



## The Asian Mind Game: Unlocking the Hidden Agenda of the Asian Business Culture - A Westerner's Survival Manual

By Chin-ning Chu

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This book, by East-West marketing consultant Chin-ning Chu, is must reading for any Westerner in business, government, or academia who negotiates in the Orient or wants to.

It is the first to reveal to Westerners the deep secrets of the Asian psyche that influence Asian behavior in business, politics, lifestyle, and battle.

Ms. Chu points out that Asian mind games have become so finely tuned over the centuries that Americans seldom realize that Asians view the marketplace (and by extension, the world) as a battlefield, and act accordingly.

She has extracted the principles of successful negotiations from centuries-old Chinese texts that have influenced all of Asia, and provides her readers with examples of their application in the modern world.

In the Western world, the ability to formulate cunning and subtle strategies for getting your own way in business, politics, and everyday life is regarded as a matter of intuition. In Asia, however, strategic thinking is a formal discipline studied by people from all walks of life. Amazing as it may seem, contemporary Asians base their outlook and behavior on the teachings of the ancients. In China, even children are familiar with the "36 Strategies," formulated by Sun Tzu, a famous military strategist, in the fourth century B.C.

Throughout Asia today, business people as well as political figures study Sun Tzu's *Art of War* and apply its strategies to all their activities, while Americans read *The One-Minute Manager* and *All I Really Need to Know I Learned In Kindergarten*. No wonder, Ms. Chu comments, that when it comes to business and political negotiations, the Chinese refer to Americans with a word that means "innocent children."

Ms. Chu brilliantly analyses how Chinese thought and culture have affected Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, and how Japanese conquest and culture have had their effect on the rest of Asia.

With United States trade and political alliances shifting increasingly to the Pacific rim, it becomes ever more urgent to understand the Asian mind. Ms. Chu, born in China and educated in Taiwan, spells out the makeup of the Asian psyche as no Westerner could.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

John Hillkirk *USA Today*: coauthor of *Grit, guts and Genius*; and *Xerox: American Samurai*. Western business people often are at an enormous disadvantage because they don't understand Eastern philosophy or strategy. Chin-ning Chu's book is a fascinating and revealing look at the Asian mind-set. Every manager doing business in the Far East -- or negotiating with Asian executives -- could learn from this book.

#### About the Author

**Chin-Ning Chu** is president of Asian Marketing Consultants, Inc. She counsels Western companies doing or wishing to do business in Asia. Born in Teinjin, near Beijing, she was raised in Taiwan after the fall of mainland China to the Communists. She has studied the teachings of sages in India, China, and Europe and believes her study of philosophy and psychology provides her with a powerful tool with which to examine the complexities of philosophical, sociological, and historical influences on the shaping of the modern Asian mind. Ms. Chu lives in Beaverton, Oregon.

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### Chapter 1

#### Preparing for the Game

The telephone in my Beijing hotel room rang. It was the Washington Post's Beijing Bureau Chief, Daniel Southerland, asking if I could meet the following day with him and a Canadian businessman, whom we will call David Buyer. He told me Mr. Buyer had taken a beating on his first business foray into China. Knowing that I was in the city, Dan thought Mr. Buyer might want to talk to me about what had gone wrong. We met in the lounge of the hotel and found a quiet corner where we could speak freely.

David Buyer came from a Canadian family with a long-established reputation in the fur business. Four months earlier, Buyer had flown into China on a custom-fitted Boeing 747 with 3,200 live foxes. In exchange for the foxes and his technical assistance in setting up scientific breeding and feeding programs, he had expected to return to Canada with about a million dollars' profit. But things had not worked out that way.

Mr. Buyer was leaving on the next day's early flight bound for home. He would leave without his million dollars and without his foxes. Once at home he would close the books on a loss of about a half million dollars and would attempt to save his fox farm from foreclosure.

David Buyer's unfortunate adventure started in the summer of 1988. Months passed as he waited impatiently for the arrival of a Chinese delegation that was to inspect the foxes. Buyer thought that perhaps they didn't want to make such a long trip and were putting it off. The real problem, however, was the complicated passport and entry visa procedures they were dealing with.

Buyer was selling breeding stock to the Chinese, and he did not want to miss the fox breeding season. As the season neared, he grew more and more anxious. He was confident that his stock would pass the most rigorous inspection, so he notified the Chinese that he would fly the foxes to China. They could conclude the deal on his arrival. The Chinese voiced no objection to the idea. At the moment the jet lifted off with its noisy cargo, Mr. Buyer's deal was already dead, but he would not find that out for several months.

Shortly after Buyer arrived in China, the price of fox dropped on the world fur market. Since Buyer had 3,200 unsold and hungry foxes 10,000 miles from home, the Chinese used the market fluctuation as a pretext to renegotiate the contract. To put even more pressure on him, the Chinese charged with the care of the foxes deliberately starved them and crowded them into very small cages. Soon disease and mistreatment had killed 150 of Buyer's foxes.

When Buyer found out that the Chinese had started buying quantities of foxes from a breeder in Finland, he was ready to cut his losses. He sought out intermediaries who could break the impasse and put together a deal for him before all his foxes were dead. The intermediaries, of course, insisted on substantial puffs. After extensive negotiation, the intermediaries managed to convince the original buyers to take 900 of the 3,200 foxes at the original price of \$380 each, but these buyers would offer only \$30 apiece for the remaining animals.

Eventually, the intermediaries were able to sell the remaining foxes by unofficial means at greatly reduced prices. But, in addition to cutting his prices drastically, to conclude the sale Buyer had to agree to sponsor a dozen children of various Chinese bureaucrats to be educated in Canada. Four years of college tuition and living expenses for each child was to come out of his pocket. But Buyer had learned the ways of the Chinese by now. He told them anything they wanted to hear so that he could unload his foxes and get out of there.

The evening we met, Mr. Buyer was carrying \$200,000 in American currency sewn into the lining of his coat. The unofficial nature of the transactions his intermediaries had arranged precluded the usual avenues of transferring money out of China. In addition to the devastating financial loss he had suffered, he was also running a very grave risk of spending the rest of his life in a Chinese prison if airport security detected the cash.

Buyer had made a serious mistake in shipping the foxes without first receiving payment. But this was not his first or most serious mistake. It was not until my return to China in August 1989 that I found out what the real problem had been.

I decided to contact Mr. Zhang, the Chinese official who had originally arranged the deal with David Buyer. It took only a few moments' conversation with Mr. Zhang to find out what had happened. He was eager to express his anger with Mr. Buyer. Buyer's decision to fly the foxes to China instead of waiting for Zhang and his associates to come to him had robbed them of a trip to Canada to which they had looked forward for months. Foreign travel is the most prestigious and sought-after perk available to a Chinese official. They could not forgive Buyer for robbing them of their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit the West. The disappointment completely dampened their enthusiasm for the entire project.

Mr. Buyer's story is an extreme example, but the lack of understanding that it illustrates is all too common. In my professional life as a representative for Western companies doing business in Asia, I am constantly frustrated by the inability of Eastern and Western minds to meet.

The great difference between Western and Asian languages is one obvious barrier to understanding. But language is not only how we express our thoughts, it is also how we create our thoughts. The underlying cause of misunderstanding is not language itself but how we think: Asians and Westerners think as differently as they speak.

I once heard Donald Frisbee, CEO and Chairman of PacifiCorp, say, "If I could just understand how the Asian thinks, I would know how to deal with him." Mr. Frisbee is much more perceptive than most Western businessmen in recognizing the difficulty. Many just assume that they understand, and simply don't want to

be told otherwise. I once spent a long afternoon listening to a man who had thirty-five years of successful marketing experience in the United States. "Marketing is marketing," he told me. "I know my business. What could be different about marketing in Asia?"

Books have been written about doing business in Asia. Many are well researched and accurate in their description of how Asians conduct their business affairs, but none I have read has shed much light on why Asians conduct business as they do. Learning about an Asian businessman's actions without understanding his motivation will not greatly help a Westerner to conduct business successfully with him. It is essential to understand the underlying causes of the Asian person's actions. This book is about those underlying causes.

Strategic thinking is deeply ingrained in the Asian mind. Specific strategies to deal with all kinds of life situations have been developed, refined, and studied for thousands of years. If the Westerner does not make an attempt to understand something of the Asian mind, he will find it almost impossible to detect the web of complicated strategies that is woven about him by his Asian counterparts, and he will fall victim to them.

Like David Buyer, too often Westerners have paid dearly for their lack of understanding in dealing with Asians. Mr. Buyer was not a fool. He made an assumption about the Chinese delegation's reasons for delaying their visit to Canada. Within the frame of reference of a Western businessman, it was a good assumption, Mr. Buyer's mistake was that he did not question his belief that what was true for him was also true for the Chinese.

I am a Chinese woman. My family lived for many generations near the Yalu River in Manchuria. As boys, my father and his friends would pay the boatman a few small coins to ferry them across the Yalu to fight mock battles with the Korean boys on the farther shore. At that time, as today, the Yalu was the political boundary between Korea and Manchuria, but over the centuries the border had moved back and forth across the land. The culture of the region was a mixture of Chinese and Korean.

The Japanese had been a presence in Manchuria dating back to the late nineteenth century. In 1931, they officially annexed Manchuria as a Japanese territory. As a colonial power, the Japanese behave very differently from Western colonial powers. They do not simply seek to exploit the wealth and resources of their colonies, they also attempt to replace the native language and culture with Japanese language and culture. They try to instill in the conquered peoples a sense of pride and identity as Japanese subjects.

My parents were educated according to a Japanese curriculum by Japanese teachers in a school where only Japanese was spoken. They learned to speak fluent Japanese and absorbed a great deal of Japanese culture. My mother often passed as a Japanese national in order to obtain better treatment for her family than was accorded to most Chinese under the occupation. In 1949, my family left the mainland for Taiwan, where I was raised.

Taiwan, like Manchuria, had been a Japanese colony for the half-century prior to Japan's defeat in World War II. Throughout my girlhood, the schools retained their Japanese influence. When the teachers would get angry they would curse us in Japanese. It was not until I was an adult and had traveled extensively in Asia and the West that I came to understand how very Japanese my family was -- and also how Korean.

The Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans share many common characteristics, but there are also marked differences between them. Westerners tend to see the similarities, but are unfamiliar with the differences. They tend to see them as Asians rather than Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. It is the purpose of this book to give you an individual and personal sense of what it is to be a Chinese, a Japanese, and a Korean and to show how this affects dealings between Westerners and people of these nationalities. To do this, I must discuss the

separate national characteristics.

It is always a little misleading to take traits that are individual in nature and apply them with broad strokes to a whole nation. If it is done at all, it must be done carefully, otherwise we descend into meaningless stereotyping. However, it is a useful way to discuss values and beliefs that are shared widely, if not universally, among the individuals who make up the nation. There is such a thing as a collective consciousness. There are such things as national characteristics. I am going to discuss them without intent to minimize the diversity that exists within each group and without intending to offend anyone.

The important thing about the generalizations I will make is not their literal truth, but that they are commonly accepted to be true by the very people who are being stereotyped. The Chinese especially have a penchant for analyzing the Chinese character in the form of a hypothetical "typical Chinese." The shortcomings of this character are often referred to as the "national disease," the virtues as the "national character."

I am not writing a scholarly study. I do not intend to cite statistics to back up every statement I make. I am dealing in common perceptions. When I state flatly that "Korean businessmen like to drink. They drink heavily and hold their liquor well," I am not going to refer to the latest study on per capita Korean alcohol consumption. Nor do I wish to be taken literally to mean that there are no abstemious or moderate Korean businessmen. What I mean is that if you stop a hundred people at random on the streets of Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo and ask them, "Do Koreans drink?" eighty of them will laugh and say, "Like fish." In making statements like this, it is not my intent to attack the Korean character, but only to arm my Western readers with the common knowledge that any Asian would have: "If you are going to go glass-for-glass with your Korean host, you had better know what you're doing."

The Asian peoples will all agree that there are discernible national characteristics that define the Chinese, the Koreans, and the Japanese. They will further agree on what those characteristics are. They differ on whether those accepted characteristics are virtues or vices, and their differences depend largely upon whether the characteristics are applied to them or to someone else.

To some racially sensitive Western readers, discussions of the characteristics of separate ethnic and national groups might seem to border on racism. The Asian concept of racism is very different from the Western concept. Concepts of racial superiority and inferiority have never been questioned as they have been in the West. There are strong feelings among the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans on the subject of racial superiority, even though the peoples are very closely related from an evolutionary standpoint. In Asia the idea that one people is racially superior to another is almost universally acknowledged.

Asians do not have the same sensitivity to racial issues as do Americans. The issue is not as emotionally charged for them. Asians regard it as natural to feel that their race, their nation, their province, their city, and their family are better than yours. Westerners exhibit most of these same attitudes and refer to them in mildly pejorative terms such as "chauvinistic," "nationalistic," "provincial." But "racist" is a very ugly word in English, even though it often only expresses the common weakness of mankind to believe that "mine is better than yours."

The preoccupation with race is so acute in America that one cannot make reference to race at all for fear of giving offense. Henrietta Anne Klauser, author of *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain* (Harper & Row, 1987), told me of an excited call she got from her editor prior to the book's publication. The editor insisted on a sentence being rewritten because it contained a racially offensive word. This is the sentence: "I have a great respect for paper and I daily bless the Chinaman who invented it." The sentence the editor found acceptable was this: "I have a great respect for paper and I daily bless its Chinese inventor." To this Chinese woman, the



first version expressed the personal affection that Mrs. Klauser felt for the Chinese. The sterilized version had lost the sensitive touch. It is very hard for an Asian to understand what the problem was with the original.

Ruby Chow, a retired long-time King County (Washington State) councilwoman, told me the following story:

In the early 1950's, Seattle's Chinatown was renamed "The International District." The reasons for the change are not completely clear. In recent years, there has been a movement to restore the name Chinatown. The restoration has been opposed by some members of the City Council. Norm Rice, when he was serving as a city councilman prior to his election as mayor, opposed the restoration of the name on the grounds that it was an insulting stereotype. Peter Woo, president of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association and a leader of the Chinese community in Seattle, stated publicly that he disagreed with Rice that it was an insulting stereotype.

Asian-born Chinese are proud to be Chinese and, in general, would not have a problem with the name Chinatown. Chinese-Americans who have been brought up with American attitudes about race would be more likely to be offended. Councilman Rice, with all the good intentions in the world, seemed to be bringing his perspective as a black American to bear on a problem that did not have the same seriousness for the people who should have been most offended.

Asians do not feel guilty about thinking in racial terms, but they do understand that Westerners, especially Americans, do. They will often use accusations of racism to disarm their Western opponents. The same Japanese politician who loudly imputes racist motives to American criticism of Japan himself believes implicitly that the Japanese are racially superior to Caucasians, and also to their Korean and Chinese neighbors. He would never admit these beliefs to a Westerner, but among Asians it is so commonplace to think in racial terms that they do not even bother with denial or guilt.

The purpose of this book is to help Westerners understand Asians from the inside out rather than from the outside in. To achieve this understanding, it is necessary for you, the reader, to surrender all preconceptions. While you are reading this book, attempt to transcend your Western heritage and become an Asian. It is only in this manner that you will be able to grasp the essence of being Asian.

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