**Fungai B. Chigwendere**

# Towards Intercultural Communication Congruence in Sino-African Organisational Contexts

Tectum

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# Abstract

Despite the prevalence of theories and research that could serve as guidelines for addressing intercultural communication challenges such as misunderstanding, ineffectiveness and inappropriateness in communication in Sino-African organisational contexts, the continued existence of these challenges suggests the inadequacy of such theories. Accordingly, in consideration of African and Chinese cultural perspectives, the aim of this study was to develop *a hybrid intercultural communication congruence (HICC) framework* in order to enhance intercultural communication and achieve intercultural communication congruence in Sino-African organisational contexts. In this study, intercultural communication congruence means effectiveness and appropriateness in intercultural communication. To achieve the study aim, an interpretive pragmatism paradigm was adopted, comprising a two-pronged approach of a synthesis of extant literature and theory as well as an empirical qualitative study, both underpinned by cross-cultural management theory. Based on the synthesis of literature and theory, a generic theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework underpinned by intercultural communication awareness – a state where communicants understand *communication orientation* and *manner of communication* in their own and their counterparts' culture – was developed. A further contribution was a theoretical contextualisation of the generic theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework, resulting in a theoretical framework for intercultural communication awareness in Western, African and Chinese cultures and a theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework *specific to Sino-African organisational contexts*. Thereafter, with the aim of validating the intercultural communication awareness dimension of the theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework *specific to Sino-African organisational contexts*, an empirical study was conducted with a sample of seven African and eight Chinese experts using in-depth interviews with open-ended and semi-structured questions. Based on qualitative content analysis, six intercultural communication awareness enablers or conditions that enable people to understand communication in different cultures and contexts for the purposes of attaining intercultural communication awareness emerged. These were *cultural orientation, manner of communication, orientation to rules and protocol, individual dispositions, intercultural communication influences* and *intercultural communication variations*. An integration of the intercultural communication awareness enablers into the generic theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework results in an updated generic theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework. Then, informed by the updated generic theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework, a further contribution of this study was an empirical verification of the intercultural communication awareness dimension of the

theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework *specific to Sino-African organisational contexts* to result in a final hybrid intercultural communication congruence framework for Sino-African organisational contexts supported by the perspectives of those involved in interaction, rather than predetermined standards of other cultures. Empirical findings suggest that both African and Chinese colleagues maintain a sense of collectivism in the Sino-African organisational context, although this is demonstrated differently. In addition, African colleagues display a blended manner of communication characterised by a mix of Western and African ways while the Chinese manner is contextual and governed by roles and relationships. In African culture, rules and protocol are negotiated, aimed at social maintenance, while strong cultural patriotism ensures strict adherence in Chinese culture. In respect of individual dispositions, African people are seen as open and accommodating while the Chinese disposition could be described as closed and ambiguous. Also evident in the findings is the existence of within-culture differences and influence of non-cultural factors on intercultural communication that should be addressed in order to achieve intercultural communication congruence. Finally, the frameworks developed and the methodological processes followed will stimulate academic debate and raise numerous questions for future research. Immediate future research could be geared towards refining the concepts of intercultural communication awareness, intercultural communication congruence and the hybrid intercultural communication congruence framework for Sino-African organisational contexts. At a management practice level, intercultural communication awareness insights provide a reference point for intercultural communication enhancement strategies and interventions in Sino-African organisational contexts.

**Key Words:** intercultural communication congruence, intercultural communication awareness, awareness enablers, Chinese, African, communication, culture.

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# Table of Contents

**Chapter 1: Introduction and Orientation ..... 23**

Introduction ..... 23

1.1 Context and Background ..... 24

1.1.1 Significance of the Sino-African context ..... 24

1.2 The Research Problem ..... 25

1.2.1 Contemporary approaches to and theories of intercultural communication ..... 26

1.2.2 Intercultural communication congruence in Sino-African organisational contexts: the state of research ..... 27

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives ..... 30

1.3.1 Main study aim ..... 30

1.3.2 Study of theory (literature study) aim ..... 30

1.3.2.1 Objectives of the study of theory (literature study) ..... 31

1.3.2.2 Theoretical (literature study) research questions ..... 32

1.3.3 Empirical aims ..... 32

1.3.3.1 Empirical objectives ..... 33

1.3.3.2 Empirical research questions ..... 33

1.4 Significance of the Study ..... 34

1.5 Research Design and Methodology ..... 35

1.5.1 Study of theory ..... 35

1.5.2 Empirical study ..... 36

1.6 Demarcation of Study ..... 38

1.7 Definition of Terms ..... 39

1.8 Structure of Thesis ..... 40

**Chapter 2: Conceptualising Intercultural Communication Congruence ..... 45**

Introduction ..... 45

2.1 Defining Intercultural Communication ..... 45

2.2 The Study of Intercultural Communication ..... 46

2.2.1 History of the study of intercultural communication ..... 46

2.2.2 Contemporary approaches to intercultural communication ..... 47
2.2.2.1 The social science approaches ..... 48
a. The psychosocial approach ..... 48
b. The skills approach ..... 48
c. Behavioural approach ..... 49
d. Knowledge of the "other" approach ..... 49
e. Common ground and acceptance of differences approach ..... 49
2.2.2.2 The interpretive approaches ..... 50
2.2.2.3 The critical approaches ..... 51
2.2.2.4 Summary ..... 51
2.2.3 Theories for enhancing intercultural communication ..... 52
2.2.3.1 Cultural convergence theory ..... 52
2.2.3.2 Anxiety uncertainty management theory ..... 53
2.2.3.3 Face negotiation theory ..... 53
2.3 Barriers and Challenges in Intercultural Communication ..... 54
2.3.1 Language differences ..... 54
2.3.2 Non-verbal communication ..... 55
2.3.3 Culture and value differences ..... 56
2.3.4 Ethnocentrism ..... 57
2.3.5 Stereotyping and prejudice ..... 57
2.3.6 Anxiety felt by the "strangers" in communication ..... 58
2.4 Considerations for Intercultural Communication Congruence ..... 58
2.4.1 Intercultural communication awareness ..... 58
2.4.1.1 Communication orientation ..... 59
2.4.1.2 Manner of communication ..... 59
2.4.2 Effectiveness in communication ..... 59
2.4.3 Appropriateness in communication ..... 60
2.5. Intercultural Communication Congruence ..... 60
2.5.1 A cross-cultural approach to enhanced intercultural communication ..... 61
2.5.2 Cultural, cross-cultural and intercultural communication ..... 61
2.6 Summary ..... 62

**Chapter 3: Conceptualising Intercultural Communication Awareness ..... 63**

Introduction ..... 63
3.1 Themes Underlying Intercultural Communication (IC) ..... 63
3.1.1 Culture and values ..... 63
3.1.1.1 Self-perceptions ..... 64
3.1.2 Worldview ..... 65

3.1.3 Communication ..... 66
3.1.4 The relationship between culture and communication ..... 67
3.1.5 Cultural differences and similarities in communication ..... 67
3.1.5.1 Dimensions of cultural variation in communication ..... 67
a. The individualism vs collectivism dimension in communication ..... 68
b. Low and high context communication ..... 69
c. High versus low face needs ..... 70
3.1.5.2 Summary ..... 70
3.2 Intercultural Communication Awareness ..... 70
3.2.1 Criteria for conceptualising communication orientation and manner of communication (IC awareness enablers) ..... 71
3.2.1.1 Criterion 1: Values, guiding philosophies *(incorporating self-perceptions)* ..... 74
3.2.1.2 Criterion 2: The nature of communication ..... 74
3.2.1.3 Criterion 3: The objective of communication ..... 74
3.2.1.4 Criterion 4: Degree of interaction in communication ..... 75
3.2.1.5 Criterion 5: Thinking process and communication ..... 76
3.2.2 Relationship between IC awareness enablers, communication orientation, manner of communication and intercultural communication awareness ..... 77
3.2.3 Framework for comparing the manner of communication ..... 78
3.3 Summary ..... 79

**Chapter 4: A Generic Theoretical Intercultural Communication Congruence Framework ..81**

Introduction ..... 81
4.1 Presenting the Generic Theoretical Intercultural Communication Congruence Framework ..... 81
4.1.1 Reading the figure ..... 81
4.1.1.1 Developing IC awareness through understanding communication orientation and the manner of communication ..... 83
4.1.1.2 Intercultural communication awareness-engendered consequences and possibilities ..... 84
4.1.1.3 Enhanced intercultural communication ..... 84
4.2 The Generic Theoretical Intercultural Communication Congruence Framework in the Context of the Present Study ..... 85
4.3 Summary ..... 86

**Chapter 5: Intercultural Communication Awareness ..... 87**

Introduction ..... 87
5.1 Western, African and Chinese Cultures ..... 88
5.1.1. Western culture ..... 88
5.1.2 African culture ..... 89
5.1.2.1 Communalism ..... 89

a. The supremacy of the community ..... 89
b. The utility of the individual ..... 89
c. The sanctity of authority ..... 90
d. Respect for old age ..... 90
e. Religion as a way of life ..... 90
5.1.2.2 Ubuntu ..... 91
5.1.2.3 Humanism ..... 91
5.1.3 Chinese culture ..... 91
5.1.3.1 Confucianism ..... 92
a. Jen (benevolence and humanness) ..... 92
b. Influence of family and insiders (zi-jiren) versus outsiders ..... 92
c. Hierarchy and role relationships ..... 93
d. Bao (reciprocity) ..... 93
e. Guanxi (relationships/connections) ..... 93
f. Mianzi (face) ..... 94
5.1.4 Summary ..... 94
5.2 Communication Orientation and Manner of Communication in Western, African and Chinese Cultures ..... 94
5.2.1 Values and guiding philosophies *(incorporating self-perceptions)* ..... 96
5.2.1.1 Self-perceptions ..... 96
5.2.2 Nature of communication ..... 99
5.2.3 Objective of communication ..... 100
5.2.4 Degree of interaction ..... 102
5.2.5 Thinking process ..... 105
5.2.6 Summary ..... 107
5.3 The Manner of Communication in Western, African and Chinese Cultural Contexts ..... 107
5.4 Theoretical IC Congruence (TICC) Framework Specific to Sino-African Organisational Contexts ..... 108
5.5 Summary ..... 110

**Chapter 6: Research Design and Methodology ..... 111**

Introduction ..... 111
6.1 The Philosophy of Research ..... 111
6.1.1 Research paradigm ..... 112
6.2 Research Design ..... 114
6.3 A: Study of Theory ..... 115
6.3.1 Traditional literature review and synthesis ..... 115
6.3.2 Quasi-systematic review ..... 116
6.3.2.1 Planning the quasi-systematic review ..... 117
6.3.2.2 Literature search and selection ..... 117

a. Timeframe for literature sourcing ..... 117
b. Inclusion and exclusion of articles ..... 118
6.3.3 Meta-synthesis ..... 119
6.3.3.1 Meta-synthesis in the context of the present study ..... 119
6.3.4 Quality assessment and ethical issues: study of theory ..... 121
6.4 B: Empirical Qualitative Study ..... 121
6.4.1 Overview ..... 121
6.4.1.1 Qualitative study interviewing experts ..... 122
a. Definition of an "expert" ..... 122
6.4.2 Data collection ..... 123
6.4.2.1 Sample and sampling procedure ..... 124
6.4.2.2 Data collection methods ..... 125
a. In-depth interviews ..... 125
b. Interview structure and intention ..... 126
6.4.3 Validity and reliability ..... 129
6.4.3.1 Confirmability ..... 129
6.4.3.2 Transferability ..... 130
6.4.3.3 Dependability ..... 130
6.4.3.4 Credibility ..... 130
6.4.3.5 Triangulation ..... 131
6.4.4 Ethical considerations ..... 132
6.4.5 Qualitative data analysis ..... 132
6.4.5.1 Level of analysis ..... 132
6.4.5.2 Procedures of analysis ..... 133
6.5 Summary ..... 138

**Chapter 7: Empirical Research Findings ..... 139**

Introduction ..... 139
7.1 Biographical Information of the Sample ..... 140
7.1.1 Distribution of cultural grouping ..... 142
7.1.2 Distribution of gender ..... 142
7.1.3 Distribution of age ..... 142
7.1.4 Distribution of ethnic group ..... 143
7.1.5 Distribution of position and education ..... 143
7.1.6 Distribution of industry sector ..... 144
7.1.7 Distribution of experience in months ..... 144
7.2 Presentation of Findings ..... 145
7.3 Perspectives of Intercultural Communication Awareness – African Culture ..... 146

7.3.1 Own perspectives: African experts ..... 146
7.3.1.1 Human centredness ..... 149
7.3.1.2 Consensus-seeking ..... 150
7.3.1.3 Respectful ..... 151
7.3.1.4 Humble ..... 151
7.3.1.5 Speaking in a direct manner ..... 152
7.3.1.6 Showing emotions ..... 153
7.3.1.7 Communalistic ..... 153
7.3.1.8 Following rules and protocol ..... 153
7.3.1.9 Family orientation ..... 154
7.3.1.10 Etiquette ..... 154
7.3.1.11 Summary ..... 154
7.3.2 Intercultural communication awareness of African culture: Chinese experts' perspectives ..... 155
7.3.2.1 African people are human-centred ..... 157
7.3.2.2 African people are arrogant ..... 157
7.3.2.3 African people are direct ..... 158
7.3.2.4 African people are humble ..... 158
7.3.2.5 African people are family-orientated ..... 159
7.3.2.6 African people talk a lot ..... 159
7.3.2.7 African people are curious ..... 160
7.3.2.8 African people show emotions ..... 160
7.3.2.9 Summary ..... 160
7.3.3 Intercultural communication awareness in African culture – own and other perspectives ..... 161
7.3.3.1 Discussion ..... 164
7.4 Perspectives of Intercultural Communication Awareness – Chinese Culture ..... 166
7.4.1 Own perspectives: Chinese experts ..... 166
7.4.1.1 Follow rules and protocol ..... 169
7.4.1.2 Face-giving and face-saving – mianzi ..... 169
7.4.1.3 In-group focus ..... 170
7.4.1.4 Indirect manner ..... 171
7.4.1.5 Pursuit of harmony ..... 171
7.4.1.6 Hierarchical ..... 172
7.4.1.7 Little talk ..... 172
7.4.1.8 Nonverbal communication ..... 173
7.4.1.9 Respect ..... 173
7.4.1.10 Relationships – guanxi ..... 174
7.4.1.11 Showing emotions ..... 174
7.4.1.12 Summary ..... 174
7.4.2 Intercultural communication awareness of Chinese culture: African experts' perspectives ..... 175

7.4.2.1 Chinese people follow rules and protocol ... 178
7.4.2.2 Chinese people have an in-group focus ... 179
7.4.2.3 Chinese people keep their own culture ... 180
7.4.2.4 Chinese people communicate nonverbally ... 181
7.4.2.5 Chinese people are abrupt ... 182
7.4.2.6 Chinese people are insincere ... 182
7.4.2.7 Chinese people are authoritative ... 183
7.4.2.8 Chinese people do not show emotions ... 183
7.4.2.9 Status-driven communication ... 184
7.4.2.10 Chinese people are calm in manner ... 184
7.4.2.11 Chinese people do not say "no" ... 185
7.4.2.12 Strong concern for face-giving and face-saving – mianzi ... 185
7.4.2.13 Communication is hierarchical ... 186
7.4.2.14 Chinese people are honourable ... 186
7.4.2.15 Chinese people do not talk much ... 187
7.4.2.16 Chinese people are rude ... 187
7.4.2.17 Chinese people value relationships – guanxi ... 188
7.4.2.18 Chinese people are indirect ... 188
7.4.2.19 Summary ... 189
7.4.3 Intercultural communication awareness in Chinese culture – own and other perspectives ... 189
7.4.3.1 Discussion ... 193
7.5 Intercultural Communication Awareness: African Own and Chinese Own Perspectives Compared ... 194
7.5.1 Summary ... 197
7.6 Intercultural Communication Awareness: African and Chinese Perspectives of "Other" Compared ... 198
7.6.1 Summary ... 201
7.7 Emerging Intercultural Communication Awareness Perspectives (African and Chinese Experts) ... 201
7.7.1 Variations ... 204
7.7.1.1 Business and social contexts ... 204
7.7.1.2 Organisational typology ... 205
7.7.1.3 Race ... 205
7.7.1.4 Level of education ... 206
7.7.1.5 Class ... 206
7.7.2 Expert observations ... 206
7.7.2.1 Mix of Western and African ways ... 207
7.7.2.2 Similarity between Chinese and African ways ... 207
7.7.3 Influences ... 208
7.7.3.1 Stereotypes ... 208
7.7.3.2 Differences in work ethic ... 209
7.7.3.3 Ethnocentrism ... 210

7.7.3.4 Motives for interaction ..... 210
7.7.3.5 Preconceptions ..... 211
7.7.3.6 Personal circumstances ..... 211
7.7.3.7 Prejudice ..... 212
7.7.3.8 No communication occurs ..... 212
7.7.4 Summary ..... 213
7.8 Intercultural Communication Awareness Categories – Sino-African Organisational Contexts ..... 214
7.8.1 Categories of intercultural communication awareness ..... 214
7.8.2 Linking intercultural communication awareness perspectives to intercultural communication awareness categories ..... 215
7.8.2.1 Cultural orientation ..... 218
7.8.2.2 Manner of communication ..... 219
7.8.2.3 Orientation to rules and protocol ..... 220
7.8.2.4 Individual dispositions ..... 220
7.8.2.5 Within-culture variations ..... 221
7.8.2.6 Intercultural communication awareness influences ..... 221
7.9 Summary ..... 222

**Chapter 8: Summary, Conclusion And Recommendations ..... 225**

Brief Synopsis of the Research ..... 225
8.1 Conclusions and Recommendations ..... 227
8.1.1 Updated generic theoretical intercultural communication congruence framework ..... 228
8.1.1.1 Cultural orientation ..... 230
8.1.1.2 Manner of communication ..... 230
8.1.1.3 Orientation to rules and protocol ..... 230
8.1.1.4 Individual dispositions ..... 231
8.1.1.5 Intercultural communication influences ..... 231
8.1.1.6 Intercultural communication variations ..... 231
8.1.2 Hybrid intercultural communication congruence framework (HICC) for Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 232
8.1.2.1 Cultural orientation in Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 234
8.1.2.2 Manner of communication in Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 234
8.1.2.3 Orientation to rules and protocol in Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 235
8.1.2.4 Individual dispositions in Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 235
8.1.2.5 Intercultural communication influences in Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 236
8.1.2.6 Intercultural communication variations in Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 236
8.2 Significance and Contributions of this Research ..... 236
8.2.1 Main contribution ..... 236
8.2.2 Study of theory ..... 236

8.2.3. Empirical qualitative study ..... 237
8.2.4 Methodology ..... 238
8.3 Limitations of this Research. ..... 238
8.3.1 Study of theory ..... 238
8.3.2 Empirical qualitative study ..... 239
8.4 Recommendations for Future Research ..... 240
8.5 Conclusion ..... 240

**9 References. ..... 241**

**10 Annexures ..... 265**

# List of Tables

**Table 1.1:** Theoretical research questions ..... 32

**Table 1.2:** Empirical analytical research questions ..... 34

**Table 2.1:** Approaches to intercultural communication ..... 47

**Table 3.1:** Criteria for conceptualising communication orientation and manner of communication 72

**Table 3.2:** Framework for comparing the manner of communication in different cultures ..... 79

**Table 5.1:** Values and guiding philosophies in Western, African and Chinese cultures ..... 98

**Table 5.2:** Nature of communication in Western, African and Chinese cultures. ..... 100

**Table 5.3:** Objective of communication in Western, African and Chinese cultures ..... 102

**Table 5.4:** Degree of interaction in communication in Western, African and Chinese cultures .... 104

**Table 5.5:** Thinking process in communication in Western, African and Chinese cultures ..... 106

**Table 7.1:** Biographical information of respondents .....141

**Table 7.2:** IC awareness of African culture – African experts' perspectives ..... 147

**Table 7.3:** IC awareness of African culture – Chinese experts' perspectives. ..... 155

**Table 7.4:** IC awareness in African culture – own and other perspectives ..... 162

**Table 7.5:** IC awareness of Chinese culture – Chinese experts' perspectives ..... 167

**Table 7.6:** IC awareness of Chinese culture – African experts' perspectives. ..... 176

**Table 7.7**: IC awareness in Chinese culture – own and other perspectives. ..... 191

**Table 7.8:** IC awareness – African own and Chinese own perspectives ..... 195

**Table 7.9:** IC awareness – African and Chinese perspectives of "other" ..... 199

**Table 7.10:** Emerging IC awareness perspectives – African and Chinese. . . . . 202

**Table 7.11:** Categories and perspectives. . . . . 216

**Table 7.11** (continued): Categories and perspectives . . . . . 217

**Table 7.11** (continued): Categories and perspectives . . . . . 218

# List of Figures

**Fig. 1.1:** Hypothetical view of poor and enhanced IC congruence ..... 30

**Fig. 1.2:** Structure of the thesis ..... 41

**Fig. 2.1:** Culture hierarchies in communication ..... 62

**Fig. 3.1:** Relationship between IC awareness enablers, communication orientation, manner of communication and IC awareness ..... 77

**Fig. 4.1:** Generic theoretical intercultural communication congruence (TICC) framework ..... 82

**Fig. 5.1:** Theoretical framework for intercultural communication awareness (TFICA) in Western, African and Chinese cultures ..... 95

**Fig. 5.2:** Excerpt from the TFICA – nature of communication ..... 99

**Fig. 5.3:** Excerpt from the TFICA – objective of communication ..... 100

**Fig. 5.4:** Excerpt from the TFICA – degree of interaction ..... 102

**Fig. 5.5:** Excerpt from the TFICA – thinking process ..... 105

**Fig. 5.6:** Comparing manner of communication in Western, African and Chinese cultures ..... 107

**Fig. 5.7:** Theoretical IC congruence (TICC) framework specific to Sino-African organisational contexts ..... 109

**Fig. 6.1:** Excerpt of coded material using a Microsoft Word macro ..... 136

**Fig. 7.1:** Distribution of cultural grouping ..... 142

**Fig. 7.2:** Distribution of gender ..... 142

**Fig. 7.3:** Distribution of age ..... 143

**Fig. 7.4:** Distribution of ethnic group ..... 143

**Fig. 7.5:** Distribution of industry sector ..... 144

**Fig. 7.6:** Distribution of experience in months ..... 144

**Fig. 7.7:** IC awareness of African culture – African experts' perspectives. ..... 148

**Fig. 7.8:** IC awareness of African culture – Chinese experts' perspectives ..... 156

**Fig. 7.9:** IC awareness in African culture – own and other perspectives (African and Chinese experts' perspectives compared) ..... 163

**Fig. 7.10** IC awareness of Chinese culture – Chinese experts' perspectives ..... 168

**Fig. 7.11** IC awareness of Chinese culture – African experts' perspectives ..... 177

**Fig. 7.12** IC awareness in Chinese culture – own and other perspectives ..... 192

**Fig. 7.13** IC awareness – African own and Chinese own perspectives compared ..... 196

**Fig. 7.14** IC awareness – African and Chinese perspectives of other compared ..... 200

**Fig. 7.15** Emerging IC awareness perspectives – African and Chinese experts ..... 203

**Fig. 8.1:** Updated generic theoretical IC congruence (TICC) framework. ..... 229

**Fig. 8.2:** Hybrid IC congruence (HICC) framework for Sino-African organisational contexts – the multi-view approach ..... 233

# Chapter 1
# Introduction and Orientation

## Introduction

The global outlook of many contemporary businesses makes the notion of intercultural communication (IC) effectiveness increasingly relevant as home and host country employees interact in organisations. More specifically, the global workplace is a microcosm of wider society (Nair-Venugopal, 2015, p. 31) and one of the most important contexts of intercultural interaction in the twenty-first century (Ladegaard and Jenks, 2015, p. 2; Martin and Nakayama, 2015, p. 14). Consequently, the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries has become more important for global businesses, in order to understand how to communicate with employees and customers from diverse cultures to fulfil the organisation's mission and build value for their stakeholders (Mathews and Thakkar, 2012).

The need for ability to communicate across cultures arises from the suggestion that when communicators share the same cultural scripts, communication between them is likely to be smoother and more effective compared to when they do not (Gao and Ting-Toomey, 1998, p. 70). Critically in a foreign environment, understanding the manner of communication, or "knowing how to listen, how to interrupt, how to praise, and how to scold, are more important to a foreign manager than learning the language" (Berger, 1987 cited in Dean and Popp, 1990, p. 405). Likewise, host country managers and employees should also strive to minimise intercultural communication challenges, such as using ineffective or inappropriate language behaviours in communication.

The aforementioned IC challenges are made worse by traditionally understood barriers, which include differences in language, cultural values, worldviews, as well as ethnocentrism (Okech et al., p. 271), anxiety felt by the "strangers" (Gudykunst, 1995) stereotyping, prejudice, ambiguity and non-verbal misinterpretations (Washington, 2013; Beebe, Beebe and Redmond, 2011; Martin and Nakayama, 2010; Phatak, Bhagat and Kashlak, 2005). Tellingly, while the expectation in IC is of a good understanding between the interactants (Neuliep, 2012), experience has taught that misunderstandings often arise from differing expectations regarding communication. Again, these expectations can differ as a result of the influence of different values and worldviews of cultures shaping and dictating communication rules, behaviours and meaning in communication – hence the proclamation by Hall (1959, p. 159), that "culture is communication and communication is culture". In the Si-

no-African organisational context, reports of the loud African people simply talking, not necessarily to reach a particular conclusion (Matondo, 2012), and of Chinese people who are too quiet and rude, are likely to be a reflection of unknown or misunderstood cultural norms. China's ambassador to South Africa, Zhong Jianhua (2007–2012), asserts that IC challenges between African and Chinese people arise from the gap between Chinese culture and the varied cultures of Africa's diverse population (Von Schirach, 2012).

Challenges brought about by the gap between African and Chinese cultures are compounded by inadequacy of basic in-depth research of the African market, making it impossible for the Chinese to avoid potential cultural complications (Von Schirach, 2012). Dietz, Orr and Xing (2008) concur, stating that successfully combining Chinese and foreign forms of communication and cultural norms is one of the biggest challenges facing Chinese companies going abroad. African and Chinese managers and employees engaged in IC should therefore continually aim to improve the way they communicate, by reducing IC barriers and challenges. Rather than seeking IC effectiveness, this study advocates for IC congruence – viewed as potentially of a higher order than IC effectiveness, and where communication is likely more effective and appropriate. "Effective" refers to the sense that one's communication goals are achieved with maximum understanding in an interaction with others; "appropriate" refers to the use of messages that are expected in a given context, and actions that meet the expectations and demands of different situations (Dainton and Zelley, 2015; Wiseman, 2003, p. 193; Spitzberg, 2000, p. 380). Effectiveness and appropriateness in communication will be further discussed in Chapter 2 sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3.

The present chapter gives an overview of the study, beginning with a description of the context and background. The significance of the China-Africa relationship and IC communication challenges experienced in Sino-African organisations is noted. A discussion regarding the state of research on IC in Sino-African organisational contexts follows, leading to identification of research gaps, articulation of the research problem, and a presentation of the aims and objectives of the present study. The remainder of the chapter introduces the research methodology, delimits the study, defines key terms and outlines the structure of the thesis. The context and background for this study follows.

## 1.1 Context and Background

### 1.1.1 Significance of the Sino-African context

China has become an important player in many African economies. Illustrative of the extent of China's involvement with Africa, is the fact that only two African countries – oil-rich Libya, and Swaziland (which has always had official diplomatic ties with Taiwan) – have not benefited from Chinese aid (Brautigam, 2011). In addition, China's non-discriminatory approach to financing development and infrastructure projects in various sectors has had positive spin-offs for various African economies (Baah and Jauch, 2009). South Africa and China, for instance, regard each other as "strategic partners" (Guli-

we, Mkhonta and Vickers, 2009, p. 300). This is evidenced by a strong Chinese commitment to strengthening ties, as symbolised by its sponsorship of South African membership to BRICS (Alden and Park, 2013).

Continuing with the example of South Africa as representative of the continent, trade has grown progressively, with two-way trade rising from ZAR5.2 billion (US$800 million) in 1998, to ZAR188 billion (US$20.2 billion) in 2011 (Alden and Park, 2013). China assumed the position of being South Africa's top trading partner in 2009. It is reported that, in 2013, China became sub-Saharan Africa's largest export and development partner; its trade with South Africa increased by 32% to ZAR270 billion from ZAR205 billion in 2012 (Pigato and Tang, 2015, p. 1). In 2014, South African Minister of Trade and Industry, Rob Davies, reported that although total trade between South Africa and China experienced decreases to ZAR261 billion by the end of 2014, it has generally been on an upward trajectory since 2009, growing from ZAR118 billion to ZAR271 billion by the end of 2013. However, as China's presence in Africa continues to grow, so too have the complexities of the engagement. Alden and Park (2013) use the metaphor of a double-storey building, where engagement "upstairs" at the macro level involves the bilateral, multilateral, political and economic engagement between South Africa, China and other international partners. "Downstairs" (meso and micro levels) refers to the organisational context and interaction between ordinary people (Alden and Park, 2013, p. 1). The meso level is the focus of the present study.

Towards articulation of the research problem, the next section discusses IC and IC congruence research in general, narrowing down to the Sino-African organisational context to determine the gaps in research pertaining to IC congruence.

## 1.2 The Research Problem

Despite the prevalence of theories and research that could serve as guidelines for addressing IC challenges such as misunderstanding, ineffectiveness and inappropriateness in communication, the continued existence of these challenges in Sino-African organisations suggests the potential inadequacy of such theories. Furthermore, theories have been criticised for their ethnocentric tendency to assume superiority over other cultures in recommending the adoption of Western styles as a solution to world problems (Blommaert, 1998), hence threatening the agency of other cultures. Agency in African and Chinese cultures signifies "self-definition, self-determination, and self-representation" (Miike, 2013, p. 199). This study therefore advances the need for more indigenous approaches to IC congruence based on the cultures of African and Chinese managers and employees in interaction. The following section provides a background understanding of the research problem by considering, contemporary approaches and theories to IC.

### 1.2.1 Contemporary approaches to and theories of intercultural communication

The contemporary understanding of IC that could contribute towards understanding IC congruence in the Sino-African context comes predominantly from Western cultures (Miller et al., 2013; Mutere, 2012; Chen, 2011; Liu, Volcic and Gallois, 2011, p. 6; Huang, 2010; Asante, 1987; Miike, 2006; 2007; Mazama, 2001; Schiele, 1990; Yum, 1988). As such, some authors view contemporary IC theories as largely irrelevant particularly in non-Western contexts (Miller et al., 2013, p. 320). That said, despite support for indigenous context-focused approaches and theories such as Afrocentricity and Asiacentricity as popularised by Asante (1987; 1991; 1999) and Miike (2003; 2004; 2007) – for African and Chinese cultures, application of these approaches and theories is still in its infancy (Miller et al., 2013, p. 317), hence the continuing reliance on Western theory and approaches.

Martin and Nakayama (2010) distinguish between three approaches to IC (Chapter 2, section, 2.2.2), forming different perspectives from which to view the complexities of the subject (Martin and Nakayama, 2010, p. 76). The first of these is the social science approach, aimed at predicting and describing human behaviour (Martin and Nakayama (2010, p. 51). Theories represented in this approach are uncertainty anxiety management theory (Gudykunst, 1998; 2005), face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1985; 2005), conversational constraints theory (Kim, 2005), communication accommodation theory (Gallois et al., 1995) and the diffusion and innovations theory (Rogers, 2003).

Second is the interpretive approach whose goal is to understand and describe communication behaviour, as represented by Afrocentric and Asiacentric approaches and theories mentioned above. The Afrocentric approach represents themes shared by people of African descent (Martin and Nakayama, 2010, p. 63). These themes include "a common origin and experience of struggle … an element of resistance to European legal procedures, medical practices and political processes" (Martin and Nakayama, 2010, p. 63), traditional values of humaneness and harmony with nature, a fundamentally African way of knowing and interpreting the world and an orientation towards communalism (Maomeka, 1989). Mazama (2001, p. 394) proposes that from an academic standpoint, Afrocentricity is an approach where African social and cultural experience is the ultimate source of reference. An Asiacentric approach (Miike, 2003; 2007) on the other hand, represents themes of circularity, harmony, other-directedness, reciprocity and relationality (Miike, 2003; 2004).

Third is the critical approach aimed at understanding and positively influencing the lives of communicators through behavioural change (Martin and Nakayama, 2010, pp. 65–66) with proponents including Halualani and Nakayama (2013), Halualani, Mendoza and Drzewiecka (2009), Kubota (2012), Leeds-Hurwitz (2013), Mendoza (2013), Moon (2013), Ono (2013). Approaches and theories of IC are discussed in Chapter 2, sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3

The next section presents a further understanding of the problem statement by giving an overview of the state of research into Sino-African interactions in general, and IC congruence in particular.

### 1.2.2 Intercultural communication congruence in Sino-African organisational contexts: the state of research

Monson and Rupp (2013) report that, following China's declaration of the year of Africa in 2006, scholarship on Africa-China relationships was dominated by a desire to understand China's policies, strategies, and their significance for international affairs (Monson and Rupp, 2013, p. 25). Apart from this focus, numerous other studies have been conducted on Chinese investments in Africa (Sun, Jayaram and Kassiri, 2017; Shen, 2015; Lampert and Mohan, 2015; Bräutigam and Xiaoyang, 2011; Gu, 2009; Baah and Jauch, 2009; Kaplinsky and Morris, 2009; Alden and Davies, 2006; Brautigam, 2003). However, few studies have focused on overall management dynamics at the meso or organisational level (Jackson, Louw and Zhao, 2011), or on Sino-African cultural values and their influences on organisational practice (Matondo, 2012).

The novelty of the Sino-African organisational context in research may be the general reason for scarcity of literature on IC congruence at the meso level. Until fairly recently, owing to the colonial history of most African countries, there has been a predominance of Western organisations operating in Africa. Correspondingly, there has been an abundance of literature on interaction of Western and African cultures. Despite the flow of Chinese investment into Africa and an increasing number of Chinese organisations setting up operations in Africa, Chinese-African relations in the Sino-African organisational context is in its infancy. It is therefore plausible that the body of knowledge regarding interactions at the meso level is limited (Alden, Large and de Oliveira, 2008, p. 1).

To add to that, the limited existing research is largely philosophical, at times stereotypical, and potentially not reflective of the realities on the ground (Giese, 2014, Jackson, Louw and Zhao, 2011; Brautigam, 2011). Often the Sino-African relationship receives negative reports in the media. Alden and Park (2013) attribute this negative reporting to potential biases of Western media, reflecting the policies and engagement at government level. However, negative reporting could also reflect the challenges faced at the meso level of relations that include difficulty in attaining IC congruence.

Studies related to Sino-African interactions in organisational contexts focus on topics such as: leadership style and quality of work life (Handley, 2016), intercultural cooperation (Mayer, Boness and Louw, 2017), organisational culture and commitment (Mabuza, 2015), employee relationships (Arsene, 2014), cultural adjustment and adaptation (Men, 2014), organisational commitment (Paterson, 2014), comparison of African and Chinese cultural values (Matondo, 2012; Westropp, 2012), culture differences in business relations (Anedo, 2012), and work ethic (Slabbert and Ukpere, 2011). For the sake of brevity however, only the studies relevant to IC are discussed.

Men (2014, p. 131) explores interaction challenges faced in a Chinese organisation in Tanzania, suggesting that Chinese managers and employees should adapt to local needs and the Tanzanians should adapt to Chinese work ethic and goals. Advancing a different view based on a Ugandan study, Arsene (2014) posits that the extent to which Chinese employ-

ers understand and accept local practices determines the nature of the relationship between the Chinese employers and African employees. Anedo (2012) and Westropp (2012) concur, holding the view that knowledge and understanding of differences in values, priorities and expectations of those in interaction enhances their chances of success in business. The position adopted in this study is that knowledge and a better understanding of practices and values by both African and Chinese managers and employees may enhance IC and the interaction between them.

Significantly, Matondo (2012) identifies synergies between African and Chinese values, thus beginning to shape an understanding of African and Chinese values in relation to each other. In exploring communication between African and Chinese people, Matondo (2012) reports differences in verbal communication styles. A preference for non-verbal styles by Chinese people is reported in contrast to the rich language of African people – who at times talk just for the sake of enjoyment and not to reach any particular conclusions (Matondo 2012, p. 43). Differences can lead to difficulty in conveying and comprehending information appropriately and accurately (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013, p. 2). A point of similarity, however, is the richness of African and Chinese languages, often difficult to understand and laced with proverbs, idioms and riddles (Matondo 2012, p. 43). This study proposes that, despite obvious language difficulties where similarities in communication are present, they likely present opportunity to find "common ground" (Chen, 2015) and these may serve to enhance IC congruence. Greater understanding of the similarities and differences in African and Chinese communication is therefore likely to enhance IC congruence in the Sino-African organisational context.

In seeking common ground, some authors have reflected on African and Chinese philosophies of Ubuntu and Confucianism (such as Metz, 2014; 2015; Bell and Metz, 2011). Prominent among the similarities noted in Ubuntu and Confucianism are the moral importance of the community, respect accorded to elders and pursuit of harmony. Interestingly however, important differences within the similarities are also evident. For example, while community under Ubuntu requires consensus in politics, Confucianism does not. It is important therefore to be aware of subtle differences within similarities to understand the dynamics of Sino-African interactions – especially concerning IC in the context of this study. It is suggested that, in order to better understand and enhance IC congruence between African and Chinese managers and employees, an understanding of the similarities and differences of communication in their respective cultures is established (see Chapter 5 of this study).

Given the increasing number of Chinese organisations in Africa, in the face of continuing IC challenges and limited research at the meso level, justification for this study comes to the fore. First, there is a scarcity of research focused on understanding IC in the Sino-African organisational context. Second, the inadequacy of Western approaches to understand IC and IC congruence in the Sino-African organisational context warrants development of indigenous context-focused approaches that build on existing theory, while considering perspectives on African and Chinese culture and communication as well as viewpoints of African and Chinese managers and employees in interaction. There are currently no ap-