

Le Bon Journal

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Volume 2 Issue 2: The importance of being earnestly Chinese

Chinese people consider and call themselves Chinese regardless of where they grew up or live. Whether they're from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, South Africa, or anywhere else that the Chinese have immigrated to, being earnestly Chinese is not about representing a country called China but being proud of inheriting the history, culture, tradition, and values of the Chinese civilisation.

This issue of Le Bon Journal celebrates the Chinese Year of the Sheep, which begins on 1st February 2003.

Climbing Chinese walls

Chinese walls refer to invisible barriers put between different businesses within the same company because of regulatory requirements. Information must not be exchanged between the two sides.

In real life, we sometimes unintentionally set up Chinese walls between the different compartments in our heads. For example, our heads say it's easy to do, but our bodies stay put. We may also set up walls between ourselves and our friends, our parents, and our neighbours. There are no requirements to do so, but it happens for different reasons.

I grew up as a Chinese in a Chinese family, in an international community, on an American air base, in Okinawa. Picture a set of concentric circles: first circle - Chinese family, second circle - an international community, third circle - American air base and school, fourth circle - Japan.

To belong and interact harmoniously within each of these circles required a lot of effort. Rather than travelling freely between the circles, it was easier to set up Chinese walls.

As children, we weren't all too happy having to take Chinese lessons. There was always a fear

that our pronunciation of Chinese words wasn't good enough. Being Chinese and practising Chinese in a non-Chinese community singled us out. And as children, more than anything, we wanted to blend in.

However, the older I get, the more important my Chinese legacy has meant to me. I now have to climb over the Chinese walls I have erected, which once allowed me to blend into the different environments I lived, studied, and worked in.

Being earnestly Chinese

I wrote a poem in 1995 in protest of having to figure out what I wanted. Entitled WANT, it reflects my dilemma of having to decide what I wanted to do - after finally fulfilling what I thought was expected of me. We spend our entire lifetime figuring out what other people want.

Since we seek their approval, in particular our parents' approval, we are eager to please. Sometimes we end up doing what we think they think we think they want us to do. The circularity of it makes this whole business of doing what's expected even more bizarre.

My non-Chinese friends ask their children to make decisions at an early age. "What do you want? Which colour socks do you want to wear today?" They are patient for their answer.

I don't remember such a conversation in my childhood, for Chinese children are taught to obey and respect their elders. The famous Chinese saying "spare the rod and spoil the child" proves this point.

I was lucky never to have been beaten or even slapped. Perhaps, that's why I've always been a nonconformist. It is easier to rebel against what I think other people want than to figure out what I truly wanted.

Want

What is want?

When should and ought dominate

*When others' needs precipitate
While what you need you obliterate.*

How to want?

*When all your life, the norms dictate
How you should think, not hesitate
To act on behalf of others' fate.*

Why must want?

*When you can do this and that,
Eat and drink and co-habitat
To be, to have, to interact.*

When to want?

*What should you want or need
To want, or ought indeed
To want what you need?*

Chinese selling tactics

My first boss, an American of Filipino descent, had once scolded me for not having the business sense of a Chinese. I had no idea that Chinese people, especially those from Shanghai, were known for their shrewd business acumen. After my recent trip to mainland China, I now understand that doing business is a way of life, so ingrained in the Chinese, that even decades of communism could not wipe it out.

The saying "a fool and his money are soon parted" befits the tourist who visits mainland China thinking that everything is cheap. Everything is in fact inflated hundreds of times according to my knowledgeable friend from Canton.

Most people compare the offered price with what they could get at home and conclude that it's worth it. Some are taught to counter the first price by halving it. The seller may retaliate with a price in between the two. And the impatient, greedy, and gullible tourist would accept and make the purchase, satisfied that he's got a discount.

It's easy to disregard the hustlers if you don't speak their language. In mainland China, however, I listen to their woes and become sympathetic to their hard lives. So I give in more easily than say in South America.

I've come to the conclusion that selling is about maximising absolute gain. A seller will try anything to

get the maximum price without feeling guilty. It's hard to feel guilty towards a tourist who will never return. And it's easy to want to get the most out of someone who looks wealthier and happier than you. For the buyer, it's about minimising relative loss. Note the "absolute" versus "relative." Buyers anchor on the original price and the relative savings made by subsequent offers.

The sellers I encountered in mainland China inflated the prices to just below what we'd expect at home. Then they go through a ritual of testing us to see how much we want the item. If they see that we want it very much, they would slow down the bargaining process. If we don't want it but have got the money, we may be lured into buying it just because we think it's so cheap.

Another tactic I observed was that of incremental selling. They first hook you in with one item. Then they get you to buy something else that's related. Before you know it, you've parted with ten times more than what you have first been offered. So you buy item A, and then you're told you've got to have item B for A to work, and so on. The momentum of selling is such that you don't realise that you don't want any of it until you get home.

Being in a tour group with its demanding schedule exacerbates the process. You have to make a decision quickly. And the seller uses aggressive tactics to get you to commit before you're ready to.

My poor father was subject to aggressive tactics of the two men who carried him in a sedan up Huan Shan, one of the most famous mountains in China. The men moaned and groaned of how hard it was to earn a living. They stopped half way before the hotel and asked my father for a tip. Concerned that he may not get back, he asked them to take him to the bank next to the hotel to fetch some money.

As if this wasn't enough, the two men returned the next day to ask for more money. Having run out of the local currency Renminbi, my father gave them what's left of his US\$ and

Taiwanese \$. In hindsight he must have complied like so many others born in China but escaped to better fortunes during the war. It was a mixture of duty, guilt, and pity.

After I ended my walk, one of the men even had the nerve to ask for a tip for carrying my father. He was also asking other tourists to help him exchange the foreign currency.

Don't they have any dignity? How could my father enjoy the magnificent scenery? He paid them to silence them and to ensure they took him to the hotel safely. The men were merely maximising absolute gain. They had all the time in the world and no qualms about spoiling my father's sedan ride.

Chinese translation

A card in the bathroom of my hotel room at Huang Shan International reads:

"Dear Guest: For the advocacy of the environmental protection, if you intend to change cotton textiles of your bathroom, please put them into the bathtub."

It's literally a word to word translation from Chinese. I suppose what it's trying to say is

"Dear Guest: To protect the environment, please put towels you want changed into the bathtub."

Confucius and Buddhism

After my father retired, he has become interested in Buddhist teachings - partly from the free literature at the vegetarian restaurants he has frequented. The easily agitated man, around whom we had to tread ever so gently as children, was a strict parent who brought us up on Confucian teachings. The Confucian doctrine brought order to society by placing people in a well-understood hierarchy. Everyone had a place. It was the epitome of bureaucracy.

After he retired, Father mellowed out and became a good friend. Whether this was due to Buddhism, vegetarianism, retirement, or all of the above, I'm not sure. I do know, though, that I feel suffocated in a

bureaucracy. I do not function well in an organisation with too much protocol and form-filling. If he had brought us up as Buddhists, would I now lean towards Confucianism?

My personal philosophy is that Chinese people are raised on Confucian doctrine as children. When they are struggling as young adults, they turn to Taoism as it is paradoxical, like life. Searching for meaning, they find only contradictions. Later, when they've retired and have more time on their hands, they turn to Buddhism.



Editor

Born in Brunei of Chinese parents, Anne Ku has lived in Taiwan and Singapore, among other places. She still yearns to find a Mandarin-speaking community in London where she lives now.

Special thanks to the Hungry Poet.

Feedback from my father:

Generally speaking, the educated Chinese would think Chinese culture, in a certain sense, is a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Many who are in their old age and are happy and at ease would still believe in Confucianism, while those who are not quite happy with their career or feel they have talent but no opportunity to use it often turn to Taoism. Some even become escapists. At the end of the Ming Dynasty, when the Manchus in the north eastern China (Manchuria) broke through the Great Wall and occupied all of China, the emperor ordered all Chinese to either follow the Manchu custom to be pigtailed or be beheaded. Many intellectuals were beheaded. Many others became monks or Taoists or hermits living in remote mountains. In all dynasties in China, intellectuals had only one way out: pass the civil servant examination to become emperor's officials. Those who could not pass gradually believed in Taoism. Sad, isn't it?

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