are: a) the impact of linguistic barriers, managerial ethnocentrism and “cultural autism” on the processes of identification with the company and integration/cooperation between Chinese and Italian workers; b) the emergence of identitarian networks; c) the emergence of a “surface” and a deep level of intercultural interaction d) the relation between cultural (and therefore knowledge) translation and the processes of intercultural integration/cooperation. Then, the outcomes of the research showed some interesting differences in the perceptions and attitudes of male and female respondents. The results of the field research are consistent with the dynamic and complex approach to the study of cultural diversity, in contraposition with the classic paradigm of cultural taxonomies, stress the relevance of managerial practices, offer some empirical evidences to the hypothesis of “identitarian networks” (Maimone 2005 and Maimone and Mormino 2010) and suggest the necessity of expanding the boundaries of the concept of cultural translation beyond the dominions of knowledge management.

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In the third part of this paper the limitations of the research, the theoretical and practical implications are discussed. Finally, we argue that only an integrated glocal approach to people management, at individual, group, local branch and corporate level could facilitate the development of “intelligent” intercultural relations and cooperation.

Key words

Transnational organization, Intercultural relations, cross-cultural management, intercultural communication, organizational identity, organizational networks, intercultural conflict, cultural translation, cultural hybridization,

Theoretical framework

A long time has past since Father Matteo Ricci, an Italian missionary and an anthropologist “ante litteram”, settled in Beijing and conquered the trust of the Ming Dynasty, behaving “as a Chinese man among Chinese people”. China has come back at the center of world relationships. According to Goldman Sachs’ researchers (Wilson et al, 2010) China’s GDP will contribute as much the G3 (30% of global GDP for each ones) to the global growth, in the next decade. Like in the 16th century, the management of culture differences is one of the key to unlock the door of the Chinese walls.

The scientific community is very far from having found a unique and common shared definition of culture. The debate on cultural differences offers an extraordinary arena for the confrontation between structural-functionalist and postmodernist scholars.

Hofstede (1980) is universally acknowledged as the most influential scholar of the functionalist approach to the study of cultural differences. According to Peterson (2007, p. 371) “Hofstede’s project summarized in *Culture’s Consequences* (Hofstede, 1980, 1980/2001) has dominated international organization studies since its appearance”. Hofstede’s cultural model is based on national culture score means (Ib.). It assumes that culture is some kind of collective programming of minds (Ib.) and national cultures could be studied and classified according to four cultural dimensions. In the late phase of his research, Hofstede added a fifth dimension (Hofstede 1988). The basic concept of Hofstede’s model is the correlation between national cultures score means and organizational behaviors. This approach presumes that managers should take into account cultural differences and manage people according to their shared national values (Peterson 2007). Despite of his success and popularity, the model proposed by Hofstede was argued in terms of lack of statistical reliability (Gerhart 2008), insufficient definition of the construct (McSweeney 2002), ecological fallacy of measure design (Peterson 2007).

More recently the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research team (House et al., 2004) proposed a new model based on national mean scores. Moreover, Schwartz (1992) developed another model based on national values.

In opposition with the structural-functionalist perspective, postmodern theorists argued against the monistic and taxonomic approach to the study of cultural difference. Geertz affirmed that to consider culture as a homogeneous and coherent entity is to ‘to pretend a science that does not exist and imagine a reality that cannot be found’ (1973, 20). According to Barinaga (2007 p. 324), the discourses on national cultures can be viewed as rhetoric strategies that permit to “define geographically limited identities, assigning particular characters, attitudes, values and interests to

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those coming from a specific region. As such, they contribute to a sense of a natural, objective, unavoidable boundary that separates group members. In sum, references to 'national culture' were made to enhance one's worth in the midst of confusion."

McSweeney (2009) argued against the structural functionalist approach proposed by Hofstede et al (2001). According McSweeney (2005, p. 91) Hofstede treats national culture "as implicit; core; systematically causal; territorially unique; and shared."-. McSweeney (2009) questioned the core assumptions of structural-functionalism: national culture as a homogeneous, stable, pure and uncontaminated reality. McSweeney (ib.), moreover, affirmed that Hofstede's model underestimates the relevance of the processes of cultural hybridization and the role played by non-cultural factors, criticizing the assumed equivalence among culture, nation and territory.

Barinaga (2007), then sustained the discursive approach to the study of cultural differences, adopting the social constructionist perspective. The author (ib. p.) argued that "...treating national culture as some sort of natural predetermined template, such research places too little emphasis on the discursive processes that go on in social life and thus fails to consider the freedom actors have in defining national identity (Ailon-Souday & Kunda, 2003)."

Moreover, the interpretative theorists argued against the functionalistic perspective, criticizing the concept of unified culture. According to Alvesson and Deetz (2000, p.34) the interpretive research questions 'the logic of displaying a consensual unified culture', focusing instead on 'fragmentation, tensions, and processes of conflict suppression'.

The debate between functionalists and postmodernists is quite intriguing. But we argue that it is possible to go beyond the dispute between "apocalyptic and integrated" (Eco 1964). Archer (1988) focused the analysis of cultural dynamics on social agency, considering stability and change just as the two coins of the same medal. Culture, therefore, may evolve through intercultural interactions (Brannen & Salk 2000) and multilevel cultural dynamics (Leung et al., 2005). Moreover, Martin (2004) tried to find a synthesis between different theoretical perspectives, proposing a multiple and subjective approach to the study of culture. So, we assume that intercultural encounters can be explained either in terms of cultural divergence (cultural differences) either in terms of cultural interaction (conflict, integration and hybridization) and change.

The functionalistic approach could help researchers to shed light to macro (convergent) cultural processes, postmodern and mainly qualitative research instead could provide a deeper and more ecologic view of meso and micro dynamics. So, the choice of one or another perspective may depend on the goals of the research, the level of analysis, the focus of the research design (deductive approach, case study or grounded theory), etc. According to Morgan and Smircich (1980, p. 498) "Qualitative research stands for an approach rather than a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness-like that of quantitative research-is contingent on the nature of the phenomena to be studied."

Identity is strictly related to social interactions (Albert and Whetten, 1985). We argue that the apparent antithesis between the integrative and the dis-integrative theoretical perspectives could be composed adopting the multiple identity perspective (Burke 2003). For example, the authors of this paper are Italians, but at the same time they belong to different regional identities, professional identities, gender identities, generational identities, etc. So then, even though all of us are

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Italian, we are supposed to have some common identitarian traits, because we share the same language, live in the same country, have studied in the same educational system, etc but at the same time we presumably have also different multiple identities. Stelzl e Seligman (2009) illustrated the results of a field research that evidenced that the students of an International business school, belonging to the same nationality, showed multiple identities and different values. These findings are consistent with the result of two field researches that involved two transnational organizations (Maimone 2005 and 2007).

If we consider identity as a process and not as a state (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002), we can assume that there could be different foci of organizational identifications (Foreman and Whetten 2002) and that people working for an organization could show multiple identities, that could coexist in the same person and or group, sometimes harmonically and sometimes in conflict (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002).

So, if convergent and divergent cultural processes may co-exist in the same organization, then the success of intercultural encounters may be also a matter of “good translation”. Holden (2002) used the word translation to define the intra-inter organizational negotiation process that permits the cross-dissemination of knowledge among different national cultural groups. But Holden considers culture and knowledge as practically equivalent (Ib.), so reversely the concept of translation could be applied also to cultural dynamics. According to Holden and Glisby (2010, page 74): -“Translation is indeed a kind of knowledge conversion that seeks to create common cognitive ground among people, for whom differences in language are hindrance to comprehension.”-. Translation is therefore a “form of knowledge modification” (Ib., page 78).

According to Holden and Von Korfleisch (2004): “translation in the sense of transposing a text in one language in terms of another is a notable form of converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge.” Holden and Glisby (2010) pointed out the role of relations in the process of translation. According to these authors (Ib. page 98): “Protagonist in cross-cultural business interaction consciously and unconsciously co-create a relationship-specific kind of tacit knowledge”. This kind of relational tacit knowledge (Ib.) is based on mutual trust, conducive working atmosphere, motivation and values.

The process of translation is enhanced by the “participative competence” (Holden, 2002, page 273), e.g. –“the ability to interact on equal terms in multicultural environments in such a way that knowledge is shared and that the learning experience is professionally enhancing”- (Ib.). And it is affected by “ambiguity, cultural interference, and lack of equivalence among languages in interplay” (Holden and Glisby 2010, page 82).

Transnational networks may facilitate knowledge translation (Holden 2002) and therefore contribute to the building up of the so called “third culture” (Casmir 1999) or “bridge culture” (Maimone 2005), that allows communication, collaboration and therefore knowledge sharing among employees working in different countries and/or belonging to different nationalities. At the same time mono-cultural networks may inhibit or disincentives the processes of knowledge translation, contributing to the maintenance and reinforcement of linguistic and cultural barriers (Maimone and Mormino 2010).

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The case study

The case study investigates the Italian subsidiary of a Chinese high-tech company. The Italian branch is a bi-cultural workplace, that employs a workforce composed of Chinese and Italian managers and employees. The company is a leading Chinese multinational firm that operates in the sector of communication and internet technologies, either in the BtB and BtC sectors. The research adopted a qualitative methodology. According to Yin (1984, p. 23) “the case study research method is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”.

The field research began with open-ended interviews with Human Resources, Training and Education managers. These were used to get a general understanding of the organizational context and to build a preliminary set of hypotheses. Then various organizational documents were collected and analyzed, in order to draw the organizational structure, the functions, and the basic processes.

Then, twenty open-ended interviews were conducted (English language). The sample was composed of 10 Chinese workers (5 male and 5 female) and 10 Italian workers (5 male and 5 female). All interviewees were key people.

The topic addressed by open-ended questions:

- Satisfaction with the quality of intercultural communication;
- Satisfaction with the quality of intercultural relationships;
- Consequences of cultural differences;
- Critical aspects of intercultural communication;
- Level of intercultural conflict;
- Social relations (personal ties).

The outcomes of interviews have been analyzed using the content analysis methodology. We adopted the conventional approach to content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), based on inductive categories development, that are build up respecting the natural language of the interviewees. We adopted an incremental process: formulation of the research questions to be answered, selection of the sample to be analyzed, definition of the record units, definition of the coding categories, test of the coding categories, assessment of the accuracy and reliability of the coding categories, refinement of the coding categories, implementation of the coding process, analysis of the results of the coding process, final assessment of the reliability and accuracy of data (Weber 1990, Kaid, 1989). The trustworthiness of the results was further verified using peer debriefing and ex-post interviews with a reduced sample of interviewees that confirmed the validity of the findings.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) “The advantage of the conventional approach to content analysis is gaining direct information from study participants without imposing preconceived categories or theoretical perspectives.”

The outcomes of the research

The 55% of interviewees are not satisfied with the quality of intercultural communication. The factors that cause the un-satisfactory level of intercultural

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communication, according to respondents, are: linguistic barriers, cultural differences, lack on intercultural communication, intercultural conflict, division of the Branch in two national sub-groups, low management focus on people, low managerial effectiveness, low cultural sensitiveness of management, differences in treatment between Chinese and Italian employees. As we can see, the asymmetric relation between Chinese (perceived by some respondents as the foreigner “lords” of the company) and Italian employees (that in some cases perceive themselves as “servants” of a foreigner employer) is one of the main sources of dissatisfaction. Clearly, in this case, the dimension of culture and the dimension of power interplay, enabling a kind of relational dynamic that cannot be explained only in terms of culture diversity, nor only in terms of employer-employee relationship.

Quotes:

“Chinese people tend to stay only with themselves creating de-facto a barrier to the real intercultural relationship to happen”.

“Managers are not under a healthy way of developing inter-culture relations, they are only focused on sales results.

“(Managers) clearly indicates every day who are the company owners on which the management bet on who others are just necessary evil needed just to face the customers giving them a localized multi-national impression.”

“Our feeling is that the Chinese attitude emphasizes control instead of facilitating integration”

The 45% of respondents, instead, said to be satisfied with the quality of intercultural communication.

Quotes:

Yes, people can freely share their own culture and working method, people can also impact each other, it can help us to look the world from different ways and judge things”

“Our company promotes exchanges, initiatives, trip abroad to facilitate reciprocal knowledge”.

Cultural differences, linguistic barriers, Intercultural trust, ability to learn from another culture, ethnocentrism and Company-local employees relations are considered critical points in intercultural communication.

Quotes:

“Chinese and Italians have two completely different mentality. They think of things from very different point... Sometimes they are even on the opposite”

“The way doing things... Chinese would like to do things as soon as possible, and optimization gradually, but Italians would like to do things very late and thinking well output and good results. They are both good to achieve final goals...”

“Problem of the language, it is difficult to express my self well”

“It needs time to understand Italian culture”

The 50% of respondents is not satisfied with the level of intercultural relationships. The percentage of Italian males respondents that affirm to be not satisfied with the level of intercultural relationships (80%) is higher than in other subgroups.

The lack on intercultural communication, mind closeness, low proactivity in establishing personal relationships with people (out of job related relations), ethnocentrism and the presence of cultural barriers are the main motives that explain the low level of satisfaction, according to half of the sample. Instead, interviewees

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that are satisfied with the quality of intercultural relationships indicate in the quality of personal relationships, the good level of cooperation, the good quality of knowledge and culture sharing, the role of diversity in facilitating creativity the main motives of their satisfaction.

The consequences of cultural differences, according the respondents, are: misunderstandings, decrease of work quality, decrease of the quality of communication process, untrustworthiness of information received, low attention at Corporate level at the feedback of subsidiaries.

The 80% of respondents attributed a medium/high value to the level of intercultural conflict. The 70% of male respondents rated the level of intercultural conflict as “high”, the 77% of female respondents rated the level of intercultural conflict as “medium”.

The 50% of Chinese male respondents prefer to ask for important and confidential information of professional nature to colleagues of the same nationality. All Chinese females instead declare to talk about important and confidential information of professional nature with colleagues of every nationality. Italian male respondents prefer to talk about personal matters with colleagues of the same nationality (80% of respondents). The majority of Italian female respondents instead declare to talk about personal matters with colleagues of every nationality. Chinese male respondents and Italian male and female respondents prefer to spend their free time with colleagues of the same nationality. Chinese and Italian female respondents generally seem to be more interested in intercultural relationships and more aware of the importance of intercultural communication.

So, the result show a significant tendency toward the forming of personal ties based on national identities, even though personal characteristic (for example the linguistic competence, the time of employment in the Italian branch, the previous multicultural experiences and the personal portfolio of intercultural competences) and gender seem to influence the process. These results are consistent with the outcomes of a field research that involved a multicultural organization (Maimone 2005).

Some respondents affirmed that the branch can operate successfully, in spite of the unsatisfactory level of intercultural integration, because people working for the Italian subsidiary are target oriented and can succeed to collaborate in a customer driven environment, enacting some kind of “surface behavior”. However, intercultural misunderstandings and conflict generate un-satisfaction and frustration at a deeper level.

The answers of many respondents suggest a lack of empathic understanding of cultural other, a difficulty in wearing others’ shoes and building up a real intercultural relationship. It is a matter of language barriers but also of a (not sufficient) reciprocal knowledge. In other words, we could say that the outcomes of the research evidence a lack of “translation” (Holden 2002, Holden and Grisbly 2010).

Quotes:

“We have to have more trust for each other and for different culture. The company have to do more job to make Chinese know more culture of Italy and to make Italians know more culture about China”

“It needs some time to understand the Italian cultures for all the Chinese staff”

“We may think different ideas of one same thing. May be it will lead some misunderstanding and impact on the later work”

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"Because we are a Chinese company. We need to sell products for local. Sometimes we stand on the opposite position to see one thing."

"Our Company is divided into two groups: the Chinese one and the Italian one. How could you expect they will make some communication truly and sincerely? Everybody sticks to their own culture"

"We need to build one team instead of two"

"If an Italian stays with Chinese for a long time, he/she will understand how superior the Chinese feel inside about the other nations. So they won't make any progress for bettering their intercultural relationships"

According the outcomes of field research, the main findings are:

a) A multifaceted and in some cases polarized map of perceptions. According to the complex perspective adopted in this work, people's experience and representation of intercultural encounters is far from be homogeneous and monolithic. Almost the totality of the sample agree on affirming that cultural differences between Chinese and Italian employees exist. But, the interpretation of the impact of these differences and the perception of the intercultural relations (either in terms of intercultural communication and interpersonal relationship) is not coherent, even though we found a tendency toward the negative evaluation of cultural (diversity) consequences.

b) The impact of linguistic barriers, "cultural autism" and managerial ethnocentrism on the processes of identification with the company and integration/cooperation between Chinese and Italian workers: as we can see, intercultural dynamics are inter-related with power and control and are influenced by personal traits, gender, nationality, linguistic and intercultural competences of interviewees.

c) The emergence of a "surface" and a deep level of intercultural interaction: accordingly to the research outcomes, employees seem to have found some kind of intercultural adaptive behavior, but surface "target and result driven" practices may hide a kind of deeper level of intercultural interaction, that impact on intercultural relationships.

d) The emergence of identitarian networks: also in this case, personal characteristic, gender, nationality, linguistic and intercultural competence may influence the process. But many respondents reveal a favoritism toward national identity bounded personal ties.

e) The relation between cultural (and therefore knowledge) translation and the processes of intercultural integration/cooperation. The reciprocal acceptance, respect and knowledge is the base for a genuine, integer and honest intercultural relationship (Ting-Tomey 1999). At the base of this relation we can find an empathic and therefore intuitive knowledge of other's culture and tacit knowledge (Holden and Glisby 2010). Some people, trough the development of intercultural networks, can enhance the process of culture/knowledge translation (lb.). For the same reasons national identity based personal ties may instead become an obstacle for the process of translation (Maimone and Mormino 2010).

f) The role of management: many respondents indicate in the business driven managerial approach and in the low level of cultural sensitiveness of managers, that in some cases may shift in ethnocentrism, one of the main reasons of intercultural

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negative relations and conflicts. A management too concerned in business goals and not aware of the importance of diversity management and of the valorization of cultural diversity is perceived as a negative factor, that impact negatively on intercultural communication and relationships.

Discussion

The results of the field research are consistent with the dynamic and complex approach to the study of cultural diversity, adopted in this paper. Gender, intercultural competences (language and multicultural background) and personal ties seem to mediate the effects of cultural differences. The outcomes of the field research stress the relevance of managerial (intercultural) practices, offer some empirical evidences to the hypothesis of “identitarian networks” (Maimone 2005 and Maimone and Mormino 2010) and suggest the necessity of expanding the boundaries of the concept of cultural translation beyond the dominium of knowledge management, consistently with the theoretical frame proposed before. Therefore we argue that cultural translation is not only a matter of knowledge sharing but also a key process for the creation of the so called third culture (Casmir 1999,), or “bridge culture” (Maimone 2005), that could facilitate intercultural integration, intercultural conflict management and therefore may enable the creation an effective multicultural space (Maimone lb.).

The outcomes of the research are not inconsistent with a taxonomic view of cultural diversity: quite all interviewees recognize that Chinese and Italian workers are different. But even though the goal of this work was not of measuring culture differences, we cannot underestimate the fact that the perception of the consequences of cultural diversity is not monolithic nor deterministic. Many respondents affirmed that intercultural relations are negative and that intercultural management is un-effective and even not present, in many cases. But there are at same times many workers, a significant subgroup composed of both Chinese and Italian workers, that affirm to be satisfied with the quality of intercultural communication and relationships. This outcome supports the complex and multilevel approach to cultural differences, adopted in this work. So, we argue that cultural differences and other personal characteristics, such as gender, linguistic and intercultural competences, personality traits etc may interplay, creating a multivariate and multi-factorial phenomenology, that is influenced also by asymmetries of power, influence and control. In other words, a complex dynamic.

Since the conducted study was of exploratory nature, limited to one specific organization, it will be necessary to conduct further field research, in order to find out similarities and differences across different business settings. Then, we suggest the opportunity to extend the study to multicultural organizations (where Chinese and Italian workers are mixed with co-workers of other nationalities). Moreover it would be interesting to explore the intercultural relationships in a workplace where the power asymmetry between Chinese and Italian is reversed (for example, a Chinese branch of an Italian Company).

The goal of this research is not to measure a phenomenon, but to describe the intercultural relationships as they are perceived in a specific organizational context. More over we believe that some findings of this research could contribute to better understanding the dynamic, morphogenetic and complex nature of intercultural encounters. We argue that the outcomes of this research support the dialogical

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perspective and presume the co-existence of convergent/divergent processes in intercultural relationships.

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