

About the Author/MIA DOUCET

Mia Doucet, author of the award-winning book, *China In Motion*, facilitates executive retreats with companies that want to increase revenues in Asian Pacific. A major automotive client describes Mia as an “innovative strategist, whose genius is her ability to combine her vision, research, and insights to spark money-making ideas.”

Visit her at <http://www.chinainmotion.com> to learn more. Be sure to sign up for her free weekly ezine, “China in Motion: 20-second bits of wisdom.” Her book, *China in Motion*, is available at Barnes and Noble, Indigo, and other bookstores.



How's Your Cultural Intelligence?

The ground staff of an American airline was attempting to upgrade a young businessman to business class on a flight to Japan. He kept politely refusing their generous offer. They assured him there was no extra charge. He would not be inconveniencing anyone. They would be very happy if he would accept their offer. The man became quite anxious and finally explained that he could not possibly accept the upgrade offer. The reason? His boss had a seat booked in business class.

How unusual this seems against a Western backdrop, where social and business relationships have become so casual. But it's the way things are done in Asia. The respect for authority explains why bright people are not willing to voice their opinions in meetings. It is also the reason Western-style brainstorming and beef sessions don't work with people of the Pacific Rim.

The Big Divide

Asian social hierarchy rules all interactions. Deference must be shown to those in authority. In business meetings, one does not speak until the “boss” has spoken. One never interrupts. One does not dare to express an opposing opinion. There is a vertical divide that protects face for both “boss” and employee. People know the roles that they are expected to play. Managers want, expect, and demand a show of respect from subordinates, in very specific ways. And if you manage employees with an Asian background and education, you will enjoy their full productivity only when you take into account their deeply programmed need to show respect to authority.

Calvin Wang received a Western university education in China and worked there as an electrical engineer for ten years before moving to Canada. Calvin says that, even after five years in corporate North

America, he is still uncomfortable speaking up to his manager to express a different opinion. He still carries the cultural imprint of his schooling where he was taught to show respect to anyone in authority. As Calvin explains, “To show respect, we cannot show that we are smarter or quicker than the boss. You always wait for him to express his opinions first. People of Asian culture are taught that it is not good to be too smart because that does not show respect to the boss. It disturbs the order, and you could be punished.”

The Talented Mr. Yang

Calvin's fear of insubordination no doubt goes back to early childhood, when cultural values are transmitted through stories and school day rituals. One of the most popular stories involves Cao Cao,

a poet king of the Han Dynasty:

King Cao Cao loved riddles. He would often challenge his ministers to guess their meaning. His first secretary, Yang Xiu, was a talented scholar who regularly succeeded at deciphering the King's cryptic messages.

Yang Xiu did not stop with the word games. One day, quite by accident, he came across the King's military strategy. He immediately set about decoding it. Now knowing what the King's strategy would require of him, he ordered his troops to decamp. He anticipated great honor, and perhaps reward, when the king learned of his cleverness. But when word got back to the court, Cao Cao was outraged. He ordered Yang Xiu executed on the spot. Poor Yang Xiu's head was mounted on a gatepost as a warning to others who would dare to usurp the kings' authority.

The moral of the story, in Calvin's words: “Your wisdom is related to your rank or class. You shouldn't show that you are smarter than the person in authority. So when a group of people is sitting together, even if the smartest person in the group interrupts his boss, others will be very uncomfortable with him.”

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The Workings of Rank and Status

First, Employment

A person's rank, status and prestige depend upon place of employment. Everyone who works for a highly ranked company shares in its perceived prestige in the marketplace. This holds true from the grassroots to the CEO level. That recognition is the purpose of the lapel pin, Loyalty is to the company first, not to the profession. If you ask what a person does for a living, the response will be, "I am a member of the staff of Haier Group or Toyota or Samsung." Not, "I am an engineer or salesperson." There is almost no communication with members of one's professional outside the work circle and professional associations do not exist.

Second, Schooling

Education is the second factor in determining rank and status. Interestingly, prestige comes not from one's profession but from one's alma mater. The higher the school's standing, the higher the status of the individual. This is why there is such intense competition for acceptance into top-ranked universities. The prestige extends to one's entire family.

Third, Seniority

The third indication of rank is seniority. Within the corporate power structure, groups are ranked by seniority, according to year of hiring. Since age is revered, even to suggest that a person may be too young to remember a certain event (considered a compliment in Western culture) may cause the Asian to lose face. You are implying that the person is too young to warrant your respect.

Then, Harmony

Next is the ability to get along well with others. Promotions go to the person who maintains harmony, and can be counted on to care about the welfare of all.

Ability?

Ability comes last.

Chinese Status

Business reflects the hierarchy of rank and status to a lesser extent than in Japan and South Korea due to Communist influence. However, Chinese are very status conscious. They are impressed by degrees from Ivy League schools. They consider it important to show status through outward displays of wealth. You will experience this first hand if they invite you to dinner at a

restaurant — at the cost of a month's salary.

Name brand imported items are popular, including designer clothing and accessories. People may not yet have money for homes or cars, but they are very well dressed. (And most still do not understand why we would lower our own status by wearing jeans and cut-offs. For this reason, save the sweat suits for exercise and alone time.)

Guanxiwang — the power to get things done through one's connections — is another visible sign of status. The better-connected one is, the more value one accumulates for future exchange purposes, the greater one's status and prestige.

“Whispering Humbleness”

The show of humility as a virtue is deeply rooted in the Asian character. Humility, like face, affects all aspects of the business relationship, from the first greeting, to the business card exchange with bows and formal introductions, to

how compliments are received. From childhood, they are taught to be modest. The lesson is, "No matter how great you are, you can always learn."

Appearance is deceiving. The show of humility cuts across rank and status. Even powerful, intelligent, wise people go to great lengths not to show their mental gifts. Often, the more powerful the person, the greater the

show of humility.

But it would be an insult to treat the person the way he is acting. This means that you must proceed cautiously in establishing a new relationship. It will take time to determine who is the highest-ranking person. You will need to observe the subtle cues of rank and status before meeting with the players.

After You, Mr. Wu

Protocol requires that Asians enter the room in order of seniority (determined by age, then rank). This applies to business meetings and after-hour social occasions, not just in the more formal context of negotiations. The practice provides important clues for you: it tells you who expects to be shown the greatest respect. This is important to know, since varying levels of politeness are required, depending on the person's rank and status.

Likewise, Asians will assume that the first person in your group or delegation to enter the room is the senior person. That is the person to whom they will show the greatest deference. And that is the person whom they expect will lead the discussion from your side.

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Don't Be Gauche

In meetings, the most important person sits in the center, facing the door. The hierarchy extends to restaurant seating. If you are the guest of honor, you will sit in the middle of the table, facing the door. The next highest-ranking person will be on your right. Your Asian host will sit opposite you. The next highest-ranking person will be at his or her right. And the pattern repeats itself. The proper protocol is to wait for your host to point out where you will sit.

To not follow the above procedures is confusing to Asians. Conversely, following established rules of etiquette when you are hosting Asian guests will prove reassuring to them. Your meetings and other business interactions will go much more smoothly.

Third Person Respect

Using the third person form of address (rather than the word "you") is a sign of great respect. Not that using the title before the name adds more face.

- "Does Mr. Director wish to comment on our proposal?"
- "Would Mrs. Wu please sit at my right at dinner tonight?"
- Would Mr. Wong do me the honor of visiting our offices the next time he is in the West?"

Put Status on the Agenda

Find out ahead of time the rank and status of everyone who will be attending the meeting. If you are not able to ascertain the pecking order in advance of the meeting, show the greatest respect to the oldest Asian in the group, since age confers rank (although it is not the sole determinant). Take a moment after the exchange of business cards to study the card. Your Asian customer's business card will show the person's rank and status. You are expected to act accordingly.

Show your own rank and status as well. Make sure your business card reflects your company's prestige, your education, and your authority. In your conversation, position your company's size, technology, and global reach.

During initial greetings, stand to the right of the person who is introducing you. (Since the rank and status of the person who introduces you extends to you, this should also be thought out ahead of time.)

Acknowledge and shake hands with the most senior person first. Do not sit down until you have been

invited to do so.

And remember to never interrupt.

The Rank and Status of the Female Sex

In China, women are accepted as equals in higher levels of business. During the Cultural Revolution, women were expected to work, both in the government and private sectors. They have equal education opportunities and work is considered their contribution to family and society. Performing well reflects on their family.

Respect shown to seniority and rank applies equally to women in the boardroom. Women do not receive preferential treatment from their male colleagues. Men do not help them with their coats, open doors, or let them enter the room first.

So, there is no apparent sexism in Chinese business. However, those in the know say there are still economic and social inequalities.

Unlike Western women, Chinese women do not want to look young, because youth deprives them of sta-

tus. For that reason, you are advised not to make observations about their youthful appearance. Comments that you may consider complimentary may cause embarrassment and loss of face.

If You're a Woman, It's No Cakewalk

Male dominance is strong in Japan and South Korea. Barriers

exists and women must work around them to succeed. If you are a woman, the best way for you to prevail is to be patient and to curb your impulse to come on strong. Allow time for the Asian businessman to appreciate your expertise, humility, knowledge, ability, and dependability. Working for a top-ranked firm, possessing impeccable credentials, and having the hide of a rhinoceros will ease the process. A great sense of humor (which you keep to yourself) will keep you sane.

You must not take offense at the male business rituals, praised in men and scorned in women. Women should not smoke. Women should not drink alcoholic beverages, and certainly, never to excess. Women should not laugh. Yes, this is a sexist double standard — and it's a reality.

But think of it this way: time and time again, women have shown they are often better equipped to deal with the complexities and nuances of communication in high-context cultures. Be glad of this great asset. ◻

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