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Nothing Succeeds Like Success

An Analysis of the Causes of Negotiation Success and Failures in China

Abstract: *This study aims to identify Chinese negotiators' views on the causes of failure in intercultural negotiations. Eighty-six Chinese negotiators were asked to rank the most frequently cited causes of failure, and 36 of them were further interviewed to provide examples about one case of successful and one case of failed business negotiations with their international counterparts and to analyze the causes of failure. The questionnaire's precursors to business negotiation failure were identified as not having enough information about the other party, not taking the initiative in negotiations, revealing one's own bottom line too early, extraneous factors, no BATNA (best alternative to no agreement) or emergency measures, and being impatient. Interestingly, the most frequent precursors to failure revealed in the interviews were Chinese negotiators' lack of communication skills, especially inadequate proficiency in English, lack of cultural awareness, the use of inappropriate business behavior and protocols, and failure to compromise on price, delivery deadlines, or payment terms. The interview results added details to the above precursors. The study concludes that negotiators should focus on more than just the negotiation process, as other elements contribute to the success of business negotiations.*

Because China's economy has become the second largest in the world, the level of international business in China is rising. Since all international business starts from negotiations, it is useful and necessary for negotiators to reflect upon their past negotiation experiences in order to enhance their future negotiation success

rate. Normally, and for understandable reasons, negotiators do not allow for observations or recordings of any negotiation process. Hence, this study approaches Chinese participants of business negotiations after the negotiations have ended, asking them to recall and simultaneously analyze their experiences to identify those factors that have contributed to successful business negotiations and those that have led to failed ones.

Since China's open-door policy was administered three and half decades ago China's international business level has increased exponentially. Hence the research field of business negotiation with the Chinese (or negotiating in China) has accordingly gained momentum, yielding publications of books, journal articles, and other forms of media. Scholars from the West, especially English-speaking countries, have made extensive efforts to conduct such studies, competing to provide their own understanding and interpretation of their experiences with their Chinese counterparts or about Chinese respondents. These efforts have been enhanced by collaboration with Chinese scholars. These studies, taken together, seem to indicate that negotiation is a system, which is characterized by a complex mechanism: strategies drive tactics, and tactics influence negotiator choice; negotiators, tempered by their respective cultures, define the negotiation process per se and determine the negotiation outcomes under the constraints of professional or industry standards in a national or international milieu. More specifically, the literature on negotiating with the Chinese or negotiating in China can be divided into the following five categories: (1) strategies, (2) tactics, (3) sociocultural impact on Chinese negotiations, (4) anecdotal reports, and (5) others. The following review describes these categories in detail.

First, business negotiations with Chinese or in China have been studied as strategies/stratagems aiming at equipping businesspeople, particularly Westerners, with guiding principles, or rules, before they actually start the negotiation process in China so that they can negotiate with the Chinese on an equal basis, if not gaining an upper hand. These researchers tend to believe that special negotiation strategies (sometimes different from those with which they are already familiar) are needed for Western negotiators to successfully negotiate with their Chinese counterparts (Adler, Brahm, and Graham 1992; Blackman 1997; Cavusgil, Ghauri, and Agarwal 2002; Fang 2006; Jehn and Weigelt 1999; Liu 2009; McGuinness, Campbell, and Leontiades 1991; Saeed 2008; Ulijn and Amant 2000).

Second, negotiations with the Chinese or negotiating in China have been studied as tactics. Studies in this category are characterized by advice on how international negotiators should interact with their Chinese counterparts and analyses of how they have actually interacted. Researchers' efforts range from analyzing factors leading to negotiation successes or failures, such as ethical issues and trust-building and testing, to the logistics of successful business negotiations in China (Al-Khatib, Vollmers, and Liu 2007; Campbell 1987; Faure 1998; Ma 2010; Rivers 2009; Tung 1982).

Third, negotiations with the Chinese have been examined in terms of sociocultural impact. This category accounts for the majority of the literature on negotia-

tion with the Chinese. This category of studies typically discusses culture-related aspects of negotiating in China. It explores how the Chinese cultural roots translate into Chinese business people's verbal and nonverbal negotiation behavior, influence their perception of the business negotiation process and outcomes, dictate their conflict management styles, and shape their negotiation styles (Buttery and Leung 1998; Gharui and Fang 2001; Gulbro and Herbig 1996; Herbig and Martin 1998; Kirkbride, Tang, and Westwood 1991; Shenkar and Ronen 1987; Woo and Prud'homme 1999). Some scholars who fall into this category (e.g., Danciu 2010; Gelfand and Brett 2004) tend to provide recommendations for Western negotiators about how to negotiate with Chinese counterparts. These studies, mostly conducted by non-Chinese, tend to agree that cultural differences have great power in explaining negotiation failures between Chinese and their international counterparts.

Fourth, some studies in this field take the form of anecdotal reports of Western negotiators' experience in negotiating with the Chinese, and they typically provide caveats and how-tos. This category of studies includes Western negotiators' real life experiences of negotiations with their Chinese counterparts. Understandably they provide their sides of the stories or what they have perceived as uncustomary, that is, different from their accustomed "Western" practices, often describing their Chinese counterparts as "tough" and even "unethical" negotiators (Chapman and Xu 2008; Mertha and Pahre 2005; Miles 2003; Sheer and Chen 2003). For example, Neidel gave the following caveats to Western negotiators: "When working outside first-tier cities, where Western deal-making styles are more familiar, foreign companies can benefit from honing their Chinese-style negotiation skills" (2010, 32).

The last category of these studies has been named "others." This category usually lists the researchers' perceptions of internal and external factors contributing to negotiation successes or leading to failure (Gulbro and Herbig 1994; Ma 2006; Ma and Jaeger 2005; Peterson 2008; Tang and Westwood 1991; Tung, Worm, and Fang, 2007; Woo 1999). An exception is Gildorf's (1997) study, in which the author describes the prenegotiation stage, which is usually overlooked by other negotiation studies.

To sum up the above categorization, studies attempting to explain general negotiation failures with the Chinese are almost exclusively practical and rarely empirical. Moreover, more often than not, these studies reflect Westerner's view points, in spite of the fact that some publications have Chinese coauthors, who contribute from the Chinese perspective but under a Western theoretical framework. Even though business negotiations in China have drawn scholarly and professional attention, few studies have had negotiators reflect upon their own behaviors in the negotiations they have experienced. While there are anecdotal reports and foreign negotiators' testimony of the hardships they have found in negotiations in China, our literature survey revealed no empirical studies investigating Chinese negotiators' perceptions of their own negotiation failure. Thus this study has the potential to develop and refine the theory of negotiation in China.

This study asks the following questions: (1) What are the most important factors that affect the outcome of negotiations in the eyes of Chinese negotiators, and more specifically what factors are likely to cause failure in negotiations? (2) These factors being pinpointed, are they equally important for Chinese negotiators? (3) Do male and female negotiators vary in their opinion as to which factors have more influence than others in affecting the outcome?

The rationale for our approach is that negotiations are extremely complex psychological reactions and behaviors. Negotiations are so complicated that failed cases often prohibit simply blaming cultural differences, whether in terms of strategy, problem/conflict-solving, or communication. Even in successful cases, simply stressing the fact that cultural differences have been considered and that the parties have shown respect for each other lacks explanatory power. That is why this study focuses on negotiators' own testimony, which could provide a remedy for the existing negotiation literature's misidentification of factors leading to success or failure.

Chinese negotiators' reflections on their own negotiation experiences (especially those with their Western counterparts) were chosen as the focus of this study in order to allow for comparison with previous studies of Western-Chinese negotiations, in which Chinese respondents' views were not adequately investigated. In this study, special attention is being drawn to the phenomenon that more and more Chinese women with overseas study or work experience have become or are becoming international business negotiators. Their contributions have the potential to identify new perspectives on intercultural business negotiation failures. The ultimate aim is that through comparison with the negotiation literature, new light can be shed on negotiation practices in China, thereby promoting understanding of the Chinese logic in international negotiation spheres so as to demystify the "inscrutable" Chinese.

Methods

Participants

One hundred Chinese negotiators with ample international negotiation experience were identified and received questionnaires in Beijing through the "snowballing" method. Eighty-seven questionnaires were returned, one of which lacked demographic information and one that was incomplete, that is, eighty-five complete questionnaires were returned. Of the 85 respondents, 59 were male, and 26 female; all the respondents had at least a bachelor's degree; 20 were science majors, and 65 majored in business- and humanity-related subjects; 56 had overseas studying or working experiences; 60 were in administrative positions; 46 assessed their English competency at an advanced level, and the rest believed that their English was at a level between intermediate and advanced. Of the 86 negotiators, 36 were interviewed further.

Instruments

The study survey consisted of questionnaires and interviews. The questions in the questionnaires originated from an early unpublished study by the researchers. The questionnaires were in Chinese, and the results were reported in English.

In the interviews, the researchers asked about the demographic information first before having the interviewees reflect upon their successful and unsuccessful negotiation experiences. Thirty-four of the 36 interviews were conducted in Chinese. Two interviewees preferred to use English as the interview language.

Processes

First, the respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of the most frequently mentioned factors that the authors selected from the relevant literature. More specifically, there were 16 frequently mentioned factors for unsuccessful business negotiations, and the respondents were asked to rate these influencing factors from 1 to 4 (1 = little influence; 2 = some influence; 3 = considerable influence; and 4 = great influence). The questionnaire answers were tallied and analyzed using SPSS 17.0.

Then the 36 interviewees reflected on their most unforgettable negotiation experiences. In the interviews each Chinese negotiator was asked to recall at least one successful business negotiation and one failure. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the researchers' graduate students, and the interview transcripts were further analyzed through coding and categorizing by the researchers themselves. The data collection and analysis process took 18 months.

Results

Questionnaire results

The factors most strongly identified as having an impact on the negotiation outcomes are as follows: not equipped with enough information about the other party ($x = 3.27$); not taking the initiative in negotiations ($x = 3.16$); revealing one's own bottom line too early ($x = 3.15$); extraneous factors ($x = 3.02$); no alternative plans or emergency measures ($x = 3.01$); being impatient ($x = 2.99$); not being familiar with the other party's strategies or styles ($x = 2.85$); lack of flexibility ($x = 2.83$); being biased toward the other party ($x = 2.72$); being too aggressive and not willing to compromise ($x = 2.72$); failure to understand the other party's nonverbal messages ($x = 2.62$); not paying attention to the other party's "face" ($x = 2.59$); not placing the other party on equal footing ($x = 2.58$); language barrier ($x = 2.49$); neglecting the other party's religion or taboos ($x = 2.41$); and other factors ($x = 0.81$).

There were no significant differences between responses from male and female

participants except on one item, namely, “not being familiar with the other party’s strategies or styles” ($t = 2.30$; $p < .024$).

Interviews results

The interviews yield interesting but somewhat different results from those of the questionnaires. The most important points can be summed up as follows.

Four of the 36 interviewees tried to define negotiation before they recalled any of their successful and unsuccessful negotiation experiences. The first attempt was: “Negotiation can take different forms, but in its nature, it is the process of the participating parties trying to accomplish the maximum possible interests for their own party at the expense of the other party.” The second interviewee just laughed upon hearing the interviewer’s intention and pointed out that it is difficult to judge whether a negotiation is successful, simply because successful negotiations can refer to the process as well as the outcome. The third claimed that a positive attitude presented by both parties is what will lead a negotiation to a good outcome. The fourth person believed that failed negotiations are ones in which the two parties see the situation as arguing sessions rather than cooperative problem-solving processes. Two of these interviewees believed that it is difficult to judge whether a negotiation is successful in its own right, because sometimes a negotiation appears to be successful at the negotiation table, especially when one party has achieved its desired goals, but later it may be viewed as unsuccessful since it might bring about difficulties or hardships to the company in honoring the contract. One interviewee pointed out that negotiations on certain topics, for example, high-tech transfer, were by nature more likely to be unsuccessful, no matter how well prepared his own party was. Another interviewee pointed out that frequently one successful deal requires a series of negotiations, big and small, formal and informal. He explained that it takes seven negotiation sessions to conclude a deal with Israelis, so he concluded that sometimes successful business negotiations are physical and psychological competitions rather than a display of strategies and tactics.

Almost without exception, the interviewees, regardless of their years of negotiation experience, were pleased to talk about their successful negotiations, going to considerable lengths to describe how the negotiations appeared to go in an unfavorable direction but that they “rescued” them from failure. The most frequently mentioned tactics for successful business negotiations were setting clear deadlines or payment terms ($n = 21$), anticipating what the other party wants ($n = 16$), and compromising on price and delivery, with a win-win mindset ($n = 11$). There is another feature in the interviewees’ reports that is worth mentioning. Some cases were near-successes ($n = 14$) but ended up in failure because one or two details went wrong at the end. Suggestions given by one interviewee were that even if a negotiation is unsuccessful in a certain negotiation round, the two parties should not close the door on further cooperation, since one can never know what will happen in the future.

Other factors most frequently cited as contributing to successful negotiations were good communication ability ($n = 17$) and, in particular, good proficiency in English ($n = 17$), proper business protocol and etiquette ($n = 13$), and quality products or services ($n = 11$). What draws the researchers' attention is the meta-negotiation aspects: long-term thinking and a growing trend of looking at China and Chinese companies ($n = 10$), and, most important of all, sincere cooperation on both sides ($n = 11$).

Highly valued qualifications for successful business negotiators included: having professional qualifications and expertise, for example, showing respect for others ($n = 13$); keeping promises ($n = 12$); understanding the importance of written records of negotiations ($n = 8$); being trustworthy ($n = 7$); understanding the importance of punctuality in showing up for the negotiation meetings and in making deliveries ($n = 7$); being flexible and humorous ($n = 5$); and possessing original and critical thinking ($n = 5$). However, the respondents agreed that even in successful business negotiation situations, not every negotiator possessed all the above-mentioned qualities.

Thirteen of the 36 interviewees (more than one-third) mentioned how not paying enough attention to cultural influences or neglecting the other parties' cultural nuances, and not understanding the other party's cultural practices in doing business, would lead to negotiation failures. In addition, another frequently mentioned ($n = 7$) factor leading to failed negotiations was the parties' different understandings of the same negotiated object, whether a product or a service.

One female interviewee mentioned that she was in charge of the catering division for the 2008 Olympic Games. Through her connections, she found an Australian who had worked in the same branch at the Sydney Olympic Games, and she wanted to ask him for suggestions and advice. The Australian refused to provide any information before they signed a contract (for knowledge transfer), since he considered his expertise in this field his own intellectual property, while the Chinese woman had not given serious thought to it at first and regarded it as a reciprocal matter that could be settled without a formal contract. However, two interviewees pointed out that in this era of globalization, cultural differences are becoming more and more insignificant, since most foreign businesspeople familiarize themselves to some extent with the Chinese culture or cultural business practices before starting negotiations with the Chinese.

Nine of the 36 interviewees reckoned that the negotiations in which they had participated ended in failure because the non-Chinese negotiator failed to properly attend to the intensely studied concept of "face." Those negotiations were unsuccessful either because the other party failed completely or partially to honor the Chinese "face." In such circumstances, communication seemed to be on different wavelengths: what one party wanted was beyond the understanding of the other. A related but somewhat different "Chinese characteristic"—being indirect—was another factor believed to contribute to negotiation failure. Two of the interviewees commented that in spite of the fact that the Chinese regard face as an important

notion in intercultural business negotiations, Americans, growing up in an individualistic culture, do not seem to capture the significance of face in many cases. When face collides with interests, they would opt for their interests without the least consideration for the Chinese notion of face, that is, they would not care about their Chinese negotiation partners' face.

Seven interviewees mentioned the issue of trust and ethics in business negotiations. In their opinion, negotiations failed either because the Chinese party doubted the other party's trustworthiness or vice versa. All seven interviewees reported that it was most difficult to build trust between parties in international negotiations, especially in initial (international) negotiations. Three of them regarded their first negotiation experiences with international counterparts, with whom they had never done business before, as "probing the way" to find out their "level of trust." Two of them even believed that it was difficult to observe ethical rules and find trust in others when it came to price issues, regardless of whether their counterpart was Chinese or foreign. Comparing negotiations to war, one interviewee cited Sunzi's *The Art of War*, regarding the proposition that "there is never too much deception in war." Most interestingly, there was mention of the use of "threats" in negotiations ($n = 2$), which, in these negotiators' opinion, was more likely to lead to failure than success.

Six interviewees pointed out that not being familiar with the local laws or regulations were the direct cause of the failed negotiations. In particular, one Chinese company had conducted several negotiations in Sudan and failed because of its unfamiliarity with the local laws. Four of the interviewees believed that in addition to the terms and conditions offered at the negotiating table, national and international milieus can complicate negotiation outcomes.

Two of the 36 interviewees mentioned that the reason the negotiations in which they had participated did not proceed as they had wished was that the other party could not understand the Chinese reciprocity principle—that is, the Chinese side had made concessions earlier, but the other side failed to understand the significance and thus did not reciprocate by making concessions. In such situations, the Chinese party wanted to establish a long-term relationship so that it could exercise the reciprocity principle, whereas its foreign counterpart wanted only a short-term one in which each deal was weighed on its own. One of the two respondents made the observation that Americans understand a little bit of reciprocity, but Europeans do not understand it at all.

In two instances, the interviewees explicitly attributed negotiation failures to interpretation or translation problems, especially the interpretation of technical jargon and usage, which is rarely taught to English majors in China. They made it clear that in addition to business expertise, a good command of English is essential in international business negotiations.

In four reports, negotiations nearly succeeded but failed for protocol and etiquette reasons. Interestingly, two of these were the same, that is, placing the U.S. national flag at the left corner of the desk instead of its proper position at the right. Chinese

norms suggest that a national flag being placed at the left corner of the desk signifies that this represented country is considered more important than its counterpart placed at the right corner of the same desk. The other two examples were presenting the “wrong” gifts to people in other cultures, for example, a Chinese negotiator presenting a painting of cranes¹ to French business counterparts and Americans presenting green headwear² to their Chinese negotiation partners.

Four interviewees believed that some negotiations were bound to end in failure because the two parties used different strategies. For instance, the Chinese party wanted to establish a long-term relationship, whereas the American party wanted only to close a particular deal. In other words, they had no intention of establishing long-term relationships.

Three interviewees suspected that corporate culture differences may also lead to negotiation failures. Other causes cited equally frequently were overconfidence and the positioning of the negotiation parties regarding their counterparts. For example, negotiators from Chinese state-owned enterprises erroneously believed that they had better leverage in the negotiations, thus they lost business worth \$1 million in the end.

Two respondents pointed out that the means of communication, face to face versus electronic, makes a significant difference. Had the remote negotiations in which they participated taken place face to face, they might have achieved a different result. When they were asked to explain the reasons, they replied that English was not their native language, and face-to-face communication in English could be assisted by nonverbal cues, a virtue that remote negotiations lack.

In five instances, the interviewees (all top-level management personnel) believed that in order for negotiations to succeed, more needed to be done than arguing at the negotiation table. In addition, it is difficult to attribute a failed negotiation to any particular cause since it is the result of a combination of inadequate preparation, international or national environment, products/services per se, and many other subjective and objective factors. In fact, three of these five believed that failed negotiations and loss of contracts were sometimes necessary “tuition fees” that the Chinese had to pay in order to improve their negotiation skills with foreigners.

Finally, some factors, such as being too pushy, not paying enough attention to another’s nonverbal cues/body language, and short-term thinking, were also mentioned in the interviews as causes of negotiation failure.

Discussion and conclusion

The study highlights that it is difficult to put negotiation theory into practice, in spite of the plethora of negotiation studies. The difficulties seem to be both subjective and objective. Strategies and tactics in negotiations work hand-in-hand in actual negotiations, and they resist separation from one another; yet when strategies go wrong, the tactics are of little use in changing the negotiation outcomes.

The interview data reveal that when two parties start negotiations with a joint

problem- or conflict-solving mindset, the negotiations are more likely to succeed rather than fail. In addition, the sociocultural environment of business negotiations cannot be overemphasized since every negotiation takes place in its unique environment. Related to this point are the negotiation protocols and etiquette, since they are culture-specific more often than not.

Though there was occasional reference to gender in the available literature, gender does not seem to play a role in negotiation in China. Good communication skills, including good proficiency in English, and good expertise in one's own business field are prerequisites for successful negotiations. Almost all literature dealing with (un)successful Sino-Western negotiations mentions that a good relationship is necessary for Western negotiators to conduct successful negotiations with their Chinese counterparts. Such relations are not necessarily created explicitly, since *guanxi* (personal relations) can be established by respecting the other negotiation party.

The trickiest of all is the issue of trust and ethics. On the one hand, Chinese negotiators long to do business with their trustworthy counterparts. On the other hand, they also believe "There is never too much deception in war," as the ancient *Art of War* pointed out. However, these Chinese negotiators' personal accounts seem to suggest that this belief applies to particular negotiation occasions only, for example, in price negotiations, thus no one would be so honest as to reveal his pricing details, or there are even untruths in their opening positions. As researchers, we believe that there is a fair degree of division between the two. However, Chinese culture sees the two as complementary rather than divisive.

Analysis of the questionnaires and interviews points to the fact that business negotiations are more complex than they appear. Negotiation proves to be a large system, with complex mechanisms that requires coordination of the different factors and parameters in order to succeed. However, the degree of success depends on how the negotiators define negotiations.

When negotiations are successful, everything falls into place, which confirms the English saying "Nothing succeeds like success." There can be different explanations for and causes of the success or failure of negotiations. A quotation from *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy is evocative: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

The tentative conclusion of this study is that cross-cultural business negotiation is a system in which factors leading to success coexist and interact with each other. A well-functioning system is therefore a prerequisite for successful cross-cultural business negotiations, which require an understanding of culture, business, negotiation mechanics, and more. Negotiation is a continuum—the ending of one is the beginning of another, or more specifically, a long-lasting partnership or similar relationship.

The present study has also found that negotiators attribute negotiation failure to different factors, with some being referred to more often than others, that is, factors leading to negotiation failure are not equally important, and the factors cited seems to be case and negotiator specific.

This study suffers from some shortcomings. First, the sample size is comparatively small and may not fully represent the population of Chinese negotiators. The interviewees were asked to recall their memories of negotiation successes and failures, and memory can be tricky when it comes to self-criticism. Some of the deficiencies mentioned were overcome by the combination of survey questionnaires and interviews. In addition, the respondents were negotiators with a great deal of experience and just getting their time to reflect on their negotiation success is a research achievement. Moreover, it is the first study of its kind to methodically ask Chinese negotiators for their input. Thus, the study illuminates a negotiation topic that possesses value for both scholars and practitioners. Future studies can take the research further by expanding the sample size and by measuring some of the antecedents of negotiations and their outcomes in real time to find statistical relationships between them.

Notes

1. According to this respondent, in French culture the crane has the connotation of a woman of easy virtue.
2. Green headwear in the Chinese culture means that a man's wife is having an affair with another man behind his back, that is, signifying that he is a cuckold.

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