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Teaching notes for the case study Audrey Fashion enters China

Abstract

Wight maintains that such case studies or critical incidents are:

“... relatively easy to develop and conduct ... [and never fail] (if written and used properly) to engage participants at a meaningful, personal level in examining attitudes and behaviors that might be critical to their effectiveness in the role for which they are preparing.” (Wight, 1995: 127). This case study focuses on an incident in the writer’s own previous working experience in the airline industry. The protagonists and companies are fictional and are used to provide a semi-authentic situation, to maximise the learning outcome of the case study. The case describes a situation which the Swiss Audrey Fashion manager Jennifer Tinner encounters on her first visit with the new distribution partner Lucille Clothing, in northwestern China. It relates, in particular, to the dilemma concerning accommodation reservations during her business stay. In the comments section, the actual decision made by the protagonist is given.

The case study provides students with an opportunity to discuss a case study and analyse the similarities and differences of working styles in China and Switzerland using a structured framework. There are several key intercultural themes to explore and students see an example of a real dilemma where a business person is placed outside of their usual everyday routine. Discussion will increase awareness of how important it is to prepare for such a trip by researching into the cultural norms of the counter partner. The case further highlights how crucial the first meeting is and what impressions are formed. Building good relationships and the importance of awareness of conventional rules of politeness and etiquette are core competences for establishing trust. (Camerer and Mader, 2015)

Audrey Fashion enters China

Teachers' notes

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This case study focuses on an incident in the writer's own previous working experience in the airline industry. The protagonists and companies are fictional and are used to provide a semi-authentic situation, to maximise the learning outcome of the case study. The case describes a situation which the Swiss Audrey Fashion manager Jennifer Tinner encounters on her first visit with the new distribution partner Lucille Clothing, in northwestern China. It relates, in particular, to the dilemma concerning accommodation reservations during her business stay. In the comments section, the actual decision made by the protagonist is given.

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The aims of the case study

1. To help develop practical intercultural communication skills in English
2. To help analyse such situations systematically with the use of theoretical frameworks.

Key themes of intercultural communication explored

1. Feeling strange and homesickness
2. First impressions and building professional relationships
3. Politeness theory i.e. positive and negative face
4. Direct / indirect communication
5. Gender
6. Individualism

The case is intended for the module on intercultural communication, which is part of the Business Administration Bachelor Degree course at the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz. The case study can also be used in specific cross-cultural or international management studies.

Lesson Plan

adapted from Greenwood (1981:258) and Harmer (1991:270)

Target groups Bachelor of Science Business administration students in module 4 of business communication in English with CEFR level B2-C1.
Intercultural and international management studies

Recent work Before the case study the students were exposed to the following
Introduction to key thinkers and concepts of intercultural communication
Everyday meetings/ First meeting and impressions Cross-cultural Awareness 1
Doing business in Switzerland
Working across cultures
Key thinkers of intercultural communication, e.g. Hofstede, Hall, Trompenaars,
Iceberg model, Globe Study
Intercultural awareness 2 Doing business in Japan/China//India hosting/
entertaining/ welcoming guests
Case studies such as merger successes and failures Lewis (2011) and critical
incidents Gibson (2010).

Time: 2 hours in class reading/notetaking and discussion of the case

Step	Time	Students	in	Instructor	Material
1	30'	Read the text and discuss the assignment questions	Indiv/ Group/ class	Forms groups of 4/5, encourages discussion. Circulates and then elicits responses to questions	Case study.
2	30'	Students exchange opinions on how they would act in the situation. Then write summary on flip chart sheet or padlet page and display	groups	Refers to question and explains how to justify reasons. Encourages appropriate language use to avoid stereotyping Asks students to display work on board at front	Flip chart page for each group. Marker pens. Alternative online https://padlet.com/maryjo_kluser/zla8rnia8icx
3	15'	Analyse situation with given RADAR framework	Indiv /pairs	Asks students to make a more detailed analysis using all information necessary. Circulates and gives help. Reminds students about theory	Worksheet References to theory in discussion guide / previous lesson
4	30'	Flipchart presentation of summary of assignment discussion / RADAR analysis	group	Evaluates and moderates	Online tool https://padlet.com/maryjo_kluser/zla8rnia8icx Flipchart paper
5	15'	Review case outcome	Class	Wraps up key themes and theoretical concepts presented in case. Announces that the outcome of the situation will be given and discussed in next lesson	

Comment on the case outcome for future work / discussions

Jennifer decided to change her hotel booking and found an excellent offer online.

The Hilton had availability, and she could book a room for the same price per night as she had paid at the present hotel. As she had to pay for the hotel herself, she decided to book this room and cancel the reservation in the hotel where she was. Jennifer ordered a taxi to take her there the next morning before she was due to appear at the office at 8.30 a.m.

On arrival at the Hilton, she was greeted by English speaking staff and immediately felt much more comfortable. There was also a European style restaurant, and the surroundings looked pleasant and green.

She arrived at the Lucille Clothing premises the next day and eventually found the office where she had arranged to meet the assistant to the manager.

There was a meeting with the regional and H.R managers who asked her about her journey and arrival. Jennifer explained most diplomatically that she had changed hotel, as she had realised that her stay would be more productive if she could stay in more familiar surroundings, where language would not be a barrier.

After a transparent exchange of facial expressions, the two men left the room to discuss the situation. It was not acceptable. When they returned, they informed her that this decision would be accepted.

Jennifer was puzzled and tried not to show her feelings of inadequacy. She had not done anything wrong but felt that the two men did not approve of her decision.

The situation had become awkward, and she was relieved when Chen showed her the way to the training room where she would start her course with employees.

The way in which Jennifer dealt with her dilemma can be used for further discussion or more detailed theoretical analysis based on the discussion guide.

In the particular module for which it has been designed, there is further application of the case study as students are asked to write an analytical report on the incident.

Possible reasons for situation

The five charts in the discussion guide of the case study show areas where there are key differences in culture and these are used to help guide the analysis.

Theoretical analysis

In Figure 2 of the discussion guide of the case study, Hofstede's Comparison of Cultures, the following differences of national culture as potential areas for misunderstanding can be seen:

1. High power distance versus low power distance
2. Individualism v collectivism
3. Indulgence versus restraint

In the case study comments, there were clear differences in the perception towards hierarchy. Whereas the managers in China felt their position to be superior to that of Jennifer, she did not consider this, expecting to be treated with equal status.

Jennifer comes from a more individualistic society where people are expected to take care of themselves. In such societies the focus is on completing the task, making decisions independently, which is not the norm for the Chinese collectivistic culture. The differences in this value are also seen in the comparison of value orientations according to the Globe Study in Figures 7 and 8.

Lastly, there is a substantial difference in the dimension of restraint versus indulgence. Here, to the Chinese managers with a tendency towards restraint, Jennifer's choice of hotel was seen as indulgent and therefore wrong. Jennifer, on the other hand, is from a society which values the importance of leisure time and having fun and generally feeling comfortable. In Switzerland it would not be normal to expect someone to work for fourteen days without a weekend break or at least, a few days' free.

The second chart showing Cultural Comparisons, (Tomalin in Figure 3 of the discussion guide of case study) also reflects these areas where challenges may occur. The two main areas which can be applied to this case study are:

1. Communication style
2. Decision making

As previously mentioned, Jennifer was used to making decisions independently. The differences in communication style is further compared with Hall's Comparison of High and Low Context Cultures. China, as a high text culture, uses a more implicit style of communication with much of the message transmitted between the lines. In order to do business successfully, the relationship requires deep commitment. Switzerland, on the other hand is more of a low context society, where the message is simple and clear, the task is seen as more important than the relationship.

The comparison of value orientations according to the Globe Study in Figures 7 and 8 is useful as it includes the more recent aspects of cultural dimensions:

Human orientation: the degree to which a society encourages an individual's fairness, generosity and kindness towards others

Institutional Collectiveness: degree to which institutions rewarding collective distribution of resources and collective action

In-Group Collectivism: degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organisations or families

Assertiveness: degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational and aggressive in their relationships with others

Gender Egalitarianism: degree to which a collective manages gender equality.

House, et al., (2004)

Scores for both societal clusters to which Switzerland and China belong and the individual values of China and Switzerland are seen in Figures 7 and 8. These comparisons highlight several similarities in both countries and areas, showing relatively low scores for gender egalitarianism, which suggests that Confucian paternal values are still the norm in China. The value orientation scores also show differences in assertiveness, with Switzerland at 4.51 (relatively high) and China scoring lower at 3.76 (relatively low). which further explains why Jennifer's decision to change hotels was considered inappropriate.

To conclude the discussion on this case study, students formulate recommendations or suggestions for best practice in such cross- border cooperation. Such examples of recommendations could be:

- future cooperation can benefit from the incident by ensuring there is someone in place with more understanding of western needs to organise the accommodation and welcome.
- The costs and who is to cover these costs need to be made clearer.
- Both partners need to accept that there are certain differences in cultural norms and working styles and be prepared to exhibit a degree of tolerance and acceptance of each other.

These recommendations will help to formulate a standard operating procedure with clear guidelines for all partners in the Swiss Chinese venture.

In the communication module at the Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz , case studies serve as input for report writing . The following flow chart is an example of how this can be used:

Make your text interesting for the reader by giving it a specific title

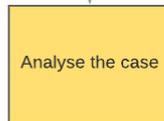
An analytical report on the Audrey International case study

Introduction



Write the introduction, state what the text is about and give a little background information. Tell the reader what is included in the report

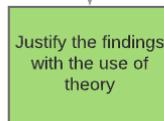
Step1
Use sequencing words and passive where needed



Try to keep your sub headings relevant to the case study

Identify the main causes of the awkward situation

Step2
Avoid stereotyping or any ethnocentric evaluations. Try to use a formal to neutral register



Transition

Refer to the key intercultural thinkers and their concepts

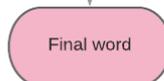
Step3
Use more of a persuasive style in this part to convince reader you are sure of your ideas



Transition

Suggest concrete solutions for both parties involved if possible

Conclusion



Finish off the text with a conclusion that reviews your text

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Case study

Audrey Fashion enters China

Abstract

Jennifer Tinner, a customer relations manager at Audrey Fashion Switzerland, was on a business trip to their future Asian branch, in a suburb of a coastal city in the north of China. After spending the weekend in Shanghai, where she had found her way around reasonably well and enjoyed the familiar western comfort of the Hilton Hotel, she was now in the room of the hotel which her Chinese partners had kindly reserved for her two-week business stay.

After entering her room, Jenny was somewhat shocked at the condition and grim view of horrible concrete buildings out of the window and the thick smog. The TV showed only Chinese programmes, the newspaper was also in Chinese, and there was no wi-fi connection. In short, nobody seemed to speak English in the hotel. As soon as the colleagues who had collected her from the airport left, she inspected the hotel, which had been described fairly negatively on Trip Advisor.

Audrey Fashion enters China

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Comments from Hotel guests
Am currently staying in this hotel, and still have a month and half more to go. Stay is through my employer. I'd avoid it if I had a choice.
Avoid staying here if you can !
Erratic hot water supply. Water's barely hot. Half the time they shut off the water for repairs. The small pantry has no water since I checked in.
Internet is the worse I have experienced in any hotel.
The breakfast buffet is cold and I dont know how many times I have complained about this. No change.
In the entire hotel there is only ONE English speaking staff. It is an absolute terror to try to talk to any of the staff.
The images of the health center on the website is an eyewash. The heater for the pool was working the first day I got here. When I went over after two days, it was broken. Oh what a surprise! Has been broken for the past one month.
The image of the gym is a LIE. It is nothing like that!
The T.V has TWO English channels, sorry - THREE. And about fifty Chinese channels. Staying in a place like this for two months or more - I see it much more of a pain than anything. The only thing that you could do in here is nothing. What an absolute dead property.
Do yourself a favour, and try someplace else. I have no clue how this hotel has managed four stars!

Figure 1 :Authentic Trip Advisor comments adapted from. from <https://www.tripadvisor.com/>

Swiss Manufacturers Audrey Fashion

Audrey Fashion Switzerland manufacture modern luxury undergarment fashion for women and are becoming a status symbol in Europe. Made in one of the few remaining textile factories in Switzerland, it reflects a modern design and high Swiss quality. In the last ten years, the market has expanded worldwide, and the beautiful brand is establishing itself in Asia. The company are planning to enter the Chinese market as the leading exporting country and have negotiated a distribution agreement with a local distributor in China.

Jennifer Tinner aged 37, has studied international management in Zürich. Jennifer's mother is English, and she has grown up bilingually in English and German. Through the work of her parents in the airline industry, Jennifer has travelled extensively. Consequently, she has a reasonable idea of working across borders. She has visited China before and knows a little about business etiquette in China. Audrey Fashions Management appointed her as the right person to lead a new course in customer care for their Chinese partner.

Jennifer's task now is to deepen the initial contacts and, in particular, to give the representatives an image-adequate appearance and offer Swiss customer service skills.

Chinese Distribution Company Lucille Clothing

The company distribute fashion wear mainly to large department stores, the future key customers for Audrey Fashion. The distribution of a Swiss luxury brand is a prestige gain and also crucial regarding earnings for the Chinese subsidiaries. Audrey Fashion is interested in the growing, well-resourced middle class in China and access to it through the partner company's distribution channels.

Two managers hold key management positions:

Chen, the H.R assistant in the Chinese branch, who has helped to organise the stay. He has travelled once to Switzerland on a familiarisation trip so has a reasonable awareness of Swiss hospitality, infrastructure and day- to- day business life at Audrey Fashion Switzerland. He has never learnt English formally as his correspondence shows in emails to Jennifer. He has absorbed English through exposure to films and American TV. There were only a few people with English skills in Chinese management.

Mr Xiu is in charge of the Lucille Clothing. Following several complaints from larger department stores in the area is very keen to have a training course on customer care for the employees.

Mr Xiu, therefore, requested such a training course from the Head Office in Switzerland.

Arrangements for the training course.

The contacts with this company are still new, and this is the first time that Audrey International have offered such a training course. Thus, the company have not yet established clear procedures 'Guanxi' does not exist between Audrey Fashion and the local company representatives yet.

Arrangements for the training course

Jennifer sat back and reflected on her concerns and objectives. Reviewing what she intended to include in her training course, she thought back to the following points that she had learned about doing business in China. Intercultural communication was her area of expertise, and now she had the opportunity to transpose her tried and tested training concepts adequately into an Asian context. She contemplated the following thoughts:

1. Feeling strange and homesickness: Jennifer felt overwhelmed on her arrival in China and experienced acute feelings of alienation. Feeling so lost, was not how she had imagined the situation to be. She was not sure whether she would be able to stay in this hotel and work efficiently. Therefore, a rapid decision was necessary.
2. First impressions and building professional relationships: Jennifer was keenly aware that her meeting tomorrow would be highly significant for establishing the working atmosphere. She pondered over whether Chen might be offended if she chose to change hotels.
3. Direct/indirect communication: Jennifer also thought about how she would communicate this to the counter partners. Would she tell them directly or let them find out indirectly?
4. Politeness theory, i.e. positive and negative face. Jennifer had learned that saving face was essential to build relationships with Chinese. Therefore would her message concerning this accommodation cause them to lose face?
5. Individualism: Would an independently made decision without consultation with Jennifer's team at home or the local management be acceptable?
6. Gender issues: Would the fact that Jennifer was a young Caucasian female affect tone and substance of her future collaboration? Chinese society is still deeply influenced by Confucianism, which advocates a rather paternal hierarchy, where a woman's place is to be at home. The introduction of Communism has meant that women are more prominent in the working force. Would this also be true in this somewhat remote area of China?

Now that she was in her room, she realised her dilemma. Jennifer had been determined not to let the remarks she had read on Trip Advisor influence her first impressions of her arrival at the hotel. There was one other hotel; the recently opened Hilton and not too far away. Chen had remarked, however, that it was more expensive than the one he had suggested. As she was in charge of her expenses, this would not be a problem. Furthermore, she could not contact the Head Office Switzerland and ask for advice because of the time difference. Even her Chinese business partners were already unreachable.

Her suitcase was still at the reception. Should she have it sent to her room or should she ask for a taxi to take her immediately to the Hilton? How could she communicate this to the hotel staff?

Assignment questions

Imagine you were Jennifer, what would you do now having read the above? Ask yourself the same at the end of all the discussions. Has your position changed? And if so, why? The models in the discussion guide may be helpful.

- Would she get used to the new surroundings?
- Did she even want to get used to this hotel?
- Would it lead to negative feelings about China?
- Would she be able to work efficiently if she continued with these feelings of homesickness?
- How did she want to be a convincing coach for the Chinese field service?
- How could she be effective in communicating her "customer management" methods?
- Should she decide to change the hotel? Why? Why not?
- Could this trigger reaction from her hosts? Why? Why not?
- Could a change imply criticism that negatively affects the cooperation willingness of business partners?
- Would Jennifer and her company be disrespected if she came to terms with her hotel situation?
- Would she still be credible and respected as a representative of a Swiss luxury brand?
- Was the choice of the hotel by the partners possibly an unconscious expression of the low esteem that was given to Audrey Fashion and Jennifer Tinner as a person?

Discussion Guidance

(you should refer to these models to support your ideas)

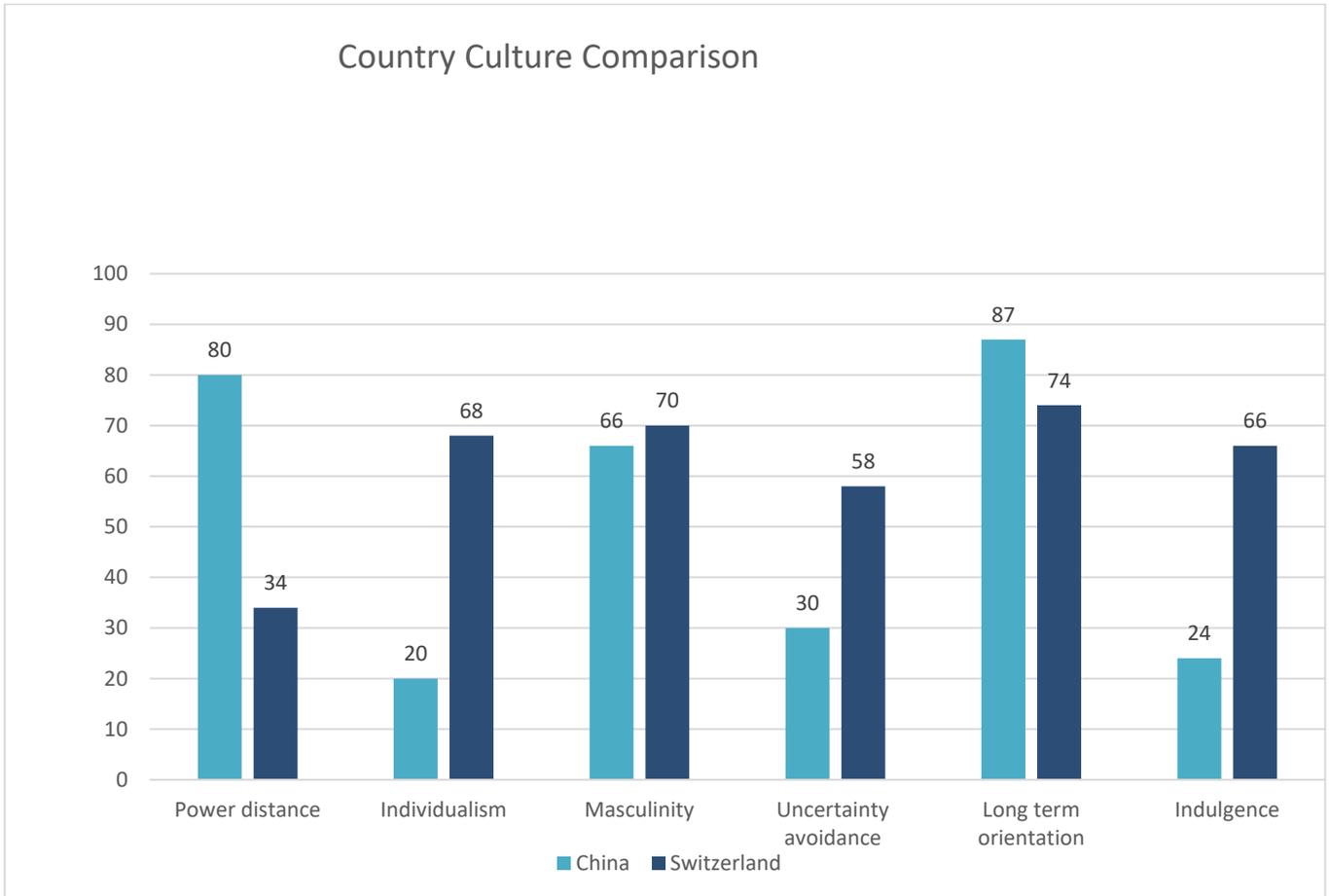


Figure 2 Hofstede's dimensions of culture

Adapted from

<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/china,switzerland/>

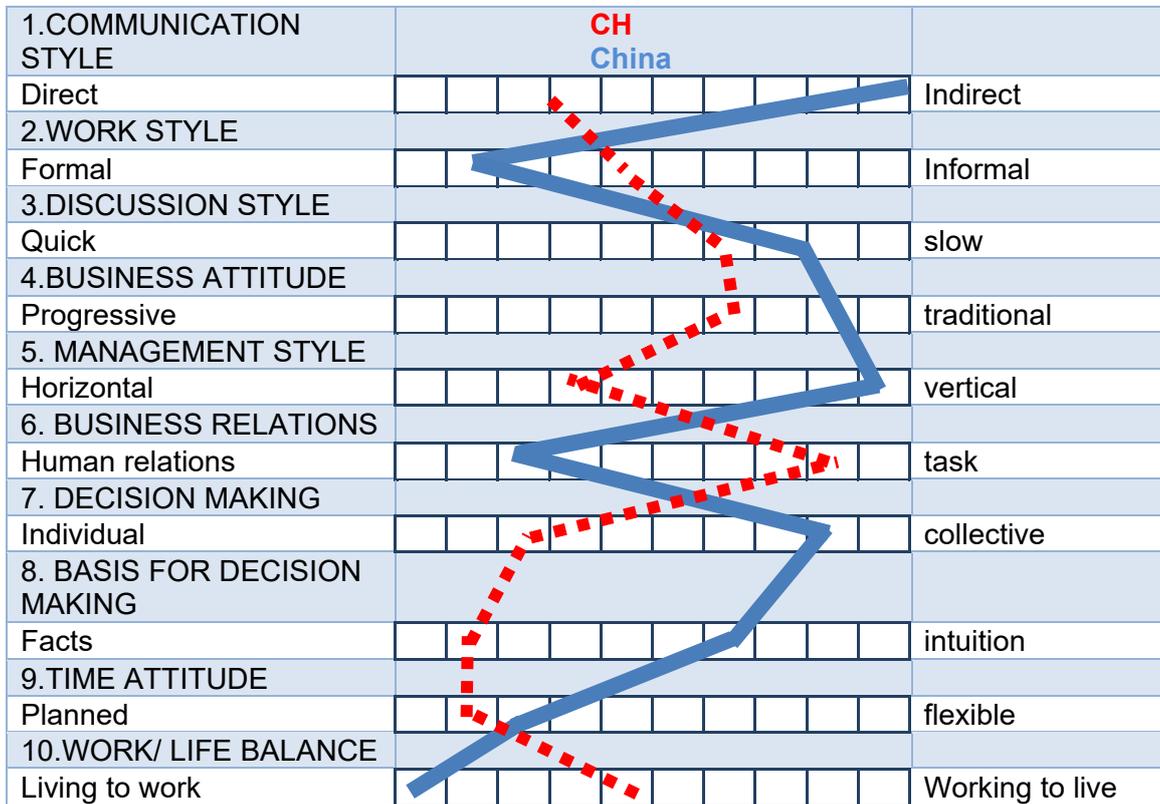


Figure 3 Tomalin's culture profile adapted from Tomalin B. (2010:186)

Factor	High context culture	Low context culture
Overtness of messages	Mainly overt and implicit, use of metaphor, reading between the lines	Mainly overt and explicit, simple and clear
Locus of control and attribution of failure	Inner focus, personal acceptance for failure	Outer focus, blame of others for failure
Use of non-verbal communication	Much use of non- verbal communication	More focus on communication than body language
Expression of reaction	Reserved	Visible, outward, external
Cohesion and separation of groups	Strong distinction between in group and outgroup Strong sense of family	Flexible and open grouping, changing as needed
People bonds	Strong with affiliation to community	Fragile, Little sense of loyalty
Level of commitment to relationships	High commitment. Relationship more important than tasks	Low commitment, Task more important than relationship.
Flexibility of time	Time is open and flexible Process is more important than product	Time is highly organised. Product is more important than process

Figure 4: High and low context cultural factors adapted from Hall, E.T. (1959).

http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/hall_culture.htm

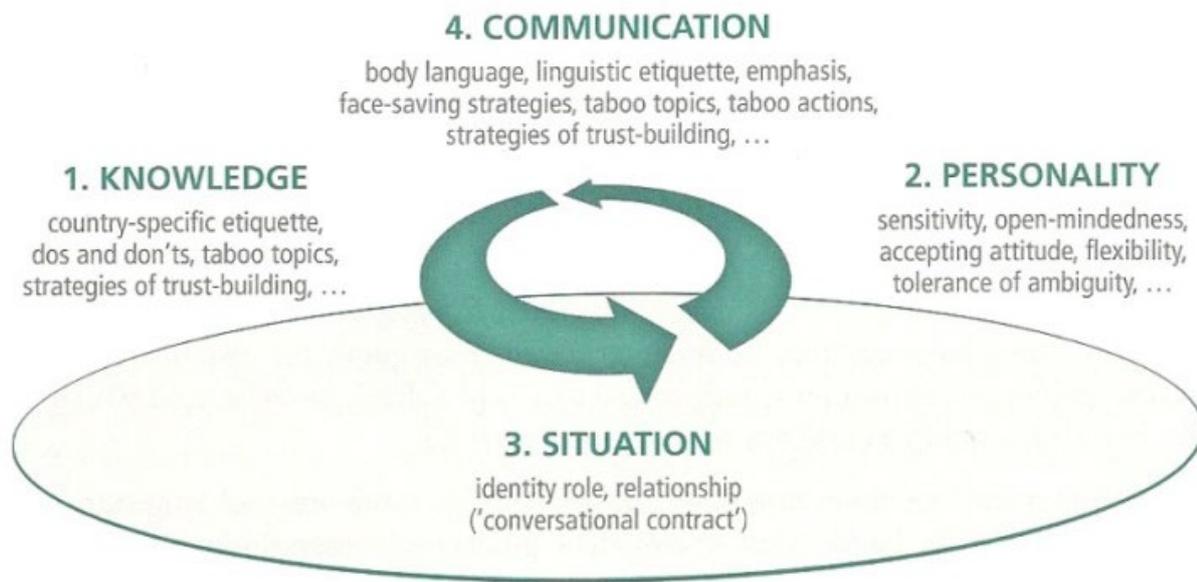


Figure 5: How to be prepared Camerer and Mader (2012:60)

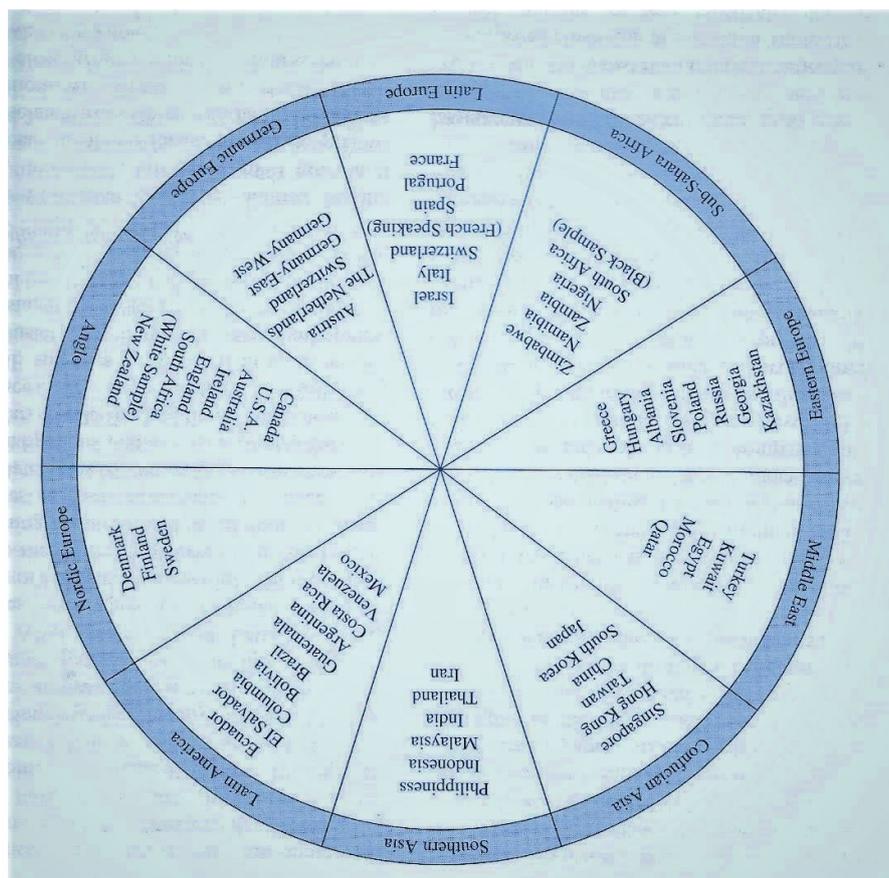


Figure 6: GLOBE Societal Clusters, adapted from House R, Hanges P, Javidan M, Dorfman.P and Gupta V. (2004:190) showing that China belongs to the Confucian Asia cluster of societies, Switzerland belongs to Germanic Europe.

Societal cluster scores for Confucian Asia and Eastern Europe according to the Globe Study 2004

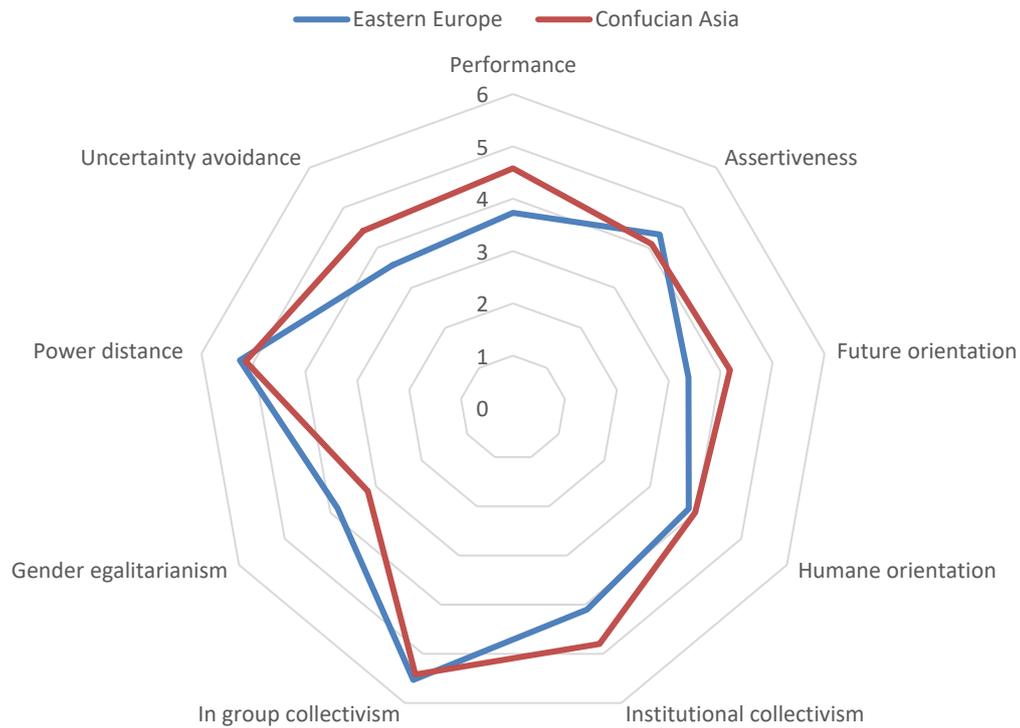


Figure 7: Comparison of value orientations for Confucian Asia and Germanic Europe presented in the Globe Study: adapted from House et al. (2004:33)

Societal cluster scores for China and Switzerland according to the Globe Study 2004

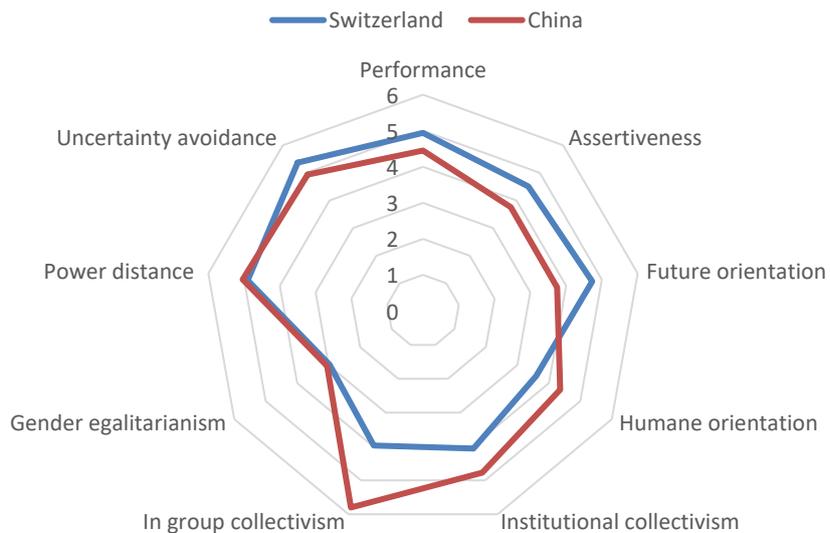


Figure 8: Comparison of value orientations for China and Switzerland presented in the Globe Study: adapted from House et al. (2004:33)

Situation	
Recognize the cultural dimension.	
Analyse the situation	
Decide what options are available.	
Act on the best option(s).	
Review what happened.	Reviewing the incident will enable Jennifer to understand what effect changing hotels will have on her partners and will help Audrey International create a standard procedure for future stays.

Figure 9: RADAR framework. Adapted from Tomalin and Nicks (2007:205) This framework is to help summarise and document the outcome of your discussion.

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