

# Effective Persuasion of International Business Sales Letters

## An Emic-etic Perspective

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### Abstract:

- Language usage has attracted increasing research attention in international business studies. Yet scarce research has been done on the use of language in sales letters across cultures.
- Our paper, using a combined *etic-emic* approach aims to compare Chinese and New Zealand managers' reflective accounts of persuasive strategies and the function of sales letters used in these two countries. In particular, we seek to contribute to an improved in-depth cross-cultural understanding through an investigation using *emic* sources of language and persuasion.
- Our findings indicate that language and persuasion play a significant role in sales letters, the Chinese managers focusing more on building *qing* (positive affect) with the reader whereas the NZ managers sought a more immediate reaction to their sales pitch and informal engagement with the reader.
- Furthermore, also based on the insights gained reflectively and reflexively from our discussion, these differences were closely related to persuasion strategies which are also important parameters influencing cross-cultural adaptations.

**Keywords:** *Etic-emic* perspective · International business language · Sales letters · Genre · Cross-cultural persuasion · Politeness

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## Introduction

Recently, an increasing number of researchers (e.g., Björkman and Piekkari 2009; Harzing et al. 2011; Piekkari and Tietze 2011) have begun to realise the importance of language in international business. The study of language is also important for comparative study in cross-cultural business communication, which is essential for managers to understand foreign markets (Tayeb 2003). Our core focus is on comparing persuasive strategies used in sales promotion letters in New Zealand (NZ) and China. Although a wide range of studies, incompletely cited here (Al-Olayan and Karande 2000; Albers-Miller 1996; Leman and Callow 2004; Tai 2006; Lowe and Corkindale 1998), relating to cross-cultural communication are evident, less emphasis is given to language and persuasion. These researchers mainly use cultural value based dimensions (e.g., Hall 1976; Hofstede 2001), also known as an *etic* perspective, to identify cultural differences. This trend seems to have prevailed up to the present day. So for at least more than a decade, cultural dimensions or *etic* perspective remains prevalent in cross-cultural comparisons while the *emic* or culture-specific perspective has been overlooked.

We see *emics* as a useful way of extending the extant *etic*-driven cross-cultural research and we will combine the *etics* and *emic* perspectives in this paper. The *emic* perspective studies view behavior from inside the system, applying *emic* perspectives including incorporating insiders' viewpoints and using local theories (Pike 1971; Helfrich 1999). The opposite is true of the *etic* (universal perspective that views behaviour as from outside of a particular system) (Pike 1971). Thus the *emics* reflect depth to local knowledge and nuances of specific cultures. An *emic* perspective is especially needed for comparative study of business language and persuasion where the *emic* trend is less apparent. Persuasion strategies differ across cultures (Pan et al. 2002). Even when using the same message, different cultures may have varying interpretations (Kleinjans 1972; Tsang and Prendergast 2009; Albaum et al. 2007). This is also a marketing challenge to persuade via sales letters in historically dissimilar cultures such as NZ and China.

Our *emic* perspective includes applying local theories and soliciting managers' views about their own culture. We seek out *emic* sources in language and persuasion, and explore how the *emic* perspective may complement the *etic* [e.g., Hofstede's (2001) individualism vs. collectivism and Hall's (1976) high- and low-context cultures]. Two reasons underpin our choice of NZ and China. Although both countries are located in the Asian Pacific Region, they represent the Anglo-Saxon/Western and Asian/Eastern cultural clusters respectively (Albaum et al. 2007). Both have radically different institutional and cultural traditions (Zhu 2009). In particular, China, with its increasing economic momentum represents an interesting site for cross-cultural comparison with English sales letters. Although sales letters are an increasingly popular form of communication in China, China represents a significant marketing challenge. Additionally, although NZ is a much smaller market compared to China, it has close trade relations with China and was one of the first developed counties to sign a Free Trade Agreement with China in April 2008 (Xinhua 2008).

Two core research questions underlie our central aim:

- What persuasion strategies do the Chinese or NZ managers follow in writing their sales letters? How do their counterparts interpret and react to these long-used traditional strategies?
- To what extent do the two different cultural groups' views overlap or differ from the language and persuasion perspective?

Using a qualitative method based genre analysis and interviews, we examine the research questions limited to sales promotion letters. We begin through a review of significant literature in cross-cultural studies relating to language, genre, and persuasion. Following this background, we discuss the reflective views of NZ and Chinese managers', first viewing their own culture and then their counterparts' on effective persuasion of sales letters. We base our conclusion and implications about the importance of combining *etic* with *emic* understanding for cultural learning and adaptation on the insights gained reflectively and reflexively from the discussion.

## **Background to Sales Promotion Letters in NZ and China**

Sales letters or direct mail are letters sent to prospective customers to solicit their responses. In a similar way to other marketing communication media, sales letters are targeted interactions to get the desired marketing messages across to prospective customers (Blythe 2000). Similar to the popularity of sales letters in the USA (Laroche et al. 2002), they are widely utilized and play an important role in interacting with prospective customers in NZ and China. Direct mail represents a significant part of the advertising budget in NZ (NZ Marketing Association 2010) and China (e.g., Sun 2008; Zhang and Sun 2007).

However, the cultural contexts of sales letter practice in NZ and China are quite different and we introduce these contexts respectively in a chronological manner. NZ is largely inherited from British and European traditions and is known as a Commonwealth country. Additionally, it is also a bicultural country interwoven with Maori and Polynesian traditions. The Maori are the indigenous Polynesian people of NZ who arrived in New Zealand at some time before 1,300 CE (Howe 2003, p. 17). Over several centuries in isolation, the Maori developed a unique culture, with their own language, a rich mythology, and distinctive crafts and performing arts.

European settlement of NZ began shortly after Captain James Cook's first voyage in 1769 and throughout the early 1800s. The arrival of Europeans to New Zealand brought enormous change to the Maori way of life. Maori people gradually adopted many aspects of Western society and culture. Yet there were no lack of conflicts and struggle of power over land and language issues since the very start of the colonial history.

The signing of the Treaty of Waitangi is a typical example of these conflicts. The Treaty was signed in Maori language by representatives of the British Government and Maori Chiefs in the village of Waitangi on February 6, 1840. According to King (2003, p. 155), the British proposed the development of a treaty, a partnership agreement with Maori, designed to provide a measure of control over settler behaviour, and to facilitate a more

organized approach to the intended further entry of British citizens (King 2003, p. 155). However, to the Maoris, the Treaty is about partnership, collaboration and protection of land and pride. Thus the spirit of Waitangi in terms of collaboration may not be reflected in the English translation of the Treaty (also better known than the Maori version) (Biggs 1989). As a result, the full potential of the Treaty of Waitangi as a foundational covenant that promotes respect and understanding between peoples is slowly being rectified (Spiller et al. 2011). The Maori language gained the official language status in 1987 (New Zealand Legislation 2012), which is recognition representation of the Maori culture. For example, all government departments' names written in both English and Maori and formal organizational meetings often start with a Maori greeting (e.g., Kio ora).

Another historic event worth noting is that NZ started its economic reform in the 1980s. As a consequence, NZ changes from a protective economy to a complete opening-up economy to international competition and investment (Bollard 1992). This reform represents a dominant force of globalization, also proposing challenges to a fuller application of the Maori language. So apart from some commonly accepted Maori greetings as noted earlier or iconic Maori words (e.g., *Pakeha* referring to European New Zealanders), English is used as the mainstream language in business communication in NZ (Chase et al. 2003). Although the dominance of one language reflects unbalanced power relations (Fairclough 1992; Vaara and Tienari 2004; Wodak and Meyer 2002), English and British-descended culture continues to play a dominant role in today's competitive business world in the NZ context. According to the most recent census data in 2006 (Statistics New Zealand 2012), 96% of the population speak English while only 4% speak Maori.

In spite of the dominance of a marketing economy and internationalization, the spirit of Waitangi also lives on. Today Waitangi Day (February 6) is celebrated as a NZ public holiday, a signal of public recognition of biculturalism and constant reminder of the core principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and Maori values. There seems to be gradual awareness about Maori cultural values. For example, some important values embodied in the Treaty include *whanau* (extended family) and *mana* (respect) also gradually becoming known in NZ society in general. Through a long historical process of struggle and tension, NZ is gradually becoming aware of the Maori values and other ethnic groups as NZ also attracts increasing migration from Asia, Europe and other parts of the world. Marketing managers can be constantly confronted with the challenges of communicating effectively with customers of bicultural and multicultural demographics in NZ. English sales letters are thus used in a complex bicultural context that deserves close *emic* research attention.

China, as an emerging economy, represents different social and cultural contexts (Zhu 2000). Starting from about 2,000 years ago, Chinese culture inherited a Confucian tradition stressing harmony and long-term relationships (Hu 1944; Ting-Toomey 1988). On the other hand, China is also going through economic reforms and adopts both state-owned and private firms. Three historic events are worth noting that affect Chinese major reforms. First, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China started its economic opening-up in 1978. In the initial stages of the late 1970s and early 1980s, China was involved in the opening up of the country to foreign investment, and permission was given for entrepreneurs to start up businesses. However, most industries still remained state-owned.

Second, major development of economic reform took place in the late 1980s and 1990s, involving the privatization and contracting out of much state-owned industry and

the lifting of price controls, protectionist policies, and regulations. In particular, in 1993, the third session of the Fourteenth Chinese Communist Party Conference passed the decision to building a Socialist Market Economy System, symbolizing a milestone transition from a planned economy to the socialist market economy with a greater emphasis on privatization and modernization (Zhonggong 2008).

The third historic event took place in December 2001 when China officially joined the WTO with a clear intention of further internationalization and globalization. Also in 2001, China officially adopted its “going out” strategy encouraging Chinese firms to invest and expand overseas especially with the EU and US markets (Cui and Jiang 2009). Naturally, and more importantly, in this context marketing practices and sales letters have become increasingly relevant and popular.

On the other hand, the traditional cultural values, especially Confucian values, have also been maintained. Recently the Chinese government strove to promote China as *hexie shehui* (harmonious society) based on Confucian values and virtues (Gan 2007). As a result, recent years have witnessed a revival of traditional values which were seriously attacked during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The *hexie* (harmonious) context offers a platform for possible co-existence of Western business practices (e.g., writing sales letters) and traditional cultural values. In particular, marketing communication can also be significantly influenced by Western business practices in the more developed regions or cities of China. As an additional effect, Chinese sales letters are often sent to organizations and are seen as an important part of the organization’s official letters (Gu 1995).

As shown in the above historical contexts, elucidating effective persuasion of sales letters in NZ and China is an important area of research and a comparison of sales letters need to involve nuances of language and persuasion, hence the need for soliciting relevant *emic* sources of knowledge in relation to specific social and cultural contexts in order to warrant in-depth analysis.

## **Incorporating *Emic* Sources**

The need for incorporating *emic* sources of knowledge has long been identified in cross-cultural business research and they are especially useful for complementing the *etic* perspective (Pike 1971; Berry 1989). Yet, applying *emic* sources is still an under-developed area. As noted by Jackson and Niblo (2003), the majority of published work on cross-cultural comparison used ‘imposed *etic*’ designs. To address similar dilemmas, Berry (1989) proposes a ‘derived *etic*’ perspective with a clear focus on incorporating an appropriate *emic* perspective before drawing any inferences about cultural differences. Berry’s view shares some similarities with Derrida (1992), who proposes that one should understand culture specifics first and then compare them with other cultures.

As noted earlier, a major strength of an *emic* perspective is that it permits an understanding of the way in which culture is constructed from within, hence it is more nuanced than the *etic*. The *emic-etic* is a widely cited concept from Kenneth L. Pike’s linguistic theory called tagmemics, which analyses language and behavior through the identification of *emic* and *etic* units (Pike 1971). Pike notes: “An *emic* unit... is a physical or men-

tal item or system treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behavior” (Pike 1990, p.28). For Pike (1967, p.38), *etic* data provide access into the system as “the starting point of analysis...” In other words, to Pike, both the *etic* and *emic* perspectives are necessary. The *etic* analytical approach was from the outside in. However, capturing the ‘*etic*’ is only the beginning, representing the first stage in the analysis. The complete understanding of the ‘*emic*’ is the ideal end point, which aims to achieve a complete description of the phenomenon from within.

Methodologically, as Pike (1971, p.41) puts it, the *emic* perspective “provides the only basis upon which a predictive science of behavior can be expected to make some of its greatest progress, since even statistical predictive studies will in many instances prove invalid”. In contrast, from the *etic* perspective, culture is viewed as a set of independent variables located outside a person, also known as bipolar cultural dimensions. “While this sophisticated stereotyping is helpful to a certain degree, it does not convey the complexity found within cultures.” (Osland et al. 2000, p.65). So a sole focus on *etics* can lead to an imposition of one set of cultural categories onto other cultures and overlook the nuances of the other cultures which researchers originally intended to study (Sinkovics et al. 2008).

Recently, international business studies have paid increasing attention to *emic* sources of knowledge. For example, Sinkovics et al. (2008) highlight the need for using *emic* or local theories in order to enhance the level of credibility of cross-cultural comparisons. Important clues for such an exploration can be drawn from two important research areas. The first derives from the *emic* sources include using insiders’ viewpoints and local theories in general (Pike 1971; Helfrich 1999). The second, also more specific and relevant to our study is the language aspects recently identified by a group of researchers in international business studies (e.g., Piekkari and Tietze 2011; Usunier 2011). As Piekkari and Tietze (2011) point out, language plays an important role in international business and management practices.

More importantly, these language-related views open up possibilities for developing the *emic* sources in order to complement the existing *etic* tendencies of using cultural dimensions. This is because an *emic* perspective may offer more nuanced explanations as noted earlier thus helping to achieve a more sophisticated understanding of other cultures. Relevant to this study are these cultural dimensions: Hofstede’s (2001) individualistic (focusing on individual interests) and collectivistic (focusing on group interests) and Hall’s (1976) high- and low-context cultures. For example, high-context cultures, such as China, are characterized by using indirect communication styles, and low-context cultures such as the USA and NZ are characterized by direct communication messages which are transmitted through clarity of styles and expressions. High- or low-context messages, although revealing, can be too generalistic and may not reflect the nuanced meanings of communication messages. From the social constructionists’ viewpoint (Berger and Luckman 1966), people make sense of their environment through an active process of engagement. Being ‘indirect’ may have many connotations in different contexts. For example, ‘indirect’ messages such as including irrelevant information of greetings in initial sales letters and inviting a guest repeatedly to an invitation party may convey specific meanings (e.g., respectful company image) relevant to the business communication contexts (Zhu 2005). An insider may not see these messages as ‘indirect’ or ‘irrelevant’ as they

carry specific information for constructing meanings between the writer and the reader. To an outsider, these messages can be 'indirect' since they are arranged differently from the 'direct' language style such as English. Noticeably, high- and low-context cultural dimension can help people identify cultural differences but it is the *emic* perspective that offers a more reflexive and constructive explanation with more depth, thus offering further insight beyond cultural differences. As Harris (2000) points out, 'native categories' with specific *emic* meanings are useful for comparative management study since translation of these categories may incur compromises and losses of nuance. In light of Harris' view, an additional example can be found in Zhu et al. (2006), who examine a series of culture-specific expressions or 'native categories' (Buckley and Chapman 1997; Harris 2000) used as business communication strategies in India, China, NZ and South Africa. They found that the word 'relationship' in these cultures, although similar in translation, actually carries different *emic* connotative meanings in their respective cultural contexts.

Based on the above discussion, *emic* sources represent an additional perspective of culture and so combining the *etic* with the *emic* perspective is one step forward towards pluralization and diversification of approaches for studying cultures (Rabinow 1986). It can also be inferred that understanding the *emic* meanings of language is conducive to cross-cultural adaptation as they offer further explanations about how and why cultures differ in close relation to the very contexts in which words are used. However, we are also aware of the limits of the *emic* perspective or 'native categories' especially in the area of cueing data by the research process (Buckley and Chapman 1997; Harris 2000). Hence it is essential for researchers to use reflexive dialogues to understand researcher (who they are) and the researched (their views) in order to make sure that data are gathered within the thought schemata of the managers (the researched) (Harris 2000, p. 756).

In what follows we will further investigate *emic* sources of language and specific sources from genre aspects, persuasion and politeness strategies are seen as relevant to this study. We will incorporate a reflexive view point for discussion of these *emic* sources where relevant.

## Genre Theory

Genre is a type of text used in a specific context and is seen as "social action" (Miller 1984) and as a response to social needs (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). Genre is composed of purpose, content and form (Orlikowski and Yates 1994). These components are often used as criteria for identifying professional genres such as sales blurbs and e-mails (Bhatia 1993; Bhatia 2004; Zhu 1997). An important unit of content is 'moves' (Swales 1990). Swales (1990) defines 'move' as a communicative event within a text, e.g., giving positive evaluation to a product. The moves of sales letters coincide with the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) model attracting reader's attention and interest, arousing the desire to own the product and soliciting a response or action (Murphy et al. 1997). 'Form' refers to specific language a text employs, for example using modifiers such as adjectives (e.g., 'excellent' and 'reliable') to promote a product.

However, genre theory is largely based on the Western practices such as writing English sales letters (Bhatia 1993) and is taken for granted as a universal theory applicable to other cultural contexts. The generalization of genre theory can be another example of

ethnocentrism in theory application and the *emic* orientation of some universal theories confined to the Western contexts. So genre theory can simply be just one *emic* theory or 'the imposed *etic* theory' from the Western contexts. Therefore it would be appropriate to include other *emic* genre sources when comparing the English genre with other cultures, hence the need for introducing the Chinese *emic* genre sources.

Chinese genre theory can be traced back 1,500 years according to Liu Xie (Shih 1959) who emphasizes the importance of reader-writer status. Based on reader-writer relations, the writer is expected to indicate an appropriate level of respect, awe, and politeness. Liu Xie's theory also lays the foundation for Chinese *gongwen* (official letters) writing. Later on *gongwen* evolved into three sub-genres of *xiaxing* (superior writing to subordinate), *pingxing* (equals writing to each other) and *shangxing* (subordinate writing to superior). A certain sub-genre requires a certain level of politeness and respect. Sales letters belong to *pingxing* genre and senders tend to have similar status. Yet, writers can still employ *shangxing* genre features in order to create a high level of politeness by employing polite linguistic forms. The division of genre based on writer-reader relationships have important implications for understanding *emic* aspects of persuasion and politeness behavior across cultures, which also constitutes an important part of genre content and form.

## Persuasion

The frequently cited source of persuasion, especially for writing, often tend to derive from Aristotle's theory (also applied as an *etic* theory), hence the need to introduce the Chinese *emic* source of persuasion and compare it with the Aristotelian approach.

Historically Aristotle's concept of rhetoric, really oral persuasion, was the basis for many years of Western persuasion theory. His tripartite persuasive rhetorical philosophy includes *ethos* (character and standards), *pathos* (emotion) and *logos* (reason and evidence). Aristotle (1991) places major importance on *logos*, giving less emphasis to *pathos*. His stress on *logos* has a fundamental influence on modern academic writing, oral communication (e.g., Young 1994) and on business writing and advertising (Murphy et al. 1997; Chase et al. 2003). As an important persuasion orientation, *logos* can be further defined as message content such as conciseness, clarity and facts as evidence (McCroskey 2001). In New Zealand, rhetorical education mainly follows the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition as a commonwealth country. Extant research on the NZ rhetorical tradition of writing (e.g., Chase et al. 2003; Zhu 2000) has also shown such a trend.

Contrastingly, Chinese rhetorical traditions developed in the vein of Confucian philosophical traditions (Garrett 1993; Lü 1998). To Confucian scholars, *ren* (benevolence) is the highest standard of moral perfection. In order to achieve this state, one has to follow the standards for adequate society conduct and also the *xin* (heart) or emotional appeal. Garrett (1993) points out that *xin* (heart) plays an essential role in Confucius' moral standards. *Xin* is very essential for achieving social harmony. Chinese researchers (e.g., Chen 1947) later developed a balanced approach combining the emotional appeal as *qing* (positive affect), and the rational appeal as *li* (reason). In light of *ren* (benevolence), *qing* is specifically composed of positive feelings such as affection or warmth, sympathy, and respect which are conducive to harmony while *li* is often interpreted as the rational behavior such as accomplishing certain tasks (Gan 2007; Zhu 2011). Li (1996) notes that *qing*

has great persuasive power, complements *li* and represents an important *emic* dimension for understanding Chinese persuasion.

## Politeness and Pragmatics

Politeness strategies can be related to the form of language in specific contexts. According to Grice (1975), linguistic communication is intentional, and the speaker can only achieve his/her goal when the intent is recognised by the hearer, and becomes mutual knowledge. Relevant to Grice's 'mutual knowledge' is speech act theory (e.g., Austin 1962) defined as an act that is performed by making an utterance, as the making of a promise or invitation. Sales letter genre may contain a range of actions (Miller 1984) or speech acts such as making a sales offer or inviting the reader to attend a sales exhibition. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) conceptualise speech acts as comprising locution (langue) and illocution (parole). What is of vital importance is the illocutionary force of an utterance which is the performing of a speech act (e.g., making a request to get the addressee to do something).

An illocutionary action such as requests requires certain felicity conditions to be met. According to Austin (1962), felicity conditions refer to the conditions that make an utterance a happy contribution to the exchange and they are also conventions that speakers and addressees use as a code to produce and recognize actions. One felicity condition relevant to our study is about appropriate language use by participants in specific circumstances. A similar view about the importance of context is also stressed by other researchers in sociolinguistics (e.g., Frake 1964; van Dijk 1977, 2008). Felicity conditions, although often applied to speech acts, can also be applied to less explicit words or sentences which imply certain performative aspects (Bach and Harnish 1992). An action within a text may be infelicitous by being irrelevant, or ill-mannered, or inappropriate. However, felicity conditions can be culture-specific, encompassing politeness strategies that may not be obvious to other cultures.

Closely related to felicity conditions is the concept of face defined as the favorable social impression that a person wants others to have of her/him (Goffman 1972). Face therefore should be seen as "...a central concept we will want to invoke to understand East-West discourse" (Scollon and Scollon 1994, p.138). According to Ting-Toomey (1988), individualistic cultures (e.g., NZ) are concerned with self-face maintenance, consequently valuing autonomy and choices. In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Chinese) "are concerned with both self-face and other-face maintenance" (Ting-Toomey 1988), and they, in turn value interdependence and reciprocal obligations. However, this *etic* interpretation of individualism (just as other cultural dimensions) about the NZ culture also needs more reflexivity, hence the incorporation of the *emic* perspective to complement the *etic* perspective.

New Zealand may also have its own *emic* characteristics in its own complex bicultural context. European NZ culture, as a mainstream culture, has co-existed with the Maori culture since the very start of its colonial history, although there has been no lack of tensions over land and language issues such as embodied in the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. And it was only more recently that some of the Maori cultural values have been gradually accepted and appreciated as noted earlier. So as a bicultural society, NZ managers may

construct individualism in relation to the gradual influence of the bicultural contexts. For example, NZ managers may adopt a consultative approach to incorporate others' views and perspectives, hence showing an open and friendly attitude. As a result, politeness and face can be closely related to informality and friendliness as part of the politeness behavior since NZ is not only a highly egalitarian culture (*etic*) (Hofstede 2001) but potentially accommodating as a historically bicultural context (*emic*). NZ sales letters may therefore prefer an informal style to indicate the above *etic-emic* tendencies.

The Chinese concept of face is an important part of politeness or *limao*, which is composed of two characters: *li* (a different Chinese character from *li* in persuasion) standing for 'rituals' while *mao* standing for 'look' or 'face'. Face can be further explained in light of *mianzi* and *lian*. *Mianzi* refers to prestige or reputation and *lian* stands for the respect for someone with a good moral reputation (Hu 1944; Hinze 2005). Giving and receiving *mianzi* or *lian* is clearly underpinned by *qing* (positive affect) in terms of respect and warmth or affection in this context.

In relation to *mianzi* and *lian*, a Chinese culture-specific politeness behavior worth noting is to show respect through using linguistic honorifics forms (e.g., using 'nin' the honorific pronoun 'you' instead of 'ni', the nonhonorific). These aspects are all related to *qing* (positive affect) and politeness behavior, important criteria for writing business letters. The writer resorts to the use of honorifics in order to create a respectable sociolinguistic distance conducive to harmony. Since ancient times various kinds of honorific pronouns were used to address Kings and the elderly. An important component of *limao* (politeness) is *li* or politeness rituals such as the use of greetings to indicate *qing* relating to warmth. Showing respect and warmth is often discussed as culturally shared politeness strategies in Chinese business communication and management (Bilbow 1995; Chen 1947; Gu 1995; He and Lü 1991; Ulijn and Li 1995; Zhu 2000, 2005). The emphasis on high-level respect thus may have an impact on a preferred formal approach in Chinese business letter writing.

The above aspects of politeness of the Chinese cultures can be seen as related to the traditional values. However, sections of China may exhibit regional differences relating to the exposure to Western marketing practices. This influence may also apply to the letters we are analyzing which were collected mainly from major cities of China. We will therefore acknowledge this type of influence. The Western influence can also be seen as related to the *etic-emic* boundaries. As noted by Buckley and Chapman (1997), Western influences may turn *etics* into *emics*. So teasing out the *emic* sources will help identify this *etic-emic* boundary.

Aspects of language, as well as the *etic-emic* interactions, constitute the linguistic repertoire as part of the totality of styles available to a speech community (Hymes 1974). Writers or speakers "learn to select from this repertoire of different speech communities in order to fill various communication needs (Milroy and Milroy 1985, p. 119). The selection of a language code can also cut through languages and cultural contexts, requiring cultural adaptation or code switching of styles (Molinsky 2007). Therefore it is possible to develop genre fluencies through being exposed to foreign languages or to other cultures' *emic* views, and consequently being mindful of other cultures and flexible with alternative communication styles, which has also been proved to be possible (Leki 1991; Molinsky 2007).

# Methodology

## Research Methods

Research methods were multifaceted based on a careful selection of data, genre analysis, and extensive interviews with both individual managers and focus groups. All data were collected by the lead author and the data analysis was conducted by both authors.

### *Step 1: Data Collection*

Data were composed of a corpus of 80 sales letters (40 from each culture). These 80 letters were randomly taken from a corpus of 266 NZ and 289 Chinese sales letters collected from sales departments of trade companies dealing with a range of products. The English sales letters were collected from Auckland, NZ (the largest city in NZ and also where major business activities take place), and the Chinese letters from Beijing, Zhengzhou, Shenzhen and Zhuhai. The four Chinese cities included the major Northern (Beijing and Zhengzhou) and Southern (Shenzhen and Zhuhai) cities of China because these locations represented more developed cities of modern business practices, hence also representing a certain level of Western influence. Specific criteria were applied. First, all the letters should have a recognizable letter format. Second, our sample letters promoted a range of technology-related products (e.g., automobiles and electronics).

Two sets of questionnaires were used with NZ and Chinese managers to select the best-case examples. A preliminary survey selected ten representative letters for five NZ and five Chinese managers to rate. Each group rated effective persuasion in all the 40 letters of their own culture between 1 (low) and 5 (high). Subsequently, ten letters were chosen to reflect the corpus of each culture, those letters gaining the highest, lowest, and medium scores.

A second questionnaire was submitted to 100 volunteer managers from each culture. NZ managers came from Auckland, a major city known for vigorous business activities. Chinese managers came from Zhengzhou, one of the largest and fastest developing cities in mainland China. An identical rating scale was used with this questionnaire as with earlier assessment criteria. The top three letters from each culture, with ratings ranging between 3.6 and 4.1 [on the 1 (low) to 5 (high) scale], were considered as best-case examples of sales letters representative of each culture. Among these highly rated letters, two promoting the similar products of motor vehicles were chosen as best case examples for this study (see Appendix).

### *Step 2: Conducting Interviews*

The first author conducted two sets of interviews. Twenty-three interviews with individual managers (11 from NZ and 12 from China) and two focus group interviews (each composed of ten people and one focus group interview for each culture) for soliciting the managers' general views about effective persuasion of sales letters and their specific comments about the best case examples. All managers were given the option of choosing either the individual or the focus group interviews. Identical questions were asked for

**Table 1:** Information about interviewees

	New Zealand managers	Chinese managers
Companies	International trade with both local and international markets; with both manufacturing, sales and wholesales	International trade with both local and international markets, mainly in sales and wholesales
Industries	Automobile, IT, telecommunications	Automobile, IT, telecommunications
Managers' roles	Sales managers Marketing managers Marketing communication managers	Sales managers Marketing managers
Work experience	3–18 years	3–15 years
Education	BA in marketing, business and other areas of social science	BA in marketing, management and business writing

both sets of interviews and all the interview participants took part in the previous survey as well. These interviews were a follow-up, seeking more detailed comments about the nuances of persuasion strategies. Each manager was first given the English letter. Then the Chinese letter was distributed following a similar procedure, except the Chinese letter was translated into English for the NZ managers since all of the Chinese managers understood or spoke fluent English.

Managers of both interview groups have similar backgrounds and more details about these informants are provided in Table 1.

Given the study's focus on sales letters, only companies which actively used sales letters as a genre of marketing communication were considered. These managers can be seen as key informants (Churchill and Iacobucci 2005; Dewsnap and Jobber 2009) whose views are predictive for the conventions of sales letters.

All interview sessions were recorded and transcribed. The NZ interviews were conducted in English while the Chinese were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The Chinese session was then translated into English and then back-translated to ensure preciseness of translation.

### *Step 3: Coding Processes and Method of Analysis*

Criteria for analyzing sales letters and coding of interview transcripts were based on the genre theory. For example, texts were coded using structural moves, e.g., 'salutations', 'credentials', and 'offering incentives' (see the left-hand column in Appendix). Two additional coders (both were fluent in Chinese and English) were asked to code the sales letters and the interview transcripts. The three coders (the third was the lead author, a native Chinese) first coded the letters independently and then met to compare their analyses to reach agreement. Codes assigned to the transcripts of the interviews also resulted in agreement. Three coders first coded the transcripts individually and then met to (1) sort out any discrepancies about the categorization of the genre components, and (2) to come up with a summary of the manager's comments. Prior to the second meeting, each coder drafted a series of summary points based on his/her coding results. The team then discussed these points at a subsequent meeting. Once again the coding team reached agreement about all the summary points of managers' views.

We analyzed the following three aspects of interviews in light of the theoretical framework proposed earlier:

1. Managers' views about effective persuasion in marketing communications based on their own genre knowledge
2. Managers' *emic* views on the best-case examples of their own culture
3. Managers' *etic* views on the best-case examples of their counterparts' culture.

In brief, the analysis includes effective persuasion of sales letters of the managers' own culture, and their reflective views on best-case examples in their own culture, and their counterparts'. These areas will be examined inductively to indicate the specific types of 'linguistic repertoires' the NZ and Chinese managers prefer.

In both data collection and analysis, we were aware of the limitations of our own cultural backgrounds. The lead author grew up and worked in China, and 20 years ago migrated to work in NZ and Australia. The second author is European American and has taught in Hong Kong, mainland China and Singapore for 28 years. Although both authors are bicultural or intercultural in experience, we may have brought our own assumptions to the cultures we are analyzing. For example, the lead author had to overcome some of her assumptions about NZ as individualistic based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions during her interviews with the NZ managers. She then adjusted her stance, accepting NZ as a bicultural society influenced by the Maori culture.

In a similar thrust, in our analysis we tried to be critical of our own intellectual assumptions. Such a critical stance is crucial for cross-cultural analysis (Hassard 1993). One critical way of managing assumptions is to be reflective and reflexive with the cultures we are analyzing in order to minimize our assumptions. For example, the lead author may take an inflexible Chinese approach based on her earlier experience working in China. China today is much more exposed to Western influence as compared to 20 years ago. The same is true with the second author. Although he had extensive understanding of the Chinese culture as an expatriate, he may have his own assumptions from an outsider's perspective and may have the tendency of generalizing Asia based on his own experience in Asian countries. We both tried to manage our own assumptions and make sure appropriate reflexive analysis was incorporated throughout our analysis. Our goal was to interpret the managers' views in light of their perspectives.

## Comparing NZ and Chinese Managers' Views

### The Managers' Overall Criteria for Effective Sales Letters

Each focus group was asked to suggest ingredients of an effective sales promotion letter, their views are summarized in Table 2 (with the frequent words and codes italicized).

NZ managers' comments stress *logos* using the AIDA construct as their major point of persuasion. Purpose, a second criterion, is to promote a product, confirming previous research about this genre. Third, content and idea development should relate to the purpose. Appropriate linguistic forms and styles were included as the final two criteria

**Table 2:** Managers' views on effective persuasion of sales letters

New Zealand managers' views	Chinese managers' views
Should attract the reader's <i>attention</i> and <i>interest</i>	Using appropriate <i>politeness</i> format and letter form to communicate Co. image
Have a <i>clear purpose</i> of promoting the advertised products	Promoting the products and harmonious and long-term <i>relationships</i> with other organisations
Be <i>brief</i> and to the point and ideas should be developed from point to point about product <i>appeals</i>	Making sure to include <i>background information</i> about the company and the product, and stress company history and <i>expertise</i> <i>Clear style</i> including relevant information about the products promoted
Use 'you-approach' and <i>engage</i> the reader usually as a potential customer	Be <i>polite</i> and use <i>respectful</i> language

of NZ managers. Here clarity is closely related to *logos*. NZ managers' views capture *logos* in terms of clarity and conciseness. Note that the NZ managers stressed politeness in relation to informality as a means of engaging the reader (e.g., using 'you approach'), hence stressing informal interpersonal communication (Chase et al. 2003). This view is an example showing that NZ managers construct a particular type of individualism in the NZ bicultural contexts.

In contrast, Chinese managers indicated different views about politeness in a number of areas. *Qing*, in particular, underpins politeness strategies to express warmth and respect. For example, Chinese managers' first and final criterion stressed the importance of a polite format, a level of respect, an integration of persuasive appeals of both *qing* (positive affect) and *li* (reason). *Qing* in terms of respect is clearly shown in recorded managerial statements such as this:

I have collected quite a few polite, well-written and respectful sales letters and have built up some business connections with some of these companies through responding to these letters.

An *emic* perspective, as seen above, suggests how to build *qing* that may lead to business connections. In brief, Chinese managers viewed politeness rituals such as showing respect and warmth as a crucial part of their persuasive strategies.

In addition, Chinese managers also stressed the importance of product promotion, which appears to be a common Western marketing practice for sales letters. However, they embedded this Western practice in the Chinese cultural context, an example showing how Western influence and practices have been absorbed.

*English Sales Letter*

Seven moves are presented in the English sales letters: Headline, salutation, establishing credentials, introducing the product, offering incentives, soliciting response and post-scripts (in bold on the left-hand column of the Appendix). Some of the NZ specific managers' comments towards this letter are cited in the following:

As shown in Table 3, the two managerial groups are quite consistent in confirming the strength of the English letter in terms of the moves of headlines, product introduction and clarity of information, which is part of the 'mutual knowledge' for promoting products. For example, both groups thought that clear, relevant and detailed information was essential for persuading the reader. In particular, the stress on clarity and brevity, and including relevant details was evident in NZ managers' evaluations regarding 'introducing product'. Being 'clear' stands out as an important component of *logos*. Note clarity-

**Table 3:** Managers' comments on the English sales letter

Genre moves	New Zealand managers' comments	Chinese managers' comments
Headline	“This is an effective English sales letter in which the writer attracts the reader’s attention with a <i>clear headline</i> of “making an astute decision”. The mention of petrol prices and environmental issues also makes the letter attractive”	“The headline stands out to <i>clearly</i> show what the letter is about.” “Sub-headings are appropriate and hint what the letter is about; entirely acceptable”
Greetings	“The writer uses an appropriate <i>you approach</i> ’ addressing and interacting with the reader directly”	“Without any warning, and <i>too abruptly</i> , the letter begins with no <i>warm</i> greetings to initiate an interaction with the reader”
Introducing product	“The letter is <i>clear</i> and provides all the <i>detailed</i> information about Honda cars in the letter as well as in the catalogue. The headlines are appropriate for highlighting the <i>main points</i> ” “The letter is <i>clear</i> and provides all the <i>detailed</i> information about Honda cars in the letter as well as in the catalogue. The headlines are appropriate for highlighting the <i>main points</i> ” “However, some sentences are too long and we would have reduced the <i>length</i> of the longest sentences to give priority to the information”	“The later sections of the letter are <i>clear, logical and detailed</i> with all the information the reader would like to have”
Soliciting response	NA	“ <i>Overt persuasion</i> ends the letter. Particularly the invitation for a non-obligatory test drive with the offer of a \$40 voucher is even more attractive to the reader, which may lead to a positive response”

related words (e.g., ‘clear headlines’, ‘main points’) italicized in Table 3. As an additional NZ manager commented:

I like the subheadings. The letter itself seems to have way too many words so the subheadings break it up.

Difference between managers occurred on the topic of politeness. The NZ managers preferred the ‘you approach’ addressing the reader directly and also to think from the readers’ perspective. According to the NZ managers, the ‘you approach’ should not be interpreted only as a marketing strategy focusing ‘your wants’ or ‘your needs’ (Murphy et al. 1997). It should also be seen as an interactive strategy or a type of *pathos* about how to engage the reader. This performative aspect of engagement requires an informal type of felicity condition in the NZ cultural context.

In contrast, Chinese managers did not seem in agreement with the above type of politeness. Instead they thought it was necessary to include a greeting or warming-up message first, hence suggesting the *emic* view about Chinese persuasion based on *qing* relating to ‘warmth’ and ‘harmony’ or a lesser degree of ‘abruptness’. As one Chinese manager commented, it was important to have a polite and respectable tone since the aim of an introductory sales letter is to establish a rapport with the reader rather than selling the product. Such a preference is apparently driven by *qing* and can constitute ‘a happy contribution’ of interaction (Austin 1962). Clearly, this Chinese manager also applies the above politeness principle to the English letter, which may not represent the same context of a Chinese sales letter, hence indicating a certain mismatch of expectations.

However, some Chinese managers did not seem to have a problem accepting the ‘abruptness’ or ‘directness’ of English sales letters. They were happy to accept the letter as it was although they may not write their own sales letter in a similar fashion. Their view resonates with Adair and Brett’s (2005) observation that people from high-context cultures tend to be quite flexible with low-context styles in low-context settings. Additionally, some Chinese managers may also have adapted to the English sales letter context as they had some command of the English language.

### *Chinese Sales Letter*

In light of genre theory, our analysis suggests that our sample Chinese sales letter has seven moves: Salutation, greetings, establishing credentials, introducing the product, offering incentives, soliciting a response and good wishes (see Appendix). NZ and Chinese managers’ views are cited in Table 4.

The two groups appear to share little ‘common knowledge’ and have clear disparate views concerning the Chinese letter regarding all the moves of this letter. Basically, the NZ managers seemed to have doubts about the appropriateness of the Chinese letter and questioned the felicity conditions of relevant moves. The first two NZ comments above were concerned with the inappropriate use of ‘Your Honourable Company’ as a salutation and inclusion of greetings. In contrast, the Chinese managers thought the opposite is true. When discussing salutations, the Chinese managers further hinted that the use of honorifics showed a high level of respect through lowering oneself, thus constructing a formal but respectful sociolinguistic distance.

**Table 4:** Managers' comments on the Chinese sales letter

Genre moves	New Zealand managers' comments	Chinese managers' comments
Salutation	"Your Honourable Company' is <i>too formal</i> ; only the person should be addressed"	"The salutation indicates a high-level of <i>respect</i> , hence appropriate"
Greetings	"Greetings are <i>inappropriate</i> as they are unrelated to promoting the product"	" <i>Politeness</i> and <i>brevity</i> characterize this letter. It also has a courteous and <i>warm</i> tone"
Introducing product	"Including the company's capacity is acceptable, but including its location appears <i>less relevant</i> " "It takes <i>too long</i> to get to the point. The purpose of the letter should occur in the opening sentence" "But there is not <i>enough information</i> about the product. A sales letter should have sufficient <i>detailed information</i> for the reader to make a purchase decision"	"The description of the product performance appears <i>professional</i> . In addition, the description is <i>not too technical</i> to avoid misunderstandings" " <i>Brevity</i> on the performance of the car appears sufficient"
Closing	"The writer <i>shouldn't assume cooperation</i> at an initial stage"	"It offers the Expo as an opportunity for further contact and communication. The way the Expo is advertised is attractive for other companies looking for possible <i>collaborations</i> "

Evidently, the specific *qing* involved in the Chinese managers' comments above is to give respect as if to someone more senior in the social hierarchy, thus giving *mianzi* to the reader. It also points to the specific felicity conditions stressing the other's face and how one is related to the other. As noted earlier, using honorifics in Chinese is a typical symbol of respect of using a *shangxing* (subordinate writing to superior) form to create a respectful image. Indeed the honorific 'you' has been used five times to interact with the reader in the Chinese letter (see Appendix). Note that this is quite different from the informal 'you approach' of the English sales letter. Furthermore, the Chinese *emic* view offers insight to outsiders about the specific use of *shangxing* language that is more than just a simple 'high-context' or 'indirect' message, hence complementing the *etic* perspective. Likewise, documents from low-context cultures might also be helpful to non-natives from high-context cultures, given that low-context cultures tend not to assume shared knowledge of culture relating to *mianzi*.

Chinese managers thought that using greetings was appropriate to indicate warmth towards the reader. To them, greetings add *qing* to sales promotion. As one Chinese manager noted:

This letter indicates a good combination of using politeness, respect and sales promotional strategies for promoting both company image and the product.

NZ managers' comments about 'introducing product' pointed out what they saw as irrelevant information. To them, using relevant information was preferred which represents a particular type of *logos* relating to clarity and detailed information. Apparently, what is relevant to the Chinese managers is not seen as such by the NZ managers.

In terms of the closing move, NZ managers did not think that it was appropriate to discuss cooperation in an initial letter as it might indicate a “threat and imposed obligation”. Such a view once again reflects the individual face of autonomy and shows the writer’s preference to avoid imposition (of cooperation) on the reader. NZ managers’ views are opposite to the Chinese managers’ and this culture clash can be related to the felicity condition about cooperation. To Chinese managers, cooperation was appropriate in the contexts of sales letters as it implied the writer’s good will and willingness to seek cooperation, a traditional positive Confucian concept of harmony.

In sum, the two managerial groups shared similarities with the promotional elements of sales letters such as the AIDA formula, showing a certain level of *etics* appearing across sales letters of both cultures under the Western influence. However, this *etic* feature is incorporated into the Chinese *emic* cultural context. Thus this type of *etic concepts* has been turned into *emics*-a phenomenon exactly what Buckley and Chapman (1997) have described as the fluid *etic-emic* boundary. Yet the two cultures differed in their *emic* views about the use of persuasion and politeness (e.g., level of formality and respect of sales letters). Compared to the Chinese managers who were ready to accept the felicity conditions of the English letter, the NZ managers did not seem to be prepared to do the same. The issue can be related to the fact that none of the NZ managers spoke Chinese while all the Chinese managers were exposed to English language in their earlier education. This finding can be revealing about the role language and felicity conditions play in cultural adaptation.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In order to answer our research questions, we tentatively have identified some general persuasion features of the Chinese and NZ culture in business contexts. More importantly, also as a major contribution of our research, we have addressed the research questions reflectively employing the *emic* perspective (local theoretical sources and insiders’ views) to complement the prevalent *etic* perspective (cultural dimensions) and by identifying issues relating to the *etic-emic* boundary. All these aspects are discussed in detail in this section.

### General Persuasion Features of Sales Letters: New Zealand vs. China

Both cultural groups (NZ and Chinese) accepted AIDA as an underlying marketing value in the business world, also representing an overarching Western influence on persuasion. However, NZ sales letters represent a clear pattern of sales promotions following the AIDA sequence, focusing on soliciting actions from the reader. In contrast, Chinese persuasive sales letters reflect a more complex process involving *qing* for soliciting actions.

Further differences are also present in other areas. The Chinese sales letters seemed to have less detailed information about the products advertised, hence suggesting a slightly different type of *li* (reason) that is more embedded in *qing* (emotion) in the organizational context. These two cultures also appeared to significantly differ in the felicity conditions. Contrastingly, the Chinese managers advocated a more formal *qing* in relation to warmth and respect while the NZ manager expressed their preference for an informal, friendly

and conversational style of persuasion. These cultural differences are further discussed in relation to the *etic-emic* complementarity in the next section.

### Specific Ways the *Emic* Complements the *Etic* Perspective

Our analysis suggests that the *emic* perspective adds strength to cross-cultural analysis in four ways. Firstly, the use of *emic* theory adds depths to *etic* cross-cultural analysis. For example, the *etic* approach in Hall's (1976) high- and low-context culture theory may interpret the Chinese style as indirect and English letter as direct. However, the taken for granted 'indirect' Chinese style actually indicates a clear *qing* (positive affect) persuasive orientation. Specifically, Chinese managers identified two types of *qing* including respect and warmth or affection. These *qing* aspects underpin politeness behavior of language which require certain felicity conditions (e.g., using certain expressions for greetings). The application of felicity conditions offers more nuanced explanations about 'how' and 'why' certain linguistic choices were preferred in interacting with the reader, such as using honorifics indicating a high-level of respect. This finding also complements the accepted view about the collectivistic cultural pattern in China (Hofstede 2001). We actually found that the writer, instead of stressing explicit collectivistic relationships, focuses on a subtle process of building *qing* through using appropriate politeness strategies conducive to harmony. It was harmony that the Chinese writers focused on hoping to establish a long-term relationship.

Drawn from the bicultural history in the NZ context, the *emic* perspective offers insight about how NZ managers actually constructed their 'individualist' or 'high-context' culture. The NZ managers' reflections on the influence of the Maori culture clearly explain the informal style of sales letters and the felicity condition is thus embedded in the bicultural context.

Secondly, we extended the meaning of *logos*, an Aristotelian underpinning of reasoned discourse in the ancient world. The *etic* approach tends to focus on three types of *logos* including brevity, clarity and relevant details (e.g., AIDA), NZ managers firmly supporting that view. We have identified the specific use of the 'you approach', often known as part of product promotion strategies, also embodying *emic* connotations in the NZ context. NZ managers offered an insightful view about their explanation of engaging the reader informally via the 'you approach', neatly fitting that concept into the NZ cultural contexts, a point we would not normally find in business communication textbooks. NZ managers' comments also point to the need for understanding Anglo-Saxon cultures with specific *emic* perspectives where relevant.

Thirdly, we examined the potential for appropriate cross-cultural adaptation in relation to using *emic* sources of knowledge to extend one's linguistic repertoires (Hymes 1974) across cultures. With the extended repertoires, one would avoid mimicking another culture at the surface level or over-doing the other culture (e.g., showing excessive respect or warmth) behaviors. For example, one would understand better the meanings of combined *qing* (positive affect) and *li* (reason) in the Chinese contexts. In other words, language in context (Frake 1964; van Dijk 1977) can be a point of departure for potential cultural adaptation or code switching of cultural behavior (Molinsky 2007). Our findings suggest

that there is a need for both parties to understand the contexts and the felicity conditions of each other's culture.

Fourthly, the *emic* view about one's own culture adds to the *etic* view about other cultures as the *emic* view helps reveal the gap in one's knowledge. The managers' *emic* views not only further proved cultural differences in language used for marketing communication, but also provided clues for managers' understanding of felicity conditions of certain genre actions (e.g., making a sales offer and greeting the reader) crucial for cultural adaptation. One way of accessing the *emic* sources of knowledge is to speak or be exposed to the core language and the related felicity conditions or at least be exposed to the *emic* views within a certain culture. Hence, we have a promising finding about the importance of knowing both oral and written foreign languages and/or understanding their felicity conditions conducive for cultural adaptation.

Although both cultural groups indicated a certain level of understanding about their counterparts, flexibility was more evident in the views of Chinese managers regarding English sales letters. Their adaptation could reflect their understanding of the felicity conditions of English sales letters because of their command of English. In contrast, NZ managers, who did not have command of the Chinese language, did not entirely accept the Chinese felicity conditions of politeness strategies applied to sales letters. For example, NZ managers expressed negative views toward the use of greetings and collaboration in the Chinese sales letter. Such interrelatedness of command of a foreign language and cross-cultural adaptation suggests the potential for using cultural differences (e.g., in felicity conditions) as resources for cultural learning. An *emic* language view thus adds to the depth of cross-cultural understanding and adaptation.

### The *Emic-etic* Boundary

In light of Buckley and Chapman (1997), we have added additional findings. For example, we found that genre theory, although used as a universal theory, has shown strong *emic* traits derived in part from Western genre theory contexts. So researchers applying *etic* theories need to take these contextual limitations into consideration. One possible way of identifying the limitations is to trace the sources and contexts of the Western theories as we did with the genre theory. In addition, the limitations of the *etic* perspective have further substantiated the imperative of using *emic* perspectives for cross-cultural comparative studies in order to have all voices heard in the comparative study of cultures (Derrida 1992).

An additional finding is the fluid boundary between the *etic* and *emic* concepts. We suggest that *etic* concepts can turn into *emics* in the Chinese sales letters through exposure to Western influence. For example, the marketing strategies and rationality of sales letters were not exactly the same in Chinese as the English sales letters. This kind of *etic-emic* fluidity seems to represent some degree of tension between the Western and Chinese traditions depending on the degree of Western influence. Therefore it would be inappropriate to treat Chinese culture or other cultures as one single 'national culture'.

In a similar way, NZ sales letters are influenced due to the increasing impact of the Maori culture. As shown in our analysis, NZ managers appeared to construct their 'individualism' in the specific bicultural context. Therefore, more importantly, we found that

this kind of tension between different cultural traditions can occur in a broader sense and the international business community may pay attention to further questions in terms of *etic-emic* boundaries such as the following:

1. Is the *etic* source really *etic*? Or was it simply an *emic* source in the Western context such as the case with genre theory?
2. To what extent, are the 'native categories' really native? And to what extent will the *emic* phenomenon or 'native categories' evolve through continued and further exposure to Western influences?

These questions have been useful in guiding our reflexive analysis. Our finding about the fluid *etic-emic* boundary parallels Clifford and Marcus' (1986) view that "Culture is contested, temporal and emergent...." We also aver that the challenges of doing comparative cultural studies require both *etic-emic* considerations.

Theoretical insights deriving from this study are significant given the dearth of prior research on the persuasion strategies in sales letters in different cultures. Firstly, the *emic* aspects can be replicated or extended to comparing other cultures. Secondly, this study has implications for identifying further *emic* sources of language to a wider range of cultures, enabling the development of new typologies for cross-cultural study. Thirdly, we have shown that the *emic* perspective can help people to adapt to foreign cultural contexts through extending their linguistic repertoires. Our emphasis on using foreign languages to conduct international business (e.g., Harzing et al. 2011) to assist with cultural adaptation in business contexts opens further revenues for future theoretical investigation.

This study has practical implications for managers' practices in cross-cultural marketing communication and international business. Firstly, in order to target customers from various cultural groups in both international and domestic contexts, it is essential for managers to understand effective use of language and persuasion using the *emic* point of view in a target culture, such as a combined *qing* and *li* for Chinese sales letters. Secondly, this study has implications for cross-cultural learning in international business. One feasible way of understanding other cultures is to be exposed to the very language or insiders' views of the language and the felicity conditions for a specific cultural context.

We have limited our discussion to European NZ and Chinese culture, examining selected sales letters and managers' reflective views on this genre. Future research could compare a wider range of cultures to determine similarity to our study. Furthermore, the *emic* theoretical sources were mainly limited to Chinese sources and influence of Maori culture on the NZ bicultural contexts. Future research may incorporate other *emic* courses from a wider range of languages and persuasion strategies, including less prominent languages (e.g., specific use of Maori language and power relations involving relevant historical and cultural contexts).

Finally, future research may also continue to look at *etic-emic* boundaries reflectively and reflexively. For example, a chronological study of *emic* sources can reveal how these boundaries may evolve under Western influence. Some culturally-rooted persuasion such as *qing* may continue for a considerable time as part of the historical cultural tradition, yet it may evolve in different patterns in different regions as China is increasingly exposed to other Western influences and modern business communication practices such as relating to e-communication. Above all, effective cross-cultural understanding involves appropri-

ate use of language and persuasion, and reflective and reflexive interpretation of *etic-emic* sources in context. Therefore readiness to learn, reflect and adapt will place managers in an advantageous position in international business.

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## Appendix

The English Sales Promotion Letter

### Headline

### HONDA—The Power of Dreams

Honda Cars Albert Ltd.

Auckland, NZ

Date

### Salutation

Dear Ms Thompson,

### Establishing credentials

#### **In today's world, it is even more important to make an astute decision**

Thinking about buying a new car? As petrol prices continue to climb and environment concerns continue to grow, buying a new car is becoming a more important decision for many people. You need a fuel-efficient car but want one that still delivers on power – and is also kinder to the environment. You also want a vehicle that maintains the most value it can once you drive it off the yard.

### Introducing products

#### **We have done your homework for you**

At Honda, we understand the decision faced by today's car buyers so we've put together a few things in the enclosed leaflet to help make your buying decision a little easier.

You'll see how intelligent improvements in engine technology have enabled Honda to achieve excellent fuel-efficiency results across our model range. In fact, since 1996 we've improved the average fuel efficiency across our range by 34.5%, and our latest addition, the all-new Accord Euro provides up to 6% improvement in fuel economy in our range of low emission vehicles, and the creation of the Honda TreeFund introduced in 2004.

### Offering incentives

#### **But don't just take my word for it**

No car buying decision would be complete without a test drive. So I invite you to take any vehicle from our impressive range out for a good field assessment.

### Soliciting response

There is absolutely no obligation and to thank you for your time, we'll send you a \$40 voucher when you complete your test drive. So give us a call on 0800 888888 and arrange a time for your test drive before 1 August.

### Good wishes

Yours sincerely,

Godden Smith

Managing director

Honda Car Albert Limited

**Postscript** One petrol voucher per invitation. Test drive must be completed to receive our gift. You must hold a current driver's licence and be over the age of 18.

The Chinese Sales Promotion Letter

**Salutation** Your Honourable Company,

**Greetings** How are you (H)? You (H) must be very busy with your work.

**Establishing credentials** As a branch of No. 1 Motors Group of China, Xuzhou Shunda Motors Company Ltd was established in September, 1990. It is located in the ancient city—Xuzhou. With seven years of hard work and immense efforts, this company is taking on a brand new look. Our consistent goal is to produce comfortable and luxury cars of high standard and good quality. We have all the expertise in manufacturing skills.

**Introducing products** The cars we produce are equipped with advanced assembled imported engines, air-conditioning, electric windows, a modern and novel dashboard, and a unique ABS braking system. Our cars are characterized by powerful engines, quick acceleration, low-noise motors, low petrol consumption, spacious seating, stylish shapes and low price. Our cars enjoy a high reputation for their performance and quality in Huaihai Economic Zone, and even in the northern and middle parts of China.

**Offering incentives** Shunda Co. Ltd. has developed today into a large enterprise in the Huaihai Economic Zone, and is the envy of the motor manufacturers of modern and luxury cars. We are offering various kinds of special prices. If you are interested in our products please contact us. We are going to hold a marketing day of the latest car models (the specific time for this will be informed later).

**Soliciting response** Welcome you (H) to come and place an order, or hold trade talks with us. We will offer (H) you warm-hearted service.

**Good wishes** Looking forward to hearing from you soon.  
Thank you for your (H) cooperation!

Sales Department  
Xuzhou Yada Motor Co. Ltd  
Date XXX

**Endnote**

1 NZ refers to European NZ culture which is also the majority culture in business communication (Chase et al. 2003) although we are also aware of the existence of other ethnic groups. Chinese culture refers to the mainland China where data were collected and interviews conducted.

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