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A study of intercultural management communication

Swedish expatriate managers in China

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Master in Communication

Report nr. 2015:60



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Abstract

China as one of emerging economies has attracted a large number of global companies, including Swedish ones, to engage in the financial investments and create many business collaborations cross-national borders. Swedish managers inevitably go to China for some reasons such as long or short-term assignment in local or Swedish organization located in China or negotiation with Chinese business partners. However, many aspects of culture and communication differ between Scandinavian countries and China, such as communication styles, feedback, and leadership styles. Those from Scandinavian countries lay on one extreme of the axis, while those from China lay one side. Thus, this study is focusing on that how Swedish expatriate managers adjust or adopt him/herself in China regarding the aspect of communication and communicative leadership. It is a study of cross-cultural management involving the interaction of culturally different people in the context of organization. The data was collected by in-depth interviews with nine Swedish managers who had worked in China for at least two years in past decade. The interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes guided by a semi-structured three-part interview questions concerning not only Swedish and Chinese culture differences and similarities but also Swedish management settlement in China. The result indicates that it clearly show that most Swedish managers enjoyed the time when they stayed in China. More importantly, it became obvious that there are more similarities than differences between two countries. Two major similarities are reflected on both Swedish and Chinese trying to avoid direct conflict and being task-orientated. These two similarities are extremely important in an international organization. Based on these two similarities, the collaboration between two countries undoubtedly will go more smoothly once the common goal is achieved. Even for differences, they are diminishing with increasing globalization and development of technology.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Nowadays the world is moving toward globalization, which is embedded with advanced telecommunications technology, cross-border trade and business, multicultural environment and integrated global economic system. It is common in this interdependent global economy that manager works in different countries with diverse cultural background. Due to the reducing transportation costs and efficient transportation network, global managers move easily to from one county to other countries. China as one of emerging economies has attracted a large number of global companies, including Swedish ones, to engage in the financial investments and create many business opportunities cross-national borders. In the past decade, a new trend appeared that there is a dramatic increase in China's outward foreign direct investment. In 2013, China has ranked as the third largest source of foreign direct investment flows in the work, followed only the USA and Japan (You and Solomon 2015). Altogether, China is becoming a marketplace attracting more and more international managers as result of inward and outward foreign investment. Thus, a large number of international companies keep sending numbers of expatriates to China for several reasons, such as managerial control, organizational development, position filling and management development (Edström and Galbraith 1977; Harzing 2001; Clegg and Gray 2002).

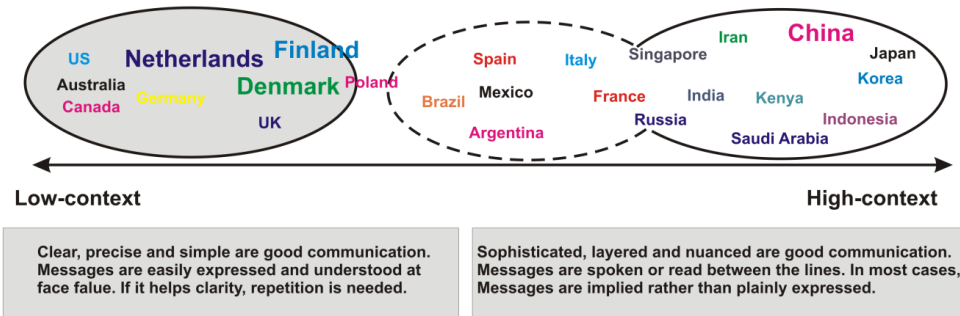
1.2 Problem discussion

However, Chinese marketplace brings not only the opportunities but also challenges to foreign companies. These foreign expatriates have to have things done in the new cultural and social context, which can be a difficult task. For most Western expatriates, China is an unfamiliar cultural environment with differences such as in food, language, expectations, personal space, etc. These differences sometime appear to be neither understandable nor acceptable, which may result in stress in some extend. As mentioned by Browaeys and Price (Browaeys and Price 2008:p88), when business cross cultures, especially when Western cultures meet with Asian cultures, reconciliation is necessary and desirable in order to build up transcultural competence. Cultural awareness, respect and reconciliation are three fundamental components of transcultural competence.

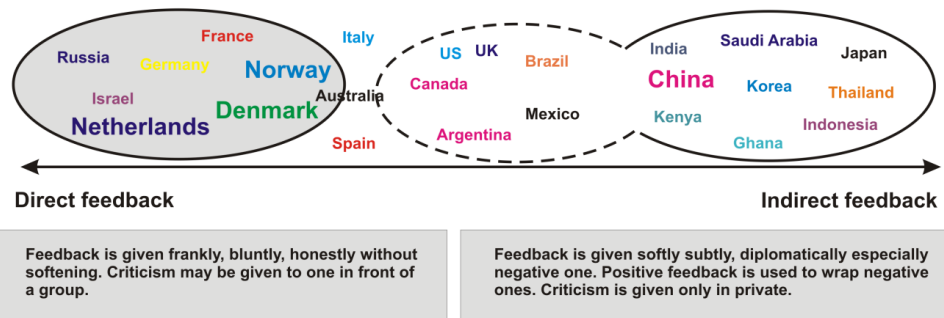
Thus, there are numerous studies regarding to China in the context of cross-cultural differences, such as how to negotiate with Chinese counterpart, how to build friendly relationship (*guanxi*) in China, how to distinguish politeness and reality during communication, etc. When Chinese culture is compared to American or western culture, Chinese culture is usually defined as collectivist while American or western culture is often considered as individualism (Liu, Spector et al. 2007). Thus, relationships and the harmony, collaboration, and face-work are very important for successful business interaction in China. Two Confucian concepts, saving face (Fang 2003) and forbearance (Hwang 1998), are also highlighted when comparing Chinese cultures with American

ones (Liu, Spector et al. 2007). Current Chinese young workforce is dominated by Social Reform generation, while managers are mainly dominated by the Consolidation generation and the Cultural Revolution generation. Since the generation is considered as a subculture in a country that indicates the value orientations during a particular historical period of that nation (Egri and Ralston 2004), cultural difference may exist between generations in a rapid growing country. The difference between these generations, on one hand, reflects the social economic development; and on another hand, it urges new evaluation of variables in intercultural communication.

A. Communication



B. Feedback



C. Leadership

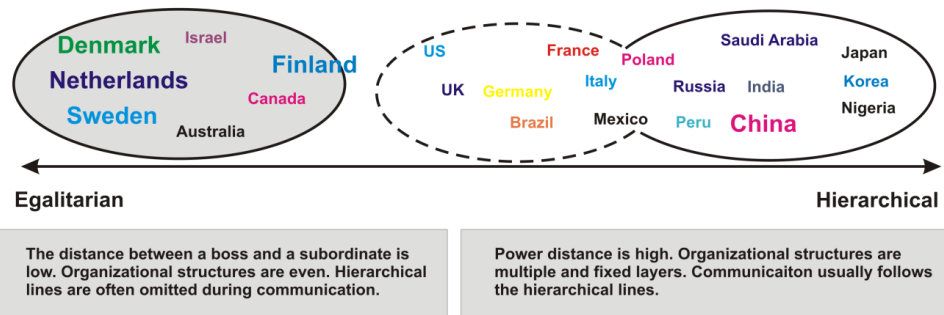


Figure 1. Scandinavian countries differ from China in many aspects, such as high and low-context during communication (A); direct and indirect communication (B); different styles of leadership (C). Source: (Meyer 2014:p41 and p69)

Many Swedish expatriate managers working in Chinese subsidiaries. Apparently, Sweden and China have different cultures and languages. “Ru xiang sui su (Entering a village,

following customs there)” is an old Chinese proverb. It is similar to the idiom “When in Rome, do as the Romans”. This proverb recommend us to adapt the way people behave and get things done, the people will be comfortable with you. Thus, it is important to have a better understanding of how differences in culture affect global communications. The values and norms of culture influenced the way that Swedish and Chinese behave in intercultural communications. Within an international company, it is important for leaders to manage these differences and relationships between employees from various cultural backgrounds. Therefore, effective communication helps Swedish managers develop and maintain good relationships in Chinese context workplace. In addition, overcome the communication problems of cultural difference can also turned to advantage to success.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

The earlier of skillful Western expatriates adjust themselves in China, the more instrumental will be achieved towards a success. However, many aspects of culture and communication differ between Scandinavian countries and China. For example, as shown in Figure 1, regarding to communication styles, feedback, and leadership Scandinavian countries and China are quite different. It means for Swedish managers, they have to not only travel half way around the world to another country but also adopt or adjust themselves from one extreme to another. Therefore, this study is focusing on that how Swedish expatriate managers adjust or adopt him/herself in China. In details, the research questions are:

How does Swedish manager work together with Chinese colleagues successfully in the Chinese workplace?

2. Theoretical background

This study is intercultural communication study in the context of Chinese-Swedish business workplace. Since this study focused on Swedish expatriate managers in China, the Swedish and Chinese cultures as well as intercultural communication will be major aspects of this study. There are many similarities and differences in culture between these two countries. It is a challenge for the twenty-first century managers to work in an increasingly social-networked, complex and cross-cultural environment.

2.1 Culture

What is culture? It refers to “*all the characteristics common to a particular group of people that are learned and not given by nature*” (Allwood 1985). Or it can be defined as “*Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people*” (Lustig and Koester 2010).

Culture as a complex whole includes values, norms, beliefs, customs, knowledge and other capabilities possessed by people as units of society. There are four primary cultural dimensions: patterns of thought; behavior; artifacts and imprints in nature. Firstly, patterns of thought mean common ways of thinking. It is the way of thinking values, norms, factual beliefs and emotional attitudes. Secondly, patterns of behavior identify common ways of behaving. Regarding the behavior could be aware/unaware; intentional/unintentional or individual/interactive, so it is not only from ways of speaking but also to ways of conducting commerce and industry. Thirdly, patterns of artifacts are the common ways of using material things and manufacturing. It includes artificial object like pens to houses, tools, dwellings, machines or media. Usually the artificial dimension of culture is given attention in museums on purpose. Lastly, imprints in nature are the environment where the long lasting imprints left by a certain group in the natural surroundings. As matter of fact, culture in the meaning of growth demonstrates a basic understanding of the notion of what is all about culture. Normally patterns of thought and behavior are involved in all human activities (Allwood 1985).

To elucidate the similarities and differences between two cultures, *Chinese Confucianism* and *Swedish Equality and Lagom* are illustrated in following sections. One can easily find out the Chinese value systems as well as ethical systems differ with Swedish ones.

2.1.1 Chinese Confucianism

Confucianism as the official ethical system in China has more than 2,000 years. It was founded by Kung-Fu-Tzu, the great sage master (孔子, 大成至圣先师) in the fifth century BC in ancient China. Confucian ideology has deeply embedded in Chinese culture over centuries. It is easy to recognize people's values and norms are based on Confucian's thought (Hill 2007). Language clearly distinguishes different cultures. It is

not the same meaning when literally translated the same words from one culture to another. Unlike the West's language, attitudes toward work and culture, Confucian Asian is more restrained in interpersonal behavior (Bass and Bass 2008).

Chinese employee's loyalty to manager and high moral, ethical conduct is central to Confucianism. Confucianism has strong influence on the culture not only in China, but also in Japan and South Korea. Loyalty to leaders, honesty in dealing with others and reciprocal obligations are the main values of Confucianism. In Confucian ideology, loyalty to one's leader or superiors is regarded as an absolute obligation or a sacred duty. The Chinese concept of "guanxi" refers to relationship networks encouraged by reciprocal obligations. In business settings "guanxi" might be better understood as connections, although literally means relationship in Chinese context. "Guanxi" will be the first cultural shock for Western managers, who usually come from deal-focused and task-oriented environment. In China, the relationship-focused culture (or "guanxi") is not amenable to doing business with stranger. It often cultivates "guanxi" in China as an important mechanism for develop long-term business relationships and make things done successfully. As Swedish managers have come to understand that the importance of Confucian philosophy of hierarchy and relationships between management and employees. Power relationships illustrate a basic difference of leadership and communication between Swedish and Chinese culture in workplace (Hill 2007).

In Chinese societies, Confucianism plays a decisive role and has a great impact on people's behavior. Thus, the values and a set of moral principles used to shape and guide Chinese behavior have different implications for business practice (Hill 2007).

2.1.2 Swedish Equality (egalitarianism) and Lagom

Scandinavian cultures have been equality-minded in many years. There are 6000 cultures among the world communicate in a more hierarchical and official way than Swedish do. Back in the pre-Christian era, rank and status differences have been less regarded in Vikings. Captain usually elected by boat crews. The world's first democratic legislative assembly has been settled in Iceland in 930 during the first millennium by Vikings. Compare with slavery abolishment in British and Americans in 1355, Scandinavian culture took five more centuries earlier. Equality-minded started up since then for a long time (Gesteland 2005).

Women plays important role in managing the family farm and fully responsibility at home when the Viking men were at sea. Women even could inherit and own property. It was not surprisingly that many well-educated and self-confident women as managers or executives making decision of Swedish companies. Therefore, egalitarian values manifest in the flat structure of Swedish organization as well as management model. It is common that top executives interact directly with junior employees and vice versa. In the meantime, feedback based on equality-minded from both sides facilitates better communication in organizations. The informal way of Swedish communication with each other is also based on the strong belief in equality and simplicity (Gesteland 2005).

This represents a society that men and women are equal. Therefore, Swedish Equality emphasized egalitarianism into modern society's workplace as well.

According to Hofstede, people living in feminine societies are featured with nurturing, quality of life, equality and solidarity while people living in masculine societies are characteristic with male control, achievement, and competitiveness (Hofstede and Hofstede 2001).

Lagom is one of the most reserved and distinguished virtues in Swedish culture (Gustavsson 1995). This is a state between two extremes, "not too much, not too little". The value of *lagom* can be inferred from the Jante Law and equality to express the mind of evenness. The *lagom* rooted in Swedes sometimes can be frustrating for many foreigners since it seems like either conflict avoiding, formal, boring, uncommunicative, socially confined, or emotionally cold. But on another hand, this reflects that the characteristic stability and openness to outside of Swedish society in general.

Since many countries have more hierarchical business culture than in Sweden, it might have cultural misunderstandings. Therefore, it is important for people from more hierarchical cultures to remember lack of deference does not actually mean lack of respect in Scandinavian cultures (Gesteland 2005).

2.2 Intercultural communication

According to Oxford English Dictionary, the word communication is defined as "*the action of communicating*" and "*the means of sending or receiving information.....*" (Dictionary 2009). Cross-cultural is comparisons between cultures, namely cross-cultural comparison.

According to Allwood (Allwood 1985), communication remains an important prior condition of human co-existence between people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Communication is characterized as the sharing information on different levels of control and awareness between people. The term intercultural is from the largely synonymous term cross-cultural and is linked to interdisciplinary. In another words, that is people cooperate with each other between different scientific backgrounds. In addition, different cultural backgrounds include not only national cultural differences but also differences that involved with participation in various activities that exist in a national unit.

The communication model is indispensable for people who are willing to understand intercultural communication, such as communication between Swedish and Chinese culture. Each sender or receiver is unconsciously goes to a certain framework when communicating. The framework includes interlocutor's knowledge of the theme under discussion; the professional or individual term's experience; interlocutor's norms and assumptions. There are distortion and misunderstanding of the messages when the sender and receivers do not share the same culture. Even if English as the global language in most international organizations remains the dominant factor in

communication process, there are still other important elements mattered, the culture context or nonverbal expressions for instance. Sometimes the messages pass might lead to incomprehension of the messages. Moreover, stereotypes and relationships are also involved in the communication model (Browaeyns and Price 2008).

Actually, several intercultural communication studies are derived from the research of Geert Hofstede, who introduced a cultural taxonomy that is nowadays used a guideline for behaviors in different cultures. Despite there are some limitations (McSweeney 2002; S oderberg and Holden 2002), the concept of five dimensions of national cultures that Hofstede developed are still widely used. These five dimensions of cultures are *power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism versus individualism, masculinity versus femininity* and *short- versus long-term orientation* (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). Recently, Hofstede added a sixth dimension namely, *indulgence versus restraint* (Hofstede, Hofstede et al. 2010). Besides these theories, the concepts of *high- and low-context* cultures as well as *polychronic versus monochronic time orientation* were developed by Hall (Hall 1981; Hall 1984). Hall emphasizes that the social context is essential for communication.

2.2.1 High- and low-context

Every culture has its own context, namely, its own way of perceiving or thinking. Context can be interpreted as the environment where communication process happened and facilitate to define the communication. Knowing each other's context helps people have mutual understanding for the communicated symbols and to the success of the communication. In low-context Swedish culture, message and information is explicit and contained in the words used. Words (verbal and direct) with minimal contextual meaning rather than context are used to give communication meaning. Communicators expect their words to be understood literally and specially. However, message in high-context Chinese culture is opposite. This means, in high-context cultures, message is delivered by behavior and context more than real words. People have to "read between the lines" in order to get right meaning. Most of the information is covert and implicit; messages are internalized; reactions normally reserved (Hall 1981; Hall 1984). Context connects to the cultural background. The Swedish managers prefer to come directly to the point and get down quickly to business with immediate feedback (Browaeyns and Price 2008). They might not note unsaid words or silence as a cue that something is wrong. The Chinese subordinate influenced by Confucianism, on the other hand, prefers not to talk directly about the business, and hidden important part of information in the text (Browaeyns and Price 2008).

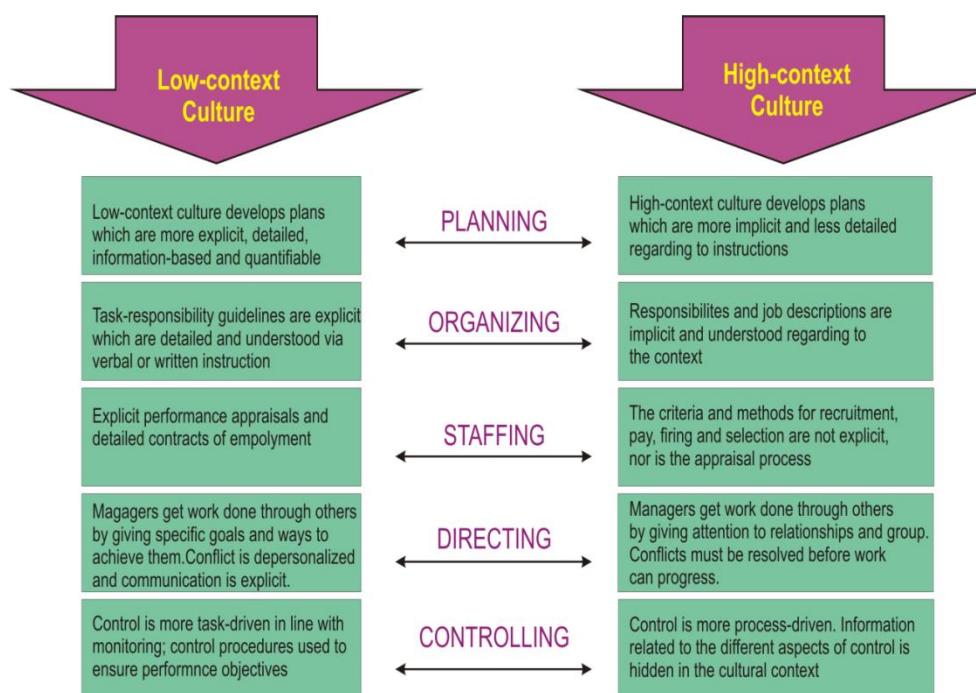


Figure 2. The general communication characteristics in high and low-context cultures (Browaeys and Price 2008).

To distinguish high- or low-context is less important than to understand the balance of verbal and non-verbal sign in any communication. One might integrate some combinations of both high- and low-context communication. Followings are difference and similarities of verbal and non-verbal communication in the context of Chinese and Swedish culture.

2.2.1.1 Verbal communication

Chinese verbal communication-Chinese tend to use indirect language in order to avoid offending people and losing face. It is the way to show polite and keeping face. A smile or laugh might signal nervousness, stress or embarrassment in Chinese verbal communication. When discussing important issues or difficult problems Chinese rely much more on face-to-face direct conversations and meetings than on written communication or phone conversations. Sometimes Chinese verbal communication may use indirect language and the meaning is ambiguous. Chinese think it might be offensive to respond with a blunt “No”. They may answer with a polite expression like “That will be not easy”. Due to the indirect discourse, such expression often confuses people from other cultures with more direct verbal language. In the northern part of China, people tend to speak rather softly and less complicated (Gesteland 2005:p181).

Swedish verbal communication-Swedish use direct verbal communication. Unlike Chinese relationship-focused culture, Swedish verbal directness might be perceived as bluntness. Swedes are comfortable talking business with strangers and transaction-oriented. The efficient Swede can get down to business directly. This is very unlike in relationship-oriented Chinese culture. Swedish managers sometime have to remind

themselves to use “polite” dialog and indirectly phrase in China. By doing so, it is better to avoid losing face and causing offense (Gesteland 2005:p302).

2.2.1.2 Non-verbal communication

Unspoken language, such as rising of eyebrows, smile, and other nonverbal cues, refers to non-verbal communication. It is unfavorable for Swedish managers to misunderstand the nonverbal cues of Chinese culture because this will lead to a communication failure and even conflict.

Chinese non-verbal communication-Chinese used to avoid a strong and direct gaze in eye contact communication. An attempt to an indication or intimidate of hostility might be interpreted by looking straight at the person. Very little touch behavior in Chinese low-contact culture (Gesteland 2005:p181).

Swedish non-verbal communication-Emotional reserved communication sometimes causes misunderstandings between Swedish and emotionally expressive behavior cultures. Soft-spoken language and Scandinavian reserve sometimes might confuse expressive cultures. It is also a problem of conversational overlap. Swedes raised in a rather reserved culture, therefore frequent interruptions is not polite and caused irritating and insulting. Swedes are very much on being punctual and schedule. It is very systematic and structured plan in Swedish time behavior. Furthermore, Swedes also expect their partners or co-workers to do the same, which is different compare with polychronic cultures (Gesteland 2005:p304).

2.2.2 Power distance

Hofstede defined the power distance as: “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede and Hofstede 2001:p98). The power distance is expressed by the *Power Distance Index* (PDI). The higher the index value is, the larger power distance the society has. Scandinavian countries are with a low PDI values such as Denmark (PDI=18), Sweden and Norway (PDI=31). On the contrary, Asian countries usually have a higher PDI values such as Singapore (PDI=114) and China (PDI=64) (Pheng and Yuquan 2002).

Therefore, it is plausible to expect that manager from high power-distance organizations refer to managing in a more patriarchal or dictatorial manner. There is less or no room for subordinates to participate. In this environment, statuses, formalities and titles are especially emphasized. On the contrary, manager from low power-distance organization tends to be more overt to his subordinates. Usually, managers are likely to dilute their authority by assigning the work to subordinates.

Chinese cultures are deeply embedded with Confucianism as mentioned above. Regarding to power distance, the “*Five Cardinal Relationships (Wu Lun)*” are most important relationships in Chinese society. These five relationships are between lord

and servant, father and child, husband and wife, older and younger, and friend and friend. Proper respects are expected when younger people meet older and higher-ranking persons. Hierarchical inequalities exist in these mutual responsibilities and respect between two parts in a relationship.

2.3 Cross-cultural management

Culture has an important influence on how managers view their world, on what they do, and on other aspects of managers. The importance of cross-cultural management is significant in the global business context. Management needs to take into account the people from diverse cultures in an organization and better manage their cultural differences. Being a wise manager with global knowledge and local understanding is always very helpful (Adler 2002).

Nancy Ader (Adler 2002) defines cross-cultural management in an international context:

“Cross-cultural management explains the behavior of people in organizations around the world and shows people how to work in organizations with employees and client populations from many different cultures. Cross-cultural management describes organizational behavior within countries and cultures; compares organizational behavior across countries and cultures: and, perhaps most important, seeks to understand and improve the interaction of co-workers, managers, executives, clients, suppliers, and alliance partners from countries and cultures around the world.”

Global manager is facing with a global competitive scale. A global manager assigned to a different culture subsidiary must expect to become aware of large and small differences in the individuals and groups behavior within that organization. The differences result from the sociocultural and national variables, also cultural variables. Economic and political system, technological factors and language, education as well as religion for instance. These variables from national and sociocultural prepare for the maintenance of development and perpetuation of the variables of the culture. However, the cultural variables decide basic attitudes toward time, work, materialism, change and individualism. An individual's motivation and expectations is affected by such attitudes regarding group relations and work behavior. Finally the attitude influenced outcomes that individual expected initially (Deresky 2013).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Literature review

The literature review is mainly focusing on Hofstede's theory (Hofstede and Hofstede 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede et al. 2010) and other available sources including books and peer-reviewed journal articles related to Swedish and Chinese management communication, conflict solution and cross-cultural management. Books and journal articles were carefully selected; most of them were published after 2000. Some of these theories or options were also used when analysing the data and discussion.

3.2 In-depth interviews

This study is qualitative research. The objective of qualitative research is to collect information in various ways in order to get a deeper interpretation of the topic studied. It is unlike quantitative method in which a high degree of formalisation is needed such as statistical means. Interviews are one common qualitative method (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011).

3.2.1 The purpose and nature of an in-depth interview

In-depth interview is a one-to-one method of data collection that occurs between a single interviewee and interviewer, specific topics have been discussed deeper in the conversation (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011). In our in-depth interview, the purpose is to discover cross-cultural management communication of Swedish manager in China. The semi-structured in-depth interview is a good way of accessing interviewee's perceptions regarding cross-cultural communication in an active research.

Because the interviewer and interviewee react to each other's personality, characteristics and appearance, instead of only asking and responding to questions. It is somehow can be called a special kind of *knowledge-producing conversation*. The interviewer and respondent co-create knowledge and meaning during the interview scenario and re-built reality (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011). There are several important things can be identified among all the information of in-depth interviews.

Firstly, "*Narratives about people's lives*" (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011:p110). Story has been shared by an interviewee in in-depth interview normally recorded by tape/phone or other recording facilities for analyses transcribing (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011).

Secondly, "*The subjectivity of the interviewee*" (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011:p110). An individual's story has been strongly influenced by interviewee his/her identity and background characteristics per se. Identifying subjectivity provides researchers better understanding of interviewee's particular story.

Thirdly, “*The context in which the interviewee lives*” (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011:p110). In order to make the interviewee feel more comfortable, in-depth interview usually takes place in a private and quiet place. Therefore it is easily to identify the context in which interviewees’ economic, cultural and social context (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011). Thus, these in-depth interviews of this study were primarily taken place in a meeting room of interviewee’s workplace, or discussion room of University library, or other places that interviewee suggested.

According to Hennink, in-depth interviewing includes many important steps. For example, a *semi-structured interview guide* need to be used to prompt the data collection; *a trust relationship rapport* need to be established between interviewer and interviewee; *open question* should be asked towards *empathic* attitude; and interviewee need to be motivated voluntary to tell their story by *probing* (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011).

3.2.2 Interviewees selection

In this study, the primary data collection was carried out from February to May of 2015. Nine interviewees were involved in this study. These interviewees were selected based on two criteria:

- (1) One has to work in China in past few years;
- (2) The position in China should be manager or equivalent.

There were eight male interviewees and one female interviewee. The age span is 20-65 years old. The gender bias was caused mainly due to the availability of different participants as well as ages. The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes. Detailed information of each interviewee related to this study is described in Table 1.

Table 1. List of interviewees.

Interviewee	Company [a]	Period in China [b]	Years in China	Cities in China	Duration of interview (minutes)
A	SKF	2005-2010	5	Shanghai	1:37:09
B	Volvo	2012-2014	3	Shanghai	36:34
C	ABB	2013-2015	2	Shanghai	21:05
D	Ericsson	1999-2003	5	Beijing, Chengdong	28:31
E	Retired	1988-2013	26	Beijing	52:33
F	Gettinge	2011-2014	3	Shanghai	35:07
G	IKEA	2008-2012	4	Shanghai, Guangzhou	38:25
H	Ericsson	2001-2003	2	Shanghai, Guangzhou	30:22

- a) It is current company or status, which is not necessarily the same company the interviewee worked for in China.
- b) It is a proximal period especially for long-term and multiple depositions.

3.2.3 Conducting an interview

An interview guide is needed in a typical semi-structured in-depth interview. It includes main issues such as introduction, background questions, key questions and closing questions (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011). Based on the purpose of this study, an interview guide of cross-cultural management communication has been structured. It is useful because it helped me to understand the sequence and control the procedures of in-depth interview. The questions are listed in the Appendix part of this thesis.

During our in-depth interview, the whole conversation has been recorded by phone, and then the mp3-format audio document has been transcribed as an in-depth interview. The conversation took place in a very easy, quiet and comfortable environment. When conducting the interview, interviewer needs to listen and respond to the interviewee. I always responded to the interviewee with feedback and asking follow-up questions as well as probing so that the interview can be kept on the right track of the guide. As interviewer, I always start with introducing myself and the purpose of in-depth interview to the participant. By doing so, the interviewee has been informed properly, instead of feeling rude. From the ethical issue consideration, privacy confidentiality and anonymity has been informed to the interviewee that the recorded conversation will be only for this study not for other place.

3.2.4 Transcribing and data analysis

The transcribing part of the in-depth interview was done manually by dictating the recorded interviewers on personal computer. Transcription includes making a written record of an in-depth interview for data analysis (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011). Since the interviewee has fluent English and standard accent, it is not difficult to write down the words, dictions, and word emphasis. It is easy to identify who is speaking, especially to distinguish the words of the interviewer and interviewee.

The codes are the central activities in qualitative data analysis. The term code relates to a topic, an issue, opinion, idea, which is evident in the data (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011). Since the research question is about participant's cross-cultural management communication in China, I raised issues related to the research question, such as motivation, time, cultural issue, communication and misunderstanding. Because most of the codes are pointed out by participants ourselves, therefore all codes can be considered as inductive codes (Hennink, Hutter et al. 2011).

The transcripts were modified to some extent in order to make them readable to the readers. The transcripts were also validated with a friend of author by listening to the recorded interviews and checking the transcripts. The data were then analyzed by using categorizations. The content related to similar theme or theories such as hierarchy, feedback and communication was put into several categories. The major categories were then described and discussed in following section.

4. Result

The results of this study are displayed according the research questioned raised to reviewees.

4.1 Views on Chinese hierarchy by Swedish manager

It is obvious that China is a high hierarchy society whereas Sweden is a low hierarchy society. All participants pointed out hierarchy are one of key difference between Swedish and Chinese leadership in the workplace. However, different Swedish managers viewed and experienced Chinese hierarchy varied. For example,

“My assistant also had problem with me. I had old mobile phone; she did not like that, because the boss should be the newest one (in China). That is very un-Swedish. She wants me to have a big desk. I did not care. But for her, working as my assistant, she wants me to be as impressive as possible. But that is not the Swedish way to be. Here (in Sweden) it is more likely the boss take the smallest desk and old telephone” (interviewee D).

“Sweden is one country where companies are extremely flatting in hierarchy; so wherever Swedish manager goes, he will see more hierarchy organization where more respect for your boss; and you do not really question that; more listening it and taking advice from boss” (Interviewee F).

“We (Swede) have platform structure but we have to adapt it to suit pyramid (Chinese hierarchy) way of looking at things” (Interviewee B).

“The generations that I worked with mainly speak about manager. They were 30-35 years; very easy to work with. It was very easy to their manager. In Sweden, you need to argue a lot; you need to explain because people need to understand to have consensus about things. There are much less questions and much more rapid executional things in China, which is a good thing and maybe not a bad thing” (interviewee G).

“And be aware of that, that is probably connected to power distance, you get less feedback on your proposal in China than you get in Sweden. When asking someone in China to do something, you need to be pretty sure you are right. In Sweden, you do not have to be that sure because someone will tell you are wrong” (Interviewee H).

4.2 No conflict but misunderstanding in workplace

Regarding to conflict in workplace in China, all interviewees gave same answer, which was no such conflicts occurred no matter big or small. Regarding to cultural aspect, both Swede and Chinese are avoiding of direct conflict, though Swede tends to more direct

during communication. Nevertheless, misunderstanding may happen inevitably, as most participants claimed.

4.2.1 Confucius and Lagom

Swedish Lagom is different from Chinese Confucius cultures, but there are similarities in both cultures in some respects.

“The Confucius way of looking at things is quite Lagom. [...] That also makes more Swedish being a little bit humble. Chinese are also quite humble very many times. That, I believe, makes it easier for Chinese and Swedish to work together. I believe, maybe it would be harder for Chinese person when an American comes in and tell everybody I am the best in the world, you should do what I say. The Swedish way is maybe a little bit try to listen and understand what Chinese experience is, and try to bring up the best for both, both sides. [...] I believe Swedish and Chinese can work pretty well together. That is my impression, maybe better than German and Chinese, American and Chinese because of the culture. They go together quite well” (Interviewee B).

The losing-face culture in Chinese culture also prevents a direct conflict. If everyone is polite and respectful to one another, there will no such big conflict. Actually, every culture including Swedish culture has more or less face issue because everyone wants to be respected rather than humiliated in front of public.

“Swede does not tell really like an American directly, or criticize somebody or shout at somebody. Rather Swede does it in a smooth or soft way, and tries to understand and tolerate. I believe Swedish people take the tolerance a little bit too far when come to if the work was not good. [...] And I had a colleague not taking the face culture so much into account that could lead to a conflict. [...] My personal experience is that the face culture is not so hard to take into account. But it was a bit one of things that caused a lot of mental efforts” (Interviewee B).

Chinese are more flexible, partially it is because that will make others less awkward. This actually is helping to avoid direct conflict.

For example, “as a Westerner if I made a mistake, un-honest mistake in the culture, it is innocent mistake as long as not yelling at somebody in front of everybody else. [...] It was generally accepted (in China) because I do not know better. [...] In China, it is okay to do mistakes. And that thing I really liked. Also one thing I learned was I was talking to my colleague, and I said ‘okay, if I do mistake in subway buy the wrong ticket, how do I with them?’ ‘Oh, we got special booth in the China, Shanghai subway. You just enter and tell you want get off at a different place compared to the one I got.’ [...] So it is not a problem. But the Swedish way to look at it, you do not know where you to go. Why did you do it correctly from the beginning? This way is looking at thing that I liked a lot” (Interviewee B).

Thus in both Chinese and Swedish culture, people all are trying to avoid direct conflict and trying to understand and tolerate each other as much as possible.

4.2.2 Yes or no

One remarkable misunderstanding in Chinese workplace is “yes” and “no” issue. The word “yes” from Chinese employee does not always mean “yes” to Swedish managers. Swedish managers would have to spend some time before they really figured out what really “yes” and “no” means during the conversation with Chinese colleagues or employees. In China, “yes, but” sometime means “no”. That, of course, will lead to misunderstanding sometime.

“I have been to some intercultural training as well. You know five “yes” that you have in China. ‘Yes, I hear that you say something’; ‘yes, I heard what you said’; ‘yes, ...’ like different yes. ‘Yes, I will do something’ is the best one and strongest one. And Chinese, there is a habit to say ‘yes’ in China a lot. ‘Yes’ does not necessarily mean this person is going to do something. It could mean something else. ‘yes, I heard’. ‘yes, I know you are there’, something like. And that could make, that could be hard thing to trust sometimes. Then you need to put probing question extra, which maybe for some Chinese persons sounds I did not trust them” (Interviewee G).

Several interviewees believed it was due to language barrier, especially 10 or 20 years ago in China.

“English is of course a limit factor. That became a lot of better since 2008. English for sure is a limiting factor. You know, then I have to repeat a lot, to speak slowly, really break down, use whiteboard at same time, break down the steps everything, you know, to make sure you have the same picture what you are talking about, and then summarized in email afterwards, get it down written also. This is one thing even though the person does not understand. You might just say ‘yes, yes, yes’ pretend to understand. But the understanding was not at all” (Interviewee C).

To avoid this misunderstanding or facilitate the communication, the manager has to use other communicative skills.

“You need to use whiteboard at same time, and you need to follow up with email immediately like a short minute meeting as complement to the oral discussion” (Interviewee C).

A deeper interpretation of this issue is responsibility. If one followed exactly what his manager said and failed in the end, he will not take at least full responsibility of the failure in a Chinese organization. But if the manager changed his original mind by taking his employee’s suggestion or insistence, the Chinese manager will blame the failure on the employee if something goes wrong. So in a Chinese workplace, Chinese employees

tend to follow the order from the manager even though they feel it might be wrong, so that they can avoid taking responsibility of failure.

“It was better to do the exactly how I said it instead of adding and improving. That is also different compared to Swedish stuff. [...] My Chinese stuff made more or less as I said even they think it is a bad idea” (interviewee D).

4.3 Other similarities between Swedish and Chinese besides avoiding conflict

As participant A pointed out, foreigners or westerners in China should not always look for difference between their own culture and Chinese culture. It will make both life and work more difficult in China. Trying to find more similarities, however, will let foreigners feel easier with their life and work in China. One can be more successful if one build up things based on similarity rather than differences. Actually, the difference in culture between China and Sweden was not as big as expected. Interestingly, when comparing American society, participant A still felt it was easier to live in China, though both Sweden and United States are western countries.

Participant A also believed that on basic level, there was no obvious difference between China and Swedish in culture and the way of thinking. The difference at that time (2005-2010) was probably different stages of maturity with Chinese people lacking international experience and oversea educational background. However, nowadays, even this difference is diminishing in China.

One similarity is that both in China and in Sweden, if the engineers or technicians in workplace make commitment, they will try their delivery it successfully and timely. Both Chinese and Swedish are task-orientated.

“If asking thing should be done in China, the immediate answer is ‘yes, we can do that’. [...] Then if this is a big problem, the stuff will come and say ‘this is a big problem’. The stuff already starts the clock to make this happen. If they commit, they did it. Swedish person would not commit as easy as Chinese stuff. This is also depends on driver. Swedish person commit it, he will do it. That is the similarity. Not easy commitment, that is the difference. But if you commit a task, in Swedish culture and Chinese culture to fulfil the task” (Interview D).

In addition, most Swedish and Chinese organizations are customers focused.

“Swedish organization is fairly customers focus. We are quite tentative to customers’ requirements. We want to always make sure we deliver what customer need. And that, I think, is very similar in China, most of Chinese in the company they bit focused on actually deliver what customers need and make sure customers gets not exactly what written word by word in the contract but actually what they need. Because that is how you build the business. So I think that is very similar. That is completely different to somewhere other or even European

countries. This is a lot of more like written contract what is written is agree; what is not written is not agree. Both in Sweden and in China, the written part is one thing, agreement on such relation you have created that you are honored in making business” (Interviewee F).

4.4 Adapting Swedish leadership to Chinese context

All interviewee pointed out Swedish leadership style has to be changed more or less in order to adapt to Chinese context.

“In Sweden, you get to learn and know each other by working together; in the Chinese culture, my impression is you get to learn and know each other, and then you start to work together. It is sort of another way around. But is really important. [...] The amount of influence that relationship on your actions in your role of company is greater in China and Chinese culture than (that) in the Swedish culture” (Interviewee B).

This relationship is important to start a business or work with Chinese colleagues or employees. Respects to manager are also quite often built up in this initial stage.

“When we are recruiting leaders, we are recruiting managers who can be adapted more to Swedish management style because we are Swedish, you know, home country. I think it is a combination of showing the people that are working now in our organization; that we want them to feel that they are in an international company. And we are not accepting old-fashion leadership style that has been before. And they are expecting career in their home country. Before a couple of years a lot of Chinese want to go aboard and make careers, but now they realize that they make their career at their home country. They are not willing to traveling, you know, aboard, because a lot of company actually come into China, international companies” (Interviewee G).

When come to management level,

“you have to be more decisive at beginning, to give more clear instructions, because in the first part you created confusion. If you go in with Swedish management style and stop to manage Chinese employees who are not used to have a foreign boss in a Swedish way, they will very confused, less secure; they will not know what you want. So you have to be very clear what you are not clear what you expect and in you decision making in the beginning” (interviewee F).

If during this process specially when there was a problem, a following-up check is needed. Otherwise, it will like what interviewee B and D said that everything would stop but you do not know where it stopped.

“In Chinese organization, I get an impression that the focus is on delivering my role, my exact responsibility and put my stamp on something. If all the bureaucracy

were not fulfilled and work stopped, and I just leave it until everything is fulfilled. And then I can complete it. And this was a little bit problem because in Swedish company culture, you expect to pick up the phone if there is a problem. And call and say "I cannot complete the task for you because this and that are lacking". That meant at beginning before we learn this. But a lot of things could take a lot time, because everything gets trouble all the time. And then it stop, you do not get any information. [...] So we have to work with culture, and start to ask people to call, drive things forwards and so on." (Interviewee B).

"I want team engineer to design a database for a system, they did not fulfil the task within the time which was expected because they had not got [...] something within the database. [...] But no one ask for the information missing. [...] They (Swede) will immediately asking for the missing information. [...] The Swedish person will immediately ask me about it when they discover; but Chinese stuff, they did not ask, until it is obvious they not been done what is as expected" (Interviewee D).

However, for R&D section which more creative and inspiration are required, the Swedish management style would benefit organization more. It is not because Chinese people lack of creation or innovation, but Chinese people needs a right channel to do it.

"In China, it is very rare for people to take the initiatives make a big ownership of a task if it has not been asked to do so especially or directly by the manager or project manager. Whereas in Sweden, people sometime take big responsibility and kind of expand what they have on the plate and take ownership even they were not asked to do so directly and specifically by manager. I feel I have to give more detail instruction to most employees, although some employees they are really that I valued as best one" (Interviewee C).

"You can also take a lot of Swedish, specific Swedish management style and implement if you want to. So what I really like that was very good. I had a small core team working with specific life-science business, which I was in charge of (in China). I developed this team from being a very Chinese team wanting a clear direction and clear task to more of independent peoples. I let them to take more initiatives and grow to same all independent and self-going. It is difficult to explain but if you have been working in Sweden for a while, you know we expect one to take own initiatives, to take decisions, not always ask for decision that we take. We rather encourage people to make mistake and that is okay. In China, it is very much you always want to ask your boss for the decision. And then when you followed the decision, you do not mind if it is wrong" (Interviewee F). He also emphasized that especially in R&D department or center, Swedish management style is indispensable. "In China, in the typical Chinese leadership styles do not power people. You want people to do what be asked to deliver. You do not power them to take their own decision, take own actions. That is very organizational difference where I think with Swedish management you can get the Chinese

organization to grow and become a lot stronger, more dynamic, so that will be the benefit. Or going from a completely Chinese leadership style into a mix between Chinese and Swedish leadership style. But there is another dimension to this” (Interviewee F).

“It was not a big issue. [...] you are not good manager if you cannot read people; understand what is driving different people. [...] that is not the hard thing. Just realize that I cannot motivate my people here (China) with the same thing I will do at home (Sweden)” (Interviewee D).

Swedish managers sometime have to build up the relationship with their Chinese colleagues and employees. Though it is not necessary, it may benefit effective leadership in organization.

“First day at work, I was expected to bring the team out for lunch. It was expected that I bring the team out to the restaurant. It was expected to drink a lot of beer as well to get know each other and so on. I think that is maybe part of trust that you are doing best time outside work to build up the social network. I mean the social network is important in China. But I would not say it was more in China than here (Sweden). But expectation (from Chinese employees) maybe is higher in China” (Interviewee I).

“You have to build as being a manager; you have to build that kind of loyalty from team member to yourself as well. That loyalty in the end has to be stronger than other loyalties, then you come to trust” (Interviewee F).

“So I think it took me at least half year to build some sort of relation or some sort of trust between us. And when you get that, then I think it is a great time when I really appreciated to work with Chinese colleagues” (Interviewee G).

4.5 Other important issues related to cross-cultural management in China

4.5.1 New generation in China

The new generation in China was born, grown and educated in 70s and 80s. With rapidly changing social and economic conditions in China, the new generation differs from previous generation (might be in charge between 1970-2000) in several aspects, such as the way of thinking, feeling, reacting, and the way of acquiring and transmitting new technology.

“Maybe there will be a difference between different generations in China. The new generation, 20-25 year-old, was coming into organization. We did see some differences. I have some discussion with HR in China how we meet with those people because they have very different expectation on work. Being brought up as

a single child in families, being used to get everything, and so on, it could change over time, I think” (interviewee I).

“The good thing that they (Chinese) were aboard is that they often have a better confidence, better self-confidence, like they dare to talk; dare to present themselves; they are not quite like that. They kind of used to say something even though there was manager in the room. That is the good thing to been aboard for a Chinese person who normally is quiet if there is a manager in high-level” (Interviewee H).

There are also some inherent issues of the new Chinese generation, which drew several participants’ attention. For example, because of being a single child of a family and living in a strong competition environment, Chinese tends to not share with others, or to be more egocentric.

“The new generation, I think, is much more egocentric compared to maybe previous generation” (Interviewee I).

“For example, in my experience, my stuff was not willing to share knowledge. They kept by themselves because knowledge is a value. [...] If you learn something, you want to keep it by yourself, because this increases your value. That for me is very typical issue” (Interviewee D).

“Most of Chinese, very well- or good education and extremely good at analytic, good at excel, figures. When I have a meeting with Chinese both this company but also my previous company. Always well-prepared, very good base for the decision, extremely well analyze figures and a lot of excel files that you can show. But been more independently by yourself, not so much you have worked together with others” (Interviewee G).

This egocentrism sometimes behaves more self-confidence, if not over. However, in the previous generation, people tends to less self-confidence when confronting with foreigner or working in an international organization because of lacking of technology and enough knowledge about outside (Interviewee A). When coming to organization policy, this egocentrism may behave like ignoring strategy or policy from high-level management being keen to thing related to self’s interest.

4.5.2 Learning some Chinese

Learning Chinese as living in China will undoubtedly facilitate the daily life, communication in workplace and relationship to Chinese colleagues or customers. More importantly, by learning Chinese and the grammar, several interviewees emphasized they started to know and understand the Chinese cultures better when they learned some Chinese.

“That is the same when they cannot really separate ‘he’ or ‘she’ because that is not constantly in the language in mandarin. So they mixed up he and she all the time. But when you study a bit of mandarin, suddenly you understand why. You can then in a nice way ask the question find out what you need instead of thinking that people are kind of confused or stupid, you know. For me, that is really good. Then, obviously, in general, if you spend as a foreigner, if you take lessons and you make some progresses, everyone around you appreciated it” (Interviewee F).

“When you look into the way that people are communicating with each other has, this I learned from China, has what do with grammatical things. Because if I ask someone in Sweden for ‘can you please tell me how to go to the restaurant?’ like something, and then they explain very logical, you know, you go 300 meters, go the right, go to the left, and then you find it. But when I ask the same question for example when I was in Shenzhen (in China), when I was working in finding my way or in Shanghai somewhere else, then to start with you are communicate in circles. [...] I think that in order to really understand the Chinese, I think, to understand the grammatical, learn that a little bit could help, for example, the Swedish managers” (Interviewee G).

Both Swedish culture and organizational management style prefers direct model, whereas Chinese ones are more like a circle. When doing negotiations, discussions always came back to previous topics, which had reached agreement already. Things will go around and around (Interviewee A and G).

5. Discussion

The main objective of this study is to investigate how Swedish managers develop and maintain good relationships in Chinese workplace. In addition, how Swedish managers overcome the communication problems of cultural difference and adapt Swedish leadership into Chinese context, which in turn benefit Swedish company eventually.

Through in-depth interview with nine interviewees, I feel that for Swedish managers, it will be getting easier if they know the similarity and difference in cultures between Sweden and Chinese beforehand. With the globalization and development of technology, the difference between two cultures is decreasing on both sides. In this study, I tried to use power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collectivism of Hofstede's theories to analyze in-depth interviews' data. It is because these theories are the most presentative dimensions to analyze Swedish and Chinese cultures.

There are more similarities between Swedish and Chinese people on basic cultural level. I found that both Swedish and Chinese people are trying to avoid direct conflict. Because of Confucius in Chinese culture and *Lagom* in Swedish culture, when facing conflict people from two countries tend to soften the problem and try to tolerate the disagreement. Chinese are as careful as Swedish are to utmost avoid confrontation and direct conflict (Gesteland 2005). However, compared to Chinese culture, Swedish people are still too direct. The Swedish directness sometimes is confused by relationship-focused Chinese indirectness. When coming to face issue in China, Swedish verbal directness or bluntness might unintentionally cause offense sometimes. Saving face refers to the strong avoidance of a sense of shame or anything that might bring shame to oneself or one's family (Fang 2003), especially when one in power and more senior in position. Thus, harmony and conflict is more like "honor" and "loss of face" in high-context culture. People in high-context culture like Chinese will try their best to please their opponent and create a good relationship. In return, this may maximally ensure them far away from the possibility of losing face in front of their opponents. This conflict avoidance is seeking or an effort to maintain mutual-face (Ting-Toomey 1992). In Hofstede's study (Hofstede and Hofstede 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede et al. 2010), Sweden scored low on the "uncertainty avoidance index", which means Swedish people has less uncertainty about unpredictability of future events. In addition, the *lagom* roots in Swedish people mentally. All of these lead Swedish to great tolerance to uncertainty, less showing of emotions, avoiding "too much or too less". As Gustavsson indicated, Swedish people would feel strongly uncomfortable with personal conflicts and have difficulties in exhibiting and receiving strong emotions, but feel better in the company of facts and reason during interaction (Gustavsson 1995).

Another similarity between Swedish and Chinese person is both task-orientated. Once they commit, they will put everything aside and fulfil the task. In workplace, this is valuable for collaboration between two countries undoubtedly. For Chinese employees,

it can be due to the collectivism to some extent in Chinese culture. From the perspective of individualism and collectivism, China is more collectivistic (Hofstede's index of individualism-collectivism = 20); while Sweden is more individualistic (Hofstede's index of individualism-collectivism = 71) in range from 1 to 100 (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). As Thomas mentioned,

“Collectivist societies tend to be concerned about the consequence of behavior for each person's reference group and expect people to be more willing to sacrifice personal interests for the good of their group” (Thomas and Peterson 2014:p53).

On another hand, though Swedish cultures tend to individualism, Swedish management style is participative in which the manager is one of a group (Zander 1999). Thus, the egalitarianism, cooperation, empowering and teamwork are distinctive characteristics of contemporary Swedish organization (Zander 1999). Swedish managers are not keen to individual independence and the consequences of a person's actions. That may explain why in the workplace in China all Swedish interviewees in this study never felt it was difficult to conduct a proposal with their Chinese employees.

Hofstede's theory demonstrates that the management styles are not the same across the countries (Hofstede, Hofstede et al. 2010). There are differences between Swedish and Chinese culture. One of obvious differences is hierarchy. In typical organizational hierarchies, the higher the person in the hierarchy, the greater power he/she will have things done. All interviewees claimed that in Sweden, the organization is flat where the information is widely distributed throughout the organization, while it is pyramid in China. Thus, it is no problem, as a Swedish manager, to get assignment or order done in China. It is also because the assignments or orders are given by managers from low-context cultures. It makes the assignment or order direct, explicit, and clear. As a receiver in high-context cultures, Chinese employees are also happy to get direct assignment or order without any expression like “maybe”, “perhaps”, “probably”, and “slightly” which quite often appeared in high-context culture (Triandis 1994). Thus, it is good that hierarchical levels persisting in the organization where Swedish manager stayed. It is because hierarchy provides employees with a sense of status, identity and belonging, which can eventually benefit to manage complex tasks. Non-hierarchical organization climate are well accepted in Swedish organization with decisions made in the way they are supposed to make in Sweden. However, sometimes decisions can be not clear because the image of manager or leader who is charge and is taking the decision is vague in flat Swedish management style (Vaara, Tienari et al. 2003). One can imagine that if a Swedish manager still keeps his/her participative role rather on a decisive role, this manager will be less successful in China.

However, all Swedish interviewees in this study also noticed short of feedback during the communication with Chinese employees. Largely, it is due to hierarchy. One has to do what he/she was told by managers to do without any question; even it might be wrong or invalid. In a cross-cultural context, like China and Sweden for instance, where different perceptions and values of the situational context interpreting messages in

different ways, misunderstood problems might arise. Difficulties arise when Asian people interpret “yes” as “I understand” instead of “I agree”. Apart from hierarchy, lack of feedback is also due to “losing face” issue. It is embarrassing for Chinese employees that they cannot understand the order from their managers; and they cannot ask their managers repeating what they just said. In this context, “yes” is interpreted as “I am listening” instead of “I understand”. Therefore, Swedish managers in China have to ask for feedback intentionally from their Chinese employees by asking questions that cannot be answered by “yes” or “no”, or creating a channel to convey the message in non-verbal means such as email.

Is there a need to adapt Swedish management styles to Chinese environment? This is one of research questions of this study. A style or policy appropriate to Swedish culture may be quite inappropriate if applied to another. Several interviewees claimed Chinese collectivism as relationship or circle. When you are part of stable groups in China, you are interdependent with other group members, such as a kinship group or schoolfellow group (Thomas and Peterson 2014). Triandis has pointed out four characteristics, which are associated with collectivism. First, the needs and goals of the circle or group are higher than that of individuals. Second, obligation to the group rather than to personal pleasure or rewards is the norm in collectivistic cultures. Third, in collectivistic culture, self is associated with other, not distinct from others. Fourth and finally, collectivistic cultures encourage cooperation rather than competition (Triandis 1995). As mentioned by interviewees in this study, once a member is accepted by group, things become easier for this group member. Therefore, these interviewees pointed out that it is extremely important for Swedish manager to build good relationship with his/her Chinese employees or business partner in order to get desirable respect and trust. Different from western countries, Chinese like to build relationship before doing business. For example, Americans and Europeans like to make legally binding contract or agreement and get started with the task, whereas the Chinese like to have good knowledge of individuals whom they are doing business (Tung 1988; Tung 1992). Therefore, business or negotiation could not go forwards until Chinese are satisfied that the harmonious relationships have been established.

The most distinguishable difference between the Scandinavian and other management styles is that human being is ranked the most important factor, even higher than leaders in importance (Gustavsson 1995). It is because Swedish manager know without creative and hard-working employees, a most miraculous manager can do nothing. Thus, Swedish manager is very easy to earn respect from Chinese employees. In addition, several interviewees mentioned that their organization or R&D centers in China were initiated with training Chinese employees, which on one hand is to implement the organizational culture, and on another hand is to improve assertiveness and creativities of Chinese employees.

One interesting aspect of this study is that the new generation in China born in 70s and 80s is changing the face of China nowadays. This generation was born, grown and educated in the Reform Era. This generation has two distinguishable characteristics:

egocentrism and oversea experiences. The egocentrism sometimes behaves more self-confidence, if not over. However, in the previous generation, people tends to less self-confidence when confronting with foreigner or working in an international organization because of lacking of technology and enough knowledge about outside. When coming to organization policy, this egocentrism may behave like ignoring strategy or policy from high-level management being keen to thing related to self's interest. As several interviewees mentioned, they are recruiting Chinese employees with oversea educational background as well as international company working experience. Overseas well education and living experiences influenced the values and norms of Chinese new generation. In recent years, the number of such young Chinese coming back China is increasing each year. They also, to some extent, fill the gap between Western and Chinese cultures. Therefore, the new generation of China has more cross-cultural competence; and they should work well with Swedish expatriate managers in workplace.

6. Conclusion

Through this study by interviewing several Swedish managers, who had work experience in China in past few years, it clearly show that most Swedish managers enjoyed the time when they stayed in China. More importantly, it became obvious that there are some important similarities between two countries. Even for differences, they are diminishing with increasing globalization and development of technology.

First, there are several similarities between Swedish and Chinese people on more generalized cultural level. Two major findings related to similarities in both culture are that: (1) people are trying to avoid direct conflict; (2) people are task-orientated. These two similarities, in fact, are extremely important in an international organization. A successful assignment is expected when Swedish manager comes to China and works with Chinese colleagues no matter in short or long-term. These managers need the support from local companies and employees to fulfil their task. Thus, task-orientated group including managers and employees in a pleasant working environment would make this happen. One can expect that the collaboration between two countries undoubtedly will go more smoothly once the common goal is achieved.

Second, the differences between Sweden and China still exist. It is probably the first impression westerners have when they come to China first time. However, in this study we tried to look at the difference from the point of Swedish managers' view. The differences that these Swedish managers experienced were certainly different from that from ordinary travelers or managers with short-term assignments. However, the longer Swedish managers stay in China, the better understanding of such differences will be achieved. Two major differences were discussed in this study: hierarchy and innovation. For Swedish managers at management level, hierarchy seems less problematic to them. Managers have to be used to asking feedback and following the assignments or orders up. As for R&D center, Swedish company culture should be introduced to China. In Swedish company culture, Chinese employees will become more independent, open-minded, and creative with proper training program.

Last, with the new generation come into power in China, the markers on this generation become more predominant nowadays. Some Chinese now working in international organization have oversea educational background, being westernized for a while, being skilled with modern technology. These Chinese might behave very different from previous generation. The generation also tends to be more egocentric, which makes this generation more diverse in comparison with previous generation.

The cultural differences do matter, especially in a global competing marketplace. Many approaches are trying to find out the difference between two phenotypes. In this study, I suggested trying to find out the similarity between China and Sweden and working on these similarities to facilitate the assignment in China would be a win-win approach. In the future, it will be very interesting to find out more similarities rather than differences between Chinese and Swedes, between Sweden and China.

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8. Appendix

Interview questions:

General information of interviewees

1. Would you please tell me about yourself?
2. What is your educational background and company?
3. How long have you been in China, in which city?
4. When you were in China, which position did you have in the company?

Key questions:

1. Would you please share your experiences with your Chinese colleagues or employees when you were working in China?
2. What is your impression in general in Chinese culture and Swedish culture? Similarities or differences?
3. Is there any problem occurred due to language or cultural or others issues when you were working with Chinese colleagues and employees?
4. How does Swedish leadership adapted in practice to suit Chinese context?
5. Have you met with any conflict or problems in the workplace?

END

1. Would you please give a short summary of your experience in cross-cultural workplace?
2. Would you like to give some suggestions for the upcoming Swedish managers who are going to work in China?