

“Business is business” – Chinese Students’ Construction of Cultural Identities in a Persuasive Writing Task

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Abstract

Past research on cultural identity has either essentialized it as being unified, permanent, bounded to and by national culture (Holliday, 2010a, 2010b) or romanticize it as readily selectable (Collier, 2005). From an interpretive and critical perspective, this study analyzed 65 Chinese students’ cultural acts in a request-writing task, audio-recorded prewriting group discussions, and post-writing reflective essays. The analyses revealed the multiple layers of cultural identities that the students constructed, co-constructed, and negotiated in the process. While students seemed able to exercise agency in an attempt to claim ownership of Anglophone discourse in writing requests, they were unable to resist or undo the cultural stereotypes that bring them the feeling of being culturally inferior. The findings alert our attention to the current trend of unidirectional globalization and the implicit culture of elitism and inferiority in many periphery education systems (Rubdy, 2009). Implications for research and teaching in intercultural communication were discussed.

Introduction

Cultural identity, as defined by Collier and Thomas (1988), is an individual’s “identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct” (p. 113). While perceived as the focal element in intercultural communication (Imahori & Cupach, 2005), it has nevertheless long been essentialized as being unified, permanent, and bounded to and by national culture (Holliday, 2010a, 2010b; Rampton, 2005). However, the globalization of this century, in juxtaposition with the rapid development of the Internet, has given rise to “the entanglement of different cultural traditions” (Bhatt, 2005, p. 41) and “the blending of a diverse set of cultural repertoires” (Rubdy, 2009, p. 166) that make it difficult to define cultural identities in exclusive ways. Hence, there has been increasing research attention upon the complexity, hybridity, and fluidity of cultural identities (e.g., Collier, 2005; Holliday, 2010a, 2010b; Jameson, 2007; Young & Sercombe, 2010), and on how individuals, as “agentive, strategic and reflective beings” (Fairclough, 2006, p. 163), negotiate their identities to their advantage when facing unequal sociocultural orders (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013; Grimshaw, 2010; Phan, 2009).

However, a tendency exists to go to another extreme—assuming equal agency in crossing cultural boundaries and freedom in claiming cultural identities (Collier, 2005). In an in-depth discussion of the theoretical tension between structure and agency, Block (2013) pointed out that the literature on identity has tended to prime agency over social structure. Considering the prominent status of English as the lingua franca and the varying value scales indexed by different forms of English (Canagarajah, 2013),

how agentive can an individual be in intercultural communication if she/he comes from a geolinguistically and economically “periphery” country (Wallerstein, 1991)? It is important to examine the “liminal” negotiation of cultural identities of periphery community members (Bhabha, 1994). However, this critical perspective has long been ignored in the field of intercultural communication. Some recent literature reviews (Cardon, 2008; Hu & Fan, 2011) shows that a large portion of studies in the field remain positivist and essentialist drawing heavily upon Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) and Hall’s (1976) cultural theories. The examination of cultural identity construction through authentic cultural acts, despite an increasing interest in the field of applied linguistics in general, has not received adequate attention in the field of intercultural communication (Holliday, 2010a, 2010b).

As Ting-Toomey (2005) points out, most studies on conflict styles and/or face concerns have relied heavily on self-report measures of face behavior in hypothetical or recalled conflicts as data (i.e., mostly through questionnaires). Few studies have examined authentic discursive acts of managing face and conflicts in order to examine the complex process of cultural identification and negotiation. It is the aim of this study to fill in the gap.

Using an interpretive and critical approach (Collier, 2005; Holliday, 2010a, 2010b), this study examined how 65 university students in Beijing, People’s Republic of China constructed, co-constructed, and negotiated their cultural identities in a simulated business writing task, through pre-writing group discussions, individual request writing, and post-writing reflective essays. In particular we looked into the Chinese students’ complex cultural identity process through their discursive acts in managing face and conflict. We addressed the following research questions in the study:

1. How did Chinese students manage face and conflict in the writing task? In other words, what conflict styles and politeness strategies did they choose to employ?
2. How did Chinese students rationalize their choices of conflict styles and politeness strategies in their pre-writing group discussions and post-writing reflective essays?
3. What kind of cultural identities were played out in the three stages of cultural acts? How agentive were the students in constructing and negotiating cultural identities?

Literature Review

In this section, we first review how the research on cultural identities has evolved from prescriptive and essentialist to interpretive and critical. We then introduce the theoretical basis of this study. We also review the relevant literature on conflict management styles and politeness strategies.

Cultural Identity: From Essentialist to Interpretive and Critical

Today, Hofstede’s (1980, 2001) and Hall’s (1976) cultural theories are still among the most influential and the most cited theoretical frameworks in the literature of intercultural communication (Cardon, 2008). Doubts, however, have been cast on them from research and political perspectives in recent years. Cardon (2008), for example, critiqued Edward Hall’s model as being “unsubstantiated and underdeveloped” (p. 399). He noticed that none of Hall’s works were published in refereed journals; no description has ever been provided of how the rankings of cultures from low-context (LC) to high-context (HC) were conceptualized or measured; and there is no mention of whether rigorous methods such as sampling techniques, triangulation, review by inquiry participants, or identifying alternative explanations have been used in data collection. Based on a meta-analysis of 224 articles in business and technical communication journals between 1990 and 2006, Cardon revealed that few of the contexting

propositions have been examined empirically, and those propositions tested have often failed to support Hall's contextualizing theory.

While Cardon's critique of Hall's cultural model points to research validity, Holliday's (2010a, 2010b) critique of Hofstede's model is more from a geopolitical perspective. In Holliday's view, such cultural dichotomies as individualism versus collectivism, although seemingly neutral, are in effect ideologically constructed, as they project an idealized Western Self and categorically "other" all the East and the South as bounded by tradition and groupism, and are thus deficient in thinking critically. In Holliday's study (2010a), the 28 participants who had confronted the issue of culture through travel, marriage, or immigration, perceived national culture only as an external variability while "small" cultures such as religion, ethnicity, class, workplaces, and even artifacts such as clothing, play a more important role in their cultural identities. Holliday (2010a), therefore, concludes,

Being part of one cultural reality does not close off membership and indeed ownership of another. Individuals can have the capacity to feel a belonging to several cultural realities simultaneously. (p. 175)

This view of cultural identities as fluid, rich, and complex defying pre-categorization and definition seems to be shared by many scholars (e.g., Collier, 2005; Jameson, 2007; Rubdy, 2009). Mathews (2000) sees culture as "the information and identities available from the global cultural supermarket" (p.186), and Connor (2011), echoing Mathews's supermarket metaphor, compared her own multi-layered identity to a colorful jacket that is woven of patches of various sizes and colors. Indeed, this highly mobile and interconnected world has blurred the original cultural boundaries, synthesized different cultural values, and reconstructed cultural identities in local communities. The concept of "intercultural identity" has therefore been proposed by some scholars (e.g., Kim, 1994; Monceri, 2009) as a counterpoint and an extension of "cultural identity". As Kim (1994) put it, the concept enables us to see "whom we may yet become" rather than simply "who we are" (p. 9).

However, are people in/from *periphery* communities really free to claim identities as they wish, just like trying on clothes in the supermarket? As we may notice, the globalization trend has long been unidirectional and centripetal, concomitant with the privileged status of English as the lingua franca in almost all arenas. As Canagarajah (2005, p. xxiii) points out, cultural values and practices associated with Anglophone civilization are now shaping the cultures and identities of many local communities. One noticeable example is the adoption of LC communication practices in so-called HC cultures, the trend of which is frequently reported in the intercultural business communication literature (Cardon, 2008). When the feeling of forever "belatedness" (Bhabha, 1994) lingered in the minds of people in/from periphery communities/nations, and when the essentialized constructions of culture made them perceive their own cultures as "located at some rung or other of the ladder of development that Europe already had left behind" (Dirlik, 1996, p. 100), it is perhaps not surprising at all to see an eager adaptation to the euro-American culture, a debasement of their own cultural roots (Rubdy, 2009), or a tendency of *self-marginalization* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 22).

In reflecting over her own itinerary as a scholar researching cultural identity, Collier (2005) questioned presumptions of equal agency across individuals in her earlier works. In many cases, we can indeed see the work of agency in successfully choosing, enacting, and negotiating a range of identities. Phan (2009), for example, described how eight Asian international students studying at a university in Thailand proactively took the ownership of English for their own advantage and resisted being ascribed as uncritical, passive, and obedient Asian Other. Their confident "colonization" of English created a "third

space" (Kramsch, 1993) for them, in which they reclaimed their "Asian" identities, produced and reproduced their multiple identities in complex and dynamic ways. Similarly, the Chinese students in Grimshaw's (2010) ethnographic study were observed to engage in acts of "crossing" (Rampton, 2005), creatively appropriating "Western" discourses in communicative events such as "international evening" and "debate contests", and in so doing, negotiating hybrid identities and producing contradictory subjectivities.

However, the above two cases of competent negotiation of multiple cultural identities both occur, as we can see, among in-group members of peripheral communities. Liu's (2011) study described a semester-long cross-national email writing activity in which the Taiwanese undergraduates found themselves caught in a power differential when communicating with American counterparts because of the felt differences in linguistic and cultural status. Some students had to resort to passive strategies like delaying responses or changing from informal to formal writing style to negotiate the power differential. Liu's study testifies to Collier's (2005) view that cultural identity theory should not imply that individuals can freely select their cultural identities in chameleon-like fashion and neglect unequal global order, social hierarchies, and other contextual constraints.

The above review sketches out the evolution of the cultural identity research from being prescriptive or essentialist, to being liberal, and then to being interpretive and critical. With an interpretive/critical perspective, this present study refrains from prescribing or defining cultural identities; instead, we recognize the complex nature of cultural identifications and negotiation and thus focus on describing individuals' authentic cultural acts in identity construction (Holliday, 2010a, 2010b). Meanwhile, we reject the "radical relativist narratives of intercultural 'becoming'" (MacDonald & O'Regan, 2012, p. 561). Echoing Jones (2013), we see cultural identity both as a verb and as a noun; in other words, we recognize the exercise of agency in choosing and negotiating identities as well as the constraining effect of structure, such as the unequal center-periphery global order, or the local education system, on individuals' agency and reflexivity in constructing cultural identities.

Cultural Identity, Conflict Styles and Politeness Strategies

As Jenks, Bhatia, and Lou (2013) point out, "the semiotic interplay between discourse on the one hand, and culture and identity on the other hand, is what shapes intercultural communication" (p. 122). Cultural identities are more often than not linguistically constructed; therefore, discourse and communication is an important window for us to look into the complex identity construction process. In this study, we looked into the participating students' discursive acts of managing face and conflicts, and their meta-discursive acts in rationalizing their pragmatic choices.

"Face", the notion which originates from Goffman (1967), is the socially situated identity that motivates politeness strategies. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), all Model Persons (MPs) have positive face—the desire to be appreciated and approved of—and negative face—the desire not to be impeded. All MPs are rational agents that are keen on efficient delivery of messages while at the same time cooperating in reciprocal face support. Some acts, such as making a request, intrinsically threaten face because they interfere with the hearer's freedom of action and freedom from imposition, and are hence referred to as "face-threatening acts" (FTAs). Conflict, defined as "an explicit or implicit interpersonal struggle process that entails perceived incompatible values, norms, goals, face orientations, scarce resources, interaction styles, and/or outcomes between two interdependent parties" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 72), is also an emotionally laden FTA. The more important the conflict topic or imposition of the conflict demand, the more severe the perceived FTA.

Of particular interest to this study is Ting-Toomey's (2005) conflict face-negotiation theory. It consists of 24 theoretical propositions, and accounts for the relationship between culture and face concerns/orientations, culture and conflict styles, and individual- and situational-level factors on face concerns. According to Ting-Toomey (2005), there are three types of face orientations in the conflict situation. They are: *self-face*, the protective concern for one's own image; *other-face*, the concern for the other conflict party's image; and *mutual-face*, the concern for both parties' images and/or the "images" of the relationship. Conflict styles are "specific behaviors used to engage in or disengage from a conflict situation" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 78). There are five conflict types ranging from the *dominating/competing* style to the *avoiding* style. While dominating/competing style emphasizes the use of tactics to push for a person's own position or goal above and beyond the other person's conflict interest, the avoiding style involves completely eluding the conflict topic, the conflict party, or the conflict situation. The *obliging* (or accommodating) style is the opposite of the dominating style, with a high concern for the other person's conflict interest above and beyond a person's own conflict interest. The *compromising* style involves an attempt to reach a midpoint agreement concerning the conflict issue, and the *integrating* (or collaborative) style that involves high concern for both self and other seeks solution closure in conflict.

The theory suggests that the cultural dichotomy of individualism-collectivism has direct effects on conflict styles, as well as mediated effects through self-construal's and face concerns. More specifically, it proposes that members of individualistic cultures tend to express a greater degree of *self-face* maintenance concerns than members of collectivistic cultures, whereas members of collectivistic cultures tend to express a greater degree of *other-face* or *mutual-face* concerns. It also proposes that members of individualistic cultures tend to use more *dominating/competing*, more assertive to aggressive conflict styles than members of collectivistic cultures, whereas members of collectivistic cultures tend to use the other four conflict styles more frequently.

The theory is supported by a number of studies that looked into the Anglo-Chinese cultural differences in terms of face concerns and conflict styles, which suggest that Chinese tend to be more concerned about face and "harmony" than western people (Gramham & Lam, 2003) and Chinese managers are more inclined to avoid conflict than American managers (Friedman, Chi & Liu, 2006; Leung, 1988). Some recent studies have come up with different findings. Du-Babcock (2013), for instance, noticed that for both Hong Kong Chinese and western managers, the *integrating* style is the most commonly used conflict management style while *avoiding* is the least used one. Zhang, Harwood, and Hummert (2007) found in their study that older Chinese participants favored the accommodating style while young participants either preferred the problem-solving style to the accommodating style or judged the two styles as equally positive. They suggest that the changing Chinese cultural context in tandem with the recent trend of globalization and modernization, give rise to the differences in interpersonal communication style between the generations.

The Study

Data

Within the context of a larger project, this study collected data from a course named "Advanced Business English Writing", which was offered to the undergraduate students in the School of International Studies in a Chinese university in Beijing. The students have received about 8-10 years of English education, and some of them had intern experiences in multinational companies. They were

informed that their course work would become the data of a research study and were promised that the research findings would be reported back to them.

Based on the provided scenario (see Appendix 1), 65 participating students were asked to compose a persuasive request in English individually within one hour. The scenario describes a task in which each student assumes the role of a local company CEO and writes to a world-famous British speaker manufacturer to request local distributorship. However, the British manufacturer already has an exclusive distributor, the president of which has a close personal relationship with the CEO of this British manufacturer. The writing task was designed in such a way that students have to face the potential face-threatening conflict—given the exclusive distributor policy, to request the local distributorship inherently poses a threat to the existing distributor, and a FTA to both the British manufacturer (i.e., the target company, henceforth TC) and the competing company (henceforth CC). Despite the absence of CC in the correspondence, the potential face-threat to CC should also be considered, given the small business world and the friendship between the leaders of TC and CC. However, the students were not given any instructions on how to write persuasive requests, conflict styles, or politeness strategies before the writing task.

Prior to the writing task, students were asked to form groups of 4 to 6 persons (12 groups in total) to generate ideas, organize information, and conduct discussions on what and how to write. The discussions lasted about 40-50 minutes and were digitally recorded and later transcribed. The students themselves chose the medium language for discussion; some groups used English, some used Chinese, and most of the groups chose to switch between Chinese and English. Group discussion was designed as one data source because it can not only elicit justifications, like think-aloud protocols, of why later the requests were written the way they were, but more importantly, as Olinger (2011) argued, the coordinated talk “provide(s) a window into the embodied construction of identities” (p. 274). After the writing task, the instructors offered lectures on how to write persuasive messages using a well-written request composed by a US student based on a similar case scenario as an example. For the follow-up, students were required to write individual reflective essays discussing reasons for writing the persuasive requests the way they were. In total, 12 transcripts of group discussions, 65 persuasive requests and 65 reflective essays were collected.

Data Analysis

Using Nvivo 8.0, software for analyzing qualitative data, we first coded the three sets of data separately. In analyzing the persuasive requests, we drew upon both Ting-Toomey’s (2005) taxonomies of face concerns and conflict styles as well as Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of FTAs and politeness strategies. We considered that there are three potential FTAs in the writing task: 1) to request to be the local distributor, 2) to mention the competing company in an unfavorable way, and 3) to purposely compare the writer’s own company (SC) and the competing company (CC). The writer can have different choices in dealing with the three potential FTAs (see Figure 1), and we identified and categorized these choices along the cline from *Avoiding* conflict style to *Dominating* style. Each request was then analyzed in terms of these choices.

Figure 1.

Choices of FTAs and Conflict Styles

FTA 1	Make implicit request	Request to be an additional distributor	Request to replace the original distributor
FTA 2	Not mention CC	Mention CC with no criticism	Mention and criticize CC
FTA 3	Make no comparison between SC and CC	Compare with positive comments	Compare with negative comments of CC



Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) 15 positive politeness strategies (p. 101-129) and 10 negative strategies (p. 129-211), we established a coding scheme that consists of 9 positive politeness and 8 negative politeness based on the recursive analysis of the present corpus of requests. Identifications of the politeness strategies were based not just on lexical and syntactic features, but also on semantic features and rhetorical moves. A clause could be double or even triple coded when it corresponds with more than one category.

The 12 pre-writing group discussions were transcribed and later translated into English if the original medium language was Chinese or mixed Chinese-English. The analysis of the discussions was focused on how the students negotiated the way they would manage face and conflict in their writing, how they perceive the influences of culture, and how they positioned themselves in relation to the audience. The analysis of both the group discussions and reflective essays followed the principles of submission, emergence, and personal knowledge (Holliday, 2007, 2010a). Through a process of reading and re-reading the data, we allowed the themes to emerge by themselves, and the use of Nvivo enabled us to link the three data sets to perform a triangulation, and to look into the intricacies of cultural identity construction via examining the inconsistencies among the data in the three sets. Furthermore, we examined our own acts in designing the research and research-related instructions and how that may influence the students' cultural behavior reflected in this study.

Findings

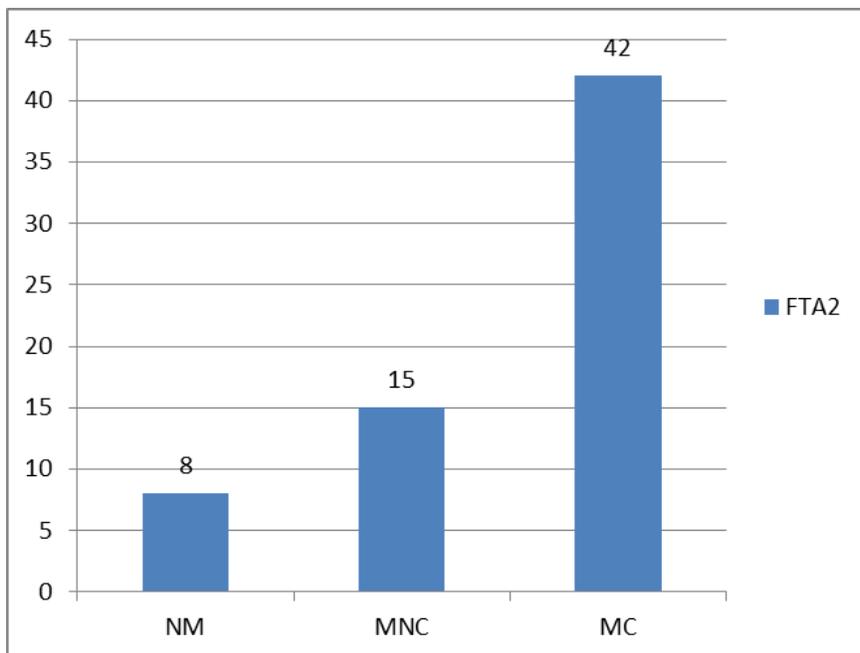
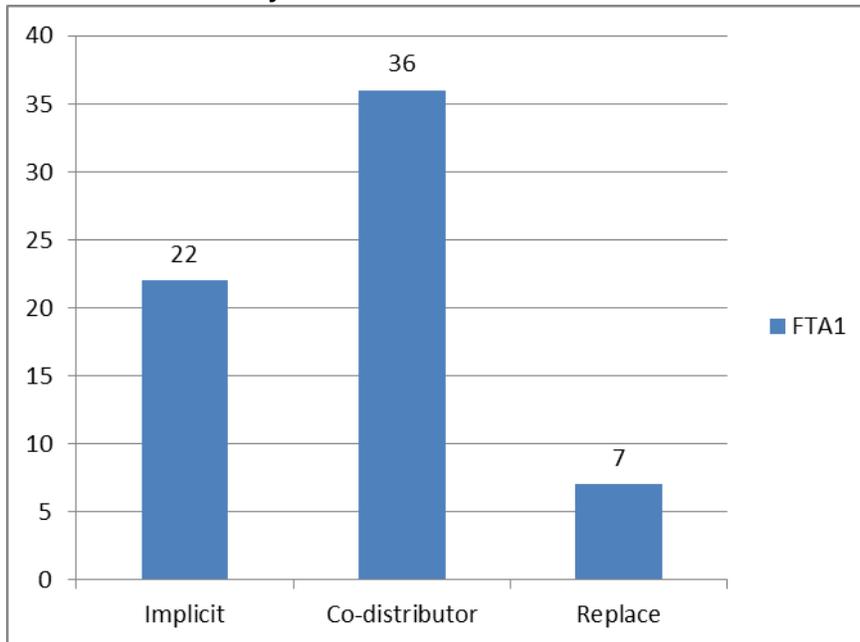
Conflict Styles and Politeness Strategies

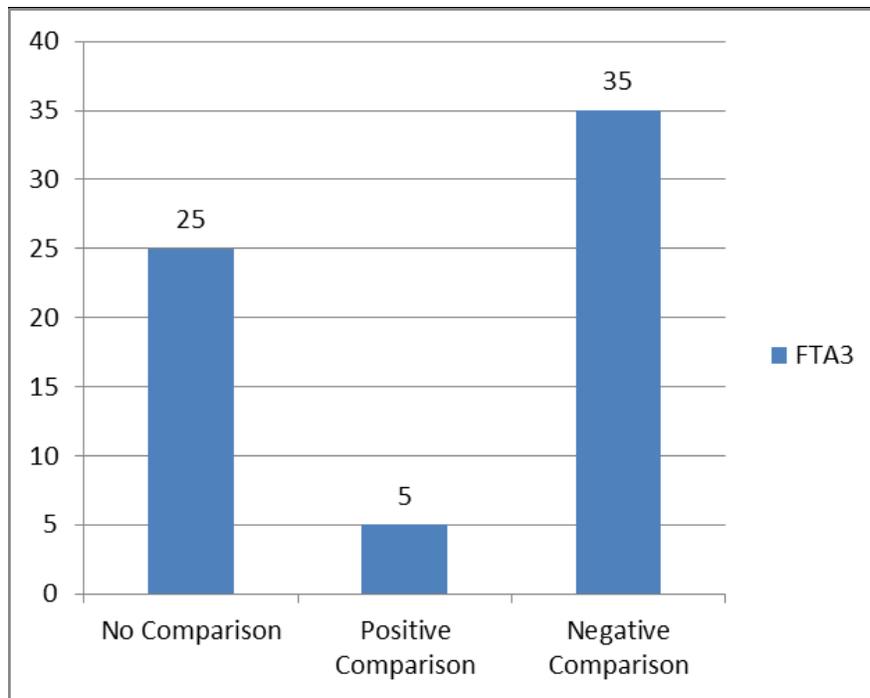
The analysis shows that the students exhibited more *dominating/competing* and *compromising/integrating* conflict styles than *avoiding* style. As can be seen in Figure 2, in terms of FTA 1, 55 percent of the students (36 out of 65) requested to be an additional local distributor, which is a *compromising/integrating* conflict behavior as it shows an intention to reach a midpoint agreement and to address the concern for both the self and the target audience/company (TC). Eleven percent of the students chose the more aggressive *dominating/competing* style aiming to replace the existing distributor while 34 percent of the students chose the *avoiding* strategy to leave the decision-making to the TC instead.

In terms of FTA 2, two thirds of the students (n=42) pinpointed the weaknesses or the problems that CC has, among whom two students did so baldly on record with no redressive politeness strategies. Below is an example in which the writer seems to be gloating over CC's recent mishaps:

Recently I've heard that there are job hoppers including top salesperson who have left Fortune Audio Co. Ltd. for other companies and *I would feel quite painful if that happens to my company as well*. But *the fact* is that talents always have their choices. (S10)

Figure 2.
Chinese Students' Conflict Behaviors





Given that only 23 percent of the students chose to withhold criticisms of CC, and 12 percent chose not to mention CC at all in their request, apparently the *dominating/competing* style is preferred in managing this most sensitive FTA. In terms of FTA 3, 54 percent of the students chose to compare SC and CC so as to foreground the advantages of SC, while only eight percent compared SC and CC to suggest the ways in which they can complement each other in local distribution with different business focus, and 38 percent chose not to conduct the comparison. The finding seems quite contrary to the previous research which suggested that individuals from HC cultures are more inclined to maintain harmony and avoid criticism (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Trompenaars, 1994) and that they in many cases do not prefer direct comparison as a persuasive means, as those from LC cultures often do (Shao, Bao & Gray, 2004).

In fact, in addition to the three potential FTAs expected by the researchers, 26 students made an attempt to indicate the niche in the TC's local business so as to convince TC that a new distributor is needed, which obviously is also a daring and aggressive FTA:

ABC entered China ten years ago, even before the founding of Hampton Corp. However, as a customer of loyalty, to be honest, *it's quite inconvenient for me to find ABC products from the market, simply because Fortune Audio is the only place that ABC products are accessible. During an expansion era of China market, ABC may lag behind because of its narrow and exclusive distribution channel in China. For a further development leap of ABC in China, a more competent distributor is the key in need.* (S45)

While the Chinese students tended to face conflicts upfront using the aggressive *dominating/competing* style, they however attempted to redress the FTAs by using positive and negative politeness strategies. As the analysis reveals, all students used positive politeness, whereas 58 students (89%) used negative politeness. The use of positive politeness (4.6 strategies per request on average) outweighed the use of negative politeness (1.9 strategies per request). The positive politeness, *describing SC's strengths,*

appeared in all requests and served to redress the FTA by explaining why and in what way SC can help TC to develop the local market, i.e., the reasonableness of the FTA (the request), and by implying “I can help you” to intensify interest to the reader. *Complimenting the TC and/or CC* is the second most frequently used positive politeness that appeared in 60 requests (92%); 25 students chose not only to pay a tribute to the TC, but also speak well of the CC as the *pre-disclosure* (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 79) to the criticism or indication of a niche, as can be seen in the following example:

I know that you have been enjoying friendly and cooperative relationship with your exclusive distributor, Fortune Audio Co., Ltd, which is a prestigious and reliable company. But China's market is so big and there are many potential market opportunities that have not been fully explored. For the sake of your company, we will spare no efforts to work together with Fortune Audio Co., Ltd to help you enlarge your business profit in China and make your products be enjoyed by billions of Chinese people (S56).

In this example, we can also identify the strategy of *showing understanding* (used in 44 requests), in the sentence beginning with “*I know that...*”. It redressed the FTA by indicating that the writer was aware that the request may put TC in an awkward position with their current distributor and thus understood the reader's concern. The last sentence which goes, “*For the sake of your company, we will spare no efforts to...*”, illustrates quite well the strategy of *emphasizing TC's benefits*. The strategy was used in 59 requests, serving to attend to the reader's interests/needs and assure reciprocity.

Small talk appeared at the beginning of 60 requests. It softened the request by talking for a while about unrelated topics such as previous meet. *Offer/promise* (25 requests) by contrast, was usually used near the end of the request; by giving some extra offers such as inviting the reader to visit SC, the writer indicates the intention to cooperate with the reader. Other positive politeness identified in the corpus include *explicit expression of harmony* (17 requests), *be optimistic* (17 requests), and *claiming common ground* (10 requests). By expressing the wish for harmony and by assuming that the reader will cooperate because of shared interest, goals and values, these strategies helped to bring closer the relationship with the reader.

Negative politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is the most elaborate and conventionalized set of linguistic strategies for FTA redress in western culture. However, with only 1.9 strategies per request, it was much less used than positive politeness in the present corpus. *Hedging* was the most frequently used negative politeness that appeared in 58 requests, with about 2.6 hedges per request. The top eight hedges identified in this corpus are *if*-clause (50 occurrences), modal verbs including *may* (27 occurrences), *could* (22), *would* (11), *might* (7), personal attribution such as *I/we believe* (15), *I/we hope* (14), *I'm afraid* (4). Other negative politeness strategies identified were *give deference* (18 requests), *other attribution* (10 requests), *show sincerity* (9 requests), *euphemism* (8 requests), *expressing indebtedness* (7 requests), *show sympathy*, and *be pessimistic* (5 requests). Below are some examples:

There seem (1) to be some problems of the distribution of your products in China based on the analysis of the feedback (2) we get from customers (S22). (1: Hedging; 2: other attribution)

However, your present distributor is now facing with some *big changes* (1) in human resources and its president, Mr. Wong, is *advancing in age* (2). *I'm afraid* (3) such changes *may* (4) affect your company's potential development (S7). (1, 2: euphemism; 3, 4: hedging)

Therefore, *if possible* (1), *we would appreciate it* (2) *if* (3) *you could* (4) change this policy since our cooperation *will also be a huge asset for ABC* and *we'll have win-win cooperation* (5) (S4).
(1, 3, 4: hedging; 2: expressing indebtedness; 5: positive politeness-emphasizing TC's benefits)

To summarize, the textual analysis shows that on one hand, the Chinese students, instead of opting for high-context, avoidance strategies in managing conflict, took on the aggressive and competing conflict style which is traditionally believed to be preferred by so-called individualists; on the other hand, they exhibited high concern for *other face* in their frequent use of politeness strategies, especially positive politeness, which fits in the traditional descriptions of Asian culture. The inconsistencies between the face orientation and conflict style could suggest that the Chinese students may have engaged in acts of "crossing" (Rampton, 2005) and developed interculturality that enabled them to draw upon the cultural and discursive practices of both individualistic and collectivist cultures and shift freely between them. The analysis of the pre-writing group discussions and reflective essays however complicates the picture.

"Business Is Business"—Construction of a Pragmatic, Business-Oriented Identity

The analysis of the pre-writing group discussions reveals that every group spent about two thirds of their time discussing the management of the three potential FTAs, and all groups were strikingly similar in taking a pragmatic, business-oriented approach. In the following episode¹ quoted from Group 3's discussion for example, the students touched upon whether to speak of the rival company's problems or not and how. They recognized the face issue and also business networking practices, vacillating between whether to be "conservative or aggressive". S13 suggested that they resort to figures and facts to soften the criticism, whereas S14 favored a straightforward criticism arguing "business is business". By relating her intern experience in a Chinese furniture company, she persuaded her peers that focusing on profits and the well-being of the business instead of face is the practice in the business world. It turned out that her peers accepted her view as all the group members adopted the *dominating* conflict style in their writing.

Episode 1

S12: *First, chitchat and make the proposal straightforwardly, then what?*

S15: *Then, praise ABC's products and speak of the rival company's weaknesses in a euphemistic way.*

S12: *Should we speak of the rival company's weaknesses at the very beginning? Isn't a little direct?*

S14: *According to foreign tradition, business is business. Mr. Wong is old, and his top salespersons are leaving the company. Even there is a close personal relationship, no competent staff works for him now.*

S15: *Actually, there can be two choices, conservative or aggressive?*

S13: *I think it would be better if we could point out the rival company's problems in numbers and figures. Foreigners like facts and figures. They're losing their salespeople...this must have influenced their sales and profits, while at the same time our company is young and vibrant, and we have increasing turnovers every year. Let's use figures to make the point so that we don't need to speak ill directly of the rival company.*

S14: *I think we don't need to be too modest to lower our status. In fact, when I worked as an intern in a furniture company, I experienced a similar situation as described in this case scenario. This foreign furniture company already has an exclusive agent in China, but our company wanted to do business with them. I happened to have read the request email. They expressed everything straightforwardly, that the present distributor didn't make a good performance in the Beijing market, and that they can explore more market potential as their company enjoys a better reputation. They just put everything on the table. Maybe we thought too much?*

As we can see, through collaborated talk, the group negotiated and co-constructed an aggressive and business-oriented cultural identity. However, not just the groups that used a *dominating* style in the requests favored a business-oriented approach. The identification with the profit-oriented value can be seen in most groups' discussions in such expressions as "Profits are more important than a close personal relationship" (G6) or "It is a priority to make money and make a profit in the business world" (G4). G10, in general, adopted a compromising/integrating style in their requests, and mocked themselves in the discussion that "We Chinese always seek a middle ground (我们中国人好中庸哦)". Yet the reason for them to choose this middle ground was no *other-face* concern but the feasibility of the proposal, as can be seen in Episode 2.

Episode 2

S51: *We should first propose to be the additional distributor and then as time goes on, if our company outcompetes the present distributor, we will naturally be promoted as the exclusive distributor.*

S49: *That...that will do. We...*

S52: *Just now she mentioned that Mr. Wong has a close relationship with the CEO of ABC.*

S51: *Exactly! That's why ABC will not kick it out.*

S52: *So it is **not realistic** that you propose to kick out the present exclusive distributor.*

S51: *Yes, I think so, too. They're old friends.*

S49: *But no matter how close they are, I think profits always count most.*

S53: *Oh, yes.*

S49: *We definitely should take this point as the most, most...*

S50: *We should stress profits and benefits.*

In the reflective essays, the students continued to consolidate this identification with business-oriented cultural values. Instead of focusing on relationships and achieving harmony, they believed that to attack the CC is a strategic move to "dismantle the cooperation between my rival and ABC Company" (S17), that it would be "a strategic loss" if the problems of CC were not discussed because TC may not know the information (S31), that it is right for "an honest man" to "tell the truth" (S7), and that "businessmen are always after profits" (S10). Their use of politeness strategies are, in many cases, for utilitarian reasons rather than to address the other-face; as in the following reflection, the student said that she was simply "to play the 'nice' card":

The strategy I adopted in constructing this article is to play the 'nice' card without sacrificing any effort to promote ourselves and to win the contract. For example, words such as 'if possible', 'appreciate' and 'convenience' were used for multiple times in this article (S6).

Cultural Freezing, Cultural Accommodation and Cultural Inferiority

If we take a look at Episode 1 again, we can see that S13 and S14 justified their approach by resorting to "foreigners'" preferences: "According to foreign tradition, business is business"; "Foreigners like facts and figures". This intent of accommodation—using "foreigners" cultural preferences as the rationale for their writing choices—was clearly conveyed not only in group discussions, but also in reflective essays; below is an apt example:

Obviously I was trying very hard to adapt to the English culture when I was writing. I did that because I have to. I have to always consider my reader. Since my reader is one from the English

culture, then I've got to play this culture card to narrow the gap of understanding, and thus get my point across to him (S17).

If we consider it positively, these acts of accommodation may have revealed that the students are interculturally sensitive and competent, or in Friedman, Liu, Chi, Hong, and Sung (2012) term, high in *bicultural identity integration*. They purposely analyzed their reader and when they noticed the cultural icons presented in the case scenario, they strategically attempted to respond in a more culturally typical way and construct a culturally appropriate identity in front of their reader.

Nevertheless, cultural accommodation often comes in tandem with cultural freezing and cultural inferiority. To read through the students' explanations of why they wrote the requests the way they were, we can see that most students not only devalued their own culture, but also categorically equated bad writing to "Chinese writing pattern" and good writing to "English writing pattern". In the following excerpts, for example, the students described Chinese writing as *tortuous, very inefficient, me-attitude, polite but meaningless, rigid and tedious, and wordy* whereas English writing was described as *clear, straightforward, pleasing and simple, and you-oriented*. They therefore expressed the intent to dissociate themselves from the Chinese culture in such expressions as "drag myself out of" (S24), "get rid of" (S46), "try not to be affected by" (S64), and the like.

*Chinese people are used to expressing themselves in a **tortuous** way which is **very inefficient**, particularly when talking about a sensitive issue. So I tried to adapt to the western style to make my idea **clear** to them (the reader) (S39).*

*Chinese culture emphasizes a '**me-attitude**' when it comes to business writing while the English culture values '**you-attitude**'. I used this strategy (you-attitude) when I wrote the email (S9).*

*Since the English culture seems to be **more straightforward**, I tried to avoid using too many **polite but meaningless** words, and stated my purpose explicitly (S11).*

*I think the English way of writing is **simple and clear**--there would be less misinterpretation while the Chinese writing **makes me think hard** (S23).*

*I tried hard to **drag myself out of** the traditional Chinese writing pattern. Chinese people prefer to illustrate something by following the fixed pattern, which includes introduction, development, transition and closure. Nonetheless, western people may not [be] accustom[ed] to **this rigid and tedious writing style**. Considering the English background of the reader and the persuasive aim of this email, I choose to make my writing **more pleasing and simple** (S56).*

*After all, it is an e-mail for an English reader. I tried not to be **wordy**, put forward my suggestion **clearly and directly**. But still, I **cannot get rid of** the Chinese traditional writing pattern (S61).*

*I tried not to be **affected** by the Chinese writing pattern. Instead, I **made my best shot to keep it from me** and get accustomed to authentic English writing pattern, although I still haven't made it (S36).*

This binary opposition constructed in the students' reflections seems to suggest that the students were not only submissive to the dominant, essentialized cultural description, but also complicit in solidifying it, by simplifying the oppositions and indexing them with high versus low value scales (Canagarajah, 2013).

The students' superficial and inadequate understanding of their own culture and discursive practices, as can be seen from the above excerpts, could partly account for this act of self-marginalization. It is also possible that when English language education is often closely integrated with the instillation of essentialized Anglophone culture, the students' perception of their inferior language competence could be confused with, or translated into, a low regard for their own language and culture.

Trapped in Their Stereotypical Cultural Imaginations

As mentioned earlier, every group devoted extensive time to the discussion of the three potential FTAs, and they wavered over whether to choose a dominating or avoiding style. They discussed the same issues over and over again, expecting to get confirmation from each other, in the process of which one student can have a different positioning in different rounds of discussion. Take S33 in G7 for example; although her request exhibited a clear *dominating* style with criticisms of CC and direct comparison of SC and CC, her inner vacillation was quite clearly revealed in the group discussion. She first proposed to *"talk about something negative about the former distributor"*. *"You have to understand that the personal relationship with the former distributor will not stop him (TC) from expanding in China. You know, business is business,"* she argued. Then in the second round of discussion, she began to feel *"worried that pointing out the weaknesses of the current distributor will upset the boss of ABC because they have a personal relationship...close relationship"*. She, therefore, suggested not doing the comparison. However in the third round of discussion, she began to question her earlier decision again—*"you know, because **Chinese people** always tend to explore [the] personal relationship with another person while they are doing business, but I do not know **if it works in western business**"*. In the fourth round, she therefore declared, *"I will point out that you and Mr. Wong have a close relationship. But the current distributor has some weaknesses. I hope that this will not cloud your vision as a great businessman"*. She, however, agreed with her teammates to convey the criticisms *"in a gentle way to avoid confrontation or emotional upset"*.

This kind of vacillation, identified in the discussions of other groups as well, was not simply a vacillation between two pragmatic or business choices. The students brought in the issue of culture, and their struggling between identifications with two different cultural traditions:

*When I wrote the letter, I felt like I **was struggling** between Chinese culture of indirect expression and Western culture of direct expression. I analyzed the weakness of my rival company in an indirect way, and pointed out our advantages in a direct manner. I think I did try to adapt to the western culture. Then I ended up meeting about half way between Chinese culture and western culture (S45).*

The students seemed to be convinced of the real existence of these two clearly delineated cultural traditions. Consequently they felt confused when the sample request composed by the U.S. student did not fit in their cultural imagination:

*I was surprised when you (the instructor) showed us the article written by a U.S. student. He didn't mention the rival company as we did, which I **didn't quite understand** because "golden mean", or "zhong yong", the core value of Chinese culture, has nurtured generations of implicit Chinese people. In comparison, geographical conditions have made sure the basis of western culture is oceanic culture, which is aggressive compared with that of China. Grown up in this culture, the U.S. student **was supposed to** compare the two companies and even enumerate the demerits of the rival. (S64)*

Some students have thus begun to question whether their previous conceptions of two general cultural traditions conform to the real situation in business communication. Some students began to explore the cultural similarities and whether other factors, such as the communicative purpose or genre, also play an important role in how the message should be structured:

*After reading the best writing (the sample request written by the U.S. student), I now find my straightforward writing too abrupt and annoying, without arousing the reader's interest. I think probably we focus too much on English writing habit. Also, we **may have misunderstood** the way native writers deliver themselves, **especially in specific genres like business letters** (S55).*

Conclusion

The present study examines 65 Chinese university students' three stages of cultural acts in a simulated persuasive writing task. The findings revealed the multiple layers of cultural identities in that the students constructed, co-constructed, and negotiated in the process.

The first layer of the analysis shows the business-oriented identity, featured by a preference for *dominating* and *integrating* conflict styles coupled with the pragmatically oriented politeness strategies. However, the analysis of the group discussions and reflective essays—the triangulation of the data—enables us to see a more complex picture of cultural identity construction. If the students discursively constructed in the persuasive requests an aggressive and assertive cultural identity, then in group discussions and reflective essays they exhibited a seemingly contradictory aspect of identity—unconfident and self-abased, submissive to and even complicit in the categorical and stereotypical cultural descriptions. The analysis suggested that the students exerted their agency in an attempt to claim ownership of Anglophone discourse in writing requests like those students in Phan's (2009) and Grimshaw's (2010) studies; yet they were unable to resist or undo the cultural stereotypes that bring them the feeling of being culturally inferior. Although some students began to question their essentialized cultural understandings after the writing task, this kind of reflexivity was only found in a small number of students.

Pedagogical Implications and Future Research

Although it is beyond the scope of the study to examine what cultural realities enabled or constrained the students' agency in their construction and negotiation of cultural identities, the findings of this study alert our attention to the problems in classrooms of intercultural communication which have been focusing on teaching essentialized knowledge of cultures (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004), and have in many ways perpetuated the implicit culture of elitism and inferiority (Rubdy, 2009).

Since we adopt a postmodern, self-introspective approach in this study, when we noticed the apparent cultural inferiority among the participants, we reexamined our research steps to see if we, in some way, induced the students' sense of cultural inferiority. As we reflect, in our post-writing instruction on how to write persuasive requests, we used a native-English-speaking student's written work as a good example, which, as we now realize, may have perpetuated the parochial exclusiveness of native-speaker norms and implicitly constructed the students as the culturally problematic "non-native speaker" Other (Holliday, 2005). A number of students later compared their own writing to the native-speaker writing example in their reflections, and the sense of cultural inferiority could be their unconscious submission to the native-speaker psyche implicated in the teacher's instruction.

Our findings and reflections could provide useful insights for instruction in intercultural communication. First, instead of teaching the stereotypes of cultures, we contend that instructors should encourage students to understand the complexity of culture by observing and/or engaging in authentic or simulated intercultural communicative events. Second, we suggest that instructors reflect upon their teaching practice regularly to see if they have unintentionally implied the superior authority of native-speaker norms and devalued local culture and traditions. Instead of letting students blindly assimilate cultural forms of Anglophone communities, we argue, to echo Rubdy (2009), that instructors should instill the concept of difference and diversity, encourage students to integrate strategically other cultural forms while maintaining their own. More importantly, students should be encouraged to jump out of the essentialized cultural frames and draw upon communicative strategies that are suitable for a particular communicative event or a genre.

We believe that our study has contributed to the research on cultural identity in several aspects. In terms of research methods, we have used authentic cultural acts as data (Young & Sercombe, 2010) instead of simply relying on self-reports (Ting-Toomey, 2005), integrating linguistic analysis with other qualitative inquiries, which helps to reveal the complex nature of cultural identification and negotiation. The study has also corroborated Collier's (2005) argument that while we recognize the work of agency, it might be restrained by various factors, such as the culture of elitism and inferiority in many periphery education system. However, we recognize that the writing task was based on a simulated case with no real interactions. It would be interesting to extend the study by involving an authentic native-English reader, for example, a group of US students personating the TC's CEO. In that case, the unequal native versus non-native relationship could be foregrounded as in Liu's (2011) study, and it would be interesting to examine whether or not US students would similarly accommodate the Chinese culture and to what extent Chinese students would exert agency when facing direct intercultural conflicts and unequal socio-cultural relationship.

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Appendix 1: Case Scenario

Your company is a very aggressive distributor specializing in high quality audio equipment, such as stereo speakers and amplifiers. You have 12 branches. In order to expand further, your company has decided to approach ABC, a world-famous British speaker manufacturer, about the possibility of your company importing their products into China. If your company could import the ABC products, you could easily double or even triple your sales turnover in a year.

However, there is a problem. ABC has a sole and exclusive distributor in China, which means that your company is not able to sell ABC products. If your company wants to sell ABC products, you will have to persuade ABC to change its policy of selling through an exclusive distributor. This means that ABC would replace its present distributor with your company or discontinue the exclusive distributor policy by adding your company as an additional distributor. The present sole and exclusive distributor, Fortune

Audio Co., Ltd. is an old, reputable, and family-owned company. The company is not as active as before. The company president, Mr. Wong, is advancing in age and several employees including their top salesperson have recently left the company. You however know that there is a close personal relationship between Mr. Wong and the CEO of ABC.

Your company was established in 2005. Your major shareholders include one of the top five trading companies in China, two leading local investment banks, and a dozen local big business companies. Your sales turnover in the past five years has been RMB 1.0 Billion, RMB 1.8B, RMB 3.5B, RMB 5.0B, and RMB 9.0B. Your company presently is the sole and exclusive distributor for several major high-quality, famous, and expensive brands of home stereo products.

Your task:

With the above data write an email to Mr. Alvin Brown, Executive Director, International Sales Division, ABC Corporation. You met him at a reception for ABC's new product exhibition six months ago at the Island Shangri-la.

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