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Poles' perception of Chinese professionals – a case study

Sino-Polish relations date back to 1949, right after the foundation of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949 (Jan, 1961). Since then, the bilateral relations between the two countries have flourished, starting with the establishment of the Chinese–Polish Joint Stock Shipping Company in 1951 in Shanghai and Gdynia; which marks the first ever sino-foreign joint-venture deed of association after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China [Chipolbrok, 2014].

The peak of the bilateral relations between Poland and China takes place in the 21st century, when the President of Poland Mr. Bronislaw Komorowski visited China in 2011, in order to encourage Chinese investors to invest in the Polish market, and the subsequent visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Poland in April 2012, which was the first visit of a Chinese Premier to Poland in 25 years [Deloitte, 2012].

However, while enjoying this increased attention of Chinese investors through mergers and acquisitions and active participation in public tenders, we have seen few solid examples of how Chinese multinational giants failed to expand their investments in Poland. Based on this author's knowledge, the most controversial example took place when the China Overseas Engineering Group (COVEC), a Chinese construction giant, withdrew

from a $447 million project on two sections of A2 highway construction in 2011, due to a financial dispute with the Polish Highways Authority (GDDKiA). The most recent one involves the appeal of the Chinese Shanghai Electric to the Polish National Appeals Chamber (KIO) in May 2014, due to losing the public tender announced by Polska Grupa Energetyczna (PGE) to build a new power plant at Turow. Shanghai Electric offered the lowest price in this bid and was expecting to win.

The increased Chinese investment in Poland has led to mixed perceptions that potentially affect or benefit the social relationship, and this topic is worth researching due to the economic power of China, as China has overtaken America in 2014 [Bird, 2014]. Furthermore, there has been no similar research conducted, as the most common research topics are related to Chinese investment, Chinese politics and economic policy.

Objectives of the study and research hypotheses

The main objective of the study is to understand how Chinese professionals are being perceived by Poles especially within the business context. The logical reason why this study focuses on perceptions within the business context is because it is believed that most Poles have their first contact with Chinese through the import-export trade, as clearly men-

tioned above with Sino-Polish relations starting in 1949 with the establishment of the Chinese–Polish Joint Stock Shipping Company.

Secondly, the research aims to distinguish the differences between the Poles' general perceptions and their personal perceptions on Chinese professionals. The rational argument to include this objective is based on P.G. Devine P. and A.J. Elliot [1995] study on stereotypes, as they believe all of us possess numerous different stereotypes of certain group of people (general knowledge), but not all of us possess the same personal beliefs of those stereotypes (personal beliefs); they give us a clear example that *whereas most white Americans possess knowledge of black stereotypes, only a subset of these individuals are actually endorse the stereotypes and believe it is veracious* [Devine, Elliot, 1995, p. 1140]. Hence, the research hypothesizes that most Poles possess various general public perceptions of Chinese professionals, but not all those perceptions represent their own personal perceptions.

Last but not least, the study will identify the similarities and differences between how Chinese think they are being perceived by Poles, and how Poles actually perceive the Chinese. The study surmises that there are significant differences between Poles' general and personal perceptions of Chinese professionals.

Literature reviews on perception

The definition of perception has its roots in natural sciences or biology, which refers to information gathering based on sense from the organism [Pickens, 2005, p. 49]. However, in social sciences, perception refers to something more than what is described in natural science by looking at how others define and describe perception. To define the word, according to D. Lee [2012], this word derives from two Latin words, namely *perceptio* and *percipio,* which literally means *receiving,*

collecting, action of taking possession, apprehension with the mind or senses [Lee, 2012, p. 149]. In the field of cognitive sciences and psychology, perception is cited as a process of gaining awareness via 'sensory information', or by using our five senses to help to interpret any information we receive from the environment around us. Lee adds that the process of perception takes place as soon as we enter the world. G.C. Walter and B.J. Bergill [1989] also support Lee's definition of perception by concluding that human perception exists when the senses interpret and capture things from the environment around us to the human mind and fit it into our 'frame of reference'. On the other hand, J. Locke [1689] summarizes perception as the way an individual communicates with 'matter' around us, and that it is about imagination, remembrance, and the mental thinking process.

In short, attitude influences our actions, controls our behavior, and impacts what we selectively remember based on what our senses interpret or perceive; and human attitude is changeable because attitude is not particularly dependent on emotion, but also on our perception of things around us.

B.J. van der Walt [1991] indicates that the process of perception can exist when human sensory organs obtain things or information through the mind and then use categories to code them in order to give certain meanings to that information. To be precise, humans code and give meaning to things based on their previous experiences, prejudices, feelings, origin, likes and dislikes.

Based on the above definition of perception by G.C. Walter and B.J. Bergill [1989], B.J. van der Walt [1991], and D. Lee [2012], it is obvious that the process of perception varies from individual to individual, as it depends on a person's framework of orientation, or what Walter and Bergill claim as *frame of reference*.

Van der Walt [1991] further asserts the things that we see and hear do not constitute perception; it rather depends upon the individual's own *frame of reference*.

With that said, this research affirms that the process of perception, in some cases, can be one of the major obstacles or barriers to effective human interaction, especially the social behavior between two group members from different cultures, which certainly brings significant impacts to business sectors where cross-cultural interaction plays an important role.

Frame of reference

Similarly to Walter and Bergil [1989], van Der Walt [1989] reckons that a person's *frame of reference* is unique and varies from one person to another. For van der Walt [1991], the *frame of reference* is an evaluation system, a system of filtering which is massively dependent on human emotion, interest and belief. This process, overall, can be called the mental thinking process. Hence, it would be important to illustrate the process designed by the van de Walt [1991], which gives a clearer picture on how humans create their own perception and decision-making within a *frame of reference*. Although this process of perception is designed to determine the perception from a consumer behavior perspective, it is ideal and can be adopted for the purpose of this study, as which aims to understand the perception of a specific culture in a business context.

According to van der Walt [1991], in the *frame of references*, three components, namely cognitive, affective and behavioral, play an effective role that constitutes perception. The cognitive component refers to human beliefs, knowledge and past experiences. While prejudices, feelings and emotions are part of an affective component, the behavioral component consists of human interests, habits and reactions. Thus, for van der Walt, when a person is confronted by stimuli and uses his senses to pass through all the above-mentioned three components, or the *frame of reference*, the person interprets the stimuli as something meaningful, based on previous experiences, which is called 'perception'. P. Lindsay and D.A. Norman [1977] also confirm the process of perception as described by van der Walt [1991]. Moreover, perception itself can be positive and negative, and there is no right and wrong or true or false perception; and whatever a person perceives from the stimuli might not be the same as in reality [Pickens, 2005].

Perceptual vigilance and perceptual defense

According to J. Pickens [2005], there are four stages of perception, namely stimulation, registration, organization, and interpretation. The process is quite similar to van der Walt's model. Pickens [2005] describes two interesting situations in the process of perception, which are perceptual vigilance and perceptual defense. Pickens believes a person has the ability to select stimuli he would like to interpret or perceive. When an individual selects stimuli that will bring satisfaction to his immediate needs, this is called perceptual vigilance; whereby when individuals ignore any stimuli that might bring psychological anxieties, this situation creates *perceptual defense*. Pickens further explains these two situations by referring to D.E. Broadbent's [1958] work, claiming that perceptual system of individuals can process any information selectively, but to choose only the options that are most relevant to him or her, mostly the positive perceptions, this is called selective perception. Hence, it is not surprising that individuals are selective in what they perceive most congruent to their beliefs and experience, but ignore to see anything which is not part of their goals, or not congruent to their experience and beliefs.

Social perception

As this research is about Poles and the Chinese, who are from two different groups and cultures, social perception is very relevant. Social perception is about *how a person sees others and how others see a person in a society* [Pickens, 2005, p. 54]. As stated before, perception is a process of categorization or coding and classification. Pickens [2005] claims that the process of social perception is obtained via six different means, namely, *halo effect, contrast effect, projection, stereotyping, pygmalion effect* and *impression management.*

The *halo effect* is about all the positive impressions possessed by an individual about the other individuals based on a single trait, for example, hardworking, dressing well, intelligent and a good public speaker, because the individual believes that the person ranks highly in one trait. Adversely, the *horn effect* is the situation when an individual holds a negative impression of someone based on a single trait, such as laziness. The *contrast effect* is about how an individual perceives someone by comparing someone's traits with a different individual who is likely to possess better or worse traits, under the same traits category. This effect applies to perceptions of self-consciousness, social anxiety and self-esteem. On the contrary, *projection* underlines how an individual perceives others by comparing them with their own attitudes and beliefs.

Stereotyping is about judging and generalizing others based on an individual's own perception. The most common stereotyping issues are related to gender, ethnicity, religion, language and behavior. The *pygmalion effect* is about a person's attitude, which is consistent with another person's expectation, regardless of its accuracy. If a person is expected to behave in a specific way, then this person will have the tendency to act consistently in accordance with the set expectation.

Finally, *impression management* is a tendency of an individual to change or manipulate other impressions of himself or herself, in order to gain a positive evaluation and to protect self-image. After all, perceptions might be ambiguous, and there is a high possibility that the least favorite objects or people can turn out to be favorite objects or people [Gregory, 1968]. This is pointed out by Pickens [2005], mentioned earlier, in that perception might not be the same as in reality.

Perception of non-whites by whites

Social perception as described above is something very general about the perception of two different cultures, and since this research focuses on the perception of the Chinese (non-whites), it would be appropriate to look into C.M. Bahk and F.E. Jandt's [2008] work on how different races are being perceived. They found out that in America, whites are perceived to be *more superior, privileged and dominant* [Bahk, Jandt, 2008, p. 317], compared to non-whites.

They further argue that there are three key dimensions of the perception of non-whites on the level of interracial interaction reluctance, namely distinctness, inferiority, and incompatibility [Bahk, Jandt, 2008]. *Perceived racial distinctness* defines how one perceives the dissimilarity of one's own culture in comparison to other groups, and the *perceived racial inferiority* is the extent of the situation, when someone perceives his culture either as superior or inferior to the other. Finally, the *perceived racial incompatibility* is about the disagreement between cultures on how to adapt and learn about each other. Unsurprisingly, the results show that perception of non-white distinctness and inferiority are positively linked with *interracial interaction reluctance*, whereas perception of non-white incompatibility is negatively associated with *interracial interaction reluctance* [Bahk, Jandt, 2008, p. 328]. This study includes

a few questions related to interracial interaction reluctance in the survey, to understand the closeness of Polish respondents to the Chinese, and how comfortable they feel while interacting with each other.

Research methodology and data analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies have been applied in this study. In the first stage of the research, Chinese professionals who are based in Poland for at least one year and work for sizeable companies were selected to conduct one-on-one in-depth interviews, in order to understand their opinion on how they are being perceived by Poles. The research topic is rather sensitive, especially that the face-saving concept plays an important role while communicating with the Chinese, and thus, open-ended questions are used [Lee, 1993] to interview the randomly selected Chinese repondents from various industries. The researcher also uses Chinese language throughout the interview allowing the conversation to be more personal and comfortable.

The objective of the interview was to collect a list of perception attributes by directing six key questions, namely:

- How are you being perceived by Poles at work or in business?
- What are the challenges you face in Poland?
- How do you overcome those challenges?
- What are the similarities or differences between your and Polish business culture?
- Do you find those similarities and differences at your current job?
- What are the best practices and examples in business that Poles can learn from the Chinese and vice versa?

The researcher also observed verbal and non-verbal communication of the respondents throughout the interview. The list of perception attributes is compiled and used in the second stage of the survey to explore the Poles' perceptions on Chinese professionals.

The list of perception attributes created in the first stage is used as the basis to design a questionnaire in English and Polish, to be then distributed to the Polish professionals from various business associations such as the Polish-Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Lower Silesia Chamber of Commerce. The identified target respondents were individuals who are currently working or used to work or do business with Chinese at a professional level. In the end, the collected data was analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

To enhance the reliability of the survey and to meet the objectives of the study, the questionnaire clearly defines *Chinese*, which refers to a Chinese national resident in mainland China such as in Beijing and Shanghai. For the Polish version of the questionnaire, the word *Chinese* has been translated as *narodowości chińskiej*, which means, a Chinese national. The rationale behind the explanation is to clarify the confusion of assuming *Chinese* as someone from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. Harding [1993] states that the Greater China, which constitutes Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau, is a concept formed in the 1970s due to strong ties of trade and investment relations between them. B. Naughton [1997] calls this the concept of *the China Circle*, while W. van Kemendade [1997] – *China, Hong Kong, Tawian Inc.* Obviously this is an informal economic tie, but it raises strong arguments in politics, and cultural linkages between them. Politically, Hong Kong was returned to China by the British in 1997 and the Portuguese handed back Macau in 1999. But the complicated relationship between Taiwan and China began

in 1949, when Chiang Kai-Shek fled to Taiwan after being defeated by the Chinese Communist Party [Chen, 2014]. The one-China principle furthers the conflict by the '1992 consensus' agreement, when both People's Republic of China (PRC), which refers to mainland China, and the Republic of China (ROC), which means Taiwan, agree that there is only one China, but interpret one-China in their own way. PRC claims mainland China is the only legitimate China in the world, while ROC believes Taiwan is the only legitimate China in the world [Sand, 2009].

Results and Discussions

In the first stage of the survey, 21 Chinese professionals from sizeable private and public enterprises in Poland were approached, but only 10 of them completed the interview, which resulted in a list of 40 perception attributes. These attributes were then used to design a questionnaire, which was distributed to around 500 Polish respondents. Eighty-three respondents, 38 male and 45 female returned the complete questionnaires. The response rate is 16.6%.

The results also show that the majority of the Polish respondents, up to 55 respondents were white-collar, and 12 respondents were business owners. Most respondents, almost 50%, speak two languages, i.e. Polish and English, while 33% of them speak three languages, such as Polish, English, Russian and French. Nine respondents speak Mandarin, which is the official language of China.

To further explore the input from the survey, the results and the discussions based on the two hypotheses are presented below.

• Hypothesis I: **There is no significant difference between respondents' level of comfort with Chinese professionals based on their experience with the Chinese.**

Van der Walt [1991] claims that human perception is connected to past experience. Bahk and Jandt [2008] conclude that perception is influenced by *interracial interaction reluctance* between whites and non-whites. Hence, the survey has delved deep to testify the first hypothesis to understand respondents' past experience with the Chinese, which includes travel experience and working experience; and to examine how comfortable they are with the Chinese.

Based on the results, the majority of the respondents, 67.5%, have never travelled to mainland China, but all of them

Table 1 **Relationship between respondents' working experience and the comfort level with the Chinese**

		How would you feel if your business counterparts or co-workers were Chinese?					
		Very comfortable	Comfortable	Neither positive nor negative feeling	Uncomfortable	Very uncomfortable	Number of respondents
How long have you been working or doing business with the Chinese?	less than 1 year	1	9	12	0	1	23
	between 1-2 years	4	15	8	1	0	28
	between 2-5 years	5	6	7	0	0	17
	between 5-10 years	4	3	5	0	0	12
	more than 10 years	1	1	0	0	0	2
Total		15	34	32	1	1	83

Source: own study.

Table 2 **Poles' general and personal perceptions of Chinese professionals**

Rank	General perceptions	N	%	Personal perceptions	N	%
1	Hardworking	63	74.1	Hardworking	46	55.4
2	Hierarchical in management	51	61.4	Hierarchical in management	45	54.2
3	Indirect in communication	45	54.2	Friendly	41	49.4
4	Bad command of English	44	53.0	Indirect in communication	38	45.8
5	High respect to a leader and management team	44	53.0	Polite	38	45.8
6	Do not show emotion in meeting	43	51.8	High respect to a leader and management team	35	42.2
7	Polite	42	50.6	Productive at work	33	39.8
8	Work life more important than personal life	37	44.6	High sense of job obligation	29	34.9
9	Friendly	36	43.4	Avoid conflict	28	33.7
10	Productive at work	36	43.4	Do not show emotion in meeting	25	30.1
11	High sense of job obligation	34	40.9	Work life more important than personal life	24	28.9
12	Strong leadership	33	39.8	Follow rules and procedures	24	28.9
13	Profit-oriented	30	36.1	Helpful	24	28.9
14	Strong loyalty to their employer	27	32.5	Strong loyalty to their employer	22	30.1
15	Follow rules and procedures	25	30.1	Strong leadership	22	26.5
16	Avoid conflict	24	28.9	Bad command of English	21	25.3
17	Strong team work	23	27.7	Personal friendship first, business comes afterwards	19	22.9
18	Personal friendship first, business comes afterwards	23	27.7	Profit-oriented	19	22.9
19	Professional	18	21.7	Proud	18	21.7
20	Not flexible to change	18	21.7	Professional	18	21.7
21	Taking instruction well	17	20.5	Trustworthy	15	18.1
22	Proud	17	20.5	Taking instruction well	15	18.1
23	Helpful	16	19.3	Strong team work	15	18.1
24	Harmony relations with others	15	18.1	Flexible to change	13	15.7
25	Not trustworthy	15	18.1	Impatient	12	14.5
26	Flexible to change	14	16.9	Rational in decision-making	12	14.5
27	Multitasking	13	15.7	Harmony relations with others	11	13.3
28	Talk too loud	12	14.5	Prefer email than face to face meeting	10	12.0
29	Always impose short deadlines	11	13.3	Multitasking	10	12.0
30	Direct in communication	10	12.0	Win-win negotiator	9	0.1
31	Impatient	10	12.0	Direct in communication	9	0.1
32	Prefer email than face-to-face meeting	9	0.1	Always impose short deadlines	8	0.1
33	Rational in decision-making	8	0.1	Innovation and creative	8	0.1
34	Trustworthy	8	0.1	Not flexible to change	7	-
35	Innovative and creative	8	0.1	Talk too loud	6	-
36	Win-win negotiator	7	-	Good listener	6	-
37	Strategic planner	5	-	Strategic planner	5	-
38	Religious	5	-	Not trustworthy	4	-
39	Equal opportunity for all	3	-	Religious	3	-
40	Good listener	2	-	Equal opportunity for all	2	-

Source: own study.

have experience working or doing business with the Chinese, as shown in table 1. The results also exhibit that the majority or 33% of the respondents have 'one to two years' experience with Chinese, and around 15% of them have five to ten years working. It is not surprising that merely 2.4% of the respondents have over ten years' experience, as China only opened the door to the world by joining the WTO on 11 December 2001. Moreover, Poland started to be more active in international trade after joining the European Union in 2004. The results also demonstrated that the majority or 60% of the respondents were comfortable or very comfortable doing business with or having Chinese co-workers, 38.6% of them felt neither positive nor negative, and merely 2.4% or two respondents felt not comfortable having contact with Chinese business counterparts or colleagues.

- Hypothesis II: **There are significant differences between Poles' general perception and personal perception on Chinese professionals.**

The most important part of the survey was to determine the perception of China based on the 40 perception attributes gathered from Chinese professionals as seen in Table 2. Respondents were asked to identify the said forty perceptions in two separate questions, namely, general perceptions of how most Poles perceive the Chinese, and their own personal perceptions of the Chinese.

The perceptions of Chinese professionals are ranked based on the frequency method, which means that the total numbers of respondents agreed to a particular perception attribute. More than 50% of the respondents agreed that seven out of 40 pre-defined attributes are the Poles' general perceptions, but only two out of these seven attributes, namely hardworking and hierarchical in management, are

their own perceptions of the Chinese. This can be clearly seen in Table 3.

On the other hand, as seen at the bottom part of the list, there are nine general perceptions and 11 personal perceptions where 0.1% or less than 0.1% respondents agreed that these attributes are part of Poles' perceptions of the Chinese. To be more specific, Poles do not perceive the Chinese as religious, good listeners, strategic planners, innovative and creative, and promoting equality for all. Inequality is a most talked-about topic in China now, which touches issues on women's inequality and income inequality. For instance, The World Bank [2014] cites that before Premier Wen Jiabao stepped down in March 2014, he claimed Chinese income inequality as relatively high, which puts China among the top 25% of the least equal countries in the world. It is also reported that not many Asian countries belong to this top 25% group.

Obviously, there are 14 similar perceptions which fall into the top 15 for both general and personal perceptions although the order of ranking is slightly different: there are two different attributes, i.e. profit-oriented and helpful, both of which are ranked at number 13. If narrowed down to the top ten and top five perceptions, eight and three of them are the same, respectively. On the bottom part for least agreeable perceptions, 13 out of 15 general and personal perceptions are the same.

As per above, we can conclude that based on rank-order, there is no significant difference between Poles' general and personal perceptions' of Chinese professionals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is important to understand that the aim of this study was not to find out a list of perceptions of how the Chinese are being perceived by Poles, but to test the Polish perceptions of Chinese based on

Table 3 **List of the perceptions agreed by the majority or by more than 50% of the respondents**

Rank	General perceptions	%	Personal perceptions	%
1	Hardworking	74.1	Hardworking	55.4
2	Hierarchical in management	61.4	Hierarchical in management	54.2
3	Indirect in communication	54.2		
4	Bad command of English	53.0		
5	High respect to a leader and management team	53.0		
6	Do not show emotion in meetings	51.8		
7	Polite	50.6		

Source: own study.

a list of 40 perception attributes contributed by Chinese professionals. This piece of research is timely, aiming to help both nations to understand each other better in business and to improve bilateral relations between two countries. Ultimately, China has become the world's biggest economy by overtaking the USA in the end of 2014. This study, which deployed survey methods to understand how Poles perceive the Chinese, provided useful insights for the Chinese and the Poles to work more effectively and to prevent potential misunderstandings that may arise within a business context.

Perception, according to Walter and Bergill (1989), van der Walt (1991), and Lee (2012) is a process of achieving awareness via human's senses, to help to interpret any information received from the environment around us, or as we call it stimuli. Since this process is very much dependent on individual past experience, environment and culture, it is essential to understand that the process of perception varies among different individuals. The results obtained via 83 completed questionnaires confirm that there is no significant difference between respondents' level of comfort with Chinese professionals, regardless of their length of working experience with the Chinese, their traveling experience to China, or even with their experience of having a close Chinese friend or a colleague at work or in busi-

ness. Additionally, there are no significant differences between Poles' general perception and personal perception of Chinese professionals, as the majority respondents rank most of the general and personal perceptions in the same order, although the percentage for general perceptions is higher.

Notwithstanding, there are three recommendations that should be emphasized for future research. Firstly, as this study aims to testify Poles' perception of the Chinese based on a list of perception attributes contributed by Chinese professionals on the basis of how they think they are being perceived by Poles, in future studies can also create the list of perception attributes from Polish respondents separately, in order to conduct a comparison study as an exploratory stage for a more advanced level of the study as well as to generate a theoretical perception model specifically for Polish and Chinese cultures.

Secondly, one-on-one in-depth interviews can be used to study perception as this topic is rather sensitive or too personal for some cultures, and some respondents might not feel comfortable to discuss this topic freely. Researchers can also observe the verbal and non-verbal communication and behaviors of respondents during the in-depth interviews to minimize the bias opinions. Eventually, this interview is conducted to gain detailed understanding

of social behavior of human relationship and to maintain the confidentiality of the information received.

The final recommendation would be to delve deeper, to further research the link between perception and stereotype, which includes the influence of perceptions on Chinese stereotypes, the best practices to minimize negatively-linked perceptions and stereotypes which affect social and business relationships, as well as to find out the advantanges of perceptions and stereotypes.

All in all, this study reminds us that individuals or professionals should remain sensitive while contacting people from a different culture, and most importantly to treat each other as individuals, as there are many internal and external factors that influence the way we perceive others, such as religion, language proficiency, travelling experience, government policy, law and tradition. The results from the study can be used as a guide or reference especially for those who would like to improve their current relationship with the Chinese, or for individuals who are 'newbies' in Sino-Poland relations. Above all, the perception attributes generated by this study should not be treated as general opinions and stereotypes which affect the human social relationships.

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