

# Different approaches in communication between China and Germany

*China*



中国

*Deutschland*



德国

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**Author:** Stefan Broda, [stefan.broda@gmx.de](mailto:stefan.broda@gmx.de)

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## 1. Introduction

The Chinese economy is growing. With an average annual growth rate between 7.5-10% during the last fifteen years<sup>1</sup>, it might become a market three times bigger than Europe. In particular the reforms turning the communist society into a market economy have significantly attracted foreign investments. China is now joining the WTO and therefore further opening their markets (Becher, Schlagintweit. p.6).

As labour is cheap and the country's purchasing power in absolute terms high, many companies have invested in the populous nation.

For a long time foreign companies were required to produce at least 50% of their products they wanted to sell in China domestically which has led to formations of many Joint Ventures.

As time went by, many of these new businesses were not profitable, went bankrupt or had to be broken up again. In 70% of these cases, management mistakes were not the reason for these failures but cultural differences (Reisach, Tauber, and Yuan. p.292) and the inability to overcome these intercultural obstacles.

One of the aspects of culture that is very important to be mastered in daily business life is communication. Microsoft Encarta (2002) gives a definition of communication as being "the process of sharing ideas, information, and messages with others in a particular time and place".

In this paper, the verbal aspect of communication will be analyzed using the cultural dimensions defined by Richard T. Hall (high context – low context) and Geert Hofstede (individualism – collectivism, power distance). Furthermore, the concept of face saving and the dimension of neutral and affection concerning emotions are taken into consideration.

It needs to be said that cultural generalizations regarding the Chinese or Germans are not universal facts but rather describe tendencies. They may apply to the majority of a culture but not to everybody.

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<sup>1</sup> Combined growth rate from two statistics (US-China Business Council) (Dr. Watkins).

## 2. Confucianism as a main influence on the Chinese culture

When the Chinese empire was in a chaotic state of feudalism Confucius was one of the most successful philosophers re-establishing the old order. His ideas were made the official state philosophy during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 9 ad) forming the foundation of Chinese social life until the beginning of the last century. Though there were many attempts at the end of that period to fight Confucius' ideas (e.g. Culture Revolution), it still deeply influences the values and attitudes of the Chinese population (Lin-Huber. p.36).

The key idea of Confucianism is to maintain the harmony of the ideal order of human beings. Furthermore, it sees the whole nation as one community where everybody has his own position determined by the five unequal relationships: father to son, ruler to subordinate, man to woman, older brother to younger brother, and older friend to younger friend. These clearly defined relationship definitions helped to avoid struggling over power and thereby conflict. Confucius doctrine "enabled the Chinese to stabilize their nation for more than 2000 years and even after eruptions such as war, they re-established order and normality at a remarkably speed"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated Quote (Wickert, E. 1984. China von Innen gesehen. p.214) from Lin-Huber p. 36

## 3. Individualism - Collectivism

This cultural dimension describes the weight of the individual's goals compared to the purposes of the collective. As Chinese show collectivistic tendencies within their group (Hu, Grove. p.5) (Reisach, Tauber, and Yuan. p.318) individual needs are subordinated to their group aims. In communication, one would more refer to "we" instead of "I", which would be the individual approach. Decisions would rarely be made alone but discussed in the group which is expected in more individualistic countries, such as Germany (Reisach, Tauber, and Yuan. p.319). As decisions are not made alone, individuals inside a group will not receive any recognition concerning their achievements. Because individual needs are subordinate, collectivism is a method of maintaining harmony the key element of Confucianism.

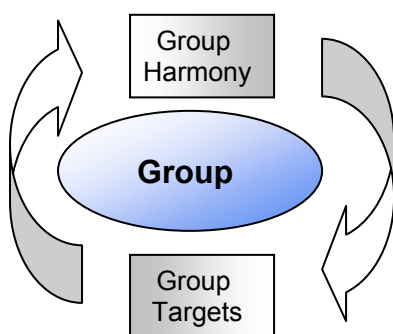
### 3.1 Task and relationship orientation - avoidance of conflict

Influenced by Confucianism, the main goal of communication in China tends to be the maintenance of harmony, communication will be rather more relationship oriented than task oriented. Unlike Germany, tending to be rather individualistic, the transfer of information is therefore subordinate.

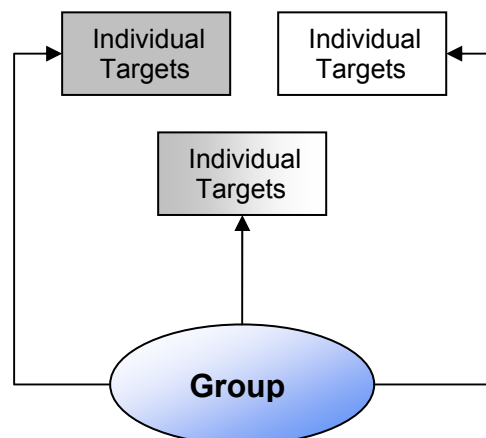
This leads to a conflict avoiding behaviour which you would seldom find in Germany as in individualistic cultures people are expected to cope with conflicts (Reisach, Tauber, and Yuan. p.318).

One very efficient approach in avoiding conflict is silence because saying less will reduce sources of provocation and therefore disagreement. This behaviour is part of the Chinese good manners and can be found in several sayings (e.g. “A good child has ears and no mouth”<sup>1</sup> (Lin-Huber p. 45) or “Too much talking leads to frustration, too much food to problems with your digestion”<sup>2</sup>). Germans who tend to be low context need more words to communicate and therefore feel uncomfortable to find themselves in silent situations.

#### Relationship Orientation / Collectivism



#### Task Orientation / Individualism



### 3.2 The difference between communicating with members of a group and outsiders

In China one distinguishes between 熟人 (Shóurén: Inner people), describing the collective or group, and the 生人 (Shēngrén: Outer people), the unknown public. Foreigners are an exception because they are seen as guests.

The principle of politeness, face and modesty only applies for 熟人. Communication with 生人 is limited in time and its purpose is the achievement of individual goals switching from a relationship orientation (maintenance of harmony) to a task orientation (“Two tickets to Beijing”<sup>1</sup>, “Three stamps”, “Fried Noodles for two people”<sup>2</sup>, Lin-Huber. p.131).

For Germans it is “very difficult to get directly to the point without any introducing words”<sup>3</sup>. To them, the Chinese practices in public life would seem to be rather distant, cool, and sometimes aggressive.

The distinction between inner and outer people also affects Chinese helpfulness. Victims of accidents will be rather unlikely to find help in China unless from someone they know or officials. First aid training is not part of the driver licence as compared to being a compulsory part in Germany (Reisach, Tauber, and Yuan. p.323). Helpfulness is expected in Germany and even if it is not always provided, failure to render assistance is an official crime.

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1 Translated Chinese saying from Lin-Huber p. 45

2 Translated Chinese saying from Lin-Huber p. 47

3 Translated Quote from Lin Huber, p. 131

## 4. High Context – Low Context

Context in Communication describes the amount of information one needs to understand a message. Low context cultures need direct and explicit verbal explanations while high context cultures are able to read between the lines, decoding the information one is not willing to directly express. Problems may occur when low context Germans and high context Chinese (Lin-Huber, p. 87) communicate with each other.

Directly addressing or criticising a person may be interpreted as respect less behaviour, and could cause offence on the Chinese side or even make them lose face (Especially in a situation in which the Chinese is not alone). Germans in China need to learn how to package their information on the one hand and learn to understand the hidden high context messages on the other hand.

Examples in business could be: HC: “We would like to ask you for further information” = LC: “I am afraid that I did not understand that point. Please repeat it” (Reisach, Tauber, and Yuan. p.331)

## 4.1 Neutral – Affective

Neutral cultures try to hide emotions while affective cultures more naturally express emotions. Germans often show emotions when having disagreements about facts during a discussion (e.g. politics). Although they avoid getting personal, the tone of the voice and body language becomes more vital and sometimes even aggressive. (Nees. p. 64)

While Germans would not necessarily take such behaviour personally, Chinese could be easily offended due to their tendency towards high context and neutral communication style.

On the other hand, it may be difficult for Germans to assess a Chinese's thoughts as they are often hidden behind a less expressive face.

## 4.2 Chinese Modesty

“Humiliate yourself but show the other respect”. This Chinese saying describes the Asian concept of modesty (Hu, Grove. p. 63). In most Asian countries, one praises the characteristics of the others and abases oneself. This can surprise Germans when Chinese react to compliments by often denying them. If for example a Chinese interpreter was told that his German was very good, his reply would likely be “Oh No, my English is very bad” (Hu, Grove. p. 49). Especially in Human Resources this could lead to misunderstandings as German HR Managers could take such denials of their applicants regarding their skills as literally and would consider them as not competent. Furthermore, this self-humiliation leads to an apology for advance behaviour. It could for example happen that before a Chinese businessperson starts his presentation he would apologize for its bad quality.

Self-humiliation and the high level of politeness also lead to different meanings of “Yes” and “No”. In China, it is considered as rather impolite to accept an offer (e.g. coffee or more food when dining) in the first place and should only be accepted when being asked the third or fourth time. The Germans on the other hand would likely interpret a “No” as a No and would not ask another time.

## 5. Power Distance

Cultures with very high hierarchies have high power distance whereas low hierarchies lead to low power distance. In his intercultural research, Geert Hofstede (1984) classified Hong Kong and Taiwan as having a higher power distance while Germans tend to have a lower power distance (Primary due to Confucius' doctrine of unequal relationships).

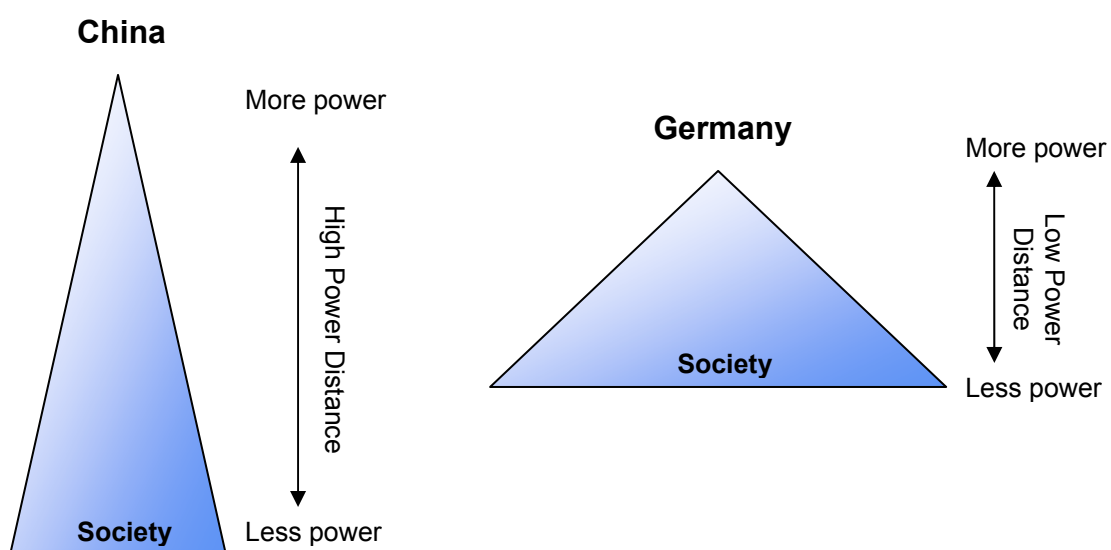
The Chinese high power distance can even be found in their language. For example, there is no single word for brother. One distinguishes between older brother (哥哥, gēge) and younger brother (弟弟, dì di) (Lin-Huber p.226).

Everybody knows his position in society's hierarchy and acts accordingly. As equal relationships are not possible, everybody knows who his superiors are, who they must be obey, and who is their subordinates, who they must teach.

In Chinese business your status will likely be determined by your position in the company and often by seniority, the "chief determinant of power in China" (Hu, Grove. p.6).

Power distance assigns the right to speak and authority. In school, the teacher is always right, as well as the boss in a company.

As a result, two Chinese first have to clarify their hierarchical positions before starting a conversation. If ranks are not given by the situation (e.g. position or age) one might ask directly for the age or profession of a person whereas questions regarding the age can be uncomfortable for Germans (especially women) as it is part of their private life.



## 5.1 Face

Every grown up human being tries to present a certain type of person (his face) to his social environment. The concept of saving your face is very strong in China. As its culture has a high power distance and is very relationship orientated, saving the face of your superiors and subordinate is of vital importance if harmony is to be maintained. An old Chinese saying expresses this need: "A person needs face as a tree needs bark" (Hu, Grove. p.59).

Although this concept is universal and found in every culture, Germans tend to be less aware of that concept, and should try to develop sensibility to avoid causing any loss of face (e.g. by criticising Chinese in front of other people).

## 6. Conclusion

As we have seen, Germany and China have very different approaches regarding their way of communicating. Being aware and possessing knowledge of these differences does not make one a successful intercultural communicator. It is a long and difficult process to bridge the intercultural gap but sensibility, awareness, and knowledge make it a lot easier.



## Appendix

Chinese Characters used:

Chinese Character	Pinyin	English
中国	zhōngguó	China
德国	déguó	Germany
熟人	shóurén	The own group (literally translated “hard boiled people”)
生人	shēngrén	The others (literally translated “raw people”)
哥哥	gēge	Older brother
弟弟	dì di	Younger brother

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