

This article is one of a series of "Cultural Context" profiles that was written for an Eaton Consulting Group newsletter.

The Cultural Context - China

by Bob Riel

While logistical information and protocol tips are necessary for navigating the day-to-day challenges presented by life in a new country, a key to long-term business success is one's ability to adapt to cultural differences. This following section focuses on important elements of a country's cultural profile which affect the way people communicate, make decisions, negotiate, conduct business, and build relationships.

A Collective Culture

Collectivism is a cultural value found in China that contrasts with the more Western emphasis on individualism. In a collectivist culture, individuals put group goals and needs ahead of their own personal desires. In fact, this value is sometimes so much a part of the culture that a person may not distinguish between personal and community needs, as the survival and cohesiveness of the group is of paramount importance.

The collective identity of the Chinese people is partly the result of a civilization that for several thousand years has been built on agriculture. Each successive generation of peasants farmed the same soil and lived with the same neighbors and relatives as their parents and grandparents before them. Thus, the family and village identity takes on a much greater importance. The Chinese have also been deeply affected by the teachings of Confucianism, which emphasizes the importance of extended families and interdependent relationships.

This manifests itself in business in several ways. The Chinese tend to create work teams, with tasks assigned to these groups rather than to individuals. Negotiation sessions are also a team effort. The Chinese usually send large delegations to negotiating sessions. Group consensus among their negotiators is an important factor in determining the progress of business talks.

Hierarchy

The Chinese have a great respect for fixed hierarchical relationships. They even have a virtue, called "li," which means both propriety and ritual. It has been translated as the manner in which each person is expected to act so as to maintain the hierarchical order. This involves showing a certain respect for others and accepting the obligations that come with one's position in the hierarchy.

Much of this emphasis on hierarchy can be traced to the teachings of Confucius, who spoke of the Five Constant Relationships - those between parent and child, elder and younger siblings, husband and wife, elder and junior friends, and ruler and subject. There are certain ways one is expected to act depending on one's place in the social order. For example, rulers are expected to be benevolent in exchange for loyalty from their subjects. Older friends will serve as mentors to their younger acquaintances.

These teachings are significant in Chinese business culture. Promotions at work are in many cases based on age before ability. In addition, the advice and opinions of an older worker are generally valued more than the words of a younger person. The young, in turn, are deferential and respectful to their older co-workers and business associates.

The Importance of Face

The phrase "to save face" is familiar to many people. In China, these words are a clue to a deeply held cultural value. The Chinese place great significance on the concept of face. They go to great lengths to avoid calling attention to errors, indiscretions or emotions that would cause themselves or another person to lose face, particularly in front of others.

The importance of this value is due partly to the long history of Chinese society. People tend to remain rooted in one place, spending their entire lives in the company of the same relatives and friends. Good relationships are maintained by avoiding conflicts and helping each other to save face. Another reason behind this value is the Confucian emphasis on both hierarchy and personal relationships. To cause other people to lose face could be seen as a challenge to their position in the hierarchy, which could threaten group harmony and the social order.

In keeping with the value of face, Chinese businesspeople will not usually be confrontational. They prefer to communicate indirectly, even to the point of not directly answering "no" in response to an unfavorable suggestion. The Chinese may also not point out that a mistake has been made, for fear that it will cause a loss of face. It is also considered disrespectful for a person to be interrupted or corrected by a more junior person.

Guanxi

There is no exact translation for the Chinese concept of "*guanxi*," but it is a mutually beneficial relationship that provides an ongoing link between individuals. It involves reciprocal favors or assistance that two people provide for each other. It has been said that this is the foundation upon which most everything is accomplished in China.

This can also be traced to the Chinese emphasis on interdependent personal relationships. When combined with the structure and protocol of Chinese society, this interdependence takes on a more formal aspect. This structured interdependence is called *guanxi*. One person will do a favor for another person, with the expectation that the person being helped is then obligated to provide some type of unspecified future assistance in return. Such relationships may exist between neighbors, with the clerk in a local store, with government officials, or with business associates.

The Influence of Confucianism and Taoism

Like all cultures, the Chinese world view has been shaped by religion, especially the two that are indigenous to China - Confucianism and Taoism. Buddhism is also widespread in China, but it has become more a vehicle for viewing the afterlife and practicing ancestor worship. Confucianism and Taoism, meanwhile, have exerted significant influence on the course of everyday life in China. These religions are not set up as exclusive and competitive philosophies. Rather, they have blended with each other in the Chinese mind.

Confucianism is more a system of ethics and personal conduct for daily life. Some of the more important core beliefs include respect for family and elders, as well as the value of accepting one's place in the social order and the consequent obligations. Taoism, meanwhile, focuses more on the nature or essence of life, with its underlying belief that a universal energy courses through all of creation. Taoists believe that *chi* is the vital energy of life, which must be allowed to flow freely and not be blocked; that humans need to live in harmony with nature and not apart from it, and that life is best understood as a balance of opposites (hence, the Taoist symbol for *yin* and *yang*).

The influence of these beliefs can be seen in everyday Chinese society. At work, there is a Confucian emphasis on interdependent relationships, on hierarchy, and on respect for the most senior managers. Taoism also makes its influence known in the business world. For example, Taoism can be seen in the Chinese system of *feng shui*, which is the art of assessing the most favorable conditions for placing buildings and offices so as to work in harmony with nature.

Communication Styles

The Chinese have a high context and nonverbal style of communication. It is high context in the sense that certain knowledge is already assumed. This is opposed to a low context culture, where more information is exchanged during each communication. The Chinese also make significant use of nonverbal means of communication, such as implied meanings, nonverbal cues, indirect statements and symbolic language. In addition, they are comfortable with a considerable amount of silence.

The high context nature of Chinese communication comes from a long history of close families and interpersonal relations. There is no need in most instances to repeat information that has been built up over time. It assumes a shared understanding between communicants. The emphasis on nonverbal communication is largely tied to the emphasis on long-term relationships and the importance of face and social harmony. In an effort to not offend another person or to not upset the order of things, the Chinese will resort to indirect or nonverbal cues.

For instance, a Chinese businessperson will rarely say "no" directly in response to a suggestion. They will often suggest instead that the matter be given further study. Similarly, open-ended questions are common, as they don't force a person into a corner as do "yes or no" questions. Rather than valuing directness, the Chinese are more likely to be polite but vague. A higher value is placed on ambiguity and tact.

Time Orientation

The Chinese view of time is oriented toward the past and is long-term. An event that happened long ago may still exert significant influence on Chinese thinking. This is understandable in light of the fact that Chinese civilization dates back 4,000 years, making it the oldest civilization in the world. There are records of Chinese ruling dynasties nearly two millennia before the birth of Christ. The Great Wall of China was constructed during the 3rd century B.C. and two of the most influential thinkers in Chinese history, Confucius and Lao Tzu, lived during the 6th century B.C. The Chinese also have a strong tradition of ancestor worship. Thus, they are more likely to see themselves as part of the continuum of history with less emphasis on the present time.

In business, this means that the Chinese are more strongly influenced by the past. It is only through the passing of time that individuals and businesses can prove themselves to be trustworthy. The Chinese are not very focused on the present or the short-term future. They certainly plan ahead, but it is more the long-term future, in keeping with a more expansive view of time.

This article was contributed by Bob Riel, a cross-cultural writer and consultant.