

Negotiating with the Chinese and the Schrödinger's Cat Paradox: The Collapse/Superposition Contradictory Paradigms

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Abstract

Physics and international negotiation had never been brought together before in order to explain cultural differences and their impact on international negotiation. We built on quantum physics to define cultures as belonging to objective collapse and superposition paradigms to explain cultural differences impacting international negotiations, because physics acknowledges paradox theories. Inspired by Schrödinger's thought experiment represented by the cat paradox, we used an ethnographic approach to examine a real-life international negotiation situation involving China and the United States as an example of superposition culture.

Keywords: cultural dimensions, international negotiation, quantum physics, China, paradoxes

Introduction

In this article, we argue that binary models which we will call **collapse theory** based models of cultural dimensions are not suitable for interpretation of **superposition cultures** and we take the Chinese culture as a pertinent example of superposition cultures. Indeed, rich in history, philosophy and tradition, China is representative of Asian institutional and cultural contexts and can serve as an important source of inspiration for cross-cultural theory building (Fang, 2011). Moreover, Sino-Western business negotiation is a key dynamic of the Sino-Western business relationship (Ghuri and Fang, 2001) and the likelihood that foreign negotiators will find themselves opposite to Chinese negotiators is increasing (Rivers, 2004). Physics and international negotiation, as the two underpinning fields applied to this research having been so far treated separately, are incorporated into the analysis of an international negotiation situation which failed because of lack cultural understanding. The strong connection between physics and international negotiation is illustrated throughout the paper, using the case of a real-life international situation held in Australia between Chinese, Australian and American negotiators.

Superposition and collapse theories: the ignorance model

Quantum superposition theory posits the existence of certain relations amongst states. Einstein stated that what is not seen or measurable such as the wavefunction (Heisenberg, 1927) might exist and represents 'our ignorance'. In an attempt to prove to his

colleagues that the superposition theory was not a matter of ignorance but just absurd, Schrödinger suggested a thought experiment in which a cat was locked in a box with a Geiger, a hammer and a vial of poison. After one hour, the cat was *both* dead *and* alive as there was no way of knowing if the Geiger had triggered the hammer, which would have broken the vial and released the poison to kill the cat. Another thought experiment invited to imagine two stacks of playing cards (Ringbauer, 2015). One contains only red cards; the other one contains only aces. “You're given a card and asked to identify which deck it came from. If it is a red ace, there's an overlap and you won't be able to say where it came from. But if you know how many of each type of cards are in each deck, you can at least calculate how often such ambiguous situations will arise”. Oppositely, **objective collapse** theories are an approach to the interpretation of problems of quantum mechanics which reject hidden variables. In quantum mechanics, wavefunction collapse is said to when a wavefunction initially in a superposition appears to reduce to a single state, mainly by observation. In other words, the collapse theory states that quantum systems evolve in time but the measurement determines a definite state at that specific momentum, as opposed to Schrödinger's equation which states that there is continuous evolution of quantum systems.

Superposition and collapse cultures: the ignorance danger

Building on quantum mechanics' theories, we can say that **superposition cultures** behave just like light - at different states at the same time. As such, they seem counterintuitive or even paradoxical, because they describe different behaviors from that seen at larger length scales. Just as light has *both* wave-like *and* particle-like properties, superposition cultures are *both* individualistic *and* collectivistic, *both* implicit *and* pragmatic, *both* emotional *and* rational. Classical measurements of cultural dimensions cannot be applied to superposition cultures because they do not accept such duality. They polarize cultural specificities and deny the existence of *both-and* states simultaneously. Indeed, the most widespread cultural dimensions applied to research are represented by Hofstede's (1984) framework according to which cultural dimensions such as Individualism X Collectivism, Masculinity X Femininity, and Long Term X Short Term orientations are among the most salient ones. Other researchers such as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2006) explain cultural differences based on each culture choosing specific solutions to certain problems that reveal themselves as dilemmas as for example, Universalism X Particularism, Ascription X Achievement, and Affectivity X Affectivity Neutral. Finally, Edward Hall (1976) identified two extremes of cultural context - Low Context X High Context. We note that the longevity of the above mentioned cultural frameworks is a testimonial to their validity. However, debate over superiority of these frameworks prompts the question on whether they offer a universal formula for understanding all cultures, let alone the Chinese culture (Fang, 2010), and particularly their impact on international negotiation.

Superposition cultural dimensions framework – the Chinese example

Traditional Chinese culture is interpreted as a multi-dimensional dynamic system that boasts diverse schools of thought inclusive of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Human interactions are interpreted as a process in which the interacting parties constantly adapt and change themselves in order to achieve a state of harmonious relationship with others. This prism reveals the Chinese worldview as that which embraces the opposites contained in one another, forming together an ever-changing, harmonious unity.

Faure and Fang (2008) suggest that the value system in contemporary China is undergoing a process of dynamic change. Opposites coexist in the Chinese repertoire of values and behaviors because “paradoxical propensities coexist in Chinese culture” (ibid, p.205), and

seemingly contradictory value orientations both of which can nonetheless be true within the same society (Fang and Faure, 2011). Paradox is defined as “the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements” (Fang, 2005, p. 76).

Impact on international negotiation

According to Hofstede’s (1984) cultural dimensions, negotiators from individualistic cultures are more independent whereas collective negotiators create teams with several members, and each one is assigned a specific role by the team leader. It is their obligation to measure the impact of the outcomes of their negotiation on the rest of their group. Hofstede also defines cultures as being masculine and feminine. Masculinity values competition, materialism, and professional achievement whereas femininity draws on values such as harmony, cooperation, and general well-being.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2006) advise that affective negotiators are warm and welcoming while neutral negotiators feel uncomfortable with these expressions, because they seem un-businesslike to them. In universalistic cultures, negotiators have a binary view of life: things are divided between what they are allowed to do and what they are not allowed to do. By contrast, in particularistic cultures, norms are obscure and context-dependent. A concession that is not possible to be made to someone can possibly be granted to someone else. An achievement-oriented culture negotiator might be more interested in their counterparts’ achievements as a businessperson and as a negotiator than in his/her personal background while ascription culture negotiators are more likely to investigate their private life to identify the networks they belong to. They are also more interested in diplomas than in working experience.

Hall (1976) states that in high context cultures the word NO is not used, constant eye contact is deemed as rude and in some of these cultures negotiators don’t shake hands as they just bow or greet at distance. Their approach to negotiation is building a good deal by bringing information from all parts together so that the negotiation process can be more efficient. Commitment is based on relationship and trust and contracts are just written milestones which record the evolution of the negotiation process, and are not definitive, as low context negotiators would like to expect. Negotiators from high-context cultures don’t like to work with people they don’t know personally. In contrast, deals are achieved quicker with less rounds in low context cultures because people go straight to the point. Small talk and digressing are deemed as a waste of time and unprofessional for these people who work with very tight schedules and usually don’t mix private with professional lives (Karsaklian, 2014).

Fang and Faure (2011) posit that from a Chinese perspective, everything embraces opposite properties; Chinese worldview is essentially *both-and* instead of *either-or* (Chen, 2001; Fang, 2003). They argue that there is a need to extend the existing methodology for the analysis of the Chinese cultural values in order to capture the complexity, paradoxes and changes in today’s Chinese society. As a result, Fang and Faure (2011) established a framework based on the **principle of contradictory values and communication patterns** referring to business and society at large and presented below.

(1) Personal connections X Professionalism

Guanxi (personal connections and contacts) is a means for getting support in an uncertain, unsecured and turbulent society with reciprocity as its core. It is about trading personal favors instead of relying on affect and professional competence. But guanxi and professionalism are

intertwined with each other and both remain important and meaningful in revealing the dynamics of business and social life in China.

(2) Importance of face X Self-expression and directness

The Confucian moral notion of shame lays the philosophical foundation of the concept of face. Social harmony is achieved through controlling feelings, appearing humble, avoiding conflict and even hiding competition. But to some extent, today's Chinese managers are more assertive, and direct in communication than they used to be and conjugate two imperatives: face preservation on the one hand and self-expression on the other hand, without opposing them on a unique continuum.

(3) Thrift X Materialism and ostentatious consumption

The Chinese attempt to fulfill two seemingly antagonistic purposes - the concern for saving and that for spending, wellbeing, leisure, and enjoyment. The value scale does not spread along a bipolar axis, but it integrates both poles. Chinese consumers want to show off but at the same time carefully calculate their expenses in order to optimize their purchases.

(4) Family and group orientation X Individuation

Family is the basic unit in the Chinese society and what holds people together. Anyone not belonging to the family is seen as a stranger. Family is the safety net all Chinese can count on. But individual behavior and self-concern are also part of the Chinese culture and they are not mutually exclusive opposites. The individual approach moves into the group sphere and vice-versa.

(5) Aversion to law X Respect for legal practices

China is governed by the rule of man and not by the rule of law. Leadership is asserted by moral behavior instead of legal punishment. The use of contracts depends on the degree of trust between parties. In addition, the flexibility of the Chinese language in interpreting meanings offers an appropriate ground to never ending negotiations.

(6) Respect for etiquette, age and hierarchy X Respect for simplicity, creativity and competence

Age is wisdom and the young are constrained to hold back and listen to the elderly. Respect of rituals wisely performed are an expression of good manners. At the same time, performance and competence play an increasing role in professional lives.

(7) Long-term orientation X Short-term orientation

Time is perceived as an unlimited resource and as a general course of events, rituals and seasons. However, the short term approach to time is revealed by the lack of a strategic business plan and a limited understanding of planning in general.

(8) Traditional creeds X Modern approaches

Being extremely superstitious but not religious, the Chinese combine modernity and technology with superstitious rituals such as Geomancy.

Method and objectives – An ethnographic approach to International Negotiation

The ethnographic data collection was operationalized through participatory observation. The case study analyzed a real-life situation of international negotiation; it was not an experiment based on a fictitious situation. The author witnessed, *in situ*, the negotiation described in the case study as an actor of cultural awareness training for an American/Australian company negotiating with a potential Chinese client. This case study is representative of several situations faced by Westerners and the Chinese in the international business world and thus, knowledge about their negotiating practices generates insights for both sides when negotiating together (Ghuri and Fang, 2001). The analysis presented here is based on excerpts of one negotiation round which were deemed by the author as deserving better understanding from the readers and representative of the main differences between collapse and superposition cultures. Although some situations and expressions might sound

stereotyped, they constitute a real transcription of words and behaviors performed during the negotiation. Our focal point is the cross-cultural negotiation process itself rather than its outcomes.

The real-life situation– The American/Australian-Chinese Negotiation

The situation - An Australian subsidiary of a US company and specialized in Public Relations and Event Management aiming at assisting the Chinese company in organizing a set of events to create awareness for their brand in the Australian market.

The settings - The negotiation round takes place in Melbourne in May 2015. There are two negotiators on the American/Australian side and five on the Chinese side. The negotiation takes place in a restaurant on Collins Street in Melbourne. It is an old Pub turned into a restaurant with original and innovative food, however with an ancient décor. The Aussie negotiator picks the Hunter's room for the lunch as it is quieter and thus better suitable for a business lunch.

The negotiation parties - The American/Australian negotiators are very informal males – let's call them John and Paul respectively - and try to make the Chinese team feel comfortable. They speak and laugh loudly, and make a lot of jokes about hunting kangaroos in Australia to break the ice. They lose their jackets as soon as they seat at the table. The Chinese team is composed of three women and two men. One woman is their spokesperson – let's call her Xinshu. She speaks perfect English and tries to laugh as much as possible with the American/Australians' jokes without translating them to her Chinese fellows. The Chinese negotiators are formally dressed and wait until their hosts tell them to take a seat. John takes the lead saying "it is great pleasure to have you here as I came all the way from the US just for this negotiation." Xinshu humbly replies– "it is our pleasure. Thank you for having us here". Then John turns to Paul and asks –"what kind of place is this one Paul?" "Isn't this place lovely? It is a Pub which combines traditional settings with original and delightful food." replies Paul. "I come all the way down here and you take me to a Pub?" chuckles John. "Relax, mate, this is part of our roots", replies Paul. "Oh man, I'm not hunting kangaroos with you!", argues John. "No bloody way! I don't hunt either. We're here to have a great meal and to do great business with our Chinese guests", adds Paul as he looks and smiles at the Chinese team.

The negotiation round - After having placed their orders, John and Paul get immediately down to business. First, they look at all the Chinese team when addressing them. But as soon as they realize that there is only one person talking to them, they just ignore all the rest of the team and focus on their spokesperson, Xinshu. They are persuaded that she is the boss and the decision maker. Quite often they ask direct questions based on *either-or* options. "If you want to work with us, this is what we can do for you. It is a whole package we put together for you and you'll benefit from our best expertise in PR", they say. "This is a great opportunity you just can't miss, right?" There is silence on the other side although the Chinese negotiators don't look at each other. Feeling uneasy, John and Paul break the silence by insisting on the whole package as being the best (only) option for them. The Chinese spokesperson asks if they could have more water at the table. As unexpected as it could sound as a response to their questions, Paul replies, "of course", and orders another bottle of water. After what John looks at Xinshu and asks – "so what do you think about our package? It's a great option, right? It contains everything you need at a very affordable price". Xinshu smiles and replies, "it sure is. I was just wondering if we could benefit from *both* some of the features in this package *and* at the same time add some other features you described separately". Paul answers, "well, no, I am afraid. You know, the package already includes all you need. The other options are, as I said other options. They are not part of this package". "I

hear your point of view but I still think that it would be better if we could mix the features that better suit our needs. I am persuaded that all these together would give a better image of our company in Australia” says Xinshu. “Well, if you are not sure about this package, then you can pick another one. This one, for example”, adds Paul. There is silence on the Chinese side again. Until John says “we’d better have some coffee. It’s already 1.30pm”.

Then Xinshu circles back to the negotiation topic, “I was wondering if we could somehow have a mix of two packages. You know, China is a big market”. The answer comes quickly from the other side – “we are really sorry, but that won’t be possible. It will be *either* this one *or* the other one. We have them separate because they are incompatible”. There is no reply from the Chinese side. After the coffee, Paul pays the bill and says he hopes that they had enjoyed the meal. Xinshu replies saying that it had been a pleasure and the rest of the Chinese team bow. Xinshu continues, “However, I would really like to envisage the possibility of mixing different features from different packages.” Paul replies, “as we said before, unfortunately, that is not possible. It doesn’t make sense to mix them now, I am sorry. But which package are you leaning towards taking?” Xinshu replies, “We’ll need to think a bit about it and we’ll get back to you. Many thanks again for such a delightful meal”. John and Paul are happy. The lunch went well and they expect to hear from Xinshu with their choice of one of the packages in few days. But the Chinese team knows that they won’t take any of them, because none of them contains all the features they need. Their next step will be to look for other options and if the other ones fail, they might go back to John and Paul and negotiate a mixed package over again. They cannot understand why the two packages are incompatible and why spare features cannot be added to a package. Briefly said, the Chinese won’t take the *either-or* option. They will search and negotiate with whoever necessary to get the *both-and* option they need no matter how long it will take them to get there.

The non-Chinese negotiators’ inability to accept and manage paradoxes generates barriers to negotiating with the Chinese, to whom paradoxical management is an integral part of daily life. Additionally, non-Chinese negotiators quickly arrive to deadlocks because to them there are only two linear paths to follow - the right one and the left one. In contrast, the Chinese see multiple paths that can be followed to arrive at the same place and they are not linear. Their holistic non-linear vision of things enables them to circumvent difficulties by finding additional alternatives more easily (Faure, 1995).

Analysis of collapse and superposition cultures negotiating together – the confrontation of *either-or* with *both-and* paradigms

If we were to analyze the Chinese negotiators in using the same frameworks as it has been done in intercultural research so far, we would say that the Chinese belong to a culture of a strong power distance, they are collective because of Guanxi, are masculine as well because they are judged based on their achievements, with low uncertainly avoidance, as they undertake ventures all over the world and are long term oriented as they don’t rush to a deal, but take their time not only to get to know the people they will work with but also to make their decisions (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). As they are implicit in their communication as well as relationship oriented, they are categorized as a high context culture (Hall, 1976), and as a reactive culture (Lewis, 2012), as they listen more than they talk and look for harmony and compromise. In addition, they are neutral as they control the expression of their emotions, ascription oriented because dependent of each individual’s position and background and particularist because propositions and responses depend on the context rather than on law and rules (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2006). But, if we analyze the Chinese negotiators’ behavior by using the appropriate framework –the eight contradictory values (Fang and Faure,

2011) - we will have a better understanding of the nuances inherent in their culture which are imperceptible to collapse culture negotiators because they use collapse cultural framework's lenses as the measurement tool.

First, the Guanxi-professionalism contradiction. While the Chinese team of negotiators was trying to get to know their American/Australian potential suppliers, they were also observing their professionalism and behaving professionally themselves, without asking them for any personal favors. Thus, they were *both* building relationship *and* being professional simultaneously. By saying that 'China is a big market', Xinshu was not only selling her country as a big potential market for her counterparts, but was also suggesting that thanks to her Guanxi, she would be able to put them in touch with other potential clients if they did business together. Unfortunately, the subtlety of her statement was not heard by John and Paul.

Second, Xinshu saved everyone's faces by not translating the jokes John and Paul made because the Chinese colleagues would not have understood them and even less been amused by them. Indeed, face is a self-regulating moral mechanism with fundamental impact on the Chinese way of life (Ghauri and Fang, 2001). Additionally, Xinshu was assertive when clearly asking why was it so impossible to mix the features she was interested in. She was *both* saving face *and* being direct at the same time. Silence is a negotiation tool the Chinese have mastered better than anyone else. The Chinese are very talkative but rarely answer to questions. In their hierarchical and collective society, taking singular responsibility is not recommended and the risk of giving opinions, let alone, information dissonant from their peers can cause a loss of face (Bhattacharjee and Zhang, 2011).

Third, the Chinese are willing to pay for high priced products and services if they bring them the satisfaction they need, *both* in terms of utility *and* of social value. Their attempt to mix features contained in the package with the ones not being part of it, did not only depend on the price but also on the corresponding symbolic value that they could not find within the same package. As we could observe during the negotiation, in no moment the Chinese evoked issues about the price. The Chinese are utilitarian, pragmatic and concrete and only the best is enough for them. Xinshu has clearly expressed her desire to add specific features to the package she was being offered with.

Forth, although Xinshu was representing a team of Chinese negotiators, she was also negotiating for herself. The fruits collected thanks to that negotiation should be *both* beneficial to their company *and* to her career, as well. By looking after her group she would first pick the options that are beneficial to the group but certainly use her negotiating skills to leverage her career within the company or outside that one. Fifth, it was hardly understandable for the Chinese why their counterparts were so rigid with their rules. She was looking for *both* respecting social norms *and* building trust with the potential suppliers. Rituals should be respected and that is why Xinshu kept going with the flow and obeying to the Western rituals which was to talk about business all over the meal. wanted *both* to obtain what she needed thanks to flexibility *and* abide the other side's rituals.

Sixth, although simple and humble, the Chinese observe their own etiquette. They waited until their counterparts told them to take a seat. And then, they waited until their boss would sit down for them to do the same. This movement, imperceptible to the American/Australian negotiators, indicated their sense of hierarchy. Indeed, the most important person in their group was strategically placed between John and Xinshu. He was the team leader and the

decision maker. As for the Chinese simplicity rules, he did not speak up, and was thereby ignored by the counterparts who thought that Xinshu was the team leader and the decision maker. As such, the Chinese team *both* respected their own rituals and hierarchy *and* behave with simplicity.

Seventh, the Chinese team of negotiators would have stayed longer at lunch because they needed to know more about John and Paul. Spending more time with them would have allowed the Chinese team to assess the likelihood of getting into a long term relationship with that company and with the two persons representing it. Had they had enough time to get the information they needed to make a decision, their response would have come faster. In other words, the Chinese team was looking for *both* getting into a long term relationship with the company *and* getting into action quickly in order to get return on investment in the short term.

Finally, the Chinese master all western theories and tools about business and negotiation mainly because most of them have studied and worked abroad and the use of high tech products enables them to stay tuned with the world outside China. But they have the ability of articulating these modern tools with their traditional superstitions and intuition which make them interrupt a negotiation or create deviations when they sense that the conversation is not heading to the desired direction. This explains why instead of replying to John's question about the package she would pick, Xinshu asked for more water at the table because she was *both* coping with their counterpart's strategy *and* trying to avoid situations that would be detrimental to her team.

Implications for researchers and negotiators

Drawing on a scientific approach to quantum physics, we demonstrated that the lenses through which cultural dimensions are traditionally assessed and defined are not appropriate to all types of cultures. To do so, we classified cultures into two types – objective **collapse cultures** and **superposition cultures**. Arguably, the existence of duality and paradoxes should not be seen as a problem to working together but as new appropriate lenses through which understand contextual behavior.

Limitations and further research

The main contribution of our research is to bring two scientific fields together in order to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges inherent in international negotiation. Nonetheless, our research presents some limitations, the main one being the cross-sectional analysis of one international negotiation situation. Ideally, the ethnographic approach should be longitudinal. Further research should explore other cultures representative of the same paradigm.

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