

Key Culture Concepts: Insiders and Outsiders

Insiders and Outsiders are Different

Joann Pittman

When I first went to China many years ago, one of the things that I and my American colleagues found most annoying about living there was the difference in price between what we paid for things and what our Chinese friends had to pay. For us, a train ticket was 400 yuan; for our Chinese friends it was 200. Why? Because there was a “foreign price” and a “Chinese price.” End of discussion, thank you very much. Since there are not many things that upset an American faster than feeling like he/she is being ripped off, this two-tiered pricing structure was a constant irritant.

In the mid-1990's, while studying Chinese, I stumbled across a Chinese expression that was a 'key' to helping me understand what was going on. I was working through a textbook called *Speaking of Chinese Culture* that taught about key Chinese cultural rules and values. One chapter was on this Chinese concept called 内外有别 *nèi wài yǒu bié*, which means “insiders and outsiders are different.”

I asked my tutor how this notion played itself out in every day life, and she said, “Well, it's why you have to pay more for the entrance ticket to the park than I do.” “You mean, they're not doing it merely to cheat me?” I asked. “No,” she replied. “Why should you, as an outsider, be treated the same as an insider?”

Lights, bells, and whistles went off in my head, exploding in a cacophony of comprehension. Suddenly, so many other things that I had seen and experienced began to make sense.

A few years later, I was studying with a professor in Beijing who added to my understanding by explaining to me that the clearest example of the concept was The Great Wall. (Hmm...that's not what the tourist posters say.)

In the Chinese worldview, there are two kinds of people in the world: Chinese and foreigners. Unlike the English usage of the word “foreigner,” which is a relative term, in Chinese it is absolute. Like the terms “Jews” and “Gentiles,” they are mutually exclusive. A Chinese cannot be a foreigner, and a foreigner cannot be a Chinese.

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to teach an orientation session for a group of Chinese high school students visiting Minnesota for 2 weeks. I started off with a little “worldview disruption” activity. I asked them a question, “什么是外国人 *shénme shì wàiguórén?*” What is a foreigner? Even though I could tell by the looks on some of their faces that they suspected it was a trick question, 3000+ years of education and cultural conditioning led them to shout with one accord “You are!”

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"Wrong," I said. "For the next two weeks, YOU are!" They laughed, firm in their belief that I had gone stark-raving mad.

I also saw this illustrated vividly in Beijing many years ago when I attended a talk given by Israel Epstein, a then 89-year-old White Russian Jew who had come to China as a 5-year old to escape the pogroms in Russia. He had stayed on in China, becoming a Chinese citizen, and becoming active in the revolution that brought the Communists to power. He even became a member of the Chinese Communist Party.

I went to the talk with some Chinese friends, and afterwards pressed them on this point. "In your eyes," I asked, "is he a Chinese or a foreigner?" They all agreed that, notwithstanding his 80+ of living in China, and his Chinese citizenship, he was still a foreigner."

Traditional Chinese culture does not hold that "all men are created equal." Instead, it is not only acceptable, but also proper, for different kinds of people to be treated differently. This is the way the world is ordered. A two-tiered price structure is not a problem to be solved; rather it is the way it should be.

Interestingly enough, China did away with the official price discrepancies in the late 1990's in order to meet WTO requirements, but unofficially it still remains in place. A foreigner will often pay more for vegetables in the market than his/her Chinese housekeeper.

Sometimes this concept cuts the foreigner's way, however, since the strong sense of hospitality in Chinese culture dictates that guests be treated with utmost honor and respect. While we may be foreigners, we are also 外宾 wàibīn (foreign guests), and are therefore entitled to certain privileges and opportunities that are not afforded to locals. Sometimes we'll be escorted to the front of lines; sometimes ushered into the pews at the front of a church or assembly even as Chinese are being moved out. It may go against my western notion of fair play, but in China, it's what you do for a foreign guest. It's just being polite.

Living well where you don't belong means graciously living as an outsider, with all the accompanying frustrations and undeserved privileges.

Insider, Outsider, and a Dying Toddler

Joann Pittman

You may have heard the news this week about a toddler in southern China who was run over by a small van (twice) and left unattended in the road while at least 18 people walked by without offering any assistance. The entire incident, from the girl first being run over to the arrival of a scrap collector who finally carries her out of the street, was captured by security cameras and, as you can imagine, has caused quite an uproar here in China...

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Chinese social media exploded with discussions about how such a thing could happen. Some say it is just another example of the breakdown of morality in a modern China that only values money. Others lay the blame at recent cases where bystanders have helped someone in need, only to be accused of causing the injury in the first place and thus being held financially responsible by the court. In other words, to help might bring the helper and his/her family 麻烦 máfan ("trouble"), both legally and financially.

I also think that the insider/outsider mentality that I wrote about in my previous post plays a part in situations like these, which are actually common in China. The difference here is that it was filmed for the entire world to see.

Interestingly, in all of the articles and analyses that I have read about this, the only journalist who's mentioned this aspect is Austin Ramzy, of Time who writes in a piece titled *Amid Anger Over Grisly Collision, China recognizes a Humble Hero*:

"In his 1939 work Peasant Life in China, Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong examined how social obligations were determined by the closeness of relationships. Fei "called this a concentric pattern of social relations with positions measured by how close one stood in relation to the actor," Linda Wong wrote in her 1998 book Marginalization and Social Welfare in China. "The more distant the location from the centre, the weaker the claim, so that ultimately one did not have any obligation to people unknown to oneself."

I don't know you, therefore you aren't.

Some are calling for the establishment of "Good Samaritan" laws to prevent these types of incidents. I suspect that the cultural context of the Good Samaritan story was similar to China, in that there were clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders, Jews and Samaritans, and this is exactly why the story must have been so radical to those listening. May we all (Chinese and foreigners) be more like the Good Samaritan, challenging cultural conventions and saying "G-d knows you, therefore you are."

<http://joannpittman.com/uncategorized/2011/inside-outside-and-a-dying-toddler>

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Discussion Questions

1. Western cultures recognize groups of insiders and outsiders as well, but the differences in the way these groups are treated are not as sharply defined as in China. How do we define “insiders” and “outsiders” in the West? How do we interact with the people in these groups? Are there regional differences in how this plays out?
2. The article mentioned that in China “...it is not only acceptable, but also proper, for different kinds of people to be treated differently.” Where do you think this comes from? How does it make you feel as a Westerner?
3. Strong differences between “in-groups” (insiders) and “out-groups” (outsiders) are more common in collectivist cultures like China (as opposed to individualistic cultures like the U.S.). Why do you think this is the case? What’s the connection between collectivism and strong in-group ties?
4. “I don’t know you, therefore you aren’t.” Have you seen this play out in Chinese society yet? If so, how? If not, can you imagine some ways this might affect attitudes and behavior?
5. What do you think are some appropriate ways we can challenge the above notion (“I don’t know you, therefore you aren’t”)?
6. It’s not an uncommon experience for Pinnacle teachers to have students or friends open up and share personal information that they wouldn’t share with others. Why do you think this is given the cultural values of insiders and outsiders?