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“Why Did it All Go So Horribly Wrong?” Intercultural Conflict in an NGO in New Zealand

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Key Words

- ▶ Workplace communication
- ▶ Chinese communication
- ▶ Intercultural competence
- ▶ Intercultural conflict
- ▶ Non-governmental organisation
- ▶ Migrant and refugee employment

1. Introduction

This case study examines problematic intercultural communication in a non-governmental, not-for-profit small organization in an attempt to make sense of how and why the communication failed. Such organizations tend to employ people who have empathy for the trans-cultural and transnational flows of people, such as economic migrants and refugees, or those very people who have undergone such an experience themselves. Thus, they are often characterized by fairly flat organizational structures, and populated by management

and employees who are socialized toward and knowledgeable about migrant intercultural communication and adaptation issues, either because employees are migrants themselves, or in the case of non-migrants, they have experience of volunteering and community work to aid settlement of mobile people. In other words, the people employed within these organizations, and their end-users, are typically intercultural and multilingual.

The context of this case study is no exception. Within New Zealand there are many small, not-for-profit community organizations—culture-specific and multicultural—which rely on both paid and voluntary labor, and which are established to aid immigration and settlement of migrants and refugees. In one sense, then, the context is ripe for successful intercultural dialogue; yet like most workplaces, misunderstandings, culturally informed rules for communication, and organizational processes challenge possibilities for successful dialogue. I draw on these aspects in this case to illustrate how communicative practices may both enable and constrain intercultural dialogue.

Taking the European White Paper's definition of intercultural dialogue as "a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organizations with different cultural backgrounds or world views" (Council of Europe 2008, 10), I aim to demonstrate how this process is critical in emphasizing consensus and collaboration as an outcome, and its potential for managing unresolved conflict. However, to realize that potential requires that communicators display (aspects of) intercultural competence, and in particular, critical cultural awareness, embodied in the notion of the intercultural speaker (Byram 2008), the person who can mediate, in real time, intercultural dialogic processes with someone from another culture, and who is capable of taking the perspective of the other. It also includes the need to make salient the intertwined and cyclical processes that underpin intercultural experience and encounters (Holmes & O'Neill 2012). These include the preparation individuals undertake leading up to the encounter, the engagement itself, the evaluation of the encounter, and reflection on the experience. As this case illustrates, the ability for individuals to manage these processes that underpin intercultural competence is difficult, especially where there are unrecognized culturally informed organizational communicative practices and competing interests.

Aside from enabling any organization to achieve its goals, successful workplace communication is important for several reasons. In the New Zealand context, a number of studies attribute intercultural communication problems in the workplace to language issues which further impact workplace integration (e.g., *Connecting Diverse Communities* 2008; Henderson, Trlin, & Watts 2006). Immigration New Zealand's IMSED Report (2010) reveals that almost two-thirds of migrants make new friends at work rather than via neighbors who are often seen to be indifferent to migrants or in the community more generally. Further, North (2007) asserts that many New Zealand employers think favorably of migrants, characterizing them as diligent, committed, hardworking, dedicated, and loyal. The pluricultural/plurilingual workplace, where the national culture is not dominant, and where speakers use multiple languages and intermingle them according to which language is salient in the communication, is therefore an important location for building integrated

communities in the face of transcultural flows of languages and cultures (Risager 2006). While these studies point to the importance of intercultural communication in the workplace, they do not account for understandings of how individuals come to socially construct their knowledge of and rules for workplace communication, or the values and attitudes learned through socialization—in the family, school, and workplace—in the first culture (Berger & Luckmann 1966), or how they experience and negotiate intercultural conflict. This case study explores these processes of intercultural communication in an attempt to unravel and make sense of the differing perspectives of those involved.

2. Constructing the Case: Background and Methodology

The case is a narrative reconstruction (Van Maanen 1988), based on my research, consultancy and service in the migrant/refugee community. The case is illustrative of many of these New Zealand NGOs serving the adaptation/adjustment needs of migrants and refugees, from East and South East Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East, who have been settling in many New Zealand cities in recent years. The activities of these organizations include providing these new settlers with further information and support in language, health, welfare, social support, and New Zealand society more generally. The case describes three critical incidents concerning the lived experience of migrants working in a medium-sized community centre (MCC) as they communicate with their local New Zealand colleagues. The narrative represents a construction of multiple examples of intercultural communication that I have encountered in these organizations, and therefore, is not located in any specific context or organization. The narrative is exemplified through the perspectives of two protagonists: a white New Zealand manager (Ian), and his Chinese colleague (Felix), a migrant employed there. A limitation to this narrative is my inability to fully explain Felix’s perspective. As a white female, although having researched aspects of Chinese communication extensively, I cannot claim to understand the motivations and rationale for Chinese communication. Further, my work in these organizations did not always enable me to gain access to employees’ inner thoughts and feelings.

Ian, in his early thirties, came to MCC having spent a couple of years in social work with migrants and refugees. This experience included managing small community grants in the not-for-profit sector. His appointment to manager at MCC represented a significant step up for him in his organizational leadership and management career. However, his previous successes in the sector, his testimonials, and his academic achievements all vouched for his ability to assume the role of managing the twelve or so employees who worked on various community contracts associated with MCC.

Felix’s job, funded by the local health authority, consisted of providing health counseling and advice to migrants from the ethnic Chinese community. As a certified doctor, with a medical degree from a prestigious university in Beijing and several years of experience in a large hospital there, Felix brought considerable skills to the role, including reasonable English language skills, although much of his communication with his Chinese migrant clients was in

Mandarin. Having resided in New Zealand for only three years, and as yet unable to have his medical qualifications recognized, Felix was, in a sense, under-employed.

However, it was not in the workplace that Ian and Felix first met. They came to know each other during Saturday morning school football matches as their daughters both played on the same school team. They also had other prior associations. They shared their keen interest in football by attending matches together at the local stadium. These commonalities had brought them together into what Ian described as a friendship, especially since Felix often asked Ian for advice on matters of schooling, occasional proofreading of written work-related documents, and other issues about life in New Zealand generally.

Prior to Felix becoming employed full-time at MCC, he and Ian had been working on community contracts together. Felix had already been contracted on a part-time basis for two years by the health authority and engaged in negotiations, trying to make sense of the vagaries of public funding to community organizations. Ian watched Felix taking notes during the meeting and was impressed at how Felix seemed to make sense of all the often complex and confusing financial and technical aspects of these publicly-funded employment contracts. He came to know Ian during this time as Ian was also involved in obtaining public health funding for East African refugees. So when it was time for Felix to renegotiate his annual contract with the health authority, and this time, from part-time to full-time, he decided to ask Ian to be a support person at the meeting. The health authority decided to transfer the new full-time contract from its own regional governance to MCC, and thus, Felix would now be managed by Ian and need to report to him, although much of his day-to-day work would be outside of Ian's expertise and oversight.

It was under these circumstances that Felix and Ian begin working together at MCC, with Felix's office located adjacent to Ian's and their sharing a connecting door.

2.1. First Incident: Direct versus Indirect Communication—Owning the Fault (through a performance appraisal), or Using a Third Party to Save Face?

Ian's first months at MCC provided a steep learning curve requiring him to set up processes and practices around MCC's expansion, and incorporating new employment contracts, like that of Felix's, into MCC's structure. This meant checking important documents signed off by employees to make sure that MCC was meeting its contractual obligations. Ian had a high opinion of Felix's professional abilities in his health counseling role. However, Felix was less meticulous over paperwork, and Ian had already had to correct Felix's errors too numerous; Ian decided that he needed to clarify this shortcoming with Felix. Ian thought about how he would approach Felix on this matter. After all, this was new territory in their relationship as "friend"; now "support person" roles were replaced by that of "boss." Ian thought about the strategy he would adopt to deal with the latest shortcoming—failing to keep detailed records about how he spent his time during the day. Perhaps Felix didn't real-

ize the health authority would need these details when he would need to renegotiate his contract. Ian called a meeting with Felix in his office and approached the matter directly.

“Felix, these forms need to be filled out in more detail.”

“Oh well, we never do (sic) that before. Cynthia [previous administrator at MCC and now departed] always took care of that,” was Felix’s casual response.

“But we need to take care of that ourselves. Here’s what we need to do. Here’s the reporting template.” And so Ian explained exactly what he wanted Felix to do and how to do it. Ian noticed two things concerning his own communication from this interaction. First was his use of language. Perhaps in past exchanges, not just with Felix, but with other colleagues who had English as an additional language, Ian’s communication was too complex. Perhaps he had been careless in running sentences together and confusing issues instead of specifically pointing out things on a step-by-step basis. He needed to use shorter sentences, and not embedded phrases that included conditional phrases added onto them. He made a mental note to adopt this more direct use of language in future communication.

Second, he had noticed how Felix had often referred to Cynthia in past exchanges when things had not been quite right, and that Cynthia had not expected them to do this or that. Using Cynthia as the scapegoat, the third person, or perhaps cultural broker, started to become a useful practice that Ian, too, found himself imitating. Even in meetings with others, he found himself saying, “This hasn’t happened because Cynthia didn’t do this, but now we need to change....”

However, things didn’t change that much. From Ian’s perspective, Felix was still underperforming and these issues had not been addressed. Felix’s performance appraisal was coming up so Ian decided to address the underperformance through this forum; he decided to take what he considered to be an upbeat approach in discussing performance issues and expected outcomes:

“Felix, these are the issues we need to work on. This is what you have to do in the next six months. This is how we are going to do them. I’ll review them in six months’ time and I’m looking forward to it being a very positive performance appraisal. This new appraisal will be sitting on your file, along with a description of the way that you have worked through the issues.”

Ian began to wonder if he had dealt with the appraisal situation appropriately, especially in being so explicit. He was unsure if such things existed in Chinese culture, and how underperformance was dealt with in Chinese organizations. Perhaps he had caused Felix to lose face by implicitly criticizing his performance and offering a path to improvement. After all, having the third party to blame had enabled Ian, too, to maintain harmony in the relationship and to keep things on a much more even keel in the office. Ian felt that Felix appeared consoled by the prospect that he (Felix) had the opportunity to improve his performance. Not only would he be able to show Ian that he was good at his job, but he would also be able to regain face.

2.2. Second incident: Relationality—Breach of confidentiality, or breach of friendship?

Things went along smoothly for the first few weeks after this meeting. However, one morning Ian received notification of the termination of a funding agreement, a small health-related project funded by a local agency. Unfortunately, the employee, another Chinese health worker, would have to have her contract terminated. The uncertainty of such contracts in the sector was not unusual, but the consequences, inevitably having to tell good employees that their services were no longer required, was common enough, and a situation that Ian always found uncomfortable vis-à-vis these loyal and committed workers. Discussions with the Chinese employee, Yu Xie, and then her manager, Phyllis, ensued. It was during this latter discussion that proceedings were suddenly interrupted as Felix burst through the door into Ian's office:

"I need to see you now!" exclaimed Felix forcefully.

"Well, I'm in the middle of discussion right now, Felix. Can it wait?" Ian replied calmly.

"No! No! I need to see you now. It's VERY important. It's very, it's URGENT!" Felix almost shouted.

Ian continued calmly, although somewhat perturbed. "It can't be that urgent. Can it wait 20 minutes! I'm in the middle of an important discussion."

"No! I need to see you now!" continued Felix unrelentingly.

At that point Ian asked Phyllis to wait a moment while he went into Felix's office to speak to him in private. Once Ian had closed the door, Felix said, "You can't do this! You don't know enough about MCC and Yu-xie's work to do (sic) this decision."

Ian, reminding himself to breathe deeply, continued calmly to try to control the situation. He informed Felix that he was unable to discuss this matter now, left Felix's office, and then took the discussion with Phyllis to another room in the building.

Ian had not taken the matter of Felix listening into the conversation through the closed door lightly. As his first conflict with Felix, he was unsure of how to make sense of it. He thought about it a lot for a few days. Keeping the matter "in-house," he also discussed it with the Chairperson of MCC's governance board. He knew he had to address this serious breach of confidentiality and process with Felix, and also move Felix's office away from his own in order to avoid such breaches in the future. Ian arranged a meeting with Felix.

However, what Ian imagined would be a careful and reasoned exchange of positions and motivations for the communication, in fact, did not happen. As Ian explained his need for confidentiality in discussions with staff at MCC and therefore the need for Felix to move his office, Felix became very upset.

"But Cynthia [the previous manager of MCC] talk (sic) to me all the time about these things. I tell her why Chinese people behave like that, and she listen to me. I don't think you know what you do here."

Ian, confused by this response, continued phlegmatically and categorically that he was responsible for managing staff in MCC, he had to act in a way that was best for everyone, and this meant not involving Felix in discussions over the contracts of other staff, and fur-

ther, that Felix would need to move his office away from Ian's. On hearing these two outcomes, Felix became visibly offended. The meeting ended abruptly and Felix left Ian's office with an ill humor. Ian knew the matter had not been resolved, but felt he was moving toward resolving the situation, first, by discussing the matter with Felix and allowing him to respond, and then by asking Felix to move offices, thus avoiding the incident happening again.

Ian was also concerned about how much the previous manager had used Felix as a cultural broker. Felix and Cynthia had worked together for a couple of years prior to Ian's arrival, so Cynthia may have shared interpersonal management issues within MCC informally with Felix in an attempt to deconstruct and understand for herself the communication among staff, especially where Chinese staff were concerned. He decided to check out these suppositions and went back to Cynthia. Cynthia denied sharing personal information of such a nature. Then Ian wondered if perhaps Felix had misinterpreted exactly the level of Cynthia's divulgence, imagining the relationship to be more open than it in fact was. Ian also wondered if Felix thought he (Ian) was guarding information by refusing to discuss Yu Xie's case and then forcing him to move offices.

Ian was also aware of his own communication style: that he presented and represented situations in a clear-cut and open manner, a management style he'd been praised for by his New Zealand colleagues. He began to mull over these issues in his mind, wondering where he was going wrong and why Felix was misrepresenting his intentions, which in Ian's mind, were all about managing people and processes efficiently and effectively.

2.3. Third incident: Power relations—Building collegiality, or demarcating boundaries?

Ian informed Felix that Felix would need to move offices, and since there were no more single offices, he would need to share with two other employees. In Ian's eyes, this would be a good thing. He assured Felix that a shared office—with a Korean and a New Zealander—would be beneficial. Felix would be able to discuss work issues with these colleagues, have the opportunity to build on his intercultural and language skills, and learn more about the working environment in New Zealand. Ian thought this was a win-win solution.

Felix, however, felt differently. He did not want to move offices. He had got used to having an office to himself. It gave him status among his co-workers, and also his clients. What would these people think of him now that he would have to share with others! Besides, they were younger than he, less experienced, and with limited qualifications!

This third incident both confirmed and cemented a shift in the relationship between Ian and Felix. Ian's new role as manager of MCC meant that his relationship with Felix, at least in the work context, had changed—from “friend” to “employer.” Once, they had been able to discuss work relationships and complicated matters similar to the incidents each was experiencing now. But now it seemed that such discussions were no longer possible. Ian conjectured that maybe Felix assumed that, even though Ian was now manager, he would still share this information. After all, Ian recalled how happy and excited Felix was that Ian

had been appointed manager. Perhaps Felix imagined that the friendship would mean that Ian, in his new role, would continue to confer with and confide in him, as friends did, and they would work things out together, side by side with the equal status that such a relationship implied. Clearly, Ian's behavior towards Felix was demarcating their relationship. Even though Ian worked to create a non-hierarchical environment in MCC, encouraging collaboration and shared problem solving through shared offices and weekly meetings, in the workplace they were colleagues with roles to play, which may mean safeguarding confidences. Perhaps Felix didn't understand this difference, Ian wondered. Perhaps Felix felt picked on! Perhaps he felt his job, and his position at MCC, was under threat! Ian felt overwhelmed by all the complexities and consequences of the incident of breach of confidentiality and Felix's affront at being asked to move offices.

2.4. Climax: Working out Another Temporary Contract or Withdrawing!

Not only were things going badly for Ian and Felix in the office, but to top it all off, the health authority contacted Ian to notify him that the contract under which Felix was employed was to terminate. They wanted to meet with Ian and Felix to discuss this termination, and the possibility of establishing a new contract, but with quite a different direction. Ian and Felix duly attended several meetings with the health authority to iron out problems and issues in the past contract, and to discuss the brief for the next one. Felix listened with enthusiasm, took notes, and contributed to the discussions. Again, Ian noted how competently Felix seemed to manage these sessions, although there were times when Felix clearly had not understood the subtleties of and intentions behind the brief that was emerging. In fact, as discussions advanced, Ian became suspicious of the health authority's motives, and wondered if there would be a contract at all. It was at that point that Ian began to doubt that Felix was understanding the full implications of the situation. Even Ian admitted to himself that he had needed to read between the lines. The discussions with the health authority were anything but clear. He recalled from past conversations, when he and Felix had deconstructed these meetings, that Felix had often not understood everything.

Thus, when the letter from the health authority arrived, stating the contract under which Felix was employed would be terminated, Ian was not surprised. With only two months left for Felix to work it out, Ian knew he had to notify Felix and went into action immediately. Within twenty minutes, Ian had requested Felix to come to his office.

"The Health Authority has decided not to renew your contract when it ends in eight weeks. I'm really sorry that all of our negotiations and discussions together and with the funding body have come to nothing. So we're going to have to discuss how you work out your remaining time here. You've still got four weeks of leave remaining, and you're going to have to take some of this before you leave. We need to make a plan of what days you could take off. We also need to finalize the projects you are working on and finish them off. So we need to develop a plan to work through over the next few weeks."

Felix became distressed at the prospect of termination of his employment. His only response was to ask Ian not to tell anyone that his job was finishing. Felix then ceased to attend staff meetings, and although partially civil to Ian, for the most part avoided discussions with him. Ian did hold a couple of meetings with Felix as there were practical details around Felix completing his employment at MCC that needed to be discussed. However, these discussions resulted in Felix shouting at Ian, and blaming him for not getting the contract renewed. It was at that point that Ian suggested mediation.

Felix did not understand what this term meant, so Ian explained. Felix also asked several of his colleagues and other New Zealand people he knew to explain the concept. New Zealand law offers legal support to employees in contractual and employment disputes; Felix decided to take up this route, believing it would allow him to redeem his position and loss of face. After all, he was sure that Ian had somehow conspired against him, causing the contract to end and thereby forcing his unemployment. He also felt that Ian had lied that the health authority were terminating it, and instead, wanted Felix out. Mediation meetings proved unsuccessful, with Felix shouting across the table at Ian and Ian feeling powerless in the face of these hostilities.

Thus ended Felix' employment at MCC, along with his friendship with Ian. Later, Ian heard from a Chinese colleague that Felix had found another part-time contract in another NGO, working with new Chinese migrants in the health sector. Ian felt saddened that his relationship with Felix had broken down. Why had it all gone so horribly wrong!

3. Analysis of Intercultural Dialogue in the Critical Incidents

The three critical incidents above can be interpreted according to the following intercultural communication concepts, all of which impact processes of intercultural dialogue. These are culturally-appropriate communication in conflict situations; cultural communication styles, with particular reference to Chinese communication; relationality; and identity challenges.

3.1. Culturally-Appropriate Communication in Conflict Situations

The intercultural conflict taking place in this case study is anathema to processes of intercultural dialogue—open and respectful exchange.

For example, Ian adopted an integrative style of communication, highly valued in the New Zealand context for resulting in win-win outcomes, a style described as reflecting “a need for solution closure in conflict and involv[ing] both parties working together to substantively resolve the issue” (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel 2003, 131). Ian expected to negotiate the conflict by showing a willingness to listen to Felix's point of view, a respect for his feelings, and a desire to share each other's personal viewpoints in a face-sensitive manner. He had also expected that mediation would lead to a similar outcome and was somewhat surprised when it failed.

Western views of Chinese conflict management are often simplistically and stereotypically analyzed in terms of obliging or avoiding styles, perceived from a Western standpoint

as being negatively engaged, that is, “placating” or “flight” (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel 2003, 143). Instead, Ting-Toomey and Oetzel suggest that Chinese people adopt a dominating approach and emotional expression in situations of intercultural conflict, especially when they have high self-face concern and an independent self, which may explain Felix’s confrontational communication approach towards Ian.

Further, Felix exhibited elements of what Hwang (1997, cited in Oetzel et al. 2003) described as confrontational conflict with an outgroup or with strangers. Hwang notes that people use this conflict style to fight for principles, in Felix’s case—loss of status through under-employment and having to share offices, loss of friendship with Ian as Ian asserted what Felix perceived to be a hierarchical management style over him which also negated his status as a qualified doctor (albeit in China). Rarely does Felix use *huibi*, an evading style and the preferred Chinese approach in managing conflict (Hwang). This could be because Felix had ceased to include Ian in his in-group (as Ian had perhaps mistakenly believed), evidenced in Felix’s break with Ian in their interpersonal relationship outside of the MCC work context.

To some extent, direct and indirect communication styles also underpin how Ian and Felix approached the conflict. Ian adopted a direct communication style, focusing on reasoned and open discussion and outcomes, as he clearly set out the issues and steps required to resolve problems. In being “open,” Ian caused Felix to lose face, and threatened Felix’s understanding of their harmonious relationship. By contrast, Felix adopted an indirect style, as indicated by the use of Cynthia as a scapegoat in the first incident. This style would enable Felix to maintain harmonious relations with Ian, and thus indirectly shift responsibility for what Ian was labelling as a poor performance away from himself to include a third person (Cynthia).

3.2. Chinese Communication Styles

Harmony and relationality are generalized as being central to Chinese communication (Miike 2003), and the preferred communication style in guarding and maintaining relationships both with in-groups and outgroups. To achieve this harmony, human relations are characterized by *gan qing*, or warm human feelings resulting from empathy, friendship, and support; and reciprocity, by showing gratitude and indebtedness (Chen 2002; Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998). Chinese also seek to establish *guanxi* with others which includes the saving of the other’s face. These communication styles often give rise to indirect communication patterns, and the use of an intermediary in case of conflict (Chen & Starosta 1997), as in the deference to Cynthia in the early stages. Harmony can be achieved in interpersonal relationships through self-restraint/self-discipline, saving/giving face, indirect expression of disapproval, reciprocity, and emphasis on particularist relationships (Chen 2002). Evidence of Ian abandoning some of these behaviors in the early stages of his management role at MCC may have destroyed any feelings Felix may have had about their sharing a harmonious relationship. For example, Ian asking Felix to move offices and not sharing confidential issues

over another Chinese employee (Yu Xie) breached notions of reciprocity and Felix’s “particularist” relationship with Ian.

Miike (2003) notes that Chinese society functions as a result of the complex webs of relationships that Chinese people build through their lives to enable them to gain employment, accomplish tasks, and manage necessities in their daily lives. Maintaining harmony in a relationship is thus a way to both strengthen and safeguard it. To some extent, in Felix’s view, his relationship with Ian embodied this web, yet the intercultural communication conflict exhibited in these incidents denied that relationship. Felix felt betrayed!

Intercultural dialogue, valuing open and respectful exchange, highlights the importance of successful face work. For Chinese people, face, *mianzi*, concerns the image, or integrity and moral character of an individual (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998; Oetzel et al. 2003). Losing face invariably brings shame and disgrace to the individual and his/her family and relational network. Face also concerns the public image one projects, represented in social position and prestige gained from performing certain social roles. Jia (cited in Oetzel et al., 556) states that *mianzi* includes the following four major characteristics: “relational (connoting harmony, interdependence, and trust), moral (primary carrier of moral codes and reputation), communal/social (public censure for any deviation from the community norms), and hierarchical (emphasizing the relational hierarchy by age, power, and blood ties, etc.).”

Much of Felix’s communication choices and strategies can be understood in terms of these culturally learned communication styles, at least in the earlier stages where he seeks to maintain and strengthen his relationship with Ian, and thereby maintain harmony. Felix exemplified some of these behaviors in two ways: first, by placing responsibility for his poor reporting practice on the fact that the former manager, Cynthia, did not require him to do it, thus playing up the relational interdependence he held with his former boss; and second, in defending his Chinese colleague, Yi-Xie, as she was about to lose her job. His communication demonstrated his communal social support for a colleague in the organization, and his understanding of a hierarchical equivalence based on what had been a supportive and friendly relationship with Ian in former times, and on his close interpersonal relationship with his former boss, Cynthia.

3.3. Relationality

A further aspect of maintaining harmonious relations and thus accomplishing relational goals (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998) is manifested in acknowledging the inter-relational self (Yang 1981). Ma (2002) noted that Chinese communicators achieve this by valuing and maintaining interpersonal and hierarchical relationships, preserving and saving face, controlling emotion, and expressing feelings indirectly. This “other” orientation results in social conformity, concern about external opinions, and adopting a non-offensive communication strategy for the purposes of harmony maintenance (Yang). It also includes the recognition of the inter-relationship between two parties, or *guanxi*. (Chen 2002; Gao & Ting-Toomey). Further, “other” orientation acknowledges recognition of and respect for hierarchy and role differentiation.

However, as exemplified in the above discussion, the breaking down of relational ties between Felix and Ian and the termination of Felix's contract marked a shift in Felix's mind to "out-group" status, thus resulting in his confrontational strategy.

3.4. Identity

Much of Felix's earlier communication points to his identity arising from his Chinese experience as a doctor, and the associated high social position that this identity affords in Chinese society. As a migrant in a much less hierarchical society, Felix may have been unable to reconstruct and renegotiate his identity and role in the workplace. In other words, his avowed identity is inconsistent with the identity ascribed to him by Ian (Collier 2005). Similarly, while Ian acknowledges that they had shared an equal friendship, he sees a demarcation between their personal and professional life. As manager of MCC he is required to draw lines between professional and social life which Felix does not appear to either accept or understand. Their differing conceptions of their identities, and the professional and social roles they enacted through these identities, resulted in conflicting understandings of power relations and positions as they each sought to negotiate a face-saving position.

4. Conclusion

On a theoretical level, the case study affords the possibility of a nuanced understanding of intercultural conflict, communication, and negotiation that goes beyond simplistic East/West and Chinese/Anglo representations as Ian and Felix display their own individual cultural identity trajectories. The outcomes of this case suggest unproductive communication and spiraling conflict that left both protagonists feeling perplexed and frustrated. In the face of Ian's direct communication style and unawareness of aspects of Chinese communication, Felix, placed in the position of outsider, adopted a confrontational strategy. In failing to comprehend Ian's signals to separate work and non-work relations, Felix felt disavowed and devalued. Attempts at intercultural dialogue, that is, open and respectful exchange of positions, appeared to have broken down as the complex social and professional relationships shared by Ian and Felix went to some extent unrecognized and negotiated.

Referring again to the Council of Europe's White Paper (2008, 10), intercultural dialogue aims to "develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality; and to enhance creative processes." Implicit in this definition is that dialogue should not be restricted to practices involving consensus, but to also include collaboration and contradiction (Ganesh & Holmes 2011, practices that entail a tolerance for conflict in communication. As this case demonstrates, contradiction underpins the communicative processes between these two protagonists. What is missing is an understanding of the origins and meaning of these contradictions to bring about collaboration, and the competence to be able to manage it; a starting point for dialogue might well be communication about and

tolerance for difference. But successful intercultural dialogue is more than that: it is also contingent on intercultural competence, the ability to be an intercultural speaker, and skills in managing intercultural encounters; it also requires tolerance for ambiguous and contradictory positions, and creative communication processes to expose and negotiate these positions. In Ian and Felix’s communication, these aspects of intercultural dialogue appear to be undeveloped.

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