Inter-Cultural Differences and the Human Element of Regional Collaboration in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region:
Evidence from the utilization of Chinese Interpersonal Connections (*Guanxi*)

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Abstract

The significance of collaboration among members of the Greater Mekong sub-region (GMS) is unquestionable. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the strategic challenge for business was viewed primarily as protecting its potential profits from erosion through either competition or bargaining. This view of strategy underwent a change in the late 1980s. The need to pursue multiple sources of competitive advantage led to the need for building stronger collaborative relationships with suppliers, customers, competitors, and a variety of other institutions. This phenomenon is also apparent within the GMS. The establishment of several cooperative projects manifests the growing role of cooperative strategies. However, despite the growing importance of strategic alliances within the region, many of them still fail.

In response to a call for better coordination, this study is aimed to provide a preliminary discussion about the need to understand the "human" component of collaboration, particularly in relation to intercultural differences among the GMS countries. Using a case of the widespread utilization of interpersonal connection *(Guanxi)* in China, this paper will elucidate the significance of understanding intercultural issues as a prerequisite to achieve better cooperative performances within the GMS.

This paper offers definition and key principle of *Guanxi* which is one of the major dynamics in the Chinese society where business behaviour revolves around it. Understanding philosophies of *guanxi* should therefore be viewed as a prerequisite for successful networking building or relationship development for all cooperative ventures, including those which have, and will be, established within Greater Mekong Sub-region. Based on this examination, managerial implications will be provided for all individuals and firms aiming to establish relationship with China.

Key Words: Chinese interpersonal connections, managerial implications, regional relations

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Introduction

The formation of collaborative alliances[2] among organizations is widely acknowledged as being a significant strategy. The greater advantages and the fewer inconveniences it offers in contrast with other alternatives are undoubtedly behind this boom. However, despite the growing importance of collaborative alliances, many of them still fail (Kogut, 1989; Das and Teng, 2000). The high failure rate is partly due to the complexity of directing and managing a strategic alliance, in which one has to control and co-ordinate various resources of several firms. These circumstances could be more complicated when the alliance is operating on an international scale and with different national and corporate cultures. It has been observed that differences in national and corporate culture are perhaps the first cause of collaborative failure. This situation is aggravated when small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form part of the alliance, insofar as they usually have deficiencies regarding their executive capacity.

Understanding intercultural issues should have significant implications for the management of cooperative ventures within the GMS countries because there is enormous human diversity in the GMS. In Lao, for example, there are officially 68 ethnic groups; in Viet Nam, 54; in Myanmar, 135. In Cambodia there are more than 10 minorities, and in Thailand more than 20 (Mattson, 2001). Yunnan Province recognises 26 nationalities. It should therefore be well recognized that to achieve any collaborative objectives of the GMS projects, understanding these diversities is a prerequisite, which is fundamental to establishing concerted strategy and close coordination among member countries. Based on the call for better coordination, this study is aimed to provide a preliminary discussion about the need to understand the

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2. The meaning of collaboration will be discussed shortly.

"human" component of collaboration, particularly in relation to intercultural differences among the GMS countries. Using a case of China and the widespread utilization of interpersonal connection (Guanxi), this paper hopes to elucidate the significance of understanding cultural issues in order to provide a pathway upon which future research could be advanced.

An Overview of Collaboration Theory

Authors have studied many facets of collaboration and cooperation using such terminology as symbiotic marketing (Adler 1966), business alliances (Badaracco, 1991), strategic alliances (Bleeke and Ernst, 1991), strategic networks (Jarillo, 1988), interorganisational relationships (Cravens et al 1993), cooperative strategies (Nielsen, 1987), coalition strategies (Ghemawat et al 1986), partnerships (Johnson and Lawrence, 1988) and relationship marketing (Nevin, 1995) to list but a few. Although there are many different terms, which are used to portray cooperative links, little effort has been made to distinguish them. Nevertheless, the literature reviewed indicated all these different terms are used to entail similar underpinning concept which is a manifestation of alliance partners pooling of skills and resources in order to achieve one or more goals linked to the strategic objectives of the cooperative firms. It is not the purpose of this paper to pursue the quest for an all-embracing single term; therefore throughout the discussion in this paper, these terms are used interchangeably.

Interorganisational collaboration is designed for various purposes and can take many forms. Collaborations can be formed between intra-industry and inter-industry groups. They can also occur both nationally and internationally. Collaborative

alliances are generally formed to achieve *collective objectives*. A collaborative relationship may comprise of firms from different sectors and industries. Generally, collaboration between competitors is referred to as horizontal collaboration (i.e collaboration between supplier and supplier) whereas vertically linked collaboration is used to refer to a supplier-manufacturer alliance. Levels of collaboration are also diverse, ranging from dyadic business relationships, to business networks, and to social partnerships. The GMS relations could be defined as a business network relationships which can be regarded as sets of connected firms, a system or a field comprised of organizations, and interorganisational relationships (Webster, 1992). However it is important to point out that business networks and dyadic business relationships are related and could be developed based on one another. In other words, network relationships emerge from activities performed by two firms. There is evident that collaboration is most likely to occur when problems are complex, wide in scope, and beyond the means of single organization to solve unilaterally. This also seems to the case of the GMS.

The "Human" Component of Collaboration and Intercultural Collaboration: Issues and Challenges

Motives underlying a firm's entry into collaboration can be seen as an attempt to capitalize on opportunities for sales and/or profit growth. Virtually economics-based viewpoints such as strategic management, exchange and transaction cost theory attempt to explain the motives on the basis of cost minimisation. The static nature of economic-based perspectives has, recently, been addressed by several researchers (Muller 1995, Jantarat and Williams, 2000). These authors argue and supported here that one problem inherent with this approach is that it is not dynamic and does not

incorporate the situation-specific interpretations of the agents involved. The economic-based perspective has overlooked the fact that any continuing relationship often becomes the 'great enforcer of morality' among participants. This is simple because economic exchange is embedded into, and interrelated with, the dynamics of underlying human relations in any social setting. This means that human interactions and relations, by and large, have an impact on their business exchanges and behaviors. It is found that the existing collaboration literature provides an inadequate examination of human interactions. It is these on which collaboration is hinged and through which it can be successfully conducted. It is posited here that the 'people' or 'human' factor inherent in collaboration is a key driving force of successful collaborative ventures.

Sociological and social-psychological literature provides a strong theoretical foundation to understand the 'human' components of collaboration. For example, the perception and characteristics of managers may affect the decision to collaborate. Earlier works by Rogers and Glick (1973) discovered that managers must have a positive attitude toward working with another organization in any joint endeavour. A number of studies advocate these findings, suggesting that managers' mental models of the environment are a basis for strategic choice and action. In addition, the role of trust, pre-existing social relationships, and emotional attachment in collaborative formation have also been examined by various scholars (Jantarat, 1996). Grandori and Soda (1995) stated that some elementary form of social coordination, such as acquaintance and communication, is the basis from which interorganisational collaboration may emerge.

It has been observed that the alliance's failure really depends on the human elements, including the selection of the most appropriate partner, but also on the

executives' daily management of common operations: formulating strategies, coordinating partners' activities, sorting out conflicts, etc (Noble, Stafford and Reger, 1995). It is precisely in these moments, in which the co-operation strategy takes place, when the processes of management and leadership, corporate culture and human resources acquire a special relevance. In connection with the latter, small differences in terms of management style and culture between the co-operating firms may end up becoming serious problems that make it difficult to create synergies, which ultimately leads to a poor cooperative performance. In this respect, certain aspects can be indicative of the differences existing between the organisations, such as differences in the size and structural design of the co-operating firms, or their belonging to different sectors (Noble et al 1995). Nevertheless, there are many characteristics (honesty, positive disposition, efficacy, etc.) that are, in principle, considered as basic, and that can only be appreciated after several years of relationship. Given the difficulty to identify, a priori, the organisational compatibility between two firms, it can be convenient to use some specific procedures. Thus, it is possible to see whether the personnel feel at ease discussing with one another during the negotiation stage. On the other hand, working informally with another company before formalising a strategic alliance, normally for non-related products or markets in which there is no direct competition, can also represent a good way to assess the level of compatibility and its potential evolution, since it is with daily contact that we can discover the partner's habits and trends (Grandori and Soda, 1995).

It is obviously that any firm should make every effort to ally with culturally compatible firms. Nevertheless, no matter how compatible they may be, there will always be divergences between the co-operating parties that must be properly dealt with. Indeed, cultural problems become particularly relevant in mergers and

acquisitions of firms, since both cultures must be integrated into a single one, or one has to be absorbed by the other (Buono, 1991). However, difficulties also arise in strategic alliances, since, although the co-operating firms continue to be independent organisations, a new situation appears in which an interaction is going to be established between two firms with different cultures. This usually implies different leadership styles, different objectives, etc. which may lead to lack of trust between the parties and to conflicts which may arise when the time comes to make decisions.

It is important to point out that though, that the appearance of cultural conflicts does not mean they cannot be solved (Hall, 1995). In this respect, Parkhe (1991, p. 585) thinks the process must start by trying to understand the partners' way of thinking and behaving, an effort in which the use of training programmes for cultural understanding can provide a valuable help. Along the same lines, Swierczek (1994) highlights the importance of multicultural skills in the managers working for the alliance. Other authors, in turn, also point out the possibility of changing, or at least of forcing a firm's organisational culture to evolve, so that problems of this kind can be minimised. Accordingly, a range of mechanisms are available that can be used to adapt the cultures of both partners in the context of strategic alliances. Indeed, education and training, the joint use of rituals and ceremonies (e.g. the celebration of annual meals), or the sharing out of benefits such as status and acknowledgements, etc., can facilitate the adaptation of the partners' behaviour and code of conduct. The following section offers a case in point of this argument.

Understanding Guanxi:

A Case in Point towards the Development of a Cultural Framework

Within the GMS framework, Thailand and Yunnan province of China have attempted to play a leading role in pushing many GMS projects, especially economic cooperation in the North-South economic corridor linking Yunnan province and northern Thailand via Laos or Myanmar. As one of the major dynamic forces in Chinese society and a "second currency" permeating the economic sphere, *guanxi* constitutes a key and/or a "secret" to corporate success in China (Luo, 1997). The problems leading to unsuccessful collaborative projects might be in various forms. As a forementioned, intercultural differences and acceptable 'rule of the game' may have been one of significant causes. *Guanxi* (Chinese interpersonal connections), as opposed to "arm's length" dealings, is often mentioned as a significant issue that usually unsettled unwary newcomers doing business with Chinese partners (Davies, et al., 1995). Some scholars pointed out that foreigners are placed at an apparent disadvantage because of their outsider position to the *guanxi* network (Alston, 1989; Ambler, 1994). It is obvious that if people want to succeed in the attractive GMS market with Chinese partners, they must grasp and master the *guanxi* skills. As classical Sun Tzu (author of The Arts of War) strategies stated that "Zhi Ji Zhi Pi, Bai Zhan Bu Dai" which means "know your opponent, know yourself, and you can fight a hundred of battles with no danger of defeat" (Chen, 1995). Gaining a full understanding of yourself and your business partners will absolutely enhance the possibility of win-win situation in the GMS Economic Zone across the geographical and cultural boundaries.

In China, *guanxi* plays a vital role in people's daily living, as Chinese people said "if you don't have a relationship, you do not exist". There is one popular saying in China "who you know is more important than what you know". "Who you know" refers to interpersonal connections with those appropriate persons. *Guanxi* is a term used in everyday and influences everyone's life. In the most general sense, *guanxi* simply means relationship. Bian (1994) defined *guanxi* as a relationship between people or things, the contact and connection between people, or a particular people with whom one has a strong connection. However, in social and business context, the meaning of *guanxi* is more complicated. Thus it refers to a special type of relationship that bonds the partners through reciprocal exchange of favour as well as mutual obligations (Alston, 1989; Hwang, 1987; Luo, 1997). The exchange of favour takes place among members of the certain *guanxi* network not only commercial, but also social. In describing the exchange of favour in *guanxi*, four elements are most frequently mentioned which are reciprocity of favours ("*ren-qing*"), face saving or social status ("*mian-zi*"), emotional attachment ("*gan-qing*"), and trust or credibility. Violate this norm of reciprocity and social obligations will result in damaging one's reputation and leading to lose face.

Four Elements of *Guanxi*

- Ren-qing (Reciprocity of Favor)

Ren-qing refers to the bond of reciprocity and mutual aid between two people, based on their emotional attachment or the sense of obligation and indebtedness (Yang, 1994). Wong and Tam (2000) added on: "the word of *ren-qing* indicating individual emotional responses of daily life means a resource allocated to another person as a gift and also connotes a set of social norms to guide an individual to get along well

with other people". In a *guanxi* relationship, *ren-qing* can be transferred in the form of gifts or substantial assistance in the social exchange. Under such circumstances, the recipients will owe a *ren-qing* to the donors that should be paid back in the future (Hwang, 1987). The feeling of indebtedness is the key in the *ren-qing* component of *guanxi*. "The debts of *ren-qing* are not often discharged rigidly and exactly, but they are remembered in minute detail and an individual can never pay off all the debt of *ren-qing*, even when some reciprocal action has been taken" (Hwang, 1987). Therefore, while emotional sentiments are central to the notion of *gan-qing*, the discourse of *ren-qing* articulates the moral and decorous character of social conduct. In this way, *ren-qing* can link a long-term personal relationship that is not imbued with deep *gan-qing* (Yang, 1994). That is, if people receive a favor based on *ren-qing*, they are obliged to pay back the favor in future. Breaking this rule will damage one's reputation and lose face.

- Mian-zi (Face Saving)

Face saving is another key element in the development and maintenance of *guanxi*. Face is an individual's public image, gained by performing one or more specific social roles that are well recognized by others (Tsang, 1998). In understanding Chinese interpersonal behavior, the most significant factor is "face saving". Although this is a human universal behavior, the Chinese have developed sensitivity to it and used it as a reference point in behavior in a much more sophisticated and developed way than other culture groups (Gilbert and Tsao, 2000). How much face the person has partly depends on his or her *guanxi* network. Tsang (1998) revealed that the large one's *guanxi* network is – and the more powerful the people connected with it are - the more face one has. Therefore, the amount of "face" a person has is a function of social status. Lockett (1988) stated that *mian-zi* has an effect on management. In his

empirical study, three quarters of a sample of managers agreed that *mian-zi* is an important managerial concept.

- Gan-qing (Emotional Attachment)

Gan-qing is an important dimension of *guanxi*. Yang (1994) pointed out *gan-qing* (emotional attachment) in interpersonal relationship as the component emphasizing affective and emotional identification rather than duty, loyalty, or obligation. It applies to a broad range of social relationships from the close linkage between parent and child, husband and wife to the hierarchical relationships between those of different social status or different ages (Jacob, 1979). To build up *gan-qing*, the experience of sharing and interaction through living, working or studying together is a prerequisite. It can happen that two persons have a *guanxi* relationship, but no *gan-qing*. For instance, the *guanxi* relationship may have built purely because both are alumni of the same school. But if one had already graduated before the other entered the school, the *guanxi* between two persons would be very distant. To strengthen the *guanxi*, both have to invest time to cultivate *gan-qing*. If two persons are not on good *gan-qing*, it also follows that their *guanxi* is not good. Hence, *guanxi* can be positive and negative that depends on people's *gan-qing*. Researchers have frequently pointed out that the key to obtaining a lasting and strong *guanxi* relationship is to cultivate a personal intimacy with the desired partner that can not be imitated by others (Tsang, 1998; Yeung & Tung, 1996). In Chinese society, exchange of gifts is one of the means to initiate and maintain the *guanxi*, but it cannot buy *gan-qing* since it is the real feeling between two persons.

- Trust or Credibility

Trust is another important ingredient in the expressive aspect of *guanxi* (Tsang, 1998). The trust in the *guanxi* relationship is personal and particularistic in nature (Wong,

1998). In Yeung and Tung's study (1996), almost 85 percent of the companies interviewed indicated that trust was an essential condition for building and maintaining *guanxi* relationships. Therefore, in most strategic models for *guanxi* building establishing personal trust is recommended as a higher level action that cements the personal relationship (Wong, 1998; Yeung & Tung, 1996).

The Significance of *Guanxi*

People generally believe that *guanxi* is a significant issue in Chinese business and daily operations. Hui and Graen (1997) indicated that the Chinese management system actually is the management of interpersonal connections, and Alston (1989) have suggested that *guanxi* is an extremely important construct in studying organizational outcomes and a key factor to corporate success in the Chinese market (Tsang, 1998). Yeung and Tung (1996) observed 19 foreign companies operating in China, participants consistently highlighted *guanxi* as a key success factor for their business with Chinese partners. They also stated that the benefits of *guanxi* were considered to be extremely valuable to many essential operational areas ranging from information procurement and negotiation to payment collection and transportation. It indicated that Chinese people naturally have deep understanding of *guanxi* meaning and deeply involved in the *guanxi* game and perceive it to be an inseparable part of their daily operations to get the benefits for them.

How to Build and Maintain *Guanxi*

The actual actions for *guanxi* building are a key factor that facilitates a weak *guanxi* relationship between two people to be strength or stretch one's *guanxi* network. The *guanxi* network does not happen automatically; however, it can be achieved through

purposive activities. Lots of scholars have mentioned that gift-giving, banquet hosting and favor tendering are the most popular approach (De Mente, 1994; Jacobs, 1979; Walder, 1986; Yang, 1989). Yeung and Tung (1996) revealed that given the instrumental nature of *guanxi*, one way to establish relations is to offer immediate rewards. Gift-giving, entertainment at lavish banquets, questionable payments, overseas trips, and sponsoring and supporting the children of Chinese officials at universities abroad are common. Those activities are the quickest way to build *guanxi* relations in China. Yang (1994) indicated that gift exchange is an important mode of exchange in economic and social life in China. According to Yang (ibid.), when a gift has been received or a request for a favor has been granted, there is a "symbolic breaking down of the boundaries between persons." Furthermore, Chinese people believe that "no *guanxi* can be built without meat and wine." Yang (ibid.) said attending a banquet with other people is often deemed as a symbol of the starting point for a *guanxi* relationship. Banquet hosting, therefore, is another main activity frequently used as an important way to cultivate *guanxi* in the Chinese society in order to create instant intimacy between the hosts and the guests. Moreover, Yang (1994) also pointed out that offering voluntary favors to a desired contact by tapping in one's own *guanxi* network or authority could also effectively raise the strength of the linkage. Yang (ibid.) then suggested that, as the giver sacrificed the material wealth and labor to present a gift, banquet, or favor, he gained an important moral (and at the same time, material) advantage over the recipient in return. In other words, the giver became the moral and symbolic superior of the recipient and could thus subject the recipient to giver's will. Ultimately, the effect of the gift, banquet or favor would materialize as the recipient repaid their debts by helping the giver to achieve

his task to compensate for the loss sustained in accepting the gift (Yeung and Tung, 1996).

Managerial Implications: To foster GMS Relations

Despite the preliminary and limited nature of this paper, some important implications can be drawn for further investigation and research. From a theoretical point, much more needs to be done to understand the dynamics of regional relations. This paper argues for a better understanding of the human elements embedded within the development of the GMS relations. A more immediate managerial implication can be outlined for interested agents or firms who want to establish relationships with its Chinese counterparts.

From the discussion of *Guanxi*, it indicates that countries within the GMS Economic Zone will benefit from developing and appropriately utilising *guanxi* relationships with their Chinese partners. Luo (1997) mentioned that although Chinese government has enacted thousands of laws and regulations, almost none are completely enforced since personal interpretations are often used in lieu of legal interpretations. Therefore, Luo (1997) concluded that *guanxi* appears to be very useful in dealing with Chinese bureaucracy.

By establishing the harmonious *guanxi* to build cooperation, and collaboration over the long term, it can reduce the uncertainty about aspects of the Chinese business environment. Similarly, good *guanxi* relationship will influence the Chinese partners' willingness to make the decision, and the loyalty for business, as Vanhonacker (2004)

advocated that good *guanxi* is not a substitute for a sound business strategy; it is merely a tool to help implement a business strategy more effectively.

Developing *Guanxi* can bring cost saving, vital resources and special treatment for those who understand *guanxi* and capitalize it. The proponents of *guanxi* argued that *guanxi*-based business is unethical. However, some scholars defended that some countries' people see *guanxi* as "using" others, according to those countries' morality, is unethical, but in China, "using" a relationship creates an obligation to reciprocate is considered ethical (Lovett, 1999; Vanhonacker, 2004).

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