

# ○ SMALL TALK: A MISSING SKILL IN THE CHINESE COMMUNICATIVE REPERTOIRE

**Xia Cui** *Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne*

*Xia Cui's research interests are in intercultural pragmatics particularly focused on workplace social interactions between Chinese and Australians, Content and Language Integrated Learning in Chinese, and the Classroom Chinese Language. In her most recent project, Xia applied the same methodological framework as set out in the article and examined the intercultural challenges native Chinese speaking teachers experience in Australian schools.*

[xiac@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:xiac@unimelb.edu.au)

There is growing evidence that social interactions at work with local colleagues present a real challenge for Chinese immigrants to Australia (e.g. Tomazin, 2009; Zhou, Windsor, Coyer, & Theobald, 2010), often leaving them feeling defeated and despairing, and the Australians puzzled or affronted. Seeking to understand the nature, origin, and dynamics of the problem at its sociocultural depth, a study was undertaken to examine the problematic social experience as reported by a group of Chinese immigrant professionals, from both their own and their Australian counterparts' perspectives. The findings suggest small talk presents professionally qualified Chinese with an acute problem, and this is because the nature and dynamics of small talk are new in their social experience. Taking a sociolinguistic perspective to analyse data comprising Chinese accounts and discussions of problematic incidents and Australian commentary on these, the root of the difficulty has been revealed to lie in mismatches in the deeply held beliefs and values of Chinese and Australians about the nature of personal identity and interpersonal relationships, most pertinently, differences in their belief about how relationships beyond the intimate circle should be best managed. The article will present the findings of the study and the implications they suggest.

**KEY WORDS:** small talk, Chinese communication, intercultural communication

## INTRODUCTION

'It's hard to have deeper conversations...It doesn't feel natural. I will just sit there and pretend to do what they are doing. It's really awkward.'

- Mei, a Chinese woman who has lived in Melbourne for 10 years.

The quote above provides a glimpse of the social experience common to Chinese immigrants in Australian workplaces, often resulting in the Chinese feeling defeat and despair and the Australians involved puzzled or affronted (e.g. Liu, 2011; Tomazin, 2009; Zhou, Windsor, Coyer, & Theobald, 2010). Studies of the problem locally, as well as those in other English speaking contexts where there is also a large immigrant population, draw attention to a lack of sociopragmatic and sociolinguistic skills to produce utterances appropriate to the situation,

and differences in culturally specific assumptions about appropriate ways of speaking in a range of situations between immigrants and their local counterparts (e.g. Clyne, Ball, & Neil, 1991; Holmes, 2000a, 2000b; Holmes & Marra, 2002; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003).

In a development on earlier studies, the research reported here examined the barriers in social interactions at work between Mainland Chinese immigrants and their Australian counterparts. The study included the perceptions of the immigrant group as well as those of the majority group, and sought to understand the nature, origin, and dynamics of the problem at its sociocultural depth from both sides. Drawn from results of three sets of data (surveys, interviews and focus group discussions), the major finding of the study is that engaging in workplace small talk presents professionally qualified Chinese immigrants with an acute problem, and the core of the problem lies in deep-seated contradictions between the Chinese and Australian perception of interpersonal relationships.

The article begins with a discussion of the key scholarship that informed the study. Following this, an outline of its design and selected cases from the data are presented. The cases reveal recurring patterns to the way Chinese participants manage challenging moments when engaging in workplace small talk with Australian colleagues, and the views of Australian peers of the Chinese experience. Discrepancies evident in these data of Chinese and Australian understanding and conduct of small talk are discussed in light of sociocultural beliefs and values in the two societies. The article concludes with the implications of the findings for research and for practical changes in the intercultural training for immigrants and those who work with them.

## THE CONCEPT OF SMALL TALK

### EARLY DEVELOPMENT

The earliest and the prototypical formulation of small talk as a communicative mode is phatic communion, a concept developed by Malinowski (1923/1999) to refer to ‘a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words’ on some ‘supremely obvious state of things’ (pp. 303-304). Malinowski perceived phatic communion as functioning not to inform, connect people in action, or express any thought, but serving ‘to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship’ (Malinowski, 1923/1999, pp. 303-304).

As the field of Applied Linguistics developed and its focus turned to sociolinguistics, the universality of the concept of phatic communication was questioned. For example, Hymes (1972, p. 40) suggested that the extent to which phatic communion is considered necessary, as well as how it is realised, varies across cultures, views echoed later by Crystal (1987, pp. 10-11). The role of phatic communion also came to extend beyond a mere exchange of words, to being seen as ‘a complex part of a ritual, highly skilled mosaic of communicative

behaviour whose function is to facilitate the management of interpersonal relationships...during the psychologically crucial margins of interaction' (Laver, 1975, pp. 217-296). These proposals on phatic communion have mostly been taken up later in studies of small talk.

### CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

Among recent works that have expanded our understanding of small talk, those conducted in the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) undertaken by Janet Holmes and her colleagues in New Zealand have been the most extensive (e.g. Holmes, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2005a; Holmes & Fillary, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2004; Holmes & Riddiford, 2009).

Their work defines the boundaries of small talk to include interactions that range from the more expansive and personally oriented talk, to formulaic greetings and parting exchanges (Holmes, 2000a, p. 38; Coupland, 2000, 2003). The content of small talk is established to typically focus on non-controversial topics such as the weather, ritualised enquiries about health, and out-of-work social activities; and the selection of topics is influenced by a range of factors, such as shared background knowledge, the relationship between participants, gender, status, and sociocultural upbringing.

The functions of small talk have been refined in the LWP studies to include three aspects: a discourse function that marks the boundary of workplace interactions; a social function that constructs and maintains collegial relationships; and a function that constructs the power relationship (Holmes, 2000a; Holmes & Stubbe, 1993, 2003). Small talk is stressed as being essential to signalling that one 'belongs' to the work team (Holmes, 2000a, 2000b). Being adept at small talk means exhibiting 'an attractive and outgoing social manner [that] can have a major impact in predisposing co-workers positively, and can even over-ride irritation when tasks are not done with maximum efficiency' (Holmes & Fillary, 2000, p. 288).

The LWP studies also take into account a non-Anglo perspective and examine the challenges non-native English speakers encounter when engaging in small talk with their native English speaking counterparts. These studies show that effective management of small talk demands a fluency of complex socio-linguistic and sociopragmatic skills, which are typically acquired gradually over years of experience in, and exposure to, such social encounters. In the course of this development decisions about how to deal with small talk situations effectively become automatic. The skills involved include knowing how much talk to use, what appropriate topics are, and being able to accurately interpret and appropriately express social meaning in interaction (Holmes, 2000b, p. 132; Holmes & Riddiford, 2010, pp. 1-2). People from a sociocultural background which provides young people with little experience of small talk while growing up will not have developed these skills, and hence find such encounters challenging (e.g. Holmes, 2005b; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003).

Work on small talk as discussed above defined its nature, scope, and functions. Taking into account a non-Anglo perspective to examine the concept has allowed the complex skills required to effectively manage small talk to be described, and the challenges faced by non-native English speakers in doing so, spelled out. However, that still leaves the deep sociocultural causes of these challenges yet to be examined. A sociolinguistic perspective on language use sees the problems arising in exchanges to be primarily grounded in gaps in participants' common ground, what they believe to be their shared basis of knowledge, values, beliefs and practices (Clark, 1996; Halliday, 1991; Hofstede, 2001). Approaching the barriers in Chinese-Australian social interactions examined in the study from this perspective, it can be expected that the causes of the problem might lie in mismatches in the deeply held beliefs and values they have about the nature of personal identity and interpersonal relationships, and most pertinently, in differences in their belief about how relationships beyond the intimate circle should be best managed. An overview of the literature discussing the Chinese and Anglo-Australian sociocultural characteristics in interpersonal relationships is presented below.

### **NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

While many scholars (e.g. Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1988, 1990, 1995) hold that the interpersonal relationship in China is socially-oriented, the development of indigenous psychology and sociology has seen a typical egoism now considered as a more accurate portrayal of the nature of Chinese interpersonal relationships (e.g. Fei, 1947; Wang & Chen, 2010; Yang, 1988; Yeh & Yang, 1997).

The theory that illuminates the concept of Chinese egoism, and has the most influence on studies of Chinese interpersonal relationship, is that of differential mode of association (Fei, 1947, p. 13). Considered the first scholar to study social relationship in China from a cultural perspective, Fei (1947) described the structure of interpersonal relationship in traditional Chinese society as differential mode of association (pp. 13-14). Essential to understanding this mode is its emphasis on identifying individuals in reference to their relationship with others and having the closeness of interpersonal relationship as the primary basis of social behaviour.

This emphasis has important implications on how interpersonal relationships should be managed, and one of these is a strong in-group/out-group distinction in the way people interact with one another. This distinction explains the situation that many Chinese do not feel knowledgeable about dealing with 'outsiders' because the value standards applied to in-groups may not be readily adapted to out-groups (Gao, 1996; Gu, 1987; Ye, 2004). The transition from an out-group to an in-group relationship, therefore, has high barriers, and it is not usually and practically achieved by social interaction itself, but relies more on organized or formal social opportunities.

Fei's concepts of Chinese-style egoism and differential mode of association, since theorised, have become the most influential indigenous concepts in the study of interpersonal relationship in Chinese society. In spite of the social changes over the past decades and their impact on interpersonal relationships in modern China, the majority of sociologists hold that the concepts, still being complemented, revised, and developed, work to illustrate the nature of interpersonal relationship in contemporary Chinese society (e.g. Du, 2007; Ren, 2008; Tu, 2009; Yan, 2009).

### **NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ANGLO-AUSTRALIAN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

In Australia, a Western country and also an English-speaking society, the dominant cultural beliefs and values can be understood in relation to both Western and Anglophone cultural characteristics, major among which are i) priority of individual rights and autonomy; ii) egalitarianism; and iii) informality (Hirst, 2009; West & Murphy, 2007).

The priority of individual rights and autonomy is recognised as the core of Australian culture (West & Murphy, 2007, pp. 23-24; Wierzbicka, 2010). It is seen to have derived from the Western conception of self, described by Geertz (1975, p. 48) as a 'bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background'. This priority leads to individual behaviour being 'organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one's internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and action, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 226).

Derived from the priority of individual rights and autonomy, the most significant value espoused in the Australian society is egalitarianism. As Renwick (1980, 1991) argues, egalitarianism retains the power to modify interpersonal relationships among Australians, and as a result of the country's geographical characteristics, European immigrant origins, settlement patterns, and the consequent homogeneous social structure, this value is even more strongly espoused by Australians than people in other Anglo-Western societies (Butler & Angelo, 1998; Gestland, 1999; Renwick, 1980, 1991; Wierzbicka, 2003). As a result, despite still being a hierarchical society in which clear class demarcations can be found, most Australians consider hierarchies to be 'disruptive of positive and productive social relations' and differences among people in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, sex, nationality, and socioeconomic level are also believed to be merely differences, not hierarchies (Renwick, 1980; West & Murphy, 2007, pp. 30-31).

Although Australian society shares the core beliefs and many of their derived values with the rest of the Western world, due to its historical development and isolated geographic location, Australian culture also has its own unique features. One of the most notable of these is a high importance placed on informality (Renwick, 1980, 1991; West & Murphy, 2007). The value

of informality is closely related to egalitarianism. According to West and Murphy (2007), keeping the conversation informal is considered by most Australians as a sign of welcome, friendliness and inclusion. Manifest in social practices, for example, most Australians expect others to call them by their first name or even by their nickname as a sign of closeness and acceptance. The commonality of laughter, joking and banter in Australian workplaces is also evidence of the societal espousal of this value.

Literature on the key characteristics of interpersonal relationships in the Chinese and Anglo-Australian society provides the wider background for understanding the studied phenomena. However, it is recognized that speaking of Chinese culture and Anglo-Australian culture is to run the risk of over-generalising and overlooking differences within the majority group, as well as between it and smaller sub-groups. The beliefs, values, and norms of practice discussed are to be understood only as major tendencies of the heritage that still exert an influence on the societal majority. Understanding these broad tendencies is considered necessary and of value because first, they are accepted in society as being a 'central reality' and cannot be overlooked when examining intercultural interactions (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 7); and second, because in stressful circumstances where they face an evident mismatch in expectations they cannot understand, as often occurs in problematic social encounters, people are more likely to take refuge in ethnocentric norms shaped by their heritage.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS AND DATA

Participants in the study included both Chinese immigrant and Anglo-Australian professionals working in Melbourne. All the Chinese involved were from Mainland China, aged between 25 and 40, had completed a degree in Australia prior to commencing work and had been living in the country for two to ten years. The areas of their profession included Finance, IT, Education, Retail, Public service, Engineering, Architecture, and Real Estate. 'Anglo-Australian' refers to those born and educated in Australia, and raised in a family where English was the first language, or the co-first language with another European language. The Anglo-Australian professionals in the study were between 25 and 55 years old, had at least a Bachelor's degree, and were working across similar areas of profession to the Chinese participants.

The data consist of survey results from 80 Chinese professionals (36 males and 44 females), which revealed the most significant problems they encountered in their social interactions with local Australian colleagues, where significance was indicated by their frequency and severity. The six most commonly experienced problems of survey respondents are listed below, each of which was marked as positive (agree/tend to agree) by more than half of them.

- After the survey, ethnographic interviews using Argyris and Schön's (1974, 1978) left-right column case protocol were conducted with 15 volunteer survey respondents, each of whom had reported having had one or more of the above problems. The group comprised eight females and seven males, aged between 25 and 35. Australian views on participants' account of, and explanation for, their problematic experience, were later gathered in Focus Group discussions. The three groups, each of four or five participants, involved a total of eight females and six males aged between 25 and 45. Both the individual interviews and focus group discussions were recorded for analysis.

The technique of left-right column case protocol that Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978) developed on the basis of their theory of action approach to human behaviour was used in the individual interviews with Chinese participants. The theory and the protocol have been widely accepted in organisational training and development, and proven useful in the area of intercultural communication research (Cui, 2014; Lu, 2007; Orton, 2000, 2001).

**Table 1. Left-right incident recount**

Setting :

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This exercise focuses on ‘directly observable behaviour’ (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 39), that is, accounts of what the person involved believes happened and was said, as best as s/he can recall. It does not purport to be the objective truth about what happened, but the constructed experience and understanding of the person involved (Cui, 2014, p. 208). The study focuses on their experience as best they can recall it, because, whatever someone else might say happened, their own account is the source of their continuing grievance. Once written out, the researcher is then able to discuss the incident with the participant to ascertain further insights into what s/he thinks and feels about the matter.

What the researcher looks for after the account is completed is the point(s) of dilemma, the point where the participant was thinking and wanting to say or do X, but instead chose to say or do Y. The discussion that follows is then aimed at investigating such dilemmatic point(s) and revealing the basis of his or her action choices: the expectations about the nature and consequences of the exchange and the values and beliefs about how they should behave in such a situation that lever the choices. The investigation of these allows elucidation of the participants’ reading of the situation and reasoning as to why in such a case, saying or doing X was deemed unsayable or undoable, which then reveals the underlying set of rules they were working from that had led to their choice of action.

Following the discussion with the author of the incident, each recount was presented to a Focus Group of four or five Australians, who discussed how they read the situation, and what available options they considered the Chinese person had at various points in the interchange to achieve what they had wanted to achieve. The problem that ensues in the interaction as a result of the Chinese participants’ choice of action will have been caused by a mismatch between their reading of the situation and the typical reading by an Australian of the same situation; and/or a mismatch in the set of rules they apply in such situations, or some of both.

The recount, and the Chinese and Australian views of it, constitute a case. In what follows, selected cases from the study are presented to illustrate the study findings.

### **JIAN’S CASE**

Jian was a 29 year old Chinese woman working for an accounting firm. Jian indicated in her survey response that she did not know how to have a social chat with her Australian colleagues and thus was unable to achieve the same closeness of relationships with them as they had among themselves. To illustrate her experience, she gave the following account.



Table 2. Jian's recount

Setting		
Don is an Australian man. One afternoon, after our boss left the office and we were both working, Don went to the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. When he came back, he started the following conversation with me [Jian later added that Don was in his mid-20s and she knew he was gay. He had been working for the company longer than she had. They shared the same office with a few other colleagues].		
What Don said/did	What Jian said/did	What Jian thought
I will make chocolate cake tonight.	Really? That's great.	He uttered this quite suddenly. I really don't know what I can say to follow this.
Pause	What kind of flour do you need?	Perhaps what I said is too short. He seems quite excited and I feel that I need to say more in response. But I feel that we are not that close yet. I don't know what to say. Perhaps the only thing I can ask is how he's going to make the cake. I wanted to ask why he's going to make the cake, but I feel that it is a little rude to ask this question. Perhaps he doesn't want to tell. If I asked, and he answers like "I just want to have it". Then our conversation would be over quite abruptly. (Note: I'm always like this. I would think whether it is appropriate before I say anything or ask any questions, I think too much).
From Safeway or Coles, the normal flour and cocoa powder.	Do I have to buy special chocolate or something else if I want to make one?	
If you like, you can get some dark chocolate. But cocoa powder would be enough.	Okay, maybe I will try next time.	I couldn't think of anything else to ask him so I just end the conversation. It doesn't feel natural to talk like this.

Jian's dilemma in this incident is shown to be that, although she had hoped to say more in response to what Don said in order to sustain their conversation, she had no idea what might make a suitable topic, and instead said things she felt were inadequate for her purposes, which effectively closed down the interaction.

Jian explained in discussion that she had wanted to have a more sustained conversation not only because she felt this was the right thing to do as Don seemed 'quite excited', but also because she would have liked the opportunity to get to know her colleagues better: 'Usually it's all about work... So it's good to talk with them'. Asked why she rejected her first thought to ask Don why he wanted to make a cake, Jian explained that 'we don't know each other that well', so asking that question 'may get too much into his privacy and not be okay', and even 'rude'. For the same reason she felt it would be inappropriate to bring up other topics that came to mind, such as his long weekend or the fact that 'men in China do not cook a lot'. Adding to her constraint from saying these pieces was also the fear of exposing her lack of language proficiency: 'I don't want to say it wrong, make grammar mistakes or not to have them understand me...quite embarrassing'. As a result, Jian chose instead to ask Don about the ingredients of his cake and the conversation petered out when she could not think of anything else to ask.

Jian felt the interaction was 'not natural' because she was very nervous and trying to think of questions to ask; and towards the end, '[it] went a little bit dry and didn't make any sense'. She felt perhaps she had taken it 'a bit seriously by asking him for the recipe', whereas Don perhaps had only meant for a casual chat. Jian was also critical of her own performance in the interaction: 'I think too much...there are always things that I want to say, but I can't say because I'm not sure if it's appropriate to say so'. As a result of this exchange, she worried that Don might have felt that she was 'not very enthusiastic' about what he said, and concluded that 'it would take a while for [us] to be able to chat with each other again'. Emerging from Jian's reasoning are the principles she was following when making action choices, which are set out in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Jian's principles of interaction

Examples of evidence from the discussion	Principles of interaction
<p><i>If among friends, friends can ask why you are making a cake...But I'm not close to him. Asking him this may not be appropriate. This may get too much into his privacy and not be okay. It may not be polite to do so.</i></p> <p><i>We don't know each other that well and he may not want to tell me.</i></p> <p><i>...in a couple of months, if we get closer, I would ask him why.</i></p> <p><i>But I always feel very nervous when I talk with them. I would be very conscious about my grammar. I don't want to say it wrong, make grammar mistakes or not to have them understand me...quite embarrassing.</i></p> <p><i>I always have the sentence in my mind first and then say it....</i></p>	<p>There are definite limits to what she says to people at the office, and the level of her relationship with them is key to making such decisions.</p> <p>The transition of her relationship with others from being just co-workers to one in which she can engage at a personal level would take a rather long time.</p> <p>She should present herself speaking correctly. Failing to do so would cause embarrassment for both and it must not be risked.</p>

Analysis of the discussion with Jian shows the crux of her dilemma is that she would not allow herself to say certain things because this could mean crossing the privacy boundary with people she was not close to. There was also the fear of producing errors in English that would then lead to the intolerable embarrassment of a breakdown in communication and a negative assessment of her. While anxious to come up with things to keep the conversation going, Jian avoided the risk of these negative outcomes that her more spontaneous responses might cause. Yet, what she did say in the end failed to achieve her goal to keep Don's interest or elicit extended responses from him.

Presented with Jian's incident, Australians in the Focus Group quickly agreed: 'It was an attempt at a nice chitchat', 'a friendly move' on Don's part to not only 'fill in a little bit', but also to 'volunteer some information' so as to have 'an opportunity to try to get to know Jian a little bit better'. The topic Don had brought up was also considered appropriate in that it was 'informal', 'simple', 'safe', 'sort of personal impersonal', and one 'that everyone might be interested in'. However, the way the conversation then progressed was problematic, and even 'odd'. Although they could see that Jian was being polite and trying to keep the conversation alive, she seemed to have 'skipped a few steps' and jumped straight into asking about cake

ingredients, which Australians found funny and unexpected. The whole conversation therefore felt like ‘it’s just two people who do not know what to say to each other’.

To explain the problem, Australians pointed out that Jian ‘doesn’t know how to have an informal conversation with someone at work’. What she could have done is to offer ‘something slightly personal’, by saying things such as: ‘Yum, I love chocolate cake, do you do a lot of cooking?’ or even what she herself had in mind, asking about why he was making a cake, although in a more hedged manner: ‘Is there a special occasion or something?’ The Australians therefore suggested that in this incident Jian may not have understood that the main thrust of an informal social interchange is to exchange personal information and to get to know each other better on a social and personal level. By asking questions about the details of making the chocolate cake, Jian most likely had led the conversation into a direction which was not what Don had in mind, resulting in the subsequent awkwardness.

In elaborating their views on Jian’s incident, the Focus Group participants revealed the following principles of interaction.

Table 4. Principles of interaction by the Australian Focus Group

Examples of evidence from the discussion	Principles of interaction
<i>In the Australian context, if you have a coffee break...there is this notion that you are having time out from work. So what you don't talk about is work. You talk about something else. – Participant 1</i>	People should talk about non-work matters in social situations.
<i>My interpretation is that he would expect: 'Do you cook a lot?' or something like that, getting into a discussion of interests or things like that. – Participant 1</i>	The purpose of having a social conversation is to get to know one another at a personal and social level. It is thus important to show engagement at a personal level.
<i>I probably would have gone into something a little slightly personal. – Participant 2</i>	
<i>I would have taken that as some sort of statement that he is a cook and he sort of wants to talk about that. – Participant 1</i>	
<i>She should have volunteered something personal. – Participant 3</i>	
<i>It was something simple where he could speak to a stranger. – Participant 3</i>	Topics such as food and sports are safe and common in social conversations because these topics are personal but not too intimate.

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*It's almost impersonal, sort of personal impersonal.* – Participant 2

*It's a common topic but maybe also something that everyone might be interested in.* – Participant 4

*There is something harmless like personal information like 'I love chocolate cake too'. I don't think that sticks outside the comfort zone anyway. That's really low level personal confession.* – Participant 2

*People would ask: 'What you are doing over the weekend...'. But that's personal stuff but it's very superficial level.* – Participant 5

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## OTHER CASES

The nature of the incident and its dynamics as shown in Jian's case are typical of that found in most of the cases in the study. Many of the incidents recalled are as fleeting and seemingly trivial in the broad scheme of time at work. The dilemmas, however, were excruciatingly felt, and the outcomes often expressed in heavily negative terms.

Bai, a married chemical engineer in her late 20s, for example, recounted an incident to illustrate her social experience at work that involved a brief 'how are you' exchange initiated by her colleague, Tim. Bai's dilemma in the encounter was that, although she really wanted to say something else to Tim, she could not, and instead said: 'I'm fine. Thanks. What about you?', an utterance she understood was inappropriate given that she had already had a similar exchange with Tim earlier that morning.

Pursued in the discussion, Bai claimed to have actually run some possible topics through her mind at the time but rejected these as either being 'superficial' or inappropriate. After ruling out factors of language and personality in the discussion, it then became evident that what had really held her back was the concern that she 'did not know him very well' and had never had any 'meaningful contact' with him. If it were in China, Bai explained, she wouldn't need to say anything in the same situation. Hence encounters like this were felt 'like a burden' and she wished 'they don't say that [how are you] so I don't have to respond'.

As in Jian's case, what constrained Bai from giving an alternative response in the encounter was not so much her lack of language or knowledge, as her uncertainty as to what it would be appropriate for her to say to people she knew very little about, a situation she had had little experience handling. Likewise in the case of 34 year old Hua working in a corporate research

company, who considered her response to a colleague who asked about her recent trip overseas to be 'inadequate', but was equally uncertain what else she could have said. She explained this was because: 'For Chinese people, I think we have circles of friends, inner circle, and outer circle. There are things we share with inner circle of friends and do not usually talk with the outer circle, like work friends'. Similarly, 25 year old Fei in a finance company believed that part of the reason he struggled to respond to jokes from Australian colleagues was that the Australians from a young age 'are in contact with a lot of people' and 'are trained to talk to different people', whereas Chinese like himself 'grow up in small circles' and do not have as much experience talking to people outside these groups.

Presented with these incidents, the Australians in the Focus Groups were quick to recognise the situational demands and point out the inappropriateness of the Chinese responses. For example, the Australians considered what Bai had said as 'a textbook type of response', 'polite' but 'closed' and 'non-committal'. They agreed that while a simple 'Fine, thank you' would have been sufficient, there was also plenty of room for Bai to open up the conversation had she wanted to. In Hua's case, just as she herself suspected, the response was felt by the Focus Group to be 'insufficient' because it was 'factual' and 'not personal'. The group concluded that Hua most likely had not realised the purpose of such social interaction is to exchange personal feelings and emotions. Fei's responding to a joke at all was also considered 'not okay'. The least he could have done, according to the Australians, was to seek clarification when he was confused about what his colleague meant. Reading across the cases of what the Australians would have said or done in similar situations, there is a clear emphasis on acknowledging the person and showing personal engagement, while keeping it causal and light at the same time.

Despite their superficial differences, the incidents reported by the Chinese professionals all involved instances of small talk, and analysis shows discrepancies between the Chinese and Australian views on the conduct of small talk. In the next section these discrepancies are discussed in light of the key features of Chinese and Anglo-Australian interpersonal relationships.

## DISCUSSION

### DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN CHINESE-AUSTRALIAN VIEWS OF SMALL TALK

As shown in the cases presented, while the conduct of the Australian interlocutors in the recalled encounters were considered by Australians to be typically social and collegial, the Chinese participants did not feel the necessity to engage in small talk and tended to give responses that the Australians considered unacceptable due to being impersonal about themselves, non-participatory, and disregarding the need to engage at a personal level with their Australian counterparts.

More specifically, similar to findings in the LWP studies discussed earlier, Chinese professionals reported having great difficulty deciding on what topics would be appropriate when engaging in small talk. Even when they admitted knowing what the Australians would have said in the same situation, they could not bring themselves to act that way, either because they felt they should not be like that, or feared not saying it the right way. In addition, they were anxious to avoid any risk of making a fool of themselves by displaying errors in their English, or in the content of their contributions. These inhibitions in many cases kept them from contributing even in the form of clarifying meaning.

Months after their seemingly trivial incident involving small talk had occurred, the Chinese in each case were still beset by uncertainty, anxiety and even anguish over it. By contrast, all the Australians consulted exhibited immediate recognition of the situation, a certainty about what was being meant and an assuredness in knowing how the interaction should be comfortably managed. As in the literature of small talk, the rules the Australians applied emphasised that participation in small talk exchanges on non-controversial topics makes up an indispensable part of workplace social life and contributes to a pleasant working atmosphere. Withdrawal from these interchanges was considered negatively. Instead, they asserted, even when one doesn't want to, or does not have the knowledge to participate, a minimal contribution in either verbal or non-verbal form to acknowledge the person and show personal engagement is still necessary. These rules were unknown to the Chinese, and even when sensed, were rejected as inappropriate for their own behaviour.

### **PARTICIPANTS' BELIEFS ABOUT INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Emerging from the discussion with Chinese participants in the study is the universal view that society is made up of distinct groups and group membership decides the manner and content of their interaction. Within the Chinese society the participants belong to, a small number of trusted in-group friends is preferred and high barriers in both time and manner are erected around these people to keep others at a distance. This is a practice that enacts the differential mode of association characterising the typical egoism proposed by Fei (1947) and reiterated by others (e.g. Ren, 2008; Tsui & Farh, 1997).

While the Australians also distinguish relationships by closeness, in contrast to the Chinese egoism, they do not make as clear a distinction among these in social situations. The importance of being friendly to many is emphasised, and there are relatively lower barriers around themselves for letting people know what they think and feel about a comparatively wide range of topics. However, this friendliness does not indicate, nor does it imply, the desire to develop a closer relationship. Such practices illustrate a type of interpersonal relationship consisting of individuals loosely but more equally related, a perception derived from the independent self-construal fundamental to Anglo-Australian culture (e.g. West &

Murphy, 2007; Wierzbicka, 2010). There is also a perceived espousal of informality in workplace social interactions.

The mismatches in the Chinese and Australian practices that are manifest in experience and differences in attitude about small talk, express a difference in their fundamental belief about how self and others are related.

### **SMALL TALK IN THE AUSTRALIAN AND CHINESE SOCIETY**

As interpersonal relationships in the Anglo-Australian context are characterised by individuals on an equal basis, more loosely connected than in the Chinese context, the management of such relationships demands a mode of discourse like small talk, so that an appropriate level of friendliness and pleasantness can be maintained among individuals of different levels of relation. Small talk obscures the surface differences among different types of relationship, both horizontally and vertically, and in doing so creates a sense of equality in social situations, which is congruent with the value of egalitarianism widely espoused in Australian society.

Small talk suits a wide range of relationships in Australian society, and its use may not reflect differences in the closeness of one's relationship with others. Participating in small talk does not demand a close relationship between the interlocutors, nor does it indicate any desire to become closer. It is by engaging with one another on such neutral and safe topics as the weather and holidays, yet at a personal level, that the desired level of pleasantness at work is maintained, and at the same time, people do not get too involved with one another, or end up in a confrontation over beliefs and values.

In contrast to the Australian concept of interpersonal relationships with its need for a generally applicable mode of discourse, Chinese interpersonal relationships do not provide the looseness and equality needed for small talk. Outside the intimate circle there is generally a lack of recognised interactional standards to regulate relations among the various circles. In spite of the changes brought by modernisation, as in the past, people still follow distinctly different codes for managing different types of relationships (e.g. Song & Liao, 2007; Tan & Snell, 2002; Wang & Chen, 2010; Ye, 2004a).

Due to the lack of close contact beyond the intimate circle, Chinese participants in the study were not experienced with small talk as it is not particularly needed for regulating interpersonal relationships in Chinese society. On the one hand, for those already close, small talk does not allow communication to be sufficiently deep so as to reinforce the relationship; and on the other, for relationships that are more at the acquaintance level, there is not the perceived need to engage personally, and there is a general lack of attention to socialising at all with people belonging to one's out-groups. Small talk initiated by their Australian colleagues thus presents Chinese participants with a new situation for which they lack



experience and repertoire, and adapting to this requires responding in ways that deviate from their own values and beliefs about how to deal with social relationships.

As a result, we could predict that, as was the case in the incidents detailed above, Chinese may not be aware of the necessity to show interest and engage at a personal level in casual encounters at work; they are likely to feel restrained towards their colleagues and would not usually initiate interaction themselves. On the occasions when they do want to take part, they are likely to experience great uncertainty about the intent of the Australians, the level of appropriate disclosure and enquiry, the content, and the length of exchange. The way in which small talk is usually initiated by their Australian colleague, spontaneously and unexpected, further adds to the demand on a Chinese person's capacity both to comprehend and respond. As a result, they may be unable to muster at the time even the sociolinguistic knowledge they do have so as to respond promptly.

A theory of action involving small talk at the national level is, of course, only a general indication of how any individual or small group might behave. Furthermore, the Chinese participants in the study were born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and grew up in a transitional period when China was experiencing great economic and social changes as a result of its increasing contact with the Western world. Findings drawn from the social experience of this particular group may need to be generalised with caution to the wider Chinese immigrant population.

## CONCLUSION

The study reported involved the innovative step of examining the perspectives of both sides of intercultural interactions that have gone badly. The aim was to identify and examine the deep sociocultural causes underlying the challenges that confront Chinese immigrant professionals when engaging in workplace small talk with their Anglo-Australian colleagues. Findings show that at root there are mismatches in the deeply held beliefs and values each side holds about the nature of personal identity and interpersonal relationships, and differences in their belief about how relationships beyond the intimate circle should be managed. While small talk suits the particular need for regulating interpersonal relationships of Anglo-Western society, it does not easily fit the concentric pattern of Chinese interpersonal relationships; and hence Chinese participants lack experience in making small talk and so have not developed the adult skills in small talk that are expected of them in Australia. Such situations quite often confront Chinese with a dilemma in which they have to choose to adhere to their socioculturally ingrained codes of behaviour or adopt what is expected in the new society. When put to the test, as the study shows, the affective grip of the Chinese home culture principles is likely to dictate the outcome, and the consequences of that are confusion for all involved and an undesired distancing from then on.

The study opens a line of research which could fruitfully be continued to examine the range and depth of operating rules invoked in actual unexpected encounters. The study also has implications for intercultural training courses that prepare overseas students or immigrants for their life in Australia. Although behaviour is not easily changed fast, and change may not even be sought, immigrants can still benefit from learning factual knowledge about their new society and build a repertoire of acceptable comments they can draw on in frequently occurring small talk situations. Armed with the necessary metapragmatic information (Fraser, 2010; Holmes & Riddiford, 2010b), the newcomers can set out on a path of observing and deepening understanding of different norms of speaking in the new society, as well as developing the cognitive maturity to critique their own behaviours.

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