

A study of 436 Chinese (People's Republic of China) managers suggests two conclusions concerning managerial communication: (1) formality dominates Chinese managers' daily interchanges through prescribed channels; (2) oral and written communication courses are among the least important, in the opinion of Chinese managers, for their managerial preparation. Reasons for these communication perceptions include a continuing tradition of Chinese and British formality; a preponderance of Communist party and central government planning that diminishes time for managerial level discussion; a cultural heritage of being orally passive within the home, an attitude which is reflected in the classroom; and a reflection of all of these results in a degree of quiet acceptance within the world of work.

A CHINESE MANAGERIAL VIEW OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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The core of this investigation seeks to offer an initial statement of selected Chinese managers' views of communication. Additionally, we hope to add to the cultural understanding of China so that when dealing with persons in managerial positions, U.S. managers, businesses, and scholars may improve their communication with and business in mainland China, similar to work for other countries completed by Everett, Krishnan, and Stening (1984); Singh (1981); Lim and Gosling (1983); and Hildebrandt and Edington (1987).

This article is divided into three sections: (1) background to industries studied; (2) research methodology; and (3) perceptions of business communication by Chinese managers. Implications and conclusions end the statement.

BACKGROUND TO INDUSTRIES STUDIED

Over 31 manufacturing and nonmanufacturing Chinese industries are represented in the sample. Because the focus was

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upon specific industries, the majority of responses come predominantly from seven that closely participated in the study: textile manufacturing (29.4%), nonelectrical machinery (15.8%), automotive manufacturing (12.1%), computer technology manufacturing (11.4%), wholesale trade (6.2%), import/export services (4.1%), and hotel management (3.2%).

The remainder of the sample (17.8%), often with few persons in each group, came from diverse categories, such as government, education, and law. Thus we caution that the data are more representative of manufacturing managers than non-manufacturing, which somewhat influences the conclusions drawn in later analyses.

In 1952, 56.9% of the gross output value of China stemmed from agriculture and only 15.3% from heavy industry. By 1985, those data show that agriculture declined to 34.3% of gross output value but that heavy industry increased to 35% (*Statistical Yearbook of China 1986* [China Stat], 1987, p. 20).

Interestingly, women managers assume 34.7% of the managerial roles in all industries represented in this study; only in the textile industry do the women outnumber the men by 51.2% to the males' 48.8%. Overall, the one-third female managerial presence is similar to that of the United States and Asia, where 20% of the managerial workforce is women (Hildebrandt, Miller, & Edington, 1987; Hildebrandt & Edington, 1987). However, this number is slightly lower than the data cited in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (Stat Abst U.S., 1987), a fact that suggests that 42.7% of the women in the workforce are in managerial and professional positions. In Great Britain, 20% of the managerial workforce is women (Davidson & Cooper, 1987). The *total* number of Chinese women in the work force in 1985 was 36.4% (China Stat, 1986, p. 103).

Two additional influences on the managers that affect their perceptions of communication are the Communist party of China (CPC) and the central government. The following is a simplified explanation of their pluralistic effects which, in

great measure, influence managerial communication in Chinese enterprises.¹

COMMUNIST PARTY

General Secretary Zhao heads a standing committee of the Politburo that in turn is responsible to the Central Committee of the CPC. Central committee doctrines are communicated from the National People's Congress to the State Council, to the ministries, the bureaus, the provinces, the autonomous regions, the municipalities, the companies, the factories, the workshops, and the party groups. CPC members are located on each level, where they work through meetings, sessions, and individual contacts to ensure adherence to and to seek support for the Communist principles laid out by the top-echelon Politburo Standing Committee.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Theoretically, the National People's Congress is the ultimate governmental authority on the national or central government level. That authority in turn extends down to the 21 provinces, five autonomous regions, and the municipal governments, with the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin being treated as municipalities. Day-to-day operations of the central government are handled through the numerous ministries, such as the Ministry of Textile Industry, plus other commissions, committees, and bureaus (Saich, 1981, p. 128). Thus, some of the managers in this study are under the managerial control of the Ministry of Textiles.

At the next level—the autonomous regions, municipalities, and provincial governments—there is a structure that almost parallels the central government (Jan, 1966; Richman, 1969). Day-to-day operations are handled by respective governments who in turn oversee and communicate with many bureaus, comparable to the responsibilities of the ministries. Somewhat

parallel structures for the county and city exist beyond the province.

Near the bottom of the hierarchical channel lies the company; that is, in a sense, it is the corporation in charge of similar types of factories producing similar products, and in a real sense relates to the various governmental levels described above. Within the factories are the functional departments or divisions—for example, production, sales, and planning—and beneath them in decreasing size and increasing specialization are the workshops, sections, functional groups, production groups, and, finally, the workers. The middle managers in this study came from the factory through the workshop level, or at the level called upper-middle management.

Even in this oversimplified presentation of the government's planning role in Chinese enterprises, it does not take long to see the stifling bureaucracy, diminished decision-making power, and communication labyrinth for managers as China tries to modernize its management system (Walder, 1985; Wang, 1986; Engle, 1986; Laaksonen, 1984; Jones, 1984). Managers face several masters: the Communist party of China, which is present at all levels, and the central government planning through its ministries, bureaus, and commissions. It is this very overlapping, this party-government parallelism, that produces managerial confusion and that General Secretary Zhao wishes to change: "But one long-standing problem has not yet been completely solved: the lack of distinction between the functions of the party and those of the government and the substitution of the party for the government" (Zhao, 1987).

The preceding background provides a glimpse of the governmental/managerial structure in which Chinese managers pursue their careers and that influence them in their workplace, their education, and their perceptions of communication.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In capsule form, the chronology for the investigation followed these steps between 1985 and 1987:

- (1) selection of questions from ongoing research of the *Newly Promoted Executive* (Hildebrandt, Miller, Bond, & Edington, 1983-1987) and other related studies by the same authors
- (2) initial discussions with Chinese scholars at the University of Michigan to determine sensitivity about and wording of certain questions
- (3) draft translation of pilot questionnaire into Mandarin; verification of translation against English original
- (4) typesetting of Mandarin questionnaire in Hong Kong and verification of proper language by immigrated Chinese living in Hong Kong
- (5) holding of interviews and submission of Mandarin questionnaire to selected Chinese managers and scholars in Hong Kong and in China: clarification of language problems, rewriting of sensitive questions, and analysis of preliminary data
- (6) second draft Mandarin questionnaire redrawn in the United States; completion in Hong Kong of typesetting of Mandarin questionnaire
- (7) administration of a 32-item questionnaire—along with some interviews—by members of Chinese research institutes, the author, and others, in the summer of 1987
- (8) returning of questionnaires to the United States, where a Chinese scholar and the author twice reviewed each Mandarin questionnaire prior to data entry

The final database produced an N of 436 Chinese managers, 282 males and 150 females (four did not indicate their sex). In order to effect comparisons with similar counterparts in the United States and Southeast Asia, the author's database of U.S. managers (N = 6,223) and of Asian² managers (N = 317) were used. Occasional references to U.S. chairmen, presidents, and vice presidents (N = 7,419), herein called executives, are made. The reason some databases are so large is that the U.S. data collection is ongoing, with results published yearly or biannually.

While the article is primarily descriptive—therefore imposing obvious cautions—analyses and inferences will occur when sharp differences between Chinese, Asian, and U.S. managers are evident.

CHINESE MANAGERS' FORMAL/INFORMAL COMMUNICATION PERCEPTIONS

To understand Chinese managerial concepts of communication, a communication background statement is needed. For many years, British economics, politics, culture, and ways of conducting business dominated Asia, particularly South and Southeast Asia. Even after the colonialism concept that "the sun never sets on the British empire" became less true, pervasive British communication influences on English language exchanges between companies and nations still continued. China was not immune from that British English influence that its intercourse with Hong Kong continues to perpetuate, dominating vividly today as banking and trade and political discussions concerning 1997 continue between the two regions.

In addition, the Chinese language historically has used a formal tone; overt politeness through oral and written forms of address to the listener/reader is common. Even the heavy use of the second person plural suggests a diminution of the self into a collective consciousness expressed through "we." Leaders and persons in positions of influence were given honorific titles. The British helped perpetuate that formality and politeness, which is also encouraged today on Chinese TV on the program "Follow Me" and via many teachers trained in British English. Understanding that communication foundation suggests a continuing European underpinning to Chinese communication practices.

Consequently, it is not unexpected that Chinese managers favor formal communication, defined as structured channels, an emphasis on written reports, formality of address, and occasional formal meetings.

Two points can be made. First, formally structured communication channels do exist—not unexpected in a planned economy, or within the confines of both a party and a centrally controlled government—beginning with initial planning done

by the Central Committee, then the Ministry, the Bureau, and finally the finished plan presented to the enterprise and the factory. Along this channel each level attaches its own mark or stamp—literally in red—either approving or amending the original State Planning Commission statement. Hence the administrative hierarchy of both party and government pre-determines the communication path, with each level in both channels repeating or slightly amending a previously worded document. It is not unusual for a lower tier, such as a factory, to receive a final document with as many as five stamps.

Second, such a precise path influences the format and tone of the documents sent through that channel: they are formal. Just over two-thirds (66.8%) of the managers indicate that formal communication is “very important” or “somewhat important.” Furthermore, the more formal tradition of writing (formal salutations and complimentary closes, extreme politeness, extensive use of first person plural, lack of contractions) continues in the colleges and institutes where British-influenced English language texts perpetuate a more formal tone of business communication than found in U.S. business communication texts (Zhu, 1979; Macintosh, 1982; Zhu, 1982; *English Business Communications*, 1983; *English Business Letters*, 1982; *Business Chinese*, 1982; *Business Dialogues*, 1983). Only slow inroads are being made (Zong and Hildebrandt, 1985) toward “American Business English.”

Although 66.8% of the Chinese managers feel formal communication is important, that evaluation decreases to 48.6% when rating the informal mode, defined as telephone conversations or casual meetings. Surely there are the usual informal operation meetings for administrative details, but the overall emphasis is upon the formal.

In summary, formality in communication, influenced by the party and governmental hierarchy within the system, a Chinese tradition of formality, and a continuing British influence affects information being transmitted in a highly formal manner.

EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION PERCEPTIONS

UNDERGRADUATE

Few Chinese managers are college educated; only 27.6% receive the equivalent of an undergraduate degree, and many of those degrees are in engineering (Burstein, 1983; Butterfield, 1987). This statistic can be attributed to the burden of being denied school during the cultural revolution and the imposed maximum age limit (age 25) for attending school. On the other hand, 65.4% of the Asian managers outside of China and 79.8% of the U.S. managers received an undergraduate degree. Such a startling difference suggests the great need for, and explains General Secretary Zhao's interest in, improving the education level of not only managers but the entire nation. As early as 1984, he offered these prescient remarks at the Sixth National People's Congress, then as premier:

[All] cadres engaged in economic work [should] conscientiously learn economic management and modern science and technology. . . . [In addition] all enterprises and institutions should train their employees in a planned way. To obtain practical results, the content and requirements of such training should vary with the posts and ages of employees. From now on, in recruiting workers and staff members, the enterprises must provide prejob training for candidates and enlist those who have done well in examination. This is to ensure the quality of workers and staff, labor-discipline, production-safety and good condition of equipment in factories and mines. (Warner, 1985, p. 75)

POSTGRADUATE

At the postgraduate³ level, only .7% in the Chinese manager sample possessed an advanced degree. Three reasons are apparent: (1) With Chinese colleges closed during the cultural revolution, there were few opportunities for advanced degree

work. Postgraduate students—and for that matter undergraduates as well—joined their professors in rural areas. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some professors and their students convened secretly to continue learning, but this was accomplished without academic credit and in turn did not benefit the postgraduate students who later returned to the formalities of the classroom. Communication was interpersonal in form during the enforced rural sojourn of professors and students. (2) There were and are comparatively few postgraduate schools in China. In 1962 (China Stat, p. 629), only 173 institutions offered postgraduate training (under rubrics as Institutions of Higher Learning; Chinese Academy of Sciences; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Ministries and Commissions; and Scientific Research Institutes of Provinces, Autonomous Regions, and Municipalities). That figure increased to 740 institutions by 1985, of which 388 were labeled institutions of higher learning. Few business communication courses exist; those which do are primarily nontheoretical and stress improving English pronunciation. (3) It follows that, with comparatively few postgraduate schools, there will be fewer students: 2,763 in 1952 and 87,331 in 1985, implying that few graduate students would occupy managerial positions, much less have been exposed to communication training. In the current study, only three managers had advanced degrees. Precise figures for postgraduate courses of study are hard to come by, but using the undergraduate percentages suggests that only 147,543 students in 1986 (China Stat, p. 630) studied economics and finance, considered business subjects in China. Those persons holding a postgraduate degree are primarily in the schools and colleges, teaching new students who will in turn educate other Chinese graduate students.

The large number of postgraduate Chinese studying abroad (c. 20,000 in the United States in 1987), along with a large number of visiting scholars, indicates that today the Chinese government strongly supports educating persons who will return to Chinese universities in professorial rather than

TABLE 1
Education Level

<i>Level of Education</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>U.S.</i>
Less than H.S.	5.4%	2.5%	0.1%
H.S. graduate	31.8	12.4	3.2
Some college	34.6	19.4	16.9
Undergraduate degree	27.6	65.4	79.8
Postgraduate degrees	.7	25.0	30.0

managerial positions. They will return with varied experiences, not the least of which will be a heightened awareness of oral and written give-and-take in the process of problem solving.

This lack of education certainly influences Chinese industry and managers' perceptions of business, since they have minimal training in modern managerial techniques, production innovations, personnel administration, and international trade policies. Adding political and governmental intervention into the industrial sector compounds the problems.

Comparative education level statistics for the Chinese, Asian, and U.S. managers are seen in Table 1.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Even though Chinese managers lack a formal higher education by Western standards, they are forthright when responding to this question: "For the student who plans to follow an undergraduate degree with postgraduate/professional study, what course of study would you recommend for an undergraduate major and for postgraduate work as the best preparation for a management career?"

At the undergraduate level, nearly two-thirds recommend business administration (60.4%), particularly courses in management administration (15.6%) followed by marketing/sales (6.5%) and other courses (14.9%). Such a high percentage—higher than that of either the Asian or U.S. managers—

TABLE 2
Recommended Fields of Study

<i>Recommended Fields of Study</i>	<i>Undergraduate</i>			<i>Postgraduate</i>		
	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>U.S.</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>U.S.</i>
Business Administration	60.4%	42.3%	49.2%	87.3%	82.4%	76.1%
Engineering	20.1	25.8	28.4	—	—	—
Science and Math	9.1	11.1	6.4	6.8	17.5	23.8
Social Science	3.3	11.7	3.2	1.0	—	—
Humanities	2.6	2.9	10.5	2.0	—	—
Behavioral Science	.6	4.7	1.5	—	—	—
Law	—	—	0.2	1.0	—	—
Other	3.9	1.1	0.6	2.0	—	—

illustrates a concern among Chinese for improving overall managerial skills, then turning to other areas such as marketing. They give less support to courses in accounting, personnel relations, and international business.

Chinese, Asian, and U.S. managers all overwhelmingly support postgraduate work in business administration, with the second position going to science and mathematics.

COMMUNICATION COURSES AS PREPARATION

Chinese, Asian, and U.S. managers and executives were asked to rank those courses that helped prepare them for their current managerial position. Some interesting parallels occur, as well as vivid differences.

(1) Asian and U.S. managers rank oral communication as most important on a scale of 1 (highest) to 5 (lowest), with means of 1.27 and 1.24 respectively. U.S. executives are about equal in their support, verified in cited studies (Murphy & Hildebrandt, 1988) that offer support for communication as preparation for manager/executive competence. However, Chinese managers place oral business communication dead last as important preparation for their current position. Why?

Earlier it was suggested that formal communication (a firm emphasis on the written, formal address, and formal channels)

was the preferred mode of communicating a message through the many hierarchical levels of both the party and the government. But that appears not to be the main reason for such formality. It appears that little argumentation or debate occurs within the present managerial system. In place of counter-arguments, central planning—at a much higher level within the structure, perhaps as high as the ministry and bureau level—has strongly recommended the direction for the enterprises. By the time a directive reaches the operations level within a factory, the decision is generally accepted and there is less need to debate its merits. Assertiveness through oral communication is less needed. Many managers appear to serve primarily as conduits of information (Fischer, 1986).

Such an accepting attitude among the Chinese is culturally and politically fashioned. For instance, in Western classrooms students willingly interact and sometimes challenge their teacher. Not so in China. There students record, listen, and accept quite silently the ideas and words of their instructor. Few would think of challenging the precepts for the day. It is not much different at university faculty meetings. There a young scholar says, “We don’t discuss . . . there is a speaker. I have only to bring my ears” (China’s Campus Life, p. A-48).

Since childhood (Solomon, 1971, p. 49), the Chinese are imbued with protocols: “a strong sense of social status and authority thus develops around interpersonal communications, of who may speak first, who must listen, or who is left speechless.” Thus the classroom, and ultimately the role of oral communication at the managerial level, in great measure mirrors the cultural training received at home.

Hence the cultural heritage of not being outspoken and of avoiding public confrontation, may influence the perception among Chinese managers that oral communication is the least important managerial preparation tool. In time it will be interesting to see if there will be variation or deviations from the preceding statement on oral managerial communication.

Such a pacific attitude is also part of the political process—at least at the lower levels of an organization—of accepting, of

listening, of following centrally planned principles of the party and the government. If most planning and debate on an issue has occurred earlier and at higher administrative levels, there is less perceived need at the lower managerial level for emphasis on oral communication.

Furthermore, the author's experience in Chinese meetings parallels the observations of Lindsay and Dempsey (1985), who noted that giving feedback, challenging or questioning others, and interrupting were gentle or nonexistent as compared with U.S. managerial meetings. If there was oral discussion, it was somewhat ritualistic: each person offered his or her opinions in apparent set speeches rather than in confrontation through debate. The end of the "discussion" occurred when the senior member of the group offered his opinion on the matter. Some group members then gave nonverbal reactions, such as head nodding or short oral approvals.

Similar arguments may be made for written communication. If a centrally planned system sets the business direction and a manager implements that policy, there is less perceived need to develop written communication skills. However, the fact that Chinese managers rank written communication slightly higher than oral communication suggests a recognition that the major mode within all channels is the written format.

(2) Both males and females rank finance and marketing first and second in course importance. Electing finance first is not surprising, since Chinese managers increasingly have opportunities to make economic decisions. And as China looks outward and has more contact with foreign nations, some sense the need for selling products worldwide that at one time were produced for local consumption. This more global attitude demands competence in marketing, which is a subject now offered in numerous Chinese management seminars along with communication training.

(3) Many years of insularity, along with an emphasis on central planning by both the government and the party, may account for managers giving minimal support to courses in

subjects such as production/ operations and law. If one accepts the principle of a self-sufficient economic model for China, one could argue that there is not much need for extensive knowledge of the laws or procedures for international business. And with central planning overseeing production goals and products, this area too would not receive much support. But changes are occurring.

(4) Mathematics has often been applied to production problems in China (Chen, 1986). That fact, along with the great number of students studying engineering (580,168 in 1986), may contribute to the managers strongly supporting statistics and math (ranked low by both Asian and U.S. managers) and computer/information systems. China missed the technological revolution (Goldman, 1986) and therefore has fewer technicians (Torbert, 1984); thus the managers' support, either initiated through central planning or gleaned from technological laboratories (Orne, 1985), implies a concern for more modern measures and technological advances to improve production.

Comparisons and ranking of other recommended courses are listed in Table 3.

CONCLUSIONS

The West must recognize (1) the tradition of Chinese formality in communication and (2) the British tradition of formality in communication in Southeast Asia and its influence upon Chinese managers. While some Western texts are found in Chinese libraries, their managerial/ business communication concepts are only slowly gaining acceptance in China. Western scholars and business persons must accept the presence of more formal Chinese formats.

Centrally controlled directives, arising out of a confluence of party and government intervention in enterprise affairs, decreases the need for managerial involvement at their stage of

TABLE 3
Courses of Study

<i>Courses</i>	<i>Total Means</i>	<i>Chinese</i>		<i>Asian</i>	<i>U.S.</i>
		<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>		
Finance	1.95	1.97	1.91	1.78	1.75
Marketing	1.97	1.99	1.94	1.71	1.83
Accounting	2.09	2.09	2.10	1.95	1.81
Computer/Information Systems	2.18	2.17	2.18	1.91	1.54
Business Policy/Planning	2.18	2.20	2.15	1.66	1.64
Business Economics/Public Policy	2.18	2.12	2.31	1.87	1.90
Advertising/Sales Promotion	2.25	2.27	2.24	2.12	2.30
Statistics	2.25	2.25	2.23	2.40	2.27
Personnel/Labor Relations	2.29	2.30	2.25	2.11	1.81
Written Communication	2.38	2.32	2.48	1.30	1.25
International Business	2.51	2.48	2.56	2.05	2.59
Production/Operations	2.51	2.54	2.43	2.47	2.07
Law	2.54	2.50	2.61	2.14	2.03
Oral Communication	2.57	2.60	2.52	1.27	1.24

decision making. At the subordinate level of the enterprise and factory, less opportunity to debate and discuss decreases a perceived need for high competence in communication.

Western classrooms foster a give-and-take attitude between student and instructor; interactive communication occurs, and college students are encouraged to question one another and their instructors. The causality may not be precise, but given the centrally controlled economy and the lack of a higher education in China, there is less perceived need for and competence gained in communication.

While some Western and Far Eastern managers position oral and written communication courses first in importance in preparing one for a management career, Chinese managers give them a low rating. The preceding three conclusions may

contribute to this attitude, but the cultural protocol of who can speak, and when, affects the speaking order and intensity of debate within the home and subsequently within the enterprise.

In sum, two tracks affect Chinese managerial communications: a centrally planned and hierarchical economy and a cultural heritage that fosters an accepting attitude, first nurtured in the home and later carried over into the world of work.

NOTES

1. The term enterprise is generic to the factories and other work units of the Chinese managers. While most of the managers (77.3%) came from the manufacturing sector, we use the term *enterprise* to refer to the other nonmanufacturing units as well. Because the term *enterprise* has a somewhat different meaning in the United States—usually the umbrella organization, with numerous subunits—we shall use the term company when referring to U.S. companies.

2. While the term *Asian* or *Asia* may also include mainland China, for purposes of differentiation we will use the term *Asian* to refer to the countries of Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and Korea. We have resisted using the term *South-East Asian* because many of the “Asians” used for comparative purposes came from Hong Kong. Hong Kong Chinese (N = 249) make up the bulk of the sample, with the others representing Singapore (62), Malaysia (5), and Korea (3), for a total of 319 “Asian” managers. Most data is taken from Hildebrandt and Edington (1987), *A Managerial Profile: The Asian Manager*.

3. The term “graduate” is less used in China when referring to students attending postundergraduate schools commonly known as graduate schools in the United States. Hence the term “postgraduate” will be used when referring to studies beyond an undergraduate education.

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