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Culture, Apology, and International Negotiation: The Case of the Sino-U.S. 'Spy Plane' Crisis

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New Research Directions

Negotiation processes ultimately succeed or fail on verbal exchanges. When words do not mean what they appear to mean or are misinterpreted, the process can break down. This article by Kevin Avruch and Zheng Wang examines the linguistic problems at the core of this post-Cold War Sino-US crisis negotiation.
— Editor

Culture, Apology, and International Negotiation: The Case of the Sino-U.S. “Spy Plane” Crisis

KEVIN AVRUCH* AND ZHENG WANG**

Abstract. This article traces the course of the Sino-U.S. negotiation in April 2001, to resolve the crisis following the collision of a U.S. surveillance aircraft with a Chinese fighter jet off of China’s coast and the subsequent unauthorized emergency landing of the U.S. plane at a Chinese airfield on Hainan Island. The negotiation focused on the Chinese demand for a full apology from the United States and the U.S. resistance to this demand. The article examines the role that culture, particularly linguistic differences, played in the course of the negotiation and its eventual resolution.

Keywords: culture; negotiation; China-U.S. relations; Spy Plane (Hainan Island) Crisis; apology; constructive ambiguity.

Introduction: Apology and Negotiation

In the literature on conflict resolution, especially in the later development of the field that identifies with “conflict transformation” and stresses the goal of *reconciliation* between parties formerly divided by deep-rooted conflict, the concept of *apology* (and in relation, *forgiveness*) looms large. Beyond individual or interpersonal situations, demands for apology can be offered by one social group to another. Examples include African-American demands for an

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apology from the United States Government for slavery; the Pope's apology (March 2000) for "sins committed" by the Roman Catholic Church's complicity in the Holocaust; and demands that the government of Australia designate a National Sorry Day for crimes and indignities perpetrated against Aborigines.¹ Pruitt and Kim (2004: 186) review some experimental work on the use of apology in conflict situations and consider it a useful tool (under the general rubric of "unilateral conciliatory initiatives") for potentially unblocking stalemates – though not a panacea, and not with potential costs, emotional, financial, or legal, among them. They also review studies connecting apology to forgiveness as part of a broader process of reconciliation (2004: 220–222). Finally, one can sometimes find apology (or such related notions as "atonement") discussed in relation to culturally "traditional" or indigenous modes of conflict resolution, usually as part of a healing or therapeutic discourse (e.g., Shook 1985; Watson-Gegeo and White 1990; Zartman 2000).

If we leave the broad field of conflict resolution for the narrower confines of negotiation, the positive status of apology becomes less secure – if not held suspect. At least one popular "how-to" guide to negotiation (part of the venerable "___ for Dummies" series), advises explicitly against apologizing. This advice, incidentally, appears connected to gender – actions women, negotiating with men, should particularly avoid (Donaldson and Donaldson 1996: 207). In most prescriptive discussions of negotiation, all of the potential costs or risks mentioned by Pruitt and Kim seem to be highlighted, especially those involving the risk of litigation and costs borne by assuming legal liability. Flipping over an auto insurance card one is likely to read, in case of an accident, "Do not admit fault." This includes (as one of the authors was once told by his insurance agent) apologizing to the other driver or police.

In the practice of criminal law, the notion that an attorney advises a client, once found guilty, to apologize or otherwise appear contrite at the sentencing phase of legal proceedings is well established. In civil cases the wisdom of this advice is not so well established. Yet even in the realm of civil legal negotiation, "in the shadow of the law" or in actual courtroom litigation, the possibilities of apology have begun to be discussed and analyzed. Mostly this burgeoning literature – see Brown (2004) for a concise review – is presently found exclusively in law journals and reviews. Jurists and law professors who have written on apology are hardly agreed as to the purpose, efficacy, costs, benefits or ethics of apology (particularly in the case of what some call *tactical apology* or so-called protected apologies), but most agree that nowadays lawyers should be prepared to counsel their clients on the subject, and more generally that a full discussion of apology in legal negotiation is overdue.²

All of these discussions have held culture, as it were, constant. That is, they presume that all the parties in the negotiation speak the same language, and

share the same basic understandings about how one apologizes and about what apologizing, or saying "I'm sorry," entails. (However, if we consider gender differences the result of socialization and thus broadly cultural, then the *Negotiating for Dummies* authors are excepted.) But what happens in a negotiation if we allow cultural differences to vary? What if the parties do not speak the same language, so that words for, and ways of, apologizing differ from one party to the other? More profoundly, what if the very meaning, and subsequent cultural "entailments," of apology differs between the parties (Avruch 1998)? One way to see such intercultural negotiations around apology is to consider international negotiations in which apology has been made explicitly an issue: demanded by one party and resisted by the other.

The case we wish to analyze from this perspective is the so-called spy plane (or Hainan Island or EP-3) incident that arose between the United States and China in April 2001. The first foreign policy crisis of President George W. Bush's administration is a rich case for analyzing the role of culture, focused around the issue of apology, in international negotiation.

The Case: A Game of Words (March 31–April 12, 2001)

At approximately 8:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Saturday, March 31 (9:15 a.m. local time Sunday, April 1 in China), a U.S. Navy EP-3 surveillance plane equipped with some of the nation's most sophisticated surveillance technology collided with a Chinese F-8 fighter jet dozens of miles off China's coast. Before the collision, the U.S. plane was monitoring Chinese electronic activity and Chinese jets were sent to intercept it. Such flights were routine, as was the Chinese response, but this time the American craft and a Chinese jet collided. The damaged American plane, quickly described in the Chinese media and official communiqués as a "spy plane," made an emergency landing in a military airfield on China's Hainan Island where Chinese officials detained its 24 crew members. The Chinese pilot, Wang Wei, was missing and presumed dead.

After the collision happened, on April 2, both countries immediately blamed the other for the crash. "Our airplanes were operating in international air space and the United States did nothing wrong," said White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer. China's Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, meanwhile, told U.S. Ambassador Joseph Prueher that Washington bears "full responsibility" for the incident. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said that the two Chinese F-8 jets "were flying normally" alongside the Navy plane when "the U.S. plane suddenly turned toward the Chinese plane." However, the head of the U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Dennis

Blair, disputed this, claiming the crash was caused by the fighter bumping into the American plane – an accident waiting to happen due to the “aggressive” tactics of Chinese pilots in these situations.³

President Bush and Chinese President Jiang Zemin also each made public demands of the other. President Bush called upon the Chinese side to release the crew and return the aircraft as soon as possible.⁴ Chinese president Jiang Zemin demanded the United States accept full responsibility for the collision and halt all surveillance flights off China’s coast.⁵ By late April 2, officials from the U.S. Embassy arrived in Haikou, the capital of Hainan province, to be closer to the crew. On April 3, Brigadier General Neal Sealock, the U.S. defense attaché, was given permission to visit the crew on the airbase. Later that day, the two sides agreed to start formal negotiations. Ambassador Joseph Prueher was appointed as the U.S. chief negotiator; his Chinese counterpart was Mr. Zhou Wenzhong, China’s Assistant Foreign Minister. Talks were held in Beijing.

Day 1 (April 3), “Daoqian” = “Apologize”?

On April 3, the Chinese side offered a concrete proposal for a resolution: The United States must “*daoqian*” to China. Both Chinese news agencies and the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C. translated the word as “*apologize*”.⁶

This was not the first time the Chinese government had demanded “*daoqian*” from the U.S. In May 1999, after the U.S. bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and in the wake of violent nationalist reaction in China, including an attack on the U.S. embassy, President Clinton managed to defuse the tension by making a public apology.⁷ This was neither the strategy nor initially the style of the Bush administration. President Bush flatly refused to make an apology and warned that relations with China could be damaged if the crew and aircraft were not returned soon. On the same day, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated: “I have heard some suggestion of an apology, but we have nothing to apologize for. We did not do anything wrong.”⁸ Meanwhile, some U.S. lawmakers, especially from President Bush’s conservative base, and some in the public media, began to show signs of impatience over China’s handling of the spy plane incident and to demand a hard-line response from the Administration toward China.

What sort of “apology” had the Chinese demanded of the United States? The meaning of “*daoqian*” (道歉), according to the most popular Chinese language dictionary, *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (Modern Chinese Dictionary, 1985), is “to express the feeling of being sorry, referring in particular to admitting a fault.” It is, in other words, a formal and explicit apology combined with an admission of wrongdoing. In Mandarin Chinese, as in English, there are several

ways to say, “I’m sorry” (see Table I). But the “semantic fields” (Cohen 1997: 40) covered by English and Chinese apologies are not identical or isomorphic. Nor, more importantly, is the larger cultural meaning of apology the same in both cultures. For example, once given, *what does an apology entail*, for giver and receiver? On both counts, culture plays a potentially complicating role in international (intercultural) negotiations. The course of negotiation over the next ten days thus was complicated at two levels: finding the right word(s), and, in terms of the broader Sino-U.S. relationship, managing the interpretation of those words – their various *entailments* – for both parties and their different “internal” constituencies.

Table I. Saying “I’m sorry” in Chinese

Saying ‘I’m sorry’

Only the first three of these Chinese phrases would be used in an official document. In the spy plane negotiations, Chinese officials were demanding “daoqian.”

daoqian

道歉 “**Apologize**”

Formal, explicit statement of apology and admission of wrongdoing.

baodian

抱歉 “**Feel sorry**”

Sincere but slightly less formal apology, accepting responsibility.

yihan

遗憾 “**Regret**”

More casual, not accepting blame, used formally and informally.

nanguo

难过 “**Feel grieved**”

Used person-to-person only, expressing sorrow without responsibility.

duibuqi

对不起 “**Have failed you**”

Excuse me, used colloquially and informally only.

buhayisi

不好意思 “**Embarrassed**”

Sorry, used even more casually and informally.

Source: Prof. Bao Zhang He, Harvard University, personal communication with Zheng Wang, December 2003.

Day 2–3 (April 4–5), “Regret” = “Yihan”?

While continuing publicly to reflect the tough stance of the Administration, the State Department did not suspend diplomatic efforts. On April 4, Secretary Powell sent a letter to Vice Premier Qian Qicheng. For the first time since the collision, Powell used the word “regret”: “We very much *regret* the pain this accident has caused. President Bush is very *concerned* about your missing pilot. His thoughts and prayers are with the pilot’s family members and loved ones, as are mine and all Americans.” On April 5, President Bush himself expressed the same “regret”: “I *regret* that a Chinese pilot is missing and I *regret* one of their airplanes is lost.”⁹

However, from the Chinese standpoint, both Powell and Bush used the wrong word. Both the Chinese foreign ministry and the official Xinhua News Agency translated Powell and Bush’s expression of “regret” as *yihan* (遗憾). *Yihan* may indeed be translated as “regret,” but this sort of regret is considered a fairly mild (and somewhat ambiguous) way of saying one is sorry in Chinese (see Table I). It is a term that carries no expression of remorse, nor acceptance of culpability. Although it can be used formally, it is more often considered an informal way of saying one is sorry. For many Chinese, it is a typically diplomatic word and not sincere in the least. As Perry Link, a professor of Chinese at Princeton University, said: “It can even be used when the other person is the one who has done wrong. I can see why, translated that way, it wouldn’t cut any ice with the Chinese.”¹⁰

Day 4 (April 6), “Dui bu qi”: A Turning Point?

On April 6, Vice Premier Qian Qicheng responded to Powell. In his letter, Qian said that the US statement on this incident is “*unacceptable*” to the Chinese side. He hinted the reason was because “the *Chinese people* have found it most dissatisfying”. Qian also noted that: “It is essential for the U.S. side to face up the facts squarely and adopt a positive and practical approach, *apologize* (*daoqian*) to the Chinese people. Then the two sides may move on to discuss matters concerning the U.S. military plane and other remaining problems.”¹¹

The two positions now appeared to be irreconcilable. As a Reuters article commented: “The fate of 24 Americans, a state-of-the-art spy plane and perhaps the future of China-U.S. relations, may in the end boil down to a single word.”¹²

Meanwhile, partly due to the early public mutual remonstrance of both leaderships and rising media involvement, the negotiation began to take on the characteristic of a classic *two-level game* (Putnam 1988). Negotiation between the two states was complicated by the necessity of each leadership to reconcile

competing positions within its own constituency. For the Chinese, this meant hard-liners in the foreign policy establishment, the Politburo, and the People's Liberation Army in particular, many of whom were still smarting after the 1999 embassy bombing in Belgrade (Gries 2001); for the Bush Administration, this included Congressional critics on its conservative right, a core constituency (Yee 2004). In both countries (but especially in China) rising domestic nationalism became a factor the leadership and negotiators had to take into account. The Bush Administration was facing its first major foreign policy crisis and, noted a former Reagan Defense official, perhaps "the end of Bush's honeymoon with conservatives" (Yee 2004: 67).

The Chinese faced a dilemma too. Trade between the two countries accounted for US\$116 billion a year, including a Chinese trade surplus of US\$80 billion, yet China needed continued American investment and technology, and sought U.S. Congressional renewal of normal trade relations. In addition, China's leaders feared that too hard-line a stance would push the Americans even further into Taiwan's camp, resulting in American support for advanced weapons, missile defense sales and even pro-independence factions. In putting forth their position for a full apology the Chinese had become the primary *demandeur* (Solomon 1999) in the negotiation, though some in the leadership or Politburo may have felt that they placed the bar too high. Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said on April 5, "We do not want to see U.S.-Chinese relations affected by this incident," a position echoed by Vice Premier Qian in a letter to Secretary Powell (Yee 2004: 73-77). Here then was the Chinese dilemma: publicly committed, they were unable to release the U.S. crew without a *daoqian*, but the U.S. seemed as if it would never formulate or propose a text around the word "apology" that could be so interpreted.

At this critical moment, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who was on a tour of Latin America, put his own spin on the issue. Perhaps he acknowledged that China had set the bar too high or believed that the U.S. encountered a dead end by using the word "regret" and needed a clue as to what exactly "*daoqian*" implies for Chinese. On April 6 he commented to journalists:¹³

I have visited a lot of countries and seen that it is normal for people to ask forgiveness or say '*dui bu qi*' ('excuse me') when they collide in the street. But the American planes come to the border of our country and do not ask forgiveness. Is this behavior acceptable?

Jiang used the term *dui bu qi* (对不起), literally "I can't face you," though often translated into English as "excuse me" or "I am sorry." Although this is a common phrase in everyday usage, it normally has no place in the language of diplomacy. In the linguistic "scale" of apology (see Table I), it is less than

daoqian and *baodian* (another term for apology, similar to *daoqian* but expressing more intensely the feeling of being sorry; it can be translated as “extremely sorry”), but more than *yihan* – or “regret” – which is where Powell started.

Yee interprets Jiang’s remarks to the journalists as having “lowered the bar” on what would constitute an acceptable apology (Yee 2004: 74), and we agree. If so, it signaled a crucial message to the Americans, which they apparently understood. Now the game of finding the right word (specifying the *text*) was under way. Taking Jiang’s “hint,” the American negotiators acknowledged that in Mandarin Chinese – as in English – there are numerous ways of apologizing, each with their own shades of meaning. They began to probe for linguistic cracks in the Chinese position. The Chinese demanded a *daoqian*, which carries with it an acknowledgment of mistake or wrongdoing, and expression of remorse. Earlier U.S. expressions of regret were translated using the word *yihan*, a term that carries no acknowledgment of wrongdoing or remorse. Another English word, more diplomatically ambiguous on the nature of remorse and wrongdoing, was called for.

Day 6–8 (April 8–10), “Sorry” is “not good enough”

On April 8, both Bush and Powell began to use the word “sorry” and express “sorrow” in the context of the lost pilot, Wang Wei. Powell did so on two of the major Sunday morning network news talk shows, Fox “News Sunday” and CBS “Face the Nation”. However, on April 10, the Chinese Foreign Ministry responded by commenting that use of the word “sorry” was “a step in the right direction,” but “not good enough”.¹⁴ The Americans would have to devise a stronger word or phrase.

Day 10 (April 12), “Very Sorry” = “shenbiao qianyi”?

On April 12 (April 11 in Beijing), after several rounds of negotiation over choosing the right words, the fifth version of Ambassador Prueher’s letter to Foreign Minister Jiaxuan was passed to and accepted by the Chinese. The exact wording of the document was the object of days of struggle by U.S. and Chinese diplomats. The English-language version of the letter says that Secretary Powell and President Bush express “sincere regret over your missing pilot and aircraft,” and to “the Chinese people and the family of pilot Wang Wei that we are very sorry for their loss.” Further, the letter states, “We are very sorry the entering of China’s airspace and the landing did not have verbal clearance.”¹⁵

In international negotiations, such texts, letters or demarches have to be translated into the other party’s language. What Yee (2004) characterized as

“semantic ambiguity,” but what can also be called, from a diplomatic or conflict resolution standpoint, *constructive ambiguity*, took hold. For what the Ambassador’s letter actually means is subject to differing interpretations. Washington of course produced its own Chinese translation of the letter, using the phrase *wan xi* (惋惜) (“deep sympathy and regret”) over the missing pilot, *feichang baoqian* (非常抱歉) (“extremely sorry”) for landing without permission, and *feichang wanxi* (非常惋惜) (“extreme sympathy”) for Wang’s family over their loss.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the Chinese Foreign Ministry translated their own version of the English text, in which the double “very sorry” became “*shenbiao qianyi*” (深表歉意), a “deep expression of apology or regret,” which was precisely what Washington had tried to avoid in its Chinese version. Chinese media were also required to use this (Foreign Ministry) version in their reports. (It was safe to assume that the U.S. Embassy’s Chinese translation would not get any ink in the Chinese press.)¹⁷

On April 12, the Chinese government issued a statement: “Since the U.S. government has already said ‘*shenbiao qianyi*’ [using ‘very sorry’ in *its* English version] to the Chinese people, the Chinese government, out of humanitarian considerations, decided to allow the 24 people from the U.S. spy plane to leave.”¹⁸

On July 3, 2001, China allowed the EP-3 to leave, dismantled, aboard an An-124 transport.

Culture and Apology, “East and West”

How can we understand the role of culture in this bilateral international negotiation? First, we should address briefly the possible objection of a realist critic who would maintain that “culture” played no role whatsoever in this negotiation; it was merely a “test-of-wills” power-play on China’s part using the issue of apology. It does indeed seem to us that it was a “test of wills” and that a contest over maintaining (for the U.S.) or (re)claiming (for China) relative power in the region was also a factor. The realist position, perceiving the crisis as a clash of national interests, is certainly plausible, but is it sufficient to explain fully the difficult course the negotiation took or the way in which it ultimately concluded? Initial Chinese demands included that the U.S. halt all surveillance flights. This demand was quickly dropped as the negotiation focused solely on the U.S. apology. Why *apology*? The realist might say, in a clash of wills any issue will serve: why not apology? Fair enough, but then why did the U.S. resist making one? And once the U.S. came around to offering something *like* one, why did the negotiating dance over the words to use take the form it

did? Clearly, to apologize means something in both cultures, something (among other things) that can be meaningfully used in diplomatic negotiations to *signal* relative power, and therefore something connected (among other things) to status, hierarchy, or even to *face* – the gaining and losing of it (see Cohen 1987; Jonsson 1990). Status; hierarchy; face – these are broadly cultural matters in both societies. But if face is well established as a particular concern in Asian societies and apologizing sends a signal, then consider that China's primary audience in making the U.S. apologize and "lose" face was its own immediate Asian neighbors (the Koreas, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, even Taiwan). An U.S. apology signaled a strong message to them, in their shared cultural idiom, about the rising standing and power of the region's rising hegemon. Such an explanation is certainly amenable to the realist perspective, but a cultural analysis has deepened and enriched it.

As we have already mentioned *face* as an important cultural value in Chinese and other Asian societies, we can begin by noting that disputes over apology between Asian and Western societies have occurred before. Leaving aside the 1999 Belgrade bombing of the Chinese embassy – for which apology was demanded and quickly and fully offered by President Clinton – Cohen (1997: 38–43) recounts an apology-driven diplomatic crisis between Australia and Malaysia. In 1993, a controversy arose regarding whether the Australian prime minister (Paul Keating) had insulted the Malaysian prime minister (Mahatir Mohamed), and if he had, what form an apology should take. Note that the cultural part of this dispute included whether, in fact, Keating's remarks, referring to Mahatir as "recalcitrant," had been an insult. Keating's original stance was that he had nothing to apologize for. In the end, cultural differences were conducive to differences in interpretation; in Malaysian "recalcitrant," translated either as *kurang ajar* or *keras kepala*, was viewed as highly pejorative. When Keating finally came around, after Malaysia threatened trade sanctions, his first attempt to defuse the situation, saying his words were "not calculated to offend," was rejected by the Malaysian foreign minister as insincere. Subsequently, Keating publicly expressed his "regret" at having given offense. In this case, unlike the Chinese, "regret" was acceptable to the Malaysians and the quarrel was resolved. Cohen, remarking more generally on the meaning of apology in Asian "high context" cultures, where it is connected to face, relative power, and hierarchy, writes that once Keating apologized publicly (on television), then "Mahatir, his superior status symbolically acknowledged, could now graciously grant pardon, canceling planned punitive action against Australia" (1997: 43).

Another apology-dispute erupted between the U.S. and Japan subsequent to the accidental sinking with loss of life of a Japanese fishing boat, the *Ehime Maru*, by the U.S. submarine *Greeneville*, in February 2001. The families of

the victims wanted an apology from the U.S. government and a personal apology from the submarine's captain, Commander Scott Waddle. Commander Waddle refused, noting that his attorney had advised him not to, concerned about admitting liability and the legal consequences of this (This tells us something about what apology might entail in litigious American culture). Eventually he expressed "sincere regret" but this was deemed "short of an apology" by most Japanese. Said one victim's brother: "It's not an apology until he says it to each of us in person." By the end of the month a special envoy from President Bush, Admiral William J. Fallon, delivered a personal message to victims' families at the U.S. Ambassador's residence. It said in part: "I'm here to request in the most humble and sincere manner that you accept the apology of the people of the United States and the U.S. Navy as a personal representative of President Bush." The press reported the message was "well received" by those present. Remarkd one family member, "I felt the envoy was sincere. . . ." ¹⁹

Finally, Cohen recounts an earlier (1981) U.S. Navy collision with a Japanese ship that resulted in loss of life, and how then-U.S. Ambassador, Senator Mike Mansfield, defused the situation. Appearing before the Japanese foreign minister, "he bowed low according to Japanese custom and apologized in full view of press and television." Cohen approvingly quotes Senator Mansfield's remarks on adopting Japanese custom in the manner of apologizing: "It was small price to pay to bring an amicable settlement" (1997: 222). ²⁰

The Spy Plane Negotiation: Culture in Text and Context

While hardly unimportant in Western culture (as even some trial attorneys are coming to see), the importance of apology in many Asian cultures is striking, as is the expansive semantic field covered by the several different terms – compared to a much narrower range of vocabulary in, English – with which to express the sentiment (see Table I). Hofstede (1980), for example, explains this by contrasting the individualistic, more egalitarian, and *low context* societies of the West with the more collectivist, rank, hierarchy and deference-based, high context cultures of Asia. The concept of face is tied to the social status the individual occupies. In Goffmanesque terms, it is the "front-stage" of one's social identity (Goffman 1959). Insults or other "wounds" to face are hindrances to a person's social placement and indirectly perhaps to the whole system of social placement. If they occur, an appropriate apology is one way to make things right again. Therefore, in such societies, apologies are highly salient and finely attuned to rank differentials, in effect affirming them when invoked.

In the case of China, a Confucian tradition (taking the patriarchal family and filial loyalty as a model and emphasizing rank and respect, in particular) heightens this (Hu 1944). Many who have written about Chinese conflict management or resolution (Chen and Ma 2002), negotiating style, whether commercial (Pye 1982) or political (Pye 1992, Solomon 1999), or indeed, about the spy plane negotiation itself (Gries and Peng 2002), have discussed aspects of Chinese culture that help us to understand the central role of apology in the spy plane negotiation. Solomon, for example, writes of the strong *demandeur* stance adopted by Chinese negotiators, with a tendency to “present themselves as the injured party” (Solomon 1999: 6), combined with a “pressure tactic . . . their tendency to lay blame or find fault as a basis for pressing their interlocutors for some action that will accommodate their interests” (1999: 130). Gries and Peng (2002: 175) note the “‘victimization narrative’ of Chinese suffering at the hands of the West during the ‘Century of Humiliation’ . . .” as a cultural factor underlying perceptions of present-day wounds to face and simultaneously centralizing the need for appropriate amends, such as apology. They assert that this collective or historical memory played a role in the spy plane negotiation, as it does in Sino-Western relations generally. Finally, Gries and Peng also support Cohen’s (1997: 42–43) assertion that, in Chinese culture, the consequences of injurious actions count more than intent in assessing culpability and fashioning remedies – restorative or retributive. This is why, in part, the Americans kept trying to establish the “fault” of the F-8 pilot in causing the accident, while the Chinese kept stressing the loss of life. There was a sense in which the two sides were talking past one another – classic intercultural miscommunication.

Nevertheless, in another sense, the two sides were negotiating over the same objective – relative power and standing in the region, *and* face – and both sides saw vital national interests at stake. Cultural commonalities and differences played a role in this negotiation (Gries and Peng 2002). One way in which a cultural analysis can help us understand the *dynamics* of the spy plane negotiation is not so much by providing a (static) list of “traits” of Chinese culture (incidentally, we have not done justice herein to American culture), but by exploring how cultural differences functioned at different levels and phases in the entire negotiation process. We call these two levels *text* and *context*.

Earlier, discussing the events of Day 1 (April 3), when the Chinese first demanded a full and formal *daoqian* apology and the U.S. demurred, we noted that the course of negotiation over the next ten days was complicated at two levels: finding the right word(s) and negotiating what the entailments of the word(s) implied for Sino-U.S. relations (or, as we now understand, for China’s claim to revised standing in the eyes of its neighbors in the region). One can

understand these two levels by regarding the *words* proffered by both sides as the (ongoing, developing) *text* of the negotiation while the cultural meaning and the different “logics of entailment” in the notion of apology, constitutes its *context*. The most visible, explicit part of the diplomatic negotiation process resides in the words used – “texts” offered, accepted, modified, or rebuffed. The “context” of a negotiation, by contrast, is often implicit and ambiguous (susceptible to simultaneous but different interpretations by the parties). This contextual ambiguity (for example, over the meaning of apology and its implication for the nature of the relationship between the parties) is potentially present even in intra-cultural negotiation, where language, specifying the meaning of the words, is shared. However, in intercultural negotiation, across language communities, an extra layer of ambiguity or uncertainty is often added, relating to the fact that different words (in the two languages) must be used, and then cross-translated, to achieve meaning.

As “proper” negotiation commenced – as opposed to the public mutual recriminations offered by both sides’ leadership – what quickly became the overt object of bargaining was the exact nature of the word(s) to be used by the United States: the *text*. In the *contextual* background, however, the bargaining was over whether any of these words constituted an “apology” in the first place.

Support for this assertion lies not so much in the formal outcome of the negotiation (with the letter of the “two sorries”), but in the way the pragmatic Chinese resourcefully used “culture” to make the American “sorries” into a proper Chinese “apology,” in the process silencing (mostly) their own internal hard-line constituencies in a Putnamesque two-level game (Yee 2004).

Ostensibly, the spy plane negotiation ended on Day 10 (April 12) when Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan accepted draft five of Ambassador Prueher’s letter. That letter, recall, expressed “sincere regret” for the loss of pilot Wang Wei (“regret” alone being unacceptable in earlier texts) and two “very sorries,” one to his family and the Chinese people for the loss of Wang Wei, and the other for entering Chinese airspace and landing at Hainan without “verbal clearance.” We conclude, however, that the negotiation really ended when the Americans and the Chinese published their respective translations of the letter. Recall that Washington’s Chinese translation used the phrase *wan xi* (惋惜) (“deep sympathy and regret”) over the missing pilot, *feichang baoqian* (非常抱歉) (“extremely sorry”) for landing without permission, and *feichang wanxi* (非常惋惜) (“extreme sympathy”) for Wang’s family over their loss. Beijing’s translation, however, was different. The double “very sorry” became “*shenbiao qianyi*” (深表歉意), a “deep expression of apology or regret,” which was precisely what Washington had tried to avoid in its Chinese translation.

On April 12, preparing its people for the release of the 24 Americans, the Chinese government issued their statement on the results of the negotiation: "Since the U.S. government has already said *shenbiao qianyi* to the Chinese people, the Chinese government, out of humanitarian considerations . . ." has decided to allow the crew of the spy plane to leave.

Some Uses of Culture in Negotiation: "Constructive Ambiguity"

In the end (for their own domestic audience, at least, and for all subsequent media, historical, and official Chinese language accounts), China pragmatically wrote its own text, and received the apology it demanded. In this regard, China "prevailed" in the negotiation. Yee (2004) remarks that not all the Chinese hard-liners were satisfied, nor were all American ones for that matter, but enough "deflection" had occurred that, in Putnam's (1988) game theoretic terms, level-one negotiators were able successfully to "defect" from their level-two internal constituencies.

In many ways, for sophisticated analysts of Chinese (or any!) culture, profoundly immersed and professionally attuned to nuance, history, deep structure, and thick description, the resolution of this negotiation seems humbling: Just let the parties use the fact of linguistic *difference* and the resulting resource of linguistic polysemy (and thus ambiguity) to write their respective "official" translations of final texts in ways that both sides may prevail: surely a new meaning for "win-win!"

We argue that a cultural account of this negotiation illuminates several aspects crucial to understanding the dynamics of why it unfolded as it did. First, at the level of *text* – finding the right word(s) to bring the dispute to a close – cultural (linguistic) knowledge is literally indispensable. Indeed, one Chinese academic, analyzing the crisis partly from their cultural point-of-view, claims that the initial American mishandling of the crisis came about because there were no people familiar with China together with President Bush at Camp David when the news first broke, and he lacked relevant information about the Chinese people's "emotional and behavioral style."²¹

Second, at the level of *context*, a cultural account goes a long way to explain why an American *apology* for the incident became the sole demand of the Chinese in the negotiation – and why the Americans resisted it. In the course of this negotiation, the Chinese government used apology as a symbolic resource to further their interests, among them to enhance their own legitimacy and rally domestic support, as a response to rising nationalism and anti-Americanism and, as mentioned, to signal facts about a new regional political environment. For the Chinese (and others, watching), the cultural "logic of

entailments” implied in the act of apology concerns, among other things, with face, rank, status and power. In making an apology their prime demand, the Chinese played this game of negotiation by their cultural rules. One cannot say that the Americans were culturally naïve or unaware of these rules – the thrust of so much critical cultural analysis of international or intercultural work – or misunderstood what was at stake. Except perhaps “around the edges” – on the fate of pilot Wang Wei for example – we do not find in this negotiation (as Cohen once put it) a “dialogue of the deaf” (Cohen 1990). Both sides knew what was at stake. In the end, *culture* (cultural difference) was not so much an impediment or obstacle in this negotiation, as it was, ironically, a resource. Cultural difference (in that most basic form of linguistic difference) provided just enough *constructive ambiguity* to allow both sides to craft the final text each wanted. Cultural knowledge (knowledge of context, in a word) is certainly important here, and illuminating, but one doesn’t need to be a cultural polymath to appreciate this resolution, just a pragmatist.

Notes

1. On the latter see <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/sorry>. The first was held May 26, 1998.
2. For contrasting views on ethics see Cohen (1999) and Taft (2000).
3. CNN, A Collision of aircraft, and More, CNN World Report, April 2, 2001. See also “Spokesman on Chinese Military airplane Bumped by a U.S. Military Surveillance Plane,” April 2, 2001. Chinese Foreign Ministry. Web site: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/3755/3756/3778/t19298.htm>.
4. “Statement by President Bush on U.S.-China Aircraft Accident,” April 2, 2001. Distributed by the Office of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov/regional/ea/uschina/bshplane.htm>.
5. “President Jiang: U.S. Must Take ‘All Responsibilities’ for Plane Incident.” Available at the web site of the Chinese Embassy in the United States: <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgx/zmgx/Military%20Relationship/t35746.htm>.
6. “Spokesman Zhu Bangzao Gives Full Account of the Collision between US and Chinese Military planes”, April 4, 2001. Available at the web site of the Chinese foreign Ministry: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/3755/3756/3778/t19301.htm>.
7. Clinton: See <http://www.usconsulate.org.hk/uscn/1999/0510.htm>.
8. Secretary Colin L. Powell, Briefing for the Press Aboard Aircraft En Route to Andrews Air Force Base, Washington, DC, April 3, 2001. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/1932.htm>.
9. See CNN, “Chinese have got to act,’ Bush says April 5, 2001”, CNN world reports, April 5, 2001.
10. Daryl Lindsey, Alicia Montgomery and Jake Tap, *War of words*, CNN, April 12, 2001.
11. Vice-Premier Qian Qichen: The US side should apologize to the Chinese People, April 6, 2001. Available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/3755/3756/3778/t19303.htm>.
12. Reuters, “US-China ties hinge on connotation of single word”, April 10, 2001.

13. People's Daily Online, "Jiang Zemin: Crew Safe and Sound, US Arrogant Conduct Unacceptable". April 6, 2001. Available at: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200104/06/eng20010406_67002.html.
14. See CNN, "U.S. envoys hold 5th meeting with spy plane crew," CNN World reports April 10.
15. According to Evan Thomas and John Barry, this became known in the State Department as the "letter of the two sorries," *Newsweek*, April 23, 2001.
16. "Ambassador Joseph W. Prueher's Letter to Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan", Beijing, China, April 11, 2001. Available at the web site of the United States Embassy in Beijing: <http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/press/release/2001/0113letter-en.html>. Its Chinese version is also available at the web site: <http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/press/release/2001/c/0113letter.html>.
17. Chinese foreign ministry's translation of the letter is available at its web site: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/ziliao/wzzt/2354/2355/2379/t11184.htm>.
18. People's Daily Online, "US Spy Plane Crew Leaves Haikou, South China." Available at: http://english1.peopledaily.com.cn/english/200104/12/eng20010412_67543.html.
19. A full journalistic account of the Ehime Maru sinking can be found at <http://www.honoluluadvertiser.com/specials/ehimearchive/index3.html>.
20. An interesting question raised by these two cases, but outside the scope of this article, is Japan's reluctance to apologize to its Asian neighbors, China and Korea particularly, for atrocities committed by its armed forces during World War II.
21. In, *Guoji weiji guanli gailun (On International Crisis Management)*, Crisis Management and Response Research Center, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, ShiShi Chubanse (Current Affairs Press), Beijing, 2003. Translation by Zheng Wang.

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