

CHINESE VS. AMERICAN THINKING

or

FISH FOR THOUGHT

I believe it safe to say average Americans and Chinese view the world differently. Respective culture, social norms, environment, political system, educational institutions and so on result in unique ways of seeing and understanding the world. You need only look around to identify situations on both the individual and national level where Americans and Chinese are not understanding one another. Something needs to give before we all go nuts or worse, begin throwing punches. Fortunately, I know of a tool that might help us all get a long a little bit better.

Research that I'll call the "Fish Tank Experiment" lends insight into our different ways of thinking. I recently explained the experiment to a group of Chinese to help them understand American thinking and then again to a group of Americans to help explain Chinese thinking. The resulting "ah-hah" moments experienced by both groups was motivation enough for me to write this post. So I write with the simple goal of increasing mutual understanding and ultimately facilitating more harmonious and fruitful interactions between us.

***Caveat:** I generally do not employ much scholarly discipline in my work. I do like scholarly concepts though, especially if they can help my business or interpersonal interactions. Admittedly, I sometimes take liberties with a good concept adjusting it per my own experience and what has become an often faulty memory. So you know, I have taken such "creative" liberty herein and sincerely hope I do not offend anyone. Oh, and the footnote at end of presentation addresses what many of you will find to be broad generalizations.*



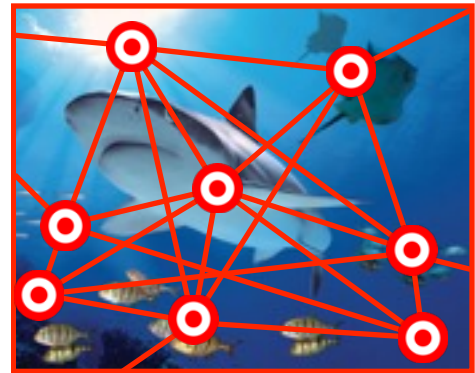
A FISH TANK EXPERIMENT

The story goes that researchers showed a picture of an aquatic scene or "Fish Tank" to a group of Asians including Chinese ("Chinese") and Anglo-Americans ("Americans"). The participants were allowed to view the picture for a period of time after which they were

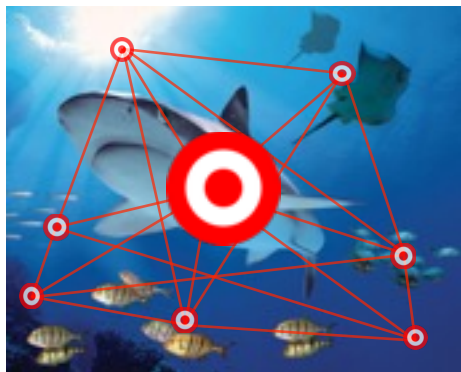
asked to describe what they had seen. The differences in how the two groups described the scene were nothing short of profound and, with just a little interpretation, lend insight into the fundamental differences in American versus Chinese thinking.

What do Chinese focus on?

Asked what they saw, the typical Chinese participant responded “I saw a big fish, some little fish, some other marine animals all swimming, coral, sunlight and water all together in the water”. Further examination suggested Chinese saw each "element" and the “relationships” between them. They saw everything as a "total" or system. Their minds saw something like the adjacent picture with targets representing focal points and lines representing relationships between them. In other words, Chinese focused on the overall context, the various elements in the "world" and the intricate relationships and interdependencies among them.



What do Americans focus on?



Americans also took in the whole picture, they saw each element. They had a sense for the context. But what was it that really grabbed their attention? Not surprisingly, it was the "shark" ("big fish" in actual study), the most obvious and dominant element in the picture. As an American I can vouch that with such a scene before my eyes, I too would focus on the shark. In other words, Americans focus on the fact or main point at hand. Focused on the main point, Americans quite naturally conclude all the other not so relevant stuff can wait. As the adjacent picture illustrates, Americans targeted the shark.

APPLICATION

Before I spout off my two cents, think for a minute. Consider your own dealings with Chinese or, if you are Chinese, with Americans. Knowing what most captures the attention of the opposite party can go a long way toward solving misunderstandings. Neither party is wrong or right. Rather, we just have different ways of seeing the same thing. With a little creative thought, one can apply "fish tank" learnings to many situations. Here is my take on what we can derive from our cute little fishes and one big shark ...

Chinese Value Context versus Americans Value Point-at-Hand

Chinese tend to look at a bigger picture or overall context. This involves seeing many things and in many shades of gray. The Chinese view seems "complicated" to Americans. Conversely, Americans prefer not to focus on everything but the single most important thing (i.e the shark). While Chinese are contemplating shades of greens and blues, Americans are set on catching a shark.



Example: A Chinese distributor and an American manufacturer are negotiating. The Americans want to finalize the details of the first order (catch the shark) and test the relationship. If all goes well, the Americans will continue with the distributor. The Chinese distributor however is negotiating in view of a larger context (situation in fish tank). They need to know about the second order, the third order, long-term exclusivity, five years from now when business is really booming ..., the possibly of a JV partnership, and so on. The Chinese feel the Americans are curt while the Americans see the Chinese as bringing up too many irrelevant issues.

Chinese Interdependency versus American Independence

Chinese see connections and feel they are a part of a bigger system, a system that both binds and depends upon them. Interdependency ruling the day, Chinese inevitably feel more "entwined" and less empowered than their American counterparts. Consider how

Chinese so effectively leverage relationships since they believe the system will not allow them to do it alone. Conversely, Americans see sharks and sometimes even feel like sharks. Big and independent, sharks just are, system or not. With such a perspective, Americans naturally feel more independent, empowered to effect change and more willing to "just do it" alone. America, after all, is a nation founded on a declaration of "independence".

Example: In a meeting, a manager asks a mixed Chinese and American staff for ideas to help grow sales faster. The Chinese sit silently with "I am a little guy and cannot change the system if I push, something is bound to push me back" running through their heads. Simultaneously, the American's are tripping over themselves with big ideas, some infeasible. A few suggestions even have negative repercussions for certain team members which is shocking for the Chinese. The Americans do not care however, they are driven by a desire to make an impact because they believe they can.



Chinese Collectivism versus American Individualism

All people like to feel connected to "the group" but no where is this more true than in China. Groups represent security, leverage and source of recognition ("face"). Being in the group though requires one conform and not shake things up, groups require consensus. One can often observe Chinese moving en masse in response to situations both small scale and national level. Conversely, Americans grow up in a "cowboy-opped" society. Americans like the idea of a superhero's ability to singlehandedly get things done. Americans learn to take pride in their independent thoughts and actions. It is not unusual for Americans to think "screw those guys, I'm gonna do it anyway" or "my way or the highway", both dreadful thoughts to Chinese.

Example: You are an American CEO traveling in China, alone. You plan to meet with the President of a potential Chinese JV partner, have a one-on-one top brass to top brass discussion. The receptionist takes you to the meeting room where you are greeted not by one president but a team of 12 people including engineering, finance, purchasing, logistics and other personnel. Whereas you had



hoped for the clear opinion of the president, it seems like everyone in the company will all have a say in the matter.

Chinese Holistic versus American Targeted Approach

Excluding politics, American culture promotes tabling a problem and working together to fix it fast. Americans are impatient beings that do not like to leave things hanging. As Larry the Cable Guy pure blooded American proclaims, "get 'er done". Americans consider fast improvement based on available information better than a slow but total solution based on "all" information. Americans like to act and adjust along the way if required. Americans see the shark and they want to catch it. Chinese are far more contemplative. Instead of seeing a shark, they see a complex environment with many elements playing together. Rather than make a rash decision, Chinese feel compelled to examine everything that might in any way be related. In the words of the Chinese "都有关系" (doh - yoh - gwan - shee) or "it's all important". Chinese decisions take longer to make but they also factor in more potentially relevant subtleties.



Example: A Chinese fellow with a recurring headache goes to a traditional Chinese medicine doctor. The doctor examines his hands, feels his skin, looks in his eyes, checks his tongue and so on. After many minutes the doctor prescribes drinking a cup of tea per day for 30 days made from a mix of roots and herbs. The patient follows the doctor's advice and 30 days later with "internal

energies rebalanced" his headache is gone. On the other side of the world, an American doctor prescribes a strong pain killer to a patient complaining of a migraine headache. The patient returns home, pops a pill and 30 minutes later is headache free. One approach balances the system and the other "attacks" the pain.



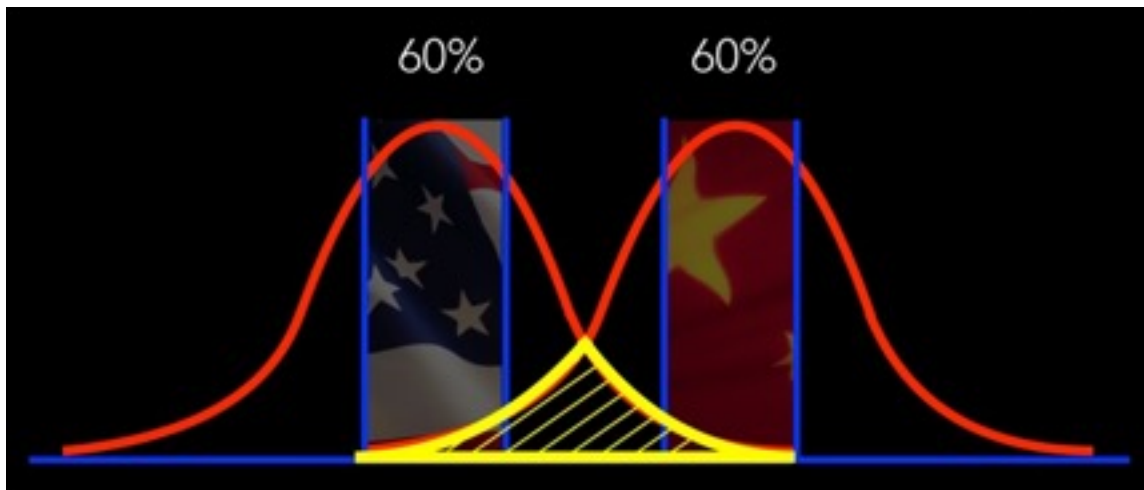
Conclusions

Needless to reiterate, Americans and Chinese do see and process many things very differently. Is there a right, wrong or better way? I propose there is not since both ways have advantages depending on circumstances. In fact, flexibly applying both ways -

incorporating a hybrid approach - may be the best course. Regardless of whether you are Chinese or American or how you think, it is important you understand the other side, remember the fish tank. Practicing a little more empathy ... attempting to move just a bit closer together, we should all be happier and maybe the world a better, safer place.

Footnote on Generalization

The above article is based on generalization. In a mixed group of Chinese and Americans or even in a group of Americans, we can find a variety of quite different personalities and traits. The article really compares the average (60% on the Bell Curve) American and Chinese personality. "Generally", the average American and Chinese person exhibit distinct differences in how they think (the gap between the 60% sections). With a bit of searching though, we can find Americans who have at least some traits that are more "Chinese" than "American" and vice versa (the yellow hatched area on the picture). So if you feel you are more American or more Chinese, then you probably are at least in some respects.



More-----individualism-----Less
(example)

END