

Key Culture Concepts: Humility

A HUMBLE HOW-TO

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Chinese modesty, in all its self-effacing glory, is most likely a product of the country's great philosopher/instant-noodlesupremo, Master Kong—or Confucius—as he was known to his Jesuit friends.

All Chinese schoolchildren learn how wise, yet humble, Confucius was, memorising such sound bite-friendly aphorisms of his, such as, “When three men walk together, my teacher must be among them,” which Confucius used to show that even the most brilliant people always have something to learn from others.

“Modesty”, be it genuine or false, permeates Chinese culture. Even today, despite its gleaming metropolises and oh-so-obvious Olympic supremacy, China refers to itself as a developing country.

THE TAO OF MODESTY

So what is “modesty” in Chinese? Let's look at the Chinese word: 谦虚 qiān xū. The first character 谦 qiān means humble, while the 虚 xū is short for 虚心 xū xīn—self-effacing, literally emptiness of heart. Unfortunately, there's a thin line between modesty—being self-effacing—and being insincere. This distinction is even closer in Chinese, as the words for modesty and insincerity both share the character for emptiness. In the former, it is used to mean “without arrogance”, in the latter it is used to mean being “false and disingenuous”.

The line is so blurred that false modesty is expected (even required) on some occasions, although to overdo it can also be frowned upon. Nevertheless, when in doubt, being excruciatingly modest is almost always the best course of action. So, it's important to note that the following guide on how to be modest in a Chinese fashion is likely error-filled and lacking substance; therefore, dear reader, please accept my most humble and kowtow-filled apologies in advance, as I meekly surrender to your undoubtedly greater wisdom.

EXCUSES, EXCUSES, EXCUSES!

Before you do anything in China, whether it's cooking up some greasy dongpo pork for your friends or performing a virtuoso erhu solo on a street corner, it's a good idea to lay the modesty groundwork—lower people's expectations by professing ignorance or lack of ability in anything you are about to do.

The ironically self-perpetuating mantra of the Chinese learner of English: “My English is poor,” is a classic example of this stratagem. After all, you can't be disappointed if your hopes have been crushed in advance.

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These excuses, like most nuances of Chinese culture, extend all the way to the dinner table. At dinner engagements, custom dictates that the host will usually provide a dizzying array of dishes for their guests. But the host may still say something like:

*I'm not much of a cook; bear with me if it doesn't taste good.
I am embarrassed that there are only a few home-cooked dishes, please enjoy but don't take them seriously.*

To which an appropriate response might be:

Not at all, there's more than enough!

COMPLIMENT COUNTER STRIKE!

The speed at which Chinese people are likely to offer a compliment is matched only by the speed at which that compliment is then subsequently deflected. A failure to deny a compliment is, in most cases, a social faux pas and may be viewed as arrogance of the highest order. Generally speaking, praise should be met with modesty, for example:

A: You speak such amazing Chinese! (你的汉语说得真好 nǐ de hànyǔ shuō de zhēn hǎo!)

B: Not at all. (哪里哪里 nǎlǐ nǎlǐ.)

I'M NOT WORTHY

Modesty is key when both giving and receiving gifts in China. When you are presenting a gift, it is always modest and slight, when you are on the receiving end of a gift, it is always a gift fit for a king.

A: It's a small gift to represent my good will. Though it can't fully represent my respect to you, but please accept it anyway.

B: What a generous gift; I'm afraid I cannot accept it.

It is generally considered polite to reject a gift two to three times before finally accepting.

<http://www.theworldofchinese.com/2013/07/a-humble-how-to/>

Quotes

(Translated from *Talking About Chinese Culture Book I*, Chinese language textbook)

"We Chinese believe that humility is a kind of virtue. We have an old proverb that says "Pride leads to loss, while modesty brings benefit." So, one shouldn't praise oneself. When we talk about ourselves or our things we usually do it in self-effacing terms. When we talk about others we use respectful and polite terms."

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Quotes (cont.)

“Chinese culture is a comparison culture. If you refer to yourself as weak, then it means that others are strong, but if you praise yourself, it’s like you’re saying everybody else is no good. So in order to be polite and show respect to others, Chinese people believe we should play down our personal contributions and do our best not to stick out.”

Discussion Questions

1. How is humility viewed in the west? What about false modesty/humility? What makes a person humble in North American cultures?
2. Many Chinese hold the belief that Americans are aggressive and arrogant. Why do you think this is?
3. The importance of humility in China usually means that compliments are deflected rather than accepted. For example, instead of saying “Thank you” in response to a compliment, a Chinese person may flatly deny the praise, or mention that it was really someone else who did the work, etc. What other ways can you think of to deflect compliments rather than accept them with thanks?
4. What do you think about the Chinese propensity to downplay personal efforts or contributions in order not to stick out? How does this differ from North American culture?
5. When you compliment someone and they disagree with you, flat-out denying what you just said, what do you think your response should be?
6. Humility in China also means that in social situations you should always be looking out for the needs of others and putting them before yourself (e.g., filling their glass up before filling your own, never taking the last piece of food, etc.). Does this remind you of any Book passages?
7. Many times in our classrooms, what we see in our students as timidity and shyness is often Chinese humility at work. How should we deal with this as teachers?