



Introduction

Since 1991, I have served several Asian student associations as a faculty advisor. This essay is based on my past meetings and interactions with Asian students from China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam who have expressed their problems, concerns, and complaints to me. The goal of this essay is to promote inclusive communication, mutual understanding, and smooth interactions between Asian students and non-Asian faculty and staff members.

1. Loss of face

Lin (1935) introduced the concept of 'face' that is important to Asians to the Western world that can be summarized below.

It is not a face that can be washed or shaved, but a face that can be "granted" and "lost" and "fought for" and "presented as a gift."

- 1) Shī miàn zi 失面子 "lose face"
You can cause someone to lose face by causing someone embarrassment, and/or tarnishing their image and reputation.
- 2) Liú miàn zi 留面子 "grant face; give (someone) a chance to regain lost honor"
In the event that you cause someone to lose face, or someone is embarrassed by circumstances that arise, the best recourse is to appropriate blame for problems that arise.
- 3) Zhēng miàn zi 爭面子 "fight for face; keeping up with the Joneses"
- 4) Gěi miàn zi 給面子 "give face; show respect (for someone's feelings)"
Face can be given to people by complimenting them, showing them respect, or doing anything that increases their self-esteem. Such actions must be done with the utmost sincerity. Doing them in a patronizing manner causes both parties to lose face.

The concept of 'face' roughly translates as good reputation, dignity, integrity, honor, respect, and prestige. The reason why Asians cannot say 'no' is not only by a concern for other people (not to hurt, offend, inconvenience, or embarrass anybody), but also a concern for oneself (to protect oneself from embarrassment).

2. In Asia, 'yes' can mean either 'yes' or 'no'

El Kahal (2001) summarized four different levels of the word 'yes' in Asian countries as follows.

- 1) Recognition
The first level acknowledges that you are talking to me, but I don't necessarily understand what you are saying.
- 2) Understanding
The second level acknowledges that you are talking to me and that I understand you perfectly, but I may have no intention of doing what you propose.
- 3) Responsibility
The third level of 'yes' conveys that I understand your proposal, but I must consult with others and secure their agreement before your proposal can be accepted.
- 4) Agreement
The final level of 'yes' means that I understand, we are in total agreement and your proposal is accepted.

3. Teachers are highly respected by students, like parents

Even though fading among younger generations, the traditional relationship between teachers and students is similar to that of parents and children following Confucian tradition. The Chinese idiom "一日为师，终身为父 (一日為師，終身為父)" literally means "teacher for one day, father forever" that can be translated as "Even if someone is your teacher for only a day, you should regard him like your parent for the rest of your life." Since any relationship is reciprocal, the idiom also implies that teachers have the responsibility of living up to the expectations of parents as well as teachers.

4. Suggestions to non-Asian faculty and staff members

4.1. Silent response generally means disagreement. Asians are very indirect in their communication and take great care to avoid communicating anything directly that would hurt or offend a colleague as it would cause a loss of 'face.' If they disagree with an idea, they will simply remain silent.

4.2. Pay attention to body language.

For Asians, non-verbal communication speaks volumes. Asians rely on facial expression, tone of voice, and posture to tell them what someone feels. Hissing sound made by inhaling through clenched teeth, frowning, tilting the head, or scratching the back of the head while someone is speaking should be interpreted as a sign of disagreement.

4.3. "Under consideration" means refusal.

If an Asian replies "I will consider," that means most likely 'no.' When Japanese express strong refusal, they say "it's inconvenient." Pay attention to any polite refusal of an undesired offer by an Asian.

4.4. Refrain from asking a 'yes-no' question

Since there is a tendency to say "yes" to questions so that you do not lose face, the way you phrase a question is crucial. It is better to ask, "When can we expect completion?" than "Can we expect completion in 3 weeks?"

4.5 Create an inclusive class environment

Most Asians students remain quiet and passive in the classroom, different from American students. Most Asian students feel they cannot be critical of teachers. In addition, Asian international students face many other language and cultural barriers to participate in classroom discussions. Instructors should encourage these students to participate by creating an inclusive environment so that they feel comfortable to express themselves in English, for example, by intentionally directing questions to Asian students to let them know that it is acceptable that they will express their opinions and by taking care in assigning students for group work to ensure diversity of backgrounds in each group. Many Asian students have complained that they were treated as stupid because they kept silence and their term papers were graded too harshly based on English grammar. An instructor reportedly told a Japanese student, "Go back to your country, learn English, and then come back to study!"

References

- El Kahal, Sonia, 2001, *Business in Asia Pacific: text and cases*, Oxford University Press, Oxford England, pp. 140.
- Lin, Yutang, 1935, *My Country and My People*. Reynal & Hitchcock, New York, pp. 199-200.