

Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies of Thai SMEs in Thai-Chinese Business Matching Activities: A Comparative Qualitative Multiple-Case Study

Sasipin Distanont

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, Thailand
sasipin.dis@mahidol.ac.th

Orapan Khongmalai

College of Innovation, Thammasat University, Thailand
korapan@reg.tu.ac.th

Abstract

This study examines the cross-cultural communication strategies Thai SMEs used when negotiating with Chinese counterparts in business-matching events in China. Using a comparative qualitative multiple-case design, it analyzes 16 Thai SME cases from two missions: Shanghai (2024, $n = 6$) and Chengdu (2025, $n = 10$). Data were drawn from pre-negotiation documents, field observations, and the researcher's reflective and analytic memos, and analyzed through hybrid thematic analysis. The findings show that communication problems arose less from simple mistranslation than from systemic constraints in interpreter-mediated interaction, particularly loss of technical detail, disrupted interactional flow, and interpreter overload in time-pressured settings. More effective cases combined four strategies: interpretable message design, multimodal support, digital verification and continuity, and culturally sensitive rapport-building. Venue format also mattered: informal settings facilitated rapport, whereas sector-based matching accelerated substantive discussion. Successful business matching depended on an integrated hybrid communication system rather than language proficiency alone.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, business negotiation, Thai SMEs, Thailand-China, interpreters, multimodal communication

INTRODUCTION

Cross-border business matching is an important mechanism for expanding markets, building networks, and fostering international economic cooperation. For Thai entrepreneurs, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), participation in business matching activities with Chinese counterparts is particularly significant because China serves simultaneously as a major market, a

manufacturing base, and a highly dynamic business environment. However, success in such settings depends not only on product quality, but also on the ability to communicate business information effectively, establish credibility, and build shared understanding under constraints of language, time, and culture.

The studies on intercultural negotiation shows that culture significantly shapes communication styles, bargaining strategies, and the interpretation of counterparts' behavior (Gunia et al., 2016; Hoo, 2016). At the same time, research on Sino-Western business negotiations indicates that small talk, speech accommodation, and the creation of a positive atmosphere before substantive bargaining play an important role in building rapport and facilitating later cooperation (Ladegaard, 2011). Hyun (2020), moreover, argues that business communication problems in Asia may stem less from lexical differences alone than from differences in cultural conceptualizations.

In the Thai-Chinese context, these communication challenges become even more complex when entrepreneurs must rely on interpreters as intermediaries while also explaining highly specialized information within limited time. Although a considerable body of research has addressed language, culture, technology, or negotiation as separate issues, a major gap remains in explaining how entrepreneurs respond when communication breaks down in real negotiation settings: what strategies they use to repair meaning, sustain negotiation momentum, and move interaction toward concrete business follow-up.

This study therefore examines the cross-cultural communication strategies of Thai SMEs in Thai-Chinese business matching activities, using data from two business-matching missions in China conducted between 2024 and 2025 under the support of Thailand's Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion and in collaboration with local governmental agencies in China. This empirical setting makes it possible to investigate real interactions in which entrepreneurs had to navigate concrete constraints related to language, interpreters, time, and event format.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) To analyze the patterns and strategies of cross-cultural communication used by Thai entrepreneurs in negotiations with Chinese counterparts.
- 2) To examine how language, culture, and event format shape communication behavior, interactional dynamics, and continuity in negotiation.
- 3) To synthesize practical approaches for enhancing the communication capabilities of Thai SMEs in Thai-Chinese business settings.
- 4) To propose policy and managerial recommendations for improving future business matching activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. Cross-cultural negotiation as a system of language, relationships, and context

Studies in intercultural communication and cross-cultural negotiation consistently suggest that international negotiation is not merely an exchange of rational information, but a process shaped by culture, institutions, and the interactional structure of the negotiation setting (Gunia et al., 2016; Hoo, 2016). The key issue, therefore, is not only who says what, but also how it is said, in what context, through whom, and how it is interpreted.

2. Chinese culture, face, and relational sensitivity

In negotiations with Chinese counterparts, relevant research has shown that long-term relationships, sensitivity to face, and non-confrontational conflict management are central elements of

negotiation behavior (Hoo, 2016; Zhao et al., 2020). Negotiators who focus solely on business information while overlooking the relational dimension may therefore miss important signals that shape trust and receptivity to cooperation.

3. The role of small talk and rapport-building

Ladegaard (2011) demonstrates that small talk and speech accommodation in the opening phase of interaction are important for creating a positive atmosphere, particularly in negotiations marked by substantial cultural difference. This has clear implications for business matching events in which time for relationship-building is limited, because designing space for informal interaction may reduce friction in the early stage and facilitate a smoother transition into substantive business discussion.

4. Interpreter-mediated communication and the friction of meaning

When negotiation depends on interpreters, meaning is not transmitted in a linear fashion. It passes through a process of selection, organization, and partial reinterpretation. Entrepreneurs are therefore not simply negotiating with a counterpart in a two-party exchange, but participating in a triadic communication system involving the Thai entrepreneur, the interpreter, and the Chinese counterpart. Such a structure increases the risk of losing technical detail, disrupting conversational flow, and generating pragmatic misalignment.

5. Negotiation of meaning across languages and multimodal communication

Studies on translingual negotiation and multimodal mediation explains that when language alone is insufficient, communicators often mobilize additional resources such as images, objects, gestures, screens, digital tools, and external sources used to verify terms or information (Im et al., 2022; Liang, 2021; Canals, 2023). Real-world cross-language negotiation should therefore be understood as a process of jointly constructing meaning rather than one of word-for-word translation.

6. Conceptual framework

Drawing on both the literature and the field data, this study employs an analytical framework that connects four major dimensions:

- 1) language and technical terminology constraints,
- 2) cultural sensitivity and relationship-building,
- 3) interpreter mediation and multimodal resources, and
- 4) communication continuity through digital technology.

This framework serves as the basis for interpreting why some negotiations were able to maintain momentum and progress further, while others stalled at the level of initial conversation.

METHODOLOGY

1. Research design and case boundaries

This study adopts a comparative embedded multiple-case study with independent cohorts in order to gain an in-depth understanding of communication dynamics in Thai-Chinese business matching under conditions of linguistic difference, cultural difference, event format, and interpreter-mediated interaction. This design makes it possible to analyze both recurring patterns and context-specific features across different venues. The bounded cases were defined as two business matching events held in China, each of which featured a distinct event structure and interactional environment (Yin, 2018).

2. Study sites and units of analysis

Field data were collected from two clearly separate rounds of Thai-Chinese business matching activities rather than by tracking the same entrepreneurs over time. The first round took place in Shanghai in 2024 and involved six Thai entrepreneurs. The second round took place in Chengdu in 2025 and involved ten Thai entrepreneurs. In total, the study covers 16 case units across two field contexts with significantly different event formats and interactional patterns.

3. Case selection

Cases were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling. Participants had to be Thai entrepreneurs who had actually been selected to join the relevant business matching mission and who took part in real negotiations with Chinese counterparts in settings that the researcher could directly observe. This approach is appropriate for qualitative research that seeks information-rich cases capable of illuminating real communication processes rather than statistically representing a larger population.

4. Data collection

Data collection drew on three main sources:

- 1) pre-negotiation documents, such as company profiles, product briefs, presentation scripts, and materials used by entrepreneurs before or during negotiation;
- 2) field notes from participant observation in actual negotiation settings, with attention to how products and services were presented and explained, how interpreters worked, what communication aids were used, and how moments of breakdown, clarification, or repair unfolded; and
- 3) the researcher's reflective and analytic memos, which were used to distinguish directly observed events from interpretive observations and to review the consistency of the analytical conclusions.

5. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using hybrid thematic analysis, combining concept-driven coding with openness to new issues emerging from the field data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Xu & Zammit, 2020). The analysis proceeded at three levels: within-case analysis, within-cohort synthesis, and cross-cohort synthesis.

6. Trustworthiness

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher employed source triangulation, maintained an audit trail of analytical decisions, separated descriptive observation from interpretive inference, and used systematic reflexive memoing. Because this study did not draw on in-depth interview data, its conclusions focus primarily on communication behavior that was observable in actual settings rather than on the participants' internal motivations or perceptions.

7. Research ethics

This study reports findings at the level of communicative patterns and does not identify individuals or companies. It also avoids disclosing commercially sensitive information that could affect the participating entrepreneurs or their counterparts.

FINDINGS

1. Event format, relationship-building, and the depth of interaction

Field data from the two years show clearly that the format of the event was not merely the backdrop for negotiation, but a factor that shaped the interaction from the very beginning. In 2024, the event included alternating Thai-Chinese presentations and created opportunities for participants to continue conversations over lunch. This format made it easier for entrepreneurs to begin with non-business talk, establish familiarity, and gradually move into discussion of products and possible cooperation. By contrast, the 2025 event was organized around sector-based matching in areas such as food, tech-digital, and services. This enabled participants to meet counterparts who were more closely aligned with their business area and to move into substantive discussion more quickly, but it left less room for small talk and the development of a relaxed interactional atmosphere.

2. The role of interpreters in Thai-Chinese negotiation dynamics

The field observations suggest that the role of interpreters shifted significantly depending on the structure of the event. In the 2024 setting, especially during lunch conversations or outside formal sessions, interpreters did more than translate words. They helped initiate conversation, reduce tension, and connect the cultural context of the two sides, making the interaction more a form of relational mediation than direct translation. In contrast, in the 2025 setting, where pitches and matching rounds were faster paced, interpreters increasingly functioned as information managers under pressure. In several cases, one interpreter had to support multiple companies and product categories at once, creating a high processing load and making it difficult to preserve the full technical detail and persuasive force of the original presentation.

3. Structural constraints of interpreter-mediated communication

The analysis shows that the main communication problem in Thai-Chinese business negotiation was not simply "incorrect translation," but rather the structural constraints of interpreter-mediated communication under time pressure and in the presence of highly specialized business content. These constraints became particularly visible when entrepreneurs had to explain product specifications, standards, production processes, or component names that were crucial to business decision-making. Although interpreters were often able to convey the general point, details that mattered for assessing the feasibility of cooperation were frequently shortened, omitted, or made less precise in the process of interpretation.

At the process level, these problems arose from three major factors: the loss of technical detail, disrupted interactional flow caused by turn-by-turn interpretation, and the heavy workload borne by interpreters who had to process large amounts of information under severe time constraints. In settings where several entrepreneurs relied on the same interpreter or where negotiation rounds rotated quickly, interpreters were expected not only to translate but also to filter content, prioritize key points, and sustain

the interaction. Under such conditions, interpreter-mediated communication itself became a decisive factor shaping how far a negotiation could move beyond a surface-level exchange.

4. Multimodal resources as compensation for linguistic and semantic gaps

When spoken communication broke down or technical terms failed to align, entrepreneurs who were better able to sustain negotiation momentum rarely continued repeating verbal explanations alone. Instead, they shifted modes of communication immediately, for example by opening product images on their phones, searching for images online, showing catalog pages, or presenting actual product samples for their counterparts to inspect directly. Moving from verbal explanation to visual and material evidence enabled Chinese counterparts to grasp the issue more quickly than in cases where communication depended on the interpreter alone. In many observed interactions, shared understanding was achieved not through exact lexical equivalence, but through meaning alignment across multiple semiotic modes.

5. Digital technology as a mechanism for verifying meaning and sustaining communication continuity

The findings indicate that digital technology was used in at least two important ways in the field. First, it was used to verify keywords during negotiation, such as equipment names, specifications, or production standards, when either the entrepreneur or the counterpart needed to check whether the term used by the interpreter corresponded to the intended meaning. Second, it was used to maintain communication continuity after a session, for instance by scanning QR codes to send Chinese-language e-catalogs, factory introduction videos, and technical information through WeChat for further review. In this sense, technology did not function merely as an emergency aid, but as an infrastructure for both precision and follow-up. At the same time, technology was effective only when bilingual or Chinese-language materials had been prepared in advance; when live machine translation was used without well-structured supporting content, it could generate additional confusion rather than reduce it.

6. Conditions for continuity in business matching under a hybrid communication system

A cross-event synthesis indicates that cases more likely to progress toward follow-up communication or requests for additional information tended to share four common elements: entrepreneurs paced their speech in ways that interpreters could relay in manageable segments; they used multimodal resources to compensate for language limitations; they relied on digital tools to verify important information and maintain communication continuity; and they entered the meeting with a business proposition that was sufficiently clear and aligned with the counterpart's interest. In other words, the success of business matching did not depend on language fluency alone. It depended on whether entrepreneurs were able to make key information intelligible, allow counterparts to understand the potential of the product or service quickly, and create a shared sense of direction for possible cooperation within the time limits of the event.

DISCUSSION

The findings support research in cross-cultural negotiation showing that culture is not merely the background to interaction, but a key mechanism shaping communicative behavior, response patterns, and the interpretation of meaning at the negotiation table (Gunia et al., 2016; Hoo, 2016). In the Thai-Chinese context, the relational dimension, sensitivity to face, and attunement to the atmosphere of

interaction remained especially important, particularly in the opening phase of negotiation when initial trust was being established and the ground for potential cooperation was being prepared.

At the same time, this study extends the existing literature by showing that when negotiation relies on interpreters, communication constraints do not arise solely from linguistic difference itself. They also stem from the triadic nature of the communicative system involving the entrepreneur, the interpreter, and the counterpart, operating under time pressure and with highly specialized information. Under these conditions, the ability to design messages so that they can be conveyed clearly and efficiently becomes just as important as language proficiency.

The findings are also consistent with work on translingual negotiation and multimodal mediation, which suggests that shared understanding in cross-language contexts emerges through the coordinated use of multiple resources rather than through language alone (Im et al., 2022; Liang, 2021; Canals, 2023). In the case of Thai entrepreneurs, the use of images, product samples, translation applications, and digital platforms should therefore be understood not as optional supplements, but as core components of negotiation in practice. These resources helped reduce semantic gaps, verify key information, and sustain communication beyond the initial encounter.

Based on these findings, the study proposes a conceptual synthesis in which successful Thai-Chinese business matching depends on a hybrid communication system consisting of four interrelated dimensions:

- 1) Interpretable messaging, or the design of messages that interpreters can convey accurately;
- 2) Multimodal compensation, or the use of multiple modes to compensate for linguistic limitations;
- 3) Digital verification and continuity, or the use of digital technology to verify information and sustain communication continuity; and
- 4) Rapport-sensitive interaction, or communication that is attentive to cultural and relational dimensions.

This proposition does not imply that entrepreneurs must mobilize every dimension simultaneously in every situation. Rather, it suggests that pre-negotiation preparation should be designed systematically, encompassing message content, supporting materials, the role of interpreters, and follow-up planning in order to increase the likelihood that business matching will develop into more concrete forms of cooperation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conclusion

This study concludes that the success of Thai-Chinese business negotiation in business matching settings does not depend on language ability alone. Rather, it depends on the entrepreneur's capacity to manage language and interpreter-related constraints systematically. Entrepreneurs who were better able to move negotiations forward tended to combine interpretable message design, visual and material support, digital tools for information verification, and rapport-sensitive communication.

In addition, event format had a substantial effect on the nature of communication. Events that created space for informal interaction were more conducive to rapport-building and trust, whereas sector-based formats supported faster entry into substantive business discussion. Accordingly, the design of trade promotion activities should treat communication as a feature of event structure rather than as a burden borne solely by entrepreneurs themselves.

2. Practical recommendations

Thai SMEs should prepare at least three levels of negotiation materials: a short summary document written in simple language, a visual sheet or image-based presentation, and Chinese-language or bilingual digital materials that can be forwarded immediately after the meeting. They should also prepare a list of technical keywords accompanied by images, product samples, and any standards-related information necessary for business decision-making. In addition, they should clarify in advance their objective, pain point, and preferred form of cooperation before entering the negotiation room.

Event organizers should place greater emphasis on cluster-based matching in order to improve the relevance of counterparts and help interpreters prepare sector-specific terminology more effectively. Standard operating procedures before negotiation should include a pre-brief template, a bilingual keyword list, and a standardized digital pack. The timing of the event should also be designed to balance formal sessions with interactional spaces that facilitate rapport-building.

For interpreter management, a short pre-briefing should be conducted before each company's negotiation round. Interpreter workload per round should be reduced in events involving highly technical content, and cluster-specific glossaries should be developed in advance. The use of segmented interpreting and recap checkpoints should also be promoted in order to reduce the loss of important information.

3. Recommendations for future research

Future studies should examine the differences between specialist interpreters and general interpreters in business settings characterized by highly technical terminology. They should also analyze interaction at a micro level in order to trace how repair and alignment occur in real time, and extend the cases to more cities and event formats in order to test the broader applicability of the present findings across a wider range of Thai-Chinese business contexts.

4. Limitations of the study

This study relies primarily on documents and field observations and therefore focuses on communication behavior as it appeared in real negotiation settings rather than on participants' internal motivations or perceptions. In addition, the cases were limited to two business matching contexts in China, so caution is needed in extending the findings to other forms of negotiation or to international business settings with substantially different conditions.

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