Problematic encounters between Chinese nationals and black South Africans in the building industry in Johannesburg, South Africa

An intercultural communication analysis

Ganfu Yang

Lian Yungang Teachers' College, China

Abstract

China's increased engagement with South Africa presents serious challenges to Chinese construction companies because of allegations about unfair labour practices. This study aimed to identify cultural differences between black South Africans and Chinese and explore the roles of the differences in their problematic encounters in the building industry in Johannesburg. The study concluded that cultural dimensions should receive due consideration when addressing contentious labour relations between Chinese companies and African employees instead of simply observing labour laws, as broadly claimed in political and economic circles.

Keywords: *cultural dimensions, problematic encounters, building industry, labour laws, Chinese, black South African*

1. Introduction

China's engagements in Africa presented an opportunity for a valuable contribution to Africa's growth and development, but it simultaneously presented a challenge (Edinger, Herman & Jasson 2008). Shih (2013) points out that China's power projection in Africa is largely through geopolitics and its sizeable spending on hard infrastructure. In African countries where Chinese workers have been brought in to build infrastructure, China's reputation has been tainted by resentment from locals (Shih 2013), constituting potential harm to China's soft power and seriously affecting the socio-political contexts of Chinese engagements in Africa. Complaints about Chinese behaviour in Africa are being voiced. The Chinese are accused of violating African employees' rights, providing poor working conditions, paying poor salaries (French 2014; Hunt 2013), sparking very hot debate in media across the region and beyond.

As elsewhere in Africa, the negative behaviour of Chinese construction companies in South Africa (SA) has resulted in industrial tension, but continues unabated. Baah and Jauch (2009) claim that Chinese presence in SA has been a popular topic of debate in business circles, especially since a diplomatic relationship was formally established with China. Given the nature of such problematic interactions and their harmful impact on bilateral relationships, remedial suggestions were made and measures were taken to resolve the problems, but no research has yet regarded different cultural dimensions as potential causes of the problems in the building industry in Johannesburg, as proposed in this study.

Culture actively influences how countries do business. Hence, embracing problem resolution without a critical look at cultural issues may cause us to miss some important clues (LeBaron 2003b). This study aimed to identify cultural differences between black South Africans and Chinese regarding individualism-collectivism, high/low contextual communication (HCC/LCC), high/low power distance (HPD/LPD) and attitudes to time and to explore the roles of such differences in the problematic encounters of interest. It is important to note that theories of cultural dimensions are broadly applied to indicate national identities. Given the nature of this study, the author regarded the theories of national identities as an indispensable tool to facilitate his comparison of cultural characteristics of Chinese and black South Africans, as well as the identification of their cultural differences and determination of the specific differences that are potential triggers of intercultural communication failure.

To achieve this aim, research questions were designed: What cultural dimensions do Chinese and black South Africans demonstrate differently and which one(s) contribute to the problematic encounters in the building industry? To answer the research questions, 112 participants were approached to complete the questionnaires. Chinese participants included 18 managerial staff, 27 supervisors and 11 artisans, while the black participants were four mid-managerial staff, 23 foremen and 29 artisans. This study found that different cultural dimensions caused problematic interactions. The study suggests that cultural dimensions should also be considered when addressing contentious labour issues in Chinese companies, instead of simply observing labour laws, as broadly claimed in political and economic circles.

2. Research design

2.1 Data-collection instruments

In this qualitative study three research instruments were used to carry the research forward. The aim of close-ended questionnaires was to identify the communication behaviour of black South Africans and Chinese in real-life situations. The response options for each of 10statements were 'agree', 'neutral' and 'disagree'. Chinese or black South African respondents circled the communication behaviour of their counterparts. The results obtained by this method reflected the reality of how the two groups observed and thought of their counterparts, thus demonstrating preliminary findings of plausible cultural differences between them. Forty Chinese and 40 black participants completed the questionnaires.

Containing six questions, the open-ended questionnaires requested the respondents' own input and no answers were suggested. These questions aimed to reveal respondents' true attitudes, opinions or behaviour when they interacted with Chinese or black South Africans. Questions 1 and 3 were designed to reflect black South Africans'/Chinese's cultural behaviour in general, while questions 2, 4 and 6 were designed to deal with specific topics regarding saving face, individualist/collectivist interests and conflict styles. Question 5 was designed to explore the participants' views of strikes in Chinese companies. Eight Chinese and eight black participants answered open-ended questions.

Face-to-face interviews were designed to explore the research questions further. Each interview lasted around 50 minutes. The 10 questions for this interview were linked with the cultural dimensions applied in this study and focused on communication styles and practices in business operations between Chinese and black South Africans. Grievances regarding strained labour relations were important considerations in designing questions. Another eight Chinese and eight black participants took part in interviews.

2.2 Control mechanisms

Control mechanisms were established to ensure that the participants cooperated closely with the author and that the required information was obtained. The managements of the Chinese companies agreed to select the respondents according to the research requirements and held meetings with them, asking them to assist the author with the academic survey.

The author obtained permission from all participants before he proceeded with the survey. Written consent from the participants was obtained. Participants' age, educational background (Grade 12 or higher) and the length of time they had been part of the workforce were considered to ensure useful and valid

feedback. Interviews were not recorded because the interviewees could not allow it. However, permission to take notes was granted prior to interviewing.

2.3. Participants

The survey was done on the construction sites of Chinese construction companies from 12 to 16 April 2016 in Johannesburg. Participants were Chinese nationals and black employees. The term 'Chinese' refers to new Mainland Chinese migrants who moved to and worked in SA after China and SA established diplomatic relations in January 1998. This is because the communication behaviour of local Chinese is different from that of Mainland Chinese according to the author's experience, observation and communication with local Chinese.

Participants to answer open-ended questions were chosen from those who had access to the internet to answer the questions electronically. Chinese mid-level management staff had to be unrelated to the owners of the businesses where they were employed for the sake of information validity and reliability. This is because many Chinese companies employ the owners' relatives as managerial staff. Thus they might provide information tainted by stereotype and prejudice in an effort to safeguard the owners' interests.

3. Cultural dimensions

A substantial amount of research studied Chinese/Western cultural dimensions, describing general cultural behaviour of Chinese/Westerners (Anedo 2012; Anderson, Hecht, Hoobler & Smallwood 2002; Burns 1998; Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998; Gudykunst 2003; Guirdham 1999; Livermore 2013;Matondo 2012; Samovar & Porter 2003; Spencer-Oatey & Jian 2003; Ting-Toomey 1999).

There is, however, limited research on African/black South African cultural dimensions (Anedo 2012; Broodryk 2002; Khoza 1994; Li 2014; Livermore 2013;Matondo 2012; Prime 2010; Thomas 2008), although there are a number of publications on African historical events, changes and African traditional cultures (Bate 1998; Gbadegesin 1998; Harding 1998; Nyasani in Lassiter 2000; Mbigi & Maree 1995; Mbiti 1990). In recognition of this, this study referred to the limited literature on Africans and also to the literature on European cultures with which African cultures have been closely interwoven. That black South Africans have been more acculturated to Western cultures during and after periods of colonialism is a core context of reference and consideration in this study. The research on Western cultures was therefore regarded as a source of reference and to indicate the significant role of Western cultures in fundamental changes in African cultures and their shift to embrace Western cultures, an initiative to identity differences between cultural groups.

According to Piller (2011:91), cultures are considered dynamic and changeable, as people continually construct and reconstruct their webs of significance. Culture depends on the context in which concrete interactions occur. The new political, economic and social-cultural contexts African people have gone through during periods of colonialism and afterwards reshaped their cultural characteristics. Africans are acculturated particularly through their interactions with Westerners. This matches the statement of 'who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purpose' (Piller 2011:91).

On individualism-collectivism, Harding (1998), Bate (1998), Mbigi and Maree (1995) Mbiti (1990), Nyasani in Lassiter (2000) and Gbadegesin (1998) claim that African traditional cultures have been changed and African collectivism/communalism has shifted to individualism. Emphasis is shifting from the 'we' of traditional corporate life to the 'I' of modern individualism (Mbiti 1990:219).

According to Mbiti (1990), LeBaron (2003 a), Broodryk (2002), Matondo (2012) and Nyasani in Lassiter (2000), traditionally, African elders, authority and leaders were highly respected and kings were even venerated with acts of worship and loyalty. However, Africa mostly embraced Western values of democracy, freedom and human rights, which have firm roots on African soil owing to the cultural, social, economic and political interactions between Westerners and Africans. Such movements are claimed to play a vitally constitutive role to shift Africa from its traditional HPD inclination to an LPD inclination, in

sharp contrast with China. In comparison with the HPD of China, black Africa can at most be categorised as having 'moderate power distance' (Livermore 2013).

The literature review offers a limited number of studies on the contextual communication of black (South) Africans. According to Livermore (2013), LeBaron (2003a) and Matondo (2012), business relationships are usually established based on friendships rather than business competitiveness, indicating that African people carry one of the marked characteristics of HCC. Thomas (2008), Prime (2010) and Livermore (2013) acknowledge that black South Africans are HCC and white South Africans, LCC.

However, black South Africans' HCC differs from that of Chinese to varying degrees, given the fact that black South Africans' culture has been interwoven with the white LCC in South African and European cultures for decades, while Chinese culture largely remains in its own perimeter. In view of this, the black South African version of HCC can at most be called a weak HCC when compared with the strong Chinese HCC.

On attitudes to time, previous studies claim that Chinese are long-term oriented (Anderson et al., 2002; Brew & Cairns 2004; Guirdham 1999; Storz 1999; Ting-Toomey 1999). African people are claimed to be short-term oriented (Anedo 2012; Livermore 2013; Mbiti 1990). According to Mbiti (1990), African time is a two-dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. 'The future is absent because events which lie in it have not yet taken place. They have not been realised and, therefore, cannot constitute time' (Mbiti 1990:17).

4. Analyses and results

Discourse analysis (He 2003) claims that linguistic forms expose users' beliefs, perceptions and ideology ingrained in their cultures. The author manually went through all the texts of three questionnaires. For close-ended questionnaires, the number of 'agree', 'disagree' and 'neutral' responses was counted and a percentage was worked out. Words, phrases and sections of texts that related to the research questions were labelled from the answers to open-ended and interview questions. Then the data were grouped according to patterns/themes in relation to cultural dimensions in the interest of meaningful data processing.

4.1 Close-ended questionnaires (Table 1)

In response to statement 1, 62.5 percent of black respondents selected 'disagree', indicating that Chinese valued company rights, while 70 percent of Chinese respondents selected 'agree', indicating that black South Africans valued individual rights. Statement 2 revealed that 62.5 percent of Chinese and 55 percent of black respondents circled 'disagree', meaning that both groups experienced high law sensitivity. In answer to statement 3, 55 percent of Chinese respondents chose 'disagree', indicating that black South Africans would not emphasise personal relationship building at work, while 65 percent of black respondents chose 'agree', indicating that Chinese would do so. For statement 4, 45 percent of Chinese selected 'agree' and 25 percent of black respondents circled 'agree'. While 40 percent of Chinese selected 'agree' in response to statement 5, 62.5 percent of black respondents selected 'agree', indicating that Chinese act respect authority and elders.

In response to statement 6, 60 percent of black respondents disagreed that labour law was the best way to solve labour problems in Chinese companies, while 87.5 percent of Chinese respondents agreed with the statement. Statement 7 is related to politeness/harmony. 42.5 percent of respondents from each group selected 'agree'. The respondents' choices for statement 8 revealed that 60 percent of black South Africans chose 'disagree', while 77.5 percent of Chinese selected 'agree', meaning that black South Africans and Chinese had different attitudes to time. In respect of statement 9, 70 percent of Chinese said black South Africans were face-giving, while 42.5 percent black South Africans said Chinese were face-giving. In reply to statement 10, 35 percent of Chinese selected 'agree' and 47.5 percent chose 'neutral', implying they were uncertain about blacks' behaviour. With 80 percent selecting 'agree', black South Africans were sure that Chinese definitely would 'accept a job with little pay because it is better than nothing'.

Table 1:

Name:		Company:		
Position:		Highest Level of Education:		
Time of Working in the Company:				
Behaviour inclination of black South Africans/Chinese:			**Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree**
Black South Africans/Chinese value their individual rights more than the company's interests.				
Black South Africans/Chinese have lower sensitivity to South African law.				
Black South Africans/Chinese would relate personal relationships with work.				
Black South Africans/Chinese are evasive/indirect.				
Black South Africans/Chinese act respectfully towards authority and their elders.				
Abiding by labour law is the best way to solve labour problems in Chinese companies.				
Black South Africans/Chinese are more harmonious/polite than Chinese/black South Africans.				
Black South Africans/Chinese would simply quit a job and not worry about 'tomorrow'.				
Black South Africans/Chinese are face-giving orientated/value face.				
Black South Africans/Chinese would accept a job with a little pay because it is better than no work.				

Note: Questionnaires for black South Africans and Chinese are combined for demonstration purpose.

4.2 Open-ended questionnaires (Appendix I)

Questions 1 and 3 ask the participants to elaborate on circumstances in which they felt offended or not respected. The other questions, however, were designed with particular cultural variables in mind, such as question 2 about face-saving and question 4 on the issue of individualist interests/collectivist interests. Question 5 was designed to explore the participants' views of strikes in Chinese companies, which indicated participants' conflict style. The last question was designed in the same spirit as question 5, to look at the participants' views on 'obedience to the boss's instructions' which revealed participants' conflict style, face concern and attitudes to time as well.

Except for question 2, which demonstrated no clear difference between the two groups, the findings from the other five questions conveyed a clear trend that the majority of the Chinese and black participants

were direct opposites in respect of offensive situations, attitudes to time, power, strikes and individual/group interests,.

4.3 Interview questionnaires (Appendix II)

As a primary instrument in this study, interviews played a unique role in that they provided a setting where the respondents' tones, gestures and eye contact etc. helped the author collect useful clues to interpret their responses more accurately.

Linked with power distance and face concern, question 1 is related to dignity, which denotes "respect" and "status". Dignity is often referred to when it is felt that someone is not receiving a proper degree of respect. Both groups of participants discussed this issue from two perspectives: dignity-losing and dignity-gaining. It was found that Chinese cared more about status, whereas black employees cared more about rights.

Question 2 is related to question 1 in that 'losing dignity' means 'being offended'. Feeling offended is interrelated with face concern, hierarchy consciousness, individual rights and equality. The situations in which the Chinese/black respondents felt offended disclosed that the Chinese were offended more often, while the blacks were less frequently offended and the Chinese cared more about respect, authority/prestige and face, while the blacks were more concerned about rights and fair treatment.

Question 3 explores a specific topic, 'impolite behaviour'. The data disclosed that the 'impolite behaviour' described by Chinese and black South Africans covered different aspects: Chinese were more concerned about status/prestige, blacks' poor planning/failure to save, work ethics and tendency to strike, while black employees were more concerned about fair treatment (not being shouted at) and rights of payment.

In reply to question 4, eight Chinese respondents conveyed a strong Chinese group sense, harmony and long-term orientation, three notable cultural themes of Chinese nationals. However, black respondents were divided on the matter. Five of eight black respondents regarded themselves as part of the group in Chinese companies. Two black respondents had no such family feeling because 'it was not necessary', creating a theme of individual interests first. One black respondent was balanced when he said: 'My rights must not disturb the company's rights while the company rights must not abuse my rights.'

The author's experience in the building industry in Africa is that Chinese are efficient, while black Africans are blamed for their poor efficiency. This is a known reality in the building industry. Question 5 was designed to investigate what is behind this phenomenon. According to Chinese respondents, the reasons include lack of training/skill, laziness, a poor time concept, not worrying about losing jobs and not being hard-working. The main reasons given by black employees for their own poor work efficiency corresponded to the ones given by Chinese respondents: no sense of urgency/patience (mentioned five times) and laziness (mentioned twice), representing a theme of short-term orientation.

Constituting the main part of the contentious labour issue in Chinese companies in Africa, striking is a sensitive subject in labour-related issues in Chinese companies. Question 6 was intended to examine the reasons for striking. Seven of the eight Chinese respondents would consider the big picture in a conflict situation, thus creating a theme of the Chinese style of conflict resolution, which is characteristic of the collectivist style and long-term orientation. However, six of the black respondents mentioned 'striking for money' and 'striking for rights'. Themes of high sensitivity to law, rights orientation and considering a small picture of an issue thus emerged.

As popularly claimed in political and economic circles (Olander 2003), Chinese and African scholars or politicians claim Chinese firms could help reduce friction by 'strictly observing the labour laws' of the host countries in Africa. However, the majority of the Chinese respondents to question 7 deviated from this claim that South African labour law is 'the best way', thus revealing a theme of low sensitivity to law. However, six black respondents said South African labour law is a tool, thus creating a theme of high sensitivity to law and a sense of rights, and two black respondents said 'the law is a quick way to solve problems', creating a theme of dominating conflict style.

As the author and his Chinese friends in many African countries can attest, black Africans would spend their whole salary without saving some for tomorrow; today they get paid, tomorrow they will disappear from their work sites. This has made the Chinese complain a lot. Question 8 was designed to investigate the cultural dimension behind this phenomenon. It was found that blacks' short-term orientation caused this phenomenon, constituting one of the cultural barriers to communication with Chinese, as some Chinese supervisors would shout at these locals or sometimes deduct money from their salaries as a punishment when they returned to work, which would elicit strong resistance from the locals.

It is normal for employees to be concerned about salary and working conditions, but employees from different cultures may have different approaches and attitudes to them. Salaries and working conditions were the key areas where Chinese companies received criticism and condemnation. Question 9 was designed to explore the differences between black South Africans and Chinese with regard to individualism-collectivism, HCC/LCC and time orientation, which affect people's workplace attitudes. A clear pattern emerged: All Chinese respondents were on the side of collectivism, HCC and long-time orientation, whereas the majority of black respondents were on the side of individualism, LCC and short-term orientation.

Face is closely associated with prestige/power in Chinese culture. Question 10 is about face and communication style. It was found that Chinese regarded blacks' 'outspoken' manner as face-losing and furthermore a challenge to Chinese prestige/authority, while blacks failed to see why speaking their minds made the Chinese lose face.

Giving an overall review of the results of three methods, the study demonstrated that the Chinese in the sample cared more about company goals, face ('mianzi'), authority and prestige, had low sensitivity to law, adopted a compromising/integrating conflict style, preferred an evasive communication style and had a long-term orientation, while black employees cared more about individual interests, legal rights, adopted a dominating conflict style, were highly sensitive to law, preferred direct communication and had a short-term orientation.

5. Discussion

5.1 Collectivism vs individualism

As revealed in the data, Chinese valued the company's interests and black employees valued individual interests. According to Chinese respondents, the collective spirit that 'individual interests depend on company interests' was accepted and applied in their work, which gives a significant indication that Chinese are strongly collectivist. The Chinese answers reflect their emotion, stance, belief and ideology about group interests (He 2003) and also buttress the collectivism theory of Hall (1976), Brew and Cairns (2004), Ting-Toomey (1999), Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), Guirdham (1999), Samovar and Porter (2003), Livermore (2013) andAnedo (2012).

However, this study did not provide a clear-cut demonstration that black South Africans are also (strongly) collectivist, as some authors claim. Seventy percent of Chinese respondents agreed that black South Africans valued their individual rights more than the company's rights. Though five of eight black interviewees said they had a 'family feeling' while working in Chinese companies, their tones of uncertainty about 'family membership' in the interview and their linguistic forms raised doubts in the author's mind, especially when comparing their linguistic forms with the clear-cut linguistic forms of Chinese respondents. One black participant told the author: 'I feel like a member of the group, working from morning to evening.' However, this does not mean that he had the same 'group sense' Chinese respondents had because the priority and purpose of 'working from morning to evening' were to satisfy his own individual demands. As another black respondent stated: 'Our goal is to make money.' Such utterances indicated that ensuring jobs for money is a key concern of black respondents. Granted, Chinese employees also cared about salaries, but the difference between Chinese employees and black employees was that Chinese employees were aware that their individual interests were dependent on company interests.

Based on the overall data, this study found that black respondents were however more individualist oriented than the Chinese. Some linguistic forms used by black respondents even demonstrated a strongly individualist cultural feature (open-ended question 4). One respondent wrote: 'Definitely I come first before the company because I cannot compromise myself.' Another respondent simply replied: 'Yes. My own first.' Obviously, by using 'Definitely' and 'My own first', these two respondents sent a strong signal that they were 100 percent individualist. The findings are in line with the theoretical considerations of Ting-Toomey (1999), Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998), Guirdham (1999) and Livermore (2013) in relation to 'individual interests'.

Black (South) Africans were regarded as individualist, as revealed by the data. This is also supported by the main assumption in the theories of Mbiti (1990) and Bate (1998), who claim that foreign cultures, especially European cultures, have changed African traditional societies. African society is a new society enlarged by Euro-Christian influences during colonialism and afterward. 'I' has replaced 'We'.

However, the findings of this study failed to fit into the theories of Livermore (2013),Anedo (2012),Matondo (2012) and the Chinese scholar Li (2014), who claim that Africans are collectivist because of African communalism/ubuntu. Li (2014) claimed that Africa's communalism or ujama is collectivism. He further pointed out that Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism, Senghor's African personality, and Nyerere's ujama are all demonstrations of African collectivism/communalism. Li's claim is not in line with the claims of Prime (2010), Cornell and Marle (2005) and Kimmerle (2006), who point out that African communalism (ubuntu) is not comfortable with collectivism in that collectivism stresses the importance of the social unit to the point of depersonalising the individual. Whereas ubuntu is certainly opposed to individualism, particularly to the latter's extreme and rugged form, it is not the opposite of individualism. Li (2014) also failed to put his claim in the context of fundamental socio-cultural changes Africa has gone through. The perception of fundamental socio-cultural changes in Africa and their impact on Africans' behaviour justifies the theories of Mbiti (1990) and Bate (1998).

That blacks were more individualist oriented, whereas Chinese were strongly collectivist, probably explains why the two groups had problematic encounters in the building industry.Being strongly collectivist, Chinese employers considered company interests more important than employees' individual rights and intermeshed person and issue, meaning that work, relationship and emotion were mixed up. See also 5.2. This conflicted with the black individualist cultural orientation. Black employees did not compromise their individual rights for the benefit of company interests as Chinese did. Blacks' strong sense of rights in respect of complaining about low salaries and poor working conditions in Chinese companies often ended up with the Labour Department and/or led to strikes, which left the Chinese employers disappointed and angry, thus creating a problematic encounter.

5.2 High power distance vs low power distance

In Chinese eyes, that a supervisor's command is fully executed by the employees is a manifestation of respect of employees for supervisors. However, most black employees failed to finish their assigned workload, thus constituting a challenge to Chinese supervisors' authority.

What black respondents mentioned about 'not being respected' is Chinese shouting at them in the workplace and unfair treatment in Chinese companies. In black participants' eyes, Chinese shouting and unfair treatment caused offence, which indicates that blacks were LPD inclined. According to Brew and Cairns (2004), people from an LPD culture have low consciousness of hierarchy and believe that emotion and work should be separated. To black employees, shouting is not part of the work, but an emotional outburst from Chinese supervisors. According to them, such emotional outbursts should not occur in the workplace. Anderson et al. (2002:95) claim that LPD culture would show respect for legitimate power. To black employees, shouting was not a manifestation of legitimate power and thus they did not accept 'being shouted at by Chinese supervisors', who intermeshed emotion and power and regarded shouting as part of supervision power. By means of strikes, or going to the Labour Department or directly and openly confronting the Chinese supervisors to lodge their complaints, black employees demonstrated low consciousness of hierarchy.

It is important to note that the different perceptions of Chinese and black respondents about 'respect for power' constructed communication barriers, leading to problematical encounters. Black employees failed to positively address the desired identity images of the Chinese supervisors who had power and thus expected due respect, and to deal sensitively with these. Thus, the Chinese did not experience satisfaction in their interactions with black employees, and vice versa. This perception corresponds to the effective communication theory of Ting-Toomey (1999). The findings that the Chinese and blacks had different communication approaches and attitudes to power match the theories of PDI and contextual communication by Anderson et al. (2002), Ting-Toomey (1999), Hall (1976) and Brew and Cairns (2004).

The data of close-ended statement 5, interview question 2 and open-ended question 6 demonstrated that Chinese acted respectfully towards authority and elders, revealing high consciousness of hierarchy. Visualising Ting-Toomey's power index culture of the Chinese, the author realises that these attributes are consistent with Confucian philosophy (Ting-Toomey 1999) and the theory of Khoza (1994) that duty, honour and deference to authority are prominent for collectivists.

Anderson et al. (2002) claim that members of HPD cultures regard power as a basic fact in society and promote coercive power to demonstrate the hierarchy of power. The findings correspond to their claim. Chinese supervisors were aware of their power and made use of this power in the workplace to ensure their instructions were followed. A power holder has a strong sense of prestige and 'mianzi' (face) in Chinese culture (Gao & Ting-Toomey 1998; Guirdham 1999; Storz 1999; Ting-Toomey 1999). This implies that power and face are interwoven in Chinese culture. During interviews, the author could physically sense how Chinese interviewees valued their face and authority. The reasons for Chinese losing/winning dignity and being offended were related to obeying instructions.

As Chinese respondents admitted, they would resort to coercive power to deal with local workers who failed to complete assigned work. Coercive power is essential when the superior employer threatens the inferior employee with a certain type of punishment if a task is not completed to the employers' satisfaction. One such punishment is the controversial dismissal of local workers and/or salary deductions. Chinese supervisors regarded dismissing local workers as punishment. In interviews, the author heard several Chinese participants saying so and such dismissals happen in Chinese companies across the African continent. A punishment like is sure to invite complaints from local employees, who will go to the Labour Department or strike to counteract the punishment, thus escalating the tense labour relationships. Illegal dismissal of local workers was one of the main factors leading to numerous labour disputes, according to the author's experience and research.

Chinese HPD culture was in direct contrast with that of black South Africans. The linguistic forms 'refuse to do something …' 'I cannot overlook myself …' 'A good manager should know how ...' exposed blacks' stance that they would not compromise individual interests to make the boss happy. These findings are consistent with the theory of Khoza (1994), who claim that duty, honour and deference to authority are less prominent for those with individualist starting points than for communitarian ones.

One significant issue black employees complained about in open-ended question 1 and interview questions 1, 2 and 3 was 'Chinese shouting at workers in the workplace'. To black respondents, 'Chinese shouting at workers in the workplace' is 'offensive' and 'impolite behaviour'. But what culture does this shouting expose? In Chinese mindsets, person and issue are intermeshed, implying that employees are part of the group, like a family member. It is normal for parents to shout at their children in Chinese cultural environments. In Chinese supervisors' eyes, shouting at their subordinates is acceptable because of their dependency relationships. This is in line with the PDI theory of Anedo (2012).

Quite often, such shouting is intuitive/emotional. This perception is in accordance with the HCC theory of Brew and Cairns (2004). These findings also match the HCC theory of Hall (1976), who claims that people in these cultures are governed by intuition or feelings rather than reason. However, black employees did not accept a supervisor's intuition. They regarded Chinese shouting as an insult. One black respondent complained: 'I am not your son'. 'I am not your son' conveyed his role as an employee who came to work and did not accept a supervisor's intuition. What this respondent said resonated among his fellowmen who regarded Chinese shouting as offensive; they regarded such a Chinese as a bully and a weakling. 'I am not your son' expressed employees' resentment of Chinese 'shouting' and also revealed

this respondent's stance, belief and ideology about power. In black employees' eyes, by shouting, Chinese abused their power as supervisors. These findings are underscored by the LCC theory of 'separate person and issue' (Brew & Cairns, 2004) and are also within the theoretical considerations of LPD in that LPD culture claims 'individuals assess authority in view of its perceived rightness' (Anedo 2012).

It is clear that the Chinese culture to 'intermesh person and issue' constituted a problem for black South Africans who preferred to 'separate person and issue'. It appeared that in Chinese supervisors' eyes 'Chinese shouting at local workers in the workplace' won them face, respect and showcased their power. However, it planted the seed of a grudge among the black employees who complained about the Chinese not respecting them[1]. It must be noted that black employees' lack of deference to their Chinese bosses also offended the Chinese and constituted a challenge to Chinese prestige. Such problematic encounters simmered in their interactions, creating troubling situations for Chinese companies.

5.3 High context communication vs low context communication

As exposed in the data, Chinese attitudes to strikes are clear-cut: do not support them and adopt a sit-down-and-talk-about-complaints conflict style. This finding is consistent with the HCC theory of Hall (1976), who claims that since these cultures are collectivist, they prefer group harmony and consensus to individual achievements. This finding also matches the theory of collectivism (Ting-Toomey 1999) and the theory of collectivist face and conflict styles of Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2003), who claim that collectivists prefer avoiding, obliging and integrating conflict styles. Blacks' striking or going to the labour court worsened conflict situations, since this behaviour is against the Chinese cultural doctrine. This view justifies the theories of Clyne (1994) and Burns (1998), who claim that Confucian values lead to conformity being a central value in Chinese society, asking individuals to adapt themselves to the collective, to advocate conformity and harmony, to avoid conflict and to oppose extremism, a manifestation of HCC culture.

According to the data, black employees had every reason to strike because people in LCC cultures value individualist goals and are governed by reason. This finding also matches the theory of communication style (LeBaron 2003b) and the theory of individualist face and conflict style of Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2003), who claim that individualism and independent self-construal cause self-face concerns, which result in dominating and competing conflict styles. As some black respondents said: 'The salaries we got from Chinese companies are not enough since prices of food increased. We strike because strike is our right.' This logical, linear and action-oriented approach supports the LCC theory of Hall (1976), who claims that people from LCC value logic, facts and directness. Solving a problem means lining up the facts and evaluating one after another. Decisions are based on fact rather than intuition, another communication mode of LCC.

Most Chinese respondents stated that blacks never considered the current economic situation and high unemployment rates in SA when they went on strike. In Chinese eyes, economic and employment situations are important considerations in job-seeking and decision-making with regard to employment. Thus, accepting work with a low salary without complaint is better than nothing, a perception generally adopted by HCC and collectivist Chinese. As such, an inference could be drawn that there is a link between Chinese HCC and collectivism and the unindustrialised treatment of black employees. In view of the above, unindustrialised treatment of black employees would not be resolved by simply following South African labour laws, as some people proposed. The cultural cause thereof should also be looked at and considered instead to cultivate cultural awareness and find a resolution.

5.4 Long-term orientation vs short-term orientation

Black South Africans' 'disappearing' from the workplace after payday and their lack of urgency demonstrate that black African people want to maximise present rewards and are less prone to saving (Anedo 2012), a characteristic of short-term orientation. These are some of the main reasons why Chinese supervisors deducted money from their employees' salaries or dismissed them. Black employees obviously often raised objections against such punishment, leading to contentious relationships between them and their employers. This finding corresponds to those of LeBaron (2003b) and Samovar and Porter

(2003) who agree that time is one of the most central differences separating cultures and cultural ways of doing things and could be problematic during intercultural interaction.

Black people's lack of productivity was also an area of dispute. An African proverb says: 'Where the runner reaches, there the walker will reach eventually.' Participating in an event is more important than the final results. This finding is underpinned by the theory of Mbiti (1990:22), who claims that micro-time is meaningful to the individual or the community only through participation in it or experiencing it and to African people, 'time is meaningful at the point of an event and not at the mathematical moment'. Thus it is normal for African people to work for eight hours a day without being productive. However, poor productivity became the main reason Chinese supervisors paid black employees low salaries or deducted money from their salaries, which caused numerous labour disputes according to this study and the author's own experience.

According to the findings, black employees did not 'accept work with unfair labour practices without complaint'. This finding is in line with the short-term orientation theory of Anedo (2012) and 'no-future' time concept theory of Mbiti (1990:16). This cultural difference explains why black Africans complained about unindustrialised practices of Chinese companies, which often resulted in serious labour disputes, often with trade unions/governments intervening in such disputes.

As noted above, striking was a contentious issue. That Chinese and blacks differed about strikes also revealed two different attitudes to time. According to the long-term orientation theory of Guirdham (1999) and Storz (1999) and theories of collectivism and face of Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2003), collectivism and interdependent self-construal lead to other-and-mutual face concerns, which would lead to the application of avoiding/integrating conflict styles. To Chinese, striking would cause conflict and thus striking is the last resort. However, the majority of black respondents supported striking, elaborating on its justice: 'strike for money', 'striking is their right'. To them, striking was a quick method to get justice. These findings are consistent with the short-term orientation theory of Anedo (2012) and Guirdham (1999) and theories of individualism and face of Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2003:140), who state that individualism and independent self-construal cause self-face concerns and are likely to lead to dominating and competing conflict styles, which are against the Chinese culture of harmony. See also 5.3. It is clear that the decision to strike or not is largely determined by cultural factors.

The findings of this study support what the author proposed to find out through the research questions: Chinese and black participants had different cultural dimensions and these differences caused problematic encounters between them.

6. Contributions

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, because no research of its kind has been reported in the literature, this study bridges the gap by investigating the cultural causes behind problematic encounters between the two groups. Under the theoretical guidance of intercultural communication, this study represents the first attempt to research real-life interaction between the two cultures, demonstrating their cultural differences and claiming that such differences led to their problematic encounters. The results obtained might be considered useful resources and references for the intercultural communication research programme between Chinese and Africans at large.

Second, this research extends our understanding and knowledge of the cultural dimensions of black South Africans. It was found that blacks in this study were mostly individualist and adhered to LPD and LCC, which refutes the claims of a number of authors. Third, this study offers preliminary insights into how situational and contextual factors served to compare, infer and identify the cultural differences between black Africans and Chinese.

The major practical implication of the present research is that it provides much needed answers for black Africans and Chinese to understand the root causes of their problematic interactions better. Thus, the results should also be applicable to a wide population that is interested in Sino-Africa relations. This study

established that simply observing labour law was unlikely to produce the desired results to remedy and mend the cracks in the China-SA relationship. Instead, theories of cultural dimensions should receive due consideration when one addresses the international concerns and outcries about the Chinese presence in Africa to construct a beneficial socio-political relationship between China and Africa.

7. Limitations and future directions

While this study offers relevant insights into the roles of cultural dimensions in problematic interactions, it has some limitations that necessitate further investigation. The limitations include that this research is an in-depth study into only a very tiny aspect of the field. Therefore, the findings might not represent all black South Africans or Chinese regarding cultural dimensions and their roles in problematic encounters. It would be relevant in future studies to obtain data from multiple sources such as education, agriculture and mining, where Chinese and South Africans increasingly interact. In addition, more interviews should be considered, because it is easier to manage face-to-face interviews than close/open-ended questionnaires. Since the existing literature gives a general account of African cultures, it is finally recommended that future work should focus on building industries in more African countries across the continent.

References

Anderson, P.A., Hecht, M.L., Hoobler, G.D., Smallwood, M. (2002). Nonverbal communication across cultures. In W. B. Gudykunst & B. Mody (Eds), *Handbook of international and intercultural communication* (pp. 89-106). Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks.

Brew, F.P. & Cairns, D.R. (2004). 'Do cultural or situational constraints determine choices of direct or indirect styles in intercultural workplace conflict? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 28, 331-352.

Broodryk, J. (2002). *Ubuntu life lessons from Africa*. Ubuntu School of Philosophy: Pretoria.

Burns, R. (1998). *Doing business in Asia: A cultural perspective*. Addison-Wesley Longman Australia Pty Ltd: Melbourne.

Clyne, M. (1994) *Intercultural communication at work: Cultural values in discourse*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

French, H.W. (2014). *China's second continent: How a million migrates are building a new empire in Africa*. Alfred A. Knopf: New York.

Gao, G. & Ting-Toomey, S. (1998). *Communicating effectively with the Chinese*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks.

Gbadegesin, S. (1998). Yoruba philosophy: Individual, community, and the moral order. In Emmanual Chunkwudi Eze (Ed), *African philosophy and anthology* (pp. 130-140). Blackwell: Oxford.

Gudykunst, WB (Ed.) 2003, *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication*. Sage Publications: London.

Guirdham, M. (1999). *Communication across cultures*. Palgrave: New York.

Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*, Doubleday, New York.

Harding, S. (1998). The curious coincidence of feminine and African moralities. In Emmanual Chunkwudi Eze (Ed), *African philosophy and anthology* (pp. 360-372). Blackwell: Oxford.

He, A.W. (2003). Discourse analysis. In M. Aronoff and J. Rees-Miller (Eds), *The handbook of linguistics* (pp. 428-445). Blackwell: Oxford.

Livermore, D. A. (2013). *Expand your borders: Discover ten cultural clusters(CQ Insight Series Book 1)*. Cultural Intelligence Center. Kindle Edition.

Mbigi, L & Maree, J. (1995). *The spirit of African transformation management*. Knowledge Resource: Johannesburg.

Mbiti, J.S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann Education Publisher: Oxford.

Piller, I. (2011). *Intercultural communication: A critical introduction*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd: Edinburgh.

Samovar, L.A. & Porter, R.E. (2003). Understanding intercultural communication: An introduction and overview. In L.A. Samovar and R.E. Porter (Eds), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (pp. 6-17).Thomson: Wadsworth.

Spencer-Oatey, H. & Jian, X.Y. (2003). Managing rapport in intercultural business interactions: A comparison of two Chinese-British welcome meetings. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 24(1), 33-46.

Storz, M.L. (1999). Malay and Chinese values underlying the Malaysian business culture. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 23(1), 117-131.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. Guilford Press, New York and London.

Ting-Toomey, S. & Oetzel, J.G. (2003). Cross-cultural face concerns and conflict styles: Current status and future directions. In W.B. Gudykunst (Ed), *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication* (pp.127-147). Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks.

Internet Sources

Anedo, O. (2012). China - Africa culture differences in business relations. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations,* 6 (4), 92-96. Retrieved 23 March 2016 from: http://www.academicjournals.org/journal/AJPSIR/article-full-text-pdf/04AE10840514

Baah, A. Y. & Jauch, H. (2009). Chinese investment in Africa: A labour perspective. Retrieved 19 Jan 2013 from: http://www.fnv.nl/binary/report2009_chinese_investments_in_africa_tcm7-23663.pdf

Bate, S. C. (1998). Inculturation in South Africa. Retrieved 1 Feb 2010 from:http://home.worldonline.co.za/~20058871/Inculturationpercent20inpercent20Southpercent20Africa.htm

Cornell, D & Marle, KV 2005, Exploring ubuntu: Tentative reflections. Retrieved 17 Dec 2017 from: http://www.ahrlj.up.ac.za/cornell-d-van-marle-k

Edinger, H. Herman, H. & Jasson, J. (2008). New impulses from the south: China's engagement of Africa. Retrieved 2 Feb 2010 from: http://www.ccs.org.za/downloads/CCS__New_Impulses_from_the_South_-_May_08.pdf

Hunt, K. (2013). China's Xi promises equal trade relations with Africa. Retrieved 11 Feb 2016 from: http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/25/world/asia/china-africa-xi

Khoza, R. (1994). Ubuntu Botho Vmunhu Vuhutho, African humanism. Retrieved 9 June 2014 from: http://www.reuelkhoza.co.za/index.php/ubuntu-botho

Kimmerle, H. (2006). Ubuntu and communalism in African philosophy and art. Retrieved 17 Dec 2017 from: http://rozenbergquarterly.com/ubuntu-and-communalism-in-african-philosophy-and-art/

Lassiter, J.E. (2000). African cultures and personality: Bad social science, effective social activism, or a call to reinvent ethnology? Retrieved 1 Feb 2016 from: http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v3/v3i3a1.htm

LeBaron, (2003 a). Culture-based negotiation styles. Retrieved 8 Aug 2014 from: http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/pcs/lebaron.htm

LeBaron, (2003 b). Cross-cultural communication. Retrieved 10 Sep 2013 from: http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/crosscultural_communication/

Matondo, M. (2012). Cross-cultural values comparison between Chinese and Sub-Saharan Africans. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 3, 38-45. Retrieved 23 Feb 2016 from: http://ijbssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No1_1_June_2012/5.pdf

Olander, E. (2003). The China Africa project. Retrieved 28 Aug 2014 from: http://www.chinaafricaproject.com/

Prime, N. (2010). Cross-cultural management in South Africa: Problems, obstacles and agenda for companies. Retrieved 6 Feb 2013 from: http://marketing.byu.edu/htmlpages/ccrs/proceedings99/prime.htm

Shih, T.H. (2013). 'Experts differ on China's 'soft power' in Africa'. Retrieved 17 Dec 2017 from: http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1287767/experts-differ-chinas-soft-power-africa

Thomas, A.S. (2008). One message, many cultures: Best practices for global communication. Retrieved 18 Jan 2013 from: http://www.iabc.com/cwb/archive/2008/0408/Thomas.htm

Appendix I

Open-ended questions

1. Under what circumstances do you feel that you are not respected/offended in your interactions with black South Africans/Chinese?
2. Is face-saving very important in your interactions with black South Africans/Chinese? Why? Why not?
3. In your encounters with black South Africans/Chinese, what behaviour displayed by them is difficult to understand/accept?
4. When you have complaints to lodge to your Chinese supervisor, do you consider the company's interests more than your individual interests? Why?
5. How do you find workers' strikes in Chinese companies?
6. Do you agree that you have to obey your boss even if you are not comfortable? Why?

Appendix II

Interview questions

1. What is your view of dignity as an employee/employer working in a Chinese company?
2. In what ways would you be easily offended in the workplace?

3. What behaviour from black South Africans/Chinese will be regarded as impolite in your communication with them?

4. As an employee in a Chinese company, do you feel you are part of their group? Why?

5. Do you think black South Africans work efficiently? Why not? What do you do then? Do you think Chinese work efficiently? Why not?

6. When a problem or a conflict situation arises, say a workers' strike, do you take a straight-to-the-point approach or adopt a holistic view of the problem or conflict situation and work out a solution accordingly? Please give reasons for your answer.

7. Do you think the Chinese strictly observe South African labour laws in their business? Do you think that abiding by labour laws is the best option to solve labour complaints? Why? Please be specific.

8. Black South Africans very much care about what they have today. They do not think and care about what they will have tomorrow. Do you think this attitude benefits their work/career?Please be specific.

9. Suppose you are not happy with your current work in terms of work conditions or salary, will you still accept it without complaining because having a job is better than no job? What do you think about this?

10. Do you agree that black South Africans are outspoken and don't care whether you are happy about it or not? Why not?

About the Author

Yang Ganfu is an associate professor of translation study at Lian Yungang Teachers' College, China. He has published over 70 articles in different journals in China and in Namibian newspapers. He has studied and worked in Africa for over 15 years. He is a founding member of the Sino-Namibia Study Centre at the University of Namibia. Currently he serves as Director of Africa Studies, Lian Yungang Development Research. In April 2018 he was awarded a degree of Doctor of Philosophy in linguistics at University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Author's Address

Unit 44 The Trails, 52 Olof Palme Street, Windhoek, Namibia
P. O. Box 87111 Windhoek Namibia
Email: yangganfu@yahoo.com

[1] During his 15 years of working in Africa, the author often heard complaints from African people from trade unions who said that Chinese were very racist and did not show respect to Africans, which created tense relationships.