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Intercultural collaboration stories: On narrative inquiry and analysis as tools for research in international business

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Abstract
The objective of this article is to show how narrative methods provide useful tools for international business research. We do this by presenting a study of stories told about the collaboration between a Danish expatriate manager and his Chinese CEO in the Shanghai subsidiary of an MNE. First, we explain and exemplify how narrative interviews are designed and conducted. In this connection, we consider the interviewers' interaction with the interviewees, and clarify our reasons for focusing on the two selected interviews. Second, we demonstrate how narrative concepts and models are able to elucidate intercultural collaboration processes by analyzing how each member of a dyad of interacting managers narrates the same chain of events. We show how the narratological concepts of peripeteia and anagnorisis are well suited to identifying focal points in their stories: situations where change follows their recognizing new dimensions of their conflicts, eventually furthering their collaboration. We explain how Greimas's actantial model is valuable when mapping differences between and changes in the narrators' projects, alliances and oppositions in the course of their interaction. Thus, we make it clear how they overcome most of their differences and establish common ground through mutual learning.
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INTRODUCTION

> Danny went about poking his nose into everything … he was very concerned because I hardly left any paper on my desk in the office, and he was anxious that the Chinese employees would think that I was not doing a bloody thing, so I had to put some piles of paper on the desk … I also received a letter from him saying that he was quite sure that pupils in Danish elementary schools were taught to place their chairs under the desks. And once he mailed to everybody in the Shanghai office that somebody had forgotten a pizza box on the copy machine. … I just thought that it was ridiculous.

This fragment of a story, told by an expatriate Danish manager in Shanghai, illustrates how he initially experienced the collaboration with his superior, a Chinese CEO. Real-life stories such as this abound in the daily lives of international business people, and this contrasts sharply with the scantiness of narrative studies published in international business research. But, as pointed out by cognitive

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psychologist Jerome Bruner, narratives generally spring from the dialectic between what was expected by the narrator and some unforeseen course of events that took place instead. And, as he phrases it: "culture is, figuratively, the maker and enforcer of what is expected" (Bruner, 2002: 15). Therefore international business, and not least the intercultural collaboration involved, provides raw material in the form of stories that people tell, which in turn become rich data from which to make sense of the micro-processes underlying cross-cultural interactions fundamental to understanding strategy implementation across borders.

In this study, we show how narrative analysis furthers international business theory development about international business collaboration. We introduce narrative theory and narrative interviewing, and demonstrate the use and potential of narrative methods by analyzing stories about intercultural collaboration as told by two managers: a Dane and a Chinese working in a Chinese subsidiary of an MNE headquartered in Denmark. Their interaction, and their mutual efforts to collaborate, involve not only different types of knowledge, values and behavior, which they may or may not share, but also their ongoing sensemaking. We show how a narrative approach offers possibilities to capture the richness of meaning in this sensemaking, something that is easily lost if their individual and mutual experiences are reduced to thematic, codable categories, as is often done in surveys and structured research interviews.

The purpose of this article is to answer the following research questions:

- How can intercultural business collaboration be studied through narrative interviewing?
- How can analyses of narrative interviews with expatriate and local managers elucidate their different attempts to make sense of and learn from critical events in their intercultural collaboration?
- Which aspects of intercultural business collaboration are narrative methods particularly suited to expound upon?

After a brief presentation of the parts of narrative theory most relevant to our research focus, we consider narrative interviewing as a method of inquiry, and describe our research design. The subsequent section consists of in-depth analyses of two narrative interviews and a discussion of our findings. Finally, we offer some concluding remarks, and discuss how other areas within international business research can benefit from applying a narrative approach.

NARRATIVE THEORY

The theory and systematic study of stories or narratives[1] began in the early 20th century as a science of literary form and structure (Propp, 1968; first Russian edition 1928). The following definition of a story highlights a number of the essential characteristics of this concept:

> A story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary. These people in turn are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such change. In turn, these changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation and the people involved, and engender a new predicament which calls for thought, action, or both. The response to the new situation leads the story towards its conclusion. (Ricoeur, 1983: 150; quoted in Feldman, Skiöldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004: 149)

The scope of narrative studies has expanded into, for instance, history, where it has been shown how historians construct plots when accounting for specific historic events (White, 1987). Narrative studies have also spread to sociology and anthropology, for example in studies of personal life stories (Riessman, 2008), and to cognitive psychology, where the focus is on how subjective reality is constructed through the stories people tell to make sense of their lives (Bruner, 2002). Narrative approaches have found their way into business-related disciplines as well. They have been applied to marketing, for example in studies of brand communities and connections between brand, individual identity and culture (Schau & Muñiz, 2006), to studies of strategy as a form of fiction (Barry & Elmes, 1997), and to studies of managers' autobiographical identity work (Watson, 2009). But, most notably, the narrative perspective has gained a solid ground in organization studies over the last 20 years. For example, Gabriel (2000) has explored emotional and symbolic aspects of organizational life, related to organizational politics, culture and change, based on analyses of stories from the field. Other organization scholars have studied not only how managers and employees construct plots and characters to make sense of change (Brown & Humphreys, 2003), but also how these stories have an organizing effect (Czarniawska & Gagliardi, 2003). Finally, concepts from narratology have been used in interpretive studies of public management (Czarniawska, 1997 and 2001;

Feldman et al., 2004), and in studies of entrepreneurship (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004).

Although some researchers have argued for the use of narrative methodology in cross-cultural organizational research, and have explored notions of control across cultures through a narrative approach (Soin & Scheytt, 2006), it has been used infrequently in cross-cultural work. This is also the case in the field of international business, with few exceptions: for example, a longitudinal study by Gertsen and Søderberg (2000) of a series of international acquisitions of a company; a study by Osland (2000) of expatriate managers' heroic tales; and a study by Søderberg (2006) of top managers' contrasting narratives about integration processes following an international merger. Even in the relatively recent *Handbook of Qualitative Methods for International Business* only one of the articles deals more than sporadically with narratives, and then primarily as a means of research representation (McGaughey, 2004).

In a study of stories told by US expatriates, Osland (2000) expounds the various stages of the expatriate experience, and the transformations the individual goes through. She relies on a framework developed by Joseph Campbell to analyze hero myths (Campbell, 1968). Our focus is not on stories of individual psychological transformation, but rather on stories of mutual learning and intercultural collaboration. We investigate how narrators present the process through which they discover and learn something new about cultural differences and how to bridge them. Furthermore, we identify the turning points where change in collaboration patterns seems to occur.

In the following we present and discuss two concepts related to the chronological development of stories, as well as a plot model of narrative structure: see the Appendix for an overview of the key concepts used in this article.

As touched upon in the definition quoted above, a story is composed as a sequence, that is, it has a chronological dimension. It is made up of actions and experiences – events – selected by a narrator and ordered along a line of time from a certain point of view. Events represent transitions from one state to another, caused or experienced by the people in the story (Bal, 1985). When narrators describe an event, they relate it to individuals' intentions and actions as well as to other events, thereby suggesting causal relations between them. In this way, they are integrated into a plot that gives them meaning. Events may have to do with changes representing challenges or crises – critical incidents, in other words.

In Aristotle's discussion of plots in *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1989, originally 4th century BC), the notion of *peripeteia* is pivotal. Literally, the Greek term means "sudden change," and it describes the reversal of fortune experienced by tragic characters such as King Oedipus. When a messenger gives him the information that makes him realize that he has slain his father and married his mother, the following train of action is changed as a consequence of his critical discovery. Something similar – although hopefully less tragic – often happens in the stories of critical incidents in the intercultural business collaborations we have studied. It may well be situations wrought with doubt, irritation or other emotional discomfort, which eventually lead not only to a change of action, but also to cultural understanding, learning and progress in collaboration. Therefore, it is relevant when studying stories of intercultural collaboration in an MNE to identify peripeteia, the turning point, and *anagnorisis*, the term introduced by Aristotle to designate the recognition of hidden aspects of a situation that marks a change from ignorance to knowledge.

Greimas's Actantial Model for Narrative Analysis

The actantial model developed by Greimas (1966) for narrative analysis of plot structure further elucidates how stories are constructed. In particular, if the model is used to compose snapshots of the stories at different points in time, and from the viewpoints of interacting narrators, it is well suited to cast light on their differing or changing interpretations of their own projects, as well as those of others who either assist or frustrate the narrators' projects. The characterizations of these others, as heroes or villains, for example, are decisive for the way a plot unfolds in the stories told.

Greimas's actantial model is widely applied in narrative analysis of plot structures, and below it is applied to a fairy tale for illustrative purposes. It is a traditional story of a prince who loves a princess captured by a dragon. He combats the dragon with a magic sword to set her free, and finally receives her hand in marriage from her father, the king (Figure 1).

The central notion in Greimas's model is the actant. Greimas posits six actants in three pairs of binary opposition. These three pairs of related actants conceptualize fundamental patterns found in most narratives: subject/object, which designates a quest or wish for something; sender/receiver, which stands for a process of transmission or

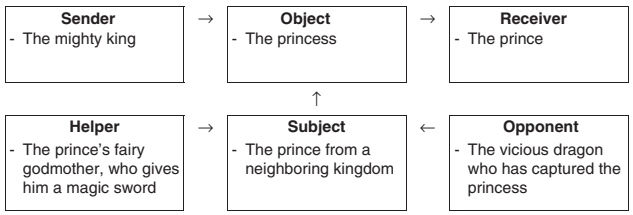

Figure 1 Greimas's actantial model: simple application to a generic fairy tale.

communication; and, finally, helper/opponent, which describes support or opposition related to the subject's endeavors. In the case of empirical narratives such as ours about intercultural business collaboration, the subject-actant is frequently identical with the narrator. He or she is trying to fulfill a desire or aspiring toward a goal (e.g., a manager working hard to establish a new subsidiary). Though the object-actant may be a human being (as the princess in the fairy tale), in our context it is more likely to consist of reaching a certain state (e.g., a promotion, or the successful completion of a project). The sender-actant may be a person (e.g., the CEO), but is often an abstraction (e.g., the forces of globalization). The receiver-actant is often, but not always, the same person as the subject-actant (e.g., the local manager who is given an important task by the CEO). Similarly, the helper-actant and the opponent-actant may be either persons or abstractions, furthering or impeding the quest for the desired object (i.e., the helper may be hard work or a competent colleague; the opponent may be laziness or an incompetent superior).

Turning points in real-life stories, like the ones we study here, represent peripeteia in the Aristotelian sense. They are often characterized by a plot development that changes the actantial model, sometimes as an expression of increased knowledge (anagnorisis). Changes in the model may be, for instance, that a helper appears, an opponent becomes a helper, the object is redefined, or the narrator presents himself/herself as a subject in a new way. The roles that the narrator assigns to him or herself and to others may be differently designed at different stages in a narrative. This means that more than one actantial model is needed to encompass a narrator's development of his/her stories about actors and events.

NARRATIVE INTERVIEWING AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We chose the two narrative interviews analyzed in the next section from a corpus of data generated in the context of a more comprehensive qualitative study of intercultural collaboration and learning in five multinational companies of Danish origin.

In autumn 2009, two scholars conducted narrative interviews with expatriate managers and Chinese managers in Chinese subsidiaries of these MNEs. The interviews centered on the interviewees' personal experiences of successes and challenges in intercultural collaboration. Three days before the interviews took place, each interviewee received an e-mail from the two researchers with information about the objectives of the research project. They assured the interviewees anonymity, and promised not to disseminate any information obtained during an interview to other persons in the company. In order to prime the interviewees, the researchers provided them with a list of sample questions. Western expatriate managers in China were asked, for example: "What are your most significant experiences from collaboration with Chinese colleagues? Can you think of something particularly surprising, frustrating, difficult, positive, thought-provoking?" The researchers sent similar questions on intercultural interaction and collaboration with expatriate managers to the Chinese managers.

All narrative interviews were performed either in the interviewee's own office or in a company conference room. Interviews typically lasted from 1.30 h to 2 h; they were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews with Danish expatriate managers were carried out in their mother tongue, Danish, whereas the interviews with Chinese managers and expatriate managers of other nationalities were carried out in English. We have translated the excerpts from the interview with the Danish manager analyzed in this article into English.

Choosing Appropriate Focal Stories for In-Depth Narrative Analysis

To elucidate through narrative analysis how managers make sense of and learn from critical events in their intercultural collaborations, we chose two stories from a subsidiary of the multinational company, ComDan,[2] with regional headquarters situated in Shanghai. This organizational unit coordinates the activities of ComDan's sales offices and production facilities in several locations in China. In Shanghai, we interviewed three expatriate managers from Denmark (the managing director of the Shanghai office, the director of business development, and a senior commercial development manager) and five Chinese managers (the

CEO of China, the deputy managing director of the subsidiary, the senior sales manager, the human resources manager, and the financial controller).

We chose the two stories because they are multifaceted in the sense of including plots, conflicts and references to organizational as well as cultural contexts. They constitute neither a random sample, nor a representative case. Such material may not be the richest, and it has been our objective to single out interviews that reveal as much and as varied information on the phenomenon of intercultural collaboration as possible (Flyvbjerg, 2004). One narrative interview is with Jan Gram, a Danish expatriate who is managing director of the Shanghai office; the other is with Danny Lim, a local Chinese who is the CEO of China. The two interviews explicitly refer to the same series of critical events in an intercultural collaboration process, but told in two different voices. They are about conflicts that evoked emotions, challenged the interviewees' existing understandings, and, in the end, made the expatriate manager and the local CEO reflect on their collaboration and cope with it in new ways.

Matching the Focus of Narrative Analysis with the Research Question

Most importantly, we chose these two particular managers' stories because their qualifications and positions in the subsidiary make it crucial to them, as well as to the MNE, that they are able to collaborate. The experienced, middle-aged Chinese CEO knows the local culture and the local markets well – context-specific knowledge that is highly needed in the MNE, which is in a phase of global expansion and has acquired several Chinese companies. According to other interviewees at the headquarters, the younger expatriate manager has the potential to become a top manager in the MNE in the future. He makes it clear in the interview that he is ambitious, and well aware that it may benefit his international career to develop his cultural sensitivity further. According to his own account, it is an important part of his assignment to raise awareness in the Chinese subsidiary of the global strategy developed by headquarters, and he realizes that he must do so in close collaboration with the Chinese CEO.

In contrast to traditional power relations between expatriate and local managers in subsidiaries of Western MNEs, the Chinese manager occupies the highest position in the subsidiary as CEO of China, while the expatriate is managing director of the Shanghai office, and thus his subordinate and second in command. This may reflect a general trend, at least in ComDan, where we learned through interviews with managers at the headquarters that the company is currently delegating much more responsibility to local managers than they did just a few years ago. However, ComDan still sends out expatriate managers, primarily to secure a better integration of operations in the subsidiaries to strengthen the global organization.

Therefore, for our two interviewees, collaboration is a *sine qua non* if they are to fill the positions they have been assigned in an adequate manner. Thus, we have chosen the two interviewees because they constitute a significant dyad in the subsidiary, and therefore may reasonably be expected to be motivated to work intensely with the challenges of intercultural collaboration.

To sum up, we find the two narrative interviews well suited to serve the two main purposes of this article: first, to illustrate how analyses of narratives of cultural encounters can be carried out using narratological concepts and tools; second, to illustrate how a narrative approach may deepen our understanding of intercultural collaboration processes and mutual learning in a business context.

Reflexivity is obviously important in all kinds of scientific activity, and not least in qualitative research such as the narrative study reported here. As researchers, we need to be aware of the active roles we play, both in the production of the narrative interviews and in the subsequent analysis of them. Narrative interviewing is not just "data collection" about "what really happened," but involves a process of mutual construction of empirical material through the interviewees' prompted storytelling about selected events. Moreover, we do not let the "voices of the field" speak entirely for themselves in our analyses; we choose the quotes according to our criteria of importance from the interview transcripts. Through our choice of models and concepts we emphasize certain structures and meanings in their stories.

Conducting the Interviews

Interviewers act as co-authors of the narratives told to them, to the extent that the interviews are carried out on their initiative: they ask the questions, and may influence the process by commenting. But, in contrast to standardized interviews, the interviewers only asked very few open questions to set the scene in the two narrative interviews we have selected for analysis. It was, however, crucial

to the interaction with the interviewer that the interviewee felt that the few questions asked – and the interview as a whole – were relevant and specifically related to the interviewees' current work situations. The interviewers had prepared for the interviews by familiarizing themselves with both the organizational and the cultural context of the subsidiary. One interviewer is a professor of Chinese business studies, the other a professor of cross-cultural communication and management. These backgrounds, as well as their knowledge of ComDan from readings and from previous interviews at the headquarters, were useful during initial informal talk (about, for instance, a recent biography of ComDan's corporate CEO) and when making a few small comments along the way, for instance about the impact of Confucian values in China. This helped in making the interviewees feel confident that they were telling their stories to interested and well-informed listeners.

An understanding of the interviewer's role as the narrator's empathic "fellow traveler" (Gabriel, 2000) guided the interviewers' efforts. Once the interviewee had started telling his stories, the interviewers tried to refrain from interrupting his train of thought by commenting or evaluating at length. The interviewer asked a few clarifying questions in order to stimulate the storytelling along the way, and occasionally the interviewer repeated a statement made by the narrator in an attempt to encourage him to go deeper into issues of specific research interest, in this case the collaboration between the expatriate and the local top manager. Sometimes it is useful for the interviewer to make a brief remark in order to keep the interview going, or to get the interviewee to go deeper into his story, for example when the interviewer remarks: "That's certainly a very positive story" and the interviewee takes this as a clue to go deeper into his story about the troublesome collaboration process: "Yes, well, but it wasn't for free! We had huge conflicts during the first six months; we had to work hard to get to understand each other. [The interviewee goes on to elaborate]." But, most of the time, the interviewers limited themselves to listening as actively and attentively as possible (by signaling comprehension and interest by nodding, keeping eye contact, or smiling sympathetically).

Further Reflection on the Interviewer Effect

When listening to the audio files and reading the transcripts of the two interviews, we notice various indications that a trustful relation between interviewers and interviewees was created. While both interviewees now feel that they have overcome most of the problems in their collaboration, it still demonstrates a degree of confidence that they are willing to tell us in detail about difficult experiences with struggles and misunderstandings from their personal perspectives. Other indications of a good social interaction between interviewers and interviewees are the narrators' humorous remarks and laughs, which became more frequent during the interviews. Also, the interviewees' body language and general attitude became increasingly relaxed. The expatriate manager, in particular, used many informal expressions and funny turns of phrase, for instance when he referred to himself with ironic distance as "a crazy headquarter connected *gwailo* [common Cantonese slang expression for foreigner, literally: 'foreign devil']." Finally, the interviewees expressed interest in getting to know more about the findings from the research project, and offered to be of further assistance. This may have been pure politeness, of course, but may also indicate that they had not experienced the interview situation as disagreeable or a waste of time.

The impression remains, however, that the interviewers were a little more successful in establishing contact with the expatriate manager. When compared with the Chinese CEO, the Danish expatriate gives the impression of speaking more freely, and of addressing problematic issues more directly. There are several possible reasons for this. One is the cultural dimensions of communication styles, where extant research would lead us to expect a Dane to be more direct, explicit and unambiguous than a Chinese (cf. Hall, 1976, on high- and low-context communication). Another explanation has to do with the power relations between the corporate headquarters and the subsidiary. Although the interviewers made it clear from the outset that they were not sent by headquarters, and did not represent its interests and perspectives, the interviewers were still of the same nationality as the vast majority of headquarters management. This may have made the Chinese CEO more wary of expressing any overt criticism related to headquarters or Danish colleagues in general. Nevertheless, he has worked in the company for 20 years, and he told the interviewers that he had familiarized himself with a more direct communication style. Actually, the Chinese CEO did make a few critical comments, too, notably when talking about

headquarters managers who know very little about Chinese culture and the Chinese society, and express no interest in learning about it. On the contrary: "You know, they will say, 'You guys, let me teach you.' They still have that kind of attitude."

The Danish expatriate, by contrast, shared the native language and cultural background of the interviewers, something that probably made him more at ease in his interaction with them. We would therefore expect it to be easier for him to tell interviewers of the same nationality about his more problematic experiences of intercultural collaboration, thus creating an *ad hoc* national community with them as "fellow travelers." He implies that he expects the interviewers to see the Chinese context much in the way that he does, for instance when he makes an initial humorous demonstration of the Chinese ritual of business card exchange, or when he describes Chinese management as being very focused on "what we in our part of the world see as silly details." Here, his use of "we" shows he includes the interviewers in his observations, assuming that they share them. A final reason why the young expatriate manager appears to speak very freely, not only about his own struggles, but also about his relation to the Chinese CEO, may be that he possesses considerable informal power due to his close connections to top management at the headquarters. We will elaborate on this point in the narrative analysis below.

NARRATIVE ANALYSES

In the narrative analyses we look at *what* the stories told in the course of the two narrative interviews say – in this case about intercultural collaboration – and compare the two accounts of the same series of events. We also look at *how* each narrator constructs his plot in order to tell a story from his perspective and in his voice.

We use the notions of peripeteia and anagnorisis when identifying critical incidents in narratives. We concentrate on events that are narrated in more detail, since the narrator typically perceives them as crucial. Since we are interested in learning how to further intercultural collaboration, we look into any instances of accompanying anagnorisis we can find in the narratives, that is, insights following from such events. In addition, we use actantial analysis to throw light on developments in alliances and oppositions as the stories proceed. We structure our analyses of the two narrative interviews around our interpretations of the actants, and the ways in which they relate to each other in the stories told by the two narrators.

In the following analyses of the narrative interviews with Jan Gram, managing director of the Shanghai office, and Danny Lim, CEO of China, we first look at the collaboration process through Jan's perspective. In order to capture the dynamics of the process as it unfolds in his understanding, we separate his story into two parts, and use the actantial model to investigate how he sees the actants and their functions in each. In the first part of the story, Jan looks back at the problematic initial phases of his assignment in Shanghai before the turning point or peripeteia; in the second part he tells of the present situation, and how he gradually learned to handle his relationship to Danny more successfully (anagnorisis). Next, we approach Danny's account of the collaboration process, and use the actantial model to show how he defines the actants and their functions differently. We also identify and analyze peripeteia in his story. Finally, we discuss and compare their stories.

Jan's Story: Pizza Boxes, Papers and Chairs – Toward an Understanding of the Chinese Business Context

Jan Gram is in his mid-30s. After his graduation from a business school in 1998, he was employed by ComDan, where he has had a meteoric career, starting at the headquarters in Copenhagen, where he was eventually appointed strategic director, and since 2007 in China, at first as a business development manager. At the time of the interview in the autumn of 2009 he had been working as managing director of the Shanghai office for about a year. As briefly touched upon, ComDan has been through a decade of rapid and dramatic growth in China, and the corporate management at headquarters has given the Chinese organization considerable freedom to run the business according to local preferences during this turbulent period of time. Now, however, the corporate management feels that the time has come to standardize operations more, and make sure that both managerial approaches and marketing efforts correspond to the strategy decided at headquarters. As a former strategic director, Jan is familiar with the goals set at headquarters, and it is part of his job in Shanghai to push the local organization in that direction.

When describing his international career to the interviewers, Jan says that he has been conscious of a need to prove himself because of his age, which is young for his position, and also because it is well

known in the organization that his former superior, the corporate CEO of ComDan, appreciates his work and has furthered his career. He is aware that this has made his Chinese colleagues see him as a "golden boy." During the interview, Jan tells primarily of the collaboration with Danny, his present superior, the CEO of China. It is a process that he now sees as fairly successful, but which was initially wrought by "huge conflicts." With a humorous twinkle in his eyes, he also mentions that Danny has nicknamed him "the turbo engine" because of his energetic, but somewhat impatient, way of handling his work.

Jan's story, part 1. Jan begins his story by telling about his initial difficulties as an expatriate manager when trying to apply the leadership style he has been socialized into at headquarters. It implied that he would see it as his job as a superior to delegate responsibility to his subordinates, and expect them to take control of the operational details and the planning required to meet the deadline agreed upon. Also, he expected them to be able to reason and act in accordance with ComDan's strategy. When he tried to implement this empowering management style in China by outlining general objectives without explicitly stipulating what should be done to meet them, his Chinese subordinates would tend to wait for more detailed instructions, but without asking directly for them: "Then Friday afternoon arrived, and the Chinese had done nothing at all, but they would defend themselves by saying that the task I had given them was not sufficiently specified, and they lacked a daily follow-up." He realized that he could not immediately change his subordinates' behavior, and that a more stepwise approach was called for:

> They are used to totally directive management. … You have to change yourself and accept that [your leadership style] must be more directive and things stated much more clearly. … They have not been taught to work in that way [i.e., independently], and if you want them to do so, you must teach them by initially managing in the way they are used to and then gradually explain and demand that they work in the way you believe they ought to.

In addition to the difficulties Jan experienced with his subordinates, he also found it hard to get used to his new superior. Jan knows that his former superior at headquarters, the corporate CEO, called the Chinese CEO, immediately after Jan's arrival. He "asked Danny to see it as his personal responsibility to integrate me into the local culture, and emphasized that he expected him to be tough as well as nice but to help me." Though this was meant to be to Jan's advantage, he found, at least initially, that Danny went about it with rather too much zeal:

> Danny went about poking his nose into everything … he was very concerned because I hardly left any paper on my desk in the office, and he was anxious that the Chinese employees would think that I was not doing a bloody thing, so I had to put some piles of paper on the desk … I also received a letter from him saying that he was quite sure that pupils in Danish elementary schools were taught to place their chairs under the desks [i.e., Jan did not do this]. And once he mailed to everybody in the Shanghai office that somebody had forgotten a pizza box on the copy machine. … I just thought that it was ridiculous.

Jan tells the interviewers that he found it exasperating and irrelevant that a CEO would comment on such minor issues, and he was also surprised that his new superior did not appear to appreciate his fast and goal-oriented working style, which had helped him achieve success at headquarters. In particular, Danny got very annoyed with Jan's way of quickly communicating his own solution to a problem by sending e-mails to all employees in the Shanghai office.

Another issue that caused some trouble was the two managers' different perspectives on work vs family life. Whereas the issue of work–life balance is launched as part of the corporate culture and the corporate social responsibility in this MNE, as well as in many other Western MNEs, Jan got the impression that there was no clear line of separation between work and private life for the middle-aged Chinese CEO. Danny would often call Jan at home: "In the beginning, he liked calling me each weekend because he thought that one of his contributions as a boss should be to make sure that I worked weekends, too, so that he could benefit as much as possible from this resource [i.e., Jan] that he had been allocated." According to Jan, his patience was exhausted one Sunday morning when Danny called him to discuss a meeting on the forthcoming Wednesday. Jan got upset and asked why they could not just discuss the specific issue in the office the next day. Then Jan simply hung up the phone, although he was aware that this would be considered an extremely rude thing to do to one's superior, especially in a Chinese context: "And we had an enormous conflict, since this was a huge loss of face for him" (see Jia, 1998; Worm, 1997, for theoretical discussions of the concept of "face" in Chinese culture).

Applying Greimas's actantial model to Jan's story, part 1. In Figure 2 we use the actantial model to systematize the plot of Jan's story about his first working experiences in the Shanghai office. Jan installs himself as the subject who aims at aligning the Chinese subsidiary more with the headquarters' global strategy, involving a higher degree of standardization, and implementing its management ideas, among them empowerment. He attempts to do so by demanding more planning and independent work of his subordinates, and he communicates his viewpoints in a direct manner, also to his superior, Danny. From Jan's perspective, Danny acts as an opponent of this project, since he practices a very different communication and management style.

Jan's story, part 2. Though Danny's unwelcome phone call represented a low point in the two managers' relationship, Jan feels that it made them both see that they were forced to find a way of working together if they were to carry out their jobs in the Chinese subsidiary:

> It made us talk about those issues, and cultural differences and family patterns, and work-life balance in China vs Europe and things like that … So when we had both calmed down, we began discussing "why did you react like that in that situation, and why did I react like that."

Jan was motivated to learn and adjust, and his job as a managing director in Shanghai provided him with opportunities to learn about cultural differences in communication and management practices. And he felt a commitment to overcome at least some of them in order to build trust. Through dialogue about their different cultural backgrounds and experiences grew a mutual respect. According to Jan, they began working as a "real management team" based on an understanding of their shared interests, which came to the fore during their discussions. They were both ambitious and hard-working leaders, identifying strongly with ComDan and its strategic goal of making the Chinese subsidiary a major player in the world's largest market for its products. Thus, from a narrative perspective, we see Danny's disturbing phone call on a Sunday and Jan's face-threatening act toward his superior as a turning point, peripeteia, in Jan's story.

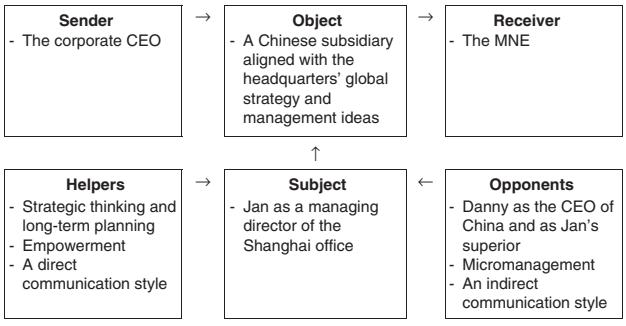

Figure 2 Greimas's actantial model applied to Jan's story, part 1.

Although the phone call represents peripeteia in Jan's story, the accompanying anagnorisis – the learning through realization of hidden aspects of the situation – did not happen overnight. But, gradually, Jan began to understand Danny better. He eventually changed his perception of, for instance, Danny's instructions regarding pizza boxes, papers and chairs as "simply pathetic" to seeing them as meaningful in the Chinese context. He came to see the Chinese CEO's talk about rules and norms detailing appropriate behavior at the workplace as symbolic communication. Also, Jan realized that Danny believed it to be a manager's duty to influence his subordinates through role modeling:

> Little by little I got an understanding that this is micromanagement, but it is also the Chinese way to use tiny examples as symbols of something essential. A left pizza box tells something about the company's concern for the environment and about respecting your colleagues. Placing the chair under your desk when leaving the office is important if, as a manager, you want other people to act in a disciplined way. And paper on the manager's desk tells your subordinates about being hard-working and committed.

After some discussions with Danny about Jan's habit of informing everyone at the office by e-mail of the solutions he thought best, Jan understood that he had inadvertently threatened Danny's face and potentially undermined his authority as CEO. This would be the case if the Chinese CEO had already made another decision regarding the matter in question, and had tried to get support for his solution from other employees through face-to-face consultations:

> At the headquarters in Denmark it is easy for a powerful boss to say, tongue in cheek: "Okay, if I am an idiot I am happy that I am surrounded by smarter people." Then we will all laugh and go on. It does not work like that in China … it has to be the eldest and most experienced person who proposes the best solution … if a junior puts forward a better idea, it will create a problem for the senior, and it means that the idea will be crushed at birth, no matter how good it is.

Jan realized that he could not translate a more egalitarian approach to decision-making directly to a Chinese business context, and moreover he learned to communicate so that due respect was paid to Danny's higher position in the company hierarchy:

> I started writing an e-mail in a draft format and then just checked up with colleagues: "Did Danny mention this project?" And with some bigger issues I just tell Danny that I plan to reply to this specific mail, and if he has not already mailed, I will take an initiative. The problem is that you are sometimes much too quick. And then you forget asking yourself about the cultural dimension: "Who is in charge of replying to this request? Who has the power to solve this problem?"

Jan begins to see that it is crucial for his relationship with Danny – and an important part of Chinese facework – that he shows him respect and reverence, also by giving Danny credit for his mentoring efforts. When telling his story to the Danish interviewer, however, Jan underlines that Danny has learned something from him as well. As one of several examples, he mentions how he has taught Danny to work out strategic plans and communicate them to headquarters in a structured form that they appreciate and understand – something that makes it easier to secure their support of local initiatives. Jan says: "We both know that it really has been more of a partnership, but when we talk about it, he is the mentor and I am the mentee."

Applying Greimas's actantial model to Jan's story, part 2. After a first year with many discussions and negotiations with Danny, Jan redefines his project and reconfigures his world view to some extent. The new situation as it is presented in the story he told may be systematized as in Figure 3. Now, his object is no longer to implement the headquarters' strategic goals and standardization plans uncritically, but rather to balance global and local needs in the development of the Chinese subsidiary.

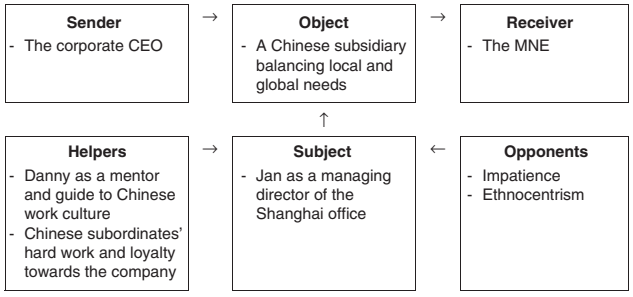

Figure 3 Greimas's actantial model applied to Jan's Story, part 2.

In this process, Danny changes from being an opponent of Jan's project into being a helper and a mentor. Instead, impatience and ethnocentrism (primarily his own and that of the headquarters) hinder his endeavors. Moreover, he now acknowledges his Chinese subordinates as hard-working and committed people, helping Jan in achieving his goals.

Danny's Story: Chinese Boxes – Mentoring through Storytelling

Danny Lim, who is CEO of China and in his 50s, has been with ComDan for 20 years, starting out as a sales manager.[3] He describes it as his overriding ambition to build a successful business for the company in China. As he sees it, his strong loyalty to the company is important in order for him to succeed. He defines it not just as a commitment to the organization as such, but also as a commitment to the individuals who work there. He believes that they will be more motivated for hard work if their managers "care for them." The notion of family is important when Danny explains his loyalty to the company, and his feeling of a necessity to "sacrifice" his immediate personal needs for the company. His ideal appears to be that the employees should be as attached to the company as they are to their families, a view that he finds widespread among the Chinese employees: "For some, we are like a family at work." (For an introduction to paternalistic leadership and the view of the workplace as a family in China, see Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Fahr, 2004; Westwood & Lok, 2003.)

Danny expresses concern that his Danish expatriate colleagues do not display the same loyalty. He says: "They will tell me, for instance: 'My family life should not be disturbed during the weekends.'" Although Danny acknowledges to the interviewers that some kind of work–life balance must be found at a modern workplace, also to accommodate the wishes of a younger generation of Chinese, he finds that the expatriates are too inflexible in this regard.

Danny's mentor story. The newly arrived Danish expatriates, especially those who have had no previous experience of Asia, sometimes pose problems. Not because they do not share Danny's desire for success in China, but because they do not realize what is needed to obtain it: "They always arrive in a very impatient mood. … This kind of impatient behavior creates an unnecessary psychological defense reaction from the Chinese. And I always experience this kind of learning process." But

whereas Danny sometimes finds it extremely hard to explain the conditions in China to foreign colleagues at headquarters, he does not feel that the problems with the expatriates are insurmountable, because he also sees cultural similarities and finds some common ground:

> The good thing is that the Danish culture and the Chinese culture have a number of common elements …: a strong commitment to make things work well and also a strong cooperative spirit. … We know that if you give them time, the Danish expats can perform. And they can adapt to the local culture.

So, eventually, most of the expatriates become able to help Danny in his quest for success in China.

This requires them to go through a cultural learning process, and Danny explains that he sees it as part of his job to assist them. As far as Jan is concerned, the corporate CEO at headquarters has explicitly asked Danny to help Jan settle in China, and Danny mentions that he is "officially his mentor." Thus, he has received the responsibility for Jan's successful socialization into the Chinese business context. He gives the impression of taking this task very seriously, and it is the central topic of the narrative interview.

Danny says confidently that Jan has "learned a lot from my coaching," and explains how he has played the same mentor role in relation to other expatriates. But the cultural exchange has not just been one-way in the course of Danny's career. During his many years with ComDan, he has learned something himself about Danish culture and Danish management, and this, he reflects, may be why corporate headquarters has singled him out for mentoring tasks. He says: "I see myself as a mix – you know I mix Chinese and Danish culture." He also acknowledges that expatriates like Jan are able to teach him and other local employees some of the capabilities he sees as necessary for ComDan China's further development. He mentions, for instance, strategic planning skills and the ability to give feedback in a motivating manner.

Mentoring Jan was not always easy: "At the very beginning the personal chemistry may pose some problems." When talking about communication, which Danny sees as "a basic fundamental difference" between Danes and Chinese, he describes the Danish approach as direct and "very clear." During meetings, for example, "the Danes like to throw things on the table." But it does not always work that way in Asia: "For the Asian people, especially the Chinese, … sometimes hide things. They are not really at a [meeting] table to try to challenge. The Danes … like challenge." Danny's description of these perceived differences fits well with research in intercultural communication; it has found that individuals from high-context cultures (such as China) tend to react to potential conflicts in a non-confrontational and indirect manner. But individuals from low-context cultures (such as Denmark) are more likely to be direct and confrontational in such situations (Chen & Starosta, 1998). When explaining how the more indirect communication style works to obtain a harmonious relationship, Danny emphasizes the importance of storytelling as an inherent part of facework and conflict resolution in a Chinese context (see also Hwang, 1998): "And this kind of storytelling – indirectly – you know, it may give you a warning … especially at times when you have done something wrong. … If you are going to criticize people, try to wrap it with some storytelling."

As Danny sees it, another main problem is that the Danes are used to making independent decisions concerning the tasks they have been given: "They have very firm ownership … they're the master of this piece of work." When Jan had just taken up his position, however, Danny frequently found it necessary to advise him on what was and what was not feasible in a Chinese context. But Jan was "*so* impatient" and did not appreciate the advice from his Chinese superior. According to Danny, he said: "You know in Denmark, when the boss tells me what to do, then I have the freedom to manage and decide and then to come out with a result!" Still, Danny did not want Jan to waste time on unrealistic plans, so they spent a lot of time arguing. Eventually, the simmering conflict blew up, and Danny's description becomes detailed when he recounts this part of the story; he quotes the dialogue word for word as he recalls what happened. This indicates a pivotal point in his story:

> One day after six months, Jan rushed to my room … He closed the door and said: "Danny, I cannot work with you, because the corporate CEO in Copenhagen [i.e., Jan's former superior] always told me 'You should do this' – and then I did it! But you, Danny, you keep on telling me not to do this and that; that along the way I have to be careful. I'm really fed up with all your interruptions."

Danny's Ferrari story. Danny responded to this outburst by telling a story, thus illustrating how storytelling is used frequently in a Chinese work

context to admonish in an indirect manner. The story went as follows:

> Assume that you are the son of Jens Holm [the Danish corporate CEO] in Copenhagen. One day your father buys you a Ferrari. The car is put outside your office and he says: "Son, this is a gift to you – drive carefully." Now, this is Jens Holm [the Danish CEO] telling you this, so you are very happy to drive it. You have no accidents … Because you're born in Copenhagen, you know *exactly* how Copenhagen people behave: you know the traffic conditions, you know *everything*. You even know that when you turn around – then you get home. Now you've come to China … and your father is now Danny Lim. Then I say: "Son, I bought you a Ferrari, but son, be careful, … even if there's a red light be careful because some cars will not stop behind you and will crash into your car. When you come to a zebra crossing, don't stop your car, because in China, no one stops at the zebra crossings … I just want you to have a safe drive and then you come home! … Now the whole issue is that your boss, your father, wants you to come home safely, so it's a kind of care more than interruptions." Jan said, "OK, thank you" and went back to his office. Twenty minutes later he came back to my room again: "Hey, Danny, thank you so much! Now I understand what you are talking about – thank you for your care." … Now Jan has been with us for three years, and he has such an excellent understanding of the local culture.

Applying Greimas's actantial model to Danny's Ferrari story. In this brief story, Jan is the protagonist and the subject. Danny assigns Jan the role of a son, while he himself (as well as the corporate CEO) acts as a father, a benign power, who bestows the gift of an expensive car and the task of driving it safely upon the subject and receiver. Danny's use of family metaphors when defining the roles in this story may be understood in the light of his ideal of the company as a kind of family. The object or the aim for Jan is to drive the Ferrari successfully. This is uncomplicated in Copenhagen, but not in China. Here, Chinese drivers act as his opponents, since they may crash into his car or behave in other ways that he cannot predict. And this is where his father acts as a helper, and provides him with the information he needs to be able to drive safely (Figure 4).

Applying Greimas's actantial model to Danny's mentor story. Thus, in Danny's narrative about mentoring Jan, his telling of this didactic story as a reaction to Jan's angry outburst becomes a turning point that radically changes the following course of action, influencing his own role and, even more so, that of Jan. It constitutes peripeteia, and is accompanied by anagnorisis. Jan's relative ignorance or lack of understanding of the Chinese

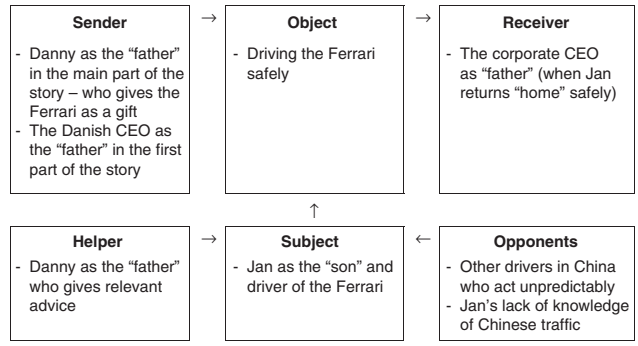

Figure 4 Greimas's actantial model applied to Danny's Ferrari story.

business context is changed to his recognition of a need to learn from Danny's advice. The story in the story is what decisively triggers off Jan's cultural learning process, at least from the narrator's point of view. Of course, the story in itself is not enough – the socialization process takes time, and time acts as Danny's helper in the mentoring process. Still, Danny's principal helper is actually the story about the Ferrari, which he employs as a didactic device. The opponent is Jan himself as he acts in the initial phase, or rather the attitudes that make him behave in that way: impatiently and somewhat ethnocentrically, without regard for his superior's advice and experience. As long as he sees all Danny's contributions as annoying interruptions of his work, Danny cannot meet his objective as a mentor.

It appears that Danny actually tells three interrelated but different stories in the narrative interview. As an overall framing narrative, he tells of himself as he strives to set up a successful business in China for his company. As a part of this endeavor, which requires the Danish expatriates to cooperate, he narrates how he has gone about the task of mentoring Jan. In Danny's story of this mentoring process, he himself is the subject, and his aim is to enable Jan to carry out his job well in China – a task for which he has been explicitly singled out by the corporate CEO. At first, Danny's project is opposed by what he sees as Jan's impatience and his somewhat ethnocentric attitude. He is helped, however, by the passing of time and, first and foremost, by his own didactic and fictitious tale of the Ferrari, where Jan learns to drive safely. Listening to it makes Jan more open to learning from Danny, and the project is furthered. The way in which Danny's narrative is structured around stories embedded in each other resembles

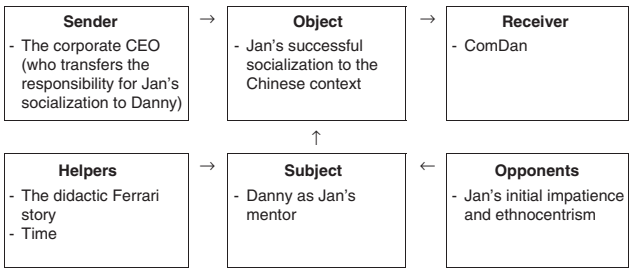

Figure 5 Greimas's actantial model applied to Danny's mentor story.

what is sometimes called a "Chinese box structure" in literary theory (no pun intended). This concept is used to characterize fiction told in the form of a story within a story (Nelles, 2002). In Danny's narrative, his embedded story about the Ferrari and its effects, as the narrator perceives them, provokes reflection and learning, thereby leading to better collaboration between the two managers (Figure 5).

Discussion

Jan's cultural learning and its positive impact on the collaboration process constitute a central theme in both stories. Jan's own description of his experiences demonstrates that he has acquired considerable knowledge of, for instance, the workings of indirect communication as well as the meaning of face and hierarchy in a Chinese context. Also, Danny praises Jan for having acquired an excellent understanding of Chinese culture. Jan has involved himself emotionally, too. His own choice of words when describing his initial conflicts shows that he felt annoyed and confused at times, something that is confirmed in Danny's story, where he describes Jan as being very upset at one point. But Jan, who is ambitious and strongly motivated to perform well in his position in China, explains how he was able to reflect on and monitor his immediate negative affective states. Gradually, he developed a more empathic and respectful attitude toward his superior. Also, his new insights into culture-specific issues were translated into changed behavior. One example is his changed procedure regarding e-mails detailing his suggested solutions. Thus, Danny's story and Jan's coincide in describing Jan's learning process as gaining momentum once he starts reflecting actively on the intercultural interaction in which he is involved, much assisted by his dialogue with Danny.

Both stories indicate that Danny has also learned something, although it is not a main theme in the stories. In Danny's own story, he is careful to place himself in the role of the mentor and Jan in the role of the mentee. Still, he does touch upon his own cultural learning, for instance when he tells about his long experience and knowledge of Danish culture as a background for his mentoring skills. Also, he mentions having learned things from expatriates, for example regarding strategic planning. Jan is very much the subject in his own story, so it is natural that he should focus on his own learning and experiences. He is very explicit about the mentee–mentor relationship between himself and Danny, and he uses this as an example of what he has learned about the importance of face in Chinese culture. He must take care to show Danny his appreciation of what he has taught him, and of letting him appear as his mentor in the eyes of others; this has been beneficial to their collaboration. He makes it clear, however, that as he sees it, he has taught Danny a good deal, too, and, like Danny, he mentions planning skills as an example.

Throughout his story Jan identifies with his position as managing director of the Shanghai office. We note, however, that he redefines his object along the way, and presents this change as related to his cultural learning process. Thus, he becomes aware of a necessity to adjust headquarters' global strategy and management ideas to the subsidiary's local conditions. Jan realizes that headquarters' standardization ambitions may not always be realistic. Also, his perception of Danny changes radically from seeing him as an opponent who exasperates him to seeing him as a helper with whom he feels comfortable working. In Danny's story about mentoring, his embedded didactic story serves as a helper, and functions as the peripeteia that redefines Jan's attitudes. Jan's impatience and ethnocentrism are – at least in Danny's perspective – changed into open-mindedness and curiosity, which allow Danny to meet his objective as Jan's mentor.

In Danny's story he constructs his identity as a Chinese and a local manager through contrast with the Danish expatriates, for instance regarding their attitudes to work and their communication style. He does, however, place himself in a position between the two categories when he characterizes himself as a hybrid of Danish and Chinese culture. This enables him to play an important role in the subsidiary as someone who has useful knowledge to share with locals as well as with expatriates. He readily accepts the task of mentoring, because this goes well with his concept of the workplace as a sort of family where he – as the CEO of China – is in a

paternal position. It also fits well with the Confucian idea of unequal and complementary relationships between the superior and the subordinate, the elder and the younger, and the father and the son (Chen & Starosta, 1998).

It is clear that Jan and Danny have different perspectives on their collaboration process, and they assign somewhat dissimilar roles to themselves and to each other. Whereas Danny identifies explicitly with his role as Jan's mentor, the latter identifies less with his role as a mentee. He mentions it, but goes on to explain that it is really more of a partnership, where they have both learned from each other. In this way, Jan indirectly challenges the mentor identity that Danny is eager to communicate in his story. However, he does not do so publicly in the organization, only in the story he tells the interviewers. On the contrary, as already mentioned, Jan is careful to confirm Danny's mentor identity when talking to him or others in the local context. Jan does not use any of the family metaphors (father/son) that Danny frequently brings up when talking about their relationship and his own role in the company. But, like Danny, Jan identifies with his managerial position in ComDan. This is something they have in common, and something that is important to both of them. It motivates them to bridge their differences, and helps them in creating common ground.

When comparing the two narrative interviews, it is conspicuous that peripeteia is not the same: Danny does not mention the phone call, and Jan does not mention the Ferrari story. This shows how they select different events for their plots: whereas Jan plots a story of conflicts and their resolution, Danny plots a story of successful mentoring. Still, there is considerable overlapping, for instance when Danny talks about the expatriates (in general, without naming Jan) not wanting to be disturbed during weekends, and when Jan talks about his realization that Chinese communication is more indirect and symbolic in nature. Also, they both describe their present relationship in similar ways: Jan acknowledges that Danny has taught him something about the Chinese business context, and Danny acknowledges that Jan has learned a lot about it.

In spite of the variations in their stories, both managers convey the impression during the interviews that they have now solved many of their problems, and work well together to adapt headquarters' strategies to the Chinese business context. Interestingly, their collaborative efforts were made visible to a wider audience of employees during the time the interviewers visited the subsidiary: the organization was in the process of adapting a new corporate strategic concept, labeled "winning behaviors," to the Chinese context. To this end, a video was produced in the Shanghai office consisting of clips from locally well-known, action-oriented movies. These were bound together through features with the Danish expatriate manager and the Chinese CEO, both dressed up like action heroes. In these attires, they related the clips to "winning behaviors," acting together in a humorous way as role models and sense-givers to the change processes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have used stories told by a Danish expatriate manager and his Chinese CEO in the Chinese subsidiary of an MNE to present a narrative approach to the study of intercultural business collaboration. We have explained and exemplified how narrative interviews can be designed and conducted, and we have reflected on the impact of the interviewers' interaction with the interviewees when prompting their storytelling about the collaboration process. It is time-consuming to conduct individual narrative interviews, in comparison with surveys of big samples, and it requires the researcher to be able to inspire sufficient trust in the interviewees for them to be willing to share their stories. But successful narrative interviewing, for example about intercultural collaboration, provides access to accounts of individual experiences and retrospective interpretations of them, a rich and complex empirical material that would have been fragmented and decontextualized in a survey with fixed categories.

In this article we have illustrated how analyses of narratives of cultural encounters can be carried out using narratological concepts and models; and we have shown how a narrative approach may deepen our understanding of sensemaking and mutual learning in an international business context. The notions of peripeteia and anagnorisis were helpful when identifying focal points in the plot analyses: situations where change, learning and progress in the intercultural collaboration process are particularly likely to have taken place. Such situations, sometimes characterized by anger or other kinds of unease, may eventually lead to a change of action, peripeteia. In the stories the two managers told, their accompanying anagnorisis, or recognition of

new dimensions of the experienced problems, eventually furthered intercultural collaboration.

In addition to the two concepts of peripeteia and anagnorisis, which are both related to the chronological course of a story, the actantial model served to create an overview of changes in plot structures. This tool has the advantage of securing a consistent and systematic approach to the analysis of the stories told in the narrative interviews. It offers a brief, graphic overview of the narrative structures in the stories told. In this way, it is possible to demonstrate clearly how an analysis is carried out, and how the conclusions are reached. We are well aware that each actantial model gives only a snapshot of the narrator's cognitive universe, as represented in his story at a given point in time. But as illustrated in the analysis we have conducted of the two parts of Jan's story, plot development and dynamics in storytelling can be captured by comparing sequential actantial models, each describing a stage in a narrative.

The narrative methodology we applied to the study of intercultural business collaboration is able to deepen our contextual understanding of these complex and often challenging processes. The differences between the two managers' stories of intercultural collaboration show that narratives do not mirror reality; instead, they provide us with different retrospective interpretations of the same series of events. The stories offer us an insight into the narrators' experiences as they recall them at the time of the interview. Furthermore, we get an impression of the different ways in which the two managers try to make sense of their experiences and reflect on their contributions to collaboration in a business context where cultural differences play a significant role.

While narrative inquiry and analysis do not provide us with a definite, unambiguous answer to the question of "what really happened" as the two managers interacted in ComDan's Shanghai office, the narrative approach does show the shifts and differences in their projects, alliances, oppositions and views of themselves as these appear in their accounts. The study of the two managers' stories tells us about their mutual learning experienced in the course of their collaboration – not just through their explicitly telling the interviewers that they had learned something, but also through the ways they constructed and developed their plots. In Jan's case, for instance, this becomes clear when he changes from seeing Danny as an opponent obsessed with micromanagement to seeing him as a helper and mentor. He also modifies his object-actant (in Greimas's terms) when he no longer aims at implementing the headquarters' strategy and management ideas uncompromisingly. Rather, he wishes to balance global and local needs, taking the subsidiary's preferences more into account.

It seems that to the extent that a manager has an ethnocentric perspective, that is, sees his own model of the world as the only correct one, he tells stories where people of other cultural backgrounds are presented as strange, and as opponents of his own projects. The stories indicate that such a frame of mind heightens the risk of contributing to conflicts and misunderstandings when interacting with culturally different others, but also that ethnocentrism needs not be a permanent state. The managers' emerging reflexive understanding of cultural embeddedness – their own as well as that of their collaboration partner – made it easier for both to bridge cultural differences. This was the critical step in creating a common ground in a work situation where intercultural collaboration was essential – both to their goals as individuals and to the goals of the multinational enterprise.

Narrative interviewing and narrative analysis have something to offer in other areas of international business besides intercultural business collaboration and cultural learning processes of individual managers. Often, when reading international business studies, one wonders whose voices are heard in accounts of companies' success and failure. It is probably safe to say that many contributions are biased toward the perspectives of the management and the headquarters (Jack, Calás, Nkomo, & Peltonen, 2008), and thus may well marginalize many voices while privileging others. Narrative interviewing offers international business scholars more perspectives on organizational realities, and gives voice to a wider range of actors showing the ways in which their interpretations of certain actions and events may correspond and differ.

Analyses of managers' and employees' stories are relevant, for instance, in studies of international mergers and acquisitions. Here, stories compete to define the new organization and make sense of the challenges faced in the complex organizational change processes following a merger or an acquisition. Such an approach has been used, for example, by Gertsen and Søderberg (2000) in a longitudinal study of a series of international acquisitions of a company, and by Søderberg (2006), who studied top managers' power struggles and sensegiving to

certain post-merger integration initiatives through their rivaling stories of an international merger. Studies of entrepreneurship in an international business context, for example in born-global SMEs, can also benefit from a narrative approach. Here, the research focus might be on what kind of founding stories entrepreneurs in born-global companies tell in conversations with actual and prospective partners, customers and investors in order to build legitimacy. Inspiration can be found in a rich qualitative study by O'Connor (2004) based on thorough participant observation in a start-up company. O'Connor's analysis of the founding stories told shows how they are gradually reshaped and retold in various transitional versions to different audiences in the course of internal and external change. Finally, narrative analysis is applicable to studies of the cross-cultural execution of global strategies. A narrative approach to an MNE's stories about its global strategy and their reception by managers and employees located in different societal and cultural contexts would offer an understanding of the challenges headquarters meet when trying to build a common understanding of the global strategy and a commitment to develop it into new practices. Likewise, a study of stories told about the culture(s) of an MNE would provide valuable insights into various individual interpretations of corporate culture, a perspective that headquarters surveys and researchers' structured interviews often miss.

Stories are an underutilized source of data in international business research, where quantitative approaches are dominant. With our analysis of plots, turning points and mutual learning in two managers' stories of intercultural collaboration we have demonstrated how a narrative approach, applied systematically to data collection and analysis, is able to offer insights not easily captured by other approaches. We have offered one example of a set of narrative concepts, among numerous alternatives, applied to an area of international business research, but as touched upon above, other areas are equally relevant to explore in this way. Thus, we hope to have inspired some of our readers to embark on narrative interviewing and analysis in order to experience the challenges and opportunities of this methodology themselves.

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NOTES

[1]In accordance with a large part of the literature we use the words "narrative" and "story" interchangeably.

[2]We have changed the company name, the names of individuals and some of the locations in order to protect the interviewees' anonymity.

[3]The interviewee's English is somewhat unidiomatic, but in the quotes that follow, we have normalized it in order to make it more readable.

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APPENDIX

Table A1 Overview of key concepts

	Definitions and examples
Key concepts of narrative structure	
Plot	A plot is the part of a story that survives when it is retold in a very brief form. A plot is the narrative structure of actors and events, consciously selected by the author/narrator and related to each other with cause and effect.
Actantial model Developed by Greimas (1966) based on analyses of the morphology of folktales carried out by Propp (1968; first Russian edition 1928)	A model of plot structure with six actants arranged as pairs in binary opposition: subject–object, helper–opponent, sender–receiver (see definitions below). An actant is defined as a function, often represented by a person, but sometimes by an institution or an abstraction. The actantial model describes fundamental patterns in stories. It is widely applied in analysis of plot structures, because the actantial pairs are useful in clarifying projects and relationships. In other words: what does the protagonist want and who/what helps or hinders him/her reach this goal?
The subject–object actants	The relation between subject and object is characterized by desire, search and action. The subject aspires towards a goal, or aims at achieving a desired state (the object). Example: An expatriate managing director wants to align the subsidiary with headquarters' global strategy.

Table A1 *Continued*

The helper–opponent actants	The helper-actant represents auxiliary support, whereas the opponent-actant represents forces of opposition that the subject must overcome to reach his/her goal. Example: Respect for local knowledge and work habits function as the expatriate managing director's helper, and ethnocentrism as an opponent.
The sender–receiver actants	The relation between sender and receiver is about communication and transmission. The person to whom the object is given is the receiver. The sender might be a person actively intervening, but it might also be an abstraction, for example, fate, bourgeois society or globalization. Example: The corporate CEO (sender) offers a subsidiary (object) as a playground to a career-oriented expatriate managing director (subject) with the intention of letting him develop it so it contributes to making the MNE more globally oriented (receiver).
Key concepts describing the course of a story	
Peripeteia (Greek)	A notion referring to the turning point/pivotal point in a story. The term was first used by Aristotle in *Poetics* about a sudden change of events or reversal of circumstances (e.g., from happiness to tragedy, from poverty to wealth). Example: An expatriate manager loses his temper and insults his local CEO by hanging up the phone when the CEO calls him at home on a Sunday morning to discuss a matter that the manager finds insignificant.
Anagnorisis (Greek)	The change from ignorance to knowledge that may accompany peripeteia or the turning point. The term was first used by Aristotle in *Poetics* about a moment in a play when a character recognizes his true identity – or someone else's identity or nature. Example: The expatriate manager realizes that he needs to establish a better working relationship with his local CEO in order to carry out his job and makes an effort to create mutual understanding and bridge their differences.

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