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**Author(s):** Stopniece, Santa

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# Simple vs. Complex Nature of Humor and Laughter in Finnish-Chinese Negotiations

Academic article



A short biography of the author: Santa Stopniece is a doctoral student of Intercultural Communication at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests focus on business communication in multicultural workplaces. Santa holds a dual citizenship of Latvia and Finland. She is currently based in Suzhou, China.

*The author hereby confirms having obtained rights to quote the interviewees by contacting them by e-mail and receiving an e-mail confirmation from them.*

e-mail: [santastop@inbox.lv](mailto:santastop@inbox.lv) (can be published for readers to respond to article)

## Abstract

This paper explores humor and laughter as sites of search for common ground and power positioning in the context of Finnish-Chinese co-operation. It is mainly based on the data obtained by interviewing individuals who work either for local governments in Finland or one of the state agencies responsible for attracting foreign investment. The study uses Positioning theory by Harré (1991) and Politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) when analyzing expressions regarding humor between the Finns and the Chinese. Humor and laughter are seen as integral to co-operation and at times can assist in finding common ground and improving the atmosphere at meetings. At the same time, perceived differences in the sense of humor and the complexities of Chinese ‘face’ may render the use of humor during negotiations difficult. According to interviewees, both sides make adjustments in their humorous expressions for the sake of co-operation. However, power positioning and autonomy may also be asserted.

Keywords: *humor, China, Finland, co-operation, common ground, power*

## Introduction

The importance of co-operation with China has been increasing in Finland and other European countries in light of the growing importance of China and interest in attracting Chinese investments. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland released the China Action Plan in 2010 which recognizes the role of China on the international scene and lists the priority areas for co-operation. Finland has established governmental agencies to facilitate Chinese investment in Finland and has also ensured the co-operation of regional and local governments in framework activities such as town twinning. Finns more often take the position of a seller, offering investment targets to Chinese; or trying to gain a foothold in the huge Chinese market. An important part of investment facilitation and wider co-operation comprises mutual delegation visits by both interested nations.

Humor and laughter are integral parts of these visits, as evidenced in observation and interviews of this study. Humor can assist in building common ground, but at the same time is complex to enact, due to cultural differences in humor and possible sensitivities. In some ways, humor may also be a comparatively new area for both the Finns and the Chinese to be explored in international affairs. China was behind a “bamboo curtain” before its opening policies. While the current President of China Xi Jinping smiles on official occasions, his predecessors hardly did so. Finland, in turn, has been somewhat marginal in Europe, with more dynamic internationalization processes ongoing only in the last few decades. A common stereotype is that Finns are not good at small talk, and humor is normally a part of small talk or talking in less formal conditions. All these aspects make humor and laughter in Finnish-Chinese co-operation an interesting area to understand.

There are only a few studies focusing on national styles of humor in face-to-face interactions. Jokes can be seen on a continuum from almost universal to very culture-specific (Grindsted, 1997). Joking strategies appear to play a significant role in business negotiations, and such strategies relate to the structure and sequencing of talk in various ways in different languages and cultures (Harris & Bargela-Chiappini, 1997). Pivoting on this research gap, the purpose of this paper is to explore and analyze humor and laughter as sites of search for common ground and power positioning in Finnish-Chinese co-operation. This study approaches the topic mostly

from the perspective of Finnish side representatives, because they were more easily accessible to the author and most of the data was obtained in Finland. The author holds dual citizenship of Latvia and Finland.

#### Theoretical framework and method

The theoretical framework of the study is based on Positioning Theory by Harré (1991), which addresses power, positioning and accommodation in intercultural communication. There is the option of multiple choices for an individual to position themselves in response to the unfolding narrative and to change and adjust their position (Davies & Harré, 1990). In telling a joke, whether explicitly or implicitly, a speaker assigns parts and characters in the episodes described, both to themselves and to other people, including those taking part in the conversation. A person thus can be said to 'have been positioned' by another speaker (Harre, 1990). Humor is part of a power play, and the Positioning Theory is a suitable resource for addressing humor in the dynamic context of co-operation with China, where power relations are being actively negotiated. Power is one of the functions of humor, the others being solidarity-based and psychological functions (Hay, 2000). Humor can be seen as a product of power relations and the contesting of these, thus humor analysis can be a tool that helps to discover organizational power relations (Dyer, 1991).

Politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) will also be used when considering the aspect of 'face' in humor. According to this theory, humor involves accommodating two different 'face' needs – the need for autonomy and the need for affiliation, one of which may be stronger in a particular culture. The concept of common ground in the context of this paper will be understood as one aspect of collaborative management when the co-operating sides are making an attempt to work closely with one another (Garber, 2006). Thus, two different 'face' needs impact the search for common ground; the 'face' of affiliation being favorable for it, and the 'face' of autonomy possibly working against it.

The main methodological approach of the study involved interviewing Finnish representatives at local and state levels who facilitated Chinese investment, co-operation and trade opportunities. Some participant observation in meetings was also conducted to get access to naturally occurring intercultural communication, and to

provide a fuller sense of the context. Nine interviews were conducted in the Finnish cities of Helsinki, Turku and Lahti in the autumn of 2013. Observations were also conducted for six days altogether during a Chinese delegation visit from Tianjin (major port city in northeastern China) to Turku (city on the southwest coast of Finland) in October 2013, and a Finnish delegation visit from Oulu (most populous city in Northern Finland) to Suzhou (city close to Shanghai) in May 2014.

Five of the interviewees were Finns, three were of Chinese origin and one was Japanese, but all had lived and worked in Finland between 5 and 20 years. Four of the interviewees were representatives of local or regional governments; three were team members of a state investment attraction agency, and two were interpreters working for the Finns. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions, broadly addressing the experiences of working with the Chinese. The purpose of the interviews was inductively to discover themes regarding communication in the setting of Chinese investment, co-operation and trade facilitation and to encourage interviewees to offer their own definitions of particular activities (Silverman, 2006; Briggs, 1986). Five interviews were held at interviewees' workplaces, two in cafeterias and the remaining two by Skype. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed. Interview quotations used in this paper are direct citations except when modified for the sake of comprehension. The interviews were coded IV 1-9 according to the sequence in which they were conducted, and information about the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee codes and basic data

<b>Interviewee code</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Working title</b>
IV1	female	Japan	Business Development Officer
IV2	male	China	Interpreter
IV3	male	Finland	Development Manager
IV4	female	China	Interpreter
IV5	male	Finland	Senior Advisor
IV6	male	Finland	Head of International Affairs
IV7	male	China	Business Development Manager
IV8	female	Finland	Customer Operations Director
IV9	male	Finland	General Manager

During the analysis stage, the interview and observation data were systematized according to subthemes and then combined for a thick description of the intercultural communication dynamics in the given context (Spradley, 1980; Geertz, 1973). One of the themes that emerged from the data was the role of humor and laughter in co-operation.

### Humor and laughter as common ground

Humor is believed to have a connection to playing. It can be interpreted as training for the unexpected, placing oneself at risk of losing balance or dominance while learning to recover; catching one another off guard in ways that simulate risk and stimulate recovery (Boyd, 2004). Humor may be connected to seeking relief, ridding ourselves of accumulated nervous energy and a release of suppressed emotion (Porteus, 1988). The shift to playful mode may imply a need for strengthening the interpersonal relationship between the speakers. Humor and laughter are universal; while laughter clearly visible and audible, humor is more difficult to analyze. Laughter is not an exclusive reaction to humor, although an important and a convenient one to include in a definition of joking, which is in itself an important aspect of humor. In a conversational approach to joking, the utterance counts as a joke if it is 1) spontaneous, 2) intentional, 3) accompanied by laughter (Grindsted, 1997). Humor in the workplace can reduce stress and enhance group cohesiveness and communication (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

During the interviews, Finnish representatives spoke of having humorous interactions and laughing with the Chinese which was helpful for improving atmosphere and for finding common ground. Mutual understanding can be achieved through humor:

We often laugh quite much in the meetings with delegations. In certain situations, somebody makes a joke and laughs, and it's not a problem. I think it's not so that we do not understand their humor; we laugh at similar things, at least in situations that I have been. (IV6)

During observation, it was also possible to see that laughter or seeing some situation in a humorous light is an integral part of visits and communication, especially in less formal conditions, for instance when having meals and demonstrations. When a Chinese group was introduced to the virtual reality glasses during their visit to Turku, a junior Chinese group member agreed to try out an exciting virtual ride on the

rollercoaster. The assisting person recommended that he sit down, because some people earlier had had strong reactions and the testing person might lose their balance if left standing. When the junior delegation member expressed his excitement about the ride, other members of the delegation were laughing. Later during lunch in Turku, the Chinese asked whether the Finnish hosts liked the food when visiting Tianjin. The Finns replied that they liked it very much, but some dishes were a bit spicy. To that, the Chinese also laughed (perhaps because Tianjin food is notoriously spicy).

One interviewee indicated that humor may be related to the necessity to find relief and to relax during negotiations:

When there are negotiations, of course, we laugh together with the Chinese, but it is not so clear why. It is more like a habit or politeness to laugh about some, I would say, not so funny joke, but at least that is something to share with them. That is also a way to relax people – to tell a joke (IV3).

Another interviewee implied that he does not see humor as central for finding common ground, but it can improve the atmosphere:

It is not joke business, it is work, so I am not paying so much attention from that point. However, it sometimes helps to get a positive attitude and leads to the happy moments. Whether you get humor or not depends on the situation. (IV9)

Thus, in some situations, humor is seen as useful for building common ground, but also vice versa - having more common ground and knowing each other better results in more humor:

In governmental meetings, the humor and telling jokes - that is not much happening in the first meeting. But when you know the person well and get into a closer relationship, then you can be a bit informal and bring humor into discussion as well. (IV8)

It was implied by one participant that the Chinese representatives are trying to use humor as a way to build common ground:

When the Chinese make jokes, I think possibly they understand that we are from a different culture and if in our culture we have jokes, then joking will be a way to find a common task. I think Chinese are really trying to be one with Westerners. (IV3).

Turning to the specifics of what the Chinese would joke about in these situations, the interviewee shared further:

From what I remember, their jokes are maybe related to something they know about Finland, about snow, or how cold it is. I think they can sometimes make this kind of jokes, then they are really pushing themselves, they are really trying. (IV3)

A similar situation was also observed during the visit from Oulu to Suzhou. There were a few jokes about the cold weather in Finland, and after that it was noted that there was still plenty of snow in Rovaniemi in May, and that Oulu was only three hours away from Santa Claus.

To sum up, humor, joking and laughter are seen as an integral part of the visits that served the purposes of feeling more relaxed, improving the atmosphere, and being polite. Thus, it can be favorable for building common ground. There is a suggestion that the Chinese may have tried to joke as an adjustment strategy to the Finnish side. Jokes may utilize the common knowledge of the other side, such as the coldness in Finland or the spicy food in China. Humor can have a universal nature and be experienced as such in Finnish-Chinese cooperation.

#### Differences in humor and the concept of face

While using humor in negotiations can often be beneficial, the complex nature of joking and laughter in interactive business contexts is also clearly apparent. In the field of humor studies it has long been recognized that both that what counts as a joke may be culturally specific, and also that the sequencing and patterning of laughter may vary (Grindsted, 1997). Attardo (1993) has explored the paradox of the communicative nature of jokes, which are defined as a type of text that may violate the principle of cooperation. Humor involves accommodating two different face needs – the need for autonomy and the need for affiliation, one of which may be stronger in a particular culture (Brown & Levinson, 1987). One way to explain humor deals with superiority theory: we laugh at errors by others because they enhance our feeling of superiority (Porteus, 1988). Boasting is a particular form of self-presentation, which can be done in a humorous way (Scollon & Scollon, 1983). It is easy to laugh at a disassociated item, but disparagement of affiliated objects may cause insult. One also has to pay attention to his team members and the face work of the whole group. While joking, one is involved in a dilemma, as it violates the need for personal autonomy.



Not wanting to intrude into the other person's autonomy may result in more self-ridicule jokes, typical for a Danish sense of humor (Grindsted, 1997).

The participants of this study revealed their views of the differences in Finnish and Chinese senses of humor and expressed some puzzlement about topics that one culture laughed about and the other side seemed not to:

There is no black humor about death or some "dirty" things that we [the Finns] laugh about – I don't know if the Chinese are laughing about that. Also some absurd things that are funny for us are not funny for them. I have not really understood what is funny for them. (IV3)

Interviewees reported feeling cautious about using humor at times, as if perceived communication style differences would make one reluctant to use humor for building common ground:

Humor... it's an art in itself. So you have to understand when to make jokes, and if to make joke at all. To be safe, I would say, less is better. I have grown up in the Finnish-Western culture and my facial and body language is more maybe U.S.-American style, and they can sense it right away. But of course I am practicing to limit myself so that I can try to be as much Chinese as possible in front of the Chinese people. It's not that much fun, actually. (IV7)

Humor as a message may not get through: "There have been situations when I felt – ok, maybe they didn't get the joke at all." (IV3) However, one participant said that gradual adjustment process takes place in understanding humor and reading subtle signs:

Maybe somehow I also understand their humor which I really do not understand, but maybe I can understand something about that. It is about understanding more about their culture and how to change my behavior from the signals that I can get on how they behave. (IV3)

Also another interviewee said that the knowledge of the other side is important: "I think sometimes when situation is right, you need to prepare even for humor, and you need to know your counterpart a little bit." (IV9)

Considering some of the complex dynamics of using humor in Finnish-Chinese cooperation, in particular participants spoke of noticed sensitivities surrounding Chinese 'face':

Surely, they have humor, but they are laughing at different things than Westerners; Chinese humor is very different from the humor in the Western world. In the Western world, we have a lot of irony; Chinese don't think about irony in that sense, because they kind of can't laugh for themselves because of losing their 'face.' (IV3)

They like that kind of slap-stick humor - it is very direct about what happened to others, but not to themselves. If I say that Chinese can't laugh at themselves, I don't know if I am right, but sometimes I felt so. (IV5)

While these Finnish participants said the Chinese are not enjoying laughing about themselves much, it was also said that the Chinese would like to laugh about the Finnish stereotypical weakness – “they make jokes on us about drinking too much.” (IV6) During observation of the Oulu delegation to Suzhou, on several occasions the Chinese laughed when getting to know small numbers associated with the Finnish population. During the visit the delegation met a Chinese man whose son had earlier studied in Oulu and had commented that it is “the smallest city in the world.” Making use of a contrast with China, a Finnish respondent said that Chinese like to joke rather boastfully about themselves - “they make jokes on the size of their organizations, and the size of China” (IV6).

To sum up, the difficulties in using humor were related by interviewees to the differences in the sense of humor, the topics of jokes, and even body language during joking, all of which, however, can be gradually understood and adjusted to on some degree. They reported that it was important to get to know the Chinese representatives well in order to make such adjustments. Chinese 'face' was one area of sensitivity, in which Finnish interviewees said generally it was difficult for the Chinese to laugh at themselves, but might joke boastfully about themselves at times. Finnish stereotypical weaknesses of drinking and small populations were reported as topics of laughter for the Chinese.

## Discussion

Limitations of this study are that it is small scale and predominantly based on interviews with the representatives of the Finnish side, with some supplemental observations. Silverman (2006) notes that interview responses are not always consistently related with peoples' behavior in naturally occurring situations. However,

their stories do provide insights about their momentary concerns and circumstances. Reflective use of interview materials has clear benefits in providing insight into topics and their characteristics in specific cultural contexts (Nikander, 2012). In a qualitative framework, research based on interviews seeks to manifest meanings; therefore, a small number of cases facilitate the researcher's close association with the respondents and inquiry in naturalistic settings (Crouch, 2006).

Despite the limitations of this study, it is possible to draw some considerations and conclusions. From the participants' answers it emerged that humor in Finnish-Chinese co-operation negotiations can be seen simultaneously as a simple and complicated area. If humor goes well, it can assist in building common ground and improving the negotiation climate. However, humor can also touch on sensitive and at times difficult areas, drawing upon different styles, acceptable topics and ways of joking.

Simply laughing a bit can be seen as easing the atmosphere when, for example, upon meeting the participating sides feel a bit nervous. Laughing and humor can be seen as a universal language to be utilized in the context of a great deal of uncertainty. Jokes at times appear to draw from national stereotypes and comparison of contrasts, such as large China, cold Finland, spicy food in China, drinking too much in Finland. These jokes may serve a purpose of self-introduction or showing what you know about the other side and, as such, can be an effort to form a bridge and create some common ground.

The data suggest that both sides try to adjust their ways of joking to their perceptions of the other side's expectations. For example, the Chinese reportedly may force themselves to joke while negotiating, and Finns learned about the specifics of the Chinese sense of humor and try to adjust to that. This also demonstrates efforts to use humor to create common ground. The adjustment may also have to do with the location of the visit: if the Chinese had arrived as visitors, they may think that they need to adjust to the local ways of negotiation, and their behavior may reflect their belief of what humor would look like in Finland.

Referring to the participants of the study, there are, however, differences in the sense of humor which may make it complicated to use humor for building common ground. In addition, the probability that a joke is not understood may have to do with the fact that English is not the native language for either side. Sensitivity of Chinese 'face' was a concrete area of difference and difficulty described in detail by the interviewees. However, Finnish participants implied that the Chinese can laugh at themselves in the

context of their own boastful jokes. Laughing at the Finnish weakness of drinking a great deal, and at the small numbers of the Finnish population was also reported and observed.

The primary contribution of this study has been to document the meanings that Finns attribute to their co-operation with the Chinese. An obvious limitation is that it was not possible to interview Chinese visitors, whose views and perceptions on humor would be equally interesting and important to consider. Consequently, this study gives more voice to Finnish interpretation regarding humor with the Chinese and there is a power imbalance in the representation, despite the fact that some participants were the Chinese working for the Finnish side. The possible effect of stereotypes on these interpretations also cannot be ruled out. Perception of the participants may be subjective and their expressions can in themselves be seen as a part of power positioning, but at the same time it is one window to reality and achieving understanding about the area of humor. A larger amount of observation data would allow for stronger claims about humor in interaction between the two groups.

## Conclusion

Although the Finnish representatives mostly see humor as a site of search for common ground, they also see that occasionally Chinese representatives may get involved in humorous power play. Referring to Brown and Levinson (1987), it can be assumed that sometimes the autonomous 'face' needs to be accommodated, asserting the power positioning over the search for common ground. Hints of the autonomy 'face' could be found in joking on others, boasting humorously and reluctance to laugh at oneself. At the same time, the 'face' of affiliation may manifest in attempts to adjust and joke during negotiations, even to the point of forcing oneself. It appears to be a complex endeavor to find the balance between needs of autonomy and affiliation when using humor as a way of expression.

This paper explored humor in the context of Finnish-Chinese co-operation, where there is an emerging dynamics of Finns as sellers of investment targets and Chinese as investors. This newly developing intercultural communication context may have similarities also with what is happening in co-operation with China elsewhere in the world. Thus, this study raises several questions for future research, keeping in mind

that one of the current power positioning narratives is that of rising China. Is the possible sensitivity of Chinese regarding 'face' in humor in any way related to their strengthening feeling of power? Would Chinese like to be respected more in humor and to use humorous boasting more because of China's growing global status? Might they be able to afford more laughter at weaknesses of others or at areas that do not measure up to China's greatness? Chinese adjustments to the perceived Western style of humor and imitation of it in negotiations could also be an interesting topic to consider in future research. What are the responses to humor of Chinese representatives by their co-operation partners?

Returning to the fact that humor is believed to have a connection to playing (Boyd, 2004), a conclusion of this study is also that humor may deal with playful expressions of power; it involves power positioning in a playful way. Positions tend to be taken up according to an unfolding narrative depending upon the outcomes they generate (Davies & Harré, 1990). Adjustments in humor occur in hopes of reaping the benefits found in finding common ground, but in certain situations, autonomy and power may also be asserted.

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