Conflict Management Styles: The Differences among the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans

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Conflict management styles: the differences among the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans resolve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisors and how cultural factors explain the differences in conflict management styles.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey was conducted involving 275 employees from China, Japan and South Korea. A hierarchical regression analysis and A-matrix hypothesis test were used to analyze the data.

Findings – Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, were more likely to use a compromise style. In addition, the Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, were less likely to dominate and were more likely to oblige their supervisors. The country differences in obliging and dominating styles were partially explained by goal emphasis (self vs collective) and concern for the self, respectively.

Research limitations/implications – While limited to recalling specific incidents and self-reported responses, there is evidence that East Asians differ from each other in resolving their interpersonal conflicts with supervisors. Future research needs to examine East Asian differences in resolving an interpersonal conflict with other targets such as peers and subordinates and using other kinds of conflict management styles such as mediation and arbitration.

Originality/value – This is one of few studies that have examined East Asian differences in conflict management styles.

Keywords Conflict management, Organizational conflict, National cultures, China, Japan, South Korea

Paper type Research paper

Conflict is inevitable in all cultures, but every culture has evolved in its own way of managing it (Brett, 2000). In the interest of broadening management theory to attain global relevance (rather than US-based relevance only) and due to the increasing number

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of multinational companies and international alliances, understanding cross-cultural differences in conflict management has therefore become increasingly important (Brett, 2000; Holt and DeVore, 2005; Kozan, 1997; Tinsley, 2001). However, most of the studies conducted on this topic have focused on comparisons between Americans and Asians only. Such studies include the work of Ohbuchi *et al.* (1999) which compared US versus Japanese undergraduate students' self-described conflict management tactics, the work of Tinsley (1998) which compared US versus Japanese managers' self-described conflict resolution models, the work of Lee and Rogan (1991) which compared US American versus Korean employees' self-described organizational conflict management behaviors, and the work of Tinsley and Brett (2001) which compared conflict management styles in the USA versus those in China. These studies found that Asians generally react to conflict in a less direct manner. Indirectness is illustrated by, for instance, avoiding being in the same place as the person with whom one has a disagreement, and avoiding topics in discussions that may become sources of dispute.

Although these studies extended our understanding of how culture or country influences conflict management styles, they paid little attention to cultural differences and the effect of these on conflict management styles among East Asian countries. In fact, they gave the impression that East Asians behave similarly. However, there are reasons to believe that Asians are substantially different from one another in their attitudinal and behavioral patterns (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995; Kim, 2004; Kim and Leung, n.d.; Leung and Tjosvold, 1998). If cross-cultural managers treat people from different East Asian countries in the same way, they may reduce their ability to effectively do business with one of the most formidable markets in the world (Kim and Leung, n.d.). Thus, non-Asians across the world need to be less complacent and egocentric in their view of "all East Asians being alike" regarding conflict resolution. In addition, comparisons among different East Asian groups can contribute to the conflict management literature by broadening our understanding of the systematic variation between cultural values and conflict management styles (Brett, 2000; Kozan, 1997). More importantly, it is necessary for cross-cultural managers to understand the differences among East Asians in terms of conflict management styles in order to minimize, if not totally eradicate, the problems in dealing with employees from these countries. However, it is surprising that there have been relatively few studies that have focused on how East Asians differ from one another in solving interpersonal conflict at work.

One study that investigated the differences among East Asians in terms of conflict management styles is that of Ting-Toomey *et al.* (1991). Ting-Toomey *et al.* examined the conflict management styles of a sample comprised of undergraduate students in terms of their conflict with classmates in a scenario-based experiment. They found that Koreans and Chinese are more likely to use an integrating style (e.g. investigating the problem with another party and finding a solution acceptable to both of them) than the Japanese. In addition, Ting-Toomey *et al.* found that Koreans use a significantly higher degree of compromising style than the Japanese, whereas the latter use a significantly higher degree of obliging style.

Although these studies found some significant differences among East Asians, several important questions remain unaddressed. First, we still do not know how East Asians differ in their efforts to resolve interpersonal conflicts with their immediate supervisors. As conflict management researchers have noted (Holt and DeVore, 2005;

Rahim, 1992), people use different conflict management styles depending on the level of authority of the other party in conflict. Specifically, superiors are more likely to force their interests and employees are more likely to compromise with their peers, whereas subordinates prefer to yield their interests. Thus, the differences cited in the work of Ting-Toomey *et al.* (1991) among East Asians in managing conflicts with peers may vary from those in managing conflicts with supervisors. Moreover, conflicts among supervisors and subordinates occur on a number of dimensions, including the subordinates' duties, responsibilities, job problems, and supervisor-subordinate communication (Wilhelm *et al.*, 1993). Effectively managing the conflict can therefore positively affect the relationship between subordinates and their immediate supervisor. Subsequently, it can also affect organizational effectiveness (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, one goal of this study is to examine the differences on how East Asians manage conflicts with their supervisors.

In addition, cross-cultural researchers have paid little attention to explaining why East Asians have different conflict management styles. As Brockner (2003) argued, most cross-cultural studies examined employees from several countries based on the assumption that they differ in psychological dimensions, and this explains country differences in attitudes and behaviors. However, most cross-cultural studies, even that of Ting-Toomey *et al.* (1991), collectively assumed that East Asians are similar. Thus, these works did not conceptualize the differences in conflict management styles among the subjects. As was mentioned, East Asians are substantially different from one other. As such, it is important to discuss possible psychological dimensions that can account for between-country differences in terms of conflict management styles, and to provide insights into the basic theoretical processes underlying the relationships between people's country of origin and their conflict management styles (Brockner, 2003). In this vein, another goal of this study is to examine how cultural factors account for East Asian differences in conflict management styles.

To summarize, this study examines how the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans resolve an interpersonal conflict with their immediate supervisors and how cultural factors such as cultural values mediate the relationship between nationality and conflict management styles. We have chosen to contrast the three East Asians countries for several reasons. First, although China, Japan, and Korea are geographically close to one another, they have different historical and cultural backgrounds that affect their behaviors (Abramson and Inglehart, 1995; Kim, 2004; Scarborough, 1998). Second, the said countries are the most frequently examined countries in current cross-cultural conflict management studies. Third, these three East Asian countries play increasingly important roles in the world economy and international trading with the USA. Consistent with these reasons, Pecotich and Shultz (1998) argued that these East Asian countries will become a major force in the world's economy and thus managers in the West need to have a knowledge of each of them, especially if they are to effectively conduct business with these countries. In the next section, we discuss the research hypotheses for East Asian differences in conflict management styles.

Theoretical background and research hypotheses

Managing conflict with supervisors

The quality of leader-member relationship is very important in evaluating organizational performance (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). When people coordinate

their interactions along the line of authority ranking, they form a linear status hierarchy which is best illustrated by a military chain of command. In this type of relationship, privileges and responsibilities depend on rank. Lower-ranking people defer to and respect their superiors, while higher-ranking people lead and protect their subordinates (Fiske, 1992). While hierarchical relationships abound and are significant in all cultures, they are considered especially powerful in East Asian countries. They tend to influence how people choose strategies in dealing with their differences with their superiors. In light of the five conflict management styles (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1983; Thomas, 1992), this section deals with the potential similarities across the three East Asian countries in terms of preferences in using these strategies.

Conflict management styles in each of the Asian countries

It is well accepted that major conflict management styles can be evaluated on two dimensions: concern for the self and concern for others (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1983; Thomas, 1992). The combination of the two dimensions results in the following styles:

- integrating (high concern for self and others);
- obliging (low concern for self and high concern for others);
- dominating (high concern for self and low concern for others);
- avoiding (low concern for self and others); and
- compromising (intermediate concern for self and others).

Most cross-cultural conflict management studies focused on comparing the differences across different cultural groups. However, it is also informative to investigate the internal ranks of these strategies within each country. Moreover, there are reasons to believe that these conflict management strategies are not created equally (Rahim, 1992; Wilhelm *et al.*, 1993). Those strategies that are ranked higher tend to be the ones that are most often utilized, and people within each country can differ in their preference for these strategies. Unfortunately, most of the studies on conflict management styles in the literature either focused on the structural features of the instruments or on the differences across countries. For instance, many of the studies we reviewed failed to provide means for their results, and there were even a few that revealed some sketchy patterns. For instance, using college students in Japan ($n = 263$) and the USA ($n = 207$), Ohbuchi *et al.* (1999) asked respondents to indicate how strongly they engaged in four types of tactics to solve a conflict with others: conciliation, assertion, third-party intervention, and avoidance. They found that compared with the American respondents, the Japanese participants used avoidance significantly stronger, and assertion and third-party intervention significantly weaker than did the Americans participants. They also compared the differences in conflict management styles within each country and found that the Japanese most strongly used the avoidance tactic, whereas Americans most strongly used assertion.

Based on these preliminary results, we would like to articulate our expectations on the ranking of these different styles, which should be relatively similar across the three East Asian countries involved in the current research. Countries in East Asia are known to be high in collectivism (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Thus, their conflict

management styles probably resemble more those of Middle Eastern cultures than those of the American culture. Particularly, it is expected that integrating would be the most preferred method, while dominating would be the least preferred one. As this study focuses on how conflict with a superior is handled, power distance, referring to the extent to which members in a culture accept the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980), is expected to play a role as well. The norms of high power distance cultures legitimize inequality between those in high power positions and those in low power positions. As a result, individuals with a higher power distance tend to be less competitive and confrontational in solving interpersonal conflict with their supervisors (Chung and Lee, 1989). With high power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 2001), all the three cultures should demonstrate high respect for their superiors and consequently show much reluctance to use dominating styles in handling conflicts with their superiors. These are the general patterns that are hypothesized to be consistent across these three Asian countries. However, significant differences in terms of strength and/or order are also expected and are thus detailed below.

Conflict management styles: East Asian differences

At this point, we have discussed how the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans are similar to one another in solving interpersonal conflicts with their supervisors. Now, we will examine how conflict management styles may differ across these three East Asian countries. In this regard, we believe that Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are more likely to use a more compromising style in solving interpersonal conflict with their supervisors. Particularly, Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are less likely to accept the fact that subordinates should not express disagreements with their managers or should carry out supervisors' requests without question. According to Alston (1989), Korean companies, unlike Chinese and Japanese companies, emphasize mutual dependence between supervisors and subordinates. In South Korea, subordinates and supervisors expect reciprocal caring and expressions of loyalty and support (Scarborough, 1998). As a result, neither supervisors nor subordinates can dominate the other party in conflict situations. That is, when they have disagreements with their supervisors, Korean employees are more likely to find a mutually acceptable, compromising solution than the Chinese and Japanese. Thus, we predicted the following:

H1. Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are more likely to use a compromising style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor.

The above argument also indicates that Koreans would not be as likely to rely on either dominating or obliging style in solving an interpersonal conflict with their supervisors. However, there are some reasons to believe that the Japanese are the least likely to use a dominating and the most likely to use an obliging style among the three East Asian countries in solving an interpersonal conflict with their supervisors. This is so because the Japanese are very modest and unassertive toward their coworkers who are supposed to be and whom they regard as part of one great family (Moran *et al.*, 1994). They do not openly express what they feel or want, and they generally do not like to attract public attention at work (Ohbuchi, 1998). The Japanese also dislike overt disagreements since they think that overt conflict threatens social relationships (Lebra,

1976). In conflicts, both parties are expected to consider the other party's concerns and resolve the conflict without bitter arguments. In addition, the Japanese highly regard honor and consider others' welfare to be very important in social relations (Honna and Hoffer, 1989). As a result, they are very careful not to mar the other person's interest and thus tend to sacrifice individual interests in conflict situations. Consistent with this, Moran *et al.* (1994) found that obliging is one of the most frequently used conflict management styles for the Japanese. However, the Chinese are less likely to feel obliged in an interpersonal conflict since they have high concern for self-face, which refers to one's own image (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). For people with high concern for self-face, their social standing is very important in their interactions with others (Gao, 1998). As a result, they are more likely to focus on their own interests and tend to be less obliging to others in conflicting situations (Ting-Toomey *et al.*, 1991). Taken together, we predicted the following:

H2. The Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, are more likely to use an obliging style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor.

H3. The Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, are less likely to use a dominating style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor.

On the other hand, Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are more likely to use an integrating style because they tend to communicate with other people more directly in interpersonal encounters. For example, Tung (1991) observed that Koreans, compared with the Japanese and Chinese, generally do not hide their feelings in public nor avoid addressing issues that may be regarded as sensitive. Consistent with this, Paik and Tung (1999) concluded that on the basis of their interviews with American executives who had experienced international business negotiations, open confrontation is inevitable in order to convince Koreans in negotiations. As a result, in an interpersonal conflict, Koreans tend to believe that they can find feasible solutions for an interpersonal conflict with others by discussing the issues together. In support for this, Lee and Rogan (1991) found that Koreans are more likely to engage in solution-oriented strategies (e.g. open and direct communication about the conflict) than Americans in their management of interpersonal conflicts. The foregoing argument also indicates that Koreans are less likely to avoid conflict situations with their supervisors than the Chinese and Japanese. Taken together, Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, thus appear to be more likely to address an interpersonal conflict with their supervisors in a way that would result in a positive outcome for all the parties concerned or for themselves, and they are less likely to avoid discussing the conflicting issues. Hence, we predicted the following:

H4. Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are more likely to use an integrating style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor.

H5. Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are less likely to use an avoiding style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor.

In summary, the predictions on power distance and direct communication group Koreans with the Chinese and Japanese, whereas the predictions based on goal emphasis and self-face concern distinguish the Japanese from the Chinese and Koreans.

Method

Participants and procedures

The participants consisted of current employees who are working in large companies in China, Japan, and Korea. A total of 271 survey questionnaires were collected and used for further analyses (i.e. Chinese = 77, Japanese = 104, and Koreans = 90). All respondents in each country were ethnically the same (i.e. Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, respectively). Table I shows the sample size, response rate, and the participants' age, tenure, and gender by country. As can be seen in Table I, there were significant country differences in age and tenure: the Japanese were significantly older and had a longer tenure than the Chinese and Koreans. However, age and tenure were not significantly associated with conflict management styles, and were thus not controlled in further analyses.

The survey questionnaires were distributed by undergraduate students who were studying in a university in each country to the employees working at companies in Beijing and Shenzhen (China), Beppu (Japan), and Seoul (South Korea). The participants were told that the survey was a voluntary exercise, and they were asked to return the questionnaires to the researcher at the address indicated in the attached form. To ensure that the participants' responses would be anonymous, the survey indicated that the respondents should not place their name anywhere on the survey form, and that individual results would not be analyzed or reported.

The first part of the surveys began by asking the respondents to assess their values toward themselves, others, and the organization. Then each of them also assessed their communication styles. The measures for values included power distance, goal emphasis, and face concern for the self. Then they were asked to describe the most recent incident in which they had an interpersonal conflict with their immediate supervisor in terms of incompatible goals, needs, and view points. After describing the incident, the respondents were then asked to indicate how they resolved the conflict. The survey was initially developed in English and then was translated into Japanese, Korean, and Chinese using Brinslin's (1986) back-translation procedure.

Measures

Conflict management styles. We measured conflict management styles using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory – II (Rahim, 1983). The respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they used each conflict management style to resolve the interpersonal conflict they had with their immediate supervisor (1 = not at all; 7 = very much).

Cultural values and communication style. We measured various cultural values that may account for country differences in conflict management styles: power distance, goal emphasis (collective vs self), self-face concern, and indirect communication. Power distance and goal emphasis were measured using Dorfman and Howell's (1988) five

Country	Sample	Response rate (%)	Age M	Age SD	Gender (%) Male	Gender (%) Female	Tenure (year)
Korea	90	45	31.91	7.93	47.80	52.20	4.73
Japan	104	52	35.72	12.44	53.90	44.30	9.95
China	81	41	31.02	4.27	40.70	59.30	3.98

Table I.
Sample characteristics

items. The sample items were "Group welfare is more important than individual rewards" and "Group success is more important than individual success." Face concern for the self was measured using Ting-Toomey and Oetzel's (2001) five items. One example was "I try not to bring shame to myself." Indirect communication style was measured using Gudykunst *et al.*'s (1996) five items. The sample items were "I communicate in an indirect fashion" and "I avoid eye contact when I communicate with others." The respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the given statements (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

Country. Two dummy variables were created to operationalize the respondents' nationality.

Control variable. We controlled the severity of the reported conflict that the respondents had with their immediate supervisor since this can affect conflict management styles (Oetzel *et al.*, 2001). Specifically, we measured the conflict's severity by asking the respondents to assess it using three sets of appositive adjectives in a seven-point Likert scale, with 1 = not at all important, 7 = very important, 1 = not at all serious, 7 = very serious, and 1 = not at all critical, 7 = very critical.

Analysis

We conducted hierarchical regression analysis using country dummy variables to examine how differently East Asians solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor. Then we compared the regression coefficients for each of the conflict management styles between two countries with the A-matrix hypothesis test using SYSTAT 10.1 (Dwyer, 1983). An A-matrix hypothesis test allows for the examination of whether or not each regression coefficient (or a set of regression coefficients) is significant, and whether or not a regression coefficient differs from another across regression equations (for details, see Dwyer, 1983). In addition, we tested whether or not cultural values (i.e. power distance, goal emphasis, and concern for self-face) and communication style can explain the country differences in conflict management styles using Freedman and Schatzkin's (1992) approach. Their approach is reliable for testing the difference between adjusted and unadjusted regression coefficients (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2002).

Results

The descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlations for all measures are reported in Table II. All reliability estimates were very high, with an average reliability of 0.84, except for power distance (i.e. $\alpha = 0.65$). The mean for integrating conflict management style was relatively higher than those for others, suggesting that employees from East Asian countries tried to discuss the conflicting issue with their supervisor in order to find a solution acceptable to both parties. As expected, power distance was positively correlated to both obliging and avoiding styles (i.e. $r = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$ and 0.19, $p < 0.01$, respectively). The correlation patterns also showed that conflict severity was strongly associated with compromising and avoiding styles (i.e. $r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$ and 0.16, $p < 0.01$, respectively). Meanwhile, gender was not significantly correlated with conflict management styles in each country. These findings are quite consistent with those in the work of Holt and DeVore (2005), in which

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Japan vs China	–	–	–											
2. Japan vs Korea	–	–	–	–										
3. Korea vs China	–	–	–	–	–									
4. Conflict severity	3.84	1.59	−0.67	0.25	−0.67	(0.91)								
5. Integrating	4.75	1.11	−0.04	0.04	−0.04	0.14	(0.88)							
6. Obliging	4.08	1.14	−0.15	−0.11	−0.15	0.11	0.25	(0.88)						
7. Avoiding	3.94	1.10	−0.18	0.10	−0.18	0.17	0.07	0.64	(0.78)					
8. Compromising	4.25	1.07	−0.29	0.33	−0.29	0.20	0.53	0.32	0.37	(0.74)				
9. Dominating	3.52	1.16	−0.03	0.19	−0.03	0.09	0.30	0.05	0.17	0.36	(0.84)			
10. Power distance	4.00	1.05	0.21	−0.24	0.21	−0.03	0.03	0.30	0.19	0.00	0.07	(0.65)		
11. Self-face maintenance	5.38	1.09	0.34	0.13	0.34	−0.16	0.25	0.02	0.11	0.07	0.27	0.17	(0.80)	
12. Goal emphasis (self vs collective)	4.28	1.03	−0.08	−0.26	−0.08	0.10	0.17	0.25	0.17	0.11	−0.05	0.38	−0.02	(0.79)

Notes: $N = 275$: Korea = 90, Japan = 104, China = 81; reliabilities are in parentheses; for all correlation above 0.10 or below −0.10, $p \leq .05$; and above 0.15 or below −0.15, $p \leq .01$

Table II.
Means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficients for variables in all data

significant gender difference with only a withdrawing style (i.e. avoiding style) was indicated in a peer-involved conflict.

Table III shows the mean scores of each conflict management style in each of the three East Asian countries. As expected, the dominating style was the least likely used in solving interpersonal conflict with a supervisor in all of the three East Asian countries (i.e. China = 3.47, Japan = 3.28, and Korea = 3.84, respectively). In Japan, the dominating style was significantly less likely to be used than did other conflicting management styles, as can be seen in Table III. Interestingly, the integrating style was the most frequently used conflict management style in all countries, suggesting that East Asians try to cooperate with their supervisors to find the best solution for both parties in conflicting situations, as can be seen in Table III (i.e. China = 4.69, Japan = 4.74, and Korea = 4.83, respectively). This result is consistent with Holt and DeVore's (2005) meta-analytic study, showing that collectivistic cultures are more concerned with creating a "win-win" situation (i.e. integrating style). As can be seen in Table III, the integrating style was used more strongly in China than did other conflicting management styles, while the compromising style was used more strongly in Korea than did the obliging, avoiding, and domination styles. Table III also shows whether or not there is a significant difference between each mean of the conflict management styles for each country.

East Asian differences in conflict management styles

H1 predicted that Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, would be more likely to use a compromising style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor. Consistent with this, Table IV shows that Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, were more likely to compromise with their supervisors to solve an interpersonal conflict (i.e. $\beta = -0.40$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). Thus, *H1* was supported.

H2 proposed that the Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, would be more likely to use an obliging style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor. Table IV shows that the Japanese significantly differ from the Chinese and Koreans in their use of obliging style. Specifically, the Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, were more likely to use an obliging style (e.g. trying to satisfy the

Conflict management style	China	Japan	Korea
Integrating	4.69 (0.13)	4.75 (0.12)	4.83 (0.10)
Obliging	3.82 (0.12)	4.44 (0.12)	3.90 (0.10)
Avoiding	3.65 (0.12)	4.04 (0.12)	4.09 (0.09)
Compromising	3.77 (0.09)	4.18 (0.12)	4.75 (0.09)
Dominating	3.47 (0.11)	3.28 (0.13)	3.84 (0.11)
Within country comparison	$a > b^{**}, c^{**}, d^{**}, e^{**}$; $b > e^{*}$; $d > e^{**}$	$a > c^{**}, d^{**}, e^{**}$; $b > c^{**}, e^{**}$; $c > e^{**}$ $d > e^{**}$	$a > b^{**}, c^{**}, e^{**}$; $b < c^{*}, d^{**}$; $c < d^{**}$ $d > e^{**}$

Table III.
Mean scores for conflict management styles in the three East Asian countries

Notes: $N = 275$: Korea = 90, Japan = 104, China = 81; standard errors are in parentheses; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$

	Integrating	Obliging		Avoiding	Compromising		Dominating	
	Step 1	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Conflict severity	0.20*	0.01	0.00	0.09	0.03	0.01	0.15	0.11
Japan vs China	0.12	−0.24**	−0.20*	−0.10	−0.16	−0.19*	0.18*	0.02
Japan vs Korea	0.05	−0.22**	−0.15*	0.03	0.25**	0.27**	0.23**	0.14*
Korea vs China	0.07	−0.02	−0.05	−0.13	−0.40**	−0.45**	−0.05	−0.11
Power distance						0.12*		
Self-face maintenance								0.26**
Goal emphasis (self vs collective)			0.19**					
R2	0.02	0.06**	0.09**	0.04*	0.13**	0.15**	0.05**	0.10**

Notes: $N = 275$; Korea = 90, Japan = 104, China = 81; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$

Table IV.
Regression results for the effects of cultural values on country differences in conflict management styles

needs of the supervisor) in solving an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). Thus, *H2* was supported.

H3 proposed that the Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, would be less likely to use a dominating style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor. Consistent with this, Table IV shows that the Japanese used significantly less dominating style than the Chinese and Koreans (i.e. $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$, respectively), suggesting that the Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, are less likely to use their influence to get their ideas accepted when they have an interpersonal conflict with their supervisors. In this respect, *H3* was supported.

H4 stated that Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, would be more likely to use an integrating style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor. In contrast to this, there were no significant differences among Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese in integrating style, as can be seen in Table IV. Thus, *H4* was not supported.

H5 predicted that Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are less likely to use an avoiding style to solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisor. However, as can be seen in Table IV, there were no significant differences among Koreans, Chinese and Japanese in avoiding style. Thus, *H5* was not supported.

The country differences discussed above are summarized in Figure 1. As can be seen, there were significant country differences among the East Asian countries in the compromising, dominating, and obliging styles, whereas there were no significant differences in the integrating and avoiding styles.

Finally, we tested whether or not cultural values and communication style can explain the country differences in the compromising, dominating, and obliging styles. First, we tested whether or not the three East Asian countries differed from one another in terms of power distance, goal emphasis (self vs collective), and concern for the self. As expected, Koreans reported significantly lower power distance than the Chinese and

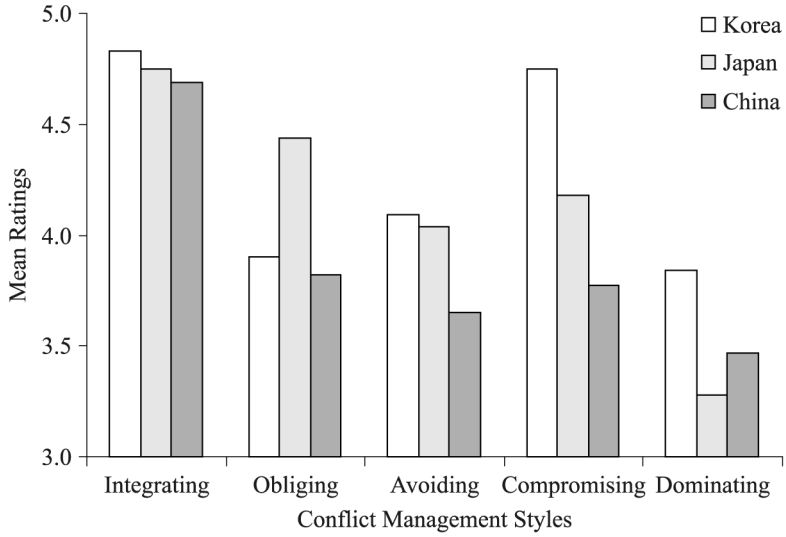

Figure 1.
Country differences in conflict management style

Japanese ($M = 3.57$ vs 4.30, $p < 0.05$; $M = 3.57$ vs 3.93, $p < 0.05$, respectively). Moreover, the Chinese also reported significantly higher power distance than the Japanese ($M = 4.30$ vs 3.93, $p < 0.05$). For goal emphasis, as expected, the Japanese were seen to be more likely to sacrifice individual goals and interests for their group than the Chinese and Koreans ($M = 4.71$ vs 4.14, $p < 0.01$; $M = 4.71$ vs 3.90, $p < 0.01$, respectively). In terms of concern for the self, as expected, the Chinese reported significantly higher concern for the self than the Japanese and Koreans ($M = 5.97$ vs 4.76, $p < 0.01$; $M = 5.97$ vs 5.58, $p < 0.05$, respectively). Koreans also reported significantly higher concern for the self than the Japanese ($M = 5.58$ vs 4.76, $p < 0.01$).

The results of Freedman and Schatzkin's (1992) approach show that Japanese vs Chinese and Japanese vs Korean differences in obliging style were significantly reduced after including goal emphasis ($t(269) = -8.85$, $p < 0.01$; $t(269) = -4.21$, $p < 001$, respectively). In addition, Japanese vs Chinese and Japanese vs Korean differences in dominating style were likewise significantly reduced after including concern for the self ($t(269) = 12.02$, $p < 0.01$; $t(269) = 7.91$, $p < 001$, respectively). However, power distance did not significantly explain Korean vs Chinese and Korean vs Japanese differences in compromising style, as can be seen in Table IV.

Discussion

Despite the continued validity of cross-cultural conflict management research (Brett, 2000; Holt and DeVore, 2005; Kozan, 1997; Tinsley, 2001), there are several important issues that are yet to be addressed. First, there is lack of research that generally examines how and why East Asians differ from one another in conflict management styles. In addition, cross-cultural conflict management research has devoted little attention to examining the differences among East Asians in terms of how they solve an interpersonal conflict with their supervisors. To address these issues, we examined how and why the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans solve an interpersonal conflict with their immediate supervisors differently from one another.

This research can provide several important theoretical implications for cross-cultural conflict management studies and suggest opportunities for more in-depth research and theory in several ways. First, this study found that the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans are somewhat different from one another in dealing with interpersonal conflicts with their supervisors. For example, Koreans, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, are more likely to compromise with their supervisors to solve an interpersonal conflict. Another example is that the Japanese, compared with the Chinese and Koreans, are more likely to yield their interests and are less likely to dominate over their supervisors. In general, these results extend the findings of current conflict management studies (e.g. Leung *et al.*, 2001; Tinsley and Brett, 2001) by examining East Asian differences. In addition, these results can enhance our understanding of cross-cultural differences by examining the subtle but important cultural attributes among different "collectivist" cultures (i.e. China, Japan, and Korea) that have been distorted or simply overlooked. This study also extends Ting-Toomey *et al.*'s (1991) study, which examined how the three East Asian countries differ in dealing with conflict with classmates in a hypothetical conflict episode, by examining conflict management with an immediate supervisor in a real organizational setting.

Another theoretical contribution of this study is the examination of how cultural values can explain country differences in conflict management styles among East Asians. Although East Asians are generally regarded to have similar cultural values, they, in fact, significantly differ from one another. For example, Koreans are less likely to value power distance than the Chinese and Japanese, whereas the Japanese are more likely to sacrifice individual goals and interests for those of their group than the Chinese and Koreans. These findings are consistent with and extend Abramson and Inglehart's (1995) argument that East Asian countries are substantially different from one another in terms of cultural values.

More importantly, these cultural values significantly explain some country differences in conflict management styles. For instance, the differences between Japanese vs Chinese and Koreans in obliging and dominating styles are significantly explained by the emphasis on collective goals and the concern for self-face. Correspondingly, these findings can contribute to cross-cultural research by determining the East Asian differences in conflict management styles (Brockner, 2003). However, the difference between Koreans vs the Chinese and Japanese in compromising style is not explained by power distance. We may need to apply the "emic" approach to describe a particular culture in its own terms (Morris *et al.*, 1999). For example, *Inwha*, an important managerial principle in Korea referring to mutual dependence between unequal parties such as supervisors and subordinates (Alston, 1989), may explain the country difference in compromising styles. Since *Inwha* emphasizes the satisfaction of both unequal parties' needs at the same time (Kim and Leung, n.d.), compromising styles will more likely be used in Korea to solve an interpersonal conflict with supervisors. However, future research works need to clarify the validity of this speculation by developing a measure for inwha and testing its explanatory effects on the country differences in compromising style.

Although some of the country differences in conflict management styles occurred as expected, others were not supported. For example, there were no significant country differences in integrating style. We expected that Koreans, who are more direct in interpersonal relationships, would be more likely to use the integrating style and less likely to use the avoiding style than the Chinese and Japanese. However, in China and Japan, there may be other cultural factors that foster the integrating style and discourage the avoiding style. For example, in Japan, since people emphasize the collective good of the company as a whole (Alston, 1989; Leung and Tjosvold, 1999), they might pay attention to an integrating style that is highly concerned with both the self and others as a whole. On the other hand, in China, people are very practical (Paik and Tung, 1999) so they try to find a solution that can satisfy the needs of both parties in conflict.

This study also offers some practical implications. For example, it helps cross-cultural managers decrease unnecessary animosity in managing people from different East Asian countries by enhancing their understanding of East Asian differences. To do so, cross-cultural managers in multinational companies should learn to adapt and shift as necessary their management styles to different East Asian employees. This study can therefore help cross-cultural managers better understand how subordinates from various East Asian counties solve conflicts with their supervisors differently. Furthermore, this study suggests that multinational companies which do business in East Asian countries and wish to manage conflicts

with East Asian employees need to more effectively develop different managerial practices to handle conflicts across East Asian countries. For example, in Korea and China, they should avoid a dominating approach to solve conflicts with their subordinates, unlike in Japan.

Limitations and strengths

We note that this study has several limitations. First, it relied on self-reported responses and did not assess actual conflict behaviors. Although it is more common to use self-reported measures in cross-cultural conflict management research (Oetzel *et al.*, 2001), it is important to validate the current findings with studies of actual behaviors.

Second, response bias may have occurred since the respondents were asked to recall a specific conflict incident with their supervisors. That is, the respondents were only able to outline what they think they did, rather than what they actually did. However, this response bias is unlikely to influence the results. Research on memory suggests that respondents are more accurate in recalling specific incidents when they are given credit than for schematic theories of memory (Alba and Hasher, 1983). In addition, the use of recalled situations cannot control situational factors, and thus the effect of situations can vary across countries. To reduce the effect of situations on conflict management styles across countries, we controlled the severity of conflict that may vary across countries.

It should also be noted that as in most cross-cultural studies, we did not have completely matched samples from the three countries studied, although we applied the same data collection procedure to the three East Asian countries (i.e. undergraduate/graduate students were asked to distribute the survey questionnaires to their friends working in a company). For example, the Japanese were significantly older than the Chinese and Koreans. However, the demographic variables did not significantly affect conflict management styles. Therefore, we expect that the demographic differences across countries did not influence the interpretation of the results. Nevertheless, this limitation underscores the urgent need for better data in future cross-cultural studies.

Despite the limitations of this study, it has several strengths also which are worth noting. First, the results of this study were based on the responses of current employees in many different firms. This sampling diversity increased our confidence that the results were not simply based on the idiosyncratic organizational culture of a single firm, or the participants' unique experiences in a certain industry. In addition, the non-student sample, unlike most of current cross-cultural management styles, can increase the generalizability of the results in real organizations. Second, this study provides a better comprehension of East Asian differences as associated with conflict management styles by examining how East Asians solve an interpersonal conflict with an immediate supervisor. Most of the current cross-cultural management styles do not specify the conflicting target, or they do not use a target that has less relevance at work (e.g., classmate and friends). In addition, this study examined the cultural factors that may explain the country difference we found. By incorporating cultural factors as an explanatory mechanism for country differences in conflict management styles, this study encourages future studies that could more comprehensively account for the impact of culture on conflict management styles.

Conclusion

Future studies may benefit from the development of a better and a more responsive theory that discusses why East Asians differ from one another in conflict management styles. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to examine how they differ from one another in solving an interpersonal conflict using other kinds of conflict management styles such as a third-party involvement (i.e. mediation and arbitration, Ting-Toomey *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, the fact that other Asian countries (e.g. Singapore) are likely to be substantially different from the three Asian countries examined in this study suggests that a more specialized theory that examines differences in conflict management styles among Asians should be developed. Cross-cultural researchers also need to examine possible differences in conflict management styles among Western countries that are claimed to have similar values. Finally, it would be interesting to examine how East Asians differ from one another in solving interpersonal conflict with other targets such as peers and subordinates.

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