

**ETHNOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AFFECTING
CONCEPTS OF CHINESE
BUSINESS COMMUNICATION**

Working Paper #632

Herbert W. Hildebrandt
University of Michigan

FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

None of this material is to be quoted or
reproduced without the expressed permission
of the Division of Research

Copyright 1990
University of Michigan
School of Business Administration
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234

Abstract: Ethnographic influences as political structures, governmental hierarchies, and educational emphases produce tenacious forces in China's society. Stemming from those forces is a lessened interest in and support for concepts understood as oral and written business communication in the West. Six assertions, as measured via data from 1,005 Chinese managers, give miniscule endorsement to training in business communication.

As business schools, indeed whole universities, begin to focus on internationalizing curriculums, research in that area proliferates. Intercultural communication investigations are no less a part of that focus. A reoccurring theme is: what impact do various ethnographic variables have on individuals or institutions within a society? Our view is on the individual within the organization; specifically, some influences in China affecting managerial perceptions of the value of business communication.

To achieve that goal, the paper has three divisions: background to the data base collected just prior to June 1989, and used in our analysis; establishing a conceptual basis for understanding the cultural context in which Chinese managers communicate; and six assertions with suggested ethnographic underpinnings for Chinese managerial evaluation of communication in their world of work.

Background

In dealing with mainland China as an Asian socialist country there are research impediments absent in most western societies. There is the obvious problem of language, both getting an instrument translated into Chinese and in turn retranslating responses into English, and comparable computer programs. There are the difficulties in making contacts with potential respondents, ensuring strict privacy, and omitting references to individuals and offices which worked on collecting the data. In short, those difficulties were lessened via personal visits and numerous fax, letter, and phone communications, resulting in a data base of 1,005 Chinese managers, completed just prior to the Tiananmen Square incidents of June 1989.

An enlarged questionnaire was constructed (back-translated) by colleagues in China and the U.S., similar to a Mandarin questionnaire used in 1987 in China and other Asian and Middle East countries (Hildebrandt, Liu, 1988, 1989). Chinese scholars in the U.S. and China made numerous meticulous word changes, ensuring avoidance of sensitive issues and protecting anonymity.

While the investigation had six major sections totalling 85 questions (Career paths, Education, Sociological patterns, Current Economic Reforms, Recommended changes in Economic Reform, and Lifestyle factors), interspersed throughout were sections focusing on communication patterns, methods, systems and communication methods used in the enterprise.¹ Subsequently we will merge some of the ethnographic characteristics with communication attitudes and methods.

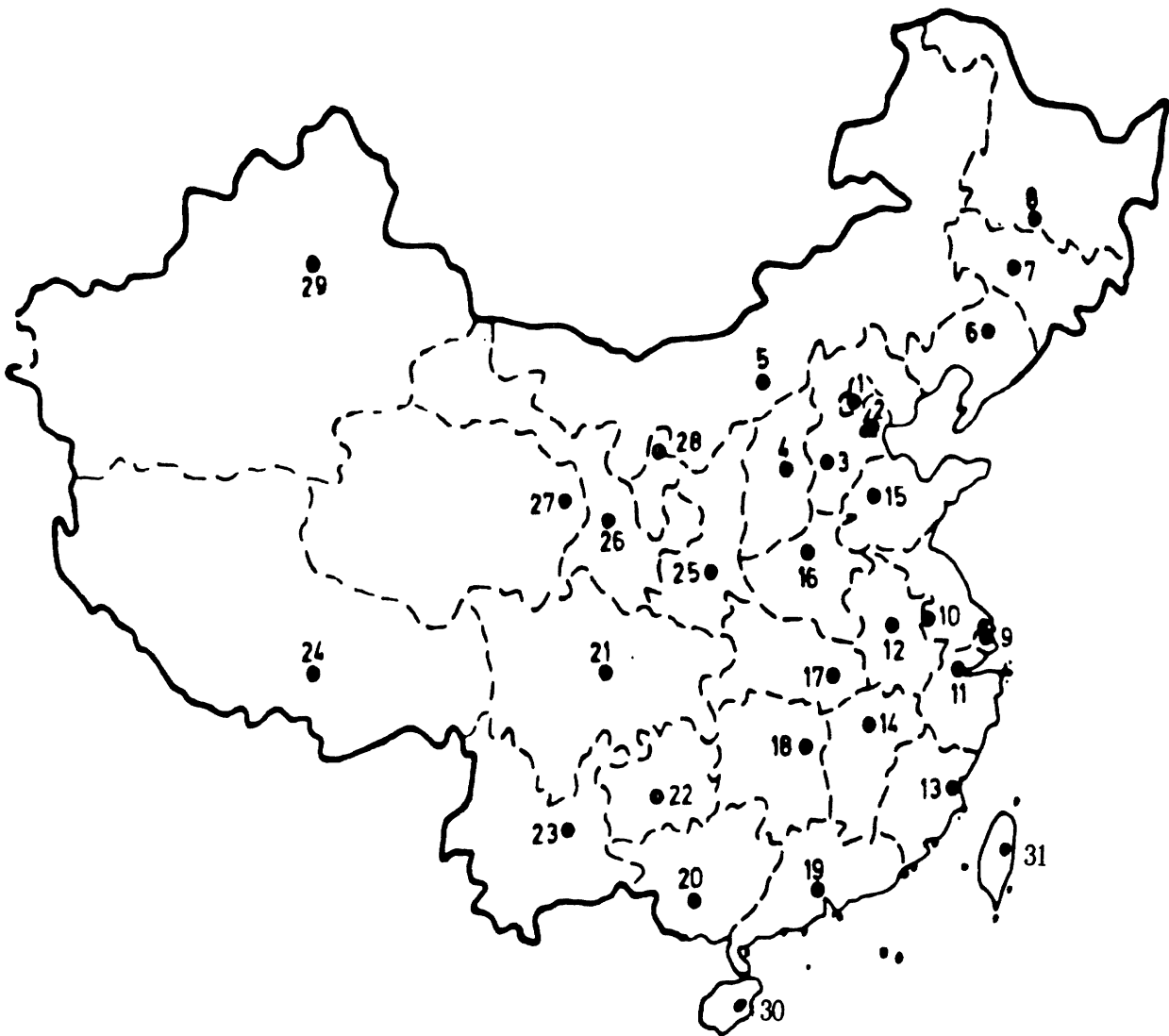
Of the 1,005 managers, 819 were male, 186 female. In order to get a perspective of both China and the fortunately wide geographic spread of the managers involved in this study, Figure I lists the 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, and 3 municipalities, the basis for the political and party structure of China. Taiwan, considered a province of mainland China is not represented, nor is the autonomous region of Tibet.²

Over 17 different industries are represented, the largest (N=185) from the area of non-electrical machinery, with the next largest from textiles (N=139); light industry (N=126); miscellaneous (N=121); and metallurgical (N=43). The smallest number of managers came from the industrial area of petroleum (N=8).

Conceptual Cultural Variables

Our approach is ethnological, that is, in addition to the above generic background information of managers impacted by our analysis, the study depends on key categories as material culture, economic, social, political, language, and sociological patterns to position the Chinese manager as a business communicator within a culture. Our

Figure I Provinces, Autonomous Regions, and Municipalities



	N	%		N	%
Provinces			Provinces		
3. Hebei	58	5.7	17. Hubei	15	1.5
4. Shanxi	15	1.5	18. Hunan	9	.9
6. Jilin	15	1.5	19. Guangdong	15	1.5
7. Liaoning	34	3.3	21. Sichuan	49	4.8
8. Heilongjiang	25	2.5	22. Guizhou	8	.8
10. Jiangsu	33	3.3	23. Yunnan	5	.5
11. Zhejiang	6	.6	25. Shaanxi	10	1.0
12. Anhui	11	1.1	26. Gansu	9	.9
13. Fujian	26	2.6	27. Qinghai	8	.8
14. Jinagxi	11	1.1	30. Hainan	3	.3
15. Shandong	181	17.8	31. Taiwan	--	--
16. Henan	87	8.6			
Municipalities			Autonomous Regions		
1. Beijing	350	34.5	5. Inner Mongolia	5	.5
2. Tianjin	5	.5	20. Guangxi	4	.4
9. Shanghai	12	1.2	24. Tibet	--	--
			28. Ningxia	2	.2
			29. Xinjiang	4	.4

emphasis is more on the political, economic, and educational as primary forces affecting communication behavior.

As the term business communication is difficult to define, the term "culture" is just as difficult, one author offering at least 164 definitions (Krober and Kluckhohn, 1952). We suggest that culture is the sum of behavioral characteristics of a group learned through interactions with others of that group. Thus, the business communication of Chinese managers--and other cultures for that matter--occurs within the confines of learned societal behaviors. An obvious caveat is that although one is part of a society, individual exceptions are consistently present.

Figure II suggests a culture in isolation, that is, each of its members has two sets of values: first, a core set of certain accepted, recognized, understood, human processes. Thus inanimate objects--and animate for that matter--have names, recognized through a common language by persons within that culture; body functions are virtually identical; these and many other core qualities make up the behavioral characteristics of that group of people.

Second, a culture has a host of other cultural variables, as indicated by the enlarged petal above the core values. In other words, the central core is the basic human commonalty; how politics, economics, education, societal control, communication patterns, and others operate are the cultural variables beyond self.

Figure III notes the interrelationships between four cultures. Thus cultures one through four have the usual common essence regardless of cultural differences (love of children, home, family) and a varying degrees of overlapping traits. In cultures one (Germany), two (Britain), and three (U.S.) most would wear shirts, ties, and suits; use telephones when communicating; address one another formally; understand the principles of logical organization in a proposal; and so on. In other words, the significant cultural

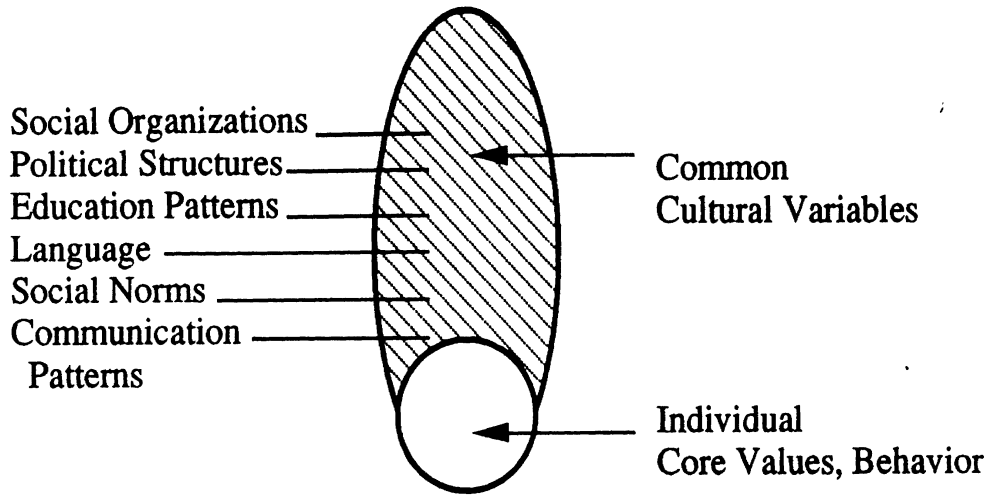


Figure II. Common Core and Cultural Values For Single Cultures

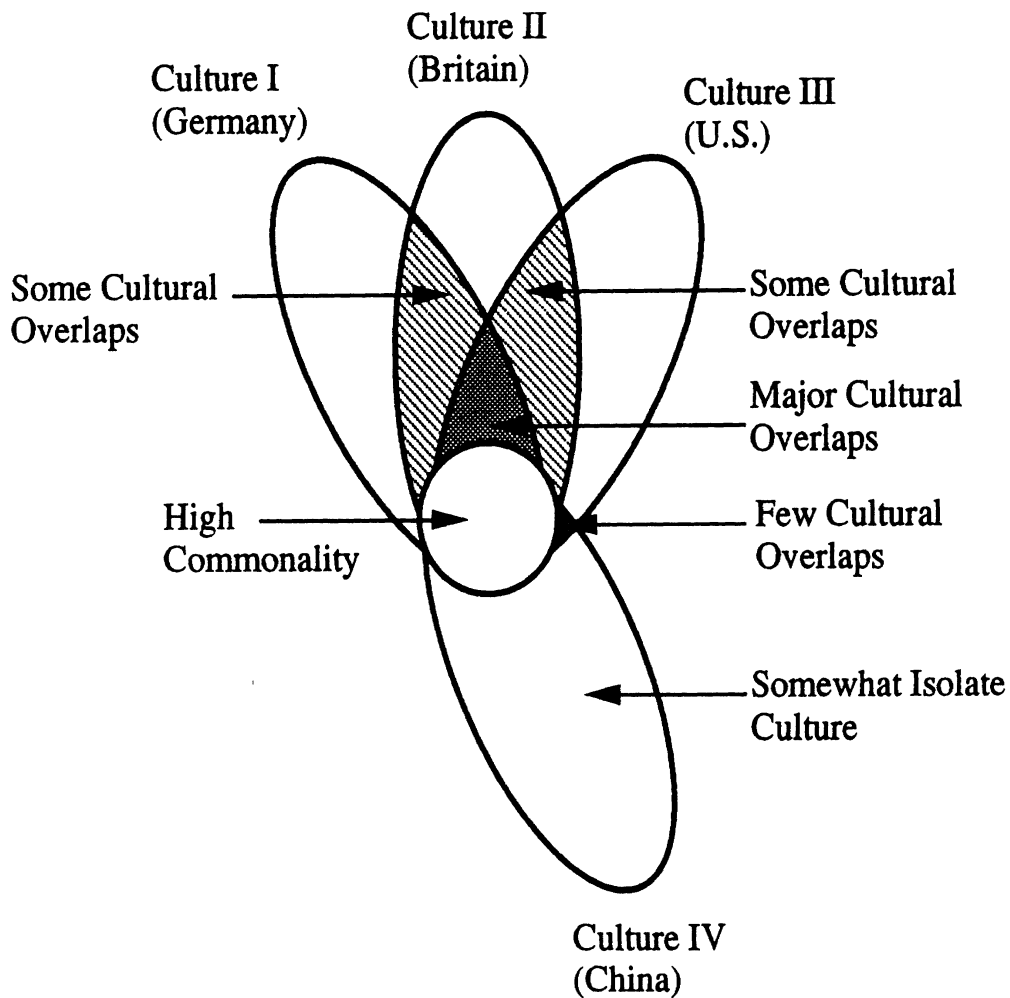


Figure III. Cultural Similarity/Dissimilarity Among Four Cultures

overlap permits certain cultures, and individuals within each culture, to more easily communicate within and without their culture. There is a high degree of comfort.

All three of the above cultures have minimal cultural overlap with number four, China. Certainly there is the usual core of communality between the cultures, but the degree of overlap beyond that core is minimal. Each country's ethnographic differences have a separate cultural identity, not entirely of each individual's making, but learned, imitated, and practiced in their country's environment. As one moves toward the apex of each petal, from a core of communality, each culture begins to change, some more than others. Why? Tradition plays a part, as does teaching, social interactions, attitudes, pressures brought on the culture beyond interpersonal relationships. Where the four petals minimally overlap (e.g. more Western dress; banking systems; joint ventures; written contracts) commonality exists.

Thus, beyond the core are many differences between nations and groups: religions are different, as are economic systems, political organizations, social control, material culture, language, different modes of communication, concepts of the value of education, and communication's role in that education. So variant are some additional behaviors that acceptance by other cultures is virtually impossible. What may be significant in one culture is insignificant in another; what in the U.S. is important may be trivial in China.

Realistically, there could be petals for each country in the world, each with common core values, each with their own peculiarities. Some countries would have extensive overlapping while others would have little. Inevitably there will arise numerous differences between Chinese and U.S. communication and social patterns, so many, that all phases of relationships, understandings, including values of either oral or written communication, will be impacted.

To complicate the matter further, within each country are individuals. Within the U.S., for instance--with its high degree of social, political, and economic independence--are individuals, each capable of an intensity of belief different from his or her neighbor. Witness the strident voices in our political parties, which although recognizing central principles of democracy still have platform planks opposite one another. Extend that same principle of opportunity for separateness to the Chinese culture and inexorable points of view arise:

U.S. Culture	Possible Chinese Alternatives
--Individuals may influence the future	--Life is under firm control of the State and political parties
--First names come first	--Last names more important than first names
--Get to the point quickly	--Get to know the person before business is transacted
--Consensus decision making	--Senior member of the team influences the decision
--Use telephones, computers, faxes to communicate	--Employ face-to-face communication
--Stress communication, as part of an open society	--Be more passive, listen to dictates of others
--Vote directly for leadership of the country	--Have little voice in leadership selection

In short, the preceding cultural analysis suggests that ethnographic systems impact relations between China and the U.S., which in turn affect communication, in business and in one's personal life. It is to these communication differences, based on an ethnographic foundation, that we shall now turn.

Chinese Managers' Perceptions of Communication

Assessment of communication courses

Chinese managers give little support to courses in oral or written business communication.

In light of the preceding discussion, that assertion may not sound so startling to U.S. managers and communication practitioners. Using the Likert scale of 1-very

important to 5-very unimportant, Chinese managers, of both genders, give minimal support to communication and its importance in furthering one's career in business. That is in vivid contrast to U.S. managers and executives, and other Asians. (Hildebrandt, Miller, Edington, 1987; Hildebrandt, Edington, 1987) Oral and written communication, for Chinese managers, ranks at the absolute bottom of 14 courses which they would take to better prepare them for a career in Chinese business, at means of 2.58 and 2.60, respectively, dead last. Chinese managers give their nods to accounting as most important (mean 1.67) followed by human resource management (1.82); and production operations (2.0), for the top three courses.

There is a correlation between education and the recommendation that oral communication courses be taken to improve one's position within industry.

None of the managers holding graduate degrees feel oral communication is very unimportant. Moreover, 11.29% of them feel it is very important, and 37.10% feel it is important, for the highest ranking of any educational category.

Written business communication courses are supported more highly by managers possessing less than a high school degree.

Although the number of managers with less than a high school education is small (N=14), 21.43% of them indicate that written business communication is important to succeed in Chinese enterprises. Furthermore, none of them feel it is unimportant or very unimportant.

Females give slightly higher support to oral communication courses than their male counterparts. Both, about equally, support courses in written communication.

While both males and females give neutral or noncommittal support to both oral and written business communication courses, 51% of the women managers (N=133) strongly sense the need for improved oral communication. That is in contrast with the males 44% (N=652). Both genders support written communication at the very important and important level: males 43.4%, females 42.7%.

Assessment of individual communication abilities

Chinese managers with less than a high school education felt they had very good oral communication skills; managers with a graduate degree felt they had very good written communication skills.

Except for managers with less than a high school education, the higher one's level of education the more competent they felt in oral and written communication.

Both genders show little difference in their ability to handle either oral or written communication.

By no means is there a valid difference between the genders regarding communication competence: males at 7.11% and 7.95% for very good oral and written competence, respectively, differ little from the females 6.70% and 5.46% for the same categories.

Causalities for decreased Chinese emphasis on business communication

This essay asserts that the ethnology of a country has a major affect upon the cultural makeup of a nation. In this section, using the assertions and the theoretical statements made earlier, we will look at three specific ethnographic causes which influence the conclusions noted above.

1. Under the ethnographic rubric of political and party control, China supports a political system more limiting, more centrally controlled than other countries. That means the Communist Party, begun in 1921, directed by the Politburo, adheres to a principle called democratic centralism: the minority accepts the decisions of the majority at the top, then is carried through the entire party system.

Hence, subordinate party structures below the Central Committee are forcefully impacted: from regional and local organizations (provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities) to large enterprises, to factories, to workshops within a factory, to a small work group. That means the communist party has a built-in, ready made network to transmit information via a defined hierarchical structure. In place of competing channels

for transmitting information, one main channel, with the party leaders acting as communication originators, sent primarily via face-to-face communication, became the paramount channel for communicating decisions and directives in one direction: downward.

At the pinnacle of party power sits the National Congress of the Communist Party. But for the most part major policy decisions are handed down via the Central Committee and its most powerful spokesperson, earlier the chairman, later, the General Secretary. Unsaid in the preceding description is that the personality of the leadership, the power and drive of the preeminent leader can become the architect of economic and political reform, impacting in turn many related segments of a culture. Personality power, nonverbal and oral, became a significant force.

One final historical assumption is in order. For the communists to take control, as they did in 1949, much of their communication--in a land devoid of modern means of communication--was dependant upon interpersonal communication. One-on-one personal contacts, face-to-face speech was more significant than the written word. As the mass media in China developed, the oral would again assume a position of significance: for the illiterate masses in the countryside via radio--where many could not read--and via TV in the large cities where higher incomes permitted purchase of a television. One can already project, discussed last in the paper, the need for an extensive focus on education in order to make use of the second vehicle of communication, the written word.

Visualize the petals described in Figure III noted earlier. China, as culture 4, has a population equal to one-fifth of the world, socially and educationally reared in an atmosphere of democratic centralism. Thus that part of their culture is radically different from the U.S. concept of democracy. Such a political schism leads inescapably to one conclusion: there is less need at the enterprise level (from which most of the Chinese

managers analyzed in this study came) for communication skills, for courses in college in communication, for decision-making conferences.

Overwhelmingly, the party mandates--in place of discussion. Directives are sent rather than received. Managers have less communication space, to amend, to omit, or to bargain, through avenues for communication so common in U.S. industries. There is less room for managers, and others in the population, in which to maneuver via oral or written communication.

2. A second ethnographic variable is the influence of the central government on communication and decision-making. Essentially, the governmental structure parallels the Communist Party structure throughout China. In reality, however, the party's wishes often supersede those of government in significant decisions affecting the entire country.

As with the Communist Party, the government is headed de jure by a congress, the National People's Congress, with the State Council of 16 persons--the executive committee of the Congress--overseeing about 50 ministries and commissions. These latter, in turn, pass along directives and communications to lower governmental levels. It cannot be overlooked that even though the government forwards directives under its imprimatur, the party influence, overt in many instances, is also carried along in the directive. A manager or worker receiving such a document has little ability to amend, particularly when the directive has political, governmental, and indeed other hierarchical support.

An outsider to the above description will quickly see that overlapping occurs between numerous ministries and systems. It is virtually impossible for a Chinese manager, for example, to make a major decision within a factory without the knowledge or consent of party members. Statistical support for this assertion rests on this data: only 8.3% of the managers (N=77) are in a position to make decisions on their own; 73% (N=679) make their decisions in a collective arena with others; 17.5% (N=163) use a

form of voting; and 1.2% (N=11) use other means of arriving at a decision. Thus a pluralistic approach, with inputs from superior and parallel personnel affects one's personal need for, or lack of communication. Local governments, often closely tied to industries, can have their decisions annulled by a superior authority, giving momentum to the principle of democratic centralism.

Inevitably, communication, either in written or oral form, is monodirectional. Managers must accept two avenues of entry into their workplace: the party and the government, each capable of giving or taking away. Whereas in U.S. industry the government is a shadow, in China it is a living presence.

A main distinction between cultures in Figure III is thus the overwhelming presence of the party and government in China retarding the need for and interest in understanding communication principles. Succinctly, why study communication? Why learn the principles of proposals, letters, memorandums unless one is positioned in the upper reaches of the government or the party? Acquiescence to higher authorities is the common norm.

3. Education

In this section we argue that managerial education, or the lack of it, was rudimentary up to 1949. Then changes occurred, propelled by the wishes of the party and the government to educate large numbers of people not entirely for business, but for the country as a whole.

Visualize early China as a collection of many family-run enterprises. Small workshops, often inbred, emphasized light industry. (In fact, 12.4% [N=126] of the managers in the study still represent this category) Among those firms one family member learned from his (males dominated) predecessor, passing on managerial skills, orally--for what they were--to subsequent generations. Some of these early "managers"

thus were an initial source for Chinese enterprises, moving to larger enterprises based on training within a cottage-style economy.

A second source of managerial talent was the military. Causality experts would be mortified with the enthememe, if you're a good military leader you'll make a good enterprise leader. Yet, as Chinese leaders searched for managerial talent--for their belated industrialization, they turned to the military, perhaps for their human resources acumen, their allegiance to the party, their distinguished service record--or for all three. Those leaders, nurtured during the early days of the Communist Party, ingrained with the idea that face-to-face communication was workable, acquainted with the value of oral communication, now carried these methods into China's fledgling industry. They too became models for subsequent leaders and managers.

Additionally, a statistic not to be depreciated is that over 200 million Chinese are still illiterate, most often those located in the countryside. That fact, from a political and economic point of view, gave further impetus to Chinese leaders--at least prior to June 1989--giving inordinate emphasis to education, building on some of the concerns mentioned earlier. Managerial training and education thus occurs most often in cities, on topics as technology and managerial practices.

Significantly, between 1949-1965 slightly over 7,000 students focused on economics and finance, the core business area. In 1987 alone, nearly 54,000 students graduated in that area with close to 300,000 students at the secondary level enrolled in such courses. (China Statistical Yearbook, 1988)

In a centrally controlled economy, with some degree of autonomy in the enterprises, with preconceptions by party and government leaders, it follows that certain topics and courses will be recommended that tend to further the aims of the economy.

But with strings attached:

--The state can assign students to schools and programs, who on graduation, and with some nod toward their wishes, may be placed in specific industries.

--Work units may elect to send students to schools, for specific kinds of training in specific kinds of courses.

--Some students, on their own, including assuming their own costs, elect a program and later depend on the school assisting them in locating work.

Rightly, one asks, where does business communication fall in a scheme seeking to quickly position a country in the industrial world? It receives no emphasis whatsoever. Even mentioning the concept produces vacuous stares. If business communication is offered, it appears more as a part of language training under the title of business Chinese or something similar. (Zhu, 1979; Zhu, 1982; English Business Communications, 1983; English Business Letters, 1982; Business Chinese 500, 1982; Business Dialogues, 1983) Indeed, only 56 managers in the entire sample had training in oral communication while 761 persons had training in writing, most often in conjunction with language training.³ Engineering, pedagogy, medicine, agriculture and forestry, outside of business topics, continue to receive major emphasis. (China Statistical Yearbook, 1988)

A paucity of texts on both oral and written business communication are to be found in university libraries. Those which are there are old, heavily prescriptive, and often used in conjunction with English language training. Resistance is strong to communication theory and more recent innovations.⁴ A positive element of Chinese texts is their international purview. Indeed, Chinese managers and scholars are critical of U.S. business communication text writers, accusing us of a myopic view, arguing that we depend too heavily on theory and internal communication. Furthermore, we are accused of not being international in view.

Management courses beyond the university also neglect communication courses, management centers stressing accounting, strategic planning, marketing, decision-making, and other topics included in any good U.S. business school.

Inadequate factory managers consequently has been a concern for China, so much so, that in 1984 a series of state examinations were given to directors and managers on China's economic structure. Though it is assumed the questions were general in nature, it

may further be assumed that questions on theories of communication were not a part of the examination. Moreover, in 1979 the China Enterprise Management Association was formed, again to give training to managers on functional topics to prepare them for both internal and external business relations.

One incident deserves mention regarding managerial training. The author's topic for selected Beijing managers was billed as business communication as part of doing business throughout the world. While the managers were polite during the lecture, the question period made little reference to communication. Instead, their interests lay on topics common to most undergraduate or graduate business courses. Communication, as we perceive it in the U.S. had little interest.

Consequently, in a centrally controlled state which oversees politics, government, and education, there is less opportunity for individual expression. Hence, Chinese managers, positioned lower in the hierarchy, give miniscule support to business communication. Surely interpersonal communication occurs, but extensive writing and oral communication training is pedagogically remote from concepts in the Western world.⁵

Notes

1. Chinese managers prefer the term enterprise in place of factory or business. In the U.S. the term enterprise is used more as the title for the umbrella organization, whereas in China it is a generic term.

2. For administrative purposes China is divided into 23 provinces (comparable to States in the U.S.), 5 autonomous regions (sections of the country in which reside different minority nationalities); and 3 large cities. All are under control of the central government.

3. One could argue that writing was more often related to translation exercises than training in producing reports or extensive letters. One sample exercise illustrates the point (English Business Communications, 1983):

Complete the following sentences in English:

We are pleased to learn from your letter of Dec. 2 that

We have already explained to you that

We have the pleasure of

We are enclosing

We hope you could provide us with

4. Discussions over the past 10 years with various communications experts in China indicate little support for U.S. business communication texts. One typescript text, incorporating both theory and practical application on business communication, is used in some classrooms, but receives little support from older Chinese scholars. (Zong, Hildebrandt, 1985).

5. With gratitude I acknowledge the influence, support, and discussions with the late Professor Oiva Laaksonen of the Helsinki School of Economics, author of Management in China During and After Mao, 1988.

References

- Business Chinese 500. (1982). Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- Business Dialogues. (1983). Beijing: China Economics and Foreign Trade Press.
- China Statistical Yearbook, 1988. (1988). Beijing: State Statistical Bureau of the People's Republic of China, China Statistical Information and Consultancy Service, 784-85.
- English Business Communications. (1983). Beijing: Foreign Trade Press.
- English Business Letters. (1982). Beijing: Foreign Trade Press.
- Hildebrandt, H. W. & Liu, Jinyun. (1988). A Managerial Profile: the Chinese Manager. Ann Arbor: School of Business Administration, Division of Research, University of Michigan.
- Hildebrandt, H.W. & Liu, Jinyun. (1989). Zhong Guo Qi Ye Guan Li Ren Yuan De Su Zhi (The Characteristics of Chinese Enterprise Managers). Beijing: Scientific Press.
- Hildebrandt, H.W., & Edington, D. (1987). A Managerial Profile: The Asian Manager. Ann Arbor: School of Business, Division of Research, University of Michigan.
- Hildebrandt, H.W., Miller, E., & Edington, D. (1987). A Review of Managers in U.S. Industries. Ann Arbor: School of Business, Division of Research, University of Michigan.
- Krober, A.L. & Kluckhohn, Clyde. Culture--A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions. (n.d.) New York: Random House. (Originally published (1952), Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University 47 (1).)
- Laaksonen, Oiva. (1988). Management in China During and After Mao. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Zhu, G. (1982). Practical Commercial English Handbook. Beijing: Business Press.
- Zhu, G. (1979). Business Correspondence. Beijing: Institute of Foreign Trade.
- Zong, B., & Hildebrandt, H.W. (1985). Communication in Foreign Trade. (Typescript). Beijing: University of International Business and Foreign Trade.