

# BECOMING A JUNZI

## Background of Interpersonal Communication in China

By Jessica Stowell

*It is a rare thing for glib speech and an insinuating appearance to accompany authoritative conduct.*

Analects 1.3

**It is authoritative conduct (*ren*) that enables one to become an exemplary person—that is, to become a junzi—the person who brings order to the community through effective communication.<sup>1</sup>**

Chinese interpersonal communication is informed by Confucian cultural values, influenced by theories such as Xun Zi's ideas on persuasion, and transformed by modern necessities. The objective of the following essay is to introduce readers to a guiding set of Confucian-influenced beliefs—a canon—that collectively represents what has traditionally been considered appropriate principles in Chinese interpersonal communication. Ideals and actual practice can often sharply diverge, but there is a scholarly consensus that key Confucian beliefs have profoundly affected Chinese interpersonal relations.

Wimal Dissanayake, who created a foundation for the Asiatic model of communication studies, maintains that Asian classical texts constitute a storehouse of communication concepts and propositions that have yet to be mined for understanding the way Chinese communicate. "Asian countries . . . have produced rich and complex civilizations that have grown over the centuries and no civilization is possible without a vigorous system of communication."<sup>2</sup> Before sampling those classical texts for clues to Chinese communication, a brief examination of the controlling principles of Chinese communication should be useful context.

### CONTROLLING PRINCIPLES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

A guiding Chinese assumption of communication is that "the universe is a great whole in transition that revolves in an endless cycle of transformation." Therefore, the development of relationships through communication is never completed. Communication is mutual and interdependent. Communication competence is the ability to develop and keep harmonious relationships between communication partners in a continuous process of mutual dependency.<sup>3</sup>

#### MISTRUST OF VERBAL SKILLS

Being members of a high context society, where actions are more important than the spoken words, most Chinese do not place high priority on oral communication skills. This is not to indicate that they lack a good command of the language or the ability to communicate ideas effectively—quite the opposite. It does mean, however, that communication classes are not taught in common schools, and only recently, but rarely, in universities.

Being articulate is associated with negative expressions, such as "having a 'honey-mouth.'" Chinese are taught from childhood to be cautious about words. Communication is an irreversible process; since maintaining harmonious relationships is the ultimate goal, any

behaviors that might not be harmonious ought to be avoided. A common Chinese strategy is that "one should use the eyes and ears, not the mouth." A wise and trustworthy person is not the one who talks a lot, but the one who listens, watches, and curbs his/her ability to speak.

#### ORIENTATION TO COMMUNICATION

Communication specialist June Ock Yum asserts that typical East Asian communication is based upon five concepts:<sup>4</sup>

**Particularistic relationships.** Instead of applying the same universal rules to everybody, as Westerners do, East Asians evaluate and respond to relationships according to the level of intimacy, the status of the person involved, and the particular context.

**Reciprocity,** an essential facet of *ren* (humanism) is a core concept in Confucianism, just as individualism is a core concept of the North American culture. Under this system, the person does not calculate what he/she gives and receives. That would be to think about immediate personal profits, which is the opposite of the Confucian principle of mutual faithfulness.

**In-group/out-group distinctions** are usually clear in East Asian communication. Mutual dependence as prescribed by the Confucian principle of faithfulness, loyalty, and justice requires affiliation with relatively small and tightly knit groups of people over long periods. In-group members make distinctions between language use among their members versus those in the out-group.

**Informal Intermediaries.** Because the distinctions between in-group and out-group members are so strict, it is critical to have an informal intermediary to help initiate a new relationship in East Asia, in contrast to the Western intermediary who works by contract, such as the marriage counselor, the negotiator, or the lawyer.

**Overlap of public and personal relationships.** The Confucian concept of *yi* (faithfulness, loyalty to friends) leads to erasure of the boundary between personal obligations and professional commitments. The traditional East Asian ideal is that one conducts business transactions not merely as contractual procedures, but also as expressions of personal relations. Yum proposes a method for understanding East Asian communication by pairing the concepts of *ren* and *li* (propriety). The essence of Confucian humanism is to treat other people with respect and deference; propriety provides ways to express humaneness.

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Confucius stated: “Practicing self restraint and returning repeatedly to li (propriety) is the way to become ren (humane).” In other words, if we were engaged in respectful and sincere patterns of interaction with another, we would develop a sincere human feeling toward the person.<sup>5</sup>

## APPROACH TO THE LANGUAGE

Theoretically, the ultimate goal of communication in Chinese culture is to preserve harmony. Harmony (*he*) is the foundation of Chinese culture; he denotes harmony, peace, unity, kindness, and amiableness. Ideally, the Chinese are inspired to live in harmony with family members, to be on good terms with neighbors, to achieve unity with the surrounding environment, and to make peace with other nations. A state of he can be achieved if one maintains appropriate role relationships, is other oriented, and accepts the established hierarchy.<sup>6</sup>

Remember the Beijing Olympics motto: One World, One Dream. Well-publicized problems with minorities notwithstanding, Chinese President Hu Jintao instructed the country’s leading officials and Party cadres to place “building a harmonious society” top on their work agenda. “A harmonious society should feature democracy, the rule of law, equity, justice, sincerity, amity, and vitality.”<sup>7</sup>

Most Chinese speakers perceive nature and the universe differently from most Westerners, with language having a profound effect upon their belief systems. Discourse style, and the use of differentiated codes in conversation, reveal insight into the Chinese system.

## DISCOURSE STYLE

Native speakers of English tend to provide the thesis of a story and then give relevant information. Chinese discourse style dictates that speakers provide minor contextual points of the story before advancing the thesis. Rather than relying on a preview statement to orient the listener, Chinese rely heavily on contextual clues. It is a listener-responsible language rather than a speaker-responsible language such as English. In a Chinese conversation, the listener is forced to construct the meaning, and usually does so, based on shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener.<sup>8</sup>

## DIFFERENTIATED CODES

Chinese language reflects specialized roles of people. For example, a sister-in-law is called by various names, depending on whether she is the older or younger brother’s wife, or the wife’s sister. Aunts, uncles, and cousins are named in a similar fashion. Thus, a father’s sister is *gu*, a mother’s sister is *yi*, an uncle’s wife is *shen*, and so on. These differentiated codes are evidence of the importance of relationships in China. If a person is important, we have a special name for him/her.

## COMMUNICATION IN THE ANALECTS

What did China’s greatest teacher have to say about interpersonal communication? The *Analects* focuses not on the process of communication but what one talks about. Words and speaking are referenced in seventeen books in the following four categories.<sup>9</sup>

**Words define and reflect moral development.** For Confucius, the single most important aspect of speaking is how moral character is reflected in the words one uses. “He who does not know the force of words, cannot know men” (XX, 3). The *Analects* note that one of three kinds of pleasure is to discuss the excellence of others (XVI,5); speaking well of others leads to a gradual improvement of moral development.

**Beautiful words lacking substance are to be blamed.** “Beautiful words, insinuating manners, are lacking in human-heartedness (ren) (I, 3).” The real power of words rests on the attributes of sincerity and truthfulness. Thus, to be a well-cultivated superior person, one must enrich the inside before expressing oneself.

**Actions are more important than words.** “The superior man is ashamed of his speaking exceeding his actions (XIV, 29).” In giving advice to one of his students who had a loose tongue, Confucius said that a virtuous man is one who is hesitant in his speech (XII, 3).

**Appropriate speaking relies upon rules of propriety.** Propriety implies that the speaker needs to be attuned to emotions of the listener, as well as the context. Different ways of speaking should be applied for different orders of relationship. While people may consider frankness as an expression of sincerity, Confucius contended that frankness without rules of propriety led to rudeness (VIII, 2). There are three kinds of errors in speaking: speaking before the time to speak, not speaking when it is time to speak, and speaking without observing the superior man’s countenance (XVI, 6). According to Confucius, speaking in a discriminating fashion reflects levels of moral development and is achieved only after life-long learning.

## ANCIENT CONCEPTS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: XUN ZI’S PERSUASIVE TECHNIQUES

Examination of a later text, *Xun Zi*, sheds further light on oral communication. Hardheaded realism marks the philosophy of Xun Zi (298–238 BCE), a great Confucian thinker who wrote that all that is good in society ... is the product of social restraint and the faculty of discrimination acting upon, training, and directing the crude animal nature of man. Discourse takes on a moral function when it becomes the vehicle for advocating righteousness. Persuasive techniques are needed to move people into action then as now.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Xun Zi speaks eloquently of “communicability.” The gentleman rejects labored discourse, but the fool seizes upon it and makes it his treasure.<sup>11</sup>

In a rare look at what we would now label presentation skills, Xun Zi discusses techniques in the context of persuasion:

*Introduce the topic with dignity and earnestness, dwell on it with modesty and sincerity, hold to it with firmness and strength, illustrate its meaning with parables and praiseworthy examples, elucidate its significance by making distinctions and drawing boundaries, and present it with exuberance and ardor, treasure it, value it, emphasize it, and vivify it, what you say will always and invariably be well received.*<sup>12</sup>

## SOPHISTS’ INFLUENCE ON THE EMPEROR

Concern about “face” (the self-image) has always been a critical element in the communication style of most Chinese people. When engaged in discourse, the speaker tries to accomplish his goal without causing embarrassment to the listener or himself. Mutual attention to face is a universal feature of social interaction and is especially critical when interacting with someone of a higher rank. An example would be exchanges between emperors and their advisors.<sup>13</sup> Huang has investigated

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such a body of writings from 722–221 BCE; forty detailed records of regulative interactions between the emperors and their advisors (Sophists) revealed a fascinating balance of influence and face-saving by Sophists, whose lives were in danger if their messages were offensive to the emperor.

The Sophists used various types of indirectness to camouflage their regulative messages, sometimes embedding their points in the forms of historical cases, fables, short tales, or riddles. Some of them even played little tricks to lead the emperor to realize his wrong doings. Another way to scold the emperor indirectly was using someone else as the “whipping boy.” Expressing regulative messages in an indirect way could render them more palatable to the emperor, and lessen the speakers’ own accountability.

Although the material is 2,500 years old, the theory is still valid: regulate the behavior of others while maintaining face. The delicate balance persists: mutual attention to face is a universal feature of social interaction.

### CONFUCIAN CULTURAL VALUES

Michael Bond, a Canadian who lived in Asia for twenty-five years, developed four patterns of behavior with the aid of Chinese researchers, based on Confucian values, which he believes guide the actions of Chinese in their communication exchanges. They are integration, human-heartedness, moral discipline, and Confucian work dynamism. Twenty-three countries were rated on Bond’s Confucian Value Dimensions. China scored by far the highest, followed by Hong Kong (one year before HK was returned to China), and Taiwan. While China scored +252, the US score was sixty-one.<sup>14</sup>

**Integration, a sense of social stability**—Behaviors that create social stability by a display of tolerance, non-competitiveness, interpersonal harmony, and group solidarity.

**Human-heartedness**—a sense of gentleness and compassion: Expressions of patience, courtesy, and kindness toward others.

**Moral discipline**—a sense of restraint and moderation in one’s activities: Following the middle way, regarding personal desires as a negative attribute, and attempting to keep disinterested and pure in activities and relationships.

**Confucian work dynamism**—a person’s orientation toward life and work: persistence, thriftiness, a sense of shame, and status differences within interpersonal relationships.

Confucian work dynamism may account, in part, for the economic success of the five dragons—Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. Values related to it are the hierarchical relationship which teaches that we owe respect to those with more rank, the family system where Chinese perceive the family as a microcosm of the village and state, *ren* (warm human feelings between people), and the emphasis on education.<sup>15</sup>

Chen maintains that the influence of Confucian work dynamism in organizations results in certain communication behaviors, including explicit interpersonal communication rules, superiors who show concern for employees in exchange for loyalty, employees who are easily motivated toward team-building, intermediaries used to avoid confrontation, a vague boundary between personal and public life, and, a high value placed on education and training.<sup>16</sup>

Chen finds the harmonious behaviors firmly in place in negotiations. Many Chinese tend to use courtesy before force, reciprocate to

courtesy, display emotional control, avoid aggressive behavior, avoid saying no in order to save face, place importance on relationships, and distinguish between in-group and out-group relationships.

### CURRENT COMMUNICATION PRACTICES ABANDONMENT OF CONFUCIAN VALUES?

Lucy Xing Lu investigated the philosophical motivations and the implementation of Confucian values in 1995. In Confucian doctrine, self-development and individualistic thinking and acting were not encouraged. The notion of individualism was equated to selfishness in the Mao Zedong era (1949–1976), and is still, in some ways, perceived negatively today.<sup>17</sup>

Even though he condemned Confucius, ironically Mao perpetuated the values of living a simple life and having a low level of material aspirations. This perspective is often no longer considered a virtue. To be rich and have the ability to make money is encouraged, praised, and honored. Since the 1980s, China has adopted the ideology of pragmatism. Maoist Communism has been replaced by the no-nonsense philosophy of Deng Xiaoping who did not care about the ‘color of the cat’ so long as it catches “mice.”<sup>18</sup> By the 1990s, the economy and middle class were burgeoning to the point that traditional values seemed no longer to be the core concern of the Chinese, but over the last decade, there has been a revival of Confucian ideology. Confucian schools for children and adults have reopened, the government has endorsed Confucian values, and books about Confucianism are best sellers.

How do these changes affect interpersonal exchanges in China? Lu maintains that Confucian values are still in place when dealing with family and close friends. Contemporary Chinese regard friendship and family bonds as more important than money. Confucian values of devotion to family and loyalty to friends are still working within the in-group members.

However, many Chinese do not use the same means of social relations with their family as they do with the out-groups where manipulation and gift giving are becoming much more common.

### GUANXI. A CHINESE WAY OF PERSUASION

Chinese society places heavy importance on *guanxi* (interpersonal relationships, connections) and reciprocity (a mutual exchange of feelings, favors, and gifts). More and more, *guanxi* is developed for self-interest; the choice of a friend must be someone who is potentially useful for personal gains.

Chinese depend largely on *guanxi* to achieve personal goals and thus communicate indirectly. Therefore, compliance-gaining messages are expected to be indirect and subtle. The three methods most frequently used for gaining compliance were *anshi* (hinting), *yi shen zuo ze* (setting an example by one’s own action), and *tou qi suo hao* (feeding a person on what he or she relishes). The adoption of the three seemed to reflect a general concern for *guanxi* in Chinese culture.<sup>19</sup>

### COMMUNICATION OF THE ONLY-CHILD GENERATION

Mei Zhong’s study of only children in the PRC is revealing in the changes it reflects.<sup>20</sup> Communication of the single child generation seems to be more explicit than previous generations, and most children are outgoing and open in their communication. In school, they are

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more likely to initiate conversation because they are motivated to make friends. Only-children reported that they communicate about a larger range of topics at school because that is the only place where they talk with someone their same age. They are able to communicate with strangers while feeling low communication apprehension.

The close relationship in the one child family leads to some negative characteristics in communication patterns. Children tend to use less respectful language in their conversation with adults. Some are perceived as stubborn and argue with their teachers, as being strong-minded because they think more independently, and as generally self-centered in their concerns.

### RECENT TOPICS OF CONVERSATION

The Chinese enjoy conversing at the interpersonal and group level as a means of entertainment. Recent topics of conversation varied with ages and social status, but Lu's study found no one talking about how to contribute to the country, society, or community. The concern was overwhelmingly individualistic and materialistic.<sup>21</sup>

The conventional belief is changing that Chinese interpersonal communication is indirect, roundabout, and face-saving. In her 1995 work, Lu also found that communication is direct among family members, good friends, co-workers, and common people at home and in work situations, but indirect and somewhat deceptive in public. With superiors and strangers in public and official meetings, her subjects changed communication styles for a number of reasons, including self-protection, fear of being taken advantage of, or getting into trouble.

The traditional values of righteousness, faithfulness, and loyalty are exhibited more in older generations than in the younger, more in rural areas than in urban, more with in-group than with out-group, and more in Northerners than in the Southerners (due to economic development in the South). Some traditional values are still practiced, but they have lost their appeal and have been seriously challenged.

### SUMMARY

Chinese communication seems to be evolving to accommodate modern necessities. The one child policy has affected children's communication, *guanxi* is used more for self-interest, but Confucian values may be returning as a factor in interpersonal relationships. Our understanding of Chinese communication is rooted in traditional orientations to communication such as particularistic relationships, reciprocity, in-group/out-group distinctions, a system of intermediaries, and the overlap of public and personal relationships. For the time being, at least, East Asian countries still adhere to basic Confucian ethics and interpersonal communication patterns in spite of population changes and rapid economic development. It remains to be seen what aspects of Confucian philosophy will continue to have a strong influence on human relationships and what aspects will be modified or lost in the face of such drastic historical changes.<sup>22</sup>

The July 29, 2009, *Shanghai Daily* reports that China will translate five classics of Confucianism into nine foreign languages to spread Confucian values. Confucianism is more about cultivation of personal character, or at least, it puts character building (*xiushen*) before everything else, be it managing a family or a state. The pity is that China witnessed two movements in which Confucianism was thrown away—one in the May 4 Movement in 1919, and another in the Cultural Revolution.

Wang Yuanhua (1920–2008), a famous thinker and former minister of the publicity department of Shanghai, said that for all the merits of the May 4 Movement, it was too radical in denouncing Confucian values. "Radicalism has no place in China today. It is time we embrace Confucianism again. Translating the five classics is just a starting point."<sup>23</sup> ■

### NOTES

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