

The Chinese “Native” Perspective on *Mao-dun* (Conflict) and *Mao-dun* Resolution Strategies: A Qualitative Investigation

Xuejian Yu

Stonehill College

Abstract

Conflict in intercultural communication and conflict management have drawn tremendous attention from intercultural communication scholars and practitioners, who believe the intersection of different cultures can present difficulties in communication when culture-bound communication patterns and cultural assumptions and values clash. Moore (1967) points out the impossibility of living with other peoples peacefully without "a substantial knowledge of the fundamental characteristics and also the variety of points of views" that constitute the minds of those peoples. Shuter (1990) calls for an "intracultural perspective" to generate cultural data that "not only increases understanding of a society, but also serves as springboard for developing intracultural communication theory" (p. 247). This paper is intended to offer an in-depth cultural-specific look at the “native” Chinese perspective on conflict and conflict resolution. Research data includes qualitative personal interviews. The author believes such data will provide us with valuable information concerning potential sources of conflict and management of conflict of intercultural nature.

Introduction

The concept of conflict has been discussed and studied in different disciplines, because it has been widely accepted that conflict is an inevitable part of human existence. Yet, increasing attention to conflict in the intercultural communication context was given in the past decades due to increasing interactions among peoples of different countries. Communication scholars and practitioners have called for more attention to conflict in the intercultural setting.

Conflict in intercultural interactions needs to be viewed in terms of culture and communication. A number of studies suggest that culture impacts not only on how people in a specific culture communicate, but also on perceptions of conflict and potential ways of resolving conflicts (Asuncion-Landé and Womack, 1982; Gulliver, 1979; Nadler, Nadler & Broome, 1985; Ting-Toomey, 1985). Scholars have conducted research focusing on specific cultures in terms of the relationship between conflict and cultural patterns and values (Awa, 1989; Driskill, 1991; Hart and Fielding, 1985; Yu, 1995). Belfry and Schmidt (1988) maintain that the lack of awareness of cultural differences and proper ways to address those differences will result in unrealistic expectations, frustration, and failure between people involved in interactions.

Shuter (1990: 228) calls for an "intracultural perspective" to generate cultural data that "not only increases understanding of a society, but also serves as a springboard for developing intracultural communication theory." The author also believes that culture specific data will provide intercultural practitioners with valuable information concerning potential sources of intercultural conflict and management of conflict of an intercultural nature. Moore (1967: 1) points out the impossibility of living with other peoples in peace without "a substantial knowledge of the fundamental characteristics and also the variety of points of views" (p.1) that constitute the minds of those peoples.

This study investigates the Chinese perspective of conflict and conflict management in a qualitative manner. First, it examines the Chinese concept of conflict according to the traditional meaning of *mao-dun* and its broad meaning in modern Chinese as advocated by Mao Zedong, late chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. Second, it offers a close look at the Chinese perspective of conflict and conflict management through information gathered from in-depth personal interviews.

Conflict and Conflict Management

The term "conflict" is complex and inclusive. Ting-Toomey (1985) defines conflict as "a form of intense interpersonal and/or intrapersonal dissonance (tension or antagonism) between two or more interdependent parties based on incompatible goals, needs, desires, values, beliefs, and/or attitudes" (p. 72). It is not difficult to find a Chinese term with similar meaning of the definition. Although terms like "*fen-qi*" (difference or divergence), "*chong-tu*" (clash), "*jiu-fen*" (dispute) or "*wen-ti*" (problem) were used to describe conflict, the most frequently mentioned word to refer to conflict is the Chinese term "*mao-dun*." The way the informants used the term *mao-dun* resembles the meaning of the English word "conflict" and fits the above definition of conflict.

However, the Chinese term *mao-dun* used here regarding conflict deviates, to a large extent, from the original Chinese term *mao-dun*. *Mao-dun* is a combination of two Chinese characters: *mao* (spear) and *dun* (shield). The original meaning of *mao-dun* was generated from an ancient Chinese story. A weapon seller boasts to his customers that shields he offers can be pierced by nothing, while at the same time spears he supplies can penetrate anything. "What is the result," one customer asks, "if your spear attacks your shield?" Thus, the original meaning of *mao-dun* is "mutually opposed" or "logically incompatible." Thus, the literal meaning of *mao-dun* is similar to the meaning of the English term "contradiction."

The meaning of *mao-dun* in modern Chinese is far beyond its original meaning. Mao Zedong (or Mao Tse-tung) (1960) in his famous philosophical work *On Mao-dun* (often translated into *On Contradiction*) provides a good example of how broad the meaning of *mao-dun* is in modern Chinese. Mao uses the term *mao-dun* in three different but related contexts: natural, social, and personal or cognitive. In the natural context, Mao says, "*mao-dun* is present in all processes of objectively existing things (1960, p. 345)," and "*mao-duns* exist everywhere, but they differ in accordance with the different nature of different things" (1968, p.91). For Mao, "(t)here is nothing that does not contain contradiction; without *mao-dun*, nothing would exist" (1960, p. 319).

In the social context, which is the most important among the three for Mao, *mao-dun* is used to refer to a dynamic relationship between different groups or classes that are opposed to one another as well as a dynamic relationship between different groups or classes that are not opposed to one another, or non-antagonistic. Mao, in this context, uses *mao-dun* to refer to a situation or relation where difficulty or problem exists.

The third context in which Mao uses *mao-dun* is the "personal or cognitive context." That is to say *mao-dun* takes place in thought or knowledge. According to Mao (1960), *mao-dun* "does happen when the original ideas, theories, plans, programs fail to correspond with reality either in whole or in part and are wholly or partially incorrect" (p.335). The *mao-dun* in this context is very much like what we define as "intrapersonal conflict."

Some essential points of Mao's concept of *mao-dun* are summarized by Soo (1981):

- (a) *Mao-dun* is used by Mao in three different contexts: natural, social, and personal or cognitive; (b) from these various usage of (*mao-dun*) emerges its primary meaning: a "dynamic relationship of interaction" or "dynamic relationship;" and (c) in addition to its primary meaning, (*mao-dun*) can be used with three nuances: "dynamic relationship of interaction" in terms of differences, in terms of a problems or difficulty and in terms of antagonism. (p. 103)

Mao-dun, for most Chinese, is a term first associated with conflict. Although people may use other terms such as *fen-qi* (disagreement) or *chong-tu* (clash) to describe a conflict depending on its intensity, *mao-dun* always can be used in place of other similar terms. *Mao-dun* varies from personal to interpersonal to group or class. Differences in values, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions can be called *mao-dun*. Family problems can be called *mao-dun*. So can clashes of interests between individuals, groups or classes. Ideological struggle or mental conflict in the mind of an individual is also referred to as *mao-dun*. Wherever there is a conflict no matter in what context, it can be described as *mao-dun* in Chinese.

Initially, conflict, even in the Western sense, was viewed by theorists as an inherently destructive force that ought to be eliminated (Conrad, 1980). But an alternative view of conflict proposed by a number of contemporary social scientists indicates that social conflict is natural and inevitable; and it is not necessarily destructive, but can be potentially constructive (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1969; Katz, 1964; Thomas, 1976). Conflict in Mao Zedong's view is not necessarily something bad or negative. According to Mao (1960), "(t)here is nothing that does not contain *mao-dun*; without *mao-dun* nothing could exist. To deny *mao-dun* is to deny everything" (p.316). Mao views conflict as a catalyst for change. He encourages the Chinese people to perceive conflict in a positive light and learn how to identify and solve *mao-dun*.

Do most Chinese share Mao's perspective on conflict? The answer is "Yes" and "No." Although the Chinese Communist tried to brainwash the Chinese masses with Mao's doctrines in the years when Mao was alive, most Chinese agreed in words and yet many managed to adhere to the traditional Chinese view of conflict in deeds. For example, Interviewee-6 (see later section for interviewee identification) puts it:

There is nothing wrong with what Chairman Mao said in his *On Mao-dun*. But it is easier said than done. I agree there is always *mao-dun* in our life. Yet who really wants *mao-dun*? Some *mao-dun* needs to be resolved, while others can be put aside. It can make matters worse if the *mao-dun* is not handled well.

Interviewee-8 seems to agree:

Mao-dun always occurs. Once there is *mao-dun*, you need somehow try to resolve it. If you handle it well, that's wonderful. But if it is not handled well, it will bring about negative consequences. It can, at least, hurt someone's feelings, let alone other things. Therefore, it's better when there is no *mao-dun*..

Conflict for the Chinese is considered by most respondents as negative and destructive, thus it should be treated with extreme caution. Interviewee-3 says:

Mao-dun is unavoidable, and we will always have *mao-dun*. There is big *mao-dun*, and there is also small *mao-dun*. In case of large *mao-dun*, you have to deal with it. Otherwise, you can't accomplish your task. But when you have small *mao-dun*, just be tolerant. We shouldn't do anything to intensify *mao-dun*. *Mao-dun* is not a good thing.

The existing literature indicates that conflict research has been heavily focused around conflict management. Since styles of managing a conflict predict the outcomes of an actual conflict (Psenicka & Rahim, 1989), researchers believe that knowing the conflict management styles can help us manage conflicts more effectively (Rahim, 1989). There is a plethora of research that showed differences in the use of conflict management strategies by individuals in an mono-culture context. Study of cross-cultural conflict styles also indicated that diversions in terms of an individual's conflict resolution strategies exist due to cultural differences (Kagan, Knight, & Martimez-Romero, 1982). Ting-Toomey (1986) also discovers that African-Americans use more controlling styles than do Anglo-Americans, and that Anglo-Americans tend to use more solution-oriented style strategies than do African-Americans. Additionally, Chua and Gudykunst (1987), Leung (1988), and Leung and Iwawaki (1988) observe that people of individualistic cultures utilize a direct, solution-oriented conflict communication style, and members of collectivist cultures tend to use an indirect and conflict-avoidance style. Furthermore, Ting-Toomey, Gao, Yang, Trubisky, Kim, Lin and Nishida (1991) find that conflict management strategy differences exist among subjects in Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States.

Chinese society is strongly collectivistic oriented (Hofstede, 1980; 1983). In the Chinese society, individualism is not encouraged, which refers to the tendency to be more concerned with the consequences of one's behavior or one's own needs, interests, and goals (Hui, 1984; Leung, 1983). Collectivism is emphasized and individuals are encouraged to be concerned about the consequences of their behaviors on group members, and to be more willing to sacrifice personal interests for the attainment of collective interests (Leung, 1988).

Although we have learned much about Chinese conflict management strategies through culture-specific studies and explanations for their choice of preferred styles offered by researchers, we know little about how the Chinese themselves talk about conflict resolution strategies due to the quantitative nature of most research. Thus, this research aims to provide an in-depth qualitative "native" perspective on Chinese conflict management strategies and the rationale for choosing those strategies.

Methods

Subjects

The author conducted in-depth interviews with four mainland Chinese students in a large mid-western university in the U. S. and four Chinese residing in China. The interviews were conducted from 1992 to 1994. All interviewees were personal friends of the investigator. Their age ranged from early twenties to late forties. The Chinese nationals in the U.S. were graduate students: Interviewee-1 (male) was a Ph.D. candidate in the physics department, interviewee-2 (male) a law school student, interviewee-3 (male) an economics Ph.D. candidate, and interviewee-4 (female) was pursuing a M.A. in chemistry. Their stay in the U.S. varied from a few months to eight years. Those in mainland were employees of a large manufacturing company in southern China. Interviewee-5 and interviewee-6 (both male) were mid-level managers. Interviewee-7 and interviewee-8 (both female) were production-line workers. Their employment in that company ranged from five years to twenty-two years. All interviewees voluntarily participated in the interview and agreed to have the conversations taped.

Procedures

All informants were interviewed formally at least once. Some of them were interviewed two to three times. The researcher made special efforts to ask open-ended questions to solicit "folk" terms used by the informants. All interviews took place either in my residence or at their homes. The formally arranged interviews were conducted in Chinese and lasted from half an hour to one hour and a half. They were tape-recorded with the permission of the interviewees and were subsequently transcribed in their entirety and then translated into English.

Data and Analysis

The interviewees' responses to questions dealing with the following issues were analyzed: (1) the Chinese views of conflict and their ways of conflict management; (2) interviewees' experiences in conflict situations; and (3) specific incidents of interpersonal conflict at home, with friends, or with co-workers, and their ways of handling those difficult situations. The focus of the inquiry was to solicit how the Chinese informants talk about conflict and conflict management and how they categorize their actions in conflict situations. The researcher tries to let the interviewees speak for themselves as much as possible in the following section.

Results and Discussion

Mao-dun is an inseparable part of nature and humanity. But according to the informants, *mao-dun* is regarded by the Chinese as something bad and destructive and is viewed negatively. For the Chinese, conflict should be dealt with in a non-confrontational manner if possible in a family or group, or at least, conflict could be minimized by those involved. In managing *mao-dun*, the Chinese prefer the non-confrontational approach - "*hui-bi*" (evading), particularly so in an in-group *mao-*

dun situation. What the interviewees have said about preferred Chinese conflict resolution strategies appear to be consonant with the argument that collectivism is associated with a heightened in-group/out-group distinction (Hsu, 1970); Leung, 1988; Leung & Bond 1984). They tend to seek harmony with those in-group members because confrontation in a conflict would lead to loss of face and jeopardize interpersonal relationships. Interviewee-2 states:

We Chinese emphasize the importance of the *zheng-ti* (the whole) and de-emphasize the individual. Individual interests are important, but they should be balanced with the interests of the whole. If a person over-emphasizes his or her own interests without considering the interests of the group, she or he may end up with saving the small only to lose the big. We should be more concerned with the big face instead of the small face of an individual.

In conflict settlement when the involved parties are unable or fail to resolve the problem themselves, mediation or arbitration is also a frequently used strategy. The use of trusted friends, close relatives or family members, and authorities in their organization are common. We can draw upon face-negotiation theory to explain the way the Chinese pursue a conflict. Ting-Toomey (1988) suggests that preferences for an indirect conflict style and indirect mediation procedure mirror the salience of the "we" identity in collective cultures.

Education, or *xiu-yang*, the process of gaining knowledge and modifying conduct according to Confucius, is highly valued by the Chinese. It is believed that education separates the masses from the elite. The interviewees seem to believe that in conflict management, the educated differs from the less educated. The intellectuals are more concerned with face-saving for themselves as well as for others, are far less confrontative in a conflict situation, and are more likely to adopt an evading approach.

Nonconfrontation vs. Confrontation

It is safe to say that any style of conflict resolution identified in Western societies can be found among the Chinese. But there are a few ways of conflict management typically identifiable with the Chinese informants. In order to understand how they manage *mao-dun*, it is important to comprehend how the interviewees view different conflict situations. Because, often times, the nature of the *mao-dun* perceived by the participants determines the styles of conflict management.

For most interviewees, conflicts caused by differences in values, beliefs or attitudes tend to be easier to resolve; and they are much more tolerant of those differences. Interviewee-1 states as agreed by several others:

Differences in attitudes, beliefs and values always exist. People are different, and you cannot make people all have the same attitudes, beliefs or values. Such differences are not of major concern. It's not difficult to deal with *mao-dun* caused by such differences as long as people respect one another and tolerate those differences.

This does not mean they are insensitive to values, beliefs or attitudes. They believe that *mao-dun* of this type does no direct harm and the impact of such *mao-dun* is comparatively less significant. When differences in viewpoints, opinions or ideas caused by divergent attitudes, beliefs or values are present, the interviewees tend to either avoid confronting them or to discuss them openly, as Interviewee-2 states:

Differences in opinion often appear. How to deal with the differences depends on the individual. You can simply avoid discussing them, or you can have a debate about them. No matter how you handle, it is always important to show respect to each other. I usually choose to avoid it, because you just don't know what a discussion would lead to. In a heated discussion, people can easily hurt each other's feelings. But I know people who don't mind confronting the issue at all. But of course, it often depends on the nature of the different opinions.

Interviewee-8 prefers the same approach by saying, "I don't like to argue over different opinions... It's meaningless to argue over trivial differences until everyone is red in the face (*mianhong-erchi*)."

Interviewee-4, on the other hand, does not seem to mind confrontation in similar situations:

I am personally not afraid of argument at all if it's only differences in viewpoints. I would rather see people put the differences up on the table for discussion than hiding them. For me, I'd like to say what's in my mind, and that makes me feel good. Everyone should be tolerant of differences of views.

When personal interests are at stake between individuals or groups, the Chinese, according to the interviewees, are least tolerant. Usually all means available to resolve the *mao-dun* are utilized. The important question here is the relationship between the involved parties. When a *mao-dun* involves family members, friends, or sometimes co-workers, non-confrontation is often a preferred mode. Most interviewees seem to emphasize avoiding direct confrontation with the other party with great concern for their *guan-xi* (relationship or connection) or *mian-zi* (face). Interviewee-6 says:

If problems arise among family members, friends, or co-workers, it's ideal to have the problems resolved. But handling the problem can be very delicate. If it's not handled well, it can have very bad consequences.

Therefore, it's safer to avoid the problem so that you will neither make each other *diu-lian* (lose face) nor hurt the *guan-xi* (relationship).

This perspective is shared by Interviewee-5:

It is better to avoid confrontation when problems are between acquaintances or friends. Our Chinese emphasize the importance of "he" (harmony or peace). . . If a problem is not dealt with appropriately, it will result in hurting people's feelings. The Chinese phrase of "*da-shi hua-xiao, xiao-shi hua-liao*" implies nonconfrontation.

"*Da-shi hua-xiao*" means to make big problems small problems and "*xiao-shi hua-liao*" means to view a small *mao-dun* as no *mao-dun*. This does not suggest that the involved parties are blind about the *mao-dun* or deny it, but rather suggests that the disputants should make an attempt to avoid dealing directly with the *mao-dun* if possible or should try to minimize the *mao-dun*.

Non-confrontational conflict resolution strategies with friends or other group members are associated with the emphasis on ongoing relationship. Non-confrontation here does not imply that the individual simply avoids pursuing the *mao-dun*, but it emphasizes tolerance or accommodation. The Chinese believe that accommodating a conflict between friends or other group members at a minor cost is more beneficial than running the risk of pursuing the conflict and disrupting the relationship. The study conducted by Leung (1988) also points out that the Chinese are less likely to pursue a conflict with a group disputant or a friend.

The preference of non-confrontation in conflict situations involving family members, friends, or other in-group members also reflects the nature of the socio-economic system. A family is a group unit, a strong united unit, and an organization is also a group unit. Interviewee-5 states, "An individual can not isolate him-/herself from any group, and an individual not identifiable with a group is socially dangerous." There is always a sense of lifetime belonging or affiliation to a group. Detaching oneself from a family is not socially accepted. Nor is disparting from a *dan-wei* (any organization in which an individual is a member), although that is changing with today's socio-economic reforms. Interviewee-7 points out, "Now the 'iron-bowl' is broken, and our jobs are not even secure. So people are losing their attachment to their *dan-wei*."

For individuals to live harmoniously or peacefully with other group members, they must be concerned with *mao-dun* situations, as is shown in the Chinese saying "*duo-zai-hua, shao-zai-ci*" quoted by Interviewee-3, meaning, "to plant more flowers and create less thorns." Face-saving is another factor behind adopting a non-confrontational strategy in *mao-dun* management. The Chinese seem to be very sensitive to face-saving, as Interviewee-4 says, "It is shameful for one to lose face, and it is equally not respectable to make another individual lose face." According to Interviewee-2, "in pursuit of any *mao-dun*, either side will lose face,

yet both sides are shadowed with shame.” Non-confrontation is a way to prevent both parties from losing face or feeling ashamed, as Interviewee-1 eloquently articulates:

In the Chinese society, shame is not simply cast on an individual, but rather it is on the whole family or the whole group to which an individual belongs. If you lose face, it’s just not only you who loses face but the whole family or people associated with you. Although we often say “*yi-ren zuo-shi, yi-ren dan*” (a person is responsible for his own deeds), we don’t always practice that. No matter what you do, good or bad, it always implicates others. They try not to bring shame to themselves, and as a result, they keep their families or groups shame-free.

There are always exceptions to the preferred non-confrontational mode of conflict resolution. People certainly can be confrontational even when a conflict of interests appears involving family members, friends, or co-workers. The interviewees cited many cases of using confrontational strategies in situations involving apartment assignment for employees, salary increases, promotions, or decisions about career development opportunities. Sometimes, two or more involved parties would pursue their own interests by any means regardless of hurting others’ feelings or saving face for either others or themselves. Sometimes, it is not unusual to see physical fights occurring between the involved parties. Interviewee-8 provides an example of confrontation in a case of apartment distribution in his company:

Last year, our *dan-wei* was allotting apartments (*fen-fang*) among employees. Many people were locked in fierce fight over the distribution. Some people who thought they deserve an apartment yet did not get it went to the homes of their *ling-dao* (authorities of a company) and threatened to stay at their home if they don’t get apartments. Others went to the apartments directly and put locks on the doors to claim the apartments. Some co-workers physically assaulted each other when trying to occupy the same apartment. In one case, members of both families got into the fight. It was horrible.

Interviewee-2 describes how the siblings in her neighbor’s family handled the family inheritance when the parents died:

Most Chinese families don’t practice the use of a will, so was the case with this family. The siblings fought really hard among themselves over who was supposed to get what from what the parents left behind... Their parents did not leave behind a fortune. It’s just some savings and furniture. Finally, the neighborhood committee and the *ling-dao* got involved and helped them resolve the problem. It was not a pretty scene.

Confrontation strategies are often used in conflict situations involving members of outside groups. Vicious quarrels or physical fights often occur between out-group members and strangers in pursuit of a *mao-dun*. Interviewee-7 says:

If you go to public places, you will often see people get into fights over trivial matters. For example, on a bus or in a train, you can see people be nasty to each other over a seat or a luggage space. The confrontation can vary from verbal attack to physical assault. You can see peddlers fight over display space or place.

The interviewees seem to agree that in general, among group members or friends, confrontation is not a favored mode of conflict management. But, involved members may not hesitate in taking the confrontative ways if their respective interests are severely incompatible. In such a case, if both parties are willing to make a compromise, the *mao-dun* could be settled just between them. Otherwise, they usually may seek a mediator or arbitrator to help settle the problem. On the other hand, *mao-dun* between out-group members or strangers is more difficult to settle since both parties are reluctant in reconciliation. Frequently, the jungle law applies. Sometimes, both parties would agree to go to an arbitrator for settlement. Or occasionally, a third party may voluntarily step in to help resolve the *mao-dun*.

One important factor related to choosing conflict management strategies is centered around the Chinese concept of *jiao-yang* (upbringing/education) or *xiu-yang* (cultivation). What Interviewee-3 says sums up several other interviewees' views on this:

How to manage *mao-dun*, to a large extent, depends on the person's level of education or cultivation. More educated people are more likely to choose *hui-bi* (evading) because they are more concerned about face-saving. Less educated people or people with poor *xiu-yang* tend to be more confrontational. They are not afraid of losing face at all. When I hear people talk about Chinese preferring non-confrontation to confrontation in general, it really bothers me, because a lot of Chinese, particularly those less educated, can often be quite confrontational.

In mainland China, people choose the confrontation strategy in conflict settlement either in the interpersonal, or organizational or intergroup context more in the last several decades, perhaps due to the Cultural Revolution and in the more recent modernization drive. On the one hand, during the Cultural Revolution, Mao encouraged the Chinese to openly criticize one another for their "wrong-doings" or "bourgeois" ideas or anybody differing from the Communist ideology or disagreeing with the Party and the central government. The Chinese public were greatly mobilized by Mao in such a pursuit and became very confrontative in their criticism. Young high school graduates were called for by Mao to leave their families to go to the countryside for re-education from farmers. As a result, a strong

sense of individualism was nurtured in the minds of the young. On the other hand, as an outcome of the reform in the past two decades, a trend which also runs counter to the traditional norm in the Chinese society is observed by a Chinese scholar who returned to China after studying in the U.S. Bu (1988) asks students about the purpose of learning, and they answer "(f)or a good job, for making money and for a prosperous personal future" (p. 378).

Mediation or Arbitration

The use of intermediaries in interpersonal conflicts is not uncommon. "Since Chinese culture does not encourage strong expressions of personal feelings, discussion through an intermediary will reduce the need for direct, emotional responses..." (Hsu, 1970, p.47). Both official and unofficial mediation or arbitration is frequently sought by the conflictive parties in a *mao-dun* situation (Ma, 1992; Wall & Blum, 1991).

One way to help resolve a *mao-dun* is to use a mediator usually mutually trusted by both sides which can not settle it themselves. As Interviewee-5 puts it:

Sometimes, it's just impossible to solve the problem between the involved parties themselves. For instance, when a couple get into a fight, both husband and wife claim to be in the right and nobody is going to admit the fault. If they continue the argument, it only makes the matter worse. Thus they can seek help from relatives or mutual trusted friends. The chosen person can sit the couple down and listen to the stories from both sides, and then try to mediate for reconciliation.

Mao-dun which occurs between family members is usually resolved within the family without the involvement of outsiders. A family *mao-dun* is considered a skeleton in the cupboard or a shame. In a domestic dispute, using a mediator may be the last resort for the disagreeable couple, as Interviewee-4 says:

An old Chinese saying states that "*Jia-chou bu-ke wai-yang*" (domestic shame should not be made public). When you take a family matter outside, it just doesn't look good. Domestic *jiu-fen* (dispute) should be dealt with within the family. Outsiders should be avoided if possible. But sometimes, outside help is necessary when both parties are unwilling to make a concession. That seems to be the last way out.

Even when a couple has to "reach out" for help in a domestic dispute, they still prefer other family members or relatives. The *jiu-fen* is usually handed over to the senior members of the family such as the grandparents or parents to settle. If they cannot satisfactorily resolve the conflict, near relatives such as uncles or aunts may be invited to step in. "As for Chinese, other family members or relatives are still considered part of the family since the Chinese sense of family is the extended family rather than the nuclear family," says Interviewee-1. If near relatives fail to settle the dispute, an outside mediator may be called in. If so, the mediator is

usually a close family friend. The mediator oftentimes makes decisions for both parties. She or he helps to reach an agreement mutually satisfactory to both parties.

Interviewees indicate that some couples even prefer the use of mutual friends to other family members or close relatives. They feel that mutual friends are less emotionally involved and better for catharsis. Interviewee-6 says:

Friends are better in some dispute situations. It's easier for disputants to get things off their chests because they don't have to worry about that family members get emotionally hurt, particularly parents. Parents usually don't want to see their children suffer in a relationship. So fighting couples may harbor inside the true feelings instead of ridding themselves of the anger... In front of friends, they don't have to worry about hurting others' feelings so that they can empty themselves of certain emotional barriers.

Interviewee-8 seems to agree with this view:

When family members are invited to help solve the *mao-dun*, the *mao-dun* usually could not be resolved. First, the couple may not tell the whole truth for fear of hurting the feelings of other family members. Second, they may pretend to agree with the solution proposed by the family mediator to make the person feel good. When the mediator leaves, the fight continues...

If a *mao-dun* between two friends, or two members of a group or an organization can not be avoided or settled by themselves, they usually try to resolve the *mao-dun* unofficially through an arbitrator, who is usually a mutual friend or an individual higher in social status (an elderly person known to and respected by both, or a highly regarded individual in the community). The arbitrator will hear both and then determine the case on the basis of the supplied information. Whether or not the disputants will act according to the arbitration is a different matter. Interviewee-2 puts it this way:

Some people would take the arbitration seriously and act upon it afterwards. Others may not pay much attention to the final arbitration at all. For them, the initial purpose of seeking arbitration is not to find a solution. But rather, they are looking for an impartial person to judge who is right and who is wrong. . . Both parties are just looking for support for their own case.

In other situations, the *mao-dun* parties may officially go to *ling-dao* (their superiors or authorities in the organization) for arbitration. The greater concern with authority was reflected in the Chinese subjects' unwillingness to challenge their superiors or to correct their mistakes even when they knew the superiors were wrong. But according to the interviewees, there seems to have generation differences in using *ling-dao*, as one 49-year-old Interviewee-6 articulates:

People in my age group or older are more likely to go for *ling-dao*, since we are used to choosing our *ling-dao* as arbitrators. We trust them and their judgment . . . We would listen to their arbitration. Young people nowadays are different. They seem to handle *mao-dun* by themselves or among their friends.

When asked why such difference exist between the older and the young using arbitrators, he expresses his opinion like this:

In wake of the economic reforms, *ling-dao* also starts to lose their prestige. Nowadays the “iron-bowl” is broken. *Ling-dao* themselves have lost security in their jobs . . . Whatever they say just doesn’t carry the same weight anymore. The younger generations are less trustful of their *ling-dao*. Thus they prefer to bring in friends to mediate.

Interview 5 who is in his late 30s who is a deputy director of a workshop in a large manufacturing company agrees by making the following comparison:

As I remember, in the past, when people like my parents had *mao-dun* they could not resolve themselves, they would go to their *ling-dao*. My father was a *ling-dao* in his company before his retirement. I remember he always seemed to have his subordinates come to our house after work and to ask him help them solve domestic disputes, fights with neighbors or co-workers. Now I am a *ling-dao* in our company. I hardly get anybody to come to my house for arbitration in conflictual situations. They seem to have found other ways to deal with their problems. That’s great . . . I don’t think *ling-dao* should be involved in domestic *jiu-fen* or other personal problems anyway. Any work related *mao-dun* would be within my authority. I just don’t have time for personal matters. . . Today, we just don’t have the same high prestige and respect as people like my father used to have as *ling-dao*.

Legal Approach to *Mao-dun*

To go to court is probably the least preferred mode of conflict settlement for the Chinese, according to the interviewees. The Chinese view the legal system not as an entity for personal conflict settlement except the cases that involve criminal behaviors. They believe courts were established for criminals. Interviewee 5 states, “Going to court is a very serious matter in China. People just won’t take their problems to court unless the behavior of the involved violates the law.” It is always a shame for a Chinese to go to court. Court is always associated with punishment of unlawful deeds. Interviewee 8 says, “Court is not for general *mao-dun*, and it’s for serious matters. If what you did violated the law, then you will be sent to court.” Interviewee 4 adds, “Going to court is such a shameful thing. Who would take ordinary *mao-dun* to court for settlement.”

Interviewee-3 who has been in the U.S. for years makes the following comments:

Have you watched the television show, I think, called "People's Court"? People go to court for all sorts of problem. Some of them are just ridiculous. For example, two so-called friends would go to court for settlement because one person borrowed some money and did not return it. They would face each other in front of the judge in the courtroom and ask for a settlement. That's ludicrous. Can you imagine Chinese friends doing that just about some unreturned money?

Interviewee-8 offers another explanation for why Chinese dislike or distrust the legal approach in resolving *mao-dun*:

Unlike many Western countries, China is not a country ruled by law (*fa-zhi*) but ruled by a few individuals (*ren-zhi*). On the surface, China has its law. But the law can be changed anytime by certain powerful individuals. Today they can say you are right, and tomorrow they can tell you that you are wrong. They are above the law and they determine the law. They control the legal system. If they want to maintain "social order" through "*yan-da*" (crack-down), you can be arrested without a warrant or you can be sentenced to several years in prison for some petty theft regardless of what the law says. If you have a legal system like that, would you trust such a system or go for help in *mao-dun* situations?

But Chinese' perception of legal settlement of conflict has been changing slowly in the past couple of decades together with the social and economic changes in today's China. As the divorce rate increases and property dispute cases arise, the use of court for conflict resolution is also on the rise. Interviewee-6 observes:

Nowadays, people don't view going to court as serious as before. Today, so many young people divorce. If you go through a divorce, you have to go to court. It's a legal procedure. Today many people start their own private business or run a business with some friends. Sometimes problems arise and they have to settle the property problem. Of course, they can solve the problem themselves. But sometimes, the involved parties cannot come to an agreement. Then they can go to court. You read similar cases reported in newspapers a lot. So people are also getting used to it and their perception of court settlement is also changing.

The Chinese view of the legal settlement of a conflict can be traced back to the days of Confucius. Confucius devalues the legal approach. According to Confucius, law and punishment are not essential ways to achieve social order. At best they can warn people that they should not violate the law. Confucius believes that a perfect society can only be built by perfect people. In order to make perfect people, the doctrine of *ren* (love, humanity) must be taught to people "so that

harmonious human relations can be cultivated." In the meantime, they must be taught to "feel shame" so that they will refrain from "undesirable behaviors" (Chu, 1977, pp. 21-24).

Even though the past two decades have witnessed an increasing involvement of the court in conflict settlement, particularly concerning divorce and property disputes, the Chinese, according to the interviewees, are still reluctant to go to court to settle *mao-dun*. On the other hand, the legal system in mainland China, according to Interviewee-2, "was not designed or established to handle conflicts the same way as in many Western countries."

Conclusion

The essential task of this study is to offer a "native" Chinese perspective on *mao-dun* (conflict) and possible conflict management strategies. Such information about a specific cultural group may assist us in identifying possible areas of conflict between members of this cultural group with other groups when they interact with one another. However, problems in intercultural communication and conflict management are far-reaching. Simply understanding cultural specific perspectives is not enough for us to manage intercultural conflict successfully.

Four implications can be drawn for the direction of future research in this line of research. First, there should be an understanding of specific differences existing between individuals with different cultural backgrounds. We must be extremely cautious in drawing a conclusion that cultural variability in attitudes would always lead to intercultural conflict. By the same token, individual variability in opting for conflict resolution strategies should not be ignored. Lumping all Chinese together and treating them all the same is just as dangerous as the failure in understanding cultural differences.

Second, attention should be paid to specific modes of conflict resolution preferred by members of different cultures. It is important for us to realize that not knowing actual differences in ways different cultural groups manage conflicts will eventually fail us in successfully resolving intercultural disputes.

Third, the importance of the culture variable has to be recognized in studying communication and conflict in the intercultural context. One effective way to help us understand certain cultures and their influence on the behaviors of their members is to use qualitative methodology to generate "rich" data about the cultures. Ethnographic analysis of interview data provides a conceptual framework to examine cultural assumptions held by cultural members and understand how those cultural assumptions guide the practices of its members.

Finally, the Chinese perspective on conflict reported in this manuscript is far from conclusive because of the small study sample. Moreover, the Chinese interviewed in this study are from mainland China. They may show differences

from Chinese in other parts of the world due to cultural changes in that country in the past five decades.

References

- Asuncion-Landé, N. & Womack, D.
1982 *Communication and conflict management across cultures*. Paper presented at the 12th International Congress of the International Political Science Association, Rio de Janeiro.
- Awa, N.
1989 *Ethnic Conflict and Politics in Africa: Examples from Nigeria and Kenya*. Paper presented at the 76th Convention of the Speech Communication Association, San Francisco, California.
- Belfry, M., & Schmidt, L.
1988 Managing the diverse work force. *Employment Relations Today*, 15, 335-9.
- Bu, K.Y.
1988 Between Two Cultures. *Social Education*, 52 (5), 5-11.
- Conrad, C.R.
1980 *Power and conflict*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas.
- Coser, L.A.
1956 *The functions of social conflict*. Glencoe, IL: Harper & Row.
- Chu, G. C.
1977 *Radical change through communication in Mao's China*. Honolulu, HI: University Press of Hawaii.
- Chua, E., & Gudykunst, W.
1987 Conflict resolution style in low- and high-context cultures. *Communication Research Reports*, 4, 32-37.
- Deutsch, M.
1969 Conflict: Productive and destructive. *Journal of Social Issues*, 25 (1), 7-41.
- Driskill, G.
1991 *Competent communication in intercultural relationships: A field descriptive study of an organization with Americans and first generation immigrants from India*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas.
- Gulliver, P.H.
1979 *Disputes and negotiations: A cross-cultural perspective*. New York: Academic Press.
- Hart, P., & Fielding, G.

- 1985 *Perspective on conflict and conflict resolution (United Kingdom)*. Paper presented to the 35th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Hofstede, G.
1980 *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hofstede, G.
1983 Dimensions of national cultures in fifty countries and three regions. In J. B. Deregowaki, S. Dziurawiec, & R. C. Annis (Eds.), *Expectations in Cross-Cultural Psychology* (pp. 335-55). Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger B.V.
- Hsu, F.L.K.
1970 *Americans and Chinese: Purpose and fulfillment in great civilizations*. Garden City, NY: Natural History Press.
- Hui, H. C. C.
1984 *Individualism-collectivism: Theory, measurement, and its relation to reward allocation*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Kagan, S., Knight, G., & Martinez-Romero, S.
1982 Culture and the development of conflict resolution style. *Journal of Cross-Culture Psychology*, 13, 43-59.
- Katz, D.
1964 Approaches to managing conflict. In R. Rahim and E. Boulding, (Eds.), *Power and conflict in organizations*, (pp.105-14). New York: Basic Books.
- Leung, K.
1983 *The impact of cultural collectivism on reward allocation*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Leung, K.
1988 Some determinants of conflict avoidance. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 19, 125-36.
- Leung, K., & Bond, M. H.
1984 The impact of cultural collectivism on reward allocation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43, 793-804.
- Leung, K., & Iwawaki, S.
1988 Cultural collectivism and distributive behavior. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 19, 35-49.
- Ma, R.
1992 The role of unofficial intermediaries in interpersonal conflicts in the Chinese culture. *Communication Quarterly*, 40 (3), 269-278.
- Mao, Z.

- 1960 *Selected works of Mao Tse-tung*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- 1968 *Four essays on philosophy*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Moore, C. A.
1967 *The Chinese mind*. Honolulu: East-West Center Press.
- Nadler, L., Nadler, M. K., & Broome, B.
1985 Culture and the management of conflict situations. In W. Gudykunst, L. Stewart, & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), *Communication, culture and organizational processes* (pp.87-113). New York: Sage.
- Psenicka, C., & Rahim, M.A.
1989 Integrative and distributive dimensions of styles of handling interpersonal conflict and bargaining outcome. In M.A. Rahim (Ed.), *Managing conflict: An interdisciplinary approach* (pp.33-40). New York: Praeger.
- Rahim, M.A.
1989 *Managing conflict: An interdisciplinary approach*. New York: Praeger.
- Soo, F. Y. K.
1981 *Mao Tse-tung's theory of dialectic*. Boston: D. Reidel.
- Shuter, R.
1990 The Centrality of Culture. *Southern Communication Journal*, 55 (3), 237-49.
- Thomas, K.W.
1976 Conflict and conflict management. In M. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp.889-935). Chicago, IL: Rand-McNally.
- Ting-Toomey, S.
1985 Toward a theory of conflict and culture. In W. Gudykunst, L. Stewart, & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), *Communication, cultural and organizational processes* (pp.71-87). New York: Sage.
1986 Conflict styles in black and white subjective cultures. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Current research in interethnic communication* (pp.75-89). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
1988 Intercultural conflict styles: A face-negotiation theory. In Y. Kim & W. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theory in intercultural communication* (pp.213-35). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ting-Toomey, S., Gao, G., Yang, Z., Trubisky, P., Kim, H.S., Lin, S., & Nishida, T.
1991 Culture, face maintenance, and styles of handling interpersonal conflict: A study in five cultures. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2, 275-96.
- Wall, J.A.Jr., & Blum, M.

- 1991 Community mediation in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 35, 3-20.
- Yu, X.
1995 Conflict in a multicultural organization: An ethnographic attempt to discover work-related cultural assumptions between Chinese and American co-workers. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 6, 211-32.