2004

Understanding the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean women

Anna Ang
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Ang, Anna, "Understanding the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean women" (2004).
Master's Theses. 2629.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.g7kb-hprz>
https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/2629

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT REPERTOIRE OF
CHINESE SINGAPOREAN WOMEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of

Communication Studies

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Anna Ang

August 2004

UMI Number: 1424500

Copyright 2004 by
Ang, Anna

All rights reserved.

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 1424500

Copyright 2005 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2004

Anna Ang

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

李文淑

Dr. WenShu Lee

Dr. Federico Varona

Dr. Marquita L. Byrd

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT REPERTOIRE OF CHINESE SINGAPOREAN WOMEN

By Anna Ang

This study examines the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean women. It seeks to develop a contextualized understanding of conflict management in an Asian context. Two research questions were raised:

Q1. How do Chinese Singaporean professional women resolve conflicts in family and professional contexts?

Q2. To what extent is their conflict management repertoire governed by Confucian values such as harmony and respect for seniority?

Multiple in-depth interviews were conducted with Singaporean women staying in the United States and in Singapore. The grounded theory approach was used to analyze the interview data. The analysis revealed that a variety of conflict tactics ranging from confrontational to engaging an intermediary was used in different social contexts. The study further explained that the heterogeneous conflict management repertoire of the women reflected a complex set of value systems embedded in the Singaporean society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would have been a difficult task to complete without the assistance, guidance, and encouragement from the dedicated individuals who have contributed tremendously to my intellectual endeavor.

I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to a committed thesis committee: Dr. Wenshu Lee, Dr. Federico Varona, and Dr. Marquita L. Byrd. The dedicated team of professors has played an important role towards the culmination of my graduate experience. They have each provided me with guidance and encouragement during this difficult and challenging journey. In particular, I am extremely grateful to the thesis committee chair, Dr. Wenshu Lee, for being a caring, dedicated, and inspiring mentor. Dr. Wenshu Lee has been a constant source of encouragement and support during the difficult periods in my graduate career. Without her expertise, constant guidance, advice, and confidence in my abilities, the completion of this thesis and my graduate coursework would have been almost impossible.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Singaporean women who had spent precious time to participate in my study. Thank you for your friendship, trust, and contributions to this research.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband and my parents for their patience, encouragement, financial, and moral support for the valuable and enriching post-graduate experience at San Jose State University.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Literature Review: Cross-Cultural Studies on Conflict Management.....	1
Confucian Philosophy	5
Confucian Principle of <i>Li</i> (propriety).....	5
Confucian Principle of Harmony.....	6
In-Group and Out-Group Distinction	7
Vertical and Horizontal Relationships.....	9
Historical and Social Background of Singapore	10
Purpose of Study.....	13
II. METHODS FOR STUDYING AND ANALYZING RESEARCH.....	14
Research Method: Multiple In-depth Interviews.....	14
Interviewees.....	14
Procedures	15
Interview Techniques	16
Analysis Procedures	17
Data-collection	18
Note-taking.....	18
Coding	19
Writing Memos.....	20
Sorting and Writing	21

III. TYPOLOGY OF CONFLICT TACTICS	22
Confrontational Tactics	23
Assertive Tactics	32
Covert Tactic	36
Avoidance Tactics	40
Compromising Tactics.....	47
Engaging an Intermediary	50
Conclusion.....	58
IV. DISCUSSION: MUTIPLE VALUE SYSTEMS	59
Heterogeneous Values That Govern Family Relations	60
Confucian Values That Govern Family Relations.....	63
Implications of Multiple Value Systems Governing Family Relations.....	65
Pragmatic Values That Govern Professional Relationships	67
Cost and Benefit Assessment of Professional Relationships	68
Efficiency and Productivity in the Professional Context	71
Conclusion.....	72
V. SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS.....	74
Summary.....	74
Personal Reflections	76
Limitations and Suggestions.....	79
Conclusion.....	81

REFERENCES.....	82
APPENDIX A. Interview Guide.....	87
APPENDIX B. Interviewees' Demographic Information.....	89
APPENDIX C. Typology of Conflict Tactics.....	91

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a common experience in our everyday communication with people. It is defined as the perceived divergence of interest or a belief that the current aspirations of both dispute parties cannot be achieved simultaneously (Rubin, Pruitt & Kim, 1994). According to Kim and Leung (2000), conflict involves a communicative exchange between at least two interdependent parties who have opposite opinions or incompatible goals and who perceive that the other is interfering in the achievement of the goals.

According to Segall (1983), whenever a conflict arises, individuals involved will attempt to resolve it in one way or another, often employing certain tactics. Conflict tactics are defined as "... behaviors, [and/or] acts by the participants in the conflict that make the situation dynamic, moving it toward one kind or another of resolution" (Segall, 1983, p. 22).

The following discussion will provide a literature review in two areas: Cross-cultural research on conflict management and the Confucian philosophy.

Literature Review: Cross-Cultural Studies on Conflict Management

A review of the literature shows that intercultural research on conflict resolution has mainly focused on comparisons of conflict resolution styles between national groups (Cai & Fink, 2002; Chua & Gudykunst, 1987; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). For instance, Chua and Gudykunst (1987) found that members from high-context cultures such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan preferred to use indirect and non-confrontational strategies for resolving conflicts more than members from low-context cultures such as the United States. In another study that compared conflict styles across

five cultures, Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) reported that United States participants used a higher degree of dominating conflict style compared to Japanese and Korean participants. On the other hand, Chinese and Taiwanese participants were reported to use a higher degree of obliging and avoiding conflict management styles compared to their United States counterparts. In their study on organizational conflict management behaviors, Lee and Rogan (1991) reported that Korean participants preferred to use solution-orientation strategies while the US participants preferred to use competitive strategies in solving conflicts.

Kim and Leung (2000) further note that researchers who carried out cross-cultural empirical studies have typically assumed participants in samples to be either individualistic or collectivistic, based on Hofstede (1991)'s categorization of world cultures. Collectivism is defined as a tendency to place group goals above individual goals while individualism is defined as a tendency to weigh individual goals more heavily than group goals (Triandis, 1995). The individualism and collectivism (hereafter abbreviated as I/C) constructs have guided much of the research in the study of conflict styles across cultures. For instance, participants from North America regions are typically assumed to be individualistic while those from Asia, Latin America, and South Africa are assumed to be collectivistic.

Recently, scholars (Chuang & Hale, 2002; Lu, 1998) have argued that I/C constructs are overly simplistic categories or inappropriate assumptions that are unable to adequately explain the complexity that exists within a culture. These abstract cultural level categories tend to produce explanations that ignore the heterogeneity that exists within a culture. For example, Chuang and Hale (2002) indicate that although cross-

cultural empirical research derived from I/C cultural schema provides insightful fundamental differences between Chinese and American cultures, this line of research is unable to account for personal traits and individual differences.

Chuang and Hale (2002) further emphasize that it is problematic to assume that most Chinese tend to adopt an accommodating or indirect approach in conflict situations with other Chinese. Similarly, Kim and Leung (2000) agree that the results from cross-cultural empirical research have led to overgeneralizations such as members of collectivist cultures prefer non-confrontational and indirect conflict styles because they value harmonious relationships.

Likewise, Singha and Tripathi (1994) caution the use of dichotomous categories to characterize nations and cultures because these abstract categories tend to ignore subtle and qualitative differences that are characteristic of social life. For instance, contrary to the common assumption that the Indian cultural system is collectivistic, Singha and Tripathi (1994) found that Indian cultures are neither predominantly collectivistic nor individualistic in orientation.

Furthermore, Gabrenya, Jr. and Hwang (1996) note that most of the empirical work on Chinese conflict behavior has been focused on Chinese participants from China. Research on participants from countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore is largely excluded until the late 1980s. Hwang (1987) argues that the ways in which the Chinese approach social relations differ from place to place in the face of industrialization and urbanization due to unique structural conditions that give individuals alternative frameworks to make sense of their social relations. Hence, by choosing to

study participants from Singapore, the aim of this study is to reexamine conventional research on cross-cultural research on conflict management.

In addition to an overly simplistic dichotomy of collectivism and individualism, gender and status of disputants are largely ignored in cross-cultural studies on conflict management. General claims based on the demarcation of world cultures along the individualistic-collectivistic dimension not only promote a single, homogenous, and privileged reality of a particular society, they further “silence the voices of the powerless (e.g., children, women) ...” (Lee, Chung, Wang & Hertel, 1995, p. 283). Lee et al. (1995) argue:

We can no longer accept on faith the positivistic paradigm in intercultural communication, which often labels North America as a low-context culture and China as a high-context culture, and accords them each ahistorical and acontextual characteristics (e.g. North Americans are individualistic and confrontational; Chinese are collectivistic, nonconfrontational, egoless, and perspectiveless, and they emphasize harmony) (p. 284).

Hence research which is based on national level constructs can lead to stereotypical images of Asians from particular geopolitical locations.

In addition, many of the empirical studies endorse a gender-neutral stance, implicitly upholding a management bias that interprets women’s communicative behavior from the standpoint of men rather than women in society (Burrell, Buzzanell, & McMillan, 1992). To further support this argument, Lee et al. (1995) emphasize, “For those whose gender is female/and or whose political views are critical of the powerful, the understanding of self and other may include different dimensions- patriarchal and monolithic oppressions” (p. 283).

According to Spitzack and Carter (1987), research that excludes women's experiences or treats women as "outsiders [who are] placed in a relation of exteriority with respect to the dominant culture" (p. 418) misses the opportunity to offer valuable insights about conflicts in a power-sensitive way.

Confucian Philosophy

The scope of this literature review will include a discussion of key concepts such as the Confucian principles of *Li* (propriety) and harmony, in-group and out-group relationships as well as vertical and horizontal relationships. It will also provide a brief description on the history of Singapore.

Confucian Principle of Li (礼)

East Asian communication patterns have been largely influenced by the doctrines of Confucianism (Yum, 1988). Confucianism is a philosophy of human nature that emphasizes proper social relationships in society. Yum (1988) states, "As a philosophy of humanism and social relations, Confucianism has left a strong impact on interpersonal relationships and on communication patterns" (p. 374). An understanding of the influence of Confucius teachings on Chinese interpersonal relationships can help us better understand how the Chinese perceive and deal with conflicts.

According to Confucian philosophy, there are five basic types of relationships in society. They are: father-son, emperor-subject, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and between friends. These particularistic relationships are governed and maintained by the principle of *Li* (propriety) (Chen 2001; Chen & Chung, 1994; Yum, 1988). Propriety involves mutual responsibilities and respect for social norms in the five types of relationships.

The principle of *Li* (propriety) stipulates that in each of these relationships, the individual must behave in accordance to his or her role expectations. For instance, Chen and Chung (1994) highlight that in a superior-subordinate relationship, the superior is obliged to protect and show holistic concern for the subordinate. On the other hand, the subordinate is obliged to show his/her respect, loyalty, and commitment to the superior. In the husband-wife relationship, the wife is expected to be obedient to husband while the husband must show his love. In the elder brother-younger brother relationship, the elder brother is obliged to display brotherly love while the younger brother must show respect. In the father-son relationship, the father is expected to display love while the son is obliged to be filial. Finally, individuals are expected to show mutual faith to their friends. The concept of *Li* (propriety) connects the individual to social obligations by means of rules such as propriety of conduct and propriety of speech (Chen & Chung, 1994).

Confucian Principle of Harmony

The principle of harmony is an important value in Chinese culture (Chen & Starosta, 1997). Chen and Chung (1994) highlight that the function of maintaining a particularistic relationship is to ensure that harmony is maintained and conflicts are avoided. Scholars (Chen, 2001; Chen & Starosta, 1997; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987) further highlight that harmony is maintained by the principle of *Li* (propriety). Chen (2002) points out that the achievement of harmony requires mutual dependency and responsibility in fulfilling each party's needs in a social interaction. Relational harmony is maintained when each individual is conscious of his/her position and thus, acts to fulfill those social obligations required by his/her position.

In addition, the principle of harmony requires one to practice self-restraint in the expression of emotions and thoughts (Chen, 2002; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987). It encourages one to be polite and courteous when communicating with others (Chen, 2001). The ability to restrain one's speech or to indirectly express disapproval during a conflict is an appropriate response that meets Confucian ideals of social harmony, especially when one occupies the less senior position within the relationship (Chen, 2002). According to Chen (2002), the demonstration of aggressive behaviors or the inability to control one's emotions in public violates the principle of harmony and thus, is an unacceptable mode of behavior that is not easily forgiven.

In-group and Out-group Distinction

The distinction between distant and close relationships is another basic assumption underlying Confucian philosophy. Hwang (1997) suggests that in-group members are governed by expressive ties while out-group members are governed by instrumental ties. The expressive tie is defined as a "relatively permanent and stable social relationship" (Hwang, 1997, p. 949). The expressive tie causes the individual to develop feelings of warmth, affection, safety, and attachment. According to Hwang (1997), this tie typically occurs among members of primary groups such as family and close friends. On the other hand, the instrumental tie is defined as a relationship that is used to attain other goals

In Confucian philosophy, the family forms the basis of society. According to Hwang (1987), the family is the most important primary group to the individual in traditional Chinese society because it encompasses a variety of functions such as economic, religious, education, and recreation. The individual is expected to do his/her

best for the family and the family will in turn supply him/her the resources for living. Hence, in traditional Chinese society, the in-group refers to the family which focuses on caring for each other and helping each other in times of need (Chang & Holt, 1994).

In addition, in-group members are expected to be less self-serving of their own interests and to be mutually dependent on one another (Yum, 1988). Chang and Holt (1994) agree that the “Chinese feel particularly comfortable with, and are at the same time burdened with obligations toward people of their own in-group, since mutual support and help is most likely to occur when one is perceived as an in-group member” (p. 257). Yum (1988) further highlights that under the system of reciprocity, the individual does not calculate what he/she receives. In addition, it is also equally important to accept the obligations that accompany such relationships.

The practice of *Li* (propriety) and social reciprocity therefore stipulate that individuals conform to their roles and interact differently for people in different orders of relationships (Chang & Holt, 1991). Yum (1988) further argues that individuals do not apply the same rule to everybody that they interact with but rather they “differentially grade and regulate relationships according to the status of the persons involved and the particular context” (p. 378).

Chen (2001) argues that the ability to distinguish the various types of relationships functions to create a supportive communication climate and to sustain a harmonious relationship between those who interact. Bond and Wang (1983) agree that Confucian philosophy functions primarily to maintain the harmony of the in-group. The individual is expected to suppress all aggressions within his or her in-group. They further note that there are few guidelines for behavior towards members of out-group.

Chang and Holt (1994) agree that out-group members are allowed to act free of obligation.

However, besides the clear distinction based on the closeness of a given relationship, Hwang (1997) argues that relationships in Chinese culture must be analyzed in terms of their vertical and horizontal dimensions. His argument is reinforced by Ho and Chiu (1994) who contend that relationships in Chinese culture are not just defined in terms of relational distance, but are also defined in terms of one's role in the relationship. Hence a person's behavior towards other people is dependent not only on the closeness of the relationship, but also on how the self is related to others in the relations.

Vertical and Horizontal Relationships

According to Hwang (1997), the correlations between two roles involved in interpersonal conflict can be differentiated into vertical and horizontal relationships. This is because the five types of relationships in the Chinese society are hierarchically structured along various dimensions such as age, sex, role, and status (Chen, 2001; Chen & Chung, 1994; Chung, 1996). For instance, elderly people influenced by Confucianism societies receive a substantial amount of respect and high status (Chung, 1996).

The senior member in a relationship is accorded a wide range of authority and prerogatives compared to the junior member (Chen, 2001; Chen & Chung, 1994; Chung, 1996). Chen (2001) further argues that the hierarchical structure of relationships ascribes power to the seniority one holds and authority one possesses. Power is defined as the control of resources valued by other parties (Chen, 2001).

According to Chen (2001), the hierarchical structure ascribes power to the superior, father, husband; older brother, and those in high status authority.

When relationships in the Chinese culture are structured along a traditional patriarchal hierarchy, the principle of social reciprocity does not apply to everyone especially Chinese women (Lee et al., 1995). Lee et al. (1995) note that women in the traditional Chinese family have to “. . . submit to the patriarchal status quo at various stages of their lives: to their fathers before they were unmarried; to their husbands after they were married; and to their sons when they were widowed” (p. 277).

However, Chinese women do not necessarily occupy subordinate positions in the various types of relationships. Depending on the individual's role and status in the relationship, the relationship can be vertical or horizontal. For example, a girl who moves from a parent-child relationship into a husband-wife relationship often does not change her relative status, but, when she becomes a mother of a child and eventually a mother-in-law, she becomes the higher ranking of the two, among women.

In order to increase the reader's understanding of Singaporeans, a brief history of Singapore is provided in the following discussion.

Historical and Social Background of Singapore

Singapore was founded in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles as a British colony. Before the establishment of Singapore as a colonial trading port, Singapore was controlled by a senior feudal chief of the Johor Sultanate, Temenggong Abdu'r Rahman. The Johor Sultanate was a Malay empire which controlled the southern part of Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and the islands in between, including Singapore in the late eighteenth century. Singapore was populated by indigenous tribes who made a living

from fishing, gathering jungle produce, trading, and piracy. These indigenous tribes owed their allegiance to the Temenggong. Also living on the island was a small group of Chinese who made their living from growing pepper produce on the island. At the dawn of the colonial era, an estimated population of one thousand people lived on the island.

The establishment of Singapore as a free port in 1819, attracted migrants from China, India, Malaya and other parts of Southeast Asia. Under colonial rule, Singapore remained an ethnically segregated city. For instance, separate living zones were allocated by the colonial government for the immigrants. Four separate educational systems -Mandarin, Tamil, Malay, and English modeled after the education in the respective homelands of the immigrants were set up. The Chinese schools taught Confucian philosophy and were based on Confucian texts such as *The Classics of Filial Piety* and *Confucius Analects, Lun Yu*. Many of the early Chinese immigrants continued to identify themselves with their family and kin in their homeland. Their thinking and behavior were influenced by Confucian ethics to a great extent (Kuah, 1990; Kuo, 1986).

In 1959, Singapore was granted self-governance by the British colonial administration. However an independent political entity was absent until People's Action Party (PAP) assumed political leadership in 1965. Under the leadership of People's Action Party, Singapore embarked on a nation-building project. Government policies such as multiracialism, meritocracy, and bilingualism were implemented. Hill and Lian (1995) state that multiracialism, as defined by Singaporean leaders refer to the practice of cultural tolerance towards the founding races of Singapore (i.e. Chinese,

Malays, Indians, and Eurasians) as well as according each community equality before the law and equal opportunity for advancement. Under the multiracial policy, the state adopts a neutral stance towards the different racial groups, giving them equal rights and opportunities in the public sphere while at the same time, allowing individuals to practice the customs and traditions according to their respective ethnic group in the private sphere. The multi-racial policy requires the various ethnic groups to work towards racial harmony, mutual respect and tolerance towards one another.

Pragmatic values such as competitiveness and meritocracy, as Chua (1995) argues, were promoted to support economic development and to improve the population's material well-being. In order to achieve the objectives of national economic growth, the overarching cultural ethos promoted in the work place, was one of mutual trust and co-operation between employer and employees. As Singapore went through a process of rapid economic development and social transformation and grew increasingly plugged into the global economy, the population was confronted with new sets of values and lifestyles. As late President Wee Kim Wee (1989) states:

Singapore is open to external influences. Millions of foreign visitors pass through each year. Books, magazines, tapes, and television programs pour into Singapore every day. Most are from the developed countries of the West. The over-whelming bulk is in English. Because of universal English education, a new generation of Singapore, a new generation of Singaporeans absorb their contents immediately without translation or filtering. This openness has made us a cosmopolitan people, and put us in close touch with new ideas and technologies from abroad. But it has also exposed us to alien lifestyles and values. Under this pressure, in less than a generation, attitudes and outlooks of Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans have shifted. Traditional Asian ideas of morality, duty and society which have sustained and guided us much in the past are giving way to a more westernized, individualistic and self-centered outlook on life (Singapore Government, 1991).

Traditional Asian values such as hard work, filial piety, respect, and responsibility were reinforced at the national level. Specifically, such values were promoted and inculcated in citizens through the bilingual policy and public discourse such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore how women approach conflicts in a Chinese society. Specifically, this study aims to provide a contextualized description of how Chinese professional women in Singapore handle conflicts in various contexts such as family, friends, and work. Accordingly, the following research questions will be addressed in this study:

- Q1. How do Chinese Singaporean professional women resolve conflicts in the family and professional contexts?
- Q2. To what extent is their conflict management repertoire governed by Confucian values such as respect for seniors and harmony?

Chapter I has examined previous cross-cultural studies on conflict management. In addition, fundamental principles in Confucian philosophy as well as a brief description on the history of Singapore have been outlined. In Chapter II, methods for studying and analyzing the research will be discussed. Research questions one and two are addressed in Chapters III and IV respectively. Finally, Chapter V provides a summary of the analyses, personal reflections, limitations of study, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter II

METHODS FOR STUDYING AND ANALYZING RESEARCH

Research Method: Multiple In-Depth Interviews

To address the research questions, multiple in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. According to Shulamit Reinharz (1992, 2000), a scholar in feminist research methods, multiple in-depth interviews provide several advantages for the researcher. First, interviewing is an important asset for studying women because it enables the researcher to gain access to the women's thoughts, ideas, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. Second, multiple in-depth interviews foster a less hierarchical power relation between the researcher and the researched via the building of trust and openness. Third, multiple in-depth interviews provide more depth and context than single interviews because the researcher has opportunities to explore the topic further with the interviewee by engaging in dialogues and clarifying previously obtained information. Hence the researcher is able to better understand how the interviewee's thoughts are framed contextually.

Interviewees

Ten Chinese Singaporean professional women were asked to participate in the research. All the interviewees had spent a substantial number of years studying, working or living in Singapore. Their age ranged from late twenties to early thirties. Seven of the interviewees were married while three remained single. Except for one interviewee who had a high school degree, the rest possessed a college degree. All the interviewees have had at least one year of professional work experience in Singapore after graduating from college or high school.

The interviewees were selected from a network of friends and acquaintances. In-depth interviews were conducted with five Chinese Singaporean women who resided in the United States and five Chinese women who lived in Singapore.

For the interviewees who resided in the United States, their stay ranged from a few months to about four years. Reasons for their stay ranged from working, studying to accompanying spouse on a job posting. These interviewees were considered as acquaintances of the author whom she had met during her three year stay in the United States.

Procedures

Multiple in-depth interviews were conducted from November 2003 through January 2004. The interviewees were informed that their identities would be kept anonymous for the purpose of the study. Interview sessions were scheduled after the interviewees had agreed to participate in the research and had given their permission to be audio-taped.

For interviewees who were acquaintances, informal social meetings prior to formal interview sessions were arranged, in order to get to know them better. Subsequently, at least two formal interview sessions were conducted with each interviewee. Each interview session lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

In contrast, there were fewer informal meetings conducted with interviewees who were considered as friends. This is because the close relationship and familiarity established prior to the study facilitated a shorter and more focused interview (Reinharz, 1992). The interviews with friends were conducted mostly in Singapore. However, due to an absence of contact, the relationship closeness with some interviewees living in

Singapore could not be presumed with certainty. Hence in order to re-establish the familiarity, the interviewees were first engaged in informal chit-chat before they were interviewed formally.

The interviews were conducted in places that provided convenience for the interviewees such as their homes and public places like cafes and restaurants.

Interview Techniques

In order to encourage interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences with openness and sincerity, Reinharz (1992, 2000) emphasizes the importance of establishing rapport with interviewees and building a trusting relationship with them. She suggests that researchers define themselves as learners and listeners to encourage the development of trust. She further suggests that self-disclosure by the researcher helps put the interviewees at ease and thus, contributes to a meaningful conversation. To create a dialogic interview atmosphere, an empathetic, receptive and non-threatening interviewing approach that focused on listening and understanding the interviewees was applied. A careful and cautious listening approach was adopted as interviewees disclosed sensitive and emotionally intense information about themselves and their conflicts which they had experienced with family members, friends, and colleagues.

A semi-structured interviewing technique was used where preset and spontaneous interview questions were asked (see Appendix A). Also where accuracy and clarity might be in doubt, information elicited was frequently summarized and clarified. Some of the interviewees were asked more probing questions to encourage them to talk more openly about their experiences.

Recognizing that it would initially be difficult for the interviewees to open up and disclose personal and intimate details about their conflict experiences, more general questions were asked at the beginning of the interview session. Some of the initial issues that were addressed included explaining the purpose of research; disclosing some personal information; eliciting demographic information, and asking the interviewee to describe her conflict experiences with out-group members. Subsequently, more intimate information was elicited by asking the interviewee to describe her conflict experiences with in-group members.

Devault (1999) suggests that speaking in ways that open up the boundaries of standard topics will encourage respondents to provide accounts that are reflective of their realities instead of the researcher's. Thus, terms and concepts which made sense to the interviewees were used to help them talk about the topic according to their everyday experiences. For instance, concepts such as in-group and out-group were replaced with *Zi Ji Ren*¹ (自己人) and *Wai Ren*² (外人), Mandarin terms which the interviewees were familiar with.

Analysis Procedures

Coding procedures developed by the grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998) were used to analyze the transcripts. Strauss (1987) states that grounded theory "emphasizes the need for developing concepts and their linkages in order to capture a great deal of the variation that characterizes the central phenomena studied during any particular research project" (p. 7). By drawing upon

¹ *Zi Ji Ren* means own people.

² *Wai Ren* means outside people.

participants' perspectives, conceptions, and interpretations towards the phenomena studied by the researcher, the grounded theory approach allows for multiple perspectives to be sought during the research inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

The codified procedures proposed by the grounded theory approach further lend credibility to the interpretations as ideas are systematically derived from the mass of interviews collected. The steps for coding and interpreting interview data are summarized in the following diagram³:

Data-collection

The interviews were audio-taped to capture more accurately the substance of the interviews rather than to rely on memory and recollection. Permission was sought from the interviewees before the interviews were audio-taped. In addition, notes were written during the interviews.

Note-taking

The interviews were transcribed and edited. Editing means “interpreting, condensing, excerpting, and polishing respondents’ talk” (Devault, 1999, p. 75). Devault (1999) explains, “The purpose of editing of editing is to cast talk into a form

³ From “Grounded theory: A thumbnail sketch” by B. Dick. (2002), from <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/grounded.html>

that is easier to read-and-more-compelling than raw interview documents, which are often lengthy, rambling, repetitive and/or confusing” (p. 75). Likewise Strauss (1987) agrees that the actual transcribing should be selective.

Minor editions such as grammatical and spelling errors were made. Sentences were joined together for greater clarity and coherence. The style, content, and distinctiveness of the interviewees’ speech were preserved and captured as accurately as possible. Interviewees’ were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Pseudonyms with English names as well as those with direct translations from Chinese names reflect western influences on the Asian culture in Singapore society.

Demographic information about each interviewee is provided in Appendix B.

Coding

At this stage, the transcripts were analyzed and labeled for emerging concepts and ideas. Categories were generated by analyzing whole sentences and paragraphs. A comparison of the categories in terms of their properties and dimensions was conducted. Categories which had similar characteristics or properties were grouped or categorized into core categories. For instance, conflict tactics that emphasized aggression and negative emotions were categorized into a single core category.

Chinese colloquial expressions and idiomatic phrases were used in the construction of categories for conflict tactics. The Chinese phrases were useful for labeling concepts because they provided vivid descriptions, conveying the meanings for each category in a compact and succinct manner. The categories were labeled using the Romanized Chinese phonetic system (*HanYu PinYin*) and simplified Chinese characters.

In addition, the various categories were compared and analyzed for their relationships and connections. The emergent relationships and concepts were compared with those in the existing literature. For instance, Hwang's (1997) model of Chinese conflict resolution was used as a preliminary model for analyzing and comparing the various categories that emerged.

The conditional/consequential matrix prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) was further used in the coding of the transcripts. The conditional/consequential matrix is an analytic coding device that helps the researcher to think about relationships between structural and contextual conditions. As argued by Strauss (1987), "Eventually, however, the grounded theory researcher must engage in coding that results in the detailed codes connecting *specific* conditions with *specific* interactions, strategies and consequences" (p. 78).

Hence the transcripts were coded for cultural values and contextual conditions such as the relationships among conflict parties. The transcripts were further analyzed according to how the various conditions interacted with the individual's conflict strategy choices.

Writing Memos

Memos refer to written records of analysis, code notes or theoretical notes (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), memos provide a "storehouse of analytic ideas that can be sorted, ordered and reordered, and retrieved according to the evolving theoretical scheme" (p. 220). Memos were therefore written for core categories and sub-categories during the coding process to enhance the researcher's interpretation of the data at the conceptual and theoretical levels.

Sorting and Writing

At this stage, the different memos were arranged and sorted into a coherent order, according to the theoretical direction of the analyses. After sorting, a typology of conflict tactics used by Chinese Singaporean professional women was constructed. Conditions that interacted with the various conflict strategies were identified and arranged accordingly. A detailed description on the typology of conflict tactics is provided in Chapter III. The interaction among structural and contextual conditions is discussed in Chapter IV.

Chapter III

TYPOLOGY OF CONFLICT TACTICS

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the various types of conflict tactics that are used to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts. By developing a typology of conflict tactics, this chapter seeks to address the first research question: How do Chinese Singaporean professional women resolve conflicts in the family interpersonal context and professional context?

Hwang's (1997) typology of Chinese conflict tactics is used as a preliminary model to construct a typology of conflict tactics used by Chinese Singaporean women. The model proposes that a particular type of conflict resolution tactic is adopted based on the actor's assessment of whether to attain personal goals or maintain interpersonal harmony. Five types of conflict tactics have been identified in this model. These tactics include a) confronting others, b) severing relationships, c) obeying in public while defying in private, d) enduring, and e) compromising.

In order to provide for a complex description on the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women, this chapter will add additional categories to Hwang's (1997) model as well as refine its existing categories. A typology of the conflict strategies developed in this study is presented in Appendix C.

It must be further noted that the categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive as they may share certain overlapping properties or characteristics. However their characteristics are differentiated and categorized to the extent that they highlight different dimensions of a conflict or a conflict strategy. Appropriate colloquial Chinese expressions and idioms are used as labels for the categories. Although these labels may

not necessarily be an exact match for the interview data due to the complexity of a conflict, they nevertheless aim to satisfy the theoretical purposes of this research.

Confrontational Tactics

The confrontational strategy emphasizes the pursuit of personal goals at the expense of interpersonal harmony (Hwang, 1997). In addition, the confrontational category further implies the adoption of an antagonistic and argumentative stance during a conflict. This approach emphasizes the use of negative emotions such as hostility, resentment, aggression, and even violence towards the oppositional conflict party.

Under the confrontational category, four sub-categories are created. These sub-categories include *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior); *Fu Yu Wan Kang* (resist and fight back); *Bu Ke Shou Shi* (cannot put things back together), and *Yi Dao Liang Duan* (sever the relationship). The four sub-categories emphasize the different dimensions of a confrontational strategy, used by interviewees.

Bu Da Bu Xiao (不大不小)

Bu Da Bu Xiao (不大不小) literally means no senior, no junior. It is a colloquial expression that describes how the junior member defies the principle of propriety when he/she transgresses the authority of the senior member. The transgression of propriety demonstrates the junior member's ignorance of the rules of propriety and therefore suggests that he/she is rude in his/her social behavior.

In this study, *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior) describes how the women used their perceived status during adolescence to challenge and confront vertical in-group members such as their parents. Research has established that children struggle for adult status as well as experience confusion due to their ambiguous role definitions during

adolescence (Comstock & Buller, 1991). For example, Winnie pointed out that she was aware that she did not have “any might or substance”, but, still she “wanted to pretend” by using her perceived adulthood to challenge her mother.

The following interview excerpt describes how Winnie used a *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior) approach towards resolving conflicts with her mother during her adolescence. She said:

I tried to run away from home, be angry, be spiteful, complain to everyone, you know, those not conducive things. Totally never talked to my mom, just accused her of being judgmental, told her that she promised this and yet went out on those empty promises.

Similarly, Charlene recalled that when she was an adolescent, she had a heated argument with her father regarding her dislike for a particular subject that her father insisted that she take. According to Charlene, she tried to resolve the issue by “yelling most of the time.” In the following excerpt, Charlene described her approach towards handling the particular conflict issue. She said:

When I was in a polytechnic, the course that I studied was a course of my dad’s choice. It was not my choice. I was building a certain amount of hatred towards my dad because of his expectations to follow his way of doing things. So we got into a heated argument. It’s adolescent age too and so your hormones are running crazy. I was yelling most of the time. It was like, “Hey, look here, I had to deal with all the discipline and now I have to deal with this. You tell me now, if you want me to do it. It’s either I’m leaving this house, (which I did for a while to live with my grandmother) or you let me do what I want.” This is a difficult stage where I needed everything.

In the above example, Charlene demonstrated her complete disregard for interpersonal harmony as she single-mindedly focused on achieving her personal goals. These examples therefore demonstrate how the interviewees transgressed the principle of *Li* (propriety)

when they adopted an aggressive and boorish confrontational tactic which completely ignores the consequences of disrupting interpersonal harmony.

In addition, *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior) describes the women's initial clumsy and boorish approach towards confrontations as they experimented with defying authority. Wu (1996) who carried out a study on Chinese childhood socialization found that Singaporean parents are traditional in many aspects of childhood socialization, instilling values such as obedience and respect for the elders. Children are taught to restrain from displaying aggressive behavior within the family. For interviewees who resisted traditional Chinese childhood socialization, the confrontational tactic was perceived as an odd and dangerous act that required courage to stand up against their parents.

For instance, Charlene said that she was "scared" when she yelled at her father for not allowing her to go out with her classmates. However, she felt "good" as it was the "first few times" she was "beginning to be expressive" with her feelings. She said, "I was like frightened and yet being frightened sort of let go of my strength."

Likewise, Mandy recalled having a conflict with her father about taking up a waitress job when she was an adolescent. Despite facing strong objections from her father, Mandy said that she nevertheless continued to "push" him for permission until he agreed. According to Mandy, it was a risky strategy because her father was angry with her for confronting him. However she realized that the confrontation was not as bad as she had thought because she was able to achieve her personal goals.

The *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior) tactic is therefore perceived as a legitimate strategy during adolescence to strengthen one's position against vertical in-

group members. Although the conflict tactic involves high risks, requiring the individual to transgress the principle of *Li* (propriety), it is nevertheless perceived as an effective strategy that can help interviewees accomplish their personal goals during their adolescence.

Fu Yu Wang Kang (负隅顽抗)

Fu Yu Wang Kang (负隅顽抗) means to fight back and put up a resistance.

Specifically, this tactic describes how the interviewees held their ground when faced with opposition from vertical in-group members. It is a defense strategy used for protecting personal interests under threat. This strategy is commonly adopted when the interviewees perceived that they have a legitimate control over the conflict issue such as concerns related to their lifestyles or the upbringing of their children.

For example, Jenny recalled having a disagreement with her father over dating rules when she was an adolescent. She said, “My dad disapproved of me dating when I was in school but I went ahead with it. I don’t care because it’s my business.” As the conflict issue was perceived as significant, Jenny adopted the *Fu Yu Wang Kang* (resist and fight back) strategy to stand up against her father.

Several interviewees said that recent conflicts with vertical in-group members arose from differences in views regarding their children’s upbringing. Differences in views and opinions were resolved by putting up a strong resistance against the oppositional conflict party. For instance, Jenny reconciled conflicting views related to the upbringing of her child by rejecting her parents’ stance and defending her position. She said:

For example, things like taking care of my son. I have my way and I do what is right. I will just do it my way. Even though my parents say that I shouldn’t be doing this, I don’t care because he’s my son.

Similarly, Sandy agreed that irregardless of other people's opinions, she would bring her child up in the "best way" she believed is right because of her responsibility towards her child. It is interesting to note that women used their parental authority as a form of legitimate power to resist vertical in-group members.

Recalling a conflict with her mother regarding issues related to the nursing of her child, Mei Ling said that she should have used her authority as a parent to defend her position and hence, put up a stronger resistance against her mother. She said:

My mom isn't very good at debating so when I pointed out the weak points in her argument, she was like, "No, it's not like that, it's not like that." Then I asked her what it was. It got nowhere. In the end, she just looked angry and went back to her room. If I can go back in time, I might have changed my tactic or the way I approach it so that I get the result, in which they understand this is time that I am the parent instead of going against them to argue with them that my point is right.

Fu Yu Wang Kang (resist and fight back) is a defense tactic used against vertical in-group members. It describes how the interviewees strategically made use of their vertical relationship with their children to strengthen their own subordinate positions vis-à-vis their parents.

Bu Ke Shou Shi (不可收拾)

Bu Ke Shou Shi (不可收拾) means that things cannot be put back together. It is commonly used to describe the escalation of conflicts to an extent where both parties find it almost impossible to work out any resolution. Sillars (1982) notes that strategies emphasizing the display of aggressive emotions towards the oppositional conflict party such as profanity, yelling, and anger do not encourage conflict resolution and may even result in the escalation of the conflict such as physical or psychological estrangements.

Aggressive emotion is defined as emotional behavior directed against the oppositional conflict party to gain compliance (Sillars, 1980).

According to Hwang (1997), when an individual is in conflict with a horizontal in-group member, direct communication is a common strategy. For example, Caroline said that when handling conflicts with her husband, she is the “attacker” who “brings up issues and displeasures” while her husband stays on the “defensive mode.” In the following interview excerpt, another interviewee, Mandy describes the extent of her quarrels with her spouse. She said:

When I’m angry, I just keep on scolding and scolding. It’s easier to quarrel with my husband as he’s my peer. Usually when I quarrel with him, it will be one-sided. He knows that I get to the point of agitation that I would really use nasty words. He knows that I actually don’t mean it when I’m angry. I just keep talking very fast and non-stop, using words that inflict harm.

As pointed out by Sillars (1980), when conflict parties use aggressive emotions to resolve the conflict, it is difficult to reach a resolution and may cause the conflict to escalate even further. The following example illustrates how aggressive emotions adopted by both conflict parties led to physical violence.

Winnie: When I find pictures of him [my boyfriend] with other girls, I would show him the proof of the pictures and asked him what it is about. Then he would try and calm me down because I would be very reactive.

Interviewer: How would you describe yourself when you are reactive?

Winnie: Very angry, very aggressive. Then we fight. We get violent, we shout, we throw things at each other. He has broken a few hand phones and the window of the apartment. He gets bruises, I get a few scratches.

These examples demonstrate that there may not necessarily be an immediate resolution to the conflict situation and thus, in such circumstances, the conflict situation becomes unknown.

Although this section has highlighted severe confrontations that mostly involve horizontal in-group members, the *Bu Ke Shou Shi* (cannot put things back together) category does not necessarily limit severe confrontations to only those involving horizontal-in group members. It can also involve vertical in-group members. As argued previously, an interviewee used the *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior) tactic to confront her parent with such intense emotions that eventually resulted in her leaving home.

Yi Dao Liang Duan (一刀两断)

Yi Dao Liang Duan (一刀两断) literally means using a knife to cut a tie into halves. It is a figurative expression that is commonly used to describe the severing of the relationship tie with the conflict party. By severing the relationship with the oppositional conflict party, this tactic puts an abrupt end to the conflict.

Towards in-group members such as family members, the severance tactic involves pushing the conflict party out of the in-group and thus, redefining in-group boundaries. For instance, Winnie described how she ended a conflict with her sister-in-law by not recognizing her as a member of her family. She said:

She [my sister-in-law] never came to apologize to me. I don't acknowledge her. I refuse to have anything to do with her. I would never want to talk to her because she is not worth my time.

Likewise, unable to arrive at a compromise with her roommates, Charlene eventually resolved the conflict issue by moving out of her apartment and severing all ties with her roommates. She said:

In the end, I just totally ignored them [my roommates]. It bothered me a lot but my husband was the one who helped me along with it. It's either they are not worth thinking about or it's not time to hang out with them as though nothing happened.

The severance tactic therefore provides a solution for interviewees to exit from the ensuing conflict by terminating their relationship with the conflict party.

In the professional context, the *Yi Dao Liang Duan* (sever the relationship) tactic is adopted in varying degrees of severity towards colleagues and superiors. It ranges from not communicating with the oppositional conflict party on a social basis outside work to resigning from the job. For example, Rebecca said that she resolved an escalating conflict with her manager by not communicating with him face-to-face unless it was required by her work. She said:

If I needed to talk and correspond with him [my manager], it is not face to face. It is more over emails. I do have to update him on every single thing that I'm working on but only via email. If he wants to talk to me and I have to talk to him, I would talk to him. Other than that, we have no situation.

Interestingly, the interview data further reveal that the severance tactic is used to resolve conflicts that involve betrayal issues by co-workers or superiors whom interviewees perceive to be members of their in-group.

When the superior failed to perform his/her obligatory duties within the superior-subordinate relationship, feelings of betrayal eventually led the interviewees to sever their relationships with their superiors. In the previous example, Rebecca explained that she did not communicate with her superior on a social basis after a "breach of trust" occurred in their relationship. Similarly, for two other interviewees who experienced conflicts involving betrayal issues, the conflicts eventually led them to resign from their jobs.

For example, Charlene claimed that her superior did not “look out” for her as a subordinate by withholding important information which prevented her from carrying out her job effectively. In another example, Winnie claimed that her superior chose to “believe” another colleague from another department instead of supporting her during a conflict.

Besides severing ties with one’s superior, the interview data also reveal that the *Yi Dao Liang Duan* (sever the relationship) is also used with colleagues who are perceived to be in-group members. For instance, Yan decided to sever her friendship ties with her colleague who was a close friend because the conflict issue questioned the trust and friendship that they shared.

According to Yan, her colleague had damaged their friendship by stealing a business client away from her. She described her feelings of betrayal after the occurrence of the incident. She said, “How do you pretend to be a person’s close friend when half the time you feel like strangling her?”

The *Yi Dao Liang Duan* (sever the relationship) tactic therefore provides a solution for the interviewees to put an abrupt end to conflicts arising from in-group relationships which have turned sour.

Summary of Confrontational Tactics

This study has highlighted various types of confrontational tactics such as *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior); *Fu Yu Wan Kang* (resist and fight back); *Bu Ke Shou Shi* (cannot put things back together), and *Yi Dao Liang Duan* (sever the relationship). These tactics emphasize the use of negative emotions in varying degrees, to influence the oppositional conflict party to comply with one’s personal goals. They further describe various dimensions of open conflicts involving vertical and horizontal in-group members.

In the following section, another type of conflict strategy, the assertive strategy is highlighted. This strategy emphasizes the process of using coherent and logical arguments during a conflict to influence the oppositional conflict party to comply with the individual's personal goals.

Assertive Tactics

The assertive strategy involves persuading the conflict party in a rational manner to accept one's position. This strategy reflects concerns for both interpersonal harmony and the pursuit of personal goals. In other words, it aims to accomplish personal goals without disrupting interpersonal harmony by using reason and rational means to persuade. Under the assertive category, two subcategories are created. They are *Yi Li Fu Ren* (persuade through sound reasons) and *Yin Shi Zhi Yi* (adopt appropriate measures).

Lang (1993) explains that conflict management in a professional context is predominantly influenced by the professional culture. Some elements of the professional culture highlighted by Lang (1993) include the awareness for efficient and reliable communication; the importance placed on flexibility and creativity; a willingness to go beyond the traditional constraints of a national character, and a sense of accommodation. These values advocated by the professional culture are displayed in the *Yi Li Fu Ren* (persuade through sound reasons) and *Yin Shi Zhi Yi* (adopt appropriate measures) tactics.

Yi Li Fu Ren (以理服人)

Yi Li Fu Ren (以理服人) literally means to persuade people through sound reasons. According to Lang (1993), there is a need for efficient and reliable communication in the professional culture. *Yi Li Fu Ren* (persuade through sound reasons) is a type of conflict tactic that reflects efficient and reliable communication in the

professional context. The interview data reveal that in the professional context, the interviewees relied upon a sound reasoning process to convince others to accept their views and opinions. According to Jenny, it is important to “reason and rationalize” at the work place. Likewise, Sandra agreed that it is important to persuade and convince others in the professional context because the process of informational exchange reflects an efficient “two-way communication” process. Persuasion through a sound reasoning process is therefore perceived by interviewees to be an important tool that can help them assert their positions.

Yi Li Fu Ren (persuade through sound reasons) is commonly used to describe a senior member in the hierarchical relationship using sound reasons to persuade and convince the junior member. The interview data further reveal that *Yi Li Fu Ren* (persuade through sound reasons) is perceived to be a more appropriate tactic when interviewees hold positions of seniority or authority within the company.

For example, Caroline, a project manager in a multi-national corporation said that her role and responsibilities as a manager empowered her to use sound reasons to persuade her team members to suppress any conflict issues that may distract them from their task goals. In the following interview excerpt, she explained:

Because of my position as a project manager, I would be the one chairing the meeting. I always concentrate on the one that is most important, like the budget or the schedule. I would say, “Hey, everybody, concentrate on that and don’t talk about the minor things that will cause disagreement. Let’s focus on timeline. We have a very tight timeline. Let’s work at it.” For me, I rather look at the big picture and get things going. If everybody can look at the big picture, then there would be lesser conflicts.

Likewise, Yan explained that occupying different positions such as being the project manager or team member would give her different degrees of power in using the assertive tactic. She explained in detail:

If I'm the project manager, I will definitely push through because we try not to overstep on each other's boundaries in terms of what kind of role you play during that project. I think towards team members, you are more discreet with certain things that you say, because at the end of the day, they are supposed to work with you. The project manager has the final say in most of the decision-making.

In the above examples, the interviewees perceived fewer constraints in being assertive when they occupy positions of seniority or legitimate authority in the company.

Yin Shi Zhi Yi (因事制宜)

Yin Shi Zhi Yi means to take appropriate measures in light of the current situation.

In this context, it refers to using available rational measures to persuade and to convince the oppositional conflict party. Besides the *Yi Li Fu Ren* (persuade through sound reasons) tactic, interviewees also used other forms of organizational communication channels to strengthen their position against the oppositional conflict party.

For example, Sandra emphasized the importance of using formal communication channels such as feedback sessions and appraisals to voice one's views and opinions. According to her, these modes of communication provide the "proper channels to do things" in a "professional environment."

Formal communication channels provide a safe forum for the disputant to be assertive in a non-threatening manner. More importantly, they reflect an approach that is reinforced by the professional culture. As Sandra further highlighted:

You are a professional, nobody will expect you to kick up a big

fuss in the professional environment. You don't want to be like an idiot, screaming and shouting at your staff, just because he or she made a mistake. You don't have to make a big drama.

In addition, formal measures such as proposals and reports can be used to build up one's persuasive power. In the following excerpt, Sandra emphasized the importance of adopting measures that are appropriate in the professional context. She said:

If you have a point and you think you are right, build it up with a proposal and take whatever standards to back your argument. If you think your boss is doing something unethical, against the accounting standards, then build it up, in black and white. Don't bother arguing like a crazy woman.

Likewise, Winnie agreed that organizational "policies and rules" are instruments that she could use to reinforce her assertive approach towards resolving conflicts with her superiors and co-workers.

Organizational measures such as formal protocol and communication channels therefore provide a neutral, non-threatening environment for the conflict to be discussed openly. More importantly, they create opportunities for interviewees to provide their reasons and rationale for their stance on the conflict issue.

Summary of Assertive Tactics

This section has highlighted two types of assertive tactics. It has further described how the tactics were strategically deployed to promote a supportive atmosphere in the professional context for interviewees to discuss the conflict and to assert their opinions and views on the matter. The following section highlights the conflict tactic that is adopted in the absence of an open climate for the explicit discussion of views and opinions.

Covert Tactic

The covert strategy is used when there are limited means to support an open climate for a discussion and hence, opportunities for the individual to openly voice his/her opinions and views to the oppositional conflict party are limited. For instance, in a hierarchical relationship, it may be difficult for the subordinate member to assert himself/herself by conducting an open discussion with the senior member because the subordinate member is expected to comply according to the Confucian principle of *Li* (propriety).

The covert strategy helps the individual to pursue personal goals in a manner that does not threaten the power structure within the relationship. In this study, *Yang Feng Yin Wei* (obey publicly, but defy privately) has been identified as a type of covert strategy.

Yang Feng Yin Wei (阳奉阴违)

Yang Feng Yin Wei (阳奉阴违) means to comply in public, but oppose in private. In this study, this expression describes how the individual conceals his/her reasons or personal goals from the oppositional conflict party by pretending to comply in public. According to Hwang (1997), when the individual attempts to maintain interpersonal harmony but does not want to give up his/her personal goal, he/she may pretend to obey publicly while doing his/her own business privately.

For example, Mei Ling had conflicting views with her relatives over how she should look after her baby. However she pretended to agree overtly with her extended kin in order to preserve social harmony. She said:

They would talk about how to raise children so that I don't get exhausted. They said to keep the baby in a baby cot so that I have free hands to do other things. So I just said, "Yah, yah, yah." My husband

and I know that deep in our hearts, we would definitely not follow.

By pretending to agree in public, this tactic enabled Mei Ling to suppress the sources of conflicts arising from divergent views and opinions.

In another example, Jenny adopted the *Yang Feng Yin Wei* (obey publicly, but defy privately) strategy to avoid quarrelling with her mother-in-law in public. She recalled a dinner episode during which her mother-in-law insisted on her having more soup even after she said she had her fill. Her attempts to explain her refusal to have more soup caused the rest of the family members who were present to think that she was picking a quarrel with her mother-in-law. In order to avoid a scene with her mother-in-law, Jenny said that she pretended to yield to her mother-in-law by telling her that she would bring the soup home to drink. However she threw away the soup upon reaching home.

Likewise, Yan said that she adopted this strategy to avoid getting into a quarrel with her mother over her diet. The following interview excerpt describes how Yan used the *Yang Feng Yin Wei* (obey publicly, but defy privately) tactic:

Interviewer: How did you respond to your mother when she told you that you should be eating this and not that?

Yan: I said, "Yah, yah, yah, I will, I will." Because she's not here so she can't see what I eat. So it doesn't really matter, right? I will say whatever to get her off my back.

It is interesting to note that this tactic is applied in situations where individuals perceived themselves to have substantial control over their personal goals. In the earlier example, Mei Ling and her husband viewed the upbringing of their child as falling within their parental jurisdiction. Knowing that their relatives did not have control over their lives, they pretended to agree with them publicly in order to maintain harmony. Likewise,

Yan and Jenny pretended to agree with their family members, but disobeyed privately because they perceived themselves to have control over the conflict issue such as their diet.

According to Hwang (1997), in a hierarchical relationship, when the individual occupying the subordinate position feels that it is futile to argue with the conflict party occupying the dominant position, he/she would adopt this strategy. In the following excerpt, Jenny explained how her perceptions of the dominant members in her family have influenced her to adopt *Yang Feng Yin Wei* (obey publicly, but defy privately) tactic. She said:

My dad and my grandfather are like “men of those days” when they think that they are the family man and whatever they say and whatever they do is right and that they are the experts in it, like “I eat more rice than you”⁴ that type of mentality. So I don’t bother to argue because these types of people are super stubborn. So if by arguing back to them, they won’t see the point because of their character. They will not see the point.

Jenny further recalled having an open disagreement with her father regarding the nursing of her baby. Jenny said she tried to convince her father about the benefits of breastfeeding but was unsuccessful. She eventually gave up arguing with her father and resisted him in private instead. In the following interview excerpt, Jenny described the effectiveness of using such a strategy.

Jenny: I just told him the benefits of breastfeeding and why I insisted on doing it. But he kept bugging me about the bottle so I just ignored him and continued with my life.

Interviewer: How would you describe your approach towards resolving this conflict?

Jenny: It’s more of me doing my own thing. The incident will end with him nagging and I’ll keep quiet. He’s the type when the more you argue with him, the more he’ll come out with more things. So by just shutting up, the house will be peaceful. Just shut up, but I don’t do it his way. Acton wise, I don’t do it his way.

⁴ “I eat more rice than you” is a colloquial expression which means I have more knowledge and wisdom than you. This expression is used by the interviewee to describe her father as a traditional Chinese man with entrenched Confucian values. In Chinese culture, the older person is perceived to be the locus of knowledge and power. The younger person is not allowed to question conventional wisdom held by the older person.

The previous example demonstrates the futility of engaging in open disagreements with some vertical in-group members who are perceived to be dogmatic. As Jenny highlighted, open disagreements would not only damage the relationship, but also cause the conflict to escalate, thereby making it even more difficult for her to accomplish her personal goals.

Likewise, Mei Ling said that it was useless trying to reason with her mother regarding the nursing of her baby because their “intellectual debate” caused her mother to get even more upset with her. According to Mei Ling, the *Yang Feng Yin Wei* (obey publicly, but defy privately) tactic would have been a more effective strategy because of her mother’s unwillingness to listen or to reach a mutual understanding during the discussion. She explained in the following:

My Mom, when she’s full of her opinions, it’s very difficult to set aside her own agenda and listen to others. Later I thought I should just say “okay, okay” and do it my way later.

The above examples demonstrate how the interviewees use the covert tactic to justify their personal goals in private. They further suggest that a mutual understanding of the conflict issue is difficult to develop in the absence of a supportive climate for open discussions.

Yang Feng Yin Wei (obey publicly, but defy privately) is a savvy strategy used by the interviewees to conceal their personal goals from the oppositional conflict party when the climate for an explicit discussion of conflict goals was non-supportive and closed. The interviewees were less likely to disrupt the power structure within the hierarchical relationship as they resisted the dominant member in private, but pretended to comply with him/her in public. The following section will highlight tactics that describe the avoidance of conflicts.

Avoidance Tactics

Avoidance strategies are strategies that avoid the explicit discussion of the conflict (Sillars, 1982). There are three sub-categories of avoidance strategies. They are *Sui Yu Er An* (accommodate to the circumstances); *He He Qi Qi* (harmonious and agreeable), and *Bu Liao Liao Zhi* (avoid talking about the conflict incident).

Sui Yu Er An (随遇而安)

Sui Yu Er An (随遇而安) means that peace and harmony will come wherever one goes or whatever one encounters. This category describes how one accommodates oneself to circumstances by passively yielding and complying with the oppositional conflict party.

The interview data reveal several instances where the interviewees used this tactic to endure or tolerate conflict issues with dominant members in their families such as the elderly or those with authority. Hwang (1997) explains that the subordinate member in the relationship who has his/her own goals may experience a feeling of strong conflict when his/her goals are in conflict with the superior member. Thus, under the power domination of the superior, the subordinate member may give up his/her personal goals and give in to the other party.

The following interview excerpt demonstrates how Charlene and her husband used *Sui Yu Er An* (accommodate to the circumstances) to comply with the request of their grandparents to hold a wedding.

Charlene: One really big example is the wedding ceremony. My husband and myself didn't want this wedding ceremony. My grandparents were the ones who wanted the ceremony. So we reluctantly gave in.

Interviewer: Was there friction at that point in time?

Charlene : There wasn't much friction. We were like, "okay." But we did delay it as long as we could because neither me nor him were

ready to confront. I don't know whether it was that we were lazy to confront or we didn't want to confront and we just left it at that, which is if they wanted it, we would do it. I think it come down to the point that I just want to make them happy because they are so old and I begin to feel that they won't be able to see a lot of their grandchildren be given away away.

Besides elderly members, the interview data reveal other instances where interviewees tolerated conflict issues with authoritative members such as their parents or mother-in-laws.

In addition, the interview data suggests that the interviewees were unwilling to bring up issues which they perceived to be trivial, with dominant members in the household. For example, several interviewees said that it is necessary for them to be tolerant of small issues in order to live harmoniously with the dominant members in the household.

For example, Caroline and Sandy who both live with their mother-in-law explained that they would tolerate the existence of small conflicts issues such as housekeeping issues in order to preserve the power structure within their relationship. Caroline explained:

I guess putting myself in my mother-in-law's shoes, "Who is this daughter-in-law telling me how to clean my house, tell me how to do this?" I feel it's not nice for her although as much as I really love to tell her that I don't like this.

Likewise, Sandy agreed that it is necessary to "put up with the small little things" when living with her mother-in-law because she is an "elder." She explained in further detail:

I mean little irritants, although they irk me, I don't want to rock the boat or jeopardize the relationship, otherwise I would be telling her every single day about my minor irritants and that wouldn't be too nice. I mean if I really want to do it, I can actually do it myself, those small

little things. The fact is that I'm currently living with her, I think it's a give and take situation.

In another example, Winnie who was staying with her boyfriend's family said that she was reluctant to confront her boyfriend's noisy aunty for disrupting her sleep because of her powerful position within the family. She explained:

Sometimes when I'm sleeping, she makes a lot of noise for no reason, talking to the maid and she talks really loud. I'll complain to my boyfriend but I wouldn't complain to her. It's her house and she's an elder. I understand her position. We go like "*Aiyoh* , *aiyoh*⁵" and then we kick the blankets over our head.

For Rebecca, who stays with her parents, she explained that it is not "worth the battle" to confront her father when the conflict issue involves trivial matters such as getting a job or going out late at night.

The above examples illustrate how the interviewees used *Sui Yu Er An* (accommodate to the circumstances) to preserve the power structure within the hierarchical relationships by yielding to the dominant members in their families and thus, maintain the harmony that is defined by these roles.

He He Qi Qi (和和气气)

He He Qi Qi (和和气气) means to behave in a harmonious and agreeable manner.

In this study, this expression further describes the manner in which the individual avoids highlighting the presence of a conflict by creating a supportive and harmonious climate or concealing differences in views and opinions.

For example, this tactic involves defining the conflict in an indirect or ambiguous manner in order to minimize the magnitude of the conflict. As stated by Sandy, "I think

⁵ *Ai Yoh* is a colloquial Singaporean exclamation phrase which means "Oh no."

even if you may feel very strongly that you are correct and the person is wrong, it just matters how you put it across.” Another interviewee said that she tries not to “make a mountain out of a molehill” when dealing with conflicts by adopting a calm and neutral stance towards the other party or the conflict issue. According to several of the interviewees, they would address the conflict issue or the oppositional conflict party in an indirect manner by being *Ke Qi* (客气: polite); diplomatic; politically correct, and tactful.

For example, Jenny recalled an incident regarding the leaking of her neighbor’s air-conditioner which disrupted her sleep. Jenny said she approached the issue in an indirect manner by being non-presumptuous about the cause of the problem. According to Jenny, she asked her neighbors to check on their air-conditioner in a polite and tactful manner instead of accusing them of the problem. Hence by adopting an ambiguous stance towards defining the conflict issue, Jenny avoided highlighting differences that would magnify the problem which could potentially result in an open conflict.

In the professional context, this tactic involves creating harmonious relationships among colleagues such as building rapport and establishing trusting relationships. In the following interview excerpt, Caroline explained the proactive steps that she adopted to minimize the presence of conflicts by creating a harmonious work climate. She said:

I like to maintain a very friendly thing with work. It’s easier to get things done. When you need a favor, you need things, it’s easier. I don’t like formalities. I believe in relationships. Whatever that makes or breaks your work, it’s really the relationships. You have to build up from there, you see. Making things more informal, when it comes to work, it’s more effective for me.

The interview data further reveal that with out-group members such as strangers, distant relatives and acquaintances, interviewees often behaved in an agreeable and

harmonious manner because they were reluctant to disrupt the harmony for issues which they perceived to have little impact on their lives. For example, Mei Ling said that she would be agreeable to others unless the issue involved a “life and death matter.” This is further supported by Winnie who said, “If it doesn’t affect me and I don’t think it’s important, then just walk away.”

According to the interviewees, conflict issues involving out-group members were perceived to be trivial because such issues mostly derived from differences in values, opinions and beliefs viewpoints which did not have a large impact on them. Hence the diplomatic and tactful approach is used to smooth over minor differences for the sake of harmony. When the conflict issue is perceived to be small, the interviewees further demonstrated a willingness to respect and tolerate diversity in opinions and views. This is highlighted by Mandy who said, “I accept that everybody⁶ has different views. They are eligible to carry on with their views even though they clash with mine. There’s no need to confront.” Similarly, Sandra emphasized that it is important to “respect other people in terms of their values and not be offensive.”

Likewise, Jenny asserted that she would not disagree openly with a stranger over issues arising from divergent opinions and beliefs. She explained in detail:

Say you meet this person in a pub. And he’s telling you all about his ideas and what he thinks is right. If it doesn’t affect me, I will just keep quiet, unless he infringes onto my personal life, unless he really pokes into my business. If he’s just talking about general things and how he handles things and even though I don’t agree with his method, I may just keep quiet. To me, what is the point of arguing just because I think differently?

⁶ In this context, everybody refers to out-group members.

Several of the interviewees suggested that due to the limited amount of interaction they shared with out-group members, the conflict issue involving out-group members is further perceived as trivial and insignificant. For instance, several interviewees gave reasons such as “you don’t see them often,” “I hardly meet them” and “you only see them once or twice a year” to explain their harmonious strategy in handling differences with out-group members.

In the following excerpt, Mei Ling explained her reasons for being polite and diplomatic towards her relatives in the following:

If there are differences in opinions, I don’t think it will lead to conflicts. For example, they [relatives] may say things because they care for you. Even if I don’t agree, I would say, “Oh, okay, yah, yah.” I mean whether I follow their instructions or not, they don’t really need to know and I don’t really see them that often. It should not go into conflicts.

Likewise, Mandy avoids open conflicts with acquaintances due to the limited interaction which reduces the significance of the conflict issue. She explained:

Acquaintances, I sometimes don’t bother to argue because I know that they may not come into my life again. Even if I have conflicts with them, I just bear it through because they don’t affect me in the long run. I just let the incident be over.

These examples suggest that the acceptance for diverse opinions and values are applied mostly in situations where conflict issues are perceived to be non-threatening to interviewees’ interests. An agreeable and polite tactic is adopted to minimize differences in views and maintain the harmony in these relationships.

Bu Liao Liao Zhi (不了了之)

Bu Liao Liao Zhi (不了了之) means the problem will resolve by itself by not resolving it. This expression describes how the individual avoids the conflict by not

raising the issue or discussing it with the other party. It is further assumed that the conflict will disappear in the absence of active attempts by both parties to resolve the issue. This tactic differs from *Sui Yu Er An* (accommodate oneself to one's circumstances) in that there is indeed an occurrence of a conflict incident and *Bu Liao Liao Zhi* (avoid talking about the conflict incident) is adopted to deal with the overt conflict.

The following interview excerpt illustrates how Caroline resolved a conflict with her sister-in-law by not pursuing the conflict issue:

- Caroline: I told her about something and it led to her slamming down the phone on me and she had never done that before.
- Interviewer: Did you go about resolving the conflict with her?
- Caroline: With her, there's no need to. With her, you just leave it. The more you try, the worse it gets. You don't pursue it because it will get worse. But you tend to be more forgiving with *Zi Ji Ren* (own people). Just forget it, there's no need to pursue this kind of thing, it will resolve itself.

According to Caroline, any explicit attempts to discuss the conflict would cause the conflict to escalate.

In his study on "Attributions and communication in roommate conflicts," Sillars (1982) suggests that conflicts can also be resolved through empathetic adjustment. Empathetic adjustment refers to the resolution of a problem in the absence of explicit attempts to communicate due to an understanding that developed between the parties. The following example illustrates how Caroline used this tactic to mend a relationship with a close friend. She said:

I never broached the topic with her, you know, say that I was sorry for this, this, this, or whatever it is. We never talked about it. We just let it be and slowly come back together again.

The interview data also reveal that the *Bu Liao Liao Zhi* (avoid talking about the conflict incident) tactic is a common strategy used to mend relationships with close friends and family members especially when the conflict involved small issues such as minor misunderstandings or damaging the other party's belongings accidentally. As stated by Charlene, "There wasn't a conflict big enough to like scratch at each other. She wasn't stealing my boyfriend and I wasn't stealing her boyfriend." In the previous example, Caroline explained that she did not want to further discuss the conflict issue with her sister-in-law as she felt the issue was too small for her to pursue.

Summary of Avoidance Tactics

This section has highlighted various types of avoidance strategies. These strategies emphasize the maintenance of harmony through the avoidance of an explicit discussion of conflict issues. In addition, the interview data reveal that avoidance tactics are commonly adopted when the conflict issue is perceived to be trivial or when the oppositional conflict party is in a dominant position. The following section will highlight conflict tactics that emphasize a willingness to reach a compromise with the oppositional conflict party.

Compromising Tactics

This section discusses two types of tactics that are used to reach a mutual agreement with the oppositional conflict party. The two types of tactics are *Yan Gui Yu Hao* (talk to resume good standing) and *Shuang Fang Tuo Xie* (reach a mutual agreement). These two tactics involve making compromises such that both parties are able to find a common ground and thus, develop a better understanding of the conflict.

Yan Gui Yu Hao (言归于好)

Yan Gui Yu Hao (言归于好) means to talk to resume good standing. In this study, this expression refers to the individual making statements that demonstrate a positive orientation to the oppositional conflict party despite of a rift in the relationship. It further describes the individual's intentions to place a greater emphasis on relationship harmony by compromising one's personal goals to a certain extent.

This tactic involves apologizing or making statements that indicate one's intention to mend the relationship. For instance, Rebecca said that she would often indicate her intentions to reconcile with her brother by asking him if he wanted coffee.

Interestingly, the interview data did not show many instances where this tactic is used to deal with an overt conflict. The *Bu Liao Liao Zhi* (avoid talking about the conflict incident) tactic is more commonly used by interviewees to deal with conflict incidents. Perhaps, assumptions about in-group harmony lead to an implicit understanding among in-group members that any disruption to in-group harmony will be restored quickly. Hence there is a lesser emphasis placed on the explicit communication of one's intention to restore harmony.

Shuang Fang Tuo Xie (双方妥协)

Shuang Fang Tuo Xie (双方妥协) means that both sides agree to reach a compromise. This expression describes both conflict parties reaching a mutual agreement upon a careful consideration of each other's position.

For example, Rebecca recalled having conflicting views with her client regarding an advertising campaign. Instead of disagreeing with her client and insisting upon her

approach, Rebecca compromised by agreeing to hold a trial campaign to test her client's suggestion. Eventually, Rebecca and her client arrived at a mutual agreement after the client realized that his suggestion was not feasible. By adopting a compromising approach, Rebecca avoided an open confrontation with her client.

This category further implies the adoption of a problem-solving approach towards conflicts. A problem-solving approach fosters conflict parties' understanding of the conflict by emphasizing mutually acceptable solutions (Sillars, 1980). It focuses on accomplishing a productive conflict outcome through a consideration of various solutions to the problem.

The following excerpt illustrates how Jenny used the problem-solving approach to reconcile opposing views, thus, reaching a mutual agreement with her colleagues. She said:

I wouldn't say that there is no respect when it comes to conflicts, it's more like selling my ideas, weighing the pros and cons. I wouldn't directly go and “*Zhuang Qiang Bi* (撞牆壁)⁷” and say that that my way is correct. No I wouldn't do that. But I would open up my views and confront by saying, “Hey, by doing this, we will be stating this problem but why don't we try this method? Although it has this problem, it will not be as bad as that problem.”

Summary of Compromising Conflict Tactics

This section has highlighted two types of tactics that emphasize working towards a mutual level of understanding between conflict parties. These two tactics require both parties to compromise their personal goals to a certain degree in order to reach a mutual level of understanding. *Yan Gui Yu Hao* (talk to resume good standing) requires one to put

⁷ *Zhuang Qiang Bi* (撞牆壁) literally means to knock against the wall. Figuratively, it means being closed-minded about alternative solutions.

aside personal differences and focus on restoring harmony and mending relationships.

Shuang Fang Tuo Xie (reach a mutual agreement) emphasizes a mutual consideration for each other's positions by considering alternative solutions. The following section will discuss the final conflict tactic: Engaging an intermediary to assist in resolving conflicts.

Engaging an Intermediary

Communicating through intermediaries will reduce the need for the expression of strong, emotional feelings that is discouraged in the Chinese culture (Hsu, 1970, as cited in Ma, 1992). Intermediaries promote the Confucian principle of social harmony by eliminating face-to-face confrontations; keeping the emotions of the disputants under control; reducing tactical rigidities, and making conflict parties re-conceptualize their relationship (Ma, 1992).

The interview data suggest that there can be two purposes for engaging an intermediary to assist in a conflict. First, the intermediary is engaged as a mediator to help both conflict parties restore relational harmony or to reach a compromise. This function is described as *Zhao He Shi Lun* (find a harmonizing person to mediate). Second, the intermediary is engaged to reinforce the position of the conflict party. This function is described as *Zhao Ren Cheng Yao* (find a person to bolster one's position). The two functions are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may sometimes overlap.

Zhao He Shi Lun (find a harmonizing person to mediate)

Zhao He Shi Lun (找和事论) means to find a harmonizing person to mediate in the conflict. Instead of directly confronting the oppositional conflict party, intermediaries are engaged to mediate in conflicts. In-group members are often requested to be intermediaries because of their close relationships with the disputants (Ma, 1992; Wall &

Blum, 1991). Ma (1992) argues that in the Chinese society, in-group members play an important role in unofficial mediations because of their in-depth knowledge about the disputants as well as their obligations and responsibilities towards one another within the in-group.

For example, Mei Ling recalled how family members were engaged as representatives to mediate in a major conflict that she had encountered with her husband.

She described the mediation process in the following interview excerpt:

When this conflict happened, my husband's parents were called to Kuala Lumpur to *Tan Pan* (negotiate). My mom thought that my husband's behavior on a particular night was very bad and that she heard from me regarding things that my husband did to me. My husband was excluded from the meeting because my parents think that his tongue is sharp and would go all his way to make sure that he is in the right. During the meeting, my husband's eldest brother and sister-in-law were there. My parents felt that they could represent me because if I go, I might be too emotional and weak. My cousin who was a businessman, can talk very well, was there to be my side. For my husband, I guess it's his eldest brother who was there to represent his side as the middle-man.

This example supports Ma (1992)'s argument that in-group members are often engaged to provide a neutral and impartial stance when mediating between conflict parties.

Ma (1992) further highlights that the adoption of an impartial stance during mediation requires the intermediary to avoid criticizing or persuading one party in front of the other. For instance, Charlene recalled a conflict issue she had with her in-laws during their visit, regarding her apartment's tidiness. As she was unwilling to confront them about the issue, Charlene asked her husband to intervene on her behalf. However Charlene felt that her husband did not mediate in a harmonizing manner.

The following excerpt highlights Charlene's expectations regarding how her husband who acted as the mediator, should have approached the conflict issue. She said:

I'm a pretty neat and tidy person. So I would do things in a certain way, like cups would be in a certain direction and certain stuff would go into different drawers. This is me and I wanted his parents to know that it's not because they are here that I get overly fussy. So I wanted my husband to understand that. So he goes like, "Charlene doesn't like this, Charlene doesn't like that, don't do it this way." I felt that he was being a little insensitive.

The above examples provide support for Ma (1992)'s argument that in-group members are expected to adopt the intermediary role as well as mediate in a sensitive and impartial manner. Besides the mediation function highlighted by Ma (1992), my interview data further suggests that intermediaries can be engaged to reinforce one's position during a conflict.

Zhao Ren Cheng Yao (找人撑腰)

Zhao Ren Cheng Yao (找人撑腰) literally means to find a person to support one's waist. Figuratively, it means to find a person to bolster one's position. This tactic involves the drawing out of the other party's cooperation (Wall & Blum, 1991).

The interview data reveal that the interviewees are able to systematically deploy resources in their social network so as to reinforce their position vis-à-vis the oppositional conflict party. For example, Mandy said that when she is angry with her mother-in-law, she would need her husband to "filter" her negative emotions and "say the logic thing" to her mother-in-law. Likewise, Sandy agreed that she would frequently "rope in" her husband to "soften the blow" when handling conflicts with her mother-in-law.

The following excerpt illustrates how Winnie attempted to resolve a major conflict with her sister-in-law by asking her mother to intervene on her behalf. She recounted the conflict episode:

I used to go home very weekend. Every weekend, my mother will make special fish and all that for me. That day, my mom was not at home and she told me that the fish is in the fridge and asked me to steam it myself. But when I went back, the maid asked me if I wanted her to steam it for me. I said, "Yah, of course." My sister-in-law came marching up to me, with her baby in tow and told me that the maid is hers and that the maid does not work for me and that she does not serve me. If I wanted to eat anything in the house, I should cook it myself. My brother was not at home. I just stared at her in shock and I was very hurt that she said such a thing to me. So I called my mom and I asked her if she knew what her daughter-in-law said to me in her house. This is my mom's house, my own house, not even her house and she's just staying there as a guest. So my mom said that she would talk to her and asked me to calm down.

In the above example, Winnie had requested her mother to be the mediator not only because she perceived it as an in-group member's responsibility but also to seek support from her to strengthen her position against her sister-in-law.

In their study on community mediation in China, Wall and Blum (1991) note that the disputants expected the mediator to make a decision as to who is in the right so that the resolution of the conflict could be expedited. The disputants did not expect the mediator to be neutral. An important mediation technique highlighted by Wall and Blum (1991) is the defending of one party's point of view by educating or advising the other party regarding how they should behave. An important reason for adopting the *Zhao Ren Cheng Yao* (find someone to bolster one's position) is that the mediator, presumably an in-group member, take sides and thus strengthen the individual's position against the oppositional conflict party.

In the previous example, Winnie had expected her mother to side with her by instructing her sister-in-law to apologize to her. According to Winnie, the mediation was unsuccessful as her mother chose not to side with her. She said:

My mom makes a decision to side with her. So fine, to me, "You made

your decision, you get a daughter-in-law, you don't get a daughter." I didn't talk to my mom for about one month.

The above example illustrates how the mediator is expected to side with the disputant party in order to reinforce her position against the oppositional party. When the mediator adopts a neutral stance deliberately or unknowingly, he/she may cause the conflict to escalate and leave matters unresolved.

In another example, Charlene recalled having a conflict with her roommates regarding cleanliness issues. Charlene said that she had expected her husband to side with her during the open discussion with her roommates. However her husband chose to be a neutral party instead. According to Charlene, she felt powerless to confront her roommates by herself and the open discussion eventually ended with her "crying and sobbing." As put across by Charlene, "There was like this division in the house and I was alone in one corner." These examples provide support for the argument that the *Zhao Ren Cheng Yao* (find someone to bolster one's position) tactic is adopted to strengthen the position of the interviewees against their opponents who are perceived as having more power.

In his study, Ma (1992) highlighted that elderly members are often asked to be the mediators because they are perceived to have more persuasive power due to their seniority status in the Chinese society. My findings reveal that there are other privileges enjoyed by the mediator that can increase his/her persuasive power. These privileges include sharing a direct blood tie relationship with the oppositional conflict party and occupying a senior rank in the family.

The absence of a direct blood tie relationship with in-laws is perceived to be a constraint that hinders interviewees from expressing themselves freely during conflicts.

Several interviewees explained that they often asked their spouse to mediate in conflicts involving in-laws because they perceived their spouse as having more persuasive power due to their direct blood tie relationship with the conflict party. For instance, Sandy explained that she would request her husband to negotiate on her behalf, because her husband, being the only child, receives a substantial amount of respect from his mother.

Due to a lack of intimacy and closeness in her relationship with her in-laws, Mandy perceived herself to be at a disadvantage when handling conflicts with them. She recognized that her husband, on the other hand, is at an advantageous position to negotiate because of his direct blood tie relationship with them. She said:

I feel that he [my husband]'s in a better position than I am to question her[my mother-in-law]. Even though she's *Zi Ji Ren* (own people), she's not that close a *Zi Ji Ren* (own people) to me. You still feel awkward if you go and confront her and talk sense into her. It's quite natural that he will talk to his mum.

Similarly, Charlene recognized that her persuasive power is limited when handling conflicts with her in-laws because of the absence of direct blood tie relationship with them.

As explained by Charlene:

I've got to get somebody to do it with me, like my husband. He was brought up by them. He's in the family, he's in the circle and he's in it. I'm outside the door.

In the above examples, the interviewees recognized that they could strengthen their position against their in-laws by asking their spouse to negotiate on their behalf. Their spouse is perceived to have more persuasive power because of the privileges they derived from sharing a direct blood tie relationship with the conflict party.

The findings also reveal that the mediator's status or hierarchical rank within the family is perceived to be an important factor that contributes to his/her persuasive power in influencing conflict outcomes. According to the Confucian tradition, the senior member in a relationship is assigned more authority and has a wider range of prerogatives compared to the junior member. For instance, higher ranking members in the family are perceived to hold greater persuasive power compared to lower ranking members.

In the following interview excerpt, Mandy explained how she would mobilize her elder siblings to negotiate with her parents on her behalf. She said:

Because being the youngest, I sort of feel that as the youngest, you are the most innocent and the most inexperienced. If it is against my parents, the siblings will normally speak and have a little discussion. I will make myself known and we will evaluate together. The representatives which are the eldest first, second, and third sister, will be the ones to talk to my parents.

Likewise, for Winnie, she had expected her mother to mediate in the conflict that involved her sister-in-law because her mother, occupying a senior position in the family, is "like a senior manager," who has power over her employees. The examples highlighted therefore demonstrate how family members with certain privileges are deployed in a strategic manner to reinforce the position of the conflict party.

In the professional context, asking a third-party to resolve conflicts is also a useful strategy because it can prevent the escalation of conflicts which may cause interpersonal antagonism and thus, hurt the disputants' careers (Walton, 1969). For instance, Caroline said that after several unsuccessful attempts to persuade a colleague from another department to help her with an urgent task, she sought assistance from her superior to

intervene on her behalf. In the following excerpt, Caroline expressed her concern for the maintenance of harmony in her professional relationship. She said:

I didn't want to sabotage the relationship and insisted on his help and try to make him see from my point of view. In a way, we are both equal managers. I didn't want to impose myself on him. I let my manager deal with him as I felt it was more appropriate doing it that way.

In the above example, asking a third-party to intervene in the conflict illustrates the strategic move adopted by Caroline to reduce any sources of interpersonal antagonism that might hurt her career.

The intermediary's rank or seniority within the organization is perceived as an important factor in helping interviewees to accomplish their personal goals. According to Chen (2000), seniority in a hierarchical relationship such as a superior-subordinate relationship, is perceived to be the center of power and knowledge in Confucianism-influenced societies.

Several interviewees said that they asked their superiors to negotiate on their behalf when they could not reach an agreement with the oppositional conflict party. For example, Rebecca said that she would seek assistance from her manager when she is unable to reach a compromise with her client. As she put across, "You speak to your boss and she [client] speaks to her boss. You go higher up." In another example, Winnie recalled a conflict incident with a senior colleague. Constrained by her subordinate position to stand up against her colleague, Winnie asked her superior to intervene on her behalf instead. She described her approach in the following:

Interviewer: So what did you do when she [senior colleague] kicked up a big fuss?

Winnie: Simple way, Asian culture, I went straight to my boss and asked him whether there is something that I needed to

know. He asked me to ask her to talk to him.

Zhao Ren Cheng Yao (find a person to bolster one's position) therefore demonstrates the strategic deployment of social resources in the individual's family and professional network to strengthen his/her position against the oppositional conflict party.

Summary of Engaging the Intermediary

This section has demonstrated two types of intermediary tactics: *Zhao He Shi Lun* (find a harmonizing person) and *Zhao Ren Cheng Yao* (find a person to bolster one's position). These two tactics engage the assistance of a third party to preserve social harmony or sometimes reinforce one's position against the conflict opponent.

Conclusion

The typology of conflict strategies set up in Chapter III demonstrates the heterogeneity that characterizes the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women. The range of conflict strategies identified in the various social contexts therefore addressed Research Question 1: How do Chinese Singaporean professional women resolve conflicts in family and professional contexts?

The following chapter discusses in greater detail some of the considerations the interviewees face when assessing conflict strategies.

Chapter IV

DISCUSSION: MULTIPLE VALUE SYSTEMS

The preceding chapter has provided an important contribution to cross-cultural research on conflict management with its complex and heterogeneous description of various conflict tactics used in an Asian society. Six different conflict strategies ranging from confrontational to engaging an intermediary have been identified. These strategies reflect the extensive conflict management repertoire that characterizes Chinese Singaporean professional women.

In addition, Chapter III has provided a contextualized description of conflict management behavior through a close examination of how Chinese professional women in Singapore handle conflicts in a variety of social contexts such as the family interpersonal context and the professional context. A contextualized description of the conflict management behavior is an important contribution to the field because the identification of multiple conflict strategies used in various contexts contributes towards a pluralistic understanding of conflict resolution in an Asian context.

As argued earlier, cross-cultural empirical research on conflict management has mainly focused on explaining conflict management behavior through dichotomous and bipolar I/C constructs. Intercultural communication scholars (Cai & Fink, 2002; Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991) have mostly assumed that national level values such as collectivism and harmony are the main influences of conflict behavior in Chinese cultures.

In light of the analyses carried out in Chapter III, this study further argues that the Confucian philosophy is not the primary influence on the conflict management repertoire

of Chinese professional women in Singapore. Specifically, this study suggests that the multiple strategies highlighted in Chapter III reflect multiple value systems that are embedded within the Singaporean society. Such value systems include gender equality, youth power, competitiveness and meritocracy in the work place. This chapter therefore seeks to provide a historically and socially sensitive explanation by examining how the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women is influenced by various competing value systems.

The following discussion addresses an important issue: How do Chinese Singaporean professional women, living in a society that has entrenched Confucian values but is also experiencing rapid economic development and globalization, reconcile traditional Confucian values with competing value systems embedded in family and professional contexts, adopt strategies that better suit their realities? In addressing this issue, Chapter IV answers the second research question: To what extent is the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women influenced by traditional Confucian values such as harmony and respect for seniority?

Heterogeneous Values That Govern Immediate Family Relations

Chen and Starosta (1997) argue that the “we-feeling” among in-group members in Chinese society reduces the possibility of conflicts or confrontations. Leung (1988) argues that individuals are less likely to pursue conflicts with in-group members compared to out-group members. However it is hasty to conclude that the Chinese do not engage in confrontations with their family members.

It is demonstrated in Chapter III that a wide spectrum of conflict strategies such as *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior); *Bu Ke Shou Shi* (cannot put things back together)

and *Fu Yu Wang Kang* (resist and fight back) are used to handle conflicts with in-group members. This study therefore suggests that these confrontational strategies reflect newer but often neglected value systems which have emerged from Singapore's rapid rate of urbanization, industrialization, and exposure to Western influences. Examples of newer values include gender equality and youth power. Youth power refers to an emphasis on social values such as independence, outspokenness and self-centeredness during adolescence.

This study also suggests that interviewees' beliefs based upon newer value systems further influence them to redefine traditional hierarchical boundaries that govern in-group relationships. For instance, the husband-wife or parent-child relationship is likely to be redefined as a horizontal rather than vertical relationship under the influences of newer values such as gender equality and youth power. Thus, when in-group members such as parent and spouse are perceived to be occupying less hierarchical relational roles or having more horizontal status, the perceived cost of using confrontational strategies with them is significantly reduced.

For example, the influence of gender equality is clearly reflected in interviewees' adoption of confrontational conflict strategies with their spouse. The Confucian principle of propriety stipulates that the wife occupies a subordinate position in a husband-wife relationship. However several interviewees who were married did not perceive themselves to be subordinate to their husbands. As stated by Yan, "To me, I don't think that my husband is more superior to me. You can say equal." Likewise, Caroline agreed that she shares an equal status with her husband in the marriage. She said:

But I feel that as equals, we are both equals, in terms of that we are both human beings in this relationship and I think we both have to make the effort to make it work.

The perception of equal status in the husband-wife relationship suggests that confrontational strategies such as *Bu Ke Shou Shi* (cannot put things back together) are less costly to adopt when the interviewees perceive themselves as having equal power with their spouse.

The influence of youth power value system is reflected in the adoption of the *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior) tactic. The Confucian principle of propriety stipulates that within the parent-child relationship, the child is expected to show his/her respect to the parent by accepting the parent's authority. However the *Bu Da Bu Xiao* (no senior, no junior) tactic reflects several of the interviewees' refusal to accept the automatic conferral of authority and power on the part of the parent during their adolescence. It appears that social values emphasizing independence and outspokenness have encouraged the interviewees to be vocal and open with their views and opinions during their adolescence.

For example, Caroline explained that she frequently questioned her mother's authority and was "on a mission" to change her during her adolescence. She said:

In the past, growing up, you tend to want to reverse it and "mother" her instead, be assertive. You are finding your identity. You are finding your voice. You begin to think that you know a lot of things.

The transgression performed by a junior tactic is reflective of the cosmopolitan youth culture in Singapore. Singapore's openness to Western influences through media, food, and clothing industry as well as education has created a value system that gives recognition

and status to the youth which has otherwise been suppressed or unacknowledged in traditional Chinese society.

Influences from Confucian values such as respect for elders and concern for harmony are also prevalent in the Singapore. However the application of the various types of conflict strategies is less straightforward than what is suggested in intercultural conflict management literature. This study suggests that conflict strategies are often applied after a cost/benefit assessment of the social context has been carried out. This study further suggests that a complex or hybrid set of conflict strategies is applied to different contexts to resolve conflicts. The following discussion will highlight some of these contexts in which interviewees perceive confrontational strategies to be costly and hence adopt less costly, harmony-oriented strategies.

Confucian Values That Govern Family Relations

The analyses in Chapter III reveal that Confucian harmony-oriented strategies are more commonly used with in-laws and relatives than with immediate family members. It is plausible that harmony-oriented strategies are adopted with in-laws and relatives to a greater extent because, unlike immediate family relationships such as the husband-wife or parent-child, relationships involving in-laws and relatives may be perceived as more vertical and less challengeable. The cost of confronting in-laws and relatives is therefore perceived to be higher.

For example, several interviewees highlighted that in the presence of their relatives and in-laws, they are obliged to adopt avoidance strategies such as *He He Qi Qi* (harmonious and agreeable) and to show their respect for authority.

The high cost of confronting in-laws and relatives is implied in the following two interview excerpts. For example, Caroline explained how a direct, open conflict strategy would cause further misunderstanding with a distant family member. She explained in the following excerpt:

With my sister-in-law, I am not close to her at all. I am regarding her as family. She is *Zi Ji Ren* (own people) by default because of her position. We are not friends. There is no rapport. So it's difficult to express feelings. Because you just can't express and expect the person to accept it. You would cause more conflict.

The high cost of challenging the in-law is implied by Caroline in the following interview excerpt:

With my mother-in-law, she's not your typical, meek, submissive kind of woman. She's also a woman in her own right. She's got views, she runs the household and all that. She's quite assertive and she can be quite domineering with her husband and her children. That's the reason why I hold back.

Overt conflicts may put interviewees in a dilemma regarding the types of conflict strategies to adopt in order to settle the dispute when an individual perceives that it is unlikely to change a dominant family member. For example, Mandy found it difficult to resolve a particular conflict that she encountered with her mother-in-law due to her role obligations and expectations. In order to maintain the relationship harmony, Mandy was obliged to conform to her subordinate role as a daughter-in-law, without raising any issues that might disrupt the relationship harmony. However in order to pursue her personal goals, she had to defy Confucian norms such as showing respect and obedience to the higher status member in the relationship. Mandy described her dilemma in the following excerpt:

I was pretty hurt and I feared for my future. It's a person [mother-in-law] you are connected with for the rest of your life and you have to face her regularly. **You really don't want to strain the relationship and yet you have to find a balance.** It is kind of difficult to resolve without straining the relationship, without hurting each other and things like that. It was agonizing at that point in time to try and resolve the conflict.

Harmony-oriented conflict strategies which emphasize conformity to roles are perceived to be less costly because they enable interviewees occupying subordinate roles to navigate through hierarchical relationships, with minimal disruption to the hierarchical structure.

It therefore appears that, even though with struggles and conflicting desires, the Confucian value system has retained, in some specific contexts, a strong influence compared to those involving immediate family members with horizontal relationships. The perceived rigidity in the hierarchical structure governing in-laws and relatives makes it difficult, pointless or even costly for interviewees to adopt confrontational strategies that challenge hierarchical roles within these relationships.

Implications of Multiple Value Systems Governing Family Relations

The multiple conflict strategies in various family interpersonal contexts reflect interviewees' efforts to reconcile different value systems. It is important to note that while newer value systems such as gender equality and youth power influence the individual to be direct, open, and even confrontational with family members especially those who are immediate, traditional Confucian values nevertheless retain their influence over other types of family relationships such as in-laws and relatives, making it difficult, costly or even pointless for the individual to be confrontational in those relationships.

This study further suggests that the interaction among multiple value systems in various types of family relationships may create a paradoxical approach towards conflict

resolution in the family interpersonal context. Confucian assumptions such as the permanence and stability of in-group relationships or mutual obligations among in-group members require family members to restore harmony whenever a conflict occurs. For example, Rebecca highlighted that she has to “mend the relationship” with her brother regardless of the severity of the conflict because she cannot simply “disown” her brother.

The same assumption can also influence the individual to be confrontational towards his/her family members. The following excerpt illustrates how these assumptions reduce one interviewee’s perceived cost of using confrontational strategies with her parents. She said:

You know them well enough. You know that they are not going to kick you out of the house. You might expect your parents to give in to you because you know them.

The cost of confronting in-group members is reduced when the individual expects other in-group members to adopt compromising strategies in response to the occurrence of open conflicts. As explained by Sandy, “At the end of the day, you will expect your family members to understand you or vice versa because you are family members.”

The paradoxical approach towards conflict resolution in the family interpersonal context implies that a hybrid set of conflict strategies is used to manage conflicts. For example, Winnie pointed out that, even though she is very “irrational” and “reactive” when confronting her boyfriend, she is nevertheless “forgiving” towards him because he is “*Zi Ji Ren* (own people).” Likewise, Sandra emphasized, “Being family members, there’s nothing you can’t say. Forgive and forget, basically.” Hence while the interviewees expect other family members to tolerate their confrontational strategies, they are also

obliged to adopt compromising and avoiding strategies towards other family members to preserve the social harmony within the family. As Caroline put across, “Family is the place where you find the most love and the most hatred because of the love.”

This section has argued that multiple value systems operating in various social contexts create a complex value system which can complicate interviewees’ perceived cost of conflict strategies in the family interpersonal context. This therefore renders necessary the use of hybrid conflict strategies such as confrontational and compromising tactics to deal with conflict situations. The following discussion will highlight the various considerations that interviewees face in assessing conflict costs in professional contexts.

Pragmatic Values That Govern Professional Relationships

The analyses in Chapter III have described a variety of conflict tactics applied in professional relationships. These conflict strategies range from assertive to compromising. These strategies reflect the various value systems that operate in the professional context. In particular, their reliance on pragmatic values reexamines traditional Confucian assumptions about the superior-subordinate relationship.

The Confucian philosophy assumes that the relationship between the superior-subordinate is governed by the rule of reciprocal obligations where the subordinate is expected to show respect to his/her superior while the superior is obliged to support the subordinate (Chen & Chung, 1994). However the rule of reciprocal obligations which governs the superior-subordinate relationship does not necessarily operate uniformly or directly in the professional context.

Conflict strategies adopted in the professional context are often guided by a hybrid set of pragmatic and Confucian values. Pragmatic values such as costs and benefits;

profits and losses have extensive influences upon the types of conflict strategies that are adopted in the professional context. These influences can sometimes complement or contradict the application of harmony-oriented strategies in the work place.

This study therefore suggests that the application of Confucian values in professional contexts in Singapore must be further understood in terms of pragmatic values such as competitiveness and meritocracy, strongly emphasized by the Singapore government.

Cost and Benefit Assessment of Professional Relationships

This study suggests that an assessment of the costs incurred or benefits reaped from professional relationships can influence individuals to adopt harmony-oriented or confrontational strategies in the professional context. Strategies that disrupt relational harmony are perceived to be costly when the individual is influenced by job-related and economic concerns such as pay cut, demotion or receiving negative performance evaluation from the superior.

For example, several interviewees had concerns regarding the negative impact of confrontational strategies upon their career prospects. As explained by Caroline, “At the end of the day, they are still bosses and they are the ones who will evaluate your performance.”

Economic concerns such as financial security can also influence the adoption of harmony-oriented strategies in the work place. For instance, a shortage of employment opportunities was highlighted as one of the reasons for adopting compromising strategies with co-workers. Yan, in her previous job as a project manager, highlighted, “The job market was really tough at that point so we [teammates] really need to make it work.”

Open confrontations were, therefore, perceived to be harmful because they could potentially affect the team's productivity and jeopardize her job.

Concerns about financial security also influence interviewees who are in the sales profession to adopt harmony-oriented strategies with their clients. For instance, Rebecca highlighted, "With clients, you have to hold their hand. You have to hold them all the way because they are the end revenue." The importance of applying the harmony principle is further noted by Yan. She said, "So far, I don't really have major conflicts with clients, I try to give them whatever they want because they are the ones paying for the services that I provide."

The cost/benefit principle that encourages the adoption of harmony-oriented strategies in the professional context, argued earlier, can contrarily affect the individual to adopt more confrontational strategies in other professional contexts. A plausible reason may be that the professional relationship is perceived to be insignificant when it no longer yields high benefits for him/her. Interviewees' explanations regarding instances when they were confrontational with their co-workers provide further support for this argument.

For example, Yan said that the cost of confronting her co-worker was significantly reduced because the relationship did not have a direct impact on her job. Yan explained that due to the autonomous nature of her profession, her relationship with her co-worker played a less significant role in yielding economic benefits compared to her relationship with her clients. Hence it was less costly for her to confront her colleague to resolve an issue. She said:

The reason why I could be this upfront is partly because of the nature of our job, which is basically self-employed. You don't owe anyone a living. You are basically in the same place to do this particular job. At the end of the

day, how successful you are is dependent on your client more than your colleague.

In another example, Charlene perceived her relationship with her superior as yielding benefits that have little significance. This is largely attributed to Charlene's accessibility to economic resources outside the existing superior-subordinate relationship. In the following excerpt, Charlene explained that the cost of confronting her superior and severing their relationship was significantly reduced due to the availability of economic opportunities such as migrating to the United States with her husband.

Interviewer: What about your position as a subordinate, did that affect you?

Charlene: There were times when decisions have to be made and you know that she is making the decision and you are reporting to her. There is obviously a significant indication of what role you play, what role she plays.

Interviewer: But in that particular conflict episode you had with her?

Charlene: No, I just totally disregard that [respect for superior] because I guess I have got nothing to lose. I'm just leaving this place. Moreover the thought of moving to US was there.

Charlene's explanation suggests that benefits which can be reaped from the existing superior-subordinate relationship are reduced significantly when other economic opportunities are made available. The availability of economic opportunities reduces the individual's financial dependence on the professional relationship and thus, reduces the perceived cost of using confrontational strategies in the work place.

These explanations suggest that confrontational strategies in the professional context are governed by cost and benefit concerns more than Confucian values of social harmony and respect. In other words, the maintenance of harmony in professional relationships is dependent, to a certain extent, on how relationships can be manipulated to benefit the individual financially. Strategies which disrupt relational harmony are

perceived to be less costly for the individual when the professional relationship yields little benefits for the individual in terms of career prospects or economic revenue.

Efficiency and Productivity in the Professional Context

Being productive and efficient are values inherent in the professional work culture in Singapore. As highlighted in Chapter II, Singapore's national policies emphasizing meritocracy, productivity, and efficiency are strongly echoed in the work place. These values influence the individual to make objective decisions that are based on efficient outcomes rather than relational concerns.

The assertive strategies adopted by interviewees in the professional context reflect these values. This study further suggests that efficiency and productivity concerns can sometimes outweigh relational concerns for harmony in professional relationships. This argument is further supported by interviewees' accounts of conflict incidents where relational concerns for their co-workers or superiors were displaced by efficiency and objective concerns.

For example, the following excerpt illustrates efficiency and objective values underlying an interviewee's assertive approach in the professional context. Jenny said:

To my immediate boss, I would be very frank and very firm as to what I think should be the way to do it because ultimately, I believe that it's going to be a group effort and more importantly, I would be the one who's going to do the thing or present the thing. I want to do my way which I think is correct.

Likewise, Mandy explained that she was assertive towards her superior over a conflict issue because the conflict issue prevented her from carrying out her job efficiently. As put across by Mandy, "I have to tell him [my superior] my feelings in order to work more efficiently."

In another example, Winnie recalled a conflict that she had encountered with her senior manager regarding travel arrangements for a business trip. According to Winnie, it was important for her to stand up against her superior because the issue required her to go against the company's policy. In the following excerpt, Winnie explained her decision to confront instead of avoiding the conflict issue :

For example, for that senior manager, if I didn't have to answer to travel center to let him travel business, I would let him go. I would say, "yah, go," nothing to do with my pocket, nothing to do with his pocket. I didn't have to confront him. But because now, I have to answer to travel center and put my name there that he can travel, I wouldn't get myself in trouble.

The above example reflects Winnie's assessment of the conflict situation, weighing carefully the costs and benefits of various value systems such as Confucianism and globalization in order to arrive at an optimal decision. The various examples therefore provide support for the argument that besides Confucian values of harmony and respect, conflict strategies in the professional context are influenced by pragmatic values such as efficiency and productivity.

Conclusion

By highlighting the various value systems, Chapter IV has addressed Research Question 2: To what extent is the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women governed by Confucian values such as harmony and respect for seniority? Chapter IV has argued that the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women is partially governed by Confucian values. It has argued that the impact of Confucian values such as harmony and respect on conflict behavior in both family and professional contexts must be further understood in terms of the multiple value systems prevalent in Singapore. These value systems exert different influences on

the individual's conflict management repertoire. These influences are reflected in the range of conflict strategies that are used in both family and professional contexts. The following chapter will summarize the study, highlight the limitations or problems faced during the research process as well as provide suggestions for future research.

Chapter V

SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

Summary

This study was carried out for several reasons. First, there is insufficient research in the intercultural field of communication regarding the manner in which Chinese from a specific geo-political location such as Singapore, handle conflicts. Second, cross-cultural scholars have contributed to a stereotypical and often misguided view about the manner in which the Chinese handle conflicts because their theorizing is mostly based on bi-polar, dichotomous national level constructs such as collectivism and individualism. Third, some cross-cultural research on conflict management has failed to provide a contextualized description about the manner in which conflicts are handled in different social contexts.

Two research questions were raised in this thesis to address the above issues. Research Question (1) asked: How do Chinese Singaporean professional women resolve conflicts in family and professional contexts? Research Question (2) asked: To what extent is their conflict management repertoire governed by Confucian values such as harmony and respect for seniority?

Research Question (1) was addressed in Chapter III. By providing a typology of conflict strategies used by Chinese Singaporean professional women, this study has presented a heterogeneous description rather than a simplistic, one-dimensional account about Chinese conflict resolution behavior, established in previous cross-cultural research on conflict management. In addition, a close examination of how conflict resolution in various social contexts such as family, friends, acquaintances, and co-workers contributed towards a contextualized understanding of conflict management in an Asian society.

Different conflict strategies ranging from confrontational to compromising demonstrate the complexity and heterogeneity that characterize the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women. It is hoped that the typology of conflict tactics described in Chapter III will demystify stereotypical assumptions and beliefs about the types of conflict strategies adopted by Chinese Singaporeans.

Research Question (2) was addressed in Chapter IV. Chapter IV argued that the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean professional women is influenced by Confucian values to a certain extent only. Chapter IV further suggested that the heterogeneous strategies demonstrated in family and professional contexts reflect multiple values prevailing in modern Singapore. For instance, Chapter IV proposed that the family interpersonal context is influenced by gender equality and youth power, values which defy the ideological reach of Confucianism. It also argued that the professional context has influences from pragmatic values, reflecting Singapore's policy on meritocracy and the rapid rate of urbanization and industrialization in Singapore.

These multiple value systems interact with traditional Confucian values to create a complex value system in Singapore. When conflict strategies are governed by different values, they can sometimes put the individual in a dilemma or create paradoxical and hybrid approaches towards resolving conflicts. This is because traditional Confucian values can sometimes contradict or support other value systems. For instance, the youth power value system with its emphasis on independence, contradicts the Confucian principle of propriety which demands dependence on the parent and the demonstration of respect and obedience to the authoritative figure. In the professional context, pragmatic and monetary values, reflective of the professional work culture in Singapore, interact with

traditional Confucian values to complement or contradict harmony-oriented conflict strategies. For example, economic concerns such as job security issues may complement the Confucian principle of harmony when the individual adopts harmony-oriented strategies in the professional context to safeguard his/her job. On the other hand, efficiency and productivity values may outweigh relational concerns at the work place, influencing the individual to adopt less harmony-oriented strategies.

In light of this perspective, this study therefore suggests that it is too simplistic to rely on traditional Confucian values such as collectivism, harmony, and respect, to study conflict management in intercultural research. Other values, reflective of a particular region, in a certain historical context, should also be addressed. In this way, descriptions about conflict management by a particular cultural group are likely to be more historically and contextually nuanced.

Personal Reflections

I have argued that influences from multiple value systems must be addressed when studying conflict management behavior of a particular cultural group. However, I caution against a simplistic approach towards viewing the individual within the cultural group as a passive recipient of various cultural and social influences.

Careful analyses of the interview data reveal that the interviewees are resourceful individuals who at times, are fully able to manipulate cultural assumptions to help them navigate through relationships. For instance, interviewees relied on cultural assumptions about in-group harmony to predict family members' responses towards confrontational strategies more effectively. To highlight another example, I have also described how some

interviewees engaged intermediaries to reinforce their position against the other party by manipulating the intermediary's privileges to their benefit.

The wide spectrum of conflict strategies further suggests that the individual often makes a conscious assessment of his/her choice of conflict strategy, weighing carefully the importance and consequences of various contextual, cultural and economic influences, to arrive at an optimal decision about the type of conflict strategy to be applied in a particular context.

Doing this study, I have been guided by the feminist tradition of interviewing. The feminist tradition of interviewing emphasizes a non-manipulative approach towards interviewing participants through an establishment of trust and openness during the interview process. However my difficulties encountered during the interviewing process suggest that feminist ideals of interviewing are difficult to realize in practice. It is assumed in the literature that the researcher occupies a more advantageous position than the researched. According to the feminist tradition of interviewing, the researcher therefore has a responsibility to create a non-hierarchical and egalitarian research relationship. However my interview experiences reveal that the relationship between the researcher and the researched can sometimes be reversed.

For instance, one of my interviewees, after giving her definitions for own people and outside people, asked me to define these two groups of people in order to reinforce her argument she was trying to make during the interview process. At other times, instead of sharing her experiences through a dialogic and conversational process, my interviewee presented her arguments and taught me how to apply appropriate conflict strategies to various social contexts. Thus, when my interviewee assumed the dominant role in the

researcher-researched relationship, I experienced tremendous stress during the interview process. My difficulties were overcome when a more egalitarian research relationship emerged after several interviews.

Another issue that I wrestled with during the course of my research is the moral dilemma with respect to my responsibilities as a friend and researcher. During the interview process, my interviewees had disclosed personal and sensitive information about themselves. Through the process of sharing and engaging in dialogues, friendships were developed and strengthened. The distinction between the research relationship and friendship became increasingly blurred after several interviews. Some of my interviewees might have developed certain expectations with respect to the trusting relationship that I had established during the interview process. The blurring distinction between my role as a researcher and my role as a friend became a moral dilemma as I tried to separate my responsibilities as a friend and as a researcher, during and after the interviews were conducted.

In the early stages of my research, I had assumed that my interviewees would have consistent and clear definitions regarding in-group and out-group members. The distinction between own people and outside people was used as a guiding framework for the Interview Guide. The purpose of using the *Zi Ji Ren* (own people) and *Wai Ren* (outside people) distinction is to help interviewees talk about their conflict experiences in a manner that is reflective of their cultural group.

However after conducting several interviews, I realized that different interviewees had different definitions about in-group and out-group relationships and their definitions varied, depending on the issue that was addressed. Some interviewees experienced

difficulties talking about their conflict experiences in terms of these two categories. In these instances, I did not impose these terms on the interviewees but rather allowed them to talk about their conflict experiences in various social contexts in their own words. As the purpose of this research is not to explore in-depth how in-group and out-group differences affect conflict strategies, the different meanings that interviewees have with respect to these two categories were not addressed in this study.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations. An important limitation concerns the homogeneity and size of the sample group. A small group of Chinese Singaporean professional women belonging to a particular generation was the main focus of this study. These interviewees have relatively homogeneous demographics. A homogeneous sample group tends to limit the variety of responses that can be elicited. For instance, Chinese Singaporean women, belonging to the working class may resolve conflicts differently from those belonging to the middle class. My initial attempts to contact working class Chinese women through a non-profit organization in Singapore were unsuccessful. The lack of available or accessible means to contact this group of women is an important factor that contributed to the limited variety of women in my sample group.

Due to the relatively homogeneous age group of interviewees, this study is unable to provide a more in-depth understanding of conflict resolution behavior of Chinese Singaporean women, belonging to different generations. For example, conflict experiences of elderly women were excluded from this study. Scholars (Chen, 2000) have argued that the elderly members in Asian societies tend to adopt authoritarian approaches towards conflicts because of the privileges they enjoy such as high status and respect. The

interviewees in this study, belonging to the late twenties and early thirties age group, had encountered conflict experiences defined mainly by their relational roles and status characteristic of their particular age group. For instance, none of the interviewees has experienced being a mother-in-law. Hence their descriptions and explanations about conflict strategies reflected only a partial view of conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporean women.

In addition, the interviewees had relied mostly on recollection and memory to describe their conflict experiences as adolescents. Their descriptions might not have been as accurate or as detailed compared to accounts provided by adolescents.

Further studies should be carried out to examine how Chinese Singaporean women belonging to different classes and generations handle conflicts. This will contribute to a more complete understanding of how Chinese Singaporean women manage conflicts in their daily lives. It will be interesting to compare and contrast class and generational differences in conflict strategy choices and how they have been influenced by cultural assumptions and values of that particular historical era. Future studies can compare the meanings and cultural assumptions that Chinese Singaporean women from different demographic groups attach to conflict strategies. Due to differences in roles, statuses and the types of social interaction that commonly occur, different groups of women are likely to have different perceptions regarding conflict management.

In the professional context, more research can be carried out on how Chinese Singaporean women manage conflicts with members from different cultures. In Singapore, one of the main goals of the multiracial policy is to ensure that all ethnic groups within the society are accorded equal status in all spheres of life. In light of this national

ideology, it will be interesting to examine the extent to which inter-group conflicts affect the conflict management repertoire of Chinese Singaporeans.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis is a pilot study that examines how Chinese Singaporean professional women resolve conflicts. The typology of conflict strategies set up in this study provides valuable insights into their extensive conflict management repertoire. Using a critical qualitative approach to describe and explain the conflict management behavior of a particular cultural group, this study has made an important contribution to the existing cross-cultural research on conflict management. By highlighting the interaction of various value influences upon the individual's conflict strategy choice, this study has reexamined conventional research on cross-cultural research on conflict management. Specifically, it has argued that besides traditional Confucian values, conflict management behavior of the Chinese must be further understood in terms of other value systems embraced by a particular cultural group, located in a specific geo-political location. The adoption of a contextualized and historical framework in my study, therefore, sets new directions for future research on cross-cultural conflict management.

REFERENCES

- Bond, M. H., & Wang, S. H. (1983). Aggressive behavior and the problem of maintaining order and harmony. In A. P. Goldstein, & M. H. Segall (Eds.), *Aggression in global perspective* (pp. 58- 74). New York: Pergamon Press.
- Burrell, N. A., Buzzanell, P. M., & McMillan, J. J. (1992). Feminine tensions in conflict situations as revealed by metaphoric analyses. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 6, 115-149.
- Cai, D. A., & Fink, E. L. (2002). Conflict style differences between Individualists and Collectivists. *Communication Monographs*, 69, 67-87.
- Chang, H.-C., & Holt, G. R. (1991). More than relationship: Chinese interaction and the principle of *Kuan-Hsi*. *Communication Quarterly*, 39, 251-271.
- Chen, G. M. (2001). Towards transcultural understanding: A harmony theory of Chinese communication. In V. H. Milhouse, M. K. Asante, & P. O. Nwosu (Eds.), *Transcultural realities: Interdisciplinary perspectives on cross-cultural relations* (pp. 55-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Chen, G. M. (2002). The impact of harmony on Chinese conflict management. In G. M. Chen, & R. Ma (Eds.), *Chinese conflict management and resolution* (pp. 3-17). Westport: Ablex.
- Chen, G. M., & Chung, J. (1994). The impact of Confucianism on organizational communication. *Communication Quarterly*, 42, 93-105.
- Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J. (1997). Chinese conflict management and resolution: Overview and implications. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 7, 1-16.
- Chua, B. H. (1995). *Communitarian ideology and democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge.
- Chua, E. G., & Gudykunst, W. B. (1987). Conflict resolution styles in low and high-context cultures. *Communication Research Reports*, 5, 32-37.
- Chuang, R. L., & Hale, C. L. (2002). A critical examination of the Eurocentric representation of Chinese communication. In W. S. Jia, X. Lu, & D. R. Heisey (Eds.), *Chinese communication theory and research: New frontiers and new directions*. Westport: Ablex.
- Chung (1996). Avoiding a "Bull Moose" rebellion in Taiwanese politics: Particularistic ties, seniority, and third-party mediation. *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*, 20, 166-185.

- Comstock, J., & Buller, D. B. (1991). Conflict strategies adolescents use with their parents: Testing the cognitive communicator characteristics model. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 10*, 47-59.
- Devault, M. (1999). Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. In M. Devault (Ed.), *Liberating method: Feminism and social research* (pp. 59-83). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Dick, B. (2002). Grounded theory: A thumbnail sketch. In *Action research resources*. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from Southern Cross University, Action Research and Evaluation online Web site: <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/grounded.html>.
- Gebrenya, Jr. W. K., & Hwang, K-K. (1996). In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 309-321). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gudykunst, W. B., Yoon, Y. C., & Nishida, T. (1987). The influence of individualism-collectivism on perceptions of communication in in-group and out-group relationships. *Communication Monographs, 54*, 295-306.
- Hill, M., & Lian, K. F. (1995). *The politics of nation building and citizenship in Singapore*. Routledge: London.
- Ho, D. Y. F., & Chiu, C. Y. (1994). Component ideas of individualism and collectivism, and social organization: An application in the study of Chinese culture. In U. Kim, H. C. Triandis, S-C. Choi, & G. Yoon (Eds.), *Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method and applications* (pp.137-156). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Softwares of the mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Hwang, K.-K. (1987). Face and favor: Chinese power game. *American Journal of Sociology, 92*, 944-974.
- Hwang, K.-K. (1997). *Guanxi and Mientze: Conflict resolution in Chinese society*. *Intercultural Communication Studies, 7*, 17-41.
- Kim, M. S., & Leung, T. (2000). A multicultural view of conflict management styles: Review and critical synthesis. In M. E. Roloff (Eds.), *Communication yearbook* (Vol 23, pp. 229-269). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kuah, K. E. (1990). Confucian ideology and social engineering in Singapore. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 20*, 371- 383.

- Kuo, E. C. Y. (1986). Confucianism and the family in an urban-industrial society. In W. H. Slote (Ed.), *The psycho-cultural dynamics of the Confucian family: Past and present* (pp. 113-144). Seoul: International Cultural Society of Korea.
- Lang, W. (1993). A professional's view. In G. O. Faure, & J. Z. Rubin (Eds.), *Culture and negotiation: The resolution of water disputes* (pp. 38- 46). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lee, H. O., & Rogan, R. G. (1991). A cross-cultural comparison of organizational conflict management behaviors. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2, 181-199.
- Lee, W. S., Wang, J., Chung, J., & Hertel, E. (1995). A sociohistorical approach to intercultural communication. *The Howard Journal of Communication*, 6, 262-291.
- Leung, K. (1988). Some determinants of conflict avoidance. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 19, 125-136.
- Lu, X. (1998). An interface between individualistic and collectivistic orientations in Chinese cultural and social relations. *The Howard Journal of Communication*, 9, 91-107.
- Ma, R. (1992). The role of unofficial intermediaries in interpersonal conflicts in the Chinese culture. *Communication Quarterly*, 40, 269-278.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Reinharz, S., & Chase, S. E. (2000). Interviewing women. In J. F. Gubrium, & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 221-237). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rubin, J. Z., Pruitt, D. G., & Kim, S. H. (1994). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Segall, M. (1983). Aggression in global perspective: A research strategy. In A. P. Goldstein, & M. H. Segall (Eds.), *Aggression in global perspective* (pp. 1-43). New York: Pergamon Press.
- Shenkar, O., & Ronen, S. (1987). The cultural context of negotiations: The implications of Chinese interpersonal norms. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 23, 263-275.

- Sillars, A. (1980). Attributions and communication in roommate conflicts. *Communication Monographs*, 47, 180-200.
- Sillars, A. L., Coletti, S. F., Parry, D., & Rogers, M. A. (1982). Coding verbal conflict tactics: Non-verbal and perceptual correlates of the “avoidance-distributive-integrative” distinction. *Human Communication Research*, 9, 83-95.
- Singha, D., & Tripathi, R. C. (1994). Individualism in a collectivistic culture: A case of coexistence of opposites. In U. Kim, H. C. Triandis, C. Kagitcibasi, S.-C. Choi, & G. Yoon (Eds.), *Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method and applications* (pp.123-136). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Singapore Government (1991). *Shared Values*. (White paper, Cmd 1 of 1991). Singapore Government of Singapore.
- Spitzack, C., & Carter, K. (1987). Women in Communication Studies: A typology for revision. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73, 401-423.
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273-285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ting-Toomey, S., Gao, G., Trubisky, P., Yang, Z. Z., Kim, H. S., Lin, S.-L., et al. (1991). Culture, face maintenance, and styles of handling interpersonal conflict: A study in five cultures. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2, 275-296.
- Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Trubisky, P., Ting-Toomey, S., & Lin, S-L. (1991). The influence of individualism-collectivism and self-monitoring on conflict styles. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 15, 65-84.
- Wall, J. A., Jr., & Blum, M. (1991). Communication mediation in the People’s Republic of China. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 35, 3-20.
- Walton, R. E. (1969). *Interpersonal peacemaking: Confrontations and third-party consultation*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

- Wei, S. S. (1978). *A practical dictionary of Chinese Idioms, English Idioms, English Synonyms*. Hong Kong: The Practical English Press.
- Wu, D. Y. H. (1996). Chinese childhood socialization. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 142-154). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Yum, J. O. (1988). The impact of Confucianism on interpersonal relationships and communication patterns in East Asia. *Communication Monographs*, 55, 374-388.

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

A. Background of Interviewee

1. Can you provide me with some background information about yourself?
2. Which age group do you belong to?
3. What do you do for a living?
4. What is your educational level?
5. What is your marital status?

B. In-group and out-group definitions

1. In Chinese culture, are you familiar with the concept of own people (*Zi Ji Ren*) and outside people (*Wai Ren*)?
2. What do these concepts mean to you?
3. Who do you consider to be own people and who do you consider to be outside people?
4. How do you make the distinction between own people and outside people?

C. Concrete examples of conflict episodes with out-group members

1. Can you recall any conflict episodes or disagreements you had with people whom you consider to be outside people? Can you tell me about the episode?
2. What was the nature of your relationship with the person?
3. What contributed to the disagreement? Can you describe the events that led up to the dispute?
4. Can you tell me about how you handled the situation?
5. Can you provide me with further examples of disagreements or conflict?

D. Concrete examples of conflict episodes with in-group members

1. Can you recall any conflict episodes or disagreements you had with people whom you consider to be own people? Can you tell me about the episode?
2. What was the nature of your relationship with the person?
3. What contributed to the disagreement? Can you describe the events that led up to the dispute?
4. Can you tell me how you handled the situation?
5. Can you provide me with further examples of disagreements or conflict episodes with other members from your own people?

E. Compare and contrast views and values towards resolving conflicts with in-group and out-group members

1. Compared to the earlier examples regarding out -group members, how different were you compared to handling conflicts with in-group members?
2. Why do you think you react or behave differently towards these two groups of people?
3. What are some important considerations that influenced the manner in which you communicated in each episode?
4. Do you think that your role or status within each relationship has played a part in affecting the way you handle the conflict in each of the episodes you have described? How so?
5. Can you recall any traditions or values you have learned from family members, school or at work that you think may influence the manner in which you typically deal with conflicts with these two groups of people?

APPENDIX B

Interviewees' Demographic Information

1. Caroline is a married woman in her mid-thirties. She lives and works in Singapore. Currently, Caroline is staying with her in-laws. She is also a project manager with a multi-national corporation in Singapore.
2. Charlene is a married woman in her late twenties. She currently resides in the California. She migrated to California in 2000 because of her husband's job posting. She is currently a full-time student at a community college. Charlene holds a high school diploma from Singapore. Before she migrated to the United States, she lived and worked in Singapore.
3. Mandy is a married woman in her late twenties. She lives and works in Singapore. Two years ago, Mandy resigned from her job as a purchasing executive to accompany her husband on job assignments in various countries, including California. She stayed in California for several months before returning back to Singapore.
4. Mei Ling is a married woman in her late twenties. She is a Singaporean permanent resident. She arrived in Singapore in the early 1990s for her university education. Upon graduation, she worked as a human resource executive for a government organization for a couple of years. Mei Ling accompanied her husband to California for his job posting in 2001. She is currently residing in California and is a full-time mother of a two year old son. When the interviews were conducted, Mei Ling had recently returned from a visit to her family members in Malaysia
5. Jenny is a married woman in her early thirties. She is also the mother of a one year old son. She is an accountant who is a manager in a multi-national corporation in Singapore. Jenny had been residing in California for several months when the interviews were conducted.
6. Rebecca is a single woman in her late twenties. She lives and works in Singapore. She is currently staying with her parents and younger brother in Singapore. Rebecca's previous job was a sales executive in the radio industry. When the interviews were conducted, Rebecca was in-between jobs.
7. Sandra is a single woman in her late twenties. She works as an accountant for a consulting company in San Jose. Sandra had spent most of her life living, studying and working in Singapore. She moved to California to work in 2003.
8. Sandy is a married woman in her late twenties. She lives and works in Singapore. Currently, she is staying with her mother-in-law. She is a lawyer. When the interviews were conducted, Sandy was expecting her first child.

9. Winnie is a single woman in her late twenties. She lives and works in Singapore. She moved out of her parents' home recently to stay with her boyfriend's family. Previously, Winnie worked in a government agency for a couple of years. Currently, she is a human resource executive for a multi-national corporation in Singapore.
10. Yan is a married woman in her early thirties. She is a Singaporean permanent resident. She arrived in Singapore in the early 1990s to attend college. She has since lived in Singapore for more than ten years. In her previous job, Yan was a project manager for a company. Currently, she is a financial advisor who sells financial plans to clients.

APPENDIX C

Typology of Conflict Tactics

Confrontational	<i>Bu Da Bu Xiao</i> (不大不小)	<i>Fu Yu Wang Kang</i> (负隅顽抗)	<i>Bu Ke Shou Shi</i> (不可收拾)	<i>Yi Dao Liang Duan</i> (一刀两断)
Definition: To adopt an antagonistic and argumentative stance.	Literal meaning: No senior, no junior. Figurative meaning: Describes a junior member transgressing the authority of a senior member.	Meaning: Fight back and put up a resistance.	Literal meaning: Cannot put things back together. Figurative meaning: Describes the escalation of a conflict where both parties are unable to reach a peaceful resolution.	Literal meaning: To use a knife to cut a tie into halves. Figurative meaning: To sever the relationship completely.
Assertive	<i>Yi Li Fu Ren</i> (以理服人)		<i>Yin Shi Zhi Yi</i> (因事制宜)	
Definition: To persuade in a rational manner.	Meaning: To persuade with sound reasons.		Literal meaning: To take appropriate measures in light of the current situation. Figurative meaning: To use appropriate procedures and measures to reinforce one's argument.	
Covert	<i>Yang Feng Yin Wei</i> (阳奉阴违)			
Definition: To deceive the opponent.	Meaning: To comply publicly but defy privately.			

<p>Avoidance</p> <p>Definition:</p> <p>To steer clear from an explicit discussion of incompatible goals.</p>	<p><i>Sui Yu Er An</i></p> <p>(随遇而安)</p> <p>Meaning: To yield and give in for the sake of harmony.</p>	<p><i>He He Qi Qi</i></p> <p>(和和气气)</p> <p>Meaning: To be harmonious and agreeable.</p>	<p><i>Bu Liao Liao Zhi</i></p> <p>(不了了之)</p> <p>Meaning: The problem resolves itself when one does not attend to it.</p>
<p>Compromising</p> <p>Definition:</p> <p>To co-operate with the other party.</p>	<p><i>Yan Gui Yu Hao</i></p> <p>(言归于好)</p> <p>Meaning: To talk to resume good standing.</p>		<p><i>Shuang Fang Tuo Xie</i></p> <p>(双方妥协)</p> <p>Meaning: Both parties arrive at a mutual agreement.</p>
<p>Engaging an Intermediary</p> <p>Definition:</p> <p>To request the assistance of a third party in a conflict.</p>	<p><i>Zhao He Shi Lun</i></p> <p>(找和事论)</p> <p>Meaning: To find a harmonizing person to mediate.</p>		<p><i>Zhao Ren Cheng Yao</i></p> <p>(找人撑腰)</p> <p>Literal meaning: To find a person to support one's waist.</p> <p>Meaning: To find a person to bolster one's position.</p>

The labels for the categories are based on the Modern Chinese Phonetic Transcription System. Simplified Chinese characters are used in the Chinese translation.