The Polite and the Rude

John N. Hooker
Carnegie Mellon University, john@hooker.tepper.cmu.edu

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Published In
The Polite and the Rude

John Hooker
Graduate School of Industrial Administration
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, USA
August 1998

Abstract

International managers are aware that business etiquette varies enormously around the world. These minor bits of behavior reflect fundamental differences in culture. By understanding their source, one can not only function with greater confidence but can begin to understand what holds the culture together. Larger behavior patterns that seemed odd or irrational begin to make sense.

Some parts of the world are known for courtesy, and others are not. The visitor, particularly one engaged in business or diplomacy, must make adjustments. Frank Australians could unwittingly spoil their relationship with a Malaysian host in the first five minutes. Aggressive North Americans may so offend a Japanese visitor that negotiation fails.

The bifurcation of peoples into the polite and the rude is not random. To put it in the blunt manner characteristic of my own country, the division boils down to this: Western cultures are rude, and other cultures are polite.

I can sense your reaction. First, there are far too many exceptions. When you visited Denmark the people were very polite, but your trip to India was marred by constant harassment in shops and on the street. Australians wait their turn, while Chinese push their way ahead of you. Canadian drivers courteously yield to pedestrians, while many African motorists ignore them. Tel Aviv is a non-Western city and yet not particularly known for courtly behavior.

Even when my generalization seems to hold, there are bewildering variations and inconsistencies. Japan's elaborate rules of etiquette maintain harmony on the street as well as in the boardroom. France is no less known for etiquette (the very word is French), and yet who can be ruder than Parisians? If the Chinese share the Japanese concern with saving face and respect for feelings, why are they prone to loud arguments and even fisticuffs in public places? Latin Americans are famous for solicitude and displays of affection, and yet theirs is the land of machismo, popularly

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associated with violence and abuse. The Shona people of east Africa charm everyone with their friendly nature and gentle good humor. But superiors bark orders at subordinates, and affability can vanish in an instant where ethnic rivalries are concerned.

Beneath the complexity, however, there is a principle at work. To put it briefly and abstractly, Western cultures are rule-based. They are deeply influenced by the justice tradition of Judaism and Islam, as well as classical Greek rationality. Laws believed to be based on reason and justice provide a foundation for living together. Other cultures find other ways. They may rely on authority, group solidarity, or sensitivity to the feelings of others. Whereas Westerners try to resolve conflict by appealing to principles of fairness, non-Westerners strive not to give offense in the first place. They develop a tradition of courtesy, empathy and deference to superiors.

This is not to say that Westerners are inconsiderate. They are bound by rules that protect the rights of others. This should not be misinterpreted as courtesy, however. Rule-governed behavior respects the rights of any person, or at least any citizen, including those one has never met. It is based on abstract principles of justice. Courtesy respects the feelings of the people at hand. It is based on concrete empathy and concern. A rule-governed Westerner might work on behalf of strangers in a distant land while ignoring the feelings of people in the same room.

The fundamental difference between rule-governed and relationship-governed cultures surfaces constantly in everyday life. It is most evident in relations between people who know each other and interact over an extended period, such as family or business associates. This is why it is so important for business people to understand courtesy, particularly in non-Western cultures, where long-term personal relationships are key to doing business. The pattern may be less evident in public life, which is complicated by other factors. Most of the apparent exceptions cited above concern people who do not know each other.

It may appear that I am reinforcing cultural stereotypes, the dangers of which are well known. But my point is about what makes cultures work, not their surface characteristics. When I say that Western cultures are rude and others are polite, I do not mean to say that everyone in a given Western culture is rude. There may be some Western countries in which most people are polite (as well as obedient to rules), due to their particular history and circumstances. My point is that courtesy does not play the necessary integrative role in the West that it does in much of the world. Because the West relies instead on rules of fairness, it can tolerate rudeness.

In the present essay I try to bring this thesis alive with the detail and complexity of some real cultures. I begin with the relationship-based Confucian culture of China, followed by its Korean and Japanese counterparts. I then move to rule-based Western culture and subsequently show how it reverted to one based on relationships under the historical conditions of Latin America. It is not my intent to describe these cultures exhaustively, nor even to provide a handbook of business etiquette for them; many treatments of the latter sort are available (see References). Rather, my aim is to show how polite or rude conduct helps make a culture work. Behavior patterns that seem strange or irrational begin to make sense when one understands how they help the system hang together. One becomes aware of their intimate connection with other matters, such as negotiation, honoring of contracts, attitudes toward authority, and even humor—a subject with which I conclude.
Visitors to an unfamiliar culture commonly memorize a few rules of etiquette just before the trip, or perhaps during the flight. It is important to know the rules, but it is far better to be aware of their source as well. A deeper understanding not only leads to a more nuanced application of the rules, but it enables one to act appropriately in situations that do not appear in the textbook. It helps one develop the confidence necessary to function effectively in a strange land.

A culture is much like an ecosystem. By understanding how the parts work together, one can better understand how to survive and flourish in it over the long term.

**China**

It is a curious fact that human beings easily learn to be embarrassed or humiliated by a blemish or smudge on the face. The tendency is so strong and reliable that its psychological equivalent can serve as the primary regulating principle in the world's largest cultural group. Saving face plays some role in almost every culture, but in China and other Confucian countries it is a constant preoccupation. One never speaks or acts in a social setting without calculating the effect on face.

A primary goal at a social or business gathering is to avoid embarrassing or offending one's associates. Rather than assume the aggressive posture typical of the USA, for example, one is humble and soft spoken. It is bad form to criticize another of equal or greater rank or even point out problems in the company, except perhaps in the most indirect possible manner, and even then preferably through a third party. Rather than say an outright "no" to a request or offer, one tries to sidestep the matter or suggest an alternative. Above all, one does not show or provoke anger. A visitor who loses his cool in a business meeting may just as well head for the airport.

Western business people feel free to disagree sharply with each other, because they can resolve the matter by appeal to principles. It is all right to level criticism at another if you can present some numbers that back it up. The other party is expected to swallow his pride. Disputes over who gets what are adjudged by appeal to what is fair, rational or efficient. Obviously if Westerners are to subjugate their feelings to abstract principles in this way, they must believe in the legitimacy of the principles. Chinese, in their hearts, do not. To get along with each other, they must maintain harmony by respecting the feelings and pride of their associates, and honoring their superiors.

The Chinese are an informal people and do not share the Japanese penchant for decorum. The business card ritual, however, is still practiced, at least to the extent of presenting and receiving the card with both hands and treating the card with respect rather than stuffing it immediately into a pocket. Table manners are important, and they are again designed to avoid giving offense. Toasts are expected, for example, and one does not refill one's own teacup. Drinking is a communal activity, and to give the appearance of "drinking alone" could send a signal of rejection to others. At the table and elsewhere, Westerners expect people to speak up when they need something, whereas a polite culture anticipates needs. It is best for a guest to drop hints or wait until her needs are sensed rather than ask for something directly. Not everything is predictable, of course. A Chinese host is disgusted when a Western guest blows her nose at the table,
but he may irritate the Westerner with his habit of using a toothpick (even though he tries to remember to cover his mouth while doing it).

A good deal of etiquette in China is related to superstition as much as to courtesy. Famous examples include the prohibition against sticking chopsticks upright in the rice bowl, or presenting a clock as a gift (both omens of death). Superstition has a function very different from that of courtesy. It is related to a basic human need for predictability and control over one’s fate.

Courtesy is almost always bound up with respect for superiors. This is because courtesy can mask conflicts but cannot resolve them. Ultimately some mechanism is needed for mediation, and the most readily available one is appeal to authority. Kōng-Zi (whose name the medieval Jesuits translated into Latin as Confucius) articulated the traditional Chinese practice of yielding to one’s parents, one’s elders, and ultimately to one’s ancestors. Women defer to men, subjects to rulers, and employees to the boss. In fact, norms of courtesy are commonly suspended when superiors deal with subordinates. Because in this instance authority directly regulates relations, courtesy may be unnecessary. This is why bosses can speak harshly to employees in Shona culture.

I hasten to add that in the large Chinese cities, the ancient pecking order seems to be changing. Parents have less authority, the one-child policy has led to a generation of spoiled children, and husbands baby-sit. There are stories about firms in Shanghai that like to hire each new crop of college graduates, firing older employees to make room for them. Younger managers with a Western education sometimes supervise older men. These trends are unthinkable in traditional China, and some of them seem to eat into the fundamental bonds that hold the society together. (Rule-based Western societies, by contrast, can tolerate individualism and weak families to a certain extent.)

In the business world, however, the boss retains a high status. When a superior enters the room, people take notice or even stand, depending on the rank. If an issue is raised, the boss speaks first and others defer to his opinion.

Western business people are typically accorded fairly high status and therefore find themselves on the receiving end of Chinese deference and respect. It is not hard to get used to this. Occasionally, however, one must yield to a person of high rank, which may seem like groveling to a Westerner. One may be obliged to supplicate or gratuitously apologize to an official in order to obtain something to which one is already entitled. This violates the Westerner’s sense of justice, but respect for authority is one of the pillars of a 5000-year-old civilization.

Appeal to authority does not work so well, however, when people from different organizations or families interact. There is no clear authority to which to appeal, except the government, which can regulate behavior in a general way but not day-to-day intercourse. In China, guānxì provides the necessary social glue between parties who interact over an extended period. A Chinese word that means “relationship,” guānxì refers in this context to a long-term relationship based on mutual obligation. One begins to build guānxì by doing small favors, taking one out to dinner, or bringing a gift. The other party reciprocates. (Mere thank-yous are regarded as insincere.) As the friendship grows, the favors can take the form of business opportunities. Trust also grows with the relationship, and one relies on the honor of his guānxì partner rather than legal remedies to vouchsafe an agreement. Westerners may regard this kind of friendship as a bit crass. Yet it occurs widely in the West and elsewhere. The Chinese difference is, again, the
critical role it plays in making the society work. When one's partner approaches with a need, it is imperative to respond by obliging, or explaining honestly why it is impossible to do so, in the latter case perhaps suggesting an alternative. Whatever may be the Western opinion of guānxì, Chinese regard someone who reneges on its obligations as uncivilized.

Guānxì plays a key role in negotiation. Many Westerners who have negotiated with Chinese may feel more like veterans of a military campaign than recipients of Confucian courtesy. This is because Chinese and Westerners approach the negotiating table with very different mindsets. To Westerners it is something akin to a poker table. The game is not fundamentally different if one plays with friends or total strangers. There is plenty of posturing and bluffing, but all within a framework of rules that keep the game going. In addition, Western-style negotiation tends to rely at least on a minimal shared sense of fairness and rationality. The excellent book *Getting to Yes* (Fisher et al. 1992) advises negotiators to challenge the opposite party to state the principle behind their position. This is good advice in the West, but not in China.

Chinese do not think about a framework of rules when negotiating. They think about their relationships with human beings. If there is guānxì between the parties, then the stage is already set for business. If there is not, then no holds are barred. The obvious lesson is that the Westerner should postpone serious deal making while developing the relationship.

Because guānxì implies trust, it is important to rely on that trust. Asking for too many details about a proposed venture may insult the Chinese partner, as it may call his honesty into question. Trust is also the basis for a "contract." Although Chinese have acceded to the Western insistence on written contracts, to the Chinese mind a piece of legal paper is worthless. An agreement is meaningful only to the extent that the human beings involved honor their promises, and their promises are cemented by their relationship. There is a legal apparatus in China (based, strange as it may seem, on German law), but as in many non-Western countries the court system is largely ineffective because it is at odds with the culture. Furthermore, because an agreement is part of a living personal relationship, either party will expect the other to be willing to modify the agreement continually as circumstances change. They regard the Western practice of adhering strictly to a written contract as perverse.

It remains to consider short-term relationships, such as brief or casual encounters in public. Here the situation is more or less one of coexistence. As in much of the world, automobile traffic is a microcosm of public life. In most Chinese cities there are few if any traffic signals. Vehicles negotiate an intersection by working their way through it. If a car must move into a stream of traffic, it noses out into the stream, and others yield just enough to allow it to enter. Chinese who visit the USA are bemused by the angry response when they pull out in front of another driver, who regards the action as an infringement of his rights. To Western eyes Chinese traffic is chaotic, and it is in fact largely ungoverned by rules. It is thousands of little compromises between drivers or cyclists who encounter each other. Motorists constantly honk their horns, but this is not an expression of anger as in much of the West, where it chides the other driver for breaking the rules. It is simply of way of making one's presence known, a way of communicating. Some vehicles in Indian cities, which have similar traffic behavior, carry signs on the rear that say, "Please honk." The noise alerts the driver to an
oncoming vehicle. China may be a bit different in that the honking can release tension to a certain extent.

Traffic behavior can also reflect power relations. This is particularly evident in much of Africa, where only the wealthy can afford cars, and those who can afford a car rarely walk. When a pedestrian encounters an automobile, the driver is almost invariably of higher rank. Pedestrians therefore yield, and drivers need take little note of them.

Public behavior in China is much the same whether one is behind the wheel or on foot. No one is angry if people fail to wait their turn at the counter or the bus stop. The sharp verbal exchanges one frequently hears in public are analogous to honking horns. The persons involved are generally not upset; it is a way of communicating and making one's presence felt. (The tonal character of the Chinese language, particularly the descending tone, can also give speech a brusque sound.) On rare occasion the exchanges degenerate into street brawls, which again seem to be a release mechanism. Although Chinese are capable of being quite friendly with strangers, the obliging courtesy of Japan is not required. Other than xì-xì, or thank you, perhaps the most popular phrase in the Chinese language (specifically, Pǔtōnghuà or Mandarin dialect) is méi-yǒu. Literally it means "don't have," but in practice it is a way of getting rid of people who ask for something. All in all, however, public life (and traffic) move along reasonably well in China. The crime rate, for example, is remarkably low, even in the largest cities.

Korea and Japan

Korea and Japan are strongly Confucian cultures but rely on interesting variations of China's social mechanism.

The Korean understanding of courtesy and deference differs from China's in three primary ways. One is the greater role of emotion in Korea. While Chinese usually remain calm with their associates, Koreans can be mercurial and intense. In fact there are many ways in which Korea can be regarded as an intensification of China. It is important not to upset the emotional equanimity or kibun of another, particularly when relating to a superior. Kibun is the emotional side of face, something akin to "temper" in the West.

A second difference is that the hierarchical tradition of Confucian culture is more thoroughgoing. It is said that all relationships in Korea are vertical. A group cannot function until these relationships are sorted out and everyone is aware of them. Given the stratified nature of the society, is an interesting fact that the South Korean distribution of wealth is one of the most equitable in the world.

Finally, guānxì relationships are transformed and intensified. They often take the form of ubiquitous gift-giving and insistent hospitality. One form of gift is the white envelope with a payment inside, generally delivered to a government official. The West views payments as evidence of corruption and dishonesty, but as individuals Koreans can be scrupulously honest. It is not unusual for a Korean to go to great lengths to return a misplaced wallet, for example. Gifts and payments cement personal relationships, which are essential to getting anything done. In the area of hospitality, people try to outdo each other with invitations to parties, banquets, golf games, etc. There are stories about men who get into heated arguments over who gets to pay the check at a restaurant.
Japan modifies Confucian culture by giving center stage to the group. This results in a unique and fascinating society. Norms for group behavior maintain harmony and build trust much as guānxì does in China.

Japanese go to great lengths to promote harmony in the group. To avoid offending those who may disagree, one talks around a point rather than saying it directly. This can frustrate Westerners, who may interpret it as evasion. Japan is an extremely "high context" society (Hall 1981, 1982a, 1982b), meaning that much is understood without having to say it explicitly. Meetings may even experience long moments of silence, a habit that makes Westerners nervous. It is bad form to squirm or try to break the ice.

One rarely criticizes or contradicts an associate. It is unusual to say "no," and "yes" (hai) indicates only that one is listening. "We will think about it" (kangaete okimasu) probably means "no." One speaks modestly and never interrupts. Mild persuasion is much more effective than a hard sell.

Decision making is a slow process (known as nemawashi, "turning the roots") because everyone's feelings must be carefully protected. Traditionally, one or more drafts (ringi sho) of the decision are circulated for signatures or personal stamps (hanco).

Trust is maintained by vetting members of the group. One rarely introduces oneself in a business setting, for example. To become part of the group, one must be introduced by a mutual friend, who can vouch for his honor. These contacts are often arranged through a network of "old boys" formed during college days. The famous after-hours camaraderie at dinners, golf games and karaoke bars is essential to maintain trusting relationships as well as to unwind from a highly regimented lifestyle. (It serves a roughly analogous function in China and Korea.) Japan's famous just-in-time supply chains are a natural outgrowth of this kind of networking, as are the keiretsu or trade alliances.

Etiquette closely governs initial meetings. Japanese greet each other with a bow, but a nod and weak handshake are appropriate for foreign visitors. Business attire is formal and conduct is subdued. Traditionally, eye contact is generally inappropriate, except perhaps during an introduction. The visitor offers her card first in the business card ritual, with her name facing the recipient. As in China, two hands are normally used to give and receive the card. A useful practice is to place the cards you receive on the table in front of you, lined up to match the positions of your hosts seated across the table. Visitors are offered tea or coffee and should accept. Gift exchange is expected on various occasions but should never be done when it could be interpreted as bribery.

Group behavior norms also manifest the need for authority. There are various conventions about positioning, for example. The ranking member of the team is likely to enter the room first and position himself furthest from the door or near the windows. The lower ranking members may be near the door or clustered in the center of the room. Positions at the negotiating table are likely to be prearranged, with the hosts facing the guests. Due perhaps to the overriding importance of group harmony, however, top executives often do not impose policy. It commonly develops through a process of nemawashi among middle managers and is ratified at the top.

Although most noticeable in small groups, Japanese etiquette extends to public behavior. It is generally improper, for example, to eat snacks on the street. One who asks directions may receive incorrect information, because it is impolite to fail to respond to the question even if one does not know the answer. (Curiously, Japanese seem to forget decorum while on vacation, even to the point of littering national parks with trash.)
The code of etiquette creates a surface resemblance with rule-governed societies, but the code protects other people only to the extent that they belong to the group, even a group as large as the entire nation (Taka 1994). Because of their very strong sense of ethnic solidarity, Japanese maintain harmony with their compatriots at large in much the same way as among colleagues at work.

The West

The rule-governed character of Western culture is deeply rooted in its Semitic and Greek origins. Its faith in universal principle is already evident, for example, in the ancient story of Jonah, which appears in Hebrew scripture, the Christian Old Testament, and the Koran. God told Jonah to travel to Nineveh to persuade the city to repent of its wicked ways. A reluctant missionary, Jonah instead boarded a ship headed in the opposite direction. When a fierce storm arose, Jonah's guilty conscience interpreted it as God's wrath. Jonah convinced the crew to throw him overboard to save themselves, whereupon he was swallowed by the famous whale. Eventually he found himself on the beach and acquiesced in his duty.

Jonah's Hebrew culture viewed itself as subject to universal moral commandments handed down by an all-powerful God. The idea of monotheism developed only gradually, but to the extent that God is one, his judgments must be universal. Conversely, if moral judgments are universal, they cannot be propounded by multiple gods, who could in principle disagree. Monotheism and universal morality are mutually reinforcing, and Judaism bequeathed both to the West.

A universalizing culture such as the West or Islam would naturally expect other peoples, in Nineveh or elsewhere, to conform to the lifestyle they regard as universally correct. The West's missionary impulse still flourishes, not only in overtly religious programs, but in foreign aid and a plethora of non-governmental organizations. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank attempt to convert nations to Western-style capitalism. The West shakes its finger at societies that are insufficiently environmentalist, feminist or human rights oriented (while Islam with equal certitude condemns societies that are too feminist and fixated on rights and freedom at the expense of family values). While most cultures view others as inferior, the West views others as undeveloped. There is essentially only one way to live, and if other peoples fail to live this way it must be because they are still learning.

The Hellenistic roots of Western culture extend its universalizing tendencies. The Jewish and Muslim traditions taught Westerners to view the world around them as a secular realm, which opens the way to viewing it as a mechanism. The rationality of ancient Greece provided the intellectual wherewithal to understand this mechanism, giving rise to Western science. Centuries later Copernicus and Newton extended the secular interpretation of nature to the heavens, and the Western scientific worldview was complete.

Rationality is universal by definition. The West must view its scientific rationality as overriding any contrary intellectual contribution, whether it be Chinese traditional medicine or Hindu cosmology. A committee of Swedes can view itself as legitimately
judging scientific work around the world. If the Nobel Peace Prize makes moral judgments as well, this only reflects the West's companion belief in universal morality.

Western belief in universal reason and principle must be steadfast, because the culture rests on it. Science-based technology, which has recently permeated so much of the world, is the Westerner's tool for controlling her fate. It is the Western counterpart of Chinese superstition, if the latter is augmented with other practices. More relevant here is its key role in regulating the way people live together. If a Westerner is dissatisfied with her lot, her most likely complaint will be, "Unfair!" Westerners must ultimately and to some degree subjugate their emotions and individual perspectives to abstract principles of fairness. They believe in human rights, an idea of relatively recent origin but one that rests on principles of justice articulated by prophets of ancient scripture. Democracy, so lionized in the West, receives its elemental plausibility from the one-person-one-vote principle; i.e., everyone gets a fair share of the power. Furthermore, it cannot succeed unless people can occasionally agree on policy. The basis for agreement is a shared understanding of what is rational (as in arguments based on economics) and what is just (whence the rights rhetoric so prevalent in political discourse).

If Westerners are to agree on how principles apply, they must frankly put forward their points of view so that everyone can consider the arguments. This is compatible with a minimal degree of courtesy, and in fact a modicum of respect for the feelings of others lubricates the process. Jewish tradition emphasizes that arguments should never become *ad hominem*. But courtesy is not the foundation of social intercourse, as it is in Confucian and many other non-Western societies. Justice is. If courtesy is unimportant in Tel Aviv, admittedly not a Western city, perhaps it is because Tel Aviv lies at the epicenter of the justice tradition.

Conversely, if a thoroughly Western nation such as Denmark seems polite, perhaps it is because rule-governed behavior is mistaken for courtesy. Queuing theorist Richard Larson (1998) tells of an incident in which his taxi approached a long queue of vehicles waiting to board a ferry in Denmark. Because he was in danger of missing his flight, the taxi driver swerved into a lane reserved for emergency vehicles. Larson remarked that this must anger those in the other cars. The driver responded, "No, they feel sorry for us, because they know we wouldn't do this unless we were under pressure."

Courtesy is not the motivation for this kind of toleration. Danes are so scrupulous about following rules that they assumed the taxi driver had good reason for his action. Consider another story. When my family and I were living in Denmark, my son (who speaks Danish) asked an elderly lady, hobbling down the aisle of a city bus, if she would like his seat. The woman refused the offer, responding sharply, "Why? Is something wrong with the seat?" Even a minimal sense of courtesy would have made my son's offer appropriate, but it was not, because the rules do not prescribe it. Not only do rules displace courtesy, but their violation can call forth surprising hostility. I witnessed a Danish motorist in a slight infraction of traffic rules, at the expense of a cyclist. The cyclist furiously gave chase to the hapless driver, screaming obscenities that would startle a hardened New Yorker.

Rules can even require the suspension of courtesy. An acquaintance of mine from the United Kingdom took a job in New Jersey. One day while driving into the parking lot of his apartment building, he allowed another driver to park close to the door and put his own car in a more distant available space. The other driver met him at the building's
entrance. Surmising that he was a newcomer, she harshly criticized his act of courtesy. She pointed out that if he kept up that sort of behavior he could never survive in New Jersey.

**Latin America**

When courtesy does prevail in a Western society, it frequently develops in a ruling class that violates the egalitarian sensibilities of a justice-based society. French etiquette evolved in an aristocracy that outlived its time, and visitors quickly learn that it does not apply to them. Southern cordiality in the USA was the product of a slave-owning class. Because justice is suspended, something else must take over.

An extreme example of this phenomenon is Latin America, which labors under a history of severe oppression of indigenous people and other groups. Although historically connected to the West, Latin American culture is not Western, in part because it is not rule-governed. It may seem otherwise because of the tangle of bureaucratic procedure one must negotiate, but as Hofstede (1991) points out, rules of this kind have a ritual function (uncertainty avoidance) rather than a regulatory function.

In the absence of justice, Latin Americans evolved an acute sense of courtesy, friendship and deference to authority. In Mexico, for example, one initiates a professional relationship by building a friendship. Rather than get down to business right away, the parties enjoy long lunches, Margaritas and mariachi singers. They discuss their families and hobbies. The relationship is similar to guānxì in that it builds trust. But it is not identical. Friends have mutual obligations as in the case of guānxì, and in fact a good friend will go to any extreme to respond to a request for help. But the binding force is emotional empathy rather than a record of past favors. Mexicans are remarkably adept at sensing the mood of others, anticipating their needs, and sharing their burdens. When greeting each other they feel free to demonstrate their affection with hugs and kisses.

Some of these characteristics even extend to the street. City dwellers who excuse rude behavior as the inevitable bane of big cities should visit Mexico City. Such polite phrases as *por favor, para servirle, muchas gracias,* and *muy amable* abound in the world's largest metropolis. By contrast, Danes rarely utter the word for "please" (*versåvenlig*, literally "be so kind"). A visitor to México D.F. who asks for assistance in halting Spanish is very likely to receive a friendly response.

Latin American warmth and courtesy may seem at variance with its history of violence, oppression and *machismo*. Actually, they are the result of that history. In turbulent times, one's life depended on one's friends. When treachery was the norm, only they could be trusted. The risks of speaking out led to skills in reading body language. The sometimes lethal consequences of giving offense counseled courtesy.

*Machismo* had a similar function. A form of masculine virtue that originated in Moorish Spain, it was a coping mechanism for difficult times. A man who used violence to master his environment achieved some degree of control over his fate and that of the family he protected. Like technology, *machismo* has served a purpose similar to that of superstition in China. It does not improve the social situation, and may even worsen it, but it gives men some sense of control of their lives.
Machismo makes a virtue of necessity. In the old days (and sometimes in the present day) boys could look forward to a life of violence and danger. Without machismo they would simply abandon themselves to this misery. With machismo they at least enjoy the honor of being able to deal with it "like a man." This concept of manly honor persists today. Although associated with violence in the lower classes, in the upper classes it primarily calls for devotion to family and willingness to sacrifice professional objectives to this end. One should therefore not take offense at an associate who breaks an appointment or shows up late to deal with domestic matters. By discussing the family over lunch, one gives evidence that he is a family man and therefore a man of honor. Loss of honor is akin to loss of face, and it is important not to criticize another or point out errors, particularly in front of one's peers. If necessary this can be done discreetly through a third party.

Latin manhood is sometimes misinterpreted in the West as requiring emotionless and rugged independence. Precisely the opposite is true, as men historically relied on their friends for their survival. It is natural for men to show emotion and to display affection toward their amigos. Machismo does, however, imply a patronizing attitude toward women that Western visitors may find offensive, although it affects Latinas more than foreigners. It is rooted in the expectation that men will dominate women in order to shield them from the vicissitudes of life. Sex roles remain sharply distinguished, and it is sometimes said that any relationship between a man and a woman is assumed to be amorous.

Guilt, Shame and Humor

Humor is closely related to etiquette, and the social dangers of attempting humor in a multicultural setting are well known. In the USA, for example, it is common to start a meeting with a joke to "break the ice," but this same maneuver would be awkwardly inappropriate in much of the world. Russians are famous for their humor, but any joke offered by a foreigner is almost certain to tread on a sensitive topic.

Humor is a subtle phenomenon, and every culture has its own brand of it. Yet the cultural factors that lie behind courtesy and rudeness can shed some light on this complex topic as well. They reveal connections with larger issues, particularly the role of guilt and shame.

Recall Jonah's guilty conscience. He boarded the ship because he was running from himself and what he perceived to be his duty, not from the censure of his fellows. He was motivated by guilt rather than shame. While shame governs relationship-based cultures, guilt plays a major role in the regulation of rule-based cultures.

A relationship-based culture is primarily concerned to regulate one's interaction with people with whom one already has relationships, particularly peers and superiors—that is, precisely the people who are in the best position to influence one's behavior. The control mechanism therefore naturally tends to be external, a complex of sanctions that can be gathered under the label "shame." A rule-based culture, however, takes much more seriously the regulation of interaction between strangers, who may have little influence over each other's conduct. The government or police may of course manage this kind of interaction to a certain extent, but not nearly to the extent necessary, except
perhaps in the most totalitarian state. The regulation therefore becomes internal as well as external. Shame plays a role, but children also learn to feel guilty when they break the rules.

Guilt is admittedly an imperfect control mechanism and exacts psychological costs. It is a poor motivator, as it tends to torment as much as to motivate. A German-American proverb states, *Ein gutes Gewissen ist ein sanftes Ruhekissen* (a good conscience is a soft pillow). The primary theological thrust of Christianity, namely justification by faith, is arguably designed to deal with the guilt load of rule-based Jewish culture. Yet despite the problematic nature of guilt, Western society relies on it.

Westerners are often unaware of the importance of close supervision in a shame-based culture, such as China. It may be necessary to monitor an employee’s work continuously in a situation where a Western manager might simply give instructions at the start of the day. This not because the employee is less responsible. Rather, the employee responds to people rather than to a guilt mechanism. The same principle applies in the community at large. When I was living in Africa, a friend told me of an incident he witnessed in a grocery. The manager of the store caught a teen-ager in the act of shoplifting. He seized the young man and hauled him into a back room. Peeking through the door, my friend watched the manager slam the boy against the wall and slap him across the face, with a warning never to try that again. In the USA the manager would be in more serious trouble than the shoplifter. He would be expected to let the police take care of people who have not sufficiently internalized the rules. In Africa, except to the extent that former colonies are Westernized, ever-present supervision is required, and all adults are expected to contribute to it. This is the role, for example, of the guards one sees in front of businesses and middle-class homes in many "developing" countries. Normally their function is not to pose a physical threat to burglars, as many would run away if threatened. They help society maintain its supervisory presence. They remind would-be criminals that they are not supposed to break in.

Guilt and shame have countless repercussions in everyday life, but humor is the primary concern here. In rule-based Western countries, humor often takes the form of jokes, which provide a bit of relief from the rules. Although the West is often identified with freedom, the weight of rationality and obligation constantly burden the Western mind. The freedom sensed by immigrants to the West is illusory, because the control is internal and therefore felt only by natives. A joke provides momentary escape from these constraints. Many jokes are based on twisted or absurd reasoning, logical tricks, or irony; puns are the simplest example. They grant a brief respite from rationality. Other jokes get their punch from a violation of moral standards, as do ubiquitous "dirty" and ethnic jokes. On this view, off-color jokes are not a distortion of humor, but part of what Western humor is all about. They help to loosen the straight jacket of guilt and conscience.

Western cultures are by no means the only ones in which laughter releases tension. In Indonesia, for example, people may laugh when offended or upset. Jokes, however, are a characteristically Western form of relief. Although humor around the world differs along many dimensions, perhaps the clearest difference is that between cultures that make jokes and those that do not.

In cultures that are not rule-based, humor tends to take the form of amusement with everyday situations. The Shona culture mentioned earlier provides an excellent example.
Here mirth is a key coping mechanism that gets one through the day. People develop a
talent for enjoying the twists and turns of everyday life. Westerners in their midst may
wish they could speak the language in order to appreciate the jokes that are responsible
for so much laughter. But no one is telling jokes.

Chinese have a similar taste for amusement, particularly in the form of diversions. They may laugh at a Western joke, but they probably laugh at the situation rather than the joke. The spectacle of a foreigner saying silly things could be quite amusing. The very presence of a visitor may strike them as funny, because a visitor is a diversion, something out of the ordinary. On one occasion I arrived at a hotel in Sichuan province when the elevator was not working. I was obliged to carry my bags up several flights. On the way I passed several people who laughed loudly at my predicament. This was not ridicule in the Western sense, however. The appearance of a Westerner at this hotel was already an exceptional event, but to see a Westerner carrying his own bags up steps was rare enough to merit a good laugh. Chinese women are particularly fun-loving and are prone to giggle for no apparent reason. In all of these cases, it is important not to interpret the laughter as derision and take offense. The Chinese are enjoying life, and the best response is to do likewise.

REFERENCES

De Mente, B. L. (1994a) Korean Etiquette and Ethics in Business (Lincolnwood, IL, USA: NTC Publishing Group).


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1  De Mente (1984a) provides an excellent account of this and other aspects of Korean culture.

2  Thanks to my colleague Thomas Kerr for this illustration.