

Xiaodong Dai, and Guo-Ming Chen, *Conflict Management and Intercultural Communication: The Art of Intercultural Harmony*, New York: Routledge, 2023.

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There are fewer topics as paramount to understand today's diverse, ever-evolving society than intercultural communication. Diversity in worldviews occurs naturally, and to manage conflict constructively is of equal importance. Authors Xiaodong Dai and Guo-Ming Chen, both with a preeminent academic career in the field, have carefully compiled a series of articles to further explore the potential of intercultural conflict management.

Although literature on these particular issues is vast and well-known, with repeated references throughout the book, it becomes apparent that there is a need for continued research on a topic that is bound to be reexamined at the same pace our globalized world is. One of this work's evident triumphs lies here; it situates much of its insightful observations in our present reality, it includes voices coming from various cultural contexts and disciplines, which lessens the ethnocentric tone other works are quick to adopt, and it encourages researchers to be alert of imminent shifts in perception and analysis of our communicative ways.

The authors delve into both issues: communication in an interconnected, interdependent world, and the conflicts that arise when said communication fails to ensure mutual understanding despite cultural differences or incompatibility in values. It seems impossible to reflect on one without implicitly referring to the other; lack of empathy and awareness for someone else's codes may lead to hostility just as an abundance of it may lead to harmony. Particular attention is paid to the cultural dimension in communicative contexts and conflict management. Cultural patterns and mores play a determinant role in understanding a global society where immovable, differentiating lines amongst us have become obsolete.

The book is divided into two sections, the first one dealing with multiple perspectives on conflict management and harmony building and the second one exploring it through different cultural and communication contexts (p. 4). In other words, the first one sets the theoretical,

analytical basis for a proper resolution of conflictual relationships, while the second one approaches it from a practical, case-specific perspective. Both sections prove to be necessary for a better understanding of what intercultural harmony is and the transformative impact it can have in a world increasingly dependent on conflict.

The first article focuses on the conceptualization of *harmony* not in the simplified, idealistic way it is oftentimes perceived, but as a notion that integrates conflict in its definition and relies on *dialogue* to achieve its goals. A difference is noted between Western and Eastern conceptions of *harmony*, a dichotomic view that will repeat itself throughout the book, and a lot of emphasis is given to *dialogue*: the various forms it can take, the efforts it requires, and what it entails for a conflict to be dealt with effectively, namely to *restore balance* by being inclusive and cooperative, and understanding *dialogue* is dynamic and nonlinear. These are some of the article's key concepts, and the book's as well: they help disassemble the idea that *harmony* is a foolishly theoretical process, or an even less probable outcome. The second article continues to reflect on a dialogical approach to conflict, with special focus on intercultural communication and feminist ethics. It incorporates the "Being for Both Self and Other" as an ideal ethical code, and as a way to build harmonious relationships; the other is perceived as part of oneself and humanity becomes the premise through which conflict can be resolved.

The third article suggests multicultural harmony as a form of processing diversity, equity and inclusion so that more sustainable solutions can be reached (p. 39); it appears as an urgent, valuable perspective in a global society that struggles to be inclusive and equitable on a deeper level, and it offers a case study to exemplify the complexity of such issues, here named *Wicked Problems*. The author proposes *design thinking* as a way to achieve optimal results, which once again refer to the importance of dialogical efforts and self-reflection to manage conflict. On the fourth article, the focus is put on interculturality; both its positive and negative aspects are outlined, that is the opportunities it brings when different cultures interact, and the space it leaves for miscommunication. After reflecting on the specifics of intercultural conflict management between the Chinese and the Americans, namely *face* and other communicative values, interculturality is presented, both for the individual and the group, as a favorable tool to deal with conflict as well as an alternative to the backward ways of ethnocentrism.

The fifth article suggests a myriad of essential, yet oftentimes disregarded principles that are key to restore harmony when conflict occurs. The author ponders about the need to find a common ground between parties, to broaden one's perspectives so that one is reminded of the humanity of the other, the respect it deserves in spite of the pain and trauma experienced, and the reasons for which it is possible to develop a harmonious relationship. So that these ideas are

not perceived as exceedingly unrealistic, William Ury's *Third Side* and Erving Goffman's *Model of Face* approaches to conflict resolution and communication are proposed as practices that have already succeeded. Back to a more theoretical tone, the sixth article deals with *Conflict Face-Negotiation Theory* in all its aspects: background, framework, research findings, trends and future directions. Much as the articles that precede it, it examines the concept of *face* and conflict approaches adopted by Americans and Chinese, with a fairly dichotomic understanding of how both cultures function in conflictual contexts.

Kathryn Sorrel's seventh article, *The Art and Discipline of Nonviolence*, is an enlightening one to read. Whilst it continues to echo much of the theoretical framework previously detailed, it does so by drawing attention to the context and conditions that incite conflict. Violence, and the ease with which it permeates every aspect of our reality, is undoubtedly linked to neoliberal globalization. The structure upon which it relies not only encourages every detrimental factor that may lead to conflict, but it conceives violence as an effective, inevitable way to deal with it. The principles of nonviolence within the intercultural praxis model, heavily influenced by Martin Luther King's words, are offered as a powerful alternative. And in a world that seems so keen to perpetuate animosity, one is bound to believe they are. The eight article, an equally interesting one, explores the potential of individuals with bicultural or multicultural identities. Past the obsolete ways of an ethnocentric worldview, individuals who have internally acquired more than one culture can take advantage of behavioral competences such as communicative flexibility to effectively manage intercultural conflict and become, per the author's words, ideal mediators.

The last articles of the first section delve into the different approaches non-Western cultures offer to conflict management. Theoretical constructs such as collectivism vs. individualism, concern for other-face, avoidance communication and other notions either deemed unfavorable by Western parties or analyzed mostly by Western academia, are observed here by a majority of non-Western authors. Miyahara, Chen, Deng (and Western authors Tremain Koch and Spencer-Oatey) dare to question several of these assumptions and whether or not their impact can be beneficial for conflict resolution, challenge the obstinacy with which Western vs. Eastern behavioral patterns are assumed, and a dichotomy is therefore conceived, and establish crucial differences in communication strategies amongst Asian cultures. They encourage the reader to view non-Western approaches in a more positive light, comprehend them better, and yet raise concerns about how these practices can come with significant drawbacks, especially in present Asian societies.

The second section of the book, as mentioned above, examines key aspects of intercultural harmony through a practical lens. Consisting of 7 articles, attention is paid to every factor that can lead to conflict amongst individuals with different cultural values and behavioral strategies. Authors from this section, just as the first one, encourage further research and perspectives in spite of sharing incredibly insightful results. For instance, in the thirteenth article, Zheng and Gao study parent-child conflict through the accounts of Chinese university students. They identify six management strategies used in dealing with conflict, and they do so by using linguistic analyses, which not only supports the suggested classification but reveals fascinating details about the use of certain verbs and the emotional implications behind them. Although avoidance strategy, typically associated with collectivistic cultures such as the Chinese, continues to be favored, results seems to suggest a potential change in value orientations in the young generation in contemporary China (p. 227). This only reinforces the unanimous idea that conflict can also occur on an intracultural level and can be influenced by intergenerational differences, as well as societal changes brought by globalization. This last notion is at the core of the fourteenth article, which analyses intergenerational communication in American adults through retrospective accounts of their experiences. *Communication accommodation theory* (CAT), which proves to be remarkably useful, is used to examine these relationships and the different approaches to conflict individuals have depending on age and time.

The fifteenth article is a helpful contribution to intercultural communication through e-learning programs that can improve communication and prevent conflict when dealing with international situations in the Japanese context. The sixteenth article, slightly more theoretical, continues to explore international communication in the business context; it highlights cognitive processes and qualities such as self-monitoring and self-disclosure, trust and knowledge of the counterpart, for mutual understanding and securing a harmonious relationship.

The seventeenth article, just as the seventh, is a highly informative one. The practical approach allows the reader to fully comprehend every theoretical concept developed throughout the book and realize the importance to support research on this field and familiarize oneself with the specifics of intercultural communication and harmony. It analyzes an intercultural conflict that occurred in the context of a transnational business deal between three companies from different cultural backgrounds. Several factors are detailed and special attention is paid to differences at the individual, organizational, and society levels that may have led to the conflict. When dealing with it in the business context, three common issues are identified: cross-cultural ignorance, preconceptions and uncertainty, and the potential advantage companies may take from these issues in order to achieve their objectives (p. 291). Mindful and inclusive

communicative strategies are suggested not only an individual level, namely left to the employee's will, but especially on a corporative level. Although the context appears specific, findings can apply elsewhere in our life, particularly when reflecting on joint, sensible efforts from our institutions rather than dealing with it on our own.

To encourage the reader's optimism, the eighteenth article reveals the potential of Sino-German collaboration as proof of the fruitfulness of intercultural communication. A myriad of different, yet highly compatible characteristics and competencies are enumerated with the possibility of bringing innovation and creativity. It's important, however, to make an active effort to integrate and value each other's contributions, otherwise a negative outcome could develop. The penultimate article echoes notions previously elaborated about the complexities of cultural diversity and the importance of dealing with interculturality at the organizational level, while the last one appeals to the potential, both for communication and conflict, that cyberspace can create.

On a closing note, for a reader like myself, with previously little knowledge of the discipline or the concepts here summarized, this reading has proven to be at times revealing, at times the ultimate argument for hope. Hope for a conscious, sensible application of the resources and strategies developed throughout the book so that conflict can be managed and understood as an integral part of harmony, and encouragement for a profound effort to gain knowledge about one self, the other, and our multicultural surroundings. Insight on non-Western approaches to conflict has been particularly enlightening, and individuals coexisting in culturally diverse environments would do well to consider them, especially those whose professional reality is inevitably dependent on it, but even after a reading as well-developed and stimulating as this one, the reader may find herself pondering Benjamin J. Broome's words on the first chapter about the pessimistic state of our diverse, complex world, and wonder to which extent these concepts can apply in a society that seems to profit so openly from conflict. Can these strategies, can these authors' findings be employed in contexts where certain actors place political and economic interests above the integrity of societies? Hardly, but perhaps because of it a book like this one is undeniably relevant and research on intercultural harmony must continue.