

PART I

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Chapter One

EMOTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHINESE CHARACTER

By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart¹ – Confucius

As we begin our journey of looking at relationships, we are about to lose some misleading stereotypes about the ‘Chinese’ character. From the imperious Mandarin to the inscrutable, calm exterior of Chinese business, to the diffident, non-personality driven face of the Chinese Government, we are about to see beyond these intimidating exteriors into the unfathomable depth of the Chinese heart.

Would it surprise you to know, for example, that the Chinese are one of the most emotionally intense and deep people in our world? It did me. Like many others, the more stereotyped views of the Chinese – their pragmatism, their ambition for skills and knowledge, the importance of money and status in their society and their apparently controlled, occasionally imperious exterior – kept the emotional base of this culture rather veiled from me.

Perhaps the greatest bar to seeing the deeply personal and emotional facets of the Chinese identity lies behind another facade: that of

¹The quotations which head up this and subsequent chapters are taken from the seminal writings of three great Chinese Thinkers: Confucius (the Analects), Lao Tzu (Tao Te Ching) and Sun Tzu (Bing Fa/Art of War). Fuller biographical and analytical detail on the above is contained in Chapter 7.

the driven, busy, ever-achieving, ever-acquiring way in which the Chinese appear to operate in life.

This deceptive acquisitiveness is perhaps the strongest masker of the depth of feeling and sincerity of friendship the Chinese embody.

This 'busyness' confuses the intentions, hides emotions and muddies motives in the eyes of the undiscerning Westerner.

It is helpful to dispense with it immediately by putting it in a context that explains the constant achievement goals and pursuant that the Chinese exhibit.

In a society where there is a cherished responsibility on the younger generation to provide for lifelong parental care and financial security, the urge to achieve has, in fact, a deep emotional basis, whereas the West has often viewed this as being a symptom of an over-developed acquisitiveness or competitive nature.

To achieve within this definition of responsibility is to display your ability to care for those you love and to give proof of living life fully and deploying life force to good consequences for one's loved ones.

To the Western perception, however, the acquisitive stereotype makes us wary of believing that a deeper emotional profile powers the Chinese character. Yet it does so indisputably. Far from being proof, as some Western perspectives would have us believe, that the Chinese deprioritise emotion in favour of achievement, wealth or status, the act of achieving is much more about contributing to family pride and wellbeing than seeking personal recognition. In such a context, prosperity is worked towards in the spirit of creating stability, life force and harmonious conditions for loved ones.

Moreover, the absence of strongly communicated individual personality and overt ego also deflects us from observing the deeper aspects of the Chinese character. Within the Chinese profile, emotion is often tempered with highly developed and evolved powers of

logic and strategic thinking as well as training in achieving balance and stability from life mentors such as Confucius.²

Yet behind all of this emphasis on logic and discipline are the emotions which fuel Chinese life and power everything from business to family relationships. Emotions, and sensitive approaches to emotions, are the key to making China accessible and moving towards a shared emotional framework.

So, moving past these deceptive facades, we are now able to look more closely at the real emotional world of the Chinese and to a better, more respectful, understanding for the purpose of building real connection.

In this exercise, it is helpful to consider the classically defined, key emotions which are identified within the Chinese holistic view of the person and used to underpin ancient Chinese approaches to the wellbeing of the individual.

Within the classical analysis of primary emotional states, five emotions are given prominence: happiness, fear, sadness, anger, and grief. Let's begin by looking at happiness, because it provides a unique key to the hopes and dreams of the Chinese and a strong basis for the goals which they establish in relationships.

The emphasis on happiness is one of the central keys to the Chinese character, often undervalued in the process of bonding.

For the Chinese, who see providing for previous generations as well as the next generation as a lifelong process, and who seek consistently in life to work hard, prosper and acquire skills, it is crucial to

²c. 6th Century BC sage and teacher, credited with founding China's first school based on merit and renowned for his vision for achieving social order and harmony which has influenced generations of Chinese thinking up to, and including, the present. A fuller description of the biographical details and highly influential teachings of this seminal Chinese thinker and mentor is contained in Chapter 6.

enjoy the journey. A life slavishly spent controlled by time and driven by deadlines is not a life for this people.

Every day is a unit of time. This time is to be deployed in the pursuit of goals that enhance one's family and reputation but, equally significantly, this must be combined with a quality of life. The Chinese like to have clear aims or subjects for their life, but insist on pursuing these in a rich, leisurely way while celebrating life and enjoying the view as much as the destination.

In China, the state of happiness is a daily organic goal. The search for happiness through simple pleasures – balancing duty and relaxation, appreciating the diversity of relationships, the art of engagement, the deep enjoyment of food and the aesthetic appreciation of sights and sensations – are what constitutes the movement towards this goal.

Whilst the West professes a similar dedication to the goal of happiness, the state of happiness as a daily objective is often eroded by ever-increasing work hours, fast food and poor work/life balance. So how can we bond around this core emotion and use this prized state of being as real common ground?

The lesson is to savour the process of living as the Chinese do, to see everything as opportunities to connect with people, the rituals of eating as an opportunity to bond rather than refuel, and to see engagement in business or work with the Chinese as the exploration of common goals rather than the achievement of outcomes, time-driven goals or deadlines.

A key factor is to understand and share the appetites that constitute happiness for the Chinese: relationships well developed and richly sustained (it is interesting to note that in China wealth is described as being rich in relationships and connections, not money); the daily rituals of life made beautiful and the time taken to enjoy them; intellect well deployed with successful outcomes; intelligent living, growing in knowledge and skills; the replenishing of energy through sharing rich experiences, and the rituals of hospitality; cultivating a sense of creating an infinity of time to give relationships

the nurturing they require at any stage in any day – no matter how busy.

Since the Chinese believe that stress is counteracted by happiness, this becomes an emotional state much sought after in Chinese daily life. While few Westerners would dismiss the state of happiness as an aspiration, within Western culture, it is more often viewed as a by-product of other positive factors such as a successful professional life, a win, a promotion, the acquisition of things translated into gains and rewards.

However, if we can invest in the emotional experience of happiness as a basis for exchange and success, and release our time-driven approach to goals and limiting definitions of relationships, we will have found a central key for engagement.

At the other end of the primary emotions identified by the Chinese is anger, not an emotion we comfortably tolerate in the West outside of the strictly personal arena. The Chinese see anger as a natural emotion which, when spontaneously expressed, quickly dissipates.

It is a response to the frustration about anything that publicly plays to a loss of face and dignity: unintelligent living, failure to seize the opportunity to assist others (especially *in extremis*), the feeling of being excluded or not needed, being deprived of the joy of rendering service and being deeply reproached for the same.

Above all, it is a response to disappointment in all its forms. If, as it does in China, the business of connecting and engaging well governs all of life, then the following are to be scrupulously avoided: jobs poorly done; promises not kept; relationship ethics breeched; inflexibility and putting outcomes before relationships or handling important connections indelicately or without kindness.

If we can participate in the appetite for happiness and provide opportunities to achieve it in the way we request help, accept support, provide opportunities for service and honour the rituals of life and the simple pleasures they enshrine, we will build a hugely rich emotional terrain and make meaningful progress.

Amidst the cherished goal of happiness in the Chinese character is the profound ability to experience sorrow and grief. The Yin/Yang face of such an intense desire for happiness is the capacity for profound sorrow, experienced not just in moments of loss, but also in instances of missing or when failure occurs.

The Chinese see adversity as a chance to grow relationships and boost their strengths. When ultimate failure occurs, if it has affected relationships, much deep sorrow is experienced even when the context is professional. This is something we Westerners would tend to experience with a much more dispassionate set of emotions – regret, concern or displeasure.

Sorrow is also experienced when relationships are not supported by communication. In such circumstances, it feels as if skills which to the Chinese are as natural as breathing are not reciprocated or are neglected through carelessness.

Communication is life force to the Chinese. It is the platform for discernment of and creation of relationships through empathy. It needs to be consistent, frequent and authentic. As a nation steeped in the duty to provide for multiple generations, the Chinese easily discern what is cursory and poorly intentioned or, conversely, what is supported by heartfelt emotions.

Sorrow and sadness are frequently felt when the Chinese are not permitted to render service to those they value or are in any way blocked from doing so.

The impulse to protect, assist, support, guide and mentor those whom the Chinese embrace into close relationships is of primal intensity. Those who are adopted as friends by the Chinese are considered to be the natural beneficiaries of the entire impressive gamut of Chinese skills, resources, energy and care; a rare and often lifelong privilege akin more to our definition of devotion than of mere relationship.

This cherished place, dealt with shortly in our analysis of relationships, makes the winning of a common ground and the task of

relating an unexpectedly nurturing destination where we meet with truly able co-creators in the business of happiness and success.

Continuing to look at the primary relationship emotional states, we approach fear. Fear has a hidden, but heavily neglected, place in the Chinese character. It is always contested by another hugely powerful Chinese quality – courage – and manifests more as a low-grade anxiety.

In a society with high perfectionist tendencies, goals and strong levels of competitiveness, the will to excel and succeed has spawned a residual low-grade anxiety that runs as an emotion through Chinese character and aspirations. Intensive, multisensory, stimuli-based living does much to quiet the anxiety or provide a distraction from it. However, in a culture where an individual carries three generational reputations and is the public face of a range of his most cherished relationships, anxiety is not to be dismissed.

The anxiety manifests as perfectionist tendencies and the need to live and work intelligently at all times and for this to be in evidence in all situations. It also gathers around critical concepts like keeping one's word, presenting pleasing externals to one's life and having the wherewithal to meet one's life goals.

Few of us in the West would deny the performance anxiety that characterises our working practices and the expectations that result in increasing life stress. However, our anxieties tend to focus on the material implications of survival, success or failure, and the ability to expend talents and manage relationships.

Our public face is not subject to the daily task of maintaining the dignity and reputation of a whole range of people, based on our behaviour and speech in every circumstance. This is an existential anxiety and presents a wonderful opportunity for those who seek to make a positive contribution to China.

By demonstrating understanding, by increasing the sense of wellbeing experienced in and around relationships, by being reliable partners in the business of creating and maintaining meaningful

reputation, we will render a deep service to the very heart and spirit of Chinese responsibility.

However, going further, we have the opportunity to show sensitivity to this anxiety by carefully conducting our part of the relationship with the Chinese in a way that alleviates these inner existential burdens. When we do this in a committed, open-hearted manner, the Chinese are profoundly grateful and often apply their superior knowledge of implementing decisions and creating outcomes to help us realise our most cherished business dreams.

The core, classical emotional states we have reviewed set the scene for an emotional framework that we can build on with the Chinese. It paints a brief picture of true impulses that act as primary catalysts for the Chinese character.

When we have further explored relationships, we will return to the key area of emotions and look at how to use a common emotional framework based on emotional signals around central Chinese values: trust, integrity, sincerity of intention, authenticity and empathy to build deep, meaningful, successful and enduring relationships. For many Western business people, this begins as an intellectual goal in respect of China. In the course of its execution, it often becomes a powerful channel for their business success as well as a heartfelt desire and intention.