



## Chinese communication characteristics: A Yin Yang perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Research on Chinese communication has so far focused on the understanding of the impact of traditional Confucian cultural values on Chinese communication characteristics. While this Confucian-oriented Chinese communication style remains meaningful and in many situations powerful in Chinese society and in communication between Chinese and western professionals, the paradox inherent in Chinese culture and communication has rarely been researched. Moreover, China's three decades of rapid economic progress and unprecedented interactions with the rest of the world have contributed to an emergent Chinese communication style, which differs from the traditional one. Based on the philosophical principle of Yin Yang, this paper provides a framework to capture the paradox and change of Chinese communication characteristics in today's changing Chinese society. Implications for how to communicate effectively with the Chinese from practitioners' point of view are also discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

China is becoming an economic superpower with unprecedented interactions with the rest of the world. "China now exports in a single day more than it sold abroad during the entire year of 1978" (Meredith, 2006: 16). Chinese firms have also started going global actively since China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (Alon & McIntyre, 2008; Larcon, 2009). In 2009, a total of 37 Chinese multinational corporations were found on Fortune 500 list compared with just six 10 years ago. Numerous Chinese fact-finding delegations are sent to abroad to study foreign experience. Against the backdrop of this new landscape of international business and intercultural relations, research on Chinese communication and how to communicate effectively with the Chinese becomes relevant and timely.

Chinese communication as an area of academic inquiry has attracted much interest and important findings have been published (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst, 1996; Jia, Lu, & Heisey, 2002; Zhu, 2005). Research on Chinese communication has so far focused on the impact of traditional Confucian cultural values on Chinese communication characteristics. While this Confucian-oriented Chinese communication style remains meaningful and in many situations powerful in Chinese society in general and in communication between Chinese and western professionals in particular, the paradox (defined as "the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements", see Cameron & Quinn, 1988: 2, in Fang, 2005–2006: 76) inherent in Chinese culture and communication has rarely been researched. Moreover, the impact of China's transition from Mao to Market and its increasing interactions with foreign cultures on Chinese communication style needs to be captured systematically.

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In the age of globalization “change has encroached upon nearly every stable pattern of life–cultural values, religious beliefs, the structures and functions of sociocultural institutions including the family, and intergenerational relationship” (Kim & Bhawuk, 2008: 303). China seems to be no exception. Globalization, foreign direct investment (FDI), the Internet, global education and entertaining programs are exposing China to unprecedented borderless and wireless global knowledge transfer, information sharing and cultural learning. Chinese institutions of higher learning are “actively courting foreign-trained faculty”, showing openness and willingness to adjust curriculum and making changes (Shenkar, 2005: 4). “When you go to the Party School in Beijing, they are no longer teaching you Marxist Leninist economics. They are teaching modern economic modeling” (Fernandez & Underwood, 2006: 219).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the dynamics of Chinese communication characteristics in today’s changing China. “[H]uman beings, organizations, and cultures intrinsically embrace paradoxes for their sheer existence and healthy development” (Fang, 2005–2006: 77). If Chinese culture embraces paradoxical value and behavioral orientations (Fang, 2003, 2010), how would the paradoxical nature of Chinese culture influence Chinese communication characteristics? If economic growth gives rise to cultural values such as freedom, self-expression and quality of life (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Leung, 2006), how would China’s market-oriented economic development, globalization, foreign direct investment (FDI) and the Internet give rise to the changes in Chinese communication characteristics?

This research holds on to a dynamic vision of Chinese culture and communication, echoing the recent advances in theory building in psychology (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000; Hong, Yang, & Chiu, in press), sociology and anthropology (Naylor, 1996), international business (Bird & Stevens, 2003; Boyacigiller, Kleinberg, Phillips, & Sackmann, 2003; Brannen & Salk, 2000; Tung, 2008), cross-cultural management (Bird & Fang, 2009; Fang, 2003, 2005–2006, 2010; Holden, 2002), organization studies (Weick, 1995), and China business studies (Faure & Fang, 2008) where culture is conceptualized not just as a tradition but more as a socially constructed changing phenomenon which embraces diversified and even paradoxical mental switching and value orientations. The dynamic vision of culture calls for research on intra-cultural variations, diversity, and paradox (Fang, 2005–2006; Tung, 2008).

After this introduction, the paper provides a literature review. Then, the changing Chinese institutional and social cultural contexts are discussed. Moreover, Chinese communication characteristics are captured in terms of paradox and change in the light of Oriental philosophy of Yin Yang (阴阳). The paper concludes by discussing future research directions and implications for communicating effectively with the Chinese in today’s borderless and wireless business world.

## 2. Literature review

Communication is culture (Hall, 1959, 1966, 1976). Human beings’ communication style is coded by their “cultural scripts” (Wierzbicka, 1996). The Chinese communication style can only be understood in indigenous Chinese culture (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Although discussions of Chinese culture and Chinese communication style can be found in both academic studies (e.g., Adler, 1991; Chen & An, 2009; Chen, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Gao et al., 1996; Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001) and popular writings (e.g., De Mente, 1992; Hu, 1944; Kapp, 1983; Seligman, 1990), studies aiming at a systematic understanding of Chinese communication characteristics are rare.

Chinese communication style is on the high end of Hall’s (1976) continuum for high- to low-context. A high-context culture communicates with implicit messages whose meaning can only be inferred from the context. Similarly, Chinese are defined as belonging to a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1980; Pratt, 1991). Personal interdependence, social harmony and group interests are prioritized over personal autonomy and satisfaction of the needs of the self.

Guo-Ming Chen (e.g., 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Chen & An, 2009) has had a number of studies on communication by drawing inspirations from the dialectical and dialogical interaction between Yin and Yang, leading to the conceptualization of communication as an interdetermining process in which interactants develop a mutually dependent relationship through the exchange of symbols. For example, Chen (2009a) has developed a model of communication based on the Chinese thought of *I Ching* (or the *Book of Changes*, see Chen, 2008) and identified five characteristics of human communication: holistic, hierarchical, interconnected, creative, and harmonious. Chen (2009b: 402) points out that “most researchers blindly treat Chinese as being collectivistic and US Americans as being individualistic without considering the internal variations of a culture. This tendency is problematic and can be dangerous, because it may misinform the results of research”.

In the current reality of China, modern culture can hardly be defined in a simple way. To understand that Chinese culture is not collectivist the way Japanese culture is labeled as collectivist, one has just to stand at a street in any Chinese city and watch how individual and collective interests are handed. The first conclusion would be that collective interest is far from being the main priority for quite a few drivers, motorcycles, bicycle as well as pedestrians.

Research on Chinese communication conducted by Gao and her team has had wide influence in management and communication literature (Gao et al., 1996; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). The research by Gao and her team addresses Chinese communication style by penetrating beneath the “emics” (Triandis, 1994) of indigenous Confucian cultural traditions. Five distinctive characteristics of Chinese communication are singled out (see e.g., Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Gao et al., 1996): Implicit communication (*hanxu*), listening-centered communication (*tinghua*), polite communication (*keqi*), insider-communication (*zijiren*), and face-directed communication (*mianzi*).

### 2.1. Implicit communication (*hanxu* 含蓄)

In Chinese, *han* means “to contain,” “to embody” or “to reserve”; *xu* means “to store,” or “to save”. Put together, *hanxu* suggests an implicit and indirect Chinese approach to communication. “The Chinese phrase *hanxu* refers to a mode of communication (both verbal and nonverbal) which is contained, reserved, implicit, and indirect. . . . To be *hanxu*, one does not spell out everything but leaves the ‘unspoken’ to the listeners” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 37).

### 2.2. Listening-centered communication (*tinghua* 听话)

*Tinghua* translates literally as “listen talks.” Chinese culture encourages listening not speaking. “To Chinese, there are conditions associated with speaking, and not everyone is entitled to speak. Thus, a spoken ‘voice’ is equated with seniority, authority, age, experience, knowledge, and expertise. As a result, listening becomes a predominant mode of communication” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 42).

### 2.3. Polite communication (*keqi* 客气)

In Chinese, *ke* means “guest” and *qi*, “air” or “behavior”. The term *keqi* means “behavior of guest,” or in a generalized sense, “polite,” “courteous,” “modest,” “humble,” “understanding,” “considerate,” “well-mannered” (Yao, 1983: 72). *Keqi* is a basic principle observed by the Chinese in their everyday communication. The ritual of *keqi* can be applied differently based on in-group vs. out-group distinction. “*Keqi* also embodies the values of modesty and humbleness in Chinese culture (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 47).

### 2.4. Insider-communication (*zijiren* 自己人)

*Zijiren* means “insiders” in Chinese as opposed to *wairen* “outsiders”. “Chinese tend to become highly involved in conversation with someone they know (insiders), but they rarely speak to strangers (who are perceived as outsiders)” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 50). “Observation of this insider effect suggests that type of relationship is a critical dimension in Chinese communication processes. The nature of the relationship determines what is communicated and how information should be transmitted” (Gao et al., 1996: 288).

### 2.5. Face-directed communication (*mianzi* 面子)

Face (*mianzi*, *lian* 脸) involves the respect of the in-group for the person with good moral reputation as well as his or her prestige (Hu, 1944). Face is thus not only an individual’s but also his or her in-group’s business, often with moral connotations. Face permeates every aspect of interpersonal relationships in Chinese communication because of the Chinese culture’s overarching relational orientation (Gao et al., 1996).

The above five-point framework of Chinese communication characteristics represents a hallmark in Chinese communication research. It rests on a number of assumptions. Firstly, Communication is embedded in culture; “[T]he Chinese way of communicating can be understood, explained, and interpreted only in its cultural context” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 35–36). Secondly, “One predominant Chinese belief about talk involves the association of speaking with negative consequences” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 36). Thirdly, “Chinese self is defined by relations with others. . . .As a result, others’ perceptions and views are critical to the interpretation of various messages” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 36). Fourthly, maintaining relationship is an integral part of Chinese communication and “the primary functions of [Chinese] communication are to maintain existing relationships among individuals, reinforce role and status differences, and to preserve harmony within the group” (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 37). The framework provides a sophisticated guideline to understand Chinese communication characteristics from the vantage point of traditional Chinese culture and Confucian philosophy. Each of the five Chinese communication characteristics can be identified in Chinese business and management texts (e.g., Blackman, 1996; Chen, 2001; Clissold, 2004; Fang, 1999, 2006; Faure, 1998, 1999; Mann, 1989; McGregor, 2005).

While the five-point framework gives importance to Confucian cultural values (e.g., relationship, face, politeness, and codes of etiquette) and their impact on Chinese communication characteristics, it does not discuss paradox inherent in Chinese culture and Chinese communication as embodied by the Chinese philosophy of Yin Yang (Chen, 2001, 2002; Fang, 2003, 2005–2006, 2010; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). In line with the spirit of Yin Yang in communication theory building advocated by Guo-Ming Chen (e.g., 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Chen & An, 2009) but with more focus on the paradoxical nature of culture and communication, this paper argues that Yin Yang is key to understanding the dynamics of Chinese communication characteristics. Yin Yang is key to understanding why in business communication the Chinese negotiator can be sincere, formal, reserved, and “win–win” oriented at the one hand and why the same Chinese negotiator can be “insincere”, “informal”, “open” and “win–lose” oriented on the other hand (Fang, 1999). In other words, the range of variation is much wider than what is allowed within western Cartesian logics.

Moreover, the five-point framework does not discuss the changing Chinese communication style as a consequence of the changing institutional and cultural contexts in China. “To understand the behavior of Chinese people it is important to examine the interplay between the contemporary social forces and traditional values and beliefs” (Leung, 2008: 184). If

Chinese communication can be understood, explained, and interpreted only in Chinese cultural context (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) and if Chinese culture is undergoing transformation in terms of value change (Fang, 2010; Faure, 2008; Faure & Fang, 2008), there is a need to extend the existing framework to capture the paradoxes and changes of Chinese communication characteristics in today's Chinese society in larger institutional, cultural and philosophical contexts of China.

### 3. Changing institutional and sociocultural contexts in China

“To be honest, it's difficult to say that there's anything that's specific to China, anything that you don't see everywhere in the world. The only thing that is really different is the speed of change.” (Steve Gilman, B&Q's CEO for Asia, in Desvaux & Ramsay, 2006: 90)

In the 5000 years of Chinese history, the past three decades (1978–2008) of the People's Republic of China have proportionally elicited changes that no western observer could foresee (Faure & Fang, 2008). The trajectory of China's development shows a fundamental shift from Mao to Market (Schubert, 2008; Story, 2003), from a nation where capital, capitalists, market, private ownership, individualism, self-expression, fashion, knowledge, professionalism, Confucian tradition, quality college education, academic degrees, piano playing and almost anything coming from the west were condemned as evils to a nation where these concepts, values, lifestyles, behaviors and almost anything western are, for good and for bad, embraced today.

China has been transformed from one of the world's most backward economies in the 1970s to the world's 2nd largest economy today in terms of purchasing power parity (Shenkar, 2005). China's GDP (gross domestic product) has increased by 10% per year on average since 1978. The Chinese people's living standard has been improved in general and particularly in coastal regions of the Chinese mainland. The World Bank estimates that approximately 500 million Chinese people have been lifted out of poverty since 1980 (Fang, Zhao, & Worm, 2008).

China was an isolated country with basically zero foreign direct investment (FDI) and extremely limited experience in international business as late as in the 1970s. Today, China is one of the world's largest FDI recipients with the incoming FDI totaling US\$ 92.4 billion in 2008. Nearly 600,000 foreign invested companies including 450 of Fortune 500 global corporations are operating on the Chinese territory. Many Chinese firms are listed in domestic and foreign stock exchanges, seeking financing in global financial markets. It is increasingly common that Chinese firms have substantial equity from foreign interests and even foreign nationals can be found sitting on some Chinese firms' board of directors.

Since China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, Chinese firms have become increasingly active in going international. Huawei, ZTE, Haier, Lenovo and Midea are eminent examples. In 2009, 37 Chinese companies were on the Fortune 500 list. Thirty years ago, private business did not exist in China; today, private and non-state sectors contribute to more than 70% of China's GDP. In March 2007, a new law was passed by the National People's Congress to legitimize private ownership in China and protect personal property (Fang et al., 2008).

China is active in learning on the global arena. More than one million Chinese have pursued studies in foreign institutions since 1977 (People's Daily, 2007). Today, it is almost impossible to find any of some 2000 universities in China that does not have any foreign exchange activities. Global MBA (Master of Business Administration) program jointly offered by Chinese and foreign institutions of high learning has played an important role in knowledge transfer and cultural learning in today's China.

Chinese firms have also started making use of western expertise to improve management (Fernandez & Underwood, 2006). Chinese government's regular press conference with its official spokesman or spokeswoman speaking to and answering questions from the world media in a professional way is a relatively new phenomenon as result of China's learning from the western mass communication technique. Indeed, questioning Chinese leaders and obtaining their answers in live TV press conference was impossible in China under Mao but now it is within the scope of normal expectation in connection with important political, economic and social events at home and abroad.

China is the world's largest mobile phone market with nearly 700 million mobile phone subscribers in 2009. China is also the world's largest Internet nation with over 300 million Internet users. Though it is under censorship by the Chinese government, the Internet is gaining an increasing power in China in creating and spreading new concepts and lifestyles and in shaping public opinions. Chinese leaders give increasing importance to the suggestions and opinions from Chinese net citizens (Fang et al., 2008). A direct online dialogue between China's President Hu Jintao and China netizens in June 2008<sup>1</sup> may be seen as the Party image promotion, but the importance of the Internet as an effective means for expressing one's opinions and critiques to the government is recognized by more and more Chinese today. Every year, many corruption charges are initiated through online messages from netizens.

A direct consequence of China's “open-door” policy implemented since 1978 is that Chinese society is now in direct contact with foreign concepts, technologies, cultures and lifestyles. This direct touch of foreign concepts, technologies, cultures and lifestyles has significant implications for understanding the change of Chinese communication. “As groups increase their interactions and dependencies, everyone of them will have to change some of their beliefs and behaviors” (Naylor, 1996: 208). No human values are time-free (Rokeach, 1973). Human values are not immune to changes entailed by economy development (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005: 34). “Culture and economic development are likely to exert mutual influence on

<sup>1</sup> <http://tv.sohu.com/20080620/n257628153.shtml>. Retrieved on 2008-07-03.

each other. Value associated with long-term orientation may have contributed to the economic success of East Asia, but economic development may also propel important value change in East Asia" (Leung, 2006: 236).

#### 4. The Yin and Yang of Chinese culture

China's enormous economic development has strongly influenced today's Chinese values and behaviors (Faure, 2008; Faure & Fang, 2008). Nevertheless, by "changes" we do not mean to imply that traditional Chinese cultural values and communication characteristics have vanished from the Chinese soil but that both old and new cultural values and communication characteristics are more and more visibly coexisting in today's Chinese society as a consequence of China's interactions with foreign cultures in the age of globalization. "China seems to have never given up its single most important cultural characteristic, the ability to manage paradoxes. Ancient Chinese society was much of a cultural oxymoron. In the current age of globalization, Chinese society has retained and reinforced this unique feature even within the most significant sociocultural changes" (Faure & Fang, 2008: 194).

In cross-cultural management and intercultural communication literature, culture and communication are conceptualized in terms of static bipolar cultural dimensions (e.g., Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980, 1991, 2001). Some societies/cultures/communications are classified as "high-context", "polychronic", "collectivistic", "feministic", etc. while other societies/cultures/communications are classified as "low-context" and "monochronic", "individualistic" and "masculine", etc. For example, Chinese are routinely described as high-context and collectivistic people whereas Americans are referred to as individualistic people. Although this "either-or" methodology has its obvious advantage in terms of focus, clarity and ease in cross-cultural comparison, it misses inherent "both-and" diversity within culture in terms of paradox and change (see, e.g., Fang, 2003, 2005–2006, 2010).

The dichotomist system of analysis reflects a western bias in defining the object as it sets attributes in terms of opposition. The Chinese logic rather tends to associate them. The non-contradictory principle is a product of western ideology, and in the Chinese semantic field just presents caricatures of reality as it applies a western analytical grid to understand non-western contents. From the Yin Yang point of view, Chinese people, like many other people, are collectivists in some situations and contexts but the same Chinese people are individualists in some other situations and contexts. Fang (2005–2006, 2010) observed that Chinese and Asian people in general may be reserved and implicit at formal workplace (e.g., discussions in formal conference room, contract signing ceremony) but the same people can be expressive and explicit in informal settings which are important for business relationships (e.g., karaoke, business dinner, and informal social event). It is even a functional necessity to build trust when doing business. In the words of a foreign manager: "Business is done not in a conference room or in an official negotiation, but rather over the mahjongg table at home or in a hotel room" (Fang, 1999). Such paradoxical orientations – the Yin and Yang – of Chinese thinking and behavior needs to be taken seriously if intercultural communication theory is to be further developed with vitality.

Research on Chinese and Japanese communication styles put them in the category of high-context (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). However, closer analysis (Ikeda, 2004) shows that they are drastic differences between both Confucian influenced practices. Chinese seem to be more direct than Japanese and resort to a much wider range of options (sometimes defined as even contradictory) when dealing with a counterpart. In fact, the differential source of these communication styles is precisely the Taoist dimension, which is exclusively Chinese in origin and, thus, orchestrates behaviors and mindsets along the Yin Yang principle.

Until most recently Yin Yang which is at the center of Chinese cognitive process (Chen, 2001, 2002; Nisbett, 2003; Peng & Nisbett, 1999) has rarely been given importance in cross-cultural communication research. Guo-Ming Chen's work (e.g., Chen & An, 2009; Chen, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) has been instrumental in bringing the indigenous Chinese thinking to the communication theory building. Chen (2008) has elaborated the historical and philosophical characteristics of Yin Yang in his analysis of the Chinese concept of *bian* (change). For centuries the mind of Chinese elites have been fascinated by the question "What is the fundamental principle of the universe?" The answer lies in the discourse on the concept of *bian* (change) which is the central theme of *I Ching* (易经), or the *Book of Changes*. Chen's (2008: 7–9) explanation of Yin Yang, *I Ching*, and the continuum nature of the dichotomies is insightful which is worth quoting at length:

As an unalterable rule, change dictates the fundamental principle of the universe. Chinese sages used to say that change itself is the only constant phenomenon of the universe. . . .In Chinese intellectual pursuit, the concept of change was mainly stipulated in the ancient Chinese writing, *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes*. The concept of change not only gives *I Ching* its name but also formulates its system of thought. . . .*I* is comprised of *sun* and *moon*. The sun represents the nature of *yang*, and the moon the nature of *yin*. Together, the interaction of sun and moon comes to the emphasis of *yin* and *yang* in *I Ching*. . . .Change as a fundamental principle of the universe forms ontological assumptions of the Chinese philosophy and was further developed into a set of guidelines for Chinese beliefs and behaviors. *Change discourse* naturally became the central focus in early Chinese discursive practices. . . .According to *I Ching*, the formation of change relies on the dialectical interaction of *yin* and *yang*, the two opposite but complementary forces of the universe, with *yin* representing the attributes of yieldingness and submissiveness and *yang* representing unyieldingness and dominance. . . .This discourse of endless, cyclic, and transforming movement of change continues to influence the philosophical discourse and its assumptions never cease to affect Chinese behaviors in the contemporary Chinese world.

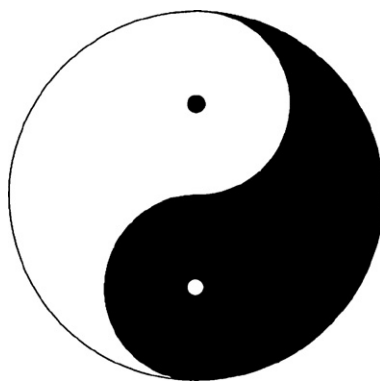


Fig. 1. Yin Yang.

As such, Chinese philosophy sees all universal phenomena as being created by dual cosmic energies called Yin and Yang. Yin stands for female energy such as the moon, water, dark, passivity, and femininity; whereas Yang stands for male energy such as the sun, fire, light, activity, and masculinity. The image of Yin Yang (see Fig. 1) suggests that there exists no absolute borderline between black (Yin) and white (Yang); a dot of black (Yin) exists in the white (Yang) and a dot of white (Yang) also exists in the black (Yin). The healthy development of universal phenomenon hinges upon a constant dynamic balance between Yin and Yang.

According to the Yin Yang thinking, opposites contain within them the seeds of the other and they together form a changing unity (Chen, 2001, 2002). In Chinese language, numerous Chinese concepts are created based on this paradoxical approach. For example, the word “thing(s)” is called *dongxi* in Chinese; *dong* means east and *xi* means west. From a Chinese perspective, everything embraces opposite properties such as east and west. *Weiji* – the Chinese word for “crisis” – is another often cited example in leadership: *wei* means danger and *ji* means opportunity. The Yin Yang principle also explains many Chinese concepts and practices which look inconsistent, weird and puzzling to westerners but do not seem to disturb the Chinese mind as far as internal consistency and coherence are concerned, such as “one country; two systems” (*yi guo liang zhi*), “socialist market economy” (*shehuizhuyi shichang jingji*), and “stable development” (*wending fazhan*) (Faure & Fang, 2008).

From the Yin Yang perspective, contradiction/paradox leading to change is a natural way of life. A culture’s strong tendency toward one extreme of a bipolar dimension (e.g., femininity) does not preclude its opposite (e.g., masculinity) (Fletcher & Fang, 2006). Asking the Chinese whether they are “collectivist” or “individualistic”, “feminine” or “masculine”, “implicit” or “explicit”, “high-context” or “low-context” they would be confusing because the Chinese view is essentially “both–and” instead of “either–or” (Chen, 2001, 2002; Fang, 2003, 2005–2006). This paradoxical view of culture has important implications for studying the dynamics of Chinese communication characteristics.

## 5. Chinese communication paradox

This paper attempts to examine the dynamics of Chinese communication characteristics. We are particularly interested in the change of Chinese communication style in light of China’s rapid market-oriented economic development, globalization, foreign direct investment (FDI) and the Internet. To achieve our purpose we adopt Fang’s (2005–2006) dialectical and paradoxical (Yin Yang) approach to the study of culture to examine paradoxes and changes inherent in Chinese communication characteristics. Here, by “change” we do not mean to suggest that old communication characteristics have vanished from Chinese culture but rather that *both old and new* cultural values and communication characteristics, like the interaction between Yin and Yang, are more and more visibly coexisting in today’s Chinese society.

First, we transform the existing five-point Chinese communication characteristics framework (Gao et al., 1996; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998) into a new framework involving five pairs of contradictory Chinese communication characteristics. In the following body of this paper, we discuss each of these five paradoxes by referring to business and society at large in today’s China:

- Implicit communication vs. explicit communication;
- Listening-centered communication vs. speaking-centered communication;
- Polite communication vs. impolite communication;
- Insider-oriented communication vs. outsider-oriented communication;
- Face-directed communication vs. face-undirected communication.

### 5.1. Implicit communication vs. explicit communication

*Hanxu* (implicit communication) refers to a “reserved”, “implicit”, and “indirect” Chinese communication style (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998: 37). The Chinese aversion to explicit and direct communication may also find its deeper philosophical roots in the famous admonition of Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism: “The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be named is not the eternal name” (Chan, 1963: 139). Traditionally, in knowledge creation and transfer process in Asian cultures, “the invisible, the tacit, the spoken, and the implied are inevitably privileged over the visible, the explicit, the written, and the articulate” (Chia, 2003: 957). The way in which Chinese philosophers and artists expressed themselves is also inarticulate. “Suggestiveness, not articulateness, is the ideal of all Chinese art, whether it is poetry, painting, or anything else. According to Chinese literary tradition, in good poetry ‘the number of words is limited, but the ideas it suggests are limitless.’ So an intelligent reader of poetry reads what is outside the poem; and a good reader of books reads ‘what is between the lines’” (Fung, 1966: 12).

A Chinese painting is much more than an aesthetic presentation but a coded system of combined symbols. For example, in a landscape, the clouds represent women, flowers also are equated to women, and trees may stand for both men and women depending on the shape of the tree. Mountains are masculine symbols, lakes are feminine, and rain is what makes the earth fertile. Creatures and feelings do not mean what they are. They have to be considered as a meta-language within which can be expressed, what cannot be said directly in the Chinese culture.

In Chinese songs, text such as “make love” and the like, which can be spelled out directly in western songs, can hardly be heard in the Chinese counterpart. Emotional expressions such as love, anger, joy, and depression are kept covert in Chinese culture (Gao et al., 1996). The Chinese rarely verbalize their love; love is often expressed through caring and helping one another (Potter, 1988, in Gao et al., 1996) and in the division of labor within the family (Tu, 1984). In conversation, Chinese tend to use small “modifiers” to condition their meanings—the way westerners often find strange and disconcerting. The ubiquitous Chinese use of “perhaps” and “maybe” is one example. If the Chinese say “Maybe I will come with you,” “Perhaps it is too far for you to walk,” and “inconvenient,” they actually mean “I’m coming,” “There’s no way I’ll let you walk,” and “impossible” respectively (Murray, 1983: 20). Here, the words “maybe” and “perhaps” are used to help create a harmonious atmosphere and prevent the parties involved from losing face. For a professor, an indirect way to suggest something to his student could be for instance to ask him if he is not too hot. Any Chinese student would immediately understand that he has to open the window.

While the afore mentioned implicit Chinese way of communicating is evident in Chinese life in many respects, we cannot help observing that opposite Chinese communication behavior *bu hanxu* (不含蓄 “not implicit”; “not indirect”, or “explicit communication”) is equally evident in Chinese society given different situation, context and time. Chinese people value not only *hanxu* but also *renao* (热闹 “warm and noisy”, suggesting a lively, cheerful, and festive atmosphere) (Fang, 2005–2006). There is no place noisier than a Chinese restaurant. Chinese behavior in business communication is often contradictory depending on the depth of trust between the parties involved in the relationship (Fang, 1999). When trust is high, the Chinese tend to communicate in more direct terms compared with the situation otherwise. However, when trust is low, the Chinese may also use a direct “win–lose” oriented negotiating stratagem, which is evident in many well documented haggling behavior of Chinese business people (Faure, 1998). Therefore, the Chinese negotiator often commutes between playing two contradictory roles “Confucian gentleman” and “Sun Tzu-like strategist” (Fang, 1999).

China’s rapid economic development has its imprint on Chinese communication style, especially in economically more developed coastal regions. China’s economic reform encourages professional performance and open competition in marketplace. The increasing demand for professional performance puts the traditional attitude of being modest, implicit and indirect communication style to test. The traditional self-restraint attitude has receded to certain extent, especially in large metropolis (Faure & Fang, 2008). In the representation of the self in daily life, self-effacement is no longer an absolute requirement and may even turn into a social handicap.

In the previous Chinese society, it was considered as unwise for anyone to show openly his or her talents. “It is the bird ahead of the flight that gets shot the first” (枪打出头鸟 *qiang da chu tou niao*) says the Chinese proverb. The point was not to make anyone jealous, to put social harmony at risk and thus to run into troubles. Today, urbanites do not put so much effort in keeping a low profile. They tend to disclose much more about capabilities than they would have done in the past. People give much more importance than before to presentation techniques, signature design and writing of an attractive CV. To some extent, today’s Chinese managers are more assertive, and direct in communication than they used to be. Facing competition Chinese managers have learned that one must look self-confident and one must dare to stand out. A highly publicized nationwide advertisement campaign from China Mobile, the world’s largest mobile communication operator illustrates this point; it shows the image of a confident Chinese manager speaking in his mobile phone in front of the entire world, with the text displaying “*Wo neng!*” (我能! “I can!”) (Faure & Fang, 2008).

The increasing respect for professionalism within the much more competitive market and the results achieved encourage open communication in Chinese business. A recent example in Beijing and Shanghai international airports is a small electronic “voting apparatus” installed in the front of each passport control police officer’s desk. Clearly indicated in the apparatus are the police officer’s identity number and the following sentence: “You’re welcome to comment on my work”. You are encouraged to evaluate the work of that police officer by pushing one of the following buttons: “Greatly satisfied”, “Satisfied”, “Checking time too long”, and “Poor customer service” (Faure & Fang, 2008).

## 5.2. Listening-centered communication vs. speaking-centered communication

Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) point out that traditional Chinese culture is a “listening-centered” (*tinghua*) communication where not everyone is entitled to speak. Speaking is associated with seniority, leadership, hierarchy and expertise. They also observed that in Chinese culture “good children” (好孩子 *hao haizi* or 乖孩子 *guai haizi*) are ones who “listen talks” (*tinghua*) and do not interrupt (插嘴 *chazui*) and Chinese schools emphasize listening skills, writing skills, and reading skills, but rarely give importance to speaking skills. Education is mostly based on memorizing and repetitions. It is a one-way communication, mainly a simple transmission of information. As the saying tells “one should use the eyes and ears, not the mouth”. A wise and trustworthy person is someone who does not indulge in excessive verbal communication. Thus, Chinese education may be viewed as strictly at the opposite of American education where questioning is almost mandatory as an indicator of participation.

Indeed, we can often differentiate a western-educated Chinese from traditional Chinese-educated Chinese by way of presentation. At western universities, presentation techniques are emphasized. It is common that a student is asked to make a number of presentations in course work and they are often evaluated as part of the student’s performance. By contrast, students in China traditionally seldom receive this presentation training. Chinese textbooks traditionally do not contain subject and name indexes, which would otherwise allow active self-learning and participation by students. Today, through various programs contributed by foreign faculties and/or foreign-trained Chinese professors Chinese universities and business schools are adapting to the international standard rapidly (Shenkar, 2005), not least in terms of presentation techniques and professional textbook publications.

The traditional Chinese wisdom “Disaster comes by way of the mouth” (Li, 1994: 127) suggests that the more one speaks the more mistakes one makes. This traditional Chinese “listening-centered” propensity is further compounded by Chinese Communist discipline. In the words of Mao Zedong (1966: 255): “We must affirm anew the discipline of the Party, namely: (1) the individual is subordinate to the organization; (2) the minority is subordinate to the majority; (3) the lower level is subordinate to the higher level; and (4) the entire membership is subordinate to the Central Committee. Whoever violates these articles of discipline disrupts Party unity.” In Mao’s China, people’s life was completely controlled by the Party through one’s work unit (单位 *danwei*), which demanded absolute loyalty. In return, the *danwei* would take care of any member from cradle to grave. Listening to the call by the Party and obeying the order of *danwei* has long been both the written and hidden rules in Chinese communication.

However, with China’s market-oriented economic development, the old *hukou* (户口 residence registration) system is largely collapsing and the increasing respect for individuals and strive for quality of life have strongly increased mobility in job market and social life (Faure, 2008). This phenomenon in turn has given rise to the *bu tinghua* (不听话 “not listening”, “not obeying”) new attitude. Today, given the one child per family policy, Chinese children are often called little “emperors” and “empresses” who are seen as at the center of the Chinese family and who tend to speak while parents and grandparents would listen.

Recent developments show that Chinese students can also be comfortable to resorting to a direct argument and use linear patterns of rhetoric in appropriate circumstances (Greenholtz, 2003; Holmes, 2004; Kennedy, 2002). In a primary school in Shanghai one of the co-authors visited in 2007, school children were debating on the topic of “Show Your True Self”. They were encouraged by their English teacher to show their creativity by challenging him.

In various Chambers of Commerce of foreign business communities in Beijing and Shanghai, executive seminars on “assertive communication” are given to train Chinese managers in professional speaking and communication skills at work. Contrary to the old wisdom “Speaking is silver; silence is gold”, books with the opposite message “Silence is silver; speaking is gold” often feature best selling leadership books across China.

An example of the development of *bu tinghua* is the decision made by Mr. Zhang, a government official in Hangzhou in south China who one of the co-authors met in 2007. At the age of 41 he and his wife decided to have their second child born. China’s “one child per family” policy does not allow any civil servants to have a second child. But this does not seem to bother Mr. Zhang and his wife (working in a multinational company). For his second child’s sake, Mr. Zhang chose to resign from his official government position to become instead a businessman in international trade, an area he has worked for 20 years.

Another example is a top manager in a state-owned company in Shanghai who turned down the offer by the top management to be relocated to an overseas post in Europe. The reason was that he got a baby recently and he did not want to live overseas separate from his family and newborn baby in the coming years. This “rebellious” attitude lends support to Leung’s (2006: 236) observation that the economic growth in East Asia has contributed to value changes in the region, which “result in more resistance toward unquestioned commitment to work and top-down leadership styles”.

In other terms, the respect, even the sacrifice, made to the Party’s interest does not any longer necessarily rank as the number one priority. The family or personal interests are taking a more and more important place (Faure, 2008). However, at the same time, the Party’s ruling position is not challenged otherwise serious consequences can follow.

In traditional Chinese culture, hierarchy and age are revered; communication is patriarchal and top-down driven. The father, often the economic cornerstone of the family, has the final say on almost everything. Junior members of the family play only “a listening role” in decision making in most cases while the family father plays the ultimate “commanding speaking role”. In today’s China it is not uncommon that the son or daughter earns a salary twenty times higher than what the family father gets. It is often not the family father, but rather a junior member of the family who pays the bill when the family goes



out dining every time. This new economic reality in China puts the traditional Chinese family hierarchy and authority to test (Faure & Fang, 2008), giving the junior persons more chances to speaking out.

American TV series such as *Sex and the City* and *American Idol* are simultaneously generating their counterparts in China. The Chinese version of *Sex and the City* is called *Haoxiang haoxiang tan lianai* (好想好想谈恋爱 “How I want to fall in love once again”), which serves to encourage female professionals in China to make their inner voice heard openly. The *American Idol* gave birth to the Super Girls contest in China in 2005, the first of its kind in Chinese history. The theme song for the contest was *Xiang chang jiu chang* (想唱就唱 “If you want to sing, just sing”). The number one hero drawing the largest audiences in the history of Chinese television was Li Yuchun, a 21-year-old music student from Sichuan province. Li won the “Super Girl 2005” title by challenging Chinese traditional values on multiple grounds through her boy-looking appearance, self-confident attitude, unconventional clothing, and straightforward communication style (Fang, 2010).

In Chinese university classrooms and in executive training programs, asking questions and even sharp questions to the professor/trainer is now common. Before, in traditional teaching the participants were supposed to come to listen to the professor/trainer who was supposed to have the unchallengeable knowledge and to be the only person to speak in the classroom. Moreover, students’ evaluation of the performance of the professor/trainer is also a jump in the radically opposite direction but now it is done. In the traditional listening-centered of communication, how could it be that students grade the professor/trainer? It should work the other way round.

### 5.3. Polite communication vs. impolite communication

Seligman (1990: 1) observed that though keenly aware of their need to learn from the West in technological areas, “the Chinese people have never felt the need for instruction from anyone in the area of decorum and protocol”. This may be exaggeration, but the Chinese concept of politeness is deeply rooted in the Confucian notion of self and harmonious relationships with others. It is regulated by *li* (propriety, rules of conduct). The concern for decorum is not so much related to aesthetics but much more as a way to organize the context in order to show, through solemnity, respect and give face to the counterpart. Sticking to heavy protocol has the same function in showing how seriously the matter is taken.

In daily communication, the Chinese use “respected terms” (尊称 *zuncheng*) to address each other and use “imposing behavior” (for example, insisting so that guests join them for dinner) to show their well-mannered politeness known as *keqi* (Gu, 1990). A young person meeting an elder one is expected to lower his/her head and bend slightly to show respect. Other typical Chinese *keqi* behaviors can be found in the following: when praised by others, a Chinese is bound to say “No, I am not worthy” instead of saying “Thank you” (Yao, 1983: 48); at the dinner table, the host tends to open even a luxury dinner party by saying to the guests “Today you are invited to a very simple meal, help yourself please.” or “Today, the dishes are not so well prepared, there is nothing delicious” (Hu, 1994: 234).

Chinese people seem to have three different ways of talking according to the type of counterpart. The first group is the family, then the friends, then the strangers. Communication with the first two groups is often extremely *keqi* while, when addressing the third group, the communication is very brief and purely functional. For instance, with taxi drivers, clerks, shopkeepers, waitresses, there is no greetings and seldom thanks. Only foreigners get a special status as counterparts with whom people have to be polite because it is an issue of face for China. However, today’s market orientation in China has also given rise to the opposite behavior. For instance, because of increased professionalism, taxi drivers, clerks, shopkeepers, waitresses who traditionally are not polite towards strangers can be very polite today.

Politeness refers also to respect for others and one’s own personal sense, that is to say the private sphere. Originally Chinese had a small sphere of personal space. It is even viewed as a most distinctive mark when comparing with western personal space. Nowadays with the current cultural changes, the concept of privacy is becoming more important in several ways. In modern cities where people live in big buildings, social control is much less than in traditional settings. The nuclear family is a much more intimate sphere than in the times when four generations were living under the same roof. Thirty years ago, in Chinese hotels, guests would keep the door of their room open when staying there. This is much less of a habit nowadays. However the issue of evolution, modernization is not so much raised in terms of “either-or” but combine both attitudes as non-contradictory, applying one or the other according to the context and the counterpart.

The Chinese can be impolite given situation, context and time. For example, Chinese negotiators may go so far as to become angry, packing up their papers with a flourish and storming out of the negotiating room (Chang, 1987; Fang, 1999, 2006; Pye, 1982; Seligman, 1990). When trust between the negotiation parties is high, the Chinese negotiator would behave as a “gentleman”, speaking in polite, respectful and “win-win” terms. However, when trust is low, the same Chinese negotiator would behave as a “strategist” resorting to tough tactics and harsh communication tools to win over the counterpart.

In Chinese culture respect is meant to preserve the relationship, which includes the other’s face, status, reputation, and feelings. Thus, hiding the truth appears as justified means for the end they serve. Furthermore, building or nurturing a relationship may simply appear as more important than short terms concrete gains. However, there is another version of respect in Chinese culture which delivers to the counterpart (especially your genuine friend and/or family member) an honest and frank answer. This is illustrated in the saying: “Good advice helps your progress though it sounds strong and good medicine helps to cure disease though it tastes bitter.”

Politeness can also be a double-edged sword that hides “impolite” tricks. For example, the Chinese negotiator may appear very polite but the true intention is to engage well-planned harsh revenge if she/he feels the counterpart behaves badly (Fang, 2001). According to Pye (1982), the driving purpose behind many Chinese negotiating tactics is the creation of

“friendship,” in which the foreign party ends up caught in strong and unclear bonds of obligation toward the Chinese. This may be understood as a Chinese negotiating tactic “Hide a knife in a smile” and “The beautiful woman stratagem” from the 36 Chinese stratagems (Fang, 1999). It is a strategy that is typically illustrated by games such as “Go” (in Chinese “*Weiqi*”) for which the basic purpose is not to destroy the other but to circle him, restrict his margin of maneuver, and his ability to take initiatives.

In business negotiations, the Chinese traditionally see detailed contract drafting as a harsh indication of distrust. Bringing lawyers to the first sessions and emphasizing the importance of a written contract would send an impolite message to the Chinese in business communication. The Chinese would say: “How could we plan for divorce when we were just talking about marriage?” (Fang, 1999) Today, Chinese society shows increasing respect for legal practice in business and in social life in general. It is now common that Chinese firms resort to legal experts as well to secure important commercial contracts. In Chinese language, two contradictory terms/roles are often used: Small man (小人 *xiaoren*—an uneducated, impolite, immoral and mean person) and Gentleman (君子 *junzi*—an educated, cultivated, polite, moral and good person). When circumstances require ending a business deal by signing a detailed written contract, in the first place, a Chinese businessperson would often say: “Let us be small men first; gentlemen next” (先做小人;后做君子 *Xian zuo xiaoren hou zuo junzi*).

#### 5.4. Insider-oriented communication vs. outsider-oriented communication

Chinese communication is insider-oriented communication (Gao et al., 1996). The Chinese have a clear propensity to engage in conversation with people they know and with those who have been introduced by people they know (“insiders”), but they rarely speak to the people they do not know (“outsiders”) (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). This Chinese communication characteristic with a clear divide between insider and outsider is culturally embedded in Chinese concept of *guanxi* (a network of personal connections) and family. Traditionally, Chinese get to know each other and build their trusted communication networks through *guanxi*. Although *guanxi* can be built on a number of bases (family, school, workplace, etc.), the strongest *guanxi* base is family (Chen, 2001; Luo, 2000). In belonging to a *guanxi*, a person is supposed to give, to receive and to repay. Through exchanges of gifts or favors takes shape a system of mutual obligation and indebtedness (Yang, 1994).

Fukuyama (1995) defines Chinese society as a “low trust” society where trust is high within the family/kinship border but low outside. Lin (1939: 172) offers a brilliant analysis of the traditional Chinese character through a close-up look at Chinese family: “The family with its friends became a walled castle, with the greatest communistic co-operation and mutual help within, but coldly indifferent toward, and fortified against, the outside world. In the end, as it worked out, the family became a walled castle outside which everything is legitimate loot.”

In Chinese society where social welfare system is far from being established, family remains not only the basic unit of the society but “as the Chinese traditional system of insurance against unemployment” (Lin, 1939: 173). Chinese family serves as “an essentially defensive mechanism against a hostile and capricious environment” (Fukuyama, 1995: 88).

Chinese communism further complicates this issue by drawing another insider vs. outsider demarcation line in terms of Party membership and internal regulations. Solidarity is exerted within the Party when considering the global society, introducing a new division between “ins” and “outs”, those leading and those who are led. The same partition is observed when considering access to information. The internal communication network provides a much more complete and accurate information than the external public network.

Nowadays, this traditional insider vs. outsider communication divide is challenged in the larger context of economic development in China in the age of globalization and Internet. The increasing respect for professionalism in Chinese business life gives increasing importance to individuals’ professional ability. This is not to say that family connections and *guanxi* do not have any influence on Chinese culture and communication any longer but rather that turning to professional “outsiders” (even non-Chinese nationals and/or organizations) based on their merits rather than personal connections for the sake of meeting objectives of the company in the marketplace is no longer seen as improper action.

Today, Chinese people tend to also communicate increasingly online. Communicating with unknown “outsiders” through the Internet, email, Skype, MSN, QQ is not considered bizarre. Internet banking involving online B2B (business to business) transactions and online credit card payment, which were unknown to most Chinese people 10 years ago is now enjoying vigorous development. Chinese society’s focus on market and performance and the rapid development of the Internet as a means of communication can turn “outsiders” to “insiders” in terms of trust and communication.

Market mobility, competition and “war on talents” (Fernandez & Underwood, 2006) are also likely to transform “insiders” into “outsiders”, without notice. Highly engaging communication with your today’s “insiders” who may become your tomorrow’s “outsiders” can be disastrous for your business in market competition. Moreover, driven by extreme personal economic interests, some individuals can go as far as to cheat their own family members and whatever persons they know within their own *guanxi*. This phenomenon of making unethical use of insider-communication networks is called *shashu* (杀熟 “killing the acquaintances”) (Faure & Fang, 2008). The emergence of the phenomenon of *shashu*, which goes strongly against the traditional Chinese thinking of loyalty towards one’s family and friends, now makes many Chinese people even cautious when communicating with their “insiders”.

### 5.5. Face-directed communication vs. face-undirected communication

Face is at the center of Chinese social psychology (Bond, 1991; Bond & Hwang, 1986). Chinese communication is face-directed communication (Gao et al., 1996). Social harmony is achieved through controlling feelings, appearing humble, avoiding conflict and even hiding competition. The expression of emotions is carefully controlled because of the risk of disrupting group harmony, hierarchies, and interpersonal relationships. Those who do not follow this code of behavior would be considered as losing face and bringing shame on them. Therefore, the Chinese rules of the game discourage saying a direct “no” and being negative which would be perceived as face-losing in communication. Not showing ignorance seems more important than telling the truth in the traditional Chinese culture (Faure & Fang, 2008).

Saving face and caring about the face of others is a major Chinese value in Confucian tradition. However, “thick face” or “faceless” attitude (Chu, 1992) is also a Chinese value in Taoism. From the Taoist point of view, having the courage to lose face would make people psychologically stronger and more mature. When facing disgrace, the best strategy, according to the Taoist principle, is not to stand firm but to “run away” in order to, later on, come back (Fang, 1999). Such a strategy has been extensively practiced by Mao Zedong during all the wars prior to seizing power in 1949.

Nowadays, in international business negotiations, Chinese executives do not hesitate to say “No” when haggling over price and other commercial issues whenever necessary (Fang, 1999). In a confrontational stance in negotiation, especially when the negotiation atmosphere is not as friendly as the parties have expected to be, saying a straightforward “No” to your counterpart is rather common in Chinese communication processes. It seems that the Chinese do’s and don’ts is not an absolute notion but a dynamic phenomenon depending on the degree of trust established between the negotiation parties.

Being negative, saying “No” to western powers is still featured as a delicate issue by Chinese diplomacy in international relations but such an attitude has gained some favor in recent years in pace with China’s development. Bestsellers books such as *China Can Say No* and *China Is Unhappy* published in recent years indicate an increasing nationalistic sentiment among some Chinese intellectuals. The use of “no” and display of emotions in ‘defense of China’s national interest are becoming more direct and open than before. For instance, Chinese students at home and abroad took to the streets in the spring of 2008 for demonstrations when they felt China was being unfairly treated in the western media on the Tibetan issue. It had already been so after the bombing of Chinese Embassy in Belgrade when students broke the glass windows of the US embassy in Beijing. It had also been a fact with the anti-Japanese rampage because of disputed wartime history books published in Japan. Thus, in many cities in China protesters smashed cars, shops, and Japanese restaurants.

In traditional Chinese culture, body, sex and gender issues are not intended to be topics for public discussions. When people meet or leave each other, they never kiss. Those doing so would be regarded as *diulian* (丢脸 face-losing). A light-clothing woman would not be viewed as a decent woman but as a *bu yaolian* (having no face; not morally suitable). Talking about sex in public was inconceivable. The word “sexy” (性感 *xinggan*) did not exist in everyday Chinese language. A “sexy” attitude was synonymous with “shameless”, “hooligan” conduct or *bu yaolian* (不要脸) behavior.

There is a growing change concerning body, sex and gender issues in today’s Chinese culture as fashion (时尚 *shishang*) is becoming a keyword in Chinese economy and society. The choice of dressing becomes a communication content in itself. A woman sends all sorts of messages through what she is wearing. The final purpose is no more conformity but singularity. Such a strategy of differentiation comes as a result of the society’s increasing obsession with branding (品牌 *pinpai*) and image promotion. Hairstyling and clothing are also means of differentiation and ways to assert one’s personality. The hair of Chinese people used to be quite black. Nowadays, in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen it is increasingly difficult to find a woman between 20- and 40-year old who still keeps her hair black. Hair is turned into all sorts of colors such as brown, auburn, chestnut, and even sometimes blond (Faure & Fang, 2008).

In public places, such as parks or places with a romantic atmosphere, one can see Chinese couples hugging and kissing each other. Cohabitation (同居 *tongju*) prior to marriage was a social taboo, a disruption of normal order, which sounded extremely negative. Today, especially in large cities, pre-marriage *tongju* is no more socially stigmatized. Today, Chinese media no longer bans open discussion on sexuality, nor even on homosexuality. “Comrades” (同志 *tongzhi*) often means “homos” (同性恋 *tongxinglian*) in Chinese Internet slang. The term “sexy” is increasingly received as a commonly used adjective. Adult products sector is among China’s most rapidly growing market segment. Expressing “freedom through sex” (Beech, 2006) can be seen as a rebellion against the traditional repression of self-expression (Faure & Fang, 2008). Autobiographies of girls telling about their sex life started flourishing such as *Shanghai Baby* (Zhu, 1993), which had met a local success before being banned and then ended as a black market bestseller at the national scale. Even if not officially welcomed, the success of such books show that a much more open style of communication in Chinese society is taking place, telling thus something essential in the current changes in Chinese society.

## 6. Conclusions and managerial implications

The paper has discussed Chinese communication characteristics from a paradox and change perspective. The paper shows that Yin Yang (Chen, 2001, 2002; Fang, 2003, 2005–2006; Peng & Nisbett, 1999) permeates Chinese culture and impacts Chinese communication characteristics. Based on the Yin Yang philosophy, the authors have developed Gao et al.’s (1996) five-point Chinese communication characteristics model into a framework of five pairs of contradictory Chinese communication characteristics in order to better capture the dynamics of Chinese communication style.

China's rapid economic development has made the paradoxical character of Chinese culture and communication embedded in the Yin Yang principle more salient. China's fast economic growth and increasing interactions with the rest of the world have contributed to the emergence of a new Chinese communication style, which diametrically differs from the traditional one. Nevertheless, the old Chinese values and communication style have not disappeared but coexist within the same Chinese culture with a new set of values and a new communication style. On this point, Faure and Fang (2008: 194) wrote:

The impact of China's modernization during the past three decades (1978–2008) on the changes of Chinese behaviours is salient. However, these changes have had an even greater impact on Chinese values. Indeed, China seems to have never given up its single most important cultural characteristic, the ability to manage paradoxes. Ancient Chinese society was an oxymoron melting pot. In the current age of globalization, Chinese society has retained and reinforced this unique feature even in the most significant sociocultural changes. Through the analysis of eight pairs of paradoxical values, referring to business and society at large, the article argues that life in contemporary China has undergone significant cultural change. Nonetheless, in terms of the thinking process, modern Chinese society remains anchored to the classical Yin Yang approach.

Future research on Chinese communication can deepen our understanding of the impact of Yin Yang on Chinese communication characteristics by looking at the role the traditional Yin Yang principle and/or modern economic development plays, respectively, in shaping today's Chinese culture and Chinese communication behaviors. If changes in communication and communication paradoxes in China are due to Yin Yang, have these changes taken place in the rural regions where modern economic development has not yet matured? If economic development has been the catalyst for allowing the Chinese yin yang to mature and thus disclose these communication paradoxes, is this being fair to the essence of Yin Yang in the Chinese society? More investigation seems needed as to cause and effect of Chinese paradoxical communication behaviors and a combination of both qualitative and quantitative analyses will be helpful to achieve a fuller understanding.

Future research on intercultural communication should give importance to not just values and communication behaviors of the communicating cultures but also the paradoxical values and communication behaviors within the same cultures. In other words, we need to be sensitive to paradox and change in communication behavior. This calls for more research on conditional factors, for example contingencies and trigger events (see Kim, 2007; Osland, Bird, & Gundersen, 2010) which would cause the variation of intercultural communication patterns. Future research can examine how conditional factors would influence the way the Chinese choose and navigate between the contradictory communication patterns. Online Chinese communication style is also an emerging area. An interesting research angle is to see online and offline Chinese communication styles as a process of interactions between Yin and Yang.

Understanding the paradoxical and changing character of Chinese communication style is of crucial importance for successful business with China. Intercultural communication consultants tend to advise people dealing with the Chinese to show a poker face, to dress formally, to behave cautiously, to speak indirectly, to control emotions and display no genuine sentiment (Frecklington, 2003). Indeed, discussing business in conference rooms would induce a formal and reserved approach to communication. However, business relationships in China are double-face. They are not just developed in meeting rooms but also through social activities and informal settings such as restaurants, teahouses, karaoke bars, golf courses, and most recently on sailing routes. In these informal gatherings which are at least as important as the formal meetings for developing business relations in China, everyone needs to open up oneself, by showing true feelings and thus building up trust. Singing and drinking are essential tools for such purpose. On these occasions, those who keep a poker face, dress formally, behave cautiously, speak indirectly, and strictly control their feelings would have fewer chances to bring home a contract. Understanding the paradoxical and changing dimension of Chinese communication is therefore a key condition for success in doing business with the Chinese.

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