A framework for Chinese Power Games – Political tactics in information systems development processes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the way one particular manager of the MIS department at *TaiJen* uses expert knowledge to adopt political tactics to achieve his goals of self-interest in information system development (ISD) processes. Based on qualitative data collected from *TaiJen* (pseudonym), the study interweaves *Chinese Power Game: Face and Favor Theory* and *Confucian Relationalism* into the different kinds of political tactics utilized by the MIS department manager. An appropriate categorization of political tactics is constructed based on two dimensions: "**relatively strong/weak power**" and "**winning/losing position**." Nine kinds of political tactics are grouped into four types: *aggression*, *defense*, *strengthening* and *withdrawal*, and the different tactics used by the manager of the MIS department on his supervisors, equals and subordinates are categorized on the basis of these types. In view of the important role played by Asia in the 21st Century, particularly by Chinese cultural societies, which represent a hugely significant market to all global enterprises, it is hoped that this study will assist the business world in understanding the culture that places emphasis on the conducting of business through interpersonal relationships.

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1. Introduction

IS development rapidly shapes the changes in relationships, communication methods, influences, authorities and controls among different departments of an organization (Keen, 1981; Markus & Robey, 1995). At the same time, it raises the level of political behavior adopted in that organization. As IS facilitates information distribution among senior management, it can be used as management's source of power to control staff (Markus, 1983). IS also reduces the bargaining chip of the staff, prompting strong resistance to managerial power to the point of failure (Kling, 1987; Willocks & Mason, 1987). Zuboff (1988) believes that IS influences the authority of middle managers, threatening their ability to control. As a consequence, they resist and distort resource allocation, and ultimately resist the implementation of IS.

At the same time, a large number of MIS scholars have emphasized the influence of culture on ISD processes (Avgerou, 2001; Avgerou & McGrath, 2007; Braa, 1997; Chang, 2010, 2012; Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998; Kumar, Dissel, & Bielli, 1998; Martinsons & Westwood, 1997; Rohitratana, 2000; Shanks et al., 2000; Walsham & Sahay, 1999). Using a literature search strategy, Leidner and Kayworth (2006) found a total of 82 articles that focused on both IT and culture from 1990 to 2004. In light of this, Avgerou

(2001) asserted that although some of the western literature on IS in developing countries recognizes the importance of local cultural understanding, it views culture as a barrier to IS adoption. Moreover, it tends to assign or imply a low worth to the indigenous culture, and a correspondingly high worth to western culture. She suggested the need for greater respect than this towards the culture of others (Avgerou, 2001).

The different approaches of eastern and western thinkers to diplomacy reflect important differences in the two cultures' understanding of human action in the world (Francois, 2004). Based on the Hellenic–Judaeo–Christian tradition, great value is placed in the West on each human life. In contrast, in the East, the life of the community and the family are of greater importance (Suen, Cheung, & Mondejar, 2007). This is especially evident in Chinese societies (Low, 1996). Therefore, the philosophy of Chinese culture differs from that of western culture (Zhang, Sarker, & Sarker, 2008), with the concept of *Relationalism* in the Chinese context being the counterpart to the notion of *Individualism* in the western context (Ho, 1998; Ho & Chiu, 1998). Ho (1998) asserted that Chinese people behave according to their particular relations with others, and that they are actually individuals embedded in a social network that is shaped by all possible reactions of individuals in relation. As a consequence, it is important that research into social actions should involve not only individual actions, but also the actions of others participating in the same event (Ho, 1993). The term *guanxi* in Chinese cultural society should be understood as being

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based on factors that promote shared social experience between and among individuals (Chiao, 1982; King, 1991; Zhuang, Xi, & Tsang, 2010). *Renqing*[1] connotes a set of social norms by which one has to abide, in order to get along well with other people in Chinese culture and those Asian countries that have been significantly influenced by Chinese culture (Hwang, 1987).

Many academics have classified political tactics in various ways (Keen, 1981; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; McClelland, 1975, 1984; Hwang, 2000; Lines, 2007). However, to date, no study has adopted both the national cultural and power characteristics to classify the political tactics in the IS development process. Moreover, while many MIS scholars have studied Chinese culture (Martinsons, 2008; Martinsons & Davison, 2007; Westrup & Liu, 2008; Zhang et al., 2008; 2005, 2004; Keil, Im, & Mahring, 2007; Martinsons & Westwood, 1997), they have tended to oversimplify the nature of "*guanxi*", and, consequently, have failed to capture its essence (Chung, Eichenseher, & Taniguchi, 2008).

The MIS department manager plays the critical role of resource allocator in ISD processes, controlling the IS and core capability data of a company, its critical downstream and upstream data as well as customer data. As a consequence, this type of manager has significant influence over IS (Thomas & Fernandez, 2009). A considerable body of literature reminds us that power manipulation and the use of political tactics vary among cultures and societies. In view of the fact that a number of Asian countries including China play an important role in the 21st Century, the huge Asian market requires organizations to adopt IT that will enhance company performance (McFarlan, 2004). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a particularly significant role in Asian cultural societies (including Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan and Thailand) (Zhang et al., 2008). To achieve their business goals, lower and middle managers rely heavily on *guanxi* and *renqing* (Dunfee & Warren, 2001).

To address the gap in the extant literature highlighted above, it is necessary to understand the following issue: how have the power wielding and political tactics of MIS department managers been influenced by Chinese culture? The goal of this study is achieved by addressing two specific questions: (1) how have the power characteristics embedded in Chinese cultural societies such as Taiwan influenced the political tactics adopted by MIS department managers? To answer this question, the present paper not only clarifies the power characteristics in Chinese cultural organizations, but also enhances the interpretation of the political tactics employed in a Chinese cultural context highlighted in Hwang's (1987) *Chinese Power Game: Face and Favor Theory*, and *Confucian Relationalism* (Hwang, 1995; Hwang, 2000). The second question considered is: (2) how can the complex political tactics of MIS department managers be recognized and understood? To address this question, a theoretical framework of political tactic categories in the Chinese cultural context is built in this study. Through the use of qualitative research methods, the adoption of cultural perspectives to draw conclusions, and the categorization of different dimensions, the intricate relationships among power characteristics, categories of political tactics, Chinese context business and culture are further highlighted.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first part provides a review of the body of literature on *Chinese Power Game: Face and Favor Theory* and *Confucian Relationalism*, and articulates an understanding of these based on an integration of the two theories. The interpretive method is then used to conduct the study. Next, the relationship among power characteristics, categories of political tactics and the Chinese culture of the MIS department manager of *TaiJen* is analyzed and discussed. The paper then builds a theoretical framework of political tactics, after which the findings are presented. The paper ends by highlighting the contributions of the study, drawing conclusions and exploring possible areas for future research.

2. Theories

Due to the failure of Sillince and Mouakket (1997) and Martinsons and Westwood (1997) to provide an adequate interpretation of the research data from their respective perspectives, this study is based on a critique of previous relevant research into the political tactics used in ISD processes that ignore Chinese conventions. The data are then interpreted with reference to *Chinese Power Game: Face and Favor Theory* (Hwang, 1987) and *Confucian Relationalism* (Hwang, 1995, 2000) to ensure a successful reconciliation of the data with Chinese culture.

2.1. Chinese Power Game: Face and Favor Theory

Hwang (1987) developed the conceptual framework of *Chinese Power Game: Face and Favor Theory*, based on the social exchange theory, to fathom the dynamic relationships among these concepts. He divided interpersonal relationships into two parts: (1) **The expressive component**: to satisfy affective feelings, an individual will manipulate others to procure some desired material resource from family, close friends and other congenial groups. An individual may also seek to generate feelings of affection, warmth, safety, and attachment from others. (2) **The instrumental component**: motivated by a strong desire to enlist help from outside resources, an individual may well attempt to manipulate others to satisfy personal goals. These two components are always mixed.

Adopting this framework in *Chinese Power Game: Face and Favor Theory*, Hwang (1987) subdivides *guanxi* (relationships) into three parts to show the degrees of permeability between the psychological boundaries evident among Chinese: (1) **Expressive ties**: this is generally a relatively permanent and stable social relationship within families. (2) **Mixed ties**: this kind of relationship, which has been termed a particularistic tie, occurs mainly among relatives, neighbors, classmates, colleagues, teachers and students who share common areas of interest. Although the members of the mixed tie network know each other and maintain a certain expressive component in their relationship, it is never so strong that all participants in the tie are able to express themselves as freely as the members in the expressive tie. (3) **Instrumental ties**: individuals must establish instrumental ties with other people outside their family to attain their material goals. A person in an instrumental tie network can, with relative ease, become a member of a mixed tie network by *la guanxi* (seeking relationship).

It is possible for both "leaders" and "workers" to be the *resource allocators* and *petitioners* in an organization. When an employee needs the support of his/her superior, the superior will judge their relationship on the basis of these three ties: (1) If they have a family relationship (expressive tie), the superior will utilize the "need rule" to satisfy the request of the petitioner. (2) If they are strangers (instrumental tie), the superior will use the "equity rule." The superior will judge the employee's contribution first and then decide whether to accept or reject the request. (3) If they have mixed ties, the superior will apply the "*renqing* rule." The superior will first gauge the cost of the request in relation to the petitioner's future repayment to the company. On that basis the superior will decide whether to accept or reject the petitioner's request. As the

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[1] *Renqing*: Chinese *guanxi* often includes *renqing* (human feelings, or human obligations); as part of the 'art of social relations', it requires people (as the architects of network-building) to adhere to the reciprocal exchange of affective elements (through gifts, condolences, etc.). Thus, *guanxi* can develop 'naturally' from pre-existing ties of *renqing* indebtedness.