Original Article

JAAS

Journal of Asian and African Studies
2020, Vol. 55(6) 832–847
© The Author(s) 2020
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0021909620935423
journals.sagepub.com/home/jas

Camaraderie and Conflict: Intercultural Communication and Workplace Interactions in South Korean Companies in Bình Dương Province, Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Hong-Xoan
Faculty of Sociology, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Catherine Earl
School of Communication and Design, RMIT Vietnam, Vietnam

Abstract

Rapid expansion of South Korean investment in Asia and Africa highlights a need to understand how local staff manage intercultural communication, particularly involving conflict with their superiors. South Korea is Vietnam's largest investor and the Southern Key Economic Zone hosts the majority of 1252 projects and 70,000–80,000 South Koreans working in Vietnam. This paper reports on a mixed methods data set comprising 356 survey responses and nine in-depth interviews of Vietnamese workers at South Korean companies in Bình Dương province. According to workers, the main causes of conflict in workplace interactions with Korean managers are 'differences in working culture' – especially about workplace time use – and 'attitude differences'. The most popular solution from both sides is to apologise. However, workers report frequently remaining silent when they are verbally abused. This research shows that intercultural communication is an ongoing and dynamic interpersonal process that is influenced by social, contextual and individual factors.

Keywords

Intercultural communication, face-to-face interactions, workplace conflict, line managers, Vietnam, South Korea

Introduction

Since the opening of the Vietnamese economy to foreign investment after the macro-economic reforms, called *đổi mới*, in 1986, Vietnam has strengthened its relations in economic co-operation with many countries, especially those in East Asia. Among them, the Republic of Korea (hereafter

Corresponding author:
Nguyen Thi Hong-Xoan, Faculty of Sociology, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City, 10-12 Dinh Tien Hoang Street, Ben Nghe Ward, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
Email: xoannguyen@hcmussh.edu.vn

South Korea) has fostered strong economic co-operation with Vietnam since the diplomatic relations of both countries established in 1992 (Ministry of Investment and Planning, 2019). The bilateral trade exchange has increased and diversified. With South Korean government policy encouraging enterprise and promoting Vietnam as a strategic investment area, South Korea surpassed Japan to become the largest foreign investor in Vietnam with US$7.92 billion (Ministry of Investment and Planning, 2019). At the time of writing, South Korea is Vietnam's top investor of 112 countries, with a cumulative capital of US$68.4 billion over nearly 40 years (Ministry of Planning and Investment of Vietnam, 2020). The majority of South Korea's 1252 projects and 70,000–80,000 citizens working in Vietnam are located in the prosperous Southern Key Economic Zone, an area incorporated in the mega-urban region of Ho Chi Minh City (Hồng Hiệp, 2016).

The Southern Key Economic Zone plays an important role in the socio-economic development of Vietnam and has always led in attracting foreign investment. It receives over 43% of the total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), with a total of US$153.27 billion and 15,295 projects that have contributed 45.4% of GDP (Thanh Giang, 2019). Bình Dương Province is the main location for receiving FDI from South Korea in the Southern Key Economic Zone. Indeed, in the first six months of 2019, about US$1.47 billion was invested to this province. Overall, there have been 3639 projects with around US$33.76 billion invested in Bình Dương. South Korean investors cite Vietnam's open policies, abundance of human resources, sustainable economic development and its cultural similarities as the main reasons they invest in Vietnam in general and the Southern Key Economic Zone in particular (Ministry of Investment and Planning, 2019). South Korean enterprises in Vietnam are appreciated by local experts and the community alike for their adaptation levels and as serious and effective investors (Bạch Dương, 2016).

It is worth noting that South Korean investors not only target Vietnam but also other countries in Southeast Asia and Africa. In 2018, the direct investment from South Korea to Association of Southeast Asian (ASEAN) member states rose nearly 17% with 1300 new firms and a total investment of US$6.6 billion (Linh Anh, 2019). In addition to the rise of its FDI in ASEAN states, South Korea has also provided support and expanded business in Africa (Signé, 2018). The investment from South Korea to African countries was stable with about US$12 billion per year between 2011–2014, and slightly increased to US$12.8 billion in 2017 (Kim, 2020). In addition to FDI, in May 2018 South Korea pledged to provide investments of US$5 billion in Africa over two years to aid its development (Han, 2018).

The increase in direct investment in ASEAN and African states from South Korea raises a number of important issues concerning the social and cultural impact of globalised economic investment in receiving countries. Foremost is the efficacy of intercultural communication in the workplace. Vietnam and South Korea are geographically co-located in 'East Asia' and co-members of the Sinosphere (the East Asian cultural sphere), through which the two states appear to share an assumed Confucian cultural heritage (Nguyen, 2014; Shin, 2011) and, arguably, adherence to the so-called Confucian-inspired set of 'Asian Values' that includes consensus, communitarianism, respect for authority and strong work ethic (Hoon, 2004).

The Asian Values debate of the 1990s primarily focused on differentiating Asian values from Western values and blurred over differences in values among Asians. Drawing on four cross-national surveys, Kim (2010) reports that East Asian respondents (including South Korea) exhibit strong work-related values compared with those from other regions such as Southeast Asia (including Vietnam). Yet, across the four surveys, a commitment to familial values and authoritarian orientations are actually lower among East Asians than other regions. In contrast, Southeast Asians have a preference for strong leadership and parental duty. Kim's findings suggest not only some shared values across Confucian-influenced Asia but also a diversification of values between Asian

countries. Indeed, there are observable differences between Vietnamese and South Korean workplace cultural practices and daily behaviour in the workplace (Trần Thị Thu Lương, 2017).

Among the differences in workplace practices are how Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues engage in intercultural communication, particularly face-to-face interpersonal interaction in the workplace. Forms of polite communication and ways of encouraging behavioural change differ notably. Both Vietnamese and South Koreans use appropriate forms of deference when they are being polite, however, the ways they do this differ. On the one hand, South Koreans tend to use more formal deferential speech with face-threatening act redressing when speaking with an out-group person and speaker-denigration or self-humbling verbs when giving/receiving something from or reporting to a superior (Kim, 2011). On the other, Vietnamese tend to use a 'deference-camaraderie' tone that blends respectfulness and camaraderie and balances silence with speech. They tend to avoid formal expressions of deference. They also avoid giving direct negative replies, as these are considered offensive and potentially face-threatening, so instead may remain silent (Chew, 2011). Moreover, Chew (2011) notes that the politeness views in modern Communist Vietnam are varied rather than being uniform and centrally controlled, with politeness understood differently in northern and southern Vietnam as well as between urbanites and rural–urban migrants in Vietnam's growing industrial zones. Different ways of encoding politeness between South Koreans and Vietnamese as well as within Korean and Vietnamese cultures leave interpersonal interactions and workplace communication open to misunderstanding and potentially causing conflicts.

Contrasting ways of encouraging behavioural change may also be a point of conflict. Yoo et al. (2014) deployed Hofstede's (1980a,b, 1991) cultural dimensions – power distance; uncertainty avoidance; individualism–collectivism; and masculinity–femininity – in a cross-cultural study of deterrence policy for software piracy in Vietnam and South Korea. They found that three of the four dimensions were shared, and that uncertainty avoidance differed significantly. South Korea is a much stronger uncertainty-avoiding culture than Vietnam (85 to 30 respectively), and South Koreans try to minimise the likelihood of uncertainty by implementing strict laws and other policy and procedural control measures. Among Vietnamese, 'punishment severity' and 'punishment certainty' are perceived more strongly. The study concludes that punishment certainty plays a more important role in suppressing software piracy as compared to punishment severity. This illustrates that Vietnamese and South Koreans respond differently to forms of reprimand that intend to encourage behavioural change.

However, as Stadler (2011) points out, generalisations drawn from *intra*-cultural behaviour may not be sufficient to predict *inter*-cultural behaviour. Stadler notes that studies of politeness have generally involved identifying typical cultural norms of polite behaviour in one culture and comparing these to another culture but have not focused on politeness in intercultural communication. Notably, as the studies she reviews have tended to rely on questionnaires, authentic data from real-life intercultural encounters is lacking. Difficulties, conflict and even physical and verbal abuse between staff and managers in intercultural communication may not be surprising. This paper aims to examine authentic data from real-life intercultural encounters between Vietnamese workers and South Korean managers, with a view to identifying what behaviours and beliefs cause conflicts and how Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues resolve problems in workplace intercultural communication.

Method

This paper reports the quantitative and qualitative results of the study called 'Challenges of intercultural communication between South Koreans and Vietnamese colleagues with recommendations to mitigate conflict and improve harmony to encourage the sustainable development of the

Table 1. Informants by companies in Bình Dương province.

Company	Case	%
A	68	19.1
H	42	11.9
N	78	21.9
V	50	14.0
Y	9	2.5
Missing cases (no company name)	109	30.6
Total	**356**	**100.0**

South Korean–Vietnamese relationship’. The research was conducted in 2016 by The Center for Korean Studies and Faculty of Sociology, University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University (VNU) in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The project aimed to understand the challenges of face-to-face interaction between Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues in the workplace and, in particular, to record experiences of conflict and examine strategies for resolving conflict. The results were used to design a communication handbook for Vietnamese workers working in South Korean companies.

The study reported in this paper was carried out in five South Korean enterprises in Bình Dương Province, Vietnam. The researchers were introduced to the Management Board of the Industrial Zone in Bình Dương. The researchers made initial contact by phone and then met in person. The representative of the Management Board supplied the names and addresses of South Korean Companies. The researchers made contact with the companies to invite them to join the study. Four companies agreed to participate and they each appointed one representative to help the research team to contact potential informants in their companies for the survey. The representative of Management Board supplied a list with names and contact numbers of 10 potential interviewees and nine agreed to participate in an in-depth interview. After receiving their informed consent, the researchers contacted the informants to arrange suitable times to conduct the interviews. The quantitative survey was administered in the companies. The researchers introduced the questionnaire and explained how to fill it out and the informants completed it by themselves. Each survey took around 40 minutes to complete. The in-depth interviews were conducted by two members of the research team outside the companies in a local bookshop café near the companies. They used guiding questions and recorded the interviews on a smartphone. Each interview lasted around 60 minutes.

The survey questionnaire was designed through a workshop process involving comments and feedback by a group of researchers at the Faculty of Korean Studies, USSH, VNU-Hanoi. The quantitative component was part of a larger study carried out nationally at multiple sites and it was used to design the communication handbook. The survey was administered in the industrial zones attracting the most South Korean companies – two in northern Vietnam and one in southern Vietnam. In the north, two South Korean companies in Hải Dương province and two in Bắc Ninh province were surveyed, with 150 responses from the four companies. In the south, the survey was administered in five South Korean companies in Bình Dương province, with 356 responses. However, 30.6% did not give their company name (considered as missing cases). The distribution of informants in South Korean companies is shown in Table 1.

The distribution of the survey respondents in Bình Dương province is shown in Table 2.

The questionnaire contained 31 questions, including open-ended, closed-ended and multiple-choice questions grouped in four main sections: satisfaction about working with South Korean

Table 2. Quantitative informants characteristics (excluding missing cases).

Characteristics	Male		Female	
Nationality and work status	*n*	%	*n*	%
Korean manager	1	1.0	0	0.0
Vietnamese manager	28	26.7	19	10.6
Vietnamese worker	76	72.4	161	89.4
Total	**105**	**100.0**	**180**	**100.0**
Age	*n*	%	*n*	%
<20	1	1.3	5	3.3
21–30	43	57.3	108	70.6
31–40	28	37.3	35	22.9
41–50	3	4.0	5	3.3
Total	**75**	**100.0**	**153**	**100.0**

colleagues; kinds of conflicts experienced; reasons for conflict; and ways of resolving conflict. In order to examine the importance of conflict reasons, the Bogardus Social Distance scale was used in matrix questions with eight factors, of which point seven is the most important and point one is not important at all (Baker, 1994: 679). The in-depth interview questions were designed after the quantitative data collection was completed by the research team at the Faculty of Sociology at USSH, VNU-HCMC. The interviews aimed to explore more deeply a range of issues and situations that were revealed in the survey data.

The data analysis involved two steps. Firstly, the quantitative data was analysed using the statistical software SPSS, version 21. Using this software, cross tabulation was processed to examine frequency distribution of cases based on two categorical variables. Mean and percentage were also calculated. The survey results in Bình Dương province were sent to the national research team and used to design the handbook for Vietnamese workers working in Korean companies.

Secondly, to provide deeper insight into the quantitative data, the qualitative interviews were analysed. Recordings were transcribed. The researchers analysed the transcripts by working individually and together in a group to read the transcripts thoroughly and identify pertinent themes. The interviews, transcription and thematic analysis were conducted in Vietnamese. The interviews were deidentified and allocated a number, such as Interview No. 5. The results of the study carried out in Bình Dương are presented in this paper and translated to English by the lead researcher. The following sections report four themes, namely conflicts in communication; conflict at work; ways of resolving conflicts; and relationships after conflicts have been resolved.

Conflicts in communication

In order to understand the type of conflicts experienced between Vietnamese workers and South Korean managers in South Korean companies in Vietnam, the researchers asked the following question: what type of conflicts are more likely happening in your company? Informants were asked to rate their evaluation of what causes conflict on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). During the analysis of the conflicts the Vietnamese workers reported having experienced in the workplace, as shown in Table 3, the most important reasons for the conflict are differences in greeting, dressing and eating behaviours between themselves and their Korean managers with 5.69 points.

Table 3. Reasons for conflict in workplace communication.

	Cases	Mean
Language differences	266	2.44
Inadequate compensation and benefits	261	3.54
Misunderstandings of thinking, attitude and behaviour	238	3.59
Differences in working culture	240	3.95
Differences in communication culture	241	3.96
Differences in attitude	261	5.12
Differences in greeting, dressing and eating behaviours	236	5.69

Second place is differences in attitude with 5.12 points. The third highest score is related to differences in communication style at the workplace with almost 4.0 points.

This list identifies behavioural practices. Chew (2011) points out the politeness in Vietnamese is the experience of behaviour, while Kim (2011) notes that there is no Korean equivalent for the English word ‘politeness’ and politeness between a Korean adult speaker and an out-group member is expressed lexically through the use formal deferential speech with face-threatening act redressing. In respective codes of normative politeness, what is said and how it is said is more important to Koreans than behaviour which is more important to Vietnamese. For them, silence, smiling, nodding, considerate behaviour and paralinguistic phenomena are all indicators of politeness. Among these, smiling is one of the most important non-verbals as it can reflect stoicism in adversity, anger, embarrassment, rejection and other emotions (Chew, 2011).

In order to find a better explanation for the differences in greeting, dressing and eating behaviours, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews. They found different greeting etiquettes were a cause of conflict between South Korean managers and Vietnamese staff. The following example of real-life intercultural encounter illustrates the tension between verbal and non-verbal politeness in workplace interactions. According to Vietnamese staff working in South Korean enterprises, South Korean bosses value daily greetings extremely highly and expect their employees to greet them in line with their normative cultural practices. It can be described as holding the upper arms close to the body, bowing and saying a formal greeting out loud in Korean. According to an accountant working for a South Korean company:

> In the morning, you have to greet him as Sir or Director. It is the rule. If you see him, you have to greet him. If not, he will be offended. . . He will get annoyed and irritated. For some new employees, at the beginning, they did not know that. They just smiled, and nodded their heads in the same way as they do when they meet their Vietnamese bosses. They did not say hello out loud or speak at all, in Korean, or Vietnamese, or English, nothing at all. They just nodded and smiled. As a result, he said to a senior staff member to tell the new girls that they have to greet him in the morning. When they were told, they answered that they had not known about that. . . because Vietnamese do not bow and say hello out loud (Interview No. 1).

While South Korean managers may value formal deferential speech and self-effacing behaviour, in contrast, Vietnamese staff are unlikely to deal with a boss in this very formal manner. Camaraderie is important in behaving politely in Vietnamese communication and familial terms are used to illustrate productive relationships and effective communication. When a Vietnamese worker passes a boss, the worker typically only nods to the boss and smiles. However, according to the Vietnamese workers in this study, their Korean bosses expect them to use normative Korean greeting culture in the workplace. In line with Vietnamese normative politeness, a Vietnamese worker who does not

hold her arms close to her body, bow and say ‘hello’ out loud when passing her boss is not intentionally failing to show respect, but her action may be decoded by her boss as failing to show an appropriate level of respect to them as a superior. The lack of formality, silence and use of gestures in a Vietnamese greeting style is considered as having the opposite meaning that the Vietnamese workers are overtly showing respect to the boss. This account of a real-life cultural encounter reported in an in-depth interview provides a more detailed explanation for why new Vietnamese workers do not greet their South Korean bosses in the way they expect. This encounter illustrates the way of expressing respect is different, as a Vietnamese worker explains:

> For the workers, they must greet in South Korean etiquettes, bow their body towards Korean managers specifically. In general, changes happen a lot (Interview No. 2).

It is worth noting that, although he was offended by a perceived lack of respect shown by his staff, the South Korean boss took steps to point it out to correct the impolite or uncivil behaviour of the staff member and show them the polite behaviour he expected. This shows his attempts to mitigate conflict caused by his perceptions of rudeness among his Vietnamese staff.

Furthermore, the use of honorifics which is reported as normative politeness among South Korean managers is an issue that may generate feelings of distance and even discomfort among Vietnamese staff. This is revealed in the in-depth interview transcripts. The researchers found that if the Vietnamese workers communicate with the South Korean boss in English (which is common), they call the boss ‘Madam’ or ‘Sir’. In Vietnamese or Korean, they report calling the boss by their status such as ‘Director’ (*Giám đốc, Songsennim*), but they never call the boss *anh, chị, ông, bà* which are superior kinship terms used as normative forms of address in Vietnamese workplaces.

Using kinship terminology and behaving as though in a familial context in workplaces is typically normative among Vietnamese. The familial context of a Vietnamese workplace extends beyond kinship terms to commensality. Related to eating culture, placing the chopsticks and bowls all together in one place is ordinary for Vietnamese but, as Vietnamese workers reported, it may irritate their South Korean managers. A Vietnamese worker serving a South Korean boss explains:

> They are very picky about where to put their chopsticks and spoon. Those have to be put in a separate place, and only they will use them. In fact, they do not like other people to touch their chopsticks and spoon, and they do not touch others’ ones either. Even their chopsticks and spoon are sent from Korea, a pair of chopsticks and a spoon. . . (Interview No. 2).

This issue is also shown in the quantitative data as Vietnamese workers indicated that differences in attitude is the second most important reason causing conflicts between South Korean bosses and Vietnamese workers (mean = 5.12). An explanation for a difference in attitude draws on (stereotypical) distinctions made in the Asian Values debate about typical normative Confucian-inspired East Asian culture. Vietnamese culture continues to be understood as communitarian and family-oriented, so that in workplaces colleagues treat each other as a big family and, although not actual family, they typically use kinship pronouns to address each other.

Furthermore, it is not unusual for colleagues in the workplace to engage in commensality as Vietnamese family life centres on enjoying eating together and sharing food. While individual members of an actual family or quasi-kin network, such as colleagues of a workplace, may prefer using one favoured bowl over another at mealtimes, crockery and eating utensils are generally not regarded among Vietnamese to belong to any one individual and may be used by anyone. Vietnamese normally put clean spoons and chopsticks on a shelf and anyone in the office can use

them. Someone may keep their utensils separately, but it is very rare. If a person does that it would make others stay away from them as it is anti-social behaviour. But Vietnamese workers note that South Korean bosses do not want to share utensils with others. If Vietnamese workers are not aware of this, they would without hesitation use the spoon or chopsticks of a South Korean boss, which may cause offence to the boss.

The examples discussed in this section come from in-depth interview reports of authentic data from real-life intercultural encounters and illustrate that intra-cultural features of one culture may inhibit workplace interpersonal interactions with staff from another culture and become a source for conflict.

Conflict at work

Camaraderie is typically normative in Vietnamese culture, so it is considered highly important in communication and social interactions. Vietnamese appreciate camaraderie not only among friends but also among colleagues. At the same time, deference remains important, so younger and more junior people are expected to express politeness through deference when greeting older and more senior people. As noted by Chew (2011), the politeness views in modern Communist Vietnam are varied rather than being uniform and centrally controlled, with politeness understood differently in northern and southern Vietnam as well as between urbanites and rural–urban migrants in Vietnam's growing industrial zones. In modern everyday Vietnamese communication, a 'deference-camaraderie' tone is preferred to stiff formal expressions of deference, including the most senior kinship terms of address such as *ông* ('Sir', literally grandfather) or *bà* ('Madam', literally grandmother). Apart from greeting styles, contrasting working cultures of Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues are also a source of conflict in the workplace. A preference among Vietnamese workers for a blend of respectfulness and camaraderie contrasts with formal respectfulness that is reported as preferred by South Korean managers when communicating with out-group members. The in-depth interviews highlight the contrasting working cultures of Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues. A Vietnamese worker explains that in contrast to the more relaxed style of Vietnamese working, in her view South Korean bosses prefer a very serious atmosphere and concentration during working hours.

> Vietnamese usually listen to music if possible. While they are working, sometimes they stop for a little chat, then get back to work. However, South Korean bosses do not like that. They do not like us to listen to music and chat at work (Interview No. 1).

A little chatter while working is a normative habit of Vietnamese colleagues and is popularly believed to originate from the collective working environment dating from before the macro-economic reforms in 1986. When this still happens, Vietnamese people typically call it 'agricultural culture' (*văn hóa nông nghiệp*). The majority of the Vietnamese workforce in the Southeast Key Economic Zone are rural–urban migrants, so arguably they maintain a collectivist camaraderie even when working in foreign companies. Mixing traditional and modern approaches to working culture and communication standards is widespread among Vietnamese workers in varying types of companies and organisations.

Different expectations about working tasks, particularly when tasks should be undertaken and how time should be used, appears to be a significant cause of conflict in the workplace. Vietnamese workers report that conflicts during working, overall, are common and the causes of conflicts are the differences between working standards and regulations. According to a factory manager, who acts as a mediator between South Korean managers and Vietnamese workers, conflicts are common and varied.

Table 4. Ways that conflict is resolved.

	Cases	%
Apologise from both sides	189	38.7
Apologise from South Korean managers only	7	1.4
Apologise from Vietnamese side only	38	7.8
No apology is made from either side	10	2.0
South Korean managers yell and Vietnamese workers remain silent	125	25.6
South Korean managers apply punishment to Vietnamese workers	31	6.3
South Korean managers fire Vietnamese workers	35	7.2
Find a third party to mediate a conflict	49	10.0
Other	5	1.0

> There are a lot of conflicts in workplaces in terms of time-use, manners, and working. Regarding time-use, Vietnamese usually go home at the fixed time, or they tend to prepare before going home, such as cleaning and resting five minutes before knock-off time. However, South Korean bosses do not accept that. They say the workers should go home after finishing their work. They have to clean the workplace and finish all the daily work, then go home (Interview No. 3).

One of the most widely discussed problems between Vietnamese workers and South Korean bosses in South Korean companies is time compliance. Time compliance is understood differently between Vietnamese workers and their South Korean bosses. Normatively among Vietnamese people, workers go home when the working day finishes. Typically, before that time they would take five to 10 minutes to clean the office, and they would also leave the work they have not yet finished to continue on the next working day. In contrast, they report their South Korean bosses expect their workers to finish all of the work set for the day, even if they have to stay late at work (with no extra pay), so they are not permitted to go home before they have completed all their work. This does not endear Vietnamese workers to their bosses and some workers have reported that the pay they receive is low for the workload and work pressure they endure. Moreover, Vietnamese labour regulations strictly lay out working conditions for Vietnamese workers and the local staff resent it when South Korean bosses import working rules, such as unpaid overtime, and other expectations about what is work and how work is completed, and apply these in their companies in Vietnam.

Ways of resolving conflicts

The quantitative survey aimed to record how conflicts are being resolved in intercultural communication between Vietnamese workers and their South Korean bosses. Survey respondents with experience of workplace conflicts were asked to list the common ways of resolving conflicts. The results are shown in Table 4.

By far the most common way to resolve a conflict, which accounts for almost 40% of answers, is making an apology from both sides. This kind of response indicates the mutual understanding of the boss and the workers, and notably the boss also apologises and acknowledges that she/he made a mistake. This situation illustrates both sides are willing to make amends in order to ensure effective intercultural communication can proceed. This is noteworthy because in the manager–employee relationship power is not equal, so the pressure on each side to apologise is not equal and a manager's apology is not equal to a worker's apology. The reciprocity of willingness to apologise is a positive sign that reveals productive communication relationships when this response accounts

for the first place among a range of other solutions for resolving conflicts between the boss and workers.

However, the second most common way of resolving conflict is when the boss uses verbal abuse of workers to end the conflict. This was reported by one in four (25.6%) of Vietnamese workers surveyed in Bình Dương. Notably, this finding contrasts with an earlier study carried out by Cao Thị Hải Bắc (2017) which found that more than two in three (70%) Korean bosses working in South Korean companies in northern Vietnam verbally abuse their Vietnamese staff. When verbal abuse occurs in the workplace, Vietnamese workers in Bình Dương reported they typically remain silent. This example emerged in in-depth interviews also. One Vietnamese worker explained that even if she is sure that her behaviour is right, she would not argue with her managers.

> In that case, I must not argue with them, but listen to them. That is it. Until they or I am happy, or they are not angry anymore. Then I can confide in them. . . After confiding in them, if the managers are wrong, they usually stay silent. . . But if I am wrong, I would have to write a report (smiled). I do not know much about other companies' culture, but South Koreans are very fastidious. If I do anything wrong, I would have to write a report (Interview No. 3).

This is similar to a Vietnamese management culture, as the boss is reluctant to show that they are wrong, so remaining silent is a way for the bosses to show that they are wrong, while workers smile when they know they have made a mistake.

In some companies, especially in manufacturing companies, abusive behaviour of bosses may become worse when they are under work pressure. South Korean bosses frequently under stress may verbally or physically abuse workers who do not meet expectations or who violate regulations. Regularly, the workers try to avoid this situation, as one interviewee explains.

> A man [manager] working with me gets stressed. That boss throws everything he has in his hands everywhere. Therefore, every time he gets mad, I seek a place to hide first, because if he throws something at me, I could die! (Interview No. 4).

This example illustrates that punishment certainty is used as a strong deterrent and it is believed to be effective among South Koreans and Vietnamese for encouraging behavioural change (Yoo et al., 2014). However, it also shows that punishment severity does not encourage behavioural change, but rather induces feelings of fear in workers. Workers who are hiding from their violent boss are disengaging from intercultural communication, so it is no surprise that violence has a negative impact on working output and workplace interaction. Vietnamese workers report that after an violent incident, they try to figure out a way to explain the situation to the boss indirectly, for example, using emails or data as proof. It is unclear if this behaviour may be decoded by the boss as not using self-denigration, but rather correcting the superior which may be interpreted as impolite behaviour in Korean normative politeness. Although many Vietnamese employees have not been verbally abused by their bosses, they actually do feel scared of them as a result of the boss' fierce reputation circulated by former co-workers. One worker reported that:

> I feel scared when I see him because in the past, some colleagues (*chi em*, literally 'sisters') said that Mr Park was extremely fastidious and terrible. Also, he has prestige and he is talented; therefore I feel scared whenever I see him (Interview No. 4).

According to the interview data, no Vietnamese workers reported that South Korean managers actually beat their Vietnamese staff. In the past, South Korean managers have been guilty of beating Vietnamese workers. However, Vietnamese law prevents this. Since the South Korean

Table 5. Relationship after conflicts by education level of informants (%).

	Primary	Secondary	High school	Vocational	College	Bachelors	Masters	Total
Sorted out completely	100	62.8	70.8	63.6	62.5	55.8	66.7	64.0
Partly sorted out	0	28.2	24.8	36.4	12.5	37.5	33.3	29.5
No improvement	0	7.7	2.7	0	0	5.8	0	4.6
Others	0	1.3	1.8	0	25.0	1.0	0	1.8
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**	**100**

managers have been made aware that beating workers violates Vietnamese law, if the law is respected, we may assume this does not happen anymore.

Relationship after conflicts have been resolved

The in-depth interviews reveal that Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues respond in divergent ways to maintaining harmonious workplace relationships after conflicts have been resolved.

After conflicts have occurred, Vietnamese workers report there are changes from both sides. South Korean managers in several companies, for example, introduced stricter working regulations in response to conflict. A Vietnamese worker explains the changes his boss made:

> Our manager has issued new regulations just for a month. Employees must be present at work before working time, and must not be late. If they are late, their salary will be docked. Regarding taking a day off, Vietnamese tend to take a day off first, then ask for permission later. Korean managers do not accept workers taking day off without a reason, so the manager has started to make some rules (Interview No. 2).

For Vietnamese, there are some changes as well. A worker reflects on the behavioural change among colleagues after a conflict has been resolved:

> The most major change from Vietnamese that I can see is they start to do their best and work more responsibly. As South Koreans are willing to work overtime to finish their work, similarly, Vietnamese somehow are doing the same, in contrast with going home as the bell rings. I can see it from my co-workers, they are willing to work overtime for five or 10 or 20 minutes to complete their work before going home. Because, you know, in the past, they went home as the bell rang, although their work was not done yet. . . (Interview No. 3).

This shows that Vietnamese workers may try to find consensus and remain agreeable, while South Korean managers may introduce stricter rules and move further from camaraderie into more formal relationships to enforce compliance.

In order to understand the relationship at work after conflict has occurred, questions were raised as shown in Table 5. Generally, the effect of the conflicts reported was not considerable; the majority of respondents believe that the relationship can get back to normal when both sides adjust by themselves (64.0%). Normally the bosses issue new working rules and the workers understand what they have to do at work and they try to comply, and then their relationships become better. This example illustrates the efficacy of punishment certainty and punishment severity in ensuring behavioural change.

Although most of the conflicts were sorted out and the relationship improved, as indicated in Table 5, just under a third (29.5%) of respondents reported that their relationship only partially improved after the conflict, and a small minority (4.6%) reported no improvement of their

relationship. Most of the Vietnamese employees working directly with Korean bosses are expected to learn Korean language, or at least to communicate in English, and to undergo training to understand Korean culture. The staff who are more likely to work directly with Korean bosses are those who hold Bachelor or higher qualifications. Table 5 shows that educational attainment has little impact on improving relationships after conflict. Differences in skill levels and educational attainment of staff appear to have little influence on the success of resolving a conflict, with around a third of Vietnamese staff at all skill levels reporting partial or no improvement of the relationship after conflict.

Most in-depth interviewees indicate that newcomers are more likely to make the boss angry, because they are still not familiar with the working rules set by the boss. However, after they have been reprimanded, they learn to modify their behaviour and try to follow the working rules, even though they are not completely satisfied doing so.

> I, myself, feel that I have changed a lot. At the beginning I usually made mistakes, such as not submitting reports on time, or I made incorrect calculations and the boss was not happy. But, at the moment, I don't make these mistakes anymore (Interview No. 9).

This shows the onus is placed on Vietnamese workers to adjust to working in South Korean companies. It may seem to be a bit one-sided, but it also reflects a culture of strong leadership that Vietnamese are believed to share (Kim, 2011).

Vietnamese workers reported that if they are unable to adjust to the foreign cultural expectations, and they find they cannot tolerate the company's environment, they may follow their colleagues who felt the only reasonable option was to move to another company. However, it seems that many of the companies have issues with conflicts arising in interpersonal interactions in the workplace and few, if any, of the companies are known to be effective in intercultural communication at work, as one interviewee summed up:

> Everywhere is the same, and my colleagues said other companies are even worse! (Interview No. 4).

Discussion

With increasing FDI investments comes the demand for greater awareness of intercultural communication especially interpersonal interaction in the workplace. Rather than relying on contrasts between intra-cultural communication of separate countries, this paper discusses examples of camaraderie and conflict in intercultural communication based on broad trends identified in survey data and deeper analysis provided by reports of real-life examples from in-depth interviews with Vietnamese workers who have experienced conflict in communication in South Korean companies in industrial zones in Vietnam. Working in these settings is new for many Vietnamese staff and, initially at least, they have little idea about the expectations of their foreign bosses. On the one hand, companies that understand well the political, socio-economic and cultural contexts, and working regulations of the host nation may be better equipped to solve the problems that arise more flexibly and have a better adaptation to changes. On the other, frequently occurring or poorly resolved conflicts in intercultural communication may adversely affect the engagement, satisfaction and integration of local staff in a foreign company. In particular, staff retention may arise as an issue if people who find it difficult to fit in easily leave the company. Dissatisfaction and lack of commitment could discourage employees' innovation and contribution (Amaram, 2007). This paper addresses these and related factors stemming from cultural differences between South Korean and Vietnamese colleagues in the workplace based on the findings indicated already. These

issues are among the main reasons reported by Vietnamese workers that cause conflict and negative impacts.

The real-life examples about reasons for conflict, particularly greeting, dressing and eating behaviours, illustrate that *intra*-cultural features of one culture may inhibit workplace interpersonal interactions with local staff from another culture and become a source for conflict. Different expectations about working tasks, particularly the time when tasks should be undertaken and how time should be used, appear to be significant causes of conflict in the workplace. Vietnamese workers report that conflicts with their bosses at work are common and, in their view, are caused by differences between their own and their boss' expectations about working standards as well as compliance to company regulations. In particular, the sociality of the workplace and the atmosphere at work have a significant impact on worker engagement and satisfaction. When Vietnamese staff feel comfortable in the workplace, listening to music and chatting with colleagues as they work, they are not only more satisfied with their workplace, they are also more productive. Differences in workplace sociality are a source of conflict in intercultural communication between Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues, with time use in the workplace generating considerable conflict and, at times, harsh responses.

The majority of conflicts are resolved by both sides apologising, which is a notable finding that indicates a willingness to co-operate and share in effective intercultural communication. While apologising is widespread, a significant proportion of conflicts are not resolved this way and the ongoing working relationship is negatively affected. Around a third of relationships after conflict are partially mended or not mended. The ways that conflict is resolved vary. Punishment certainty is used as an effective deterrent among South Korean and Vietnamese colleagues for encouraging behavioural change. While punishment certainty may be effective, punishment severity does not encourage behavioural change. Rather, it seems to induce fear among workers, so much so that the reputations of some bosses are circulated between workers as a warning to prevent conflict occurring and protect new colleagues from potential harm. Other strategies Vietnamese workers use are responsive not preventative, such as communicating with the boss indirectly via email and avoiding interpersonal interaction. It should be emphasised that the majority of South Korean bosses in the majority of conflict examples take steps to apologise and remedy the situation by explaining their expectations and introducing measures to avoid a repeat. However, many other examples highlight that the onus is placed on Vietnamese workers to adjust to working in South Korean companies and, without explicit cultural awareness training and tips for effective intercultural communication, they may be ill-equipped to do so. Better equipping local staff to working in foreign companies may improve staff retention and satisfaction, and also enhance the reputations of South Korean companies in Vietnam as good employers who are known for effective intercultural communication at work.

This project has revealed a number of issues in intercultural communication between Vietnamese and South Korean colleagues that require further research. Table 6 summarises these unexplored issues.

Conclusion

Typically, normative ways of running companies and ways of working in companies may not be appropriate anymore in a globalised context. Relying on hierarchical structures may no longer be a suitable model for globalised companies. Rather, creating a working environment with mutual respect for one another's cultures – one that accepts diversity and draws on globalised values such as inclusion – is a matter of concern for developing effective intercultural communication between local staff and foreign managers in foreign companies. Both foreign companies and local staff are required to collaborate to find a way to improve the effectiveness of intercultural communication and reduce incidents of conflict in interpersonal communication in the globalised context.

Table 6. Unexplored issues in intercultural communication.

South Korean side	Vietnamese side	Future research questions
Be strict with working time	Not follow working time strictly	How is time-use distributed and valued with respect to the workplace and non-workplace? What influences do temporalities have on intercultural communication?
Thorough concentration on work tasks while working	Chat or listen to music while working	In what ways does normative sociality shape the workplace culture? How are distractions/divided attention measured and valued in intercultural communication?
Complete work tasks before leaving the workplace	Leave the workplace at a fixed time even if tasks are not completed	What workplace practices and behaviours are indicative of worker engagement, satisfaction, commitment, etc.? What are the challenges for implementing employment laws and regulations in diverse workforces/companies?
Employees should not argue with superiors	May not work to the best of their ability	When are resistance strategies deployed by workers and why? In what ways are hierarchical organisational structures conducive to increasing productivity (output and quality)?
Use of verbal/physical abuse to encourage behaviour change among workers	Follow the rules because they are afraid of being punished	In which circumstances does punishment certainty and punishment severity motivate workers? How is commitment expressed in intercultural communication? What is the role of silence in intercultural communication?
Work with high intensity	Have limited ability to work under stress	How are stress and work pressure managed in diverse workforces/companies?
Use their own utensils for eating	Share utensils for eating, make noise when eating	To what extent is commensality/communitarianism conducive to increasing productivity, worker engagement, satisfaction, retention, etc.? To what extent is commensality at work an 'Asian value' and what value does it have?

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the project's research assistant Ms Ngô Trà My (Tra-My Ngo) who helped with the data collection and data analysis. We also thank two anonymous reviewers for their advice on an earlier draft.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City received funding from the Academy of Korean Studies to conduct this research.

References

Amaram DI (2007) Cultural diversity: Implications for workplace management. *Journal of Diversity Management* 2(4): 1–6.

Bạch Dương (2016) The third wave of South Korean investment in Vietnam (Hàn Quốc và "làn sóng" đầu tư thứ ba vào Việt Nam). *VnEconomy*, 18 November. Available at: http://vneconomy.vn/doanh-nhan/han-quoc-va-lan-song-dau-tu-thu-ba-vao-viet-nam-20161116053649450.htm (accessed 10 February 2020).

Baker LT (1994) *Doing Social Research*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Cao Thị Hải Bắc (2017) Korean-Vietnamese conflicts in Korean companies in the north of Vietnam (Thực trạng mâu thuẫn Hàn-Việt trong một số công ty Hàn Quốc tại khu vực miền Bắc Việt Nam). *Journal of Korean Studies (Tạp chí Hàn Quốc học)* 2(20): 7–19.

Chew GCL (2011) Politeness in Vietnam. In: Kádár DZ and Mills S (eds) *Politeness in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 208–225.

Han S (2018) KOAFEC 2018: South Korea to invest 5 billion (USD) for Africa's inclusive economic development – African countries welcome the Panmunjeon declaration. *Global News Network Liberia*, 23 May. Available at: http://gnnliberia.com/2018/05/23/koafec-2018-south-korea-to-invest-5-billion-usd-for-africas-inclusive-economic-development-african-countries-welcome-the-panmunjeon-declaration/ (accessed 10 February 2020).

Hofstede GH (1980a) Motivation, leadership, and organization: Do American theories apply abroad? *Organizational Dynamics* 9(1): 42–63.

Hofstede GH (1980b) *Culture's Consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Hofstede GH (1991) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hồng Hiệp (2016) South Korean enterprises invest heavily in Ho Chi Minh City (Doanh nghiệp Hàn Quốc rót vốn mạnh vào TPHCM). *Saigon Liberation Newspaper Online (Sài Gòn Giải Phóng Online)*, 19 September. Available at: https://www.sggp.org.vn/doanh-nghiep-han-quoc-rot-von-manh-vao-tphcm-341975.html (accessed 8 February 2020).

Hoon CY (2004) Revisiting the Asian Values argument used by Asian political leaders and its validity. *Indonesian Quarterly* 32(2): 154–174.

Kim AH-O (2011) Politeness in Korea. In: Kádár DZ and Mills S (eds) *Politeness in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 176–207.

Kim H-S (2020) Korea-Africa Forum (KOAF) – South Korea's middle power diplomacy and its limitations. In: Iwata T (ed.) *New Asian Approaches to Africa: Rivalries and collaborations*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, pp. 53–83.

Kim S (2010) Do Asian Values exist? Empirical tests of the four dimensions of Asian Values. *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10(2): 315–344.

Linh Anh (2019) Korea – one of the important strategic partners of ASEAN (Hàn Quốc - Một trong những đối tác quan trọng hàng đầu của ASEAN). *Communist Review* (*Tạp chí Cộng sản*), 5 April. Available at: http://tapchicongsan.org.vn/hoat-ong-cua-lanh-ao-ang-nha-nuoc/-/2018/815502/view_content (accessed 28 March 2020).

Ministry of Investment and Planning (2019) *FDI to Vietnam in Year 2019 reaches US$38.02 billion (Thu hút FDI năm 2019 đạt 38,02 tỷ USD)*. 25 December. Available at: http://www.mpi.gov.vn/Pages/tinbai.aspx?idTin=44949&idcm=188 (accessed 28 March 2020).

Ministry of Investment and Planning (2020) *Report about FDI to Vietnam in the first two months of 2020 (Báo cáo tình hình đầu tư trực tiếp nước ngoài 2 tháng đầu năm 2020)*. 25 February. Available at: http://www.mpi.gov.vn/Pages/tinbai.aspx?idTin=45363&idcm=208 (accessed 28 March 2020).

Nguyen X (2014) A cultural analysis of the life experiences of Vietnamese transnational brides in South Korea. *Journal of Family and Gender* 9(1): 58–76.

Shin DC (2011) *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Signé L (2018) Korea–Africa relations hold enormous trade, development, and investment potential. *The Hill*, 13 December. Available at: https://thehill.com/opinion/international/420770-korea-africa-relations-hold-enormous-trade-development-and-investment-potential (accessed 28 March 2020).

Stadler S (2011) Intercultural communication and East Asian politeness. In: Kádár DZ and Mills S (eds) *Politeness in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 98–121.

Thanh Giang (2019) The Southern Key Economic Zone continues improving procedure and attracting FDI (Vùng kinh tế trọng điểm phía Nam: Tiếp tục cải cách thủ tục, thu hút FDI). *Financial Review (Tạp chí tài chính)*, 10 October. Available at: http://tapchitaichinh.vn/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/vung-kinh-te-trong-diem-phia-nam-tiep-tuc-cai-cach-thu-tuc-thu-hut-fdi-313838.html (accessed 10 February 2020).

Trần Thị Thu Lương (2017) Similarity and differences in behaviours between Korean and Vietnamese culture (Tương đồng và khác biệt trong ứng xử giữa văn hóa Hàn Quốc và Việt Nam). *Journal of Korean Studies (Tạp chí Hàn Quốc học)* 2(20): 40–45.
Yoo CW, Sanders GL, Rhee C, et al. (2014) The effect of deterrence policy in software piracy: Cross-cultural analysis between Korea and Vietnam. *Information Development* 30(4): 342–357.

Author biographies

Nguyen Thi Hong-Xoan (Xoan Nguyen) is an Associate Professor and Dean of Sociology at the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City. Hồng-Xoan has written extensively on spontaneous rural–urban migration, youth labour migration, transnational marriage and climate change vulnerability in Vietnam. Her recent book *Di dân trẻ tại Tp. Hồ Chí Minh (Migration of Youth in Ho Chi Minh City)* was published in Vietnamese in 2015.

Catherine Earl is a Lecturer in Communication at RMIT Vietnam. Author of *Vietnam's New Middle Classes: Gender, career, city* (2014) and editor of *Mythbusting Vietnam: Facts, fictions, fantasies* (2018), Catherine has published extensively on the changing nature of work and welfare, migration, gender and social change in contemporary Vietnam and Australia. Her current research focuses on digital use among middle and affluent classes in the mega-urban region of Ho Chi Minh City.