As China modernizes, it imports more and more Western culture and etiquette. The pace at which this is happening is at least as fast as the economy is growing. Over time, Western etiquette has been skillfully assimilated into the Chinese mainstream. It now looks and feels Chinese.

In large meetings, the host usually welcomes the participants by uttering the phrase “Ladies and Gentlemen” in Chinese, similar to what hosts normally do in the West. This may appear as if the Chinese are respecting women more by saluting them ahead of men, but that’s where the similarity ends.

In the West, out of courtesy and fairness, it is important to give women priority, such as opening doors for them or giving them seats. This has become a fine social etiquette. However, the spirit remains regarding helping the weak and those who are less fortunate. The same courtesy is given to children, the elderly, people with disabilities and those who can’t compete with healthy adult men on equal terms. But despite the adaptation of this imported etiquette, the best of China is still reserved for those with the highest status in the social hierarchy, irrespective of their gender, age or physical condition.
Because culture affects how we organize and work, we can use some common activities, such as food and food service, to compare and contrast Chinese and Western work styles.

Chinese people prefer to sit around large round tables and have a meal together. The round table symbolizes smoothness. It has no sharp corners, which is also how a civilized person should conduct himself. In a formal Chinese banquet, guests are seated round a big round table according to their social status. A guest’s age, his relationship with the host, his professional level and his experience determine where he should sit relative to the host, who normally occupies the seat at the table furthest from the door, facing the entrance. Across from the head of the table is his co-host or the person who is handling the evening’s program. The seat to his right is the power seat reserved for the evening’s honored guest. This is an adaptation of Western dining etiquette. In old China, the seat to the left of the host was reserved for the honored guest.

At the Western table, the guests are arranged according to their common interests, such as professions, hobbies or marital status. Status is less important at the Western table. Affinity is primary.

At a Chinese banquet, alcoholic beverages, including beer, should be consumed only during toasts. Tea, mineral water, soda or juice are the only beverages that one can drink alone. The Chinese believe that drinking is a social activity, so it ought to be shared. Enjoying a cocktail or wine in solitary contemplation is considered to be disrespectful to those around.

Drinking helps to loosen the inhibitions in the protocol-rich Chinese culture. When a group of family, friends and colleagues share drinks and laughter together, the formalities they strive so hard to maintain during the day are subsumed by the alcohol-induced bliss with their fellow beings.

At the dinner table there is often a small bottle of Baijiu (sorghum distillate, or “firewater”) and a shot glass in front of each person. Just because it’s there doesn’t mean that you should drink it. Chinese etiquette stipulates that you should pour drinks for others before you serve yourself. After the glasses are all filled, the guests should raise them to toast each other before they drink.

This ritual, which is designed to show respect for others, is practiced all over Asia. In Korea it goes even further: it is quite common for two old
acquaintances to exchange soju (rice liquor) glasses and drink from them as a gesture of friendship and respect. I experienced this when I visited South Korea during the SARS epidemic in 2002. After I drank from my host’s glass, I secretly hoped that the spirit was strong enough to render any virus that might be there inoperative.

When a subordinate offers a toast to his seniors, he should circle to where they sit at the table and do it in front of them. He should never raise his glass across the table or, worse, wait for the seniors to come to him. When a subordinate proposes a toast, he should not raise his glass higher than his senior’s glass because this would be seen as disrespectful.

A typical Chinese banquet has at least ten courses, usually consisting of a variety of fresh local produce and delicacies, including the must-have chicken and steamed fish. The meal usually begins with soup and appetizers, similar to Western restaurants. Again, this is an adaptation of Western-style table service. In the old days, soup was served at the end of the meal rather than at the beginning. Too much fluid intake before the main meal can slow down digestion.

In a Chinese banquet the dishes are carefully chosen by the host to reflect the season, a contrast of textures, and a balance of color, fragrance and taste. With such a variety to choose from there is bound to be something for everyone.

Sharing food is a fine ritual at the Chinese table, and very different from the more individualistic style of dining in the West. In a Western restaurant, each guest orders his own choice of food from the menu and eats by himself. There is little sharing, with the exception of wine and bread. Dining is less about the sharing of food and more about a culinary experience enhanced by good ambience, conversation and humor.

The service in Chinese and Western restaurants is also organized differently. In a US restaurant, each waitress is assigned a set number of tables. It is her role to take care of these. If she does a good job taking care of her customers, she will make good tips. After deducting a portion for the busboys, she pockets the rest. The waitress is accountable to her own customers and responsible for how much she makes.

In a typical Chinese restaurant, every waiter works with other waiters on all tables. They take orders when the guests come in and serve the dishes when they are ready. They watch out for each other and operate
with a keen awareness of what’s going on in the entire restaurant at all times. They know what the guests are missing and what the other waiters are working on. They are busy running around but also working smoothly together.

At the end of the evening, all the waiting staff sit down to share a meal and split the tips. In this type of team arrangement, everybody shares the same responsibilities and benefits. Everyone does everyone else’s job and feels responsible for the group. There is camaraderie and efficiency, but little personal service.

A Chinese banquet can last for two hours or more, so there is plenty of time for toasting. Red wine is for casual toasting, whereas Baijiu is the heavy weapon after everyone has had a chance to warm up. However, the ritual of having red wine with food is also modified with Chinese characteristics. Here the quintessential Western activity of savoring burgundy slowly is modified to accommodate the Chinese desire for sharing and group affinity. So instead of slowly sipping their red wine, Chinese people walk round the tables and clink their wine glasses to toast each other. They empty the nectar in big gulps, sometimes even downing full glasses. Never mind the ritual of slowly snifffing a burgundy to savor its fine bouquet and swirling it in the mouth to release its complex flavors of fruits and spices. The strong tannin aftertaste of a bottle of regal Bordeaux is now hopelessly conmingleed with the delicate flavors of a steamed giant grouper.

Despite a slowdown in economic growth, Chinese wine consumption continues to increase. A 2013 CNBC report statee that wine consumption in China is expected to double every five years. So in 2016 China should catch up in wine consumption with the US, which is currently the second largest wine-consuming country after France. With all the bottoms-up wine toasting there is very little risk to this forecast.

In greetings, most Chinese now use the common Western handshake. Young people may say “Hi” or hug each other as they do in the West. In the old days, men never shook hands. Instead they shook their clasped fists at a distance to greet each other. Touching another person was considered rude, and prohibited if the party was from the opposite sex.

However, like many other imports, the handshake has been modified with Chinese characteristics. To greet a senior person, a subordinate
should demonstrate subservience by softly squeezing his boss’s right hand instead of applying the customary vice grip. It is quite different than what is considered best practice in Western societies, where a crushing handshake and piercing eye contact projects sincerity, irrespective of the other person’s status. On the other hand, a dead-fish-like handshake connotes weakness and mendacity. In other words, this person cannot be trusted.

**The Chinese No**

The Chinese and many Asians don’t like to say the word no or give negative answers for fear of offending people. Hence they are masters at saying no without ever uttering the word. To deliver rejections without offending others is humility in practice and an art of getting along with others without appearing negative. However, because a Chinese no may not be a definitive no, one should not take no as an answer.

If a Chinese person is asked a question that requires a negative answer, he will often dance around the subject and not give a straight answer. Sometimes he may even give an ambivalent yes and no answer. To many Westerners, this reeks of dishonesty. However, this high-context answer is not limited to the Chinese; many other Asians use it routinely. The Japanese, for example, often turn silent to difficult questions so as to not embarrass each other.

Sometimes questions are asked and answered in a sort of word game to allow people to interact socially. They are not meant to carry much substance.

In the US, people greet each other by saying, “How’s it going?” Such a greeting does not require an elaborate answer. It is just what it is supposed to be, a greeting. No one would really want to stop and listen to the other person’s life story every time he asks the question “How are you?” Similarly, Chinese people greet each other by saying “Ni hao?” and then move on.

Another common Chinese greeting is “Have you eaten yet?” This shows just how important food is to the Chinese. The response to this query can be a bit more involved. An old lady in Beijing greets her neighbor by saying, “Have you eaten yet?” If the neighbor answers,
“Yes”, she would say, “Too bad, next time come have dinner with us.” However, if he answers, “Not yet”, she would say, “Then you should hurry home to have dinner with your family. They are waiting for you.” Of course, the person who is being asked knows this is just pleasantries and plays along.

People from other high-context cultures are also comfortable with a certain level of looseness and ambiguity when they interact with each other. Westerners who take it too seriously are often baffled by this kind of double talk.

The Chinese have many subtle ways of delivering negative messages, so they must be viewed in the proper context. Silence is a common response to a difficult question. If a Chinese person stays mum for a long time, you should consider other approaches. Many Chinese people also defer answering tough questions by pushing them into the future in the hope that by that time the question will be conveniently forgotten.

The following are some common no responses and their interpretations:

- It’s not easy for me to comment on this (这个不好说)—meaning you already know what the answer is but it is difficult for me to say it out loud without incriminating myself.
- It is not convenient for us to discuss it now (现在不方便讨论)—meaning factors outside of my control are standing in the way. Most likely the senior people have not made up their minds yet or there are some changes to the organization coming soon, so no one is in a position to comment. The Chinese like to use the phrase “not convenient” to give an answer when they really don’t have any. Encapsulated in the phrase are things that are important but may or may not be directly related to the subject of discussion. There may be technical, financial, personality or political reasons. It is up to you to figure out what they are.

The equivalent English expression is “Our system is down. You will hear from us as soon as the problem is fixed.” In other words, we don’t have an answer for you now; you should just wait.
• We need to wait for the appropriate moment (等适当时再再说)—meaning let’s defer the discussion until I am authorized to talk about it, which may be in a while or never.
• Let’s do some more research on this (需要再研究一下)—meaning we need to stew over this some more, or can you do better with the terms? It may also be a delaying tactic because the Chinese love to learn, especially if it’s done for them free.
• We should look at this again (要再看一下)—meaning I am not convinced you have the right stuff, or the boss has not indicated his preference, or you have not fully considered our position.
• This matter has some difficulties (这事情有难度)—meaning we can’t go on until you understand and do something about the hidden agenda. The ball is now in your court.
• There shouldn’t be a fundamental problem (这事情基本上没有问题)—meaning although we agree on the main items, the hidden agenda is holding us up.
• We need to be more diligent (要继续努力)—meaning you need to come up with more concessions or else the answer is a definite no.

Most Chinese people would immediately recognize what these replies stand for. They may work the channels to apply leverage or refocus their attention on something else more productive. Many other Asians also practice the subtle no answers. It’s not dishonesty but a contextual-rich way of communicating something negative without ever saying the word no.

Sometimes saying no is actually an indirect way of saying yes. Traditional Chinese culture venerates humility and modesty. A person should never boast about his own achievements to others. When an employee is praised by his boss for doing a good job, he may say something like, “Not really! It is really just average work”, even if he has slaved for months to complete the assignment with good results, and he is quite proud of them.

A Chinese parent may humbly say, “My son is just lucky. He is really just an average student”, even if the youngster has won an award in the
prestigious Intel Science Talent Search or has gained admission to an elite college.

When being presented with a gift of value or an important invitation, the Chinese recipient always appears reluctant to accept it. He politely refuses and pushes the gift back to the presenter, saying something like, “You are too generous. I really can’t accept it.” The presenter persists and pushes again. This push and parry routine repeats for at least two or three times before the recipient acts reluctantly and says, “Ok, if you really insist, I’ll do the safe keeping for you”, and leaves the package on the coffee table before he sees the guest off.

When asked to give a speech at a function, a Chinese person may say, “You are too kind. I am really not qualified to give such a speech at your esteemed function.” The requester would insist. After a few rounds of this back and forth, the speaker would reluctantly say, “Alright, I’ll try my best, but please don’t be embarrassed by my meager presentation.” This etiquette goes all the way back to the Zhou Dynasty.

To most Westerners, if someone insists on not accepting something then he must have some legitimate reasons. The person proffering a gift should respect that and try some other way to show respect. However, if they understand this part of the Chinese culture, they should definitely consider the indirect Chinese no as a possible maybe.

A Coinish Way of Living

The old Chinese copper coin, which is round and has a square hole in the middle, symbolizes just how a civilized person should conduct himself. He should be smooth and forgiving on the outside but a square on the inside. In other words, a man should be tough and principled on himself and his family but forgiving towards others.

Many Asians behave this way. Beneath their genteel appearances, there is toughness and resiliency. Westerners often interpret this kind of manner as meek, and push hard. If they venture too far into an Asian’s comfort zone, they will inevitably be surprised by the ferocious response.
Most Asians have a reserved manner. Unlike Westerners, who often speak their mind and wear their emotions on their face, Asians rarely display their emotions openly. They also don’t like to openly challenge others, or appreciate being challenged in the open. If they have to argue with someone they would rather do it in private.

The Chinese believe that challenging others exposes a person’s rough edges. It destroys harmony and doesn’t bode well for their cultivation. Westerners often interpret this as being passive or unsure.

Westerners are more comfortable speaking up at big meetings, where they often fight to make their point. To be able to state and defend one’s position clearly and forcefully when everybody else is speaking at the same time is the art of advanced verbal combat. Western politicians, in particular, are experts at hurling insults at their opponents to score political brownie points. This type of confrontational behavior is at odds with most Asians.

Because of the virtue of humility, many Asians are hesitant to speak up and be noticed, especially when there are senior people around. In traditional Asian culture, no one wants to be seen as the nail that sticks up, for doing so would invite a painful hammer strike. This is opposite from the West, where squeaky wheels would get the grease. So when Asians do speak, they often don’t make their point loud enough or fast enough, even though they may have a good idea. As a result, the fast-talking Westerners simply talk over them.

The ability to speak up is an important skill to have in today’s corporate arenas. In the fast-paced business environment, it is not enough to have good academic credentials and brilliant ideas; it is as important to leverage people and resources to turn your good ideas into reality. To do that, you must speak up, bring others to your cause, and lead with purpose and integrity. This salesmanship aspect of success is often lacking in Asians, who were brought up to be humble.

When I was managing Moody’s financial institutions ratings team in Asia, I had to modify a practice in our Japanese office. Moody’s had a team of very talented analysts in the Tokyo office covering major Japanese banks and insurance companies. When I was there, the team was led by a couple of very capable senior analysts who knew the Japanese financial system inside out and had great respect from institutional clients and
issuers. Given that this was Japan, they often dominated the internal discussions and the junior analysts rarely said anything. However, I knew from their written work that the juniors were strong analysts with interesting ideas, and we could benefit from their participation at meetings.

This was very different from my experience at the Moody’s New York office, where analysts were not only good at credit analysis but also were opinionated and outspoken. As Moody’s is an organization that prides itself on diversity and the free flow of opinions, I needed to find a way to reconcile these two different work cultures.

I instituted a practice in the Tokyo office where every one of our analysts had to express an opinion at meetings, regardless of his rank. One by one, starting from the lowest-ranking analyst, each was asked for his opinion and rationale regarding the credit issues being discussed. In the end, the lead analyst would make his rating recommendations and the votes were tallied. After we had done this for a few awkward meetings, the junior members, including several women, became more vocal and confident at expressing themselves. The resultant analysis also became richer.

Managers in hierarchical organizations should find practical means to encourage their team members to contribute freely and professionally to the organizational cause.

As a Matter of Face

Face is an important facet of Asian life and a major component of its social etiquette. It is much more than just what you see in the mirror; it is how Asians view themselves through the eyes of others. For an Asian person, face is positively related to his self-esteem, and his ability to function effectively in a society that depends on mutual acceptance and support. A person’s face should be firm and radiant, without too many imperfections. If it is blemished, he will feel self-conscious in front of others. His productivity and relationships will suffer as a result.

To the Chinese, if other people respect them, they gain face; if others compliment them, their faces glow; if others challenge them openly, they lose face.
Losing face is akin to losing power and influence in a society that thrives on mutual support. If a person of authority loses face, he is damaged goods. His acquaintances will stop coming by to visit him, and it will be difficult for him to seek favors from them ever again. If one person has caused another to lose face, it will be remembered as a terrible insult and the resentment will not go away easily.

How much face a person is entitled to is directly correlated with his social status. Therefore the higher up a person is in the social hierarchy, the more face he is entitled to.

In Chinese temples, devotees often paste gold foils on their idols’ faces. That is because, as deities, they deserve the best face. Therefore when a person compliments another person, it is often referred to as pasting gold on that person’s face. On the other hand, people at the lower end of the social strata are not given much face.

When the US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, a staunch anti-communist, refused to greet Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in Geneva in 1954, it caused Zhou to lose face badly in public. This famous cold war episode angered the Chinese so much that it helped to fan their resentment towards Americans. It was not until 1972, when President Nixon visited China, that the Sino-American relationship began to thaw from the deep freeze.

Nixon understood perfectly how important face was to the Chinese. When Air Force One touched down in Beijing for his historic visit, Nixon made sure that his entourage stayed inside the plane when he and his wife, Pat, walked down to greet the awaiting Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. The two then shook hands warmly as if they were long-lost friends who hadn’t seen each other for ages (they had never met before).

Nixon wanted to make sure that he, as the US President and leader of the free world, showed Zhou the proper respect and gave him plenty of face in front of his Chinese audience. That would make Zhou’s job of convincing his party colleagues easier, and that in turn would help to make Nixon’s China trip more successful. A simple gesture by Nixon went a long way towards repairing the delicate relationship.

Because of humility, blowing your own horn is frowned upon in much of Asia. In contrast, Westerners, especially Americans, do not hesitate to trumpet their own accomplishments. After all, if a person does not blow
his own horn in a society where everyone’s primary objective is to look after number one, who else is going to do it?

Because a Chinese person cannot give himself face, he must get it from someone else, preferably from someone more powerful than he is.

When a foreign dignitary praises a project or development, he gives tremendous face to the Chinese host, irrespective of how perfunctory his comments may be. Photos taken with dignitaries instantly give face to a person, notwithstanding they are routinely taken at large gatherings for a small fee.

Strategic possessions can also bolster a person’s face. An executive may dress shabbily, yet his office shelves are stacked with massive volumes of bound technical manuals and important literary works. The impressive book collection bodes well for his intellect and enhances his face, even though they may never have been opened.

Because face is so important to the Chinese, they can be either its biggest promoter or its biggest abuser. When Chinese managers want to promote a project, they often hold a big ceremony, sometimes called a swearing-in ceremony, and invite all kinds of senior officials and dignitaries to participate. The bigger the crowd of luminaries, the more face it gives to the organizers and the greater the likelihood that the project will be completed successfully.

At the gathering, attendees all give flowery speeches, heaping praise on the project and its team members. There is plenty of backslapping and camaraderie to go round. This ritual raises the project profile, bolsters the face of team members and makes them feel that they are part of an important undertaking. However, there is also another important function.

This kind of ritual also serves as an unwritten social contract that binds the attendees together for the same goal. This is essential for the Chinese world, for no participant would want to default on his commitment and, as a result, lose face in front of his peers.

Western companies also have big kickoff meetings before launching important projects. However, these are usually reserved for team members only, unless it is for a major product launch, where all sales people would gather to share battle cries. Even so, it doesn’t quite have the same significance as the Chinese swearing-in ceremonies.

Because face is so important to Chinese managers, they are masters at using it both as a tool to motivate and as a weapon to punish. Like
parents, Chinese bosses don’t praise their employees much. So on the rare occasions when they do, it gives plenty of face to those receiving it.

A common management trick is to give employees plenty of face in front of their colleagues, such as giving them all kinds of small rewards or by praising them in public gatherings. In a typical awards ceremony, the honored recipients, with red boutonnières pinned on their lapels, proudly march up to the stage to collect their awards from the headman, amid thunderous applause forms their colleagues. The ceremony gives them face in front of their peers, which fosters their loyalty as employees.

On the other hand, managers with ill intentions often use face to humiliate those they wish to discredit. In this situation, face can become a deadly psychological weapon.

Tarnishing the face of a Chinese person is akin to stripping him of his dignity or, worse, denying him of his raison d’être.

Because of cultural reasons, Chinese managers are often reluctant to engage in direct confrontation. Therefore they are masters at applying indirect means of influence, including face and group pressure, to achieve their management objectives. Often, large crowds are directed to do the management’s dirty work, such as killing someone with a borrowed knife.

During the Cultural Revolution, a decade-long self-inflicted calamity that lasted from 1966 to 1976, youthful Chinese Red Guards often staged large rallies to humiliate Mao’s political opponents. The Red Guards, who were mainly young students, would normally not have commanded much respect in patriarchal Chinese society. However, in large crowds and incited by loyalists, the dynamics reversed and they became ruthless tormentors.

Chinese intellectuals, including many prominent teachers and professors, writers and artists, and other so-called class enemies, were denounced and persecuted in this way during the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards often dragged these undesirables on stage and accused them of all kinds of misdeeds, while inciting the crowds to go along. To add insult to injury, they made the denounced individuals parade through the streets wearing degrading placards and dunce’s caps.

The seniority and reputation these fine folk assiduously accumulated over decades of hard work and sacrifices were instantly removed by this humiliating exercise. Worse, it was done at the hands of teenagers, who at more normal times would have been studying hard to emulate those
they persecuted. Many could not endure the humiliation and serious loss of face, and some committed suicide. It was a national tragedy.

Comparatively speaking, Westerners judge themselves by who they are and what they have accomplished, and less by how others view them. Therefore they may find it difficult to appreciate the Chinese (and Asian) obsession with face. Americans are brought up as individuals. Many of them also possess a self-deprecating sense of humor. They are able to smear mud on their own faces and joke about it. It’s a part of the culture.

It is important for Western managers to find out ahead of time where the Chinese person they deal with sits in the corporate hierarchy so as to provide face-appropriate treatments for him. For example, it is imperative that whatever the guests are being offered, such as a reception and banquet, rest and relaxation trips, and souvenirs, is at least equal to, and preferably better than, what their peers are given.

It would be a serious loss of face for the guest and a faux pas for the host if a Chinese executive was feted at a restaurant in a four-star hotel while his competitor dined at a five-star establishment. While these issues may seem trivial to Westerners, they are hugely important to the Chinese because of face.

Regardless of how fast China is modernizing, face will always remain an important part of people’s lives. Understanding the importance of face can help foreigners to appreciate the broader context of the country’s culture and navigate its befuddling ritual landscapes. For those Chinese venturing overseas, it behooves them to understand that locals may not be as sensitive as they are about face. Therefore they should be less concerned about their own face, and strive to take things more at face value.

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