Spirituality In Cross-Cultural Conflict Management

CLARA CHENG

Abstract: Interweaving with stories of her cross-cultural experiences in three countries, Cheng contends that the context of conflict management is the emotional wholeness of a cross-cultural worker. For cross-cultural workers from an individualistic cultural background, the core lesson is to move their social life and conflict management from a self-centered orientation towards more of a communal life orientation. The approach of spirituality in cross-cultural conflict management must be psycho-spiritual. The keys in spirituality amidst of various dynamics in conflicts are: self-awareness and guarding of one’s own heart, intimacy with God, biblical self-esteem and social boundary, humility and meekness, gentleness and calmness, fear of God instead of fear of human being. Resilience in intimacy with God is the very key to growth for the cross-cultural workers during and after conflicts.

Introduction

Ministry in cross-cultural life is like a coin with two facets: the ministry itself and the life of the cross-cultural workers. The well being of the workers as people definitely affects the quality of the ministry. Nevertheless, we often neglect the workers per se. Please let me share a personal story with you here.

When I was serving in my first cross-cultural setting, I was clinically burned out. I had had conflicts with my housemate who was also my only co-worker from the same organization in town. Both my roommate and I were concerned with keeping up our self-imposed self-image, which was that we must be a good match for any co-worker and roommate. But we happened to be a mismatch. The conflict between my housemate and I was basically a boundary issue. She imposed on me how I should live daily and I conceded to her way.

Both of us lacked conflict management skills and I built up much resentment and bitterness towards her. It took me years to recover physically with medical care and to recover emotionally with professional counseling. Through counseling, I learned of my own internal unresolved issues and those of my roommates. It was not the conflict that caused my burnout. It was the lack of awareness in my own unresolved issues and my own interpersonal attitudes. Thankfully, God redeemed my past so that I even thrive from this experience after extensive care. However, my roommate and I never were able
to be caring with each other years after we departed. Sadly, conflict among team members is one of the main factors that can derail cross-cultural ministry. Some of the burned out workers never recover.

In this article, I will expound on that, 1) the context of conflict management is the emotional wholeness of a cross-cultural worker. 2) One of the starting points of cross-cultural conflict management is self-awareness of the impact of one’s national character on their personality, especially in relation to individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The other starting point is the understanding of conflict dynamics in general and the issues in cross-cultural conflicts. 3) I will also explain why the approach of spirituality in cross-cultural conflict management must be a psycho-spiritual approach.

I am limiting the term “cross-cultural workers” to the believers of Jesus Christ who labor long term cross-culturally or semi-cross-culturally for the sake of advancing the name of God. “Semi-cross-cultural workers” may minister to peoples of their own cultural background but in a cross-cultural setting outside their own countries or to peoples of other cultures within their own countries.

The Context of Conflict Management: Emotional Wholeness

When a cross-cultural worker carries some emotional bruises or damaged emotions1 to the cross-cultural setting, it would make the adjustment to the new environment difficult for him/her. This would eventually lead to maladjustment in cross-cultural conflict management. Therefore, a new cross-cultural worker must be aware of the “destabilizing influence” (Myron Loss 1993, 48) in the process of cross-cultural adjustment. Marjorie Foyle explains that a worker undergoing culture stress experience feelings of uncertainty, apprehension, frustration, helplessness, a sense of inferiority, anxiety, false guilt, and hurt feelings from being misunderstood (Foyle 1987, 105–107). People crossing cultures may experience depression closely related to losses, with the most devastating effect of loss of self-esteem. This is because “feelings of security and significance are probably vital for self-esteem” (Jones 1995, 83). Such a low self-esteem depletes the workers’ ability in managing conflict and self-confidence in social interaction.

I would contend that all cross-cultural workers must undergo some kind of emotional assessment as well as emotional healing when deemed necessary. As a general rule, it is advisable for cross-cultural workers to manage emotions effectively by “recognizing and understanding the nature and source of their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others … acknowledge others’ feelings as legitimate, because denying their existence or validity is likely to escalate group tensions further” (Barker, Michelle, Dr Elisha Frederiks and Brona Farrelly. “Managing Cross-Cultural Conflict Productively”). This is to ensure that we establish a healthy reserve of emotional energy and dynamics in the workers’ cross-cultural life, as well as a sound context for their future cross-cultural conflict management.

Knowledge of National Character

The deepest adjustment a cross-cultural worker has to make is in national character. “National character” is a term coined by a psychological anthropologist Douglas Haring (1956:23). It refers to the distinct set of shared characteristics in personality by people from the same culture. The main example of this is that we can roughly classify the cultures in the world into two categories: individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures.

For people in an individualistic culture, the center of attention is individuals. They spend their life effort in discovering and developing the potential of an individual to fulfill the individual’s desires and potentials. Independence is valued. Ideally, individuals’ opinions are to be expressed explicitly.

Meanwhile, the basic unit of concern for collectivistic peoples is their communities. For examples: their families and kinship, their neighbors, their schools and companies, and so on. They consider all factors of the “community” in their decision process. Harmony in the community is the value.
Individuals’ preferences come secondary, or even at times, ignored. Assertion of one’s personal opinions and interests is shunned. Consequently, they value implicit and indirect communication style.2

When cross-cultural workers cross cultures, they are interacting from their own national character with the new national character. If a certain factor in the hosting national character is contradicting their own, they would subconsciously favor their own national character. Or, they may conform to the hosting national character behaviorally, but inwardly feel resentment. Conflicts will eventually erupt if such tension keeps building up. I will expound later on what the likely issues of cross-cultural conflicts are between the individualistic culture and the collectivistic culture.

Dynamics in Conflicts

What does “conflict” involve? “Sometimes what appears on the surface to be the source of conflict is not the true source at all; it is only a symptom of the real problem” (Shawcchuck 2005). I would define conflict as “the emotional tension of the people involved over their differences in common issues of concerns”. Emotional stress is what bothers the conflicting parties the most in conflicts. Subsequently, broken relationship and lack of unity and love are the final products of some existing conflict. Or, they can be the manifestation of some hidden difficulty in emotional wholeness in the member(s) involved in the conflict that hinders them to apply spiritual principles to the situation. Therefore, the presented problem of a conflict may not be the real issue of concern. It could be the personalization of the conflict on the part of the involved parties and the personal problem of the people involved in their emotional wholeness. Or, it could be the preference of the involved parties over the styles of handling conflicts.

Personalization of Conflict

In high context cultures3, matter and people are inseparable. Often an underlying problem is beneath the “presented” conflict. “Sometimes what appears on the surface to be the source of conflict is not the true source at all; it is only a symptom of the real problem. The source is almost always below the surface” (Shawcchuck, 2005a). In general—regardless of the culture, since issues only become a conflict when the parties involved perceive the situation as a conflict, the presented conflict may not feel merely like an objective issue. (Emotional tension automatically builds up. People subconsciously take the issues in conflicts personally. We must remember that issues and emotions are usually intertwined, so that conflicts automatically mean interpersonal conflicts, especially in high context cultures. However, this emphasis on personalization of conflict is not to deny that in reality, there could be objective issues in conflicts.

Dynamics of the People involved in the Conflicts

Moreover, there are certain sets of temperaments or personalities that practically do not work well together.4 Even honest communication and desire of unity may not necessary eliminate their conflicts. When issue-conflicts cannot be resolved and the difference in personalities of the parties involved only aggravates the condition, it is wise to simply recognize and accept the situation. In such a scenario, the solution to the conflict is for the conflicting parties to depart from each other without feeling guilty. This is acceptance and unity in God’s kingdom, not breaching. As Dean Tjosvold says in his Learning to Manage Conflict: Getting People to Work Together Productively, “Sometimes the best resolution is to end the relationship” (Tjosvold 1993, 12). This “let go; let God” and blessing of the other party approach indeed is a mature, spiritual approach to conflict management when the problem cannot be resolved.

Conflict Management Styles

Intriguingly, differences in conflict managing styles5 of the parties involved become an additional dynamic in conflicts. When the members of the conflicting parties differ in their preferences in the styles of how to handle conflicts, the differences
complicate the conflict even more. I would suggest that genuine communication in reaching an agreement of the conflict management styles may be advisable even before they attempt to address the presented issue of the conflict and the underlying issue in the conflict.

However, we must take note that the concept of directly managing conflict simply does not exist in a high context culture. High context people who are involved in conflicts usually have to resolve the emotional tensions within their hearts while letting the problem continue. Or, they may go to a third party to seek for help. This method of conflict management intrinsically has two underlying dangers. As long as the problem is not resolved, the emotional tension may lead to unresolved spiritual sins, like bitterness, resentment and so on. While they seek to release their pent-up emotions, the conversation may easily turn to negative gossip. Therefore, a clear conscience before God that does not allow resentment and judgment is much needed. Interestingly, research conducted by three university professors concluded that “...the more individualistic the cultural members are, the more likely they will be to adopt the dominating style” (Wei, Yuen and Zhu 2001, 13). Therefore, workers from the individualistic culture must learn when silence is important. Instead of compulsive confrontation, much prayer is needed in private, entrusting with patience to the work of the Holy Spirit in the other party’s heart.

Issues of Cross-Cultural Conflicts

What are the common factors that may lead to cross-cultural tensions? What are the points of conflict in the clash of cultural values between the individualistic and collectivistic cultures? How do the conflicting differences in cultural values determine how people interact in their interpersonal relationships and in their conflict management?

Common Factors of Cultural Tensions

Sherwood Lingenfelter & Marvin Mayers succinctly point out that there are “six pairs of contrasting traits” in cultural values. Basically, these six pairs of contrasts revolve around matter orientation versus “people-in-context” orientation. The former orientation is geared towards the absolutes of the details in the matter, an orientation of individualistic culture. The latter one is geared towards preserving the face and status of the person concerned in the societal context, a collectivistic culture.

Certain orientations may form clusters of distinctive characteristics of a cultural feature. The collective feature becomes a national character. Nevertheless, even people in the same culture may still vary in their degrees of inclination in each of these traits of value orientations. Here, I would like to highlight two main cultural concepts that are significantly opposite between individualistic and collectivistic cultures; which potentially may lead to much cross-cultural conflicts.

Concept of Harmony

In individualistic societies, issues and people are separable. Harmony does not hinge on the networking of people. It hinges, rather, on how individuals are treated in matters of fairness. Individualistic people assert to fight for their own rights and interests. The matter of right and wrong is a top priority. After the matter of conflict is resolved, it is supposed that the interpersonal relationship is automatically resumed to a harmonious one.

In collectivistic societies, people are not seen as individuals but as part of a network of people. “Good friends, families and also ... close colleagues [become] in-group members. They communicate with them intensively” (High context versus Low Context). On one hand, people are expected to sacrifice their own rights and interests for the sake of harmony in the group or community. On the other hand, people expect others to be observant and offer help. They rely on each other to save face for one another.

In high context cultures, the “face” or honor of a person is equivalent to the dignity of humanity. It is closely knitted to the core of a person. If a person is shamed by losing face, it is almost like being
murdered. Therefore, the preservation of face and status of a person and avoidance of shaming anyone are of utmost priority in the issue of harmony in a society. This even presides over the resolution in the matter of conflict. When a person is confronted directly with a conflict, the person is actually being ripped off one's standing in the context of his/her society. This is when real conflict begins between the confronting person and the person confronted. The conflict becomes personal loss of harmony and broken interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, people from an individualistic background must seek the Lord’s wisdom in how to preserve another’s honor and protect one’s standing as a person when they attempt to confront someone’s failure and sin. I have an interesting experience of this in Taiwan with one of my students, when I confronted his sin of cheating in an examination without pointing to him as the offender. I could see that he was remorseful although he never confessed openly to me his cheating. And the seminary I taught at never disciplined him because they trusted my report of his remorse. I thank the Lord that with prayers, He gave me the wisdom how to counsel the student and that the Holy Spirit’s work was evident in the counseling sessions.

**Concept of Affirmation**

Another opposite concept between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is the concept of affirmation. When affirmation is perceived as lacking in interpersonal relationships, good relationships are not likely to be built up. People of individualistic societies tend to be independent and respect others’ independence as their right to privacy. Affirmation occurs when an individual does things right and well. And affirmation comes mainly in the form of verbal appreciation and praise.

By contrast, in collectivistic societies, affirmation comes from being cared for. Companionship, gifts of food and other presents, and offer of help and advice are common expressions of affirmation. For example, Chinese individuals tend to receive affirmation through receiving care or concern from others. By not having received care from people of individualistic cultures, a Chinese cross-cultural worker may not sense being affirmed as a person. One might still feel neglected by having received only verbal affirmation on their performance. Workers from collectivistic cultures must learn to gain their affirmation heavily from God instead of counting on people’s care for them.

Meanwhile, the expression of affirmation in the form of uninvited care may be perceived by individualistic peoples as an intrusion into their independence and privacy. Or, they may feel that they are perceived as incapable of taking care of themselves. Workers from individualistic cultures must learn to be more open in the receiving and giving as a way of affirmative love and be less concerned with safe guarding ones’ privacy and independence. They are on the way to letting go of a self-centered position to a more communal life.

**Cross-Cultural Conflict Management**

Due to the differences in underlying values in cultures, the styles and approaches to conflict management also vary in individualistic and collectivistic societies. Unresolved conflict in the interaction between peoples in these two kinds of cultures is potentially high if the involved parties are not aware that the tension is stemming out of national character differences, as well as the differences of conflict management styles and approaches.

**Assumption of Confrontation as the Only Biblical Way of Conflict Management**

There is a common assumption in American culture that “confrontation” is the only biblical way for conflict management. The connotation of the term confrontation means talking to the persons involved in the conflict face to face in person, addressing the problem directly and openly. Confrontation means ideally to address the conflicting issue, to express feelings, and to find an agreed solution together. Once the matter is resolved, there should be no unresolved interpersonal conflict pending. It is even interpreted that this model of
confrontation is the sole Biblical conflict management model.

However, the only passage in the Bible when Jesus instructs the disciples to show someone's fault with a face-to-face “confrontation” is in Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won someone. If he does not listen, take one or two others along” (Matt. 18:15–16). I would argue that confrontation is not the only possible method of showing someone’s sin. We see example after example in the Bible of how the showing of someone’s sin is different from the “confrontation model”. In addition, the purpose of going to the person is to restore someone who has sinned. If we recall the issues of conflict, often the issues are not simply that someone is sinning against another person.

Therefore, awareness of cultural diversity is mandatory for cross-cultural conflict management. In collectivistic societies, the method is not to bring up the conflict in front of the parties involved. Even the manner of addressing the conflict is indirect, because the conflicting parties will understand what the problem is. They may not necessarily meet face to face but the conflict can be dealt with.

For an example, some students in the seminary I previously taught in a collectivistic culture society requested me to counsel a certain student whom they saw cheating. I happened to be his mentor who counseled him from time to time; I asked that student whether he would like to meet with me again. When we met, I read some Scriptures and we discussed it together. I mentioned that I heard a student recently cheated at an examination, and I said I wished that student would understand the passages we read. In the following few times we met, I discussed about the cheating matter with him but never once pointed out that he was the cheater. I could see how remorseful he was although he never made any confession. I informed the Academic Dean and the Executive Director of the seminary what I did and how remorseful I observed he became, and I asked if the seminary would still discipline him or not. To my surprise, they both said, “If he is remorseful, he will make a good pastor. No more action is needed.” Please note that his classmates did not approach him directly but used a mediator instead.

Use of Mediator

Many Asian societies prefer the indirect method of using a mediator. Is the technique of using a mediator in conflict management biblical? The answer is definitely yes. What is the role of a mediator? It is peacemaking. God sent His Son to pay the price of sins on the cross to reconcile us to Himself. Moreover, Christ continues to be our mediator by interceding for us. Jesus also calls us to be peacemakers. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Mt. 5:9). Therefore, the involvement of a third party in mediation is definitely biblical.

Use of Vulnerability

Elmer coined a term, “taking the one-down position” for the use of vulnerability (Elmer 1993, 80). This technique is to:

Make yourself vulnerable to another person or indicate that without their help you are in danger of being ashamed or losing face. You put yourself in debt, obligation, or obvious deference to the other party. By taking the position of need and calling on another for assistance, you utilize another twist on the notion of shame or loss of face (Elmer 1993, 80).

I find this technique even useful in the American context. However, for a person from individualistic culture with a value of independence, this technique really challenges their pride as a person. A healthy Biblical self-esteem and humility are much needed in the employment of such technique for a cross-cultural worker from individualistic culture.
Awareness of One-Self’s National Character

If cross-cultural workers are aware their strong feelings or reaction to conflict are coming from a certain place in their national character, they will understand what the conflict is about. The conflict may not be about the situation, but about the differences of national characters. I would like to give an illustration of my own experience in Asia. Growing up in Hong Kong, I was conditioned that efficiency is the highest value that everyone must achieve. One time, I cut a dice from a block of bean curd (tofu) to show my house helper to the size of the dices I wanted; asked her to cut the whole block. Later on, I saw her cutting the tofu dice by dice. My immediate response was anger. I immediately prayed. I heard God answering, “The word ‘efficiency’ is not in the Bible.” It made me realize that the concept of efficiency is not a concern in the Philippines culture. And it calmed me down. I went to my helper; showed her how to dice with just a few cuts by speaking gently to her. My house helper was delighted to learn an easy method, even though the concept of efficiency was still not in her mind.

I can give example after example of how the Lord heightened my awareness of the differences in national characters and calmed me down again and again in my years of cross-cultural life. It enabled me to make wise decisions to solve conflicts and brought serenity to my soul. “Spirituality reflects the presence of a relationship with a higher power or being that affects the way in which one operates in the world” (Fry, 2003, 705). Therefore, as followers of Jesus Christ and as cross-cultural workers, we should learn to exercise listening prayer and be able to listen to the voice of the Lord in any situation, especially in cross-cultural conflicts.

On Defining Spirituality

An individual’s spiritual development means growth towards a fuller union with God through prayer and a growing conformity to God’s will in life. This growth in oneness with God will tend to bring about growth in goodwill towards one’s fellows and in personal integration. This development is possible only through the action of God’s grace but it demands the individual’s deliberate cooperation (Christopher Bryant 1986, 565).

From the above quotation, we see the first element in spirituality is intimate relationship with God; the second element, integration of God’s love and truth into their own inner beings. The third element is harmonious relationships with people. But often, the second element of integrating emotional wholeness with spirituality is overlooked. David G. Benner coins the term “psycho-spiritual” to describe such an intertwining approach of emotions with spirituality:

The spiritual quest is, at one level, a psychological quest, and every psychological quest can be understood to be in some way reflective of our basic spiritual quest. Human personality is such that we are psycho-spiritual beings; no problem is purely spiritual nor purely psychological (1989, 24).
Therefore, a holistic approach of spirituality of cross cultural workers aims at addressing their emotional, social, and cultural wholeness in an interlocking manner, with the context of life in cross-cultural ministry.

Key elements in Spirituality in the Midst of conflicts

What are the key elements in spirituality in the midst of various dynamics in conflicts? The urgent response is neither to immediately solve the conflicts nor to change the involved parties, but to guard one’s own heart.

Self-awareness and Guarding of One’s Own Heart

“Above all else, guard our heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Proverbs 4:23, 1978 NIV version of the Bible). We must be alert to our own emotions and attitudes in the midst of conflict, or we will grumble against God and people and grow bitterness and anger or even hatred in our hearts. When I look back to my burnout, the conflicts I had with my housemate was not the main cause. It was that I did not guard my heart from growing bitter against her. I was also intimated by my own self-imposed image of a “good Christian” that must be able to live with anyone so I did not take action to deal with the conflicts.

Intimacy with God and Self-Awareness

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) No human being is capable of self-awareness with genuine and thorough insight of their heart attitudes without revelation from God. Therefore, it is only in intimacy with God that He enables us to receive discernment, correction and encouragement from the Holy Spirit. We can only gain immediate self-awareness from intimacy with God, listening to God’s voice at any time.

Biblical Self-Esteem and Social Boundary

The conflict between my housemate and I was basically a boundary issue, which is also an identity issue too. “… The individual experiences an identity crisis because the individual wishes to satisfy the expectations of others who have differing viewpoints of who the individual should be” (Rittle, 2008, 9). My roommate imposed on me how I should live daily and I conceded to her way. I only later learned the lesson of “boundary” from Galatians 6:5, “… each one should carry his own load”. Jesus also commanded us that we should “love your neighbor as yourself.” In order to love our neighbors well, we must first learn to love ourselves.

I should not have conceded to live my life according to my roommate’s lifestyle. That was not my load. Setting up a biblical boundary socially is actually acknowledging oneself as a person created with God’s unique design. Unfortunately, my roommate and I clung to our self-imposed image. I ignored my own uniqueness and that we were a mismatch. If we both had accepted that we were uniquely precious in the sight of God, we would have faced our conflicts. We would have the security of biblical self-esteem to acknowledge the mismatch of our personalities and be able to resort to the use of separation, as a means of resolving conflict. It is because it can actually be a way to show mutual esteem, giving freedom and goodwill to each other.

A Biblical self-esteem also enables cross-cultural workers from both an individualistic and collectivistic culture to apply the principles of giving and receiving affirmation to each other. It is also from where humility and meekness can grow healthily.

Humility and Meekness

In order to use the cross-cultural conflict managing skills of using a mediator and the vulnerable position of one-step-down, humility and meekness in one’s own spirit make the application it much natural. They bear genuinely loving relationships. This is what the Jesus talks about “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). Without humility, the process of conflict management will be ultimately
manipulative even if conducted in a culturally appropriate manner and will bear no spiritual result.

**Gentleness and Calmness**

Gentleness gives us strength to face the conflict calmly in the heat of stress in conflict. We must remember that confrontation, if deemed the appropriate way of managing the conflict, is about restoration. It is not about winning personally. In gentleness and objective calmness, God will enable us to separate substantial issues from emotional issues in the conflict. Cross-cultural stress creates vulnerability of prolonged fatigue. Therefore, regular rest is necessary for a cross-cultural worker in order to be calm in spirit. Gentleness and calmness also enable the worker to entrust the result of the conflict management to God and continue to rest in God. “A gentle answer turns away wrath, . . . a patient man calms a quarrel” (Proverbs 15:1a & 18b). “Do not fret because of evil men . . . Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him . . .” (Psalm 37:1a & 7a).

**Fear of God versus Fear of Human Being**

Fear is one of the strongest emotions being stirred up in conflict. People from a high context cultural background bear the burden of how others would be affected by their decisions and behaviors all the time. This creates fear of people subconsciously in their inner beings. It is especially challenging when a situation demands the consideration of face versus truth. As cross-cultural workers who may also be responsible for the spiritual wholeness of those we serve, we must maintain a sound biblical balance of fear of God’s holiness and respect for the “face” of people. “. . . ‘Maturity is knowing more and more what is worth fighting for and what is not worth fighting for’” (Elmer 1993, 35). Yet, the principle is, “A wise man fears the Lord and shuns evil.” (Proverbs 14:29a).

**Conflict as One’s Spiritual Formation**

“The paramount goal of managing conflict is not to eliminate it; rather, the goal is to accentuate its profitable dynamics” (Rittle 2008, 4). Hau-Chee P. Chan also takes up this position and advises us to see conflict positively as a chance for spiritual formation (Chan 1995, 67). I find his approach to conflict management and spirituality is inspirationally preventive. He points out that the practice of the spiritual disciplines of solitude and hospitality serves to nourish an “unpossessive spirit, emptiness of mind, humbling of soul, and sharing heart . . . beneficial to conflict situations” (Chan 1995, 73).

He wisely focuses on letting God change our own hearts in conflict. This can only be achieved by prayer, inviting God’s work into the situation and suspending judgment. (Chan 1995, 85). I appreciate especially that he suggests we take further measures beyond resolving the conflict by going through a process of six steps in forgiveness and blessing the conflicting party. (Chan 1995, 154-159, 168-169).

**Conclusion: Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Conflicts**

Given the complexity of cross-cultural life, it is mandatory that cross-cultural workers be knowledgeable about the characteristics of collectivistic and individualistic cultures. They should be aware of how their own national character shapes their personality. Identify prayerfully which characteristics in their national character are matters of biblical truth and what are merely cultural preference. Renounce those that are not biblical. In a cross-cultural conflict situation, rely on the Holy Spirit for discernment of what is worth fighting and what is not.

Self-esteem and emotional wholeness of workers are very vulnerable under culture stress and the demands of cross-cultural adjustments. Therefore, cross-cultural workers must approach spirituality with a psycho-spiritual approach in order to withstand the complexity of cross-cultural ministry and life and thrive. It is advisable that new workers be proactive in seeking emotional wholeness. Read about emotional wholeness and inner-healing; ask God to show us if we have any
bruises in our emotional lives. If yes, go for pastoral and/or professional counseling and inner-healing even before starting the ministry.

Cross-cultural workers from a collectivistic cultural background must align their sense of affirmation as worthy human beings with biblical self-esteem, rooting it in the image of God and His love for us. Those from individualistic culture must align theirs to the community love that God designs for us as social beings, instead of upholding individual independence. Set up biblically sound social boundaries in the issue of harmony. Relax and delight ourselves in the Lord. With humility and with focus on unity with others, enjoy people as they are. Meanwhile, never compromise biblical truth for the sake of harmony and fear of people. Employ cross-cultural conflict management skills as much as possible with prayers, wisdom, love, humility and gentleness in the process of not succumbing to conformity.

Intimacy with God through daily practice of spiritual disciplines leads to a resilient spirit in the lives cross-cultural workers. In addition, beware of overworking and exhaustion. The spiritual disciplines of rest and recreation/celebration must be observed. Bear the spiritual fruits of love for God, self and others with humility, meekness, gentleness, calmness, fear of God in dealing conflicts. When we nurture a hospitable spirit, we will naturally reduce conflicts. We take hold of a conflict situation to treat it as a chance for spiritual growth and obedience to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. In the face of conflict cross-culturally, persevere for God with a global and eternal perspective of the kingdom of God. Rejoice that our names are in the Book of Life. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution…or danger or sword?…No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Romans 8:35, 37). Resilience and intimacy with God on the part of workers is the key to spirituality in cross-cultural conflict management.

Works Cited


Endnotes

1. Ken Williams (Williams 1992, 1) coined a term called “bruises”, referring to hurts caused by earlier traumas in one’s life. I would extend his definition further to any unmet, developmental, psychological need that is still impacting a person negatively in his/her personality. A person with unresolved emotional bruises carries what David Seamands called “damaged emotions”. However, damaged emotions are not the same as psychological problems clinically. The impact of damaged emotions depicted by Seamands is that “…damaged emotions] directly and deeply affect our concepts, our feelings, [and] our relationships [in a damaging way]. They [even] affect the way we look at life and God, at others and ourselves” (Seamands 1981, 11).

2. Please refer to William Gudykunst and Stella Ting-Toomey’s Culture and Interpersonal Communication, 1988, Newbury Park, CA: Sage for a comprehensive elucidation on these two kinds of cultures.

3. In their Culture and Interpersonal Communication, Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey discussed exhaustively on culture in terms of high and low contexts. Usually, a high context culture is also a collectivistic culture and a low context culture, individualistic culture. And “much of the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America” are of high context culture (http://www.marin.edu/buscom/index_files/Page605.htm).

4. The impractical matching of personalities is idealist versus pragmatist, impulsive versus phlegmatic, sanguine versus perfectionist, organized versus disorganized, and neat versus sloppy (Palmer 1990:11).

5. Scholars like Dennis Rittle, Norman and Donald Palmer all reach a consensus that there are five major styles in conflict management. They are avoidance, sacrifice of oneself to bring peace and harmony, full participation and communication by all parties for solution, negotiation of gives and takes, and competition to win (Rittle 2008: 3, Shawchuck 2005b; Palmer 1990:26-31).

6. They are Wu Wei, Edith Yuen and Jonathan J. Zhu. The former two are from the Department of Management & Organization, Faculty of Business Administration, National University of Singapore and the latter one is from the Department of English, City
University of Hong Kong, Kowlong, Hong Kong.


8. All quotations from the Holy Bible in this article are quoted from the 1978 NIV version, B.B. Kirkbridge Bible Co., Inc and Zondervan Bible Publishers.

9. The six steps are valuing and loving the other, canceling demands, restoring trust, opening the future to “the freedom to fail again”, and celebrating love (Chan 1995, 168-169).