



How Gender Values and Culture Shape Business in China

By Karen H. Tangen

When making a group presentation, promoting a project, or sharing the salvation message, good communicators understand that knowing one's audience is critical.

In the business world, the impact of cultural values on relationships is significant, particularly when marketing products and services in China. Gender values are changing, especially within that country's emerging educated generation of leaders and consumers.

The implications of these changes within Chinese culture are profound. In the book *Contemporary leadership and intercultural competence: Exploring the cross-cultural dynamics within organizations*, M.A. Moodian declares, "In the 21st century, leadership success may

be unattainable without intercultural competence." Culture provides the complex cognitive and affective frameworks that organizations rely upon to support their behavioral systems. It is incumbent upon global businesses to understand these cultural changes when creating the business plans for its international operations."¹

This is particularly important as developed markets become saturated and Western multinationals look toward emerging markets as a source of economic growth. The Economist reported in April 2010 that the emerging markets of India and China alone are expected to comprise at least 40 percent of the world's growth.²

A "Supersized" Nation

Americans like supersizes, and China

hits the mark. It is a country that "outsizes" the United State's population by four times—1.3 billion—one-fifth of the world's population. Of China's 1.3 billion citizens, 72 percent are between the ages of 16 and 64. In the past, missionaries viewed China as a billion souls to save, whereas marketers viewed it as a billion shoes or cars to sell. But because China was poor, it was never realized. That is rapidly changing.

China has grown about 9 percent a year for more than 25 years—the fastest growth rate for a major economy in recorded history. During this time, the Chinese economy had taken 300 million people out of poverty levels and quadrupled the average Chinese worker's income.³

We share the world with a Chinese population of 1.3 billion people, and need to understand this country. Global companies that are aware of personal and cultural boundaries and use that knowledge to work with individuals, firms, and authorities have successfully sustained their presence in China.

In the business world, what could be more important than getting along with buyers and sellers? Research tells us that people do not buy or do business with people they do not like or with whom they do not share the same values. When working with China's future leaders and consumers, it is essential to discover what they, as a culture, like and dislike about others. It is especially critical for foreign businesses to develop insight regarding male and female values and the emphasis that the Chinese emerging generation places on these values.

China's High Context Culture

Cultural values encompass beliefs and traditions that have evolved in China over centuries. They serve as founding pillars upon which moral reasoning and decision-making are placed. In order to work within foreign cultures, it is essential to understand cultural differences and similarities.

Several models of cultural competence emerge to help with business endeavors including Edward Hall's "high and low context." According to Hall's model, China has a high context culture. The core element is "guanxi," which represents taking time to develop permanent personal friendship and camaraderie between individuals, and to demonstrate the ability to exert influence. In 2005, research by D. Lee and P. Dawes also underscored the fact that Chinese people are process-oriented rather than goal-oriented.⁴ Another core element of Chinese culture is "mianzi," which means face or reputation. Saving face, losing face, and giving face are important to the Chinese. The words "no" and "not" can cause loss of face, so they should be replaced with more

indirect verbal interaction and phrases such as "That would be inconvenient." Formal titles and adherence to hierarchy are highly valued. Group consensus and cooperation are emphasized over individualism and competition. Modesty is prized more than confidence. The Chinese place great value on family, group, and surface harmony.⁵

Researcher Geert Hofstede developed a framework to explain how different cultures process information. Hofstede, who spent years studying more than 100,000 IBM employees



worldwide, attempted to identify value dimensions which differ from culture to culture. He offered five dimensions of culture: the Power Distance Index (PDI); the Individuals/Collectivism Index (IDV); Masculinity/Femininity Index (MAS); Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI); and the Long Term Orientation (LTO). Hofstede determined that the MAS rating, which describes the distribution of roles between genders, was especially high in China.⁶ In another study, Fons Trompenaars research revealed that in cultures like China, physical contact and obvious facial expressions are taboo, and emotions are strictly hidden. Calm and self-possessed conduct is admired. In contrast, cultures high in affectivity, people openly show their feelings by smiling, gesturing, laughing, and showing facial expressions. High affective cultures are transparent, expressive, and animated. Emotions flow easily, and physical contact is appreciated.⁷

A Unique Opportunity

The author had an unusual opportunity to conduct a survey of university students in mainland China. (Note: In the late 1960s and 1970s, M. Rokeach conducted research and developed the Rokeach Value Survey, a pivotal instrument that assessed a large body of Hong Kong university students who participated in that study.)⁸

The research conducted in Beijing is noteworthy because it reveals much about the mindset of students enrolled in Chinese mainland universities. There are few independent studies in mainland China that have focused on the values of that country's emerging educated consumer generation.

Background

The author had contacts through a long-time friendship with a Chinese scholar (first met while bringing university students from America to China). As noted earlier, the concept of "guanxi" is extremely important to the Chinese. Friendships, once established, are loyal, sincere, and indispensable. Nothing substantial happens in China without guanxi.

This Chinese scholar went way out of the usual relationship favors to arrange an invitation into the classrooms of two prestigious Beijing universities. It is highly unusual to be invited into the private classrooms of a Chinese university to conduct research. The Chinese scholar, a former student at one of the universities, was extremely well connected and had developed friendships at both universities.

The researcher and the Chinese scholar went into the classrooms, presented a short introductory lecture on values and research, and asked all of the students to participate voluntarily in the cultural research. The survey questions were asked in several classes of undergraduate students, all of whom were bilingual.

Participants

In the present research, participants were 161 students from the mainland of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) enrolled in universities in Beijing. The subjects ranged in age from 19 to 24 years of age. Although the populations were not strictly randomly selected, they appeared representative enough to allow for meaningful considerations (University students are selected from throughout China to study at the universities based on their academic records and test scores). Undoubtedly, they are the upcoming generation of China's educated leaders and consumers.

Survey Questions Yield Interesting Results

The male and female students in the classrooms of each university were asked each question (in English by the author and in Chinese by the translator), then told to quickly write their responses in ten words or less (independently, anonymously, and without discussion), both in English and Chinese:

- What do you like most about men?
- What do you like least about men?
- What do you like most about females?
- What do you like least about females?

The papers were immediately collected. The responses were then translated by the Chinese scholar (a fluent English scholar who has studied extensively in England, Germany, and Turkey), comparing the Chinese answers with the English translations to ensure accuracy. Only a few questions were left unanswered by some of the students. The responses were spontaneous, and the students were unaware beforehand of the questions they would be asked.

A New Glimpse of Understanding

What is remarkable about the Beijing mainland survey is that the sample

size was relatively large and represented not only students from the mainland of China, but also the best and the brightest youth from all over China. The study asked the students to generate for themselves not only those values they liked in males and females, but also those they disliked. No value list was given to the students to prompt or bias their responses. They were simply asked to write what they liked and disliked in both

ROKEACH SURVEY	PRESENT STUDY
TOP RANKINGS:	TOP RANKINGS:
Courageous	Honest
Responsible	Courageous
Intellectual	Helpful
Capable	Responsible
Broad-minded	Intellectual
Independent	Broad-minded
Honest	Gentle
Helpful	Handsome/ Beautiful

males and females.

Like the Rokeach Value Survey, which has been shown to be a valid value measure, the results of the present Beijing study also show that Chinese university students have great concern toward personal character related values.

In comparing the results of this study with the Rokeach Value Survey, there are many similar positive values. The Rokeach instrumental values (personal values), which was the focus in the present study, showed the values of responsible, courageous, intellectual, and capable as the top four, in that order.⁹

On the other hand, the Rokeach Value Survey is somewhat different in theoretical conceptualization and

therefore limits absolute direct comparisons with the present study. Values ranked in the present study, however, mentioned many similar top ranked values as in the Rokeach study: e.g., males ranked as high the male values of honesty, friendship, and courage; males ranked as high the female values of gentle and kind (represented in Rokeach's Survey as loving). Females ranked as high the male values of courage, helpful, responsible, and intelligent; females ranked as high the female values of gentle and kind (represented in Rokeach's Survey as loving), honest, capable, and intelligent. These were all qualities mentioned as high ranking on the Rokeach Value Survey.¹⁰ Consistent with the earlier Trompenaar study, the Beijing survey showed the Chinese to be affectively neutral or more subdued. Results showed that both females and males ranked gentle and kind as high values for females; females and males ranked arrogant and rude as qualities they dislike in males; and garrulousness as a value both genders did not like in females.

Friendship was ranked high by males as the male value they thought most important. (This might be a result of the impact of China's one child policy.)¹¹ Males value friendship greatly because they do not have brothers, so they form significant friendships to fill this gap. This finding is consistent with the results of the Rokeach's study.¹²

When comparing values on the dimensions of the importance of character, physical, or intellectual traits, the present study overwhelmingly showed character traits as most valued by both genders. Intellectual and physical traits were considerably less important as values for both males and females.

Male-Female Differences and Similarities

To be sure, some gender differences were found. Male students were more personal, accomplishment, and competency oriented. Female students

show greater concern for moral and intrinsic values. (Comparisons by year in school and field of study showed insignificant variations.)

Males most like honest, courageous, intelligent, and strong men with whom they can have true friendships. Women like the same traits in men along with helpful and responsible. Males like gentle, kind, beautiful, and honest traits in women, with women ranking the same values as being important in women. Males dislike the traits arrogant, rude, cowardly, and dishonesty in men. Women dislike the same traits in men along with effeminate traits. Men dislike artificial, rude, and garrulous traits in women. Women also dislike those traits in women along with dishonest and mean traits.

One of the main discoveries of the Beijing study was the lack of available, reliable research regarding Chinese gender value studies in mainland China. The findings of the value preferences of university students in this investigation, however, are quite clear. The study indicates that male and female Chinese university students in the P.R.C. share similar gender values. To somewhat varying degrees, what males like and dislike about men and women are similar to what women like and dislike about men and women. The same character traits are mentioned by both men and women, and both genders place less emphasis on physical and intellectual values. The reason may be that phys-

ical and intellectual traits are not as important when forming friendships—one does not deeply bond with friends at a meaningful level because of physical and intellectual traits.

Knowledge Shapes Communication

Possessing information about gender values makes it easier for businesses to know their audiences—to better understand how the educated generation of China will respond to marketing campaigns. Such insights are essential in developing business relationships.

In addition, this type of research is invaluable to marketing and advertising firms in particular. Marketing is about understanding consumer wants, desires, needs, and dislikes. Using this research helps agencies cater to these values in advertising. A marketer can use information about gender values to guide market decisions and redirect advertising, public relations, and business strategy. Understanding relationships is key to successful business. Additionally, it is valuable information in recruiting foreign students to U.S. universities.

The Beijing survey results can also be helpful for Christ-followers. In Mark 12:30-31, Jesus reminds us of the commandments to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your minds and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” How can you love your neighbor

unless you get to know him or her better?

Insight into the Chinese culture and values and an informed solid perspective on how Chinese men and women see the world can only promote understanding and build true guanxi. This understanding is essential in the development and success of doing business in China.



About the Author

Karen H. Tangen, Ph.D., serves as an associate professor in the Department of Business and Economics at Bethel University, St. Paul, Minnesota. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Dr. Tangen's business career includes positions in two Fortune 100 companies and she has served as a State Director of Health and a State Director of Education. Presently, Tangen's passion for international studies, especially Asia, has helped her in developing business programs and bringing students to China and India.

NOTES

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