

# Key Culture Concepts: Harmony

---

## The Confucian Value of Harmony and its Influence on Chinese Social Interaction

Excerpts from a scholarly paper by Wei Xiaohong and Li Qingyuan

Harmony is highly valued by the Chinese in their interpersonal relationships. The value of harmony guides people's interactions, manners, and norms in every aspect of Chinese social interaction—in family, between friends, at school, in business, and among strangers. The ability to achieve interpersonal harmony is the crucial criterion of one's competence in Chinese social interaction (Chen, 2002).

According to Huang (1999, cited in Leung 2002), there are two major types of harmony in Chinese social interaction: "genuine" and "surface." The former refers to holistic and sincere harmonious relationships while the latter refers to harmonious relationships that appear on the surface level, although conflicts remain underneath the surface. In the latter case, harmony is a communicative norm or strategy that covers, or in some cases supports, hidden conflicts. Strategic tolerance allows better opportunity in the future. Huang further argues that genuine harmony is difficult to establish and, therefore, people generally settle for surface harmony. As Chang (2001) points out, Chinese interpersonal harmony is a "social performance," often conducted at the surface level. The preference to surface harmony over direct confrontation in Chinese social interaction often makes foreigners confused, and the idea of harmonious performance might even pose a serious challenge to their sense of integrity, thus resulting in their reluctance and poor performance in interacting with the Chinese.

## The Characteristics of Chinese Social Interaction under the Influence of the Confucian Harmony

As for interpersonal harmony management in Chinese social interaction, most studies have defined it as conflict control (Chen, 2002; Huang, 2006), which intends to reduce the degree of conflicts and to avoid confrontations in communicating harmony-threatening messages, such as disagreement, competition, and frustration.

### Group Centeredness

While growing up in China, one tends to be sensitive to his or her position in the group, as above, below or equal to others. Individuals' roles and expectations of individuals in a group correspond with one's hierarchical position in the group. For example, when making a decision, those who sit lower on the hierarchy scale are normally expected not to play the decisive role, therefore they commonly deemphasize their ideas or stand their ground less firmly. Their opinions should be conveyed in a more humble manner than those who stand higher in the hierarchy scale. And once a decision has been made, individual group members are expected to embrace it and act on it. That's one reason why outsiders seldom hear a Chinese make an irreverent comment, or openly express a view at odds with that of his or her inside group. Toeing the line is important, and it is enforced.

# Key Culture Concepts: Harmony

---

## The Doctrine of the Mean

The Confucian equilibrium of the Doctrine of the Mean advocates self-restraint and indirect expression of disapproval. According to Confucianism, in order to promote harmony, cultivated people must subdue their emotions in public as a symbolic expression of promoting welfare and neglecting the personal desires, because showing raw emotions immediately threatens the principle of 礼 lǐ. Such kind of view is somewhat extreme. Withholding all kinds of strong feelings is not applicable to the present situations of China. The Chinese modern view of harmony holds that people should express those strong feelings in a moderate manner. This moderate manner may be best described by the Chinese word 含蓄 hánxù, which refers to a communicative mode that is contained, reserved, implicit and indirect. Therefore, the Chinese tend to express negative feelings or contrary opinions in an indirect manner. In the network of human relationships, open, aggressive arguments and behaviour are seldom allowed in public or in a conflict situation because they are regarded as an insult to the collective.

## Saving or Making Face for Others

Why concern for face should have such high importance for the Chinese mainly lies in two principal factors. For one thing, over the centuries, agriculture has been an important part in Chinese economy, which makes Chinese society one of very restricted geographical mobility. Most people are attached for life to a place or a given community. Under such circumstances, maintaining harmonious relationships among all its members becomes of extreme importance. Consequently, in people's social interaction, face-saving behaviors are emphasized. Everyone exerts their efforts to maintain harmony, avoid conflicts, and protect the integrity of the group. For another, Confucianism emphasizes that humans exist in interactive relationships with others and that most human relationships are characteristic of hierarchical nature, as is put, "seniors and juniors have their ranking". Chinese people are good at identifying with their own relative positions in hierarchies and behaving properly according to the scale where they stay. Social harmony is often preserved when all parties in a social situation behave in a proper way. One important way to maintain harmonious relationship is to accept and respect each person's need to maintain his or her face.

## Conclusion

With China's fast economic growth and expanding collaboration with the rest of the world, tens of millions of people will pour into China. No matter what their specific purposes may be, they all wish to have a better understanding of and communication with the Chinese people. The key to their success in establishing good relationships with Chinese people is to understand the core spirit of Confucian harmony and its influence on Chinese social interaction.

# Key Culture Concepts: Harmony

---

## Quote

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

Most of the time, when someone comes up against impolite speech or behavior, they'll restrain themselves. They won't immediately get into an argument, though from that point on the relationship will be soured. If they don't restrain themselves they may cause a fight in public, which would not only cause them to lose face, but quite possibly the relationship as well. Because of this, people avoid this kind of extreme situation by restraining themselves and maintaining a surface-level politeness, making things more convenient for them if they meet again in the future. With strangers, however, it's a different story. If someone accidentally hits another's bicycle and doesn't immediately apologize, he definitely will not be forgiven.

## Discussion Questions

1. What comes to your mind when you think of the word "harmony?"
2. In North American social interactions, do we have something similar to "genuine" and "surface" harmony that the authors mentioned? If so, how does it play out?
3. How does Chinese collectivist (group-centered) culture affect peoples' views on conflict and confrontation?
4. The Doctrine of the Mean translates to "everything in moderation," which leads to a collective personality of reserved expression (含蓄 hánxù) and conflict avoidance. How does this compare to North American culture?
5. The authors mentioned that "social harmony is often preserved when all parties in a social situation behave in a proper way." As foreigners, we will face many new social situations in China. What are some ways we can learn the "proper way" to behave in these situations?
6. When is it appropriate in North American culture to restrain yourself? Are there times or situations where we choose to tolerate bad behavior or malicious words? How does this compare to the Chinese idea of harmony?
7. If the Chinese are generally conflict-avoidant, then why did I see a woman arguing with the fruit seller on the street the other day?