

EXPLORING HOW INDIANS AND CHINESE THINK AND ACT DIFFERENTLY

Why many Chinese find it hard to work with Indians

■ Wenjuan Zhang



communication with each other for vital years, when they were in the critical stage of new nation building.

As one of the few Chinese working as a full-time faculty at an Indian university, I have tried to share my learning and reflection in India with the Chinese community back home, through social media.

In one of my recent articles, I shared my perspective as a Chinese toward Indian thinking. The essay, titled ‘Why Chinese Find it Difficult to Interact with Indians’, written in my native language, went viral on Chinese social media. The article resonated with most of the Chinese who have worked and/or lived in India. It was received with hundreds of comments. Multiple reproductions by big and popular social media and online media portals such as Epaper, Sohu.com etc further multiplied its readership.

In this essay, I reflected on three fundamental differences of thinking among the Indians and the Chinese, based on my personal experience, my interaction with Indians, and also my interactions with other Chinese who had lived and/or worked in India.

On Promises

Unlike the Western culture based on professionalism, both Indians and Chinese usually do not say a clear ‘No’ to any-

thing, for reasons of courtesy. However, in terms of dealing with promises, the cultural pressure on their implementation is different in India and China.

In India, promises are usually given as an expression of positive attitude or for courtesy. The Chinese find that the Indians will respond to any matter with a highly positive expression, and speak of it in very concrete, reassuring terms. The Chinese assume this to be their promise

It is true that the Indians and the Chinese have had a long history of rich interaction over centuries. But this won’t help in the people-to-people contact in the present times, since both nations have pursued different political paths for their modernization. It is unfortunate that due to some tragic conflicts, India and China almost closed the doors of



on the issue, and not mere courtesy.

This can be reflected in words regarding sticking to a specific time schedule for tasks, or as a promise for specific actions. In India, there is no cultural pressure in case there is failure in fulfilling what was promised.

Indians find it hard to say 'No'. Therefore, they always give some response even if they do not know anything. The main method of saying 'No' in India is dragging.

When a typical Chinese is working with a typical Indian, the former will experience four stages of being: happiness, anxiety, disappointment, and fury.

In Chinese culture, an individual will be looked down upon, if he or she breaks a concrete promise. In the Chinese culture, if people want to dodge their responsibility, they usually express positive things in an ambiguous way, and do not use any concrete or promissory terms.

With increasing commercialization in China, contract violations are not rare. One will find liars and cheaters aplenty. For example, earlier the rights of migrant workers were commonly violated, because the sub-contractor did not keep his promises towards their payment or welfare.

However, based on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Report, contract enforcement in China has been among the top five globally for several years,

Indians find it hard to say 'No'. Therefore, they always give some response even if they do not know anything. The main method of saying 'No' in India is dragging

which is very impressive for a society which has seen such rapid economic and social transformation.

Legal pressure helps to ensure strict implementation of contracts. But moral pressure is equally significant when it comes to guiding social conduct.

As a Chinese who has grown up to value keeping one's promise, I feel confusion in my daily interaction with my Indian colleagues and students. The confusion is regarding how much I can trust their 'promises'. My experience of working in the global university taught me that the more an Indian had been exposed to an international environment, the higher were the chances that he or she would keep the "promise".

On Results

China and India are almost on the two extremes in the pursuit of legitimacy, which heavily influences people's thinking and actions. While the Chinese prefer outcome-based legitimacy, Indians are inclined towards procedure-based legitimacy.

Outcome-based legitimacy implies that you are evaluated on the basis of the outcome that you have achieved. Procedure-based legitimacy implies that you will be evaluated on whether you have followed the specified procedure faithfully.

In China, the traditional culture and also the political philosophy favour outcome-based legitimacy. The revolution part of Confucianism is merit-based instead of gene-based legitimacy. This is why China developed the first examination for civil servants named Keju. Chinese constitutional governance is party-state plus parliamentary sovereignty. These exclude external political checks, but focus on self-reflection and performance-based legitimacy. The challenging part of this model is that it may be at the cost of procedural justice and adequate protection of minorities.

In India, the co-existence model of cultural diversity and the political philosophy of liberal democracy demand and also strengthen procedure-based legitimacy. In India, on the World



Bank of Ease of Doing Business, its best performed indicator is “protection of minorities”, which is a positive evidence of this philosophy.

But when it comes to personal and professional interactions, the pursuit of procedure-based legitimacy may exhibit itself in diverse ways. From the perspective of a Chinese working in India, this may be confusing.

I have often found that my Indian colleagues will perform his or her individual part of a given task. But few take ownership of responsibility for the final outcome.

A recent experience was typical of this attitude. We needed to shift the venue of a conference from Conference Hall A to Conference Hall B, half an hour before it began. I informed my colleague at the International Office about it, and she promised to do it. I assumed that she would take the ownership of getting it done.

Five minutes before the conference, I asked her if she has posted the notice regarding the shifting of the conference hall. She replied that she had informed the event team, but they told her it was too late to shift the conference venue.

Right there, I took a piece of paper and wrote on it, ‘Conference Room for Environmental Governance Shifted from Con-

When a typical Chinese is working with a typical Indian, the former will experience four stages of being: happiness, anxiety, disappointment, and fury

ference Hall A to Conference Hall B’. The task didn’t need any fancy logo or frills. All we needed urgently was neatly mentioned information, which would serve the purpose of guiding participants to the right room. I think I should have a talk with her some day to understand why she thought this simple task could not be done.

On Rights

I have observed that the Indian society is rights based. In China, it is duty-cum-rights based. In India, an individual’s life is ruled by family dynamics and social dynamics. Within the family, the members are bound towards each other, both by duties and rights. For example, Indians are very committed to family functions.

Beyond family, though, people-to-

people interaction is mainly rights based. In the political and economic zone of activity, individuals are committed to fight and get ahead to best secure their self-interests.

This divided life attitude can be evidenced by the constitutional designing and the framework of laws which govern social and personal life. On one side, India uses universal adult suffrage as the pillar for social revolution. On the other hand, it is ambiguous toward personal law. Hence, personal accountability is not a strong force, either in the society, the economy or the political sphere.

In China, values and rules guiding the family have been socialized. The family and the state function in the framework of similar logic.

The political philosophy of Leninism further emphasizes the idea of collective rights rather than individual rights, and also strengthens duty-oriented tradition. The consciousness of rights and duties are reflected in the reciprocity-based daily interaction in China. Many Chinese feel disappointed in their interactions with Indians, because they feel that Indians lack the sense of reciprocity.

My observations on how the Indians and the Chinese think and act differently is essentially an attempt to make both understand the other, and bridge the two cultures. My purpose is not to judge the Indian culture, but to explore the nuances of cultural differences, and their impact on daily life. I personally look forward to more interactions with Indians who have had rich experiences of Chinese life and culture. I would like to explore the difficulties they have faced due to our cultural differences. Such efforts will enrich cross-cultural understanding on both sides. □



Wenjuan Zhang is Associate Professor at Jindal Global Law School and Executive Director, Center for India-China Studies, Sonipat.