

Asia and America: How Cultural Differences Create Behavioral Nuances

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Background

Background of Chosen Demographic: Asians

The Pew Research Center, in a report titled *The Rise of Asian Americans*, concluded that Asians are “the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States.” (Wang, Grace) For the purpose of this study, I will use the phrase ‘Asian’ to classify people with origins from the Far East and Southeast Asian regions. To hone in on a single branch of the many where Asians and Asian-Americans have dominated, the music industry provides evidence of the rise of Asians on a literal and quantifiable level. According to *American Quarterly*, 30-50% of student bodies in America’s top music programs like Juilliard are comprised of Asian Americans. Specifically, Chinese and Korean musicians master the art of violin, piano, and cello. (Wang, Grace) This success extends to academics, particularly standardized admissions tests like the SAT. Scott Jaschik noted that in 2012, Asians scores across all three subjects – verbal, math, and writing - are approximately 140 points higher than that of Caucasians (Appendix 1).

The term ‘Asian’ is used to reference people of full Korean, Japanese, or Singaporean heritage.

Hypothesis

Success is difficult to quantify and measure, but the steps leading up to success are easier to analyze.

Between Americans and Asians, there are specific traits embedded in one’s culture that influence how one approaches success. Therefore, I posit that the following nuances are critical to understanding how behaviorally, Asians and Americans are different: introversion and relationships.

By grasping a broad understanding of the fundamental differences between these two cultural demographics, one can better cater to workers, students, and ultimately create a more cohesive environment that plays to each person’s strengths.

Research

Insecurity and Introversion in Asia

Amy Chua, author of *The Triple Package* and Yale Law Professor, identifies insecurity as a key trait that most leaders and strong cultural groups embody. She drew reference to Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville's observations about differences between Europe and America: in short, poverty-stricken people in the "Old World" exhibited a peaceful and positive attitude, while Americans who were technically the liberated and "free" men were "anxious and on edge." (Chua, 85). As such, this insecurity that the latter group exhibited can be attributed to self-consciousness or, as Chua explains, a "longing to rise."

Similarly for Asians, this insecurity that I observed may be related to "racially gendered stereotypes." (Nancy Wang) Here, I defined one as insecure if they exhibited any of the following behavior during our interview or during my observational period: looks down while talking, avoids eye-contact, is soft-spoken, voice wavered, poor posture, fiddling of thumbs, etc. I spoke with a handful of Asians in Korea and Singapore about where their insecurity may stem from. There was no overwhelming consensus, but among the Asian-Americans I spoke to, most seemed to point to some aspect that physically defines them as "Asian" and sets them apart from white and black peers and colleagues. Based on one's race or defining facial features like almond-shaped eyes, coupled with existing stereotypes, Asians can be and have been subject to potential morally-demeaning racially-gendered stereotypes; this directly deepens the wounds of insecurity created by society. With regards to stereotypes, media is another critical factor that I identified in perpetuating these generalizations, namely through the continual casting of female Asian actors to concubine or exotic martial-arts roles, like *Crouching Tiger*, and men as mathematics prodigies that struggled to find a date, as seen in *Mean Girls*. As actor Yul Kwon said, "In almost every instance, people of Asian descent were depicted as foreigners, not as Americans." (CNN)

In an interview with an Asian student, Michael Kim - aged 17 - described instances of bullying where he was called a “chink” or mocked through references to his Asian culture like a “kimchi smell.” Kim’s self-esteem not only was destroyed, but he developed physical disorders like obsessive-compulsive disorder and social anxiety, all of which affected his growth from child to teenager. Kim also attributes this bullying and insecurity to his Meyer-Brigg’s personality result, INTJ, which categorizes him as an introvert. (Chon)

Furthermore, strong evidence confirms that most Asians do exhibit an introverted personality. Psychologist Robert McCrae published a research in the *Journal of Research in Personality* where he created a multidimensional scaling plot of 36 cultures (Appendix 2). This map placed a scale of neuroticism on the vertical axis and a positive correlation with extraversion and a negative correlation with agreeableness on the horizontal axis. The results reveal that cultures like that of China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Marathi, and Zimbabwe tend to rank lower on the extroversion scale. McCrae notes that this introversion can be due to Asian and African cultures’ emphasis on tradition, conservatism, and compliance. He also recognized that the results are not perfect, as two seemingly-different countries – Croatia and Peru – are isolated in the center while Japan is an outlier and aligns more closely with the European countries. Still, the evidence seems to point to Asian cultures as predominately introverted. (McCrae)

This introversion can also be identified during an interview with Neil Nguyen of Tokyo Academics, a rigorous tutoring center based in Japan, similar to Korean *hakwons*. During our discussion, Nguyen divulged that his experience at Tokyo University was different from his experience at University of Berkeley. “Many students slept over in the lab. There is a huge lack in social skills for many students in Japan.” This introversion extended to the middle and high school students he tutors, as he explained that community service is not present in Japan. While American students tend to list volunteering

experience on their resumes, “Japanese kids don’t do anything outside of school, unless their school offers a specific club which is usually academic-based.”

It is important to clarify that introversion is not a characteristic exclusive to the Asia, but rather a commonly identified trait across the Asian demographic. Korean-American college student Casey Suehyun Chon, who grew up for eighteen years in America, attested to her own experience attending boarding school with international students. “In my experience, Asian students tend to hang out with their own kind, meaning kids of the same ethnicity. It does depend on the person.” Upon reflection, Chon realized that Asian Americans cannot be clumped into the broad category of Asians or American. Oftentimes, certain demographics like Asians and Asian Americans are rendered vulnerable in a professional setting, because executives may mistake certain strengths of soft-spoken or introverted employees as weaknesses. Still, despite the cons that insecurity can bring upon a person, Chua believes that “insecurity can motivate.” (Chua, 112)

Extroversion in America

In contrast, America has built upon a foundation of extroversion. To identify how this phenomenon became the behavioral ideal in America, Cain studied self-help books through the past few centuries. The 1678 *Pilgrim’s Progress*, heavily influenced by religion, urged restraint from readers reaching heaven in the afterlife was a goal. (Cain, 22) This sense of being reserved, however, slowly became overshadowed by a shift of manuals emphasizing one’s exterior character. In 1920 particularly, many manuals began to instruct on how to converse or what to say, thus creating a prototype for an ideal man or woman. It is similar to how fashion magazines instruct readers what to or what not to wear. Eventually, what was once a nudge towards an outgoing character evolved into a full-fledged manifesto of how to become extroverted. Cain provided two lists of words she pulled from manuals pre- and post-1920 to illustrate the shift towards an extroverted society. (Cain, 23)

Earlier guides listed attributes like:

- Citizenship
- Honor
- Reputation
- Integrity

Post 1920, guides emphasized qualities like:

- Fascinating
- Dominant
- Energetic
- Attractive

Chon observed how despite her inherent introverted nature, as an Asian that was raised in America, the extroverted culture of America crept into her own life. “I went to a high school where harkness tables promoted discussion, so I felt comfortable saying whatever I wanted in class. My natural introverted character didn’t hinder me from saying what I wanted. If I thought a chapter in *Heart of Darkness* sucked, I will let the class know what I think.”

Relationships and Work in Asia

I spoke with Wei Loon, a Taiwanese Equity Salesman based at Morgan Stanley’s Singapore office about his observations and thoughts on the differences between American and Asia’s business culture. He started off by sharing a typical schedule for him:

5:30am Wake up

6:00am In the office

6:00-6:45am Morning meeting to discuss what happened in America and discuss predictions for what will happen in Asia during the trading day.

6:45am Phone calls with Taiwan, Korean, and neighboring Asian countries about trends or particular things to look out for during the day.

8:00am Back at the desk. Start calling a list of clients.

9:00am Markets open.

10:00am Finish calling clients. Start digging into research regarding

stocks to sell, talk to analysts about excel models.

11:00am-2pm Allowed to leave desk. Lunch time is spent entertaining clients or taking around companies that are coming through Singapore to meet investors.

2pm-5pm Continue talking with analysts and researching.

5pm Day is over. Go to bars with clients or see clients before dinner.

10pm-1am Work day is over.

There are a few caveats worth mentioning regarding the above schedule. According to Wei-Loon, Singapore is very lunch-and-drinks-specific, while cities like Hong Kong and New York are more centered on dinner. The end of the day also depends on whether one must entertain clients and the location of the entertainment – for example: going to a dinner will end earlier than going to a club to show clients the Singaporean culture. Given that this schedule is specific to Asia, the morning is the “most crucial period, as most of the developments happen in the morning overnight in America.” In conclusion, Wei-Loon approximated that he spent 50% of his time on office work, 30% running around with analysts and corporates, and the last 20% wining and dining.

A large component of Wei-Loon’s job which is not mentioned above is traveling twice a month, often to neighboring cities in Asia or New York. Based on his travels, he observed that America is more professional and merit-based, while Asia is very relationship-centric. “The best brokers are those who can forge relationships. We don’t get paid for having the best ideas or making money. I am incentivized to take my clients out so that they stay with my firm.” Even his work focuses more on building an intimate relationship with his clients. Despite working with 2-3 research assistants who help compile PowerPoint slide decks, Wei-Loon describes his work as “less teamwork and more individual.” However, this relationship-oriented profession seems to contradict the introverted premise aforementioned. It turns out that at Morgan Stanley Singapore, new hires almost always study in America and have pristine conversational skills to ensure that their personality and sociability match the position that requires

such human interaction. As a result, in the finance industry, specifically with equity, extroverted qualities are valued.

Yet while much work revolves around relationships in Asia, many – particularly Asian students - tend to keep to themselves. They don't avoid relationships, but they don't actively seek out forging friendships if not necessary for career advancement of some sort. Koh Hui Qin Alethea, a psychology doctoral student at the National University of Singapore, described the Singaporean culture and why people tend to be self-oriented. "The society here [in Singapore] has a cram school culture. Parents take kids to dance, piano, and sports. Our government is very routine. You get rewarded for everything you do, but there seems to be little to no motivation."

The pressure of the cram school culture that is ingrained in Asia is augmented by the routine of publicizing grades of students after major exams. Here, Alethea explained why Americans may be more comfortable with forging relationships and working in teams, whereas Asians flourish when working alone. "If your marks are on the bottom, you may become even less motivated and stop caring about your rankings. It may actually help you to realize your true passion because you're no longer trying to become a doctor or a government figure. It's similar to American entrepreneurs. Most aren't top-scorers, but in that field, grades and rankings are less important." Alethea refers to the intrinsic motivation to pursue projects that ultimately garner more job satisfaction, an instance that is unfortunately less common in Asia.

Alethea again points to the disparate education systems as a source of difference in relationship in America versus in Asia. She drew on the example of entrepreneurs again to make her point. "There is a feeling that you are a part of something that will eventually become big. At the same time, you are doing something different. It's the idea that you are breaking out the norm to get a feeling of gratification." This is critical in Singapore, a country where start-ups are few. Alethea herself could only

name three: Banff Cyber, an anti-web defacement solution, Tookitaki, a data intelligence startup, and LawCanvas, an online legal system in Singapore. Most Asians, according to Alethea, lack skills that relationship-oriented jobs require in terms of being comfortable with networking and face-to-face interactions with strangers. As such, this can serve as a detriment in a work setting if unidentified.

That said, a source of strength is the humility that Asians exhibit. “Humility is important because you become less defensive since you’re not focusing on your own flaws. Humility is essential for self-identity and self-realization,” said Alethea. It is also a crucial indicator of how people perceive relationships. A study conducted by Elinor McKone revealed that on a scale of 1-7, where awe is around 5-6, Asian subjects are faster to respond to self-praising words as measured by a reaction time (McKone). They are not aware that they are prideful, but when Asians achieve something – be it a good score on an exam or praise from a superior – they feel both happiness and genuine sadness. Alethea described this sadness as arising from their consideration of their coworkers and friends’ feelings. As a result, for many Asians, rewards are often a source of sadness rather than happiness. So, while remaining proud, Asians are also humble.

Further Research

I am continuing to conduct a study observing Asian students entering a negotiation with their American peers to identify whether respect is another notable facet that should be noted when approaching success. Respect took the forefront in a study conducted by Shirli Kopelman and Ashleigh Shelby Rosette to better understand nuances between Asian and Israelis in a negotiation setting. For this study, seventy-seven MBA students from Israel and Hong Kong were tasked with imagining their own hypothetical marriage. The subjects eventually ‘met’ their contact at a catering company for the wedding through a video. The managers ranged from friendly to antagonistic (the independent variables), while the message remained constant: the price was hiked up for the wedding date because another couple had offered a higher value for the same date. In this study, 71% of the Asians accepted

the deal from the smiling caterer but only 14% accepted a deal from the more irritable manager.

However, the Israelis were willing to negotiate with either manager. (Kopelman) The results here can be related to how Asians perceive respect, in that most Asian people “show esteem by minimalizing conflict.” (Cain, 232) A follow-up summary will be compiled upon completing this study to better understand whether respect that stems from filial piety arises in a work setting during a negotiation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the differences in the work ethics of Asians and Americans can be attributed to many facets including introversion and relationships. Asians are inclined to be introverted, but this quality can be mistaken for as a weakness. However, introversion can be wielded as an asset and should not be an overlooked trait. That said, this natural timid behavior can make forging business and social relationships challenging for Asians. Americans are akin to the entrepreneurship culture which encourages breaking out of the societal mold, while Asians tend to follow a more rigid and straight career path. Research however shows that if the person experiences humility, relationships can persist.

Appendix

Appendix 1:

Average SAT Scores, by Race and Ethnicity, 2012

Group	Reading	Mathematics	Writing
American Indian	482	489	462
Asian American	518	595	528
Black	428	428	417
Mexican American	448	465	443
Puerto Rican	452	452	442
Other Latino	447	461	442
White	527	536	515

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<<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/09/25/sat-scores-are-down-and-racial-gaps-remain>>.

Appendix 2

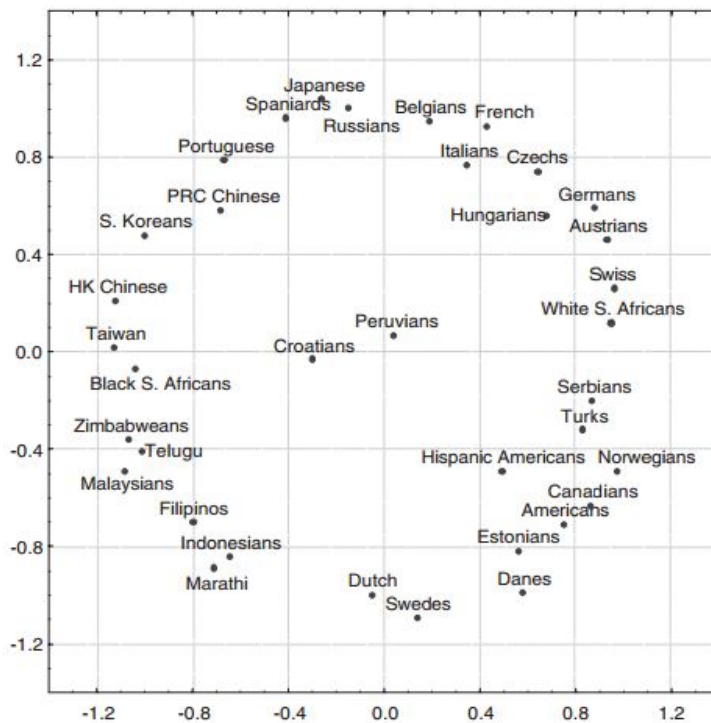


Figure 2: Multidimensional Scaling Plot of 36 Cultures

NOTE: As a mnemonic, it can be noted that North in the figure is associated with N (neuroticism) and East with E (extraversion; see Table 2).

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