

## Relation From the Perspectives of Chinese Culture and German Culture: Cases Analysis of Networking in Germany-Funded Enterprises

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### Abstract

Networking is an essential part of work for both the German and Chinese who serve for Germany-funded in China. In this paper, unstructured interviews will be conducted to twenty-six subjects employed by Germany-funded corporations. After a thorough analysis of their intercultural experiences, a summary of the similarities and differences of individual networking methods and strategies follows. A combination of the reasons behind strategic differences and some plausible suggestions comes as the final part.

**Key words:** Chinese and German culture; Networking; Germany-funded corporations

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### INTRODUCTION

With the globalization of economy, the number of Germany-funded enterprises has been increasing year by year. These enterprises are engaged in different fields and vary in scale. For both Chinese and German workers who serve for Germany-funded enterprises, there is still a great deal to learn as for how to manage individual relations with the enterprise, colleagues and clients in

a bicultural environment. This paper is based on the interviews conducted to twenty-six employees of German businesses from either China or Germany, trying to dig out the similarities and differences of networking strategy from authentic intercultural experiences. The underlying reasons will be exposed before certain proposals are put forward on the future communication between Chinese and Germans personnel.

### 1. RELATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF CHINESE CULTURE AND GERMAN CULTURE

Many Germans who live or work in China for a certain period of time can pronounce the word “relation” in Chinese and almost all of them come to a consensus about the significance of relation in China, whether they have systematically learned the language or not. With an overview of Germany’s literature in intercultural communication, the word relation rarely appears as a major subject in the theoretical and practical achievements of the intercultural communication between Germany and other countries. In the study of intercultural communication between China and other countries, however, relation is a frequent occurrence.

In German, the word “Beziehung”, which is an equivalence of relation, is used, in most cases, in its plural form in communication, which means the specific connections between individuals, groups, organizations or nations<sup>1</sup>. In *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current Chinese*, relation is defined as the interconnection between either humans or things<sup>2</sup>.

Semantically, there is little difference between the

<sup>1</sup> “Beziehung”, *Langenscheidt Standard Dictionary, German as a foreign language* (1993). Langenscheidt KG, Berlin and Munich.

<sup>2</sup> “关系”(relation), *Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current Chinese* (2005). Beijing: The Commercial Press.

definitions of “relation” in German and in Chinese, but in authentic communication, the understandings of relation in these two cultures differentiate to a great extent. In German culture, relation is a description of some certain existing connection, which does not have functionality. In Chinese culture, nevertheless, relation is more than an existing connection. It is rather a weighted counter in communication. This can be proven by some Chinese terms that are relevant to the concept of relation. For example, in the study of relations, relation is defined as the ways or tricks used to pull strings and “the net of relations”, as the net of interpersonal or social relations nurtured by individuals or groups to seek private gain at work<sup>3</sup>. Although they are lexically satirical or derogatory, these words in a subtle way convey the importance of relation in Chinese culture.

## 2. NETWORKING OF CHINESE AND GERMAN PERSONNEL IN GERMANY-FUNDED ENTERPRISES: CASE ANALYSIS

In order to learn the similarities and differences of the various methods adopted by Chinese and German personnel in Germany-funded corporations, the author in total interviews twenty-six subjects from such companies, among whom nine are Germans and the rest Chinese. They hold posts like general manager, head of sales, technology manager, secretary, etc. in twenty different corporations, either Germany-funded or joint venture enterprises. Among the German subjects, seven are heads of their companies (chief executive officer, president or general manager), and the other two heads of technology and manufacture. The posts of the Chinese employees are more widely spread, ranging from heads of German business office in China and sales or technology manager to average secretary. These enterprises, engaged in areas like manufacture, service, fair, insurance, certification, aviation, are mostly located in the Pearl River Delta region.

In this paper, unstructured interviews are conducted to probe into the management systems of these enterprises, the daily routines of the subjects and the problems in dealing with clients and partners. With a focus on the methods of dealing with different kinds of relations, the following text will be devoted to the establishment and maintenance of the relations between the subjects and their respective enterprises, colleagues and clients, from which an attempt is made to draw a conclusion of the similarities and differences between Chinese subjects and German subjects.

<sup>3</sup> “关系学”(study of relations), “关系网”(net of relations), *Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current Chinese*. (2005). Beijing: The Commercial Press.

### 2.1 Establishing Connection With Enterprises – Recruitment System

After learning how the subjects get recruited in their companies, the author gathers that except three who are the owners of their companies, the other four of the subjects from Germany get recruited via either public recruitment or opportunities got from their vocational education. As for the Chinese subjects, most of them enter their companies via public recruitment or recommendation. Among them, six are recruited via recommendations of friends or teachers or some connections from previous jobs, and the rest of them, on the other hand, via information and advertisement in newspapers, job fairs or company briefing sessions. While the access to job vacancies differentiates in one way or another, the subjects get the final tickets to their present companies after a series of fierce competition.

It is noticeable that in one of these Germany-funded enterprises, a special recruitment policy is implemented. That is, whenever there is job vacancy, information would be announced to the whole staff to encourage recommendations. The detail goes like this – regular information about job vacancy would be sent to the staff via email attached with a recommendation form, and if there is any suitable candidate, the form can be filled and sent to the human resources department. Once the candidate gets recruited, the proposer would be rewarded with a bonus. As far as the subjects are concerned, this recommendation-and-reward policy allows the company to know the candidates in a deeper level from the very beginning when compared with public recruitment, which requires a process of resume reviewing and face-to-face interviews. But the premise should be that the staff are reliable in term of talents recommendation and have a good knowledge of the jobs.

### 2.2 Dealing With Colleagues

When it comes to the impression of their German superiors and colleagues, the Chinese employees in Germany-funded enterprises usually use “open” to describe them. This characteristic is shown, in most cases, when individual opinions are expressed straightforward to their superior or colleagues. For example, any disagreement about the job performance of colleagues is welcomed, and this opposite stance at work will not be extended to personal life, namely it does not have any negative influence on the personal relationship between the people involved. Most German subjects, however, use “friendly” to describe their Chinese colleagues. Due to the fact that the majority of the German subjects are at the helm of their companies, their connection with Chinese colleagues is confined to communication and cooperation at work only. Few Germans develop personal relationships with Chinese colleagues outside work.

The experience of one of the Chinese subjects may be worth learning. She was an employee of the branch office

of a Germany-funded company. Once, a German manager resident in Beijing came to inspect the Guangzhou branch. Most of the Chinese employees avoided any talk with him, while she managed to chat with the boss at the intervals of a meeting. With the discovery that they have kids of a similar age, they began to discuss children education, which intrigued them both. From then on, the boss had a deep impression on her and invited her to be his neighbor when the staff was eating out. The establishment of this connection has helped accelerate an application of procurement, avoiding the lengthy process of approving.

She gave her comment on this experience, "Sometimes I reflect through it and the conclusion I get is that the boss will treat you the way you treat him. Under certain circumstances, the boss hopes to be closer to his employees, but the fact is people are unwilling to get close to their boss for one reason or another. I think people can just be relaxed in front of the boss. He'll be happy if you do so. He is a person. He has emotions and needs to share with others. The problem is that people tend to be uneasy and distant with the presence of their boss. Generally speaking, people from outside China are not as jittery as Chinese people. The reason why Chinese people don't dare to get close to their boss is that people think it is shameful to pull strings. Actually, foreign people hope to be seen as ordinary. Of course, it'll be different if you're at work. That's how I feel."

Many Chinese employees in foreign enterprises keep a distance from their superiors due to language barriers or fear of misunderstanding. A conclusion can be drawn from the subject's experience that, in fact, rather than the significance of hierarchy in Chinese culture, establishing personal relationships can help deepen relations at work, which is equally workable in the networking with German superiors and colleagues.

### **2.3 Establishing and Sustaining Relations With Clients**

For Germans who live and work in China, the cultural environment surrounding them is completely new. Thus, they tend to come across culture shock they have trouble understanding when dealing with Chinese partners or clients from outside the company.

A German preparing to set up a factory has questioned the work efficiency of Chinese people during his visit. He said that it takes triple the time to get whatever done in China. If it normally takes 15 minutes to address a problem, it will mean 45 minutes. If a conversation is needed, then three will happen. Once he attempted to place purchasing orders on fittings from a staff in charge of an US-funded company, but he was rejected though after all their prolonged talks. After complaints were made to the superior of this person, they met a few more times but he still got the reply that they needed to wait for more discussion made at meetings. As far as the German respondent is concerned, the three key messages including

products, delivery time and pricing have been covered, so he finds it incomprehensible not to get any explanation about why they failed to reach consensus.

Another German described his special product-selling experience. At a promotion event of the enterprise, he was introduced to a potential client. He was not consulted about the price or quality of products but was rather invited to a drink. It was unacceptable to him to drink during work hours, but he did so after the client insisted in the name of respect. It turned out that the contract was quickly signed afterwards and no objection was raised about the price.

It is imaginable that what these Germans have experienced in China can also happen to Chinese employees. But none of the Chinese employees surveyed has regarded such experience special or brought it up in particular. Speaking of sending gifts to clients at the end of the year, a respondent thought it was completely natural and understandable to sustain relations with clients in such a manner.

The reason for different reactions between Chinese and German employees lies in their distinct attitudes towards "relations". For Chinese people, the prerequisite of trust and cooperation is building up a private connection first. If your partner is willing to have a drink with you, it means he is ready to be your friend, laying the foundation for your further business ties. Neither the information about products nor the pricing is of concern under this circumstance. Moreover, Chinese people tend to observe their new business partners with doubts. Even though relevant information has been well grasped, they still tend to hesitate and solve problems inefficiently. According to Hall's theory, Chinese culture can be categorized as a typical "high-context culture" where informal channels—private connections outside the workplace—for information delivery is of particular significance. Therefore, Germans who are completely focused on business itself will hardly get the reaction they expect from their Chinese partners.

### **2.4 The Norms of "Distance" Hidden Behind "Relations"**

Whether in the workplace or in daily life, relationship building means getting closer to others. Yet, skills are required to keep an appropriate distance from others to sustain relations. In every social system, group or nation, there exist certain norms for distance-keeping that people follow when socializing. To socialize successfully with people from different cultures, it is essential to understand such norms in a specific culture with "critical tolerance" (Wierlacher, 2003).

Comparing how Chinese and German employees entered Germany-funded enterprises, one could discover that some enterprises chose to recruit candidates they had already known or took the recommendations from internal staff as an important evaluation standard. In other words,

information gained from the latest channels such as resumes and interviews during the recruitment process is not entirely counted on in the course of “relation-building” between employers and employees. Instead, information previously known is taken into account. This tallies with the characteristic of a “high-context culture” where private connections and working relations are not strictly differentiated. Despite so, a majority of the enterprises in the following process go through rounds of selections in accordance with standard procedures in order to recruit a most suitable candidate. During this process, the relation-building between employers and employees is based on objective factors such as the experience and abilities of employees. What’s more, rigorous interview procedures are in place, aligning with the emphasis of German enterprises on working procedures.

Comparing the methods and strategies adopted by Chinese and German employees respectively to deal with their colleagues in Germany-funded enterprises, one could discover they are both accustomed to separate work from personal life and the two cultures are not contradictory. It is positions rather than cultural backgrounds that determine whether they are close or not. Since German employees are usually top management, it is relatively hard for them keep close relations with their Chinese colleagues after work. Employees from the two different cultures but holding similar positions are more likely to have connections after work which has a positive impact on their work. When it comes to conflicts, many Chinese have the habit of avoiding them and smoothing them out. But Chinese employees in these Germany-funded enterprises can be straightforward and focused directly on the work itself. If they dare not express their opinions including unpleasant ones, they will be considered incapable. It is, to a large extent, because they are well equipped with cross-cultural communication abilities due to their previous experience in making friends or working with Germans or foreigners from other western countries.

They follow the norms that keep their work away from their private life, which helps to form healthy relations with colleagues.

When dealing with clients or partners from outside the enterprise, German employees will find it a challenge. In the final analysis, it is because they have not yet grasped the Chinese way of removing interpersonal gaps. For Chinese, the key to removing gaps is building up private connections which pave way for their future working relations. Even in a workplace, Chinese people try to establish private ties with those they negotiate with by sharing meals together or sending gifts. After they get closer, their working relations will be naturally built up. For German people, however, work and private life are separated. Naturally, they cannot understand why their Chinese clients would test their willingness to remove the gaps and make friends.

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## CONCLUSION

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A couple of advice could be taken when it comes to dealing with relations with employers, colleagues and clients. For one thing, Chinese employees should respect the German culture that distinguishes working relations from private connections and be straightforward and directly focused on the work itself when dealing with employers and colleagues. For another, considering that the removal of interpersonal gaps is valued in Chinese culture, it is better for German employees to build up private connections when dealing with Chinese clients before they start business cooperation.

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