

# Key Culture Concepts: Hierarchy

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## Status & Hierarchy (Or “Respect my authority!”)

Excerpt from “Confucius 101: A key to understanding the Chinese Mind” – China Mike

Confucius was mainly interested in how to bring about societal order and harmony. He believed that mankind would be in harmony with the universe if everyone understood their rank in society and were taught the proper behaviors of their rank. Similarly, he believed that the social order was threatened whenever people failed to act according to their prescribed roles. If he had a catchphrase, it might have been: “A place for everyone and everyone in their place”.

Confucius devised a system of interdependent relationships — a structure in which the lower level gives obedience to the higher (extending from the family level to the national). As a result, Chinese culture tends to give a considerable amount of reverence for authority and age (though not necessarily sincere, especially in a changing modern China).

He believed that moral behavior stemmed from the fulfillment of traditional roles, as defined by these “five principle relationships” (with trust between friends as the only horizontal relationship):

- Ruler and minister
- Father and son
- Elder brother and younger brother
- Husband and wife
- Friend and friend

Though modern China has moved past these narrowly defined roles, the Chinese today are still used to thinking in terms of hierarchy. They tend to respect hierarchy and differences in status much more than Westerners, who tend to be more egalitarian and open towards strangers. Americans, in particular, tend to value people who treat everyone with equal respect, regardless of their relative socio-economic statuses. For instance, you often hear stories of the “down to earth” big shot CEO who chats with the janitor every morning on a first-name basis. You won’t see this in China.

<http://www.china-mike.com/chinese-culture/understanding-chinese-mind/confucius/>

## What Does “Leader” Mean in China? (Excerpt)

Sean Upton-McLaughlin

## An Introduction to the Concept of Lǐngdǎo 领导

A universal term in Chinese for an executive, a boss, or anyone’s direct superior is “Lingdao,” which can be roughly translated as “leader.” However, in actual practice the term Lingdao cannot simply be used interchangeably with its English equivalent. First of all, the general usage of the term varies greatly with how Westerners use the term “leader.” Most Westerners only use the term

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“leader” on occasion, (e.g., a conference of western leaders), and rarely, if ever, use the term to refer to or directly address a superior. In contrast, the term Lingdao is much more common in Chinese daily and professional language, and is often used to directly address managers and executives. Several common uses of the term Lingdao have been translated and provided below as examples:

*I value the Lingdao's concern for me.*

*We've just received the Lingdao's instructions. Let's begin work immediately.*

*Through the support of the Lingdao, I will do my best to make contributions to the company.*

In addition to the differences in common usage, the term Lingdao also carries a very different inherent meaning in China than leader does in Western countries. In many ways, it harkens back to the traditional system of imperial rule in ancient China, with an all powerful emperor supported by an elite cadre of government officials. Rulers and other powerful men and women in China over the centuries have never really had to deal with limits on their power or the sort of checks and balances found in many Western democracies. In Western countries, the terms “leader” and “leadership” often imply bettering oneself and managing in a fair, just, and responsible manner. In China, Lingdao has much more to do with personal power.

<https://chinaculturecorner.com/2014/05/12/what-does-leader-mean-in-china/>

## Filial Piety

Sean Upton-McLaughlin

Another form of etiquette that takes a high level of prominence in Chinese society is filial piety (孝 xiào), or how one respects and interacts with one's elder family members. Ancient China long practiced ancestor worship, in which memorials to dead ancestors were displayed in a family temple and obedience and respect were given chiefly to the eldest member of the household. Today, Chinese children and young adults are almost always subject to the wishes of their parents, including where to go to school, what to study, what careers to pursue, and who to marry. They are also expected to marry and have children by a certain date, and to a certain degree engage in a lifestyle approved of by their parents. Chinese children who deviate from what is expected of them, while not subject to direct ostracism, are instead subject to steady pressure and critique to conform.

### Quotes

(Translated from *Talking About Chinese Culture Books I and II*, Chinese language textbooks)

“China has a strong sense of rank and rank distinctions. For example, the Chinese tend to have a high regard for people in powerful positions, the elderly, and the highly educated. In meetings, those in authority speak first, with lower-ranking employees speaking last or not at all. During a banquet, the person with the highest rank or status will enter first, sit first, eat first, and leave

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first. And unless those accompanying him or her are close friends or elderly, the leader will be referred to by title, not name.”

Dialogue:

*Guo Jianguo: I think our standards of politeness and behavior often depend on age. For example, an older person can get away with saying something that a younger person wouldn't be able to. Or an older person can get away with doing something that a younger person couldn't, such as patting someone on the shoulder. If an older person pats someone on the shoulder it's acceptable, but if a younger person pats an older person on the shoulder, it's considered very rude. Also, in any kind of activity involving people of the same social status, the older people are always taken care of first. They're the ones who will get on the bus first, be given the best seats at the table, be given the chance to speak first, and eventually they're the ones who will exit the room or building first.*

*Anna: So, if this is really true, then why do you still see young people who won't give up their seats for an elderly person?*

*Guo Jianguo: Because they don't know that person. If they knew him or her, even if they were only five years older, they would give up their seat. There are different standards for strangers and people you know; this comes from traditional ideas about "insiders and outsiders" in Chinese culture.*

## Discussion Questions

1. Most western countries are considered to be “low power-distance” cultures, which means that the differences between authorities and subordinates is downplayed as much as possible. Can you think of any examples of this in North American society?
2. Why do think Chinese leaders wouldn't want to be seen as “down to earth?”
3. Why do you think North Americans don't talk about our “leaders” in the same way the Chinese do? How do we talk about (and to) our “leaders”?
4. “Filial piety” often means obeying parents' wishes, even into adulthood. How does this differ from North American culture? How do you think this concept might affect the students you will encounter?
5. What do you think about the idea of having different standards for strangers vs. people you know? Do we have this type of standard in North America?
6. How do you think the high-power distance structure here in China might affect you?
7. What are some practical ways you can think of to show respect to the leaders at your school?