

Unit 4: Gestures and Taboos

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Importance of gesture/taboo knowledge for East Asian linguists
- Helpful cross-cultural perspectives possessed by military personnel
- Necessity of personal restraint and effort to become culturally adept
- Universal cultural message of the smile
- Foundational attitudes helpful in dealing with East Asian peoples
- Greetings, gestures, and eating 'dos and taboos'
- Cautions military linguists should employ
 - China's long-standing tradition of isolation from other cultures

Identify

- Collectivism
- King Ashoka
- "Face"
- Isolationist tradition
- Agnostic, Exorcism
- Guru, Reticent behavior
- T.E. Lawrence, Field-Marshal Viscount Slim
- General Joseph W. Stilwell

Realize

- Magnitude of customs and taboos within East Asia
- Importance of humility, sincerity and restraint when working cross-culturally
- Overarching impact and long history of Chinese manners and customs in East Asia
- Importance of community and family in East Asian societies

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Author John Hersey, in his novel *The Call*, identifies many Chinese customs which are directly the opposite of ours--the seat of honor being the left rather than right; mourning clothes being white instead of black; serpents, dragons as symbols of wisdom and benevolence. *"At the heart of it all, the biblical message of 'sin'--utterly, utterly foreign to the Chinese."*

--John Hersey, *The Call*, p. 245



Manners, morals, customs and taboos--it is impossible to know all the elaborate and complex rules which govern interactions within a given society or culture. The task overwhelms.

The purpose here is not to rephrase guidance given in manners and customs texts. Rather, this section first outlines general perspectives military personnel can take in approaching a new culture. Then it treats common attitudes, greetings, gestures, eating practices and cautions to employ when dealing with East Asian peoples.

I. General Perspectives

1. Confidence As members of the United States Armed Forces, we maintain a sensitivity to culture whenever we put on our uniforms.

Higher ranking officers receive salutes, a sign of respect due to their rank. Noncommissioned officers exert hands on guidance and supervision. The titles, sergeant and petty officer suggest a different--though no less important--type of respect. These courtesies recognize varied cultures within the military.



Applied to dealing with peoples of other lands and societies, these same habits and respect for authority become invaluable.

Desert Storm/Shield/Farewell authenticated the sensitive and knowledgeable cross-cultural abilities possessed by our armed forces personnel. More than 560,000 American service members deployed to the theater. Customs and traditions of Saudi Arabia were drastically different than those of the United States.

Yet what happened during the deployment? Writes logistician Lt. Gen Pagonis in his account of the conflict, "*Nothing*."

There was not a single incident of deliberate misconduct on the part of our service members...our soldiers showed great understanding and compassion... [They] demonstrated that they were smart, and talented, and flexible." (Moving Mountains, p. 228.)

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The Gulf conflict demonstrated the certainty that, when put to the test, training prepares airmen, soldiers, sailors and marines to deal with sensitivities of other cultures.



2. Restraint T.E. Lawrence, British adventurer, writer and Arabist of the early 20th century, described this sense of tempered behavior. "*Keep always on your guard,*" wrote Lawrence, "*...be a little stiff at first.*"

We may feel the best way to get along is to imitate, in some ways, the conduct of East Asians in order to be accepted. The safest course of action is often to imitate. The best approach however, is to restrain our impulsive, up front, forthright, let-it-all-hang-out behaviors.

Treating individuals as if they were entering our living rooms--by dispensing courtesy and grace--goes a long way to cement solid relations with others. Possessing a cautious and restrained demeanor--always observing and seeking to learn--does much to promote meaningful interaction. Recognizing the long-standing, tradition-bound nature of East Asian cultures assists.

Harmony then comes in possessing a nonjudgmental frame of mind. Such restraint helps avoid actions which are shocking or insulting.

3. Wholehearted Effort General Joseph W. (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell, the senior American commander in the China/Burma/India theater of operations during WW II, served for many years in China. Throughout his lifelong association with China, General Stilwell absorbed--through observation, travel and linguistic study--much of Chinese culture.

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As outlined by Foreign Area Officer Major Roy Kamphausen, the wholehearted effort demonstrated by General Stilwell is "a *model worth emulating.*"

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"First, [General Stilwell] was a top-notch linguist.

Second, he was an irrepressible traveler and adventurer.

Third, Stilwell also had an unshakable belief in the fighting ability of the Chinese soldier if he was given the proper equipment and adequately trained.

Finally, Stilwell was known as a friend of China, though he did not mince words if he found problems with the Chinese leadership, his deep knowledge of Chinese language and culture, as well as long years of association and devotion to the cause of reform in the Chinese military earned him a deep respect..." (Trip Report, U.S. Embassy, Beijing, China, 10 Sep 1996.)

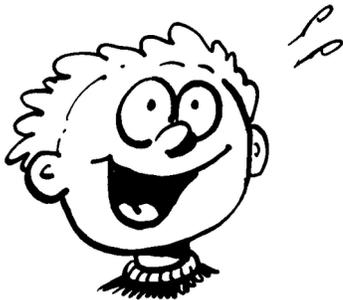
"Your success will be just proportioned to the amount of mental effort you devote to it."

-- T. E. Lawrence



4. The "Ultimate Gesture" Business advisor Roger Axtell, in his book Gestures, The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World, describes this universal symbol. Called the "ultimate gesture," it is rarely misunderstood, releases positive energy, and assists in the most complicated of situations.

"What is this singular signal, this miracle [manner], this giant of all gestures?"



It is, quite simply, the smile.

Use it freely. Use it often." (p. 113.)

II. Overall Attitudes

The following general principles apply when dealing with peoples of East and Southeast Asia.

1. Recognize Long-standing Traditions In Alan Burgess' delightful novel, The Inn of the Sixth Happiness, based upon the true story of English missionary Gladys Aylward's adventures in Asia during WW II, the Mandarin of Yancheng speaks to Gladys of the long history of civilization in China.

"The Mandarin placed his slender hands in the wide silken sleeves of his robe.

'We have produced great art and great philosophy. The Mandarin speech of China is more beautiful and descriptive than any other in the world. Our poets were singing when Britain was but a rocky outpost on the edge of the known world and America was inhabited solely by redskinned aborigines. Yet you come to teach us a new faith? I find it very strange.' (p. 82.)

Just as the Mandarin counseled Gladys, so we would do well to recognize that manners and customs in Asia go back to the beginnings of civilization. Long-established practices and conventions--fashioned over centuries--govern interactions between individuals.

2. Practice Civility and Respect Defer to those of higher status and age. Recognize those who bow when greeting. Showing such respect acknowledges someone else as having more experience of life or spiritual practice. The attitude portrayed is one of honor and humility.

John Fairbank's essay "Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience" in Chinese Ways in Warfare describes the ideal, superior person in Confucian thought.

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The individual who practiced moral and appropriate conduct (civility and respect) developed an attractive prestige in the face of others. Moral authority--a sort of personal power--was the result. A courteous and gracious attitude was crucial to this practiced attitude of respect. (See pp. 6-7, Chinese Ways in Warfare.)

3. Show Kindness



Most cultures generously accept people who show consideration of others, who maintain fairness in clarifying their views, and who model a tolerant approach which seeks peace.

4. Practice Humility Former President Richard M. Nixon, comparing experiences with the Chinese to those of the former Soviet Union, found the Communist Chinese lack of conceit and arrogance a refreshing change. Constantly, relates President Nixon, the Chinese showed self-criticism and a desire for advice on how to improve themselves. (See The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, Volume II, p. 41.) We would do well to demonstrate such humility--the demeanor which models kindness and forbids being harsh, rude or even speaking loudly to others.

5. Seek Moderation Self-restraint is central. The Buddhist avoidance of extremes--either an overt pursuit of passionate world desire, or an austere discipline practiced by ascetics--which enables individuals to exhibit moderation and grace, applies.

Loud, untactful, or boisterous behavior is usually regarded as being in very poor taste.

6. Be Sincere A kind, honest, humble approach--free of arrogant and overbearing attitude--naturally opens the way for agreeable exchanges. Writes Dr. Nydell,



"Foreigners are forgiven a great deal--even conservative people make allowances, particularly when they know your motives are good. The essential thing is to make a sincere, well-meaning effort to adapt and understand."
(Understanding Arabs, p. 112.)

7. Remember the Group As outlined in Encountering the Chinese, collectivism, whereby individuals subordinate their personal goals to those of a collective, characterizes China's culture. The smallest unit of society is not the individual, rather the collective. Whether work unit, family, or village neighbors, the community is the important concept.

8. Seek Harmony Intergroup harmony and avoidance of overt conflict in interpersonal relationships--especially with family members, close friends and colleagues--is a matter of supreme concern. For harmonious interactions with civilians or United Nations/Allied soldiers from Buddhist countries, understanding of general attitudes and specific practices, as illustrated in the following guidance from the "First Separate Kalinga Edict" of King Ashoka, the Buddhist convert and ruler of India from 272-236 B.C., helps.

"Therefore it is desirable that you should practice impartiality, but it cannot be attained if you are inclined to habits of jealousy, irritability, harshness, hastiness, obstinacy, laziness, or [weariness of body/mind due to strain]...The basis of all this is constant avoidance of irritability and hastiness in your business..." (As quoted in Lucien Stryck, The World of the Buddha, p. 242.)

III. East Asian Manners and Customs

1. Face Field-Marshal Viscount Slim, in his book Defeat Into Victory, his account of actions in the China/Burma/India theater during WW II, described his affection for the Chinese soldier. "Courage, endurance, cheerfulness and an eye for country" were basic traits. To deal effectively with the Chinese, Field-Marshal Slim found, the most important thing was realization of "face." He defined this term as



"...the respect in which one [Chinese soldier] is held by others. In practice, if a proposal can be put to a [Chinese soldier] so that carrying it out will enhance his prestige among his associates he will almost invariably accept it." (pp. 64-65)

Field-Marshal Slim also pointed out that the concept of "face" is also a very human trait. Concern for what neighbors think is not just limited to Chinese culture.

The concept of face, the perception that others have of you, while applying to some degree in most cultures, is a distinct characteristic of many Asian societies. Face connotes an avoidance of embarrassment, failure, defeat or contradiction.

Due to the emphasis placed upon harmony, tolerance and solidarity, saving one's face and that of other group members--in particular the superior--is of central importance.

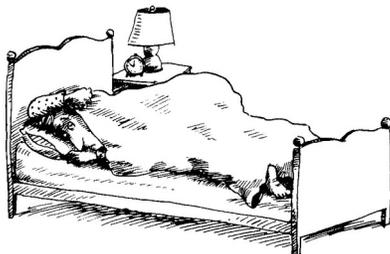
By using tact, focusing on the group rather than individual persons, and avoiding self-centered, monopolized conversations, we display an awareness of this important notion of face.



Authors Hu Wenzhong and Cornelius Grove give the following guidelines concerning face. (See Encountering the Chinese, pp. 121-122.)

- Be deferential to those above you in age or position.
- Be considerate to those below you in age or position.
- Do not expect the Chinese to act contrary to group norms.
- Do not insist that your hosts respect your rights or opinions.
- Do not in any way defy your hosts' accepted moral standards.
- Do not show anger; avoid confrontations.
- If you must say no, try to do so as tactfully as possible.
 - If you must criticize, do so in private and with expressions of positive regard.

2. Isolation One of China's long-standing traditions is that of isolation.



Seeing themselves as at the center of the earth, throughout her history China often regarded outsiders as barbarians. This perspective still affects, in some way, East Asian views of others.

Personal qualities of dignity, reserve, patience, persistence and a sensitivity to and respect for Chinese customs and temperament are built through

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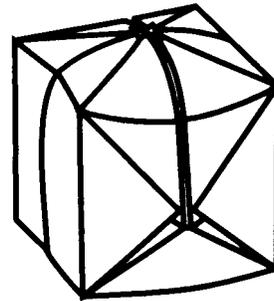
mutual respect and admiration. Behaving in a noncondescending manner and avoiding loud, boisterous behavior also enhance cross-cultural relationships.

Respect for customs and temperament applies also to religious practice. Authors Philip Harris and Robert Moran, in their book entitled Managing Cultural Differences, state:

"Westerners should never denigrate traditional beliefs and practices that are still fundamental to the culture. Avoid references and jokes about superstition, spirits, seances, voodoo, whatever..."
(p. 409.)

3. Greetings

- Handshakes, but more often a slight bow, are appropriate when meeting someone. A person's formal, full title will often be used in introductions. The Chinese may not smile on being introduced. This emotional reticence is based on a tradition of keeping feelings inside rather than openly showing emotions.
- If giving a gift or business card, use both hands to either give or receive.
- Etiquette dictates declining a gift for up to three times, even though a person may desire to receive it.

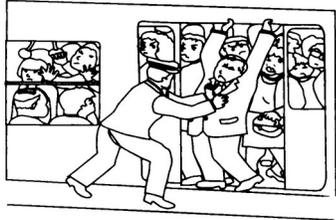


4. Gestures

- Seating arrangements are important, with the guest at the head of the room, facing the door.
- Don't be surprised by enthusiastic applause. When applauded, it is customary to return by hand clapping.

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- Silence, a sign of politeness and contemplation, is a virtue. Do not be put off by periods of silence in discussions. Take care when interrupting others.
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- Before deployments, determine the ground rules you and your unit will follow regarding drinking with host nation partners, patronage/acceptance of gifts, and frequenting with women/men. Alcoholic beverage toasts may be forced upon all participants.
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- Recognize the Chinese are not a "touching" society. They may appear more reticent, retiring, reserved or shy when compared with North Americans. Public displays of affection are very rare. Avoid being physically demonstrative, especially with older people and/or those more senior in position or rank.
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- In smaller communities, visitors may be subject to much curiosity and stares, especially if fair-haired.
 - Ask permission of local people before taking photographs.
 - When boarding public buses or trains, expect some shoving or pushing. This is 'all in the course of things' and requires no apology (given or received).
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- Maintain good posture. Avoid slouching, putting feet on desks and chairs, and using feet to point or move things around.
- Personal space for friends is much less than in the West. If engaged in friendly discussion, expect a closer spatial distance. If talking with a stranger or limited acquaintance, expect a greater social distance.
- Use the open hand (not finger) for pointing. Call for someone by palm facing downward with fingers moved in a scratching motion.
- Although governments may try to cut down on the habit, spitting and blowing the nose without use of a handkerchief may be common on public streets. This is considered an act of personal hygiene, not a crude manner.
- To suck air in quickly and audibly between the teeth is a common reaction to something surprising or a difficult request. If such is the case, modify the request made to avoid a potentially embarrassing situation.

5. Eating The following guidance, adapted from Gestures by Roger Axtell, applies to eating practice.



- Though the custom may be changing, tipping is considered an insult.
- Toothpicks are often available for use during and after a meal. Cover your mouth when poking or picking.
- Refusing food may be considered impolite. Move unwanted items to the side of your dish.

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- Begin eating after the host picks up his or her chopsticks. Watch your host for tips on use of chopsticks.

Concerning the finer points of chopstick use, the following applies:

- A host may rub wooden chopsticks together first before eating. This removes any splinters from the utensils. It is impolite for guests to do so as it suggests you have been given a cheap, rough chopstick.
- Use either a pair of serving chopsticks to take food from a communal dish, or allow your host to serve. Do not take food portions with sticks you have brought to your mouth.
- Due to cultural connotations, do not stick chopsticks straight up in your cooked rice.
- Carry on if you drop a chopstick on the floor. Some consider this a positive sign--an invitation to another meal.
- Use chopsticks for eating, not sucking.
- When a knife is unavailable, lift morsels of food to your mouth and bite off a piece.
- When finished, place your sticks parallel across your bowl.



In their book, Encountering the Chinese, Hu Wenzhong and Cornelius Grove also identify (p. 37) the following:

Smacking lips, slurping liquids and other mouth noises; bringing a bowl to one's lips; smoking at the dinner table; spitting onto the floor--all may be expected behavior around an informal Chinese meal.



"Dream, think, become."

