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Managing Rapport in Intercultural Business Interactions: A Comparison of Two Chinese–British Welcome Meetings

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Abstract

This paper explores the management of rapport in intercultural business interactions. It compares two Chinese–British business welcome meetings that were held by the same British company. Despite many similarities between the two meetings, both the British and the Chinese were very satisfied with the first meeting, while the Chinese were very annoyed by the second. This paper describes the similarities and differences between the two meetings, and explores why they were evaluated so differently. It argues that research into the management of relations in intercultural communication needs to use a broader analytic framework than is typical of intercultural discourse research, and that it needs to gather a wider range of data types.

1. Introduction

This paper compares two Chinese–British business meetings that took place in Britain. Each of the meetings was a welcome meeting, organised by a British company at the start of a 10-day Chinese delegation visit. However, despite many similarities between the two meetings, both the British and the Chinese were very satisfied with the first meeting, while the Chinese were very annoyed by the second. This paper describes the similarities and differences between the two meetings, and explores why they were evaluated so differently. The findings reported in this paper are drawn from a larger study of relational management in Chinese–British business interactions that was conducted from 1996 to 2000. The research design for that study was emergent rather than pre-specified.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study was politeness theory (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983; Gu, 1990). Linguists have defined politeness in various ways, but nearly everyone agrees that it relates to the (smooth) management of relations; for example, Lakoff (1989: 102) defines it as ‘a means of minimizing the risk of confrontation in discourse’. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) classic work identifies face, ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself’ (p.61), as the main motivating force underlying politeness, and identifies acts that threaten a person’s face as ‘face-threatening acts’ (FTAs). Their explication of FTAs is virtually exclusively in terms of speech acts, such as requests, criticisms, and apologies, and so the study of politeness, especially in cross-cultural studies, has typically been very closely linked with analyses of speech acts.

Many authors (e.g. Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1989, Mao 1994) have criticised Brown and Levinson’s conceptualisation of face, especially in relation to Japanese and Chinese societies. While the debates on this continue, Spencer-Oatey (2000) has more recently argued for an expanded framework. Using the term ‘rapport’ instead of politeness, she

maintains that there are two motivational forces underlying the management of relations, face and sociality rights¹. In addition, she argues, that rapport is managed across five interrelated domains: the illocutionary domain (the performance of speech acts), the discourse domain (the choice of discourse content, such as topic choice, and the management of the structure of an interchange, such as the organisation and sequencing of information), the participation domain (the procedural aspects of an interchange such as turn-taking, inclusion/exclusion of people present, and the use/non-use of listener responses), the stylistic domain (stylistic aspects, such as choice of tone, choice of genre-appropriate lexis and syntax, and the use of honorifics), and the non-verbal domain (non-verbal aspects, such as gestures and other body movements, eye contact, and proxemics (2000: 20). The study reported in this paper used a data-driven approach and considers whether this expanded framework is sufficiently broad to deal with the different facets of rapport management that emerge in authentic data.

3. The Data

3.1 Data Collection

The two meetings described in this paper took place in the autumn of 1996 and the summer of 1997 respectively. Both were post-sales visits, not pre-sales negotiations. Prior to these visits, the company had received about twelve similar Chinese delegations, and were thus experienced in handling such visits.

Three types of data were collected for analysis: (1) video recordings of all the official meetings between the British and Chinese business people; (2) field notes of supplementary aspects of the visits, made by one of the authors, who spent as much time as possible with the Chinese visitors in order to build up rapport and trust; and (3) interview comments made by the participants. For the first visit, the participants were each asked to complete a questionnaire that probed their evaluations of the meetings and their impressions of the other party. These questionnaire responses were then used as the basis of a follow-up interview. It was found, however, that the Chinese in particular were reluctant to commit their views to paper, yet were very open in the interview situation. Therefore, for the second visit, the questionnaire was dropped, and playback sessions were combined with interviews. The interviewees were asked to stop the tape whenever they wanted to comment on something, whenever they felt uncomfortable about something, or whenever they felt there had been a misunderstanding, and to explain their reactions. All the interviews were audio-recorded.

In all aspects of the data collection, we endeavoured to maximize the validity and reliability of the data. Over the last few years, we have developed very good relations with staff at the host company. In addition, during the visit, one of us spent as much time as possible socially with the Chinese visitors in order to build up a good rapport with them (e.g. accompanying them on sightseeing trips). We did this deliberately, so that both British and Chinese participants would have confidence in us, so that they would not feel too uneasy about the recording, and so that they would be honest and open with us in the interviews and playback sessions. We were very satisfied with the ways in which they seemed to

‘conduct their business as normal’ and with their cooperation during the follow-up sessions, but we recognise of course that our presence may still have affected the proceedings. (For more details on the research procedure, see Xing 2002)

3.2 Welcome Meeting One

The delegation for Visit One comprised 6 Chinese engineers. They arrived at London Heathrow Airport very early one morning, were driven to their hotel in the town where the British company was located, and then taken to the British company headquarters for an introductory welcome meeting later that morning.

The welcome meeting took place in a rather small room with a rectangular table in it. The British chairman, who was the Sales and Marketing Manager for China, sat at one end (i.e. the 'head') of the table, and another British staff member sat at the other end of the table. The Chinese visitors sat around the rest of the table, and three other British staff sat or stood behind other people. As the meeting began, it emerged that there was no interpreter with the delegation (as had been promised), and so one of the authors was asked on the spot to fulfil that role.

The brief structure of the welcome meeting is shown in Table 1.

Stage	Duration	Time of Start and End
Meeting Start		11.19.21
Pre-meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preliminaries: exchanging cards, serving drinks • Small talk by the chair (while waiting for others to arrive), interspersed with silences • Chair called away • Other British introduce themselves • Administrator explains programme • Small talk by other British staff, interspersed with silences 	14'42 4 mins. 4½ mins. 1 min. 1½ mins. 3½ mins.	11.19.21-11.34.03
Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome • Introduction of staff • Explanation of the programme • Concluding remarks 	13'58	11.34.03- 11.48.01

Post-meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casual talk • Further introduction of admin staff • Reply speech from deputy leader of the delegation • Further talk about programme • Reply speech from leader of the delegation • Small talk by chair 	6'39	11.48.01-11.54.40
Total Meeting Time	35'19	

Table 1: The Structure of the Welcome Meeting during Delegation Visit One

As can be seen from Table 1, the visitors had to wait for about 15 minutes before the welcome meeting officially started. This was because at first the chairman was waiting for some of his British colleagues to arrive, and then he was called away to take an important international telephone call. During this pre-meeting phase, the British unofficially introduced themselves and initiated a lot of small talk. There were very frequent pauses during this preliminary phase, many of which were very long; for example, there was one 22" (second) pause, one 21" pause, one 15" pause, one 14" pause, one 8" pause, one 7" pause, three 6" pauses, one 5" pause, and three 4" pauses (for more details, see Xing 2002.) The British seemed very uncomfortable during these pauses, and always took the initiative to break the silence by engaging in small talk. The preliminary phase of the meeting ended up being slightly longer than the actual main part of the meeting.

During the main meeting, the British chairman did all of the talking, including introducing his British colleagues, explaining the programme for the visit, and commenting that the visitors' goods had already been shipped.

During the post-meeting phase, there was some casual chat, and then two of the Chinese visitors took the initiative to give short speeches, thanking the British for their welcome and expressing their pleasure at being in Britain.

3.3 Welcome Meeting Two

The delegation for Visit Two also comprised six Chinese engineers. They had arrived the day before, and since that was a Sunday, they spent the remainder of that day resting. The following morning they were brought to the company headquarters for the introductory welcome meeting.

The welcome meeting took place in the same small room with the same seating arrangements. The British chairman again sat at one end (i.e. the 'head') of the table, the Chinese visitors sat around the rest of the table, and six other British staff either sat or stood behind other people. A local Chinese technical expert was also present as an interpreter,

since in Visit One it was found that the interpreting required a lot of technical understanding.

The brief structure of this welcome meeting is shown in Table 2.

Stage	Duration	Time of Start and End
Meeting Start		10.06.09
Pre-meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preliminaries (informal greetings, exchange of cards, seating) 	2'34	10.06.09-10.08.43
Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal greeting, self introduction & welcome • Introductions by British staff • Introductions by Chinese visitors • All British staff except chairman leave • Introduction to the company • Concluding remarks 	16'59 3 mins. 2 mins. 2½ mins. 1 min. 6½ mins. 2 mins.	10.08.43-10.25.42
Post-meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrangements for site visit • Small talk • Farewells 	3'58	10.25.42-10.29.40
Meeting Finish		10.29.40
Total Meeting Time	23'31	

Table 2: The Structure of the Welcome Meeting during Delegation Visit Two

During this welcome meeting, the timings were very smooth. No one was kept waiting, and the pre-meeting phase was brief. During the main meeting, the British chairman, who was the Operations Director of the company, welcomed the visitors and asked the British staff to introduce themselves. He then asked the Chinese visitors to introduce themselves in turn, after which he gave a brief introduction to the company. The welcome meeting concluded with a brief post-meeting phase when there was some small talk and arrangements were made for a site visit.

4. Participants' Evaluations of the Meetings

In the follow-up interviews to Delegation Visit One, both the British and Chinese evaluated it positively, saying 'It was a success' (British staff member) and 'it was good, the arrangements were good' (Chinese delegation member)². None of the Chinese complained about being kept waiting at the beginning of the welcome meeting; in fact, when questioned about timings and arrangements, they complimented the British on their

willingness to make last-minute alterations to sightseeing arrangements, according to the weather.

For Delegation Visit Two, on the other hand, both the British and the Chinese were dissatisfied with the visit as a whole. The British did not notice any particular problems with the welcome meeting, but by the end of the visit, one British staff member complained 'they haven't any ethics, you know they had no due respect for their hosts'. The Chinese visitors, on the other hand, were so annoyed by the welcome meeting that they cancelled all the training sessions that had been arranged for them, and insisted on spending the whole time sightseeing and shopping. Moreover, at the end of the visit, they spent over five hours challenging their hosts over a range of issues. What, then, did the second delegation find so annoying about their welcome meeting?

4.1 Seating Arrangements

The Chinese participants of Visit Two were upset by the seating arrangements, and attributed very great significance to them. In a follow-up interview, the delegation leader commented as follows, with the other five members chorusing agreement:

Comment One (Chinese Delegation Leader, Delegation Visit Two)

'...it shouldn't have been that he was the chair and we were seated along the sides of the table. With equal status, they should sit along this side and we should sit along that side...'

In other words, the Chinese felt that since the two teams were of equal status, they should have sat on opposite sides of the table, with the heads of each side sitting in the middle. They interpreted the different arrangements as conveying a significant 'status' message:

Comment Two (Chinese Delegation Leader, Delegation Visit Two)

'... they were chairing, and we were audience, which naturally means that you do what you are told to... They were, right from the start, they were commanding, in control, contemptuous. In actual fact we should have been given equal status...'

The British, on the other hand, clearly had no idea that this was the impression they had conveyed. While they acknowledged that the room was too small, the chairman explained that they had previously taken a more formal approach, but that the visitors on successive delegations had got younger and younger and did not want to have very formal meetings.

4.2 Discourse Content Issues

In Visit Two, the Chinese were also dissatisfied with the content of the British chairman's speech. The chairman stressed the good relationship his company had with the Chinese, drew attention to the importance of the Chinese contracts to his company, and expressed the company's hope that the good relationship between the two parties would continue in the future:

Extract 1: British Chairman (Delegation Visit Two)

'It is extremely important for us at (company) to make a special effort to welcome all of our Chinese friends and colleagues, as you and your company are very important to us. We we've over the last probably four or five years had quite quite a good relationship with with China, and have people from (company) and (place) and and the the various (industrial plants) in the various provinces of China, and we hope this will continue in the future.'

Later on, he gave some background information on his company, and made the following comments:

Extract 2: British Chairman (Delegation Visit Two)

'So we are obviously very experienced eh in the design and the manufacture of these products. ... A lot of our trade now obviously goes to China and to the other Eastern countries, because that is obviously where a lot of the world trade now is and will be in the future.'

In the follow-up interview with the British chairman, he pointed out that his company wanted to make the visit memorable for the Chinese visitors, so that they would have a good impression of his company and remember it on their return to China. The Chinese, on the other hand, felt that his comments on the Sino-British relationship had not been weighty enough. They had heard on the Chinese grapevine that the British company was in serious financial difficulties, and they believed it was the Chinese contracts that had saved them from bankruptcy. They therefore felt that the British hosts should have expressed their sincere gratitude to them for helping them so significantly.

Comment Three (Chinese Sales Manager, Delegation Visit Two)

'It is understandable for them to praise their own products, but by doing so they in fact made a big mistake. Why? Because, you see, because for a company when they haven't got new orders for their products for several years it is a serious problem, to them, but they didn't talk about it. ... he should have said that you have made great efforts regarding [the sale of] our products, right? And hope you continue. They should have said more in this respect. He didn't mention our orders. So in fact this is a very important matter. It is not just a matter of receiving us.'

It seems that the British were not strong enough in their compliments towards the Chinese, and in the degree of gratitude they expressed.

4.3 Discourse Structure Issues

In Meeting Two, after the British chairman had finished giving his welcome comments, the British staff introduced themselves, and then the chairman asked the Chinese delegation members to introduce themselves. The head of the delegation took it as an invitation to deliver a return speech, and started to express the group's appreciation to the hosts. However, he was cut short by the interpreter, who explained that they had been asked to introduce themselves, not give a return speech. After several minutes of uncomfortable discussion in Chinese by the visitors, each delegation member introduced himself.

Once again, the British and Chinese participants interpreted the issue very differently. In the follow-up interview with the Chinese, they all argued that it was normal and polite for the head of the delegation to 'say a few words of appreciation', and then introduce himself and each member of the delegation. The head of the Chinese delegation explained it as follows:

Comment Four: Chinese Delegation Leader (Delegation Visit Two)

'According to our home customs and protocol, speech is delivered on the basis of reciprocity. He has made his speech and I am expected to say something. ... Condescension was implied. In fact I was reluctant to speak, and I had nothing to say. But I had to, to say a few words. Right for the occasion, right? But he had finished his speech, and he didn't give me the opportunity, and they each introduced themselves, wasn't this clearly implied that they do look down upon us Chinese.'

Clearly, he and his colleagues were bitterly hurt by not being given the chance to deliver a return speech. Yet the British chairman, in the follow-up interview, claimed that current delegations are different from earlier ones, saying that they used to have return speeches, but that as the Chinese have become more familiar with them, 'formalities have really eroded and sort of drifted away'. The British were completely unaware that the Chinese visitors wanted to give a return speech. They thought that by being informal, letting each person introduce him/herself, they were making things easier and less stressful for the visitors.

In fact, in Delegation Visit One, the chairman also did not invite the Chinese to give a speech. However, the Chinese leader himself took the opportunity to give one during the post-meeting phase.

5. Contextual Factors influencing the Outcomes

In many ways, the welcome meetings for both visits were very similar: the seating arrangements were virtually identical, the content of each chairman's welcome speech was comparable, and neither delegation leader was invited to give a return speech. The only real difference was that the welcome meeting for Visit One had a long pre-meeting phase, because people needed to wait for some British staff to arrive, whilst the Visit Two welcome meeting started promptly. Why, then, did things turn out so badly for Visit Two but not for Visit One? Several factors played a combined role.

5.1 The Interpreter

Both the British and the Chinese were very dissatisfied with the interpreter for Visit Two. They commented that he spoke too quietly, that they were worried that his interpreting was inaccurate, and most importantly, that he inappropriately tried to influence proceedings rather than simply acting as an interpreter. When watching (during the playback) the point in the meeting when he stopped the Chinese delegation leader from giving a return speech, the British chairman remarked how confused he felt, not knowing what was going on as the

visitors discussed amongst themselves in Chinese. When he was told what had happened, he commented as follows:

Comment Five: British Chairman (Delegation Visit Two)

‘That’s interesting, so it goes back to the point of our concern about interpretation, because if the interpreter said to me that they are just making a return speech, then it would have been fine.’

When the Chinese visitors watched this part of the videotape, they had differing interpretations as to who was to blame for the lack of opportunity to give a return speech. One person felt the interpreter played a critical role, saying ‘In this whole thing, I felt [interpreter’s name] played a very important role.’ But the head of the delegation blamed the British as follows

Comment Six: Chinese Delegation Leader (Delegation Visit Two)

‘No, maybe they didn’t want me to speak. ... I was speaking and if they didn’t want me to, he [the interpreter] wasn’t wrong [to interrupt me]. You and I are not familiar with things here, that is, perhaps the British look down on us Chinese.’

Clearly, the interpreter’s behaviour had a negative impact on the proceedings, and on people’s interpretations and evaluations of them.

5.2 British and Chinese Assumptions and Expectations

The British company’s previous experiences of receiving Chinese delegations had led to certain assumptions and expectations as to what the visitors would want and how they would expect to be received. During the interviews, they commented that they used to be much more formal in hosting the Chinese delegations, but that over time, the delegation members had become younger and less concerned about protocol such as the giving of formal speeches, and so they had dropped these formalities. They clearly failed to notice that in both these welcome meetings (and maybe earlier ones too) the Chinese had actually wanted to give a return speech. Moreover, the British recognised that although the official purpose of the Chinese visits was to inspect the goods and receive technical training, the visitors would want a balance between work and sightseeing activities. However, they did not expect the whole visit to be for sightseeing, and so were offended when the second delegation cancelled all the training sessions.

The Chinese visitors in Delegation One seemed to come with fairly low expectations as to how they would be received, because of the rather negative feedback from earlier visitors, and so were pleasantly surprised:

Comments Seven and Eight: Chinese Delegation Members (Delegation Visit One)

‘Compared to what we heard from people who came over before about how they were received, I feel this time it is very much better than the way they were treated.’

‘This is also because they are more experienced, they have drawn some lessons from the requests proposed to them, so this time it is better.’

In contrast, the Chinese members of Delegation Visit Two had heard on the grapevine in China that the British company was in serious financial difficulties (this was vigorously denied by the British company). They believed (unbeknown to the British) that the Chinese contracts were responsible for saving the British company from bankruptcy, and so were expecting to receive especially deep-felt expressions of gratitude from the British company. They were thus offended when they only heard fairly routine words of welcome.

5.3 The Chairmen

Normally, the Sales and Marketing Manager for China would have chaired both meetings. However, because the Chinese delayed their visit quite considerably, he was away on an overseas trip when the second delegation arrived. The company thus arranged for another senior member of staff to receive the delegation, the Operations Director. This person had been involved with most of the previous Chinese delegation visits to the company, but he had never been to China himself, so unlike the Chairman for Visit One, he was unable to draw on personal experiences within China to help make the visitors relax.

5.4 Judgement of the Roles and Importance of Visitors

The British believed that the visitors in both delegations were nearly all engineers, and that therefore both groups would be interested in receiving technical training. However, whilst that was true for the first group, nearly all of the second group were sales managers. They were thus less interested in technical training, and in addition, since sales managers in China are much more affluent than engineers, they regarded themselves as much more important. From a Chinese perspective, the second delegation was therefore significantly different from the first group.

Why, then, were the British unaware of this? One reason could be the way in which jobs and positions are often identified in Chinese and translated into English. It is common practice in China for a person to have two titles on his/her name card, an 'expertise' (technical) title, and a 'position' (job) title. The former shows the area/field s/he is skilled or trained in, and the latter shows the position s/he holds within the organization. So a person, for example, may be trained as an engineer but working as a sales manager. The only information given to the British hosts in advance (by their agent in China) was the delegation members' 'expertise' titles, not their 'position' titles. In other words, they did not receive the full information given in Table 3; they only received that shown in columns one and two (along with company affiliations).

Name	'Expertise' Title	'Position' Title
Mr FJY	Senior Engineer	Head of Delegation [position title not given on card]. Design Department, [W] Company
Mr YZY	Engineer	Sales Manager, International Sales and Planning, [W] Company
Mr XZB	Senior Engineer	Director, [X] Project
Mr LT	Engineer	Director of [Y] Company; Manager of [Z] Company
Mr WFS	Assistant Economist	Head of Equipment Section, [X] Project

Mr HP	Economist	General Manager of [A] Company and [B] Company
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Table 3 Delegation Visit Two: Chinese Visitors' 'Expertise' and 'Position' Titles

The British planned the visit in accordance with the information they got in advance. The poor interpreting failed to make them question their assumptions, and it seems the British did not bother to look carefully at the business cards to check who the people really were. As a result, the misconception was never properly rectified, and the problems in Visit Two were thus exacerbated.

5.5 The 'Compounding Effect'

During Delegation Visit One, the seating arrangements and the lack of invitation to give a return speech had less negative consequences because the visitors themselves were less status conscious (presumably because they did not attribute any particular importance to their role in the business dealings with the British company). Moreover, during the pre-meeting phase when they were kept waiting for fifteen minutes, the Sales and Marketing Manager for China was chairing the meeting and was thus able to take the opportunity to engage in small talk. From the British perspective, this was primarily a gap-filler to avoid embarrassing silence, but from the Chinese perspective, it gave a valued opportunity for relationship building (cf. Harris and Moran 1987, Chang and Holt 1991). It seems that the embarrassing wait (from the British perspective) was perceived by the Chinese visitors as a positive and valuable component of the welcome.

During Delegation Visit Two, on the other hand, all the factors combined in a negative way. In particular, the Chinese visitors' conception of their own status and importance heightened their sensitivity to face issues. The seating arrangements and lack of invitation/opportunity to give a return speech became face-threatening acts to them. The British chairman's welcome speech also became offensive because it did not praise them sufficiently and was not self-deprecating enough, and thus did not enhance their face sufficiently.

6. Towards an Expanded Framework for the Analysis of Rapport Management

The data from this study offer support for Spencer-Oatey's (2000) rapport management framework, in that rapport is clearly managed through multiple domains, particularly the discourse and non-verbal domains. In addition, the findings emphasise the importance of gathering 'perception' data (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2002) when studying relational management, and suggest the need for examining the macro-context of authentic interactions. These two issues are discussed in this section.

6.1 The Importance of 'Perception' Data

As Fraser and Nolan (1981: 96) point out, no sentence of linguistic construction is inherently polite or impolite. Rather, politeness is a social judgement, and whether or not an utterance is heard as being polite, is to a large extent, in the hands (or ears) of the hearer. This

indicates that if we are to understand how relations are managed, we need to have insights into the social expectancies and judgements of the people involved.

This study highlights the importance of not over-interpreting the discourse itself, and the value of gathering 'perception' data from the interlocutors themselves. Problems do not always emerge clearly in the discourse itself, as people may simply avoid raising conflictive issues. Conversely, we may interpret something as problematic (such as the long wait before the start of the welcome meeting in Delegation Visit one), when some of the participants may have a different reaction.

One useful way of collecting 'perception' data is to interview the interlocutors and/or play back (parts of) the interaction. The interlocutors can then give explanatory comments and/or interpretive reactions that can provide additional insights into the discourse/interaction. However, it should not be assumed that there is necessarily any 'right' or 'correct' interpretation of 'who meant what by saying or doing X'. Communication is an interpretive process that is not simply a matter of linguistic encoding and decoding, but rather involves background knowledge (such as world knowledge, pragmatic conventions and norms) and personal goals and concerns (Spencer-Oatey and Zegarac, 2002). Rapport management is a social judgement, and so there can never be definitively correct or incorrect interpretations of the pragmatic meaning of discourse or of behaviour.

Moreover, on a practical level, it is not always easy to obtain this 'perception' data. For example, in this study it was extremely difficult to arrange the playback sessions. Unlike in some research (e.g. Fiksdal's, 1990, gatekeeping interviews), where the video recordings are short and the full recording can be played back to the participants, in this study only certain (parts of) meetings could be played back to participants. There were several reasons for this. Firstly, the recordings were long and involved several meetings, some of which lasted three hours or more. It was often impractical, therefore, to play back the whole of a meeting, let alone all meetings, to the participants. Secondly, each delegation's schedule was very tight. People went out early in the morning on various types of trips, and came back in the evening, leaving little time after dinner. Thirdly, the setting and the equipment were sometimes difficult to arrange, as the hotel rooms they were staying in did not always have video playing equipment.

6.2 The Importance of the Macro-Context

Sometimes there can be a tendency to treat a piece of discourse, such as an intercultural business meeting, as an isolated sample for analysis. In reality, though, all discourse occurs in a context, both micro and macro (cf. Günthner and Knoblauch, 1995), and this needs to be considered.

Charles (1996) argues that the length and the stage of the business relationship is an important contextual component. In this study, the context was even broader, as feedback from other Chinese delegations/customers, and rumours in China about the British company all affected the Chinese visitors' expectations and assumptions.

The future was also an important contextual issue in this study. The British company wanted to continue doing business with China, and were aware that their current end-users, their importing company and their potential future end-users all had links with each other. Because of this, they were very conscious of the fact that if one set of delegation visitors had a bad impression of the company, this could have a negative impact on future business. They thus tried to pay particular attention to rapport management issues, even though they often struggled to handle them as the Chinese wanted.

7. Concluding Comments

If we are to increase our understanding of the management of relations in intercultural interactions, it is vital that we gather a wide range of authentic data, and use a broad theoretical framework for analysing it. Ideally, we need authentic intercultural discourse data to be supplemented with post-event interview/ playback data, as well as field notes that describe the macro context. Needless to say, it is extremely difficult to negotiate access to such data, but if we are to advance our understanding of intercultural communication, it is vital that we take up the challenge!

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Notes

¹ She defines sociality rights as ‘fundamental personal/social *entitlements* that individuals effectively claim for themselves in their interactions with others’. (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 14)

² All comments from Chinese delegation members were originally spoken in Chinese. They have been translated into English by one of the authors and checked by a bilingual speaker.