

# *Building Alliances Across Differences?*

Center for Gender in Organizations  
2000-2001 Seminar Series

## **What Does It Mean to be Chinese (and Female) in the United States?**

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### **Presenter:**

Elena Yang, *Independent Scholar*



Elena Yang

We began the seminar by going around the room and introducing ourselves, as well as explaining our interest in the seminar topic. Following this, Elena Yang, using her research, personal experience, and personal observations, discussed some basic underlying principles in traditional Chinese culture, and then explored the ways in which these principles play a role in how Chinese people in the United States interact in “American” culture—both Western individualism and the many different ethnic cultures which are prevalent in the U.S. The process of finding the fit and the fusion between Chinese and American cultures lies in fundamentally different cultural thinking and behaving. Only after there is some basic understanding of differences and similarities between cultures, says Yang, can we begin to assess the ways in which gender and race matter in networking. Finally, in the emerging process of finding and defining one’s new voice, Yang asked questions such as, from whom should one draw support? With whom does one want to form alliances, and for what purposes?

### **Introductions and why we are here**

We began the Series this year by discussing with our participants why they were interested in thinking about and discussing the theme “Building Alliances Across Differences?” Some of the reasons for why individuals came to this seminar were as follows:

- To explore what alliances are, for whom they work, and when they do and do not work, both in organizations and in communities.
- To explore relationships between groups—in particular, relationships between Asian-Americans and African-Americans.
- To think about why “alliances” have not worked in various activist/organizational endeavors.

- Interest in thinking beyond the black/white dichotomy in terms of race, which is what is most discussed in the US context when “diversity” is addressed.
- Interest in the notion of cross-cultural effectiveness in organizations and in learning new ways of conceptualizing difference.
- There were several Chinese female students at the seminar, many of whom expressed an interest in hearing a Chinese female scholar speak, which was described as an unusual opportunity. As well, there was an interest in thinking about similarities and differences among Chinese women.
- There was an interest from consultants in thinking about how to make the ideas and learnings from seminar discussions more accessible to organizations.
- A desire to understand Chinese culture—particularly a gendered reading of this culture.

## **Presentation**

Elena Yang began her presentation by explaining that, in order to discuss the issue of building alliances, she first needed to discuss what she feels it means to be a Chinese woman in the United States.

### **Why Chinese and not Asian/Pacific Asians?**

Yang explained that to use the term “Asian” or “Pacific Asian” would be a misnomer for her presentation because either of these terms would encompass a much larger and more diverse group of cultures than “Chinese culture.” She focused her presentation on:

- Introduction to key concepts in traditional Chinese culture
- What it is like to be Chinese in the US
- What it is like to be a Chinese woman in the US
- What “forming alliances” might mean to Chinese people

### **Introduction to key concepts in traditional Chinese culture**

Yang’s dissertation research was mainly concerned with the role of culture in business networking for Chinese-American entrepreneurs. In her work, she found that understanding cultural identity was key to understanding Chinese-Americans’ interests in businesses. She found many challenges in doing her research because, as she explained, traditional Chinese culture does not encourage probing into the process of self-identity, and as a result there are not as many tools in the language to ask these questions as there are in Western individualist cultures. Therefore, in order to proceed with her research, Yang realized the importance of being aware of

and processing the ways in which Chinese cultural thinking works. Below are the major points that Yang made regarding Chinese culture.

In traditional Chinese culture, an individual is defined as one unit of people. In this culture, an individual cannot be defined until one understands the set of relationships around this individual—that is, to whom the individual is connected and how well the individual is regarded by these other people. This is true to the point that in Chinese, there is a word for a person who behaves very badly that literally means that they are “not recognized as a person.”

Yang discussed the five key relationships in Confucian thinking:

1. Emperor/citizen (or master/disciple or teacher/student)
2. Father/son
3. Brothers
4. Husband/wife
5. Friends

Yang explained that these five sets of relationships are supposed to define what will happen in a person’s life—that is, individual lives are defined by sets of relationships.

Yang used the following quote from Margery Wolf’s study of a Taiwanese village in order to explain the importance of relationships in defining the self in Chinese culture:

The interaction of the Taiwanese villager and his friends and neighbors is like the spice of a soup: savory but of little substance. It is with his family, parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren that he takes the measure of his life. His relations with his parents may be strained, with his wife distant, and with his children formal. But without these people, he would be the object of pity and of no small amount of suspicion. He will be pitied because he has no parents to help him and no children to support him in his old age. . . . A man not thoroughly embedded in a network of kinship cannot be trusted because he cannot be dealt with in the normal way. . . . Money has no past, no future, and no obligations. Relatives do.

### *Guan-xi*

Yang explained the Chinese term *guan-xi* as a kind of purposeful networking between people that does not clearly separate personal and professional relationships. For example, in a business relationship between a Chinese entrepreneur and one of their clients, they would want to know more about one another than what each of them does professionally. In this way, their “personal information” becomes part of their business transaction.

### Losing face

Yang explained the Chinese concept of “losing face” with the following example:

A Chinese woman is looking for a job at a television station, and this woman’s mother knows the Secretary of State’s wife, because the mother’s other daughter is a friend the Secretary of State’s daughter. The Chinese woman’s mother would go to the wife, and the wife would go to her

husband, who would put in a call to the TV station. The TV station would give the woman the job so that the station would not lose face with the Secretary of State. Once the woman starts her job, if she did not perform well, she would lose face with her mother.

This interaction also explains how a person's set of relationships, or *guan-xi*, is built. If a big favor is granted, then the other person would need to return the favor several times. While there is a network one can use to obtain what one needs, one must also constantly return favors. As a person goes through their life, their *guan-xi* expands.

Finally, in negotiations between Chinese, compromise is viewed as a win-win situation. In a negotiation, initial goals are seen simply as a starting point, and the expectation is that one would end up in a different place from where one had originally started—the idea of compromise is not only acceptable, but expected in negotiation.

### What it is like to be Chinese in the US

Yang explained that there were both positive and negative aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Chinese culture is, as Yang says, a “high context culture,” i.e., in interactions with others, it is assumed that there is not much need for explanation because there is a similar understanding of how relationships should work. In some ways, this can be efficient, but in others, there can be a lot of second-guessing, which can lead to miscommunication. Yang explained that in a US context, it can be difficult for someone who is operating from a traditional Chinese cultural frame to present their ideas—both in speaking and in writing—in a linear way. Often, in Chinese conversation, the narrative is more important than the concluding point. In the US context, this style of communication can often be labeled as unclear and vague. Without an understanding of the different linguistic tools between cultures, it would therefore be difficult to build alliance or connection.

In addition, there is an emphasis in Chinese culture on avoiding attracting attention to oneself. Rather, one should clearly demonstrate the ways in which they are embedded in a set of relationships.

### What it is like to be a Chinese woman in the US

In looking back at the five key relationships in Confucian thought, Yang noted that women are explicitly addressed in only the husband/wife relationship. Therefore, because the culture is more explicitly focused on male relationships and there are seemingly few explicit rules for women, she hypothesizes that it may be easier for Chinese women than Chinese men to adjust to US culture.

### What “forming alliances” might mean to Chinese people

Yang discussed the ways in which the concept of *guan-xi* can make it difficult for Chinese people operating in a US context to “build alliances” with others. In the US context, when a group feels disenfranchised, the suggestion would be to form a group to take up the cause of disenfranchisement. In Chinese culture, this reason for getting together would not be compelling. The primary reason for getting together stems from the much broader concept of *guan-xi*. As well, it would be unlikely that people would get together to share their frustration with work,

because this frustration would be seen as the person's problem rather than a problem that was caused by some outside reasons. If you have problems at work, discussing them would mean that you would lose face. Rather, to deal with your problem, you do not cause conflict, but instead find a way to compromise. And you would find this compromise by mobilizing your *guan-xi*.

## Conclusion

Yang concluded by raising the idea of concentrating on forming alliances within ourselves, rather than focusing on building alliances across different groups. As a Taiwanese woman who has been in the US for 26 years, Yang finds that she is constantly carrying the complexity of both being "Chinese" and being "American," and feeling the influence of both cultures. Finding the "fit" or what works best, depending on what context one is in, can only happen after one works to understand the different cultures by which one is influenced. She has found that, rather than judge any culture as "better" or "worse", it is important to understand the ways in which culture operates and how and why these cultures influence who you are.

## Readings

Yang, Elena Ai-Yuan and Tsai, Gloria Yi-Yun. Unpublished paper. A Case of Researchers' Journey into Home Culture: Interaction of Culture and Method Through a Medium of Researchers. Presented at the Research Methods Division, 1996 Academy of Management Conference. Winner of the "Best Doctoral Student Paper" Award.

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