General cultural differences and stereotypes
Chinese family culture and customs

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Introduction

Traditional Chinese values include love and respect for the family and parents. Honesty, loyalty, humility, patience, persistence, hard work, friendship, commitment to education and belief in order and stability are important. The emphasis is on obligations to the community rather than on individual rights. These values are generally taught to children from nursery school onward.

Confucianism stresses that a person’s worth is determined by public actions. The concept of li defines a set of social relationships and clearly describes how people should behave towards one another. Confucians categorise relationships into five different groups (Wu-lun): between king and his ministers, father and his son, older brother and his younger brother, husband and his wife and friends. Wu-lun has been expanded to include all relationships. It includes the structure of responsibilities and duties. According to li, the subordinates show respect and obedience to the rulers (in this context, subordinates mean people with less rights) and the rulers have to reciprocate with love, good will, support and affection towards the subordinates.

Chinese people create social networks whose structure is based on the concept of Wu-lun. An individual link within a social network is called Guanxi. Guanxi describes a personal connection between two people in which one is able to prevail upon another to perform a favor or service. Guanxi can also be used to describe a network of contacts, which an individual can call upon when something needs to be done, and through which he or she can exert influence on behalf of another. An important concept of Chinese social relationships is giving and taking honour – maintaining face, which is related to relationships in and between social classes according to the concept of Wu-lun.

Social class influences on personal position and social networks. In ancient China, the king and his ministers were dignified and respected; teachers were the next, then farmers and businessmen. Soldier is the lowest social class. Nowadays social classes include a capitalist class (politicians, business managers and the rich), a middle class (highly educated, professionals, businessmen) and a lower class (farmers, soldiers, the poor). A high social class means having a higher social position. Age and office also influence on a person’s social position: the elderly and high officials are in a higher social position than the young and lower officials.

Family structure

A family of many generations was and still is central to Chinese family structure. Life expectancy was low virtually throughout the history of China. For example, the sixtieth birthday was celebrated with respect. It was not common for people to see their
grandchildren grow up. Because of this, although three-generation families were common, four-generation families were rare and five-generation families were truly significant.

Obedience of children is highly important in Confucianism. It encourages the younger generation to follow the teachings of their parents who tell the young about manners and their duties. Both children and adults are taught to respect their parents, regardless of their age. They obey the parents and do no such things that would bring pain or sorrow to them.

The family hierarchy is strongly symbolised by the concept of Xiao, which is usually translated as "obedience of children", but the more specific translation would be "subordination of children". The family hierarchy is normally the same as the family tree hierarchy. Two members of a Chinese family do not have equal authority. Traditionally, older generations had more authority than younger ones, parents more than children and men more than women. According to the traditional rules of the society, it was a serious offense if a child showed disobedience to his parents.

However, the Chinese family values have gone through some changes over the time. But there are some things in the Chinese culture that still remain the same. For example, the father is the provider and protector of the family. He can make decisions for his children on important matters but he is no longer the head of a family that makes all the decisions. Nowadays children have more freedom to choose a carrier of their own choice. However, they do have to listen to the advice of their parents. Children have to obey the rules that the parents have set for them. The family puts a lot of pressure on the children when it comes to their education.

According to Confucianism, the oldest man and oldest father are without dispute the highest authority. Confucius promoted an idea that it was important to worship one’s parents while they were still alive. The elderly had to be respected for their wisdom and knowledge, even though they were physically weak. The best way to describe this respect is with "the elderly first"—rite of the Chinese New Year's Festival. The family members knelt according to the hierarchy. At first, everybody knelt in front of the grandparents, then in front of the parents and their siblings and so on. Also the elderly of the neighbours sometimes participated in this rite.

The children usually are encouraged to get an education and it’s their parents’ responsibility to take care of that their children receive appropriate education. There is tough competition at school and the children have to attend entrance examinations already at early stage.

**Effects of the one-child policy**

The one-child policy was introduced in the 60s. It has created a generation of children who grew up without siblings. Most psychologists claim that people who grew up without siblings cannot learn to share or make compromises. Members of Chinese families used to be responsible for each other. Nowadays everybody thinks about their own interest. Parents try to satisfy all the needs of their child. The Chinese call this generation “the generation of little emperors”, which means the child gets everything he wants and the parents have to be willing to fulfill all the demands of their child. When the child grows up, he is rather indifferent towards others. Children used to take care of their parents at home. Nowadays young people move away from home and do not take care of their parents.
anymore. Today it is very common that also couples who are not married live together. As a bad result, the number of divorces in China is increasing. Divorce used to be rare in the Chinese family culture. Today the number of divorces increases approximately with 50 % annually.

Rules of social behaviour

Social network

Chinese people live in a strong social network. Before you ask for help, you have to assess your relationship (Guanxi) with the person you’re asking help from. Is he an acquaintance, a close friend or a family member? Then you have to consider what kind of help you are asking for. Handling the request and the results are completely different in different relationships.

Receiving and giving honour

Guanxi is very important in Chinese social life and maintaining a good Guanxi is important. The Chinese prefer the term Miànzi (face) 'giving and taking (maintaining face)' over 'giving and taking honour'. The Chinese highly value Miànzi. If you have offended the other one’s honour, the Guanxi is threatened. Normally, when you ask for help, you wait for the request to be accepted. Otherwise you lose Miànzi. The “level” of losing face depends on the level of Guanxi.

Avoiding conflicts

When it comes to disagreements, Chinese people prefer making compromises over conflicts because nobody wants to lose their face or see the other one lose their face. This is an important way to maintain a good social network.

Social groups

The Chinese don’t normally say ‘no’. Instead, they say 'yes' which merely means ' I hear what you say'. When a group of people have to make a decision, the Chinese usually wait for suggestions from others and adapt to the decision made by the group. In this way, it is possible to maintain a network of Guanxi and avoid conflicts.

Family during the week

The Chinese have three different calendars: the Gregorian calendar, the lunar calendar and the Yellow Calendar. The Gregorian calendar is used on weekdays like in other countries. The lunar calendar, which is based on the schedule of farming, is used for following traditional festivals. For example, the New Year according to the Gregorian calendar is celebrated on the first of January, whereas the date of the Chinese New Year varies from mid-January to mid-February. Because of this, the traditional Chinese festival and holiday seasons vary annually, whereas the national and international festivals are fixed dates in the Gregorian calendar.

The Yellow calendar is an astrological calendar which tells the dates of important events in life. For example, they dates when you get married, move into a new home etc. The
Yellow calendar is often used for checking a date that is useful and brings good luck to business.

**Traditional Chinese festivals**

*Chinese New Year (The Spring Festival)*

Chinese New Year begins on the first day of the new moon and ends on the full moon 15 days later. In the festival, people have traditionally emphasised a religious ceremony in which people pay respects to their ancestors and the gods of Heaven and Earth. The fifteenth day of the New Year is called the Lantern Festival and it is celebrated at night. The Lantern Festival consists of lantern exhibitions and a parade of children carrying lanterns.

The Chinese New Year is very similar to Finnish Christmas. The house must be cleaned thoroughly before the New Year’s Eve, because it removes bad luck. Mother of the family prepares a sumptuous dinner and often the whole family helps in preparing it. After the dinner the family spends time together and shoots fireworks at midnight. On New Year’s Day the children congratulate their parents and receive presents (a red envelope). Then the family goes to wish happy New Year from door to door, first to their relatives and neighbours.

*The Qingming Festival*

People visit graves and pay respects the memory of their ancestors and burn incense and paper money. They also bring roasted pork, steamed chicken, fruits and wine to the dead.

*The Dragon Boat Festival*

Since dragon is a god of water, the dragon boats sail in water after the water has been blessed. According to the tradition, people wash their hair and body in the blessed water. It is a way of blessing the upcoming year.

*The Mid-Autumn Festival (The Moon Festival)*

Cultivators celebrate the end of the harvest in autumn. Today family members and friends traditionally gather to admire the bright moon and eat moon cakes.

**Appendix:** Chinese greeting customs
- Always use the title (Mrs, Mr, PhD...) and surname.
- Full name (surname, first name) is used between friends and family.
- Using only surname is considered to be impolite.
- No hugging – Chinese people need space and hugging insults it.
- shaking hands – women or people in higher position begin
- Greeting from a distance – look in the eye and nod slightly as a sign of greeting
- Always use both hands when giving or taking