NTC's *Dictionary* of CHINA'S CULTURAL CODE WORDS

Boye Lafayette De Mente

NTC's Dictionary of CHINA'S CULTURAL CODE WORDS

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Boyé Lafayette De Mente

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PREFACE

All languages are reflections of the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual character of the people who created them.

The older, more structured, and more exclusive a society and its language, the more words it has that have deep cultural implications.

China is therefore a quintessential example of a country in which "cultural code words" play a vital role in the lives of its people.

Many of China's key code words are derived from the sayings and writings of its greatest philosophers and contain wisdom and guidelines that are both universal and eternal. Others are new and come and go with the times.

Knowledge of China's code words is especially important to foreign visitors, businesspeople, and others involved with China because the cultural nuances of the terms are often misunderstood and misused—or ignored altogether—by foreigners. And just as often, the Chinese presume that it is their cultural imperatives, as defined by these words, that will be followed in any relationship.

The problem of dealing with China's culture-bound words is far more sensitive and complicated than is generally assumed. Being only a little off in the interpretation or use of a term can be enough to prevent a relationship from beginning—or destroy one that already exists.

This presents an extraordinary challenge to those who approach China without the benefit of professional training or personal experience in any of the languages or the culture of the country. One of the first steps in overcoming this challenge is, of course, to become familiar with as many of China's code words as possible and to learn something about when and how they are used.

Most of the words in this book are in the Beijing or Mandarin dialect of Chinese—known as *Putonghua* or *ordinary language*—which was made the "official" language of China by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 and has been taught in schools throughout the country since the 1950s.

All of the terms and expressions appearing in this book also exist in the other major Chinese languages (Cantonese, Shanghaiese, Fukienese, Hokkien, Hakka and Chin Chow). And although the words are written with the same ideograms or "characters" in each of these languages and have the same meanings, they are pronounced differently.

Words that appear in their Cantonese or other versions (because they are better known in those languages) are labeled as such.

Boye Lafayette De Mente
Beijing, China

GUIDE TO KEY CULTURAL THEMES

For the reader's convenience, I have cross listed entries under themes that are central to Chinese culture. All entries that touch upon the theme of "politics," for example, are listed numerically. The reader can therefore explore a theme more thoroughly by reading the related entries.

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1

爱

Ai

(Aye)

"Loving Chinese Style"

Romantic love between men and women has been rare in the history of China. In a society based on absolute hierarchical relationships, the survival of the family name, suppression of individuality, the primacy of the family-group, and arranged marriages, there was virtually no concept of romance in the Western sense.

From a young age, boys and girls were more or less raised separately. Young men and women did not date, and any feelings of love they might develop for a member of the opposite sex were seldom consummated.

In higher class families in particular the separation of males and females into different worlds made it virtually impossible for men and women to learn how to relate to each other on the basis of mutual respect or anything approaching equality and helped to perpetuate the concept that females were inferior to males.

Personal feelings, in every aspect of the society, were sublimated to the interests of the family, the clan, the village, and the nation at large. Romantic love, with all of its uncertainties and unpredictabilities, was the exact opposite of the Chinese commitment to order, harmony, and predictability.

But this is not to suggest that the Chinese did not want and need *ai* (aye) or love, or that there was no love in their lives. The Chinese were very much aware of and appreciative of the emotion of love. They chose to control it and to channel it in directions that would contribute to the stability and survival of their society.

Not surprisingly, the Chinese took a philosophical approach to defining and dealing with the emotion described as *ai*. Many of the great sages of early China saw love as a spiritual manifestation, as the ideal bond uniting mankind and the cosmos—a concept that included the "love thy neighbor as thyself" morality advocated by Christianity.

This idealized concept of love extended to one's personal character and behavior. A person truly motivated by love would have a good heart, be well-behaved, and live a graceful life in tune with one's self, one's neighbors, and the cosmos.

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But in the reality of the Chinese political and economic environment, love in this broad sense of selfless giving was an impossible dream. Even the most virtuous of emperors failed to live up to this philosophical ideal.

Because love in the sense of a private, personalized thing, applying primarily to members of the opposite sex was forbidden to the Chinese, they focused their love-emotion on their children, their ancestors, their arts and crafts, and the spirit world.

Romantic love as a human right is therefore a relatively new phenomenon in China. In a broad sense it dates only from the latter years of the 1970s when the Communist Party, recognizing that it was in danger of self-destructing, began allowing people the freedom to make some decisions for themselves.

Although the Communist government of China passed a law prohibiting arranged marriages in 1950, they still occur, particularly in remote rural areas. But dating and love matches are now commonplace, as is divorce.

With the flowering of romantic love in crowded China one of the greatest challenges facing urban couples is finding places where they have enough privacy to engage in intimacies. Two places most often used are city parks and theaters that feature semi-private two-seated booths, which, appropriately, are offered as "love places" or "corners of love."

Since romantic love is not compatible with Confucianism or most of the other foundations of traditional Chinese life, however, the effect that it is having on China is revolutionary.

2

安

An

(Ahn)

"Heaven on Earth"

Scientists tell us that the cosmos began with the mother of all "big bangs"—an explosion that created all of the stars and star matter of the heavens, setting in motion actions of such violence, such destruction and creation, that it is more like a dream than reality.

Scientists also tell us that in all of the chaos of the heavens there is an order, a scheme to everything, and that the most random actions are a part of this great order.

The Chinese were among the first to grasp the essential nature of the cosmos, to see the order in its seemingly unending cycle of destruction and creation, and they went much further than most in applying this knowledge to the making of their own world.

One of the pillars of the original Chinese concept of universal order in their world was the supremacy and dominance of the masculine sex. Men were the keepers of the keys to heaven, and everything flowed from that basic concept.

In the Chinese world, men were the positive, forceful matter of the universe on high, and women were the negative, receptive matter below. In this masculine context of things, the only way that *an* (ahn) or "tranquility/stability" could be achieved between men and women on earth was for women to be subordinated to men.

This cosmic view of earth-bound tranquility between the sexes is dramatically illustrated in the ideogram used to denote the concept. It consists of a character meaning *woman* under an ideogram representing the roof of a house. In other words, tranquility is a woman in a man's house.

An, with its underlying connotations of universal tranquility and male dominance over female, is a key part of several other important words, including *safety*, *anxiety*, and *peace* of mind.

To maintain friendly relationships with Chinese, in business or personal matters, it is essential that *an* be given its due. But the degree of harmony that traditionally existed between the sexes in China is a thing of the past. Women no longer automatically view men as superior or as their masters, and cross-sexual disharmony is growing at an exponential rate.

Among the unplanned benefits to China that one might attribute to Communism (1949-) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was partial emancipation of Chinese women. So much of traditional China was obliterated during those decades of destruction that there was no going back to the absolute male chauvinism of the past.

In China today, just as in other countries around the world, women are slowly but surely proving that they are generally more rational, more adaptable, and often more talented than men and are gradually achieving the respect and control of their own lives that has been denied them since the beginning of Chinese civilization.

With the extraordinary resilience and diligence bred into Chinese women for millennia combined with equally deep yearnings for self-realization, there is no telling how far Chinese women may go in the future.

3

帮

Bao

(Bah-oh)

"Bartering 'Social' Credits"

Life in China is based on a set of rules that are very different from the typical American and European experience. These cultural differences go to the very heart of the Chinese way of thinking and doing things, and are an ongoing challenge to Westerners dealing with the Chinese.

Westerners are generally conditioned to base their personal and business relationships on impersonal rules that apply to everyone—friends and acquaintances as well as strangers. These rules, in turn, are founded on the principles of frankness, fairness and a sense of equality that pervades our most fundamental concept of the world at large. In principle, we can approach anyone, anytime and expect to be treated fairly and courteously.

Chinese, on the other hand, are acculturated to deal with people on the basis of social debts built up through a variety of personal relationships in the past—with family members, relatives, teachers, friends, business associates, and employers. In accepting help, of whatever kind, from various people the Chinese build up a reservoir of debt that they owe to these people. By the same token, they also build up a bank of "receivables" from people they help along the way.

Paying and collecting these social debts serves as the primary means of interpersonal relationships in China, from purely social to business and political affairs, and is controlled by the concept of *bao* (bah-oh), which might be translated as "social reciprocity."

Fulfilling the obligations of *bao* is one of the most important ways the Chinese maintain and nurture their "face." Failure to properly discharge social debts that are owed is regarded as one of the most dishonorable things a Chinese can do. People who ignore *bao* are regarded as uncivilized.

While more and more Chinese who are involved with outsiders socially, economically and politically, make some attempt to break away from the rigid bonds of *bao* in order to accommodate new relationships that are not based on social obligations, virtually all Chinese automatically make a strenuous effort to very quickly establish the kind of obligatory social debts they are used to because that is the only way they know how to react.

Newcomers to the world of China will find that their way is much smoother if they give building "social credit accounts" the highest possible priority. In fact, speaking broadly, it is often impossible to operate effectively in China, in virtually any capacity, without such "social credit," so there is no other acceptable choice.

Anyone proposing to go to China on business or for any professional purpose should begin to lay the groundwork for establishing "social credit" prior to arriving there by getting as many introductions as possible, and taking along a grab bag of gifts and favors.

And, of course, these introductions should include as many foreign residents of China as possible because they represent a trove of insights and contacts that help newcomers begin the process of establishing their own networks.

Those who have no mainland China contacts to begin with would be well advised to make their approach to China through Hong Kong, spending whatever time is necessary there to obtain the all-important introductions.

4

报仇

Baochou

(Bah-oh-choe-ou)

"The Need for Revenge"

Chinese history is gory with stories of Imperial usurpers, victorious warlords, generals, criminal chieftains and others wiping out entire families, including uncles, aunts, and cousins, as a way of ending family lines and future threats.

The same "final solution" has also traditionally been used by those in power to eliminate intellectual dissidents and military leaders who failed in revolutionary attempts.

Part of this propensity for killing one's enemies came under the heading of *baochou* (bah-oh-choe-ou) or "revenge," the need for which was built into Chinese culture.

The Chinese were never restrained by any religious beliefs in the sanctity of life or in the concept of forgiving one's enemies and thereby avoiding sin and gaining favor in the eyes of some deity.

Quite the contrary, they felt under deep obligation to extract their own revenge because there was no God in Chinese heaven who would eventually do it for them, and no body of law on earth that could be depended upon to protect and preserve them.

They were ruled by personal, hierarchical relationships rather than by laws based on equality and human rights. It was left up to individuals to keep these relationships in order.

Without equitable laws to guide, restrain and protect them, the Chinese had to depend upon their personal connections and their reputations or "face" to survive and function within their society.

Because this system was based on personal rather then objective factors, the Chinese developed extreme sensitivity to slights, insults and actions they perceived as threatening to their "face."

Every blemish that they suffered or believed that they had suffered had to be wiped clean. If they were not in a position to revenge themselves overtly, they felt compelled to do it behind the scenes, no matter how long it took.

Baochou thus became a characteristic trait of Chinese behavior, and survived from tribal times down through the ages. Much of the mass slaughter that occurred during the 20-year war between the Nationalists and Communists resulted from this revenge factor.

Chinese Communist Party leaders have routinely taken revenge against critics as well as against competitors within the Party, either imprisoning them or exterminating them.

It is not likely that this trait will be fully exorcised from the psyche of most Chinese until they have lived for two or three generations in a society in which human rights are protected by law, and behavior is based on rational, universal standards of fairness rather than political power and personal idiosyncrasies. Fortunately, the growing number of Chinese who are exposed to Western educations and cultures, and become involved in foreign trade, are leading the way in putting this tribal trait behind them.

5

保甲

Bao Jia

(Bah-oh Jee-ah)

"Your Brother's Keeper"

The initial success of communism in China should not have been a surprise to those who knew the country well. From the time of the Shang Dynasty (1550–1030 B.C.), China's government was centralized down to the smallest detail and the people lived in tightly organized family, village, city and regional units.

All of the rituals of work, religious activities and civic responsibility were minutely prescribed and deviations were not allowed. Independent thought and behavior were taboo. Government representatives were everywhere, and maintained a close watch on everyone.

Upper class families (the equivalent of the Communist elite) were bonded together through clans and lineage organizations, lived in walled and guarded compounds, and were rabid believers in the feudalistic doctrines that were the basis of their power.

One of the most draconian methods of social control used by early China's authoritarian governments was a community mutual responsibility system known as the *bao jia* (bah-oh jee-ah), or "household groupings."

Beginning with the Sung Dynasty in A.D. 960, all households in China were required to belong to a *jia* or group of one hundred families. Ten *jia* were grouped together to constitute a *bao*—or one thousand families.

Jia and *bao* were supervised by head men chosen from among their own members on a rotating basis. The head men were responsible for making sure that every member of each family was properly registered (gender, age, relationship and occupation), for ensuring that the members paid their taxes, and for seeing that they obeyed all of the other customs and laws of the land.

If any member of a *jia* misbehaved or failed to carry out his or her responsibilities, the head man as well as the other members of the group were held responsible. In China, every man was truly his brother's keeper. (And, as a result of this system of enforcing order and obedience, the job of head man was not that popular.)

American and European traders, diplomats and others who began showing up in China in the 18th century and ran afoul of the law were shocked to

discover the collective nature of Chinese justice. Because they were not members of any *bao jia*, however, Chinese authorities first let them get by with paying fines for felonies, including murder.

But before the end of the century, the Chinese began asserting their right to judge and execute foreigners guilty of serious crimes, often using the threat of collective punishment to force ship captains and consulates to surrender fugitives.

The *bao jia* system of mutual responsibility naturally played a vital role in programming the Chinese to be especially circumspect in their own personal behavior and to exercise extraordinary pressure on members of their own families and *jia* to scrupulously obey all laws.

China's Communist government continued the system of organizing the country into family and work-unit groups, with only slight changes in the focus and labels. Mutual responsibility remained a key factor in the nature and intent of the groups.

During the madness of the so-called Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and lasted for nearly ten years, whole families were punished for the alleged sins of individual members.

Collective punishment is no longer applied in a blanket fashion in China but it is still a significant factor in the thinking and behavior of both the authorities and the public at large.

Families of individuals accused of "political crimes" invariably suffer through discrimination of one kind or another, including the loss of educational, employment and other opportunities.

6

包间

Bao Qi Lai

(Bah-oh Chee Lie)

"Booking Mistresses"

Virtually all better Chinese restaurants, in China as well as in such East Asian and Southeast Asian cities as Bangkok, Seoul, Singapore, Taipei and Tokyo, have one or more separate rooms for groups that want to dine in some privacy.

Many restaurants, particularly in Taipei and Hong Kong, feature private rooms and cater especially to businessmen and others who are interested in *more* than just private areas for dining.

Some of these latter restaurants include attractive young women on their "menus" to act as hostesses and companions for male diners. These restaurants often have adjoining apartment-type accommodations available by the hour.

In its original meaning, the Cantonese term *bao qi lai* (bah-oh chee lie) refers to booking a private room in a restaurant. But in cash-flush Hong Kong of the 1980s and 1990s it took on an added dimension, and came to also mean "booking" up-and-coming movie and TV starlets on short-term "mistress contracts."

It became common for businessmen, usually those suddenly made rich by successful manufacturing and exporting operations, to offer beautiful young starlets anywhere from one to several million dollars to become their exclusive mistresses for three months to longer periods.

The word in the film industry is that the present minimum rate for a "new face" on a three-month *bao qi lai* contract is one million dollars. Well-known stars who opt for such contracts are said to receive several million dollars for similar periods.

In addition to cash payments, Hong Kong's contract mistresses also receive luxurious gifts that include gold, diamonds, furs and cars. It is said that some of the more popular starlet mistresses become quite wealthy within a few years by fulfilling several successive contracts.

While film starlets may have become the most sought-after mistresses among Hong Kong's business tycoons, the majority of the city's mistresses come from the huge pool of women who work in the night-time entertainment trade as club and cabaret hostesses.

Many of these Suzy Wong-types can be "rented" by the hour or night. Others are generally available for longer-term liaisons on an exclusive or near-exclusive basis, and play a role similar to that once performed by second wives and concubines.

A famous story reported in *Fortune* magazine and the business press in Asia relates how a billionaire paid off his mistress with a blank check, which challenged her to avoid greed because she did not know how much was in the account after the wife ordered the affair to be ended.

Mistress-keeping by foreign male residents of Taipei and Hong Kong is common but few if any of these arrangements are on a *bao qi lai* contracted fee basis. (The Mandarin equivalent of this term is *bao jian*. Hong Kong in Mandarin is *Xiang Guang*.)

7

备

Bei

(Bay-ee)

"Keeping Your Powder Dry"

One of the primary reasons why China has survived over the millennia has been the meticulous control exercised by its huge cadre of bureaucrats who were trained to maintain the status quo at whatever the human cost, and were the elite of the country by virtue of their unassailable, absolute power.

The effectiveness of China's bureaucratic power was based on controlling the minds as well as the behavior of the people through enforcing long-established customs and a body of taboos and guidelines that covered practically every aspect of human behavior. Virtually nothing was left to the free will of the people.

This concern for and control of thought and behavior down to minute details was one of the key points made by the great military strategist Sun Tzu. The first of his thirty-six stratagems in his classic book, *The Art of War*, was *bei* (bay-ee) or "foresight," under which he subsumed the gathering and synthesizing of knowledge and planning.

Sun Tzu taught the not-so-always-obvious philosophy that one should always assume that an enemy will eventually attack if you give him an opportunity, so the best strategy is to always be prepared to withstand and counter any invasion.

This stratagem has now been co-opted—some would say corrupted—by China's business community, including government bureaucrats who mix politics with operating commercial enterprises.

In Sun Tzu's original discourse, he said the successful ruler should follow a number of fundamental factors in pursuing war: make sure that the people will follow him without reservations or fear; take seasonal and other environmental conditions into consideration; make sure that local conditions in getting to and confronting the enemy are understood and accounted for; ensure that the general is up to the challenge of command by having the right combination of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness; and make sure that the troops are well-organized, well-trained and well-supplied.

When these axioms are translated into business terms they cover (a) setting the corporate mission; (b) analyzing all of the factors that will or may

impact on the mission; (c) establishing specific policies and objectives; (d) developing strategies that take the fullest possible advantage of personnel, technology and such external conditions as the weather, politics, economics, and so on; (e) implementing the strategies; and (f) monitoring and evaluating the results.

Sun Tzu's main point in this stratagem, the unending pursuit of knowledge (about one's products and services and their relation to the marketplace), combined with careful attention to both internal and external factors, are usually the precise areas where businesspeople falter, particularly when they are attempting to enter a foreign market.

While skills in cross-cultural human relations cannot be obtained from books or other secondary sources—that requires personal experience—having advance knowledge of the attitudes, behavior and expectations of the people concerned dramatically shortens the learning curve.

And again taking a cue from Sun Tzu, it is often the most trivial appearing cultural factor that trips up the novice in China.

8

比

Bi

(Bee)

"Unity the Chinese Way"

A quick, superficial glance might suggest that China is a paragon of cultural and social unity—a huge country, over five thousand years old, with the benefit of a long line of distinguished philosophers who delved into the depths of human nature and came up with guidelines for every activity, every possible eventuality in human affairs.

But somewhere between the philosopher's well and the reality of Chinese history, much of the wisdom that was gained was either relegated to a tiny elite minority of academics, or subverted to serve the interests of emperors, kings and bureaucrats.

The rulers of China, past and present, understood the importance of order and *bi* (bee) or "unity," but their way of maintaining these key social

factors was to use brute force rather than work cooperatively with the populace.

China's philosophers, themselves essentially victims of the prevailing political powers, could not prevent the common people from being cooped up and silenced for century after century; a situation that resulted again and again in the gradual buildup of friction and frustration that could only be alleviated by outbreaks of violence.

In this setting much of the *bi* that existed in China was artificial. It existed only because the people were forced to live and work in closely supervised unity, with virtually no freedom of choice.

Of course, there was unity in China resulting from race, common philosophies, common experiences and a need for defense against outside threats. But this unity too was subverted because it was held together by constant pressure rather than the free will of the people.

In present-day China the lack of unity in virtually every nook and cranny of society is shocking, and represents a threat both to the people of China and the world at large. Having had no historical experience in coming together on their own accord, peacefully settling their own differences, and forging natural bonds of *bi*, the Chinese are not good at doing it.

Some three thousand years ago the *Book of Changes* noted that true, natural unity was essential not only for the proper functioning of societies but for individuals as well. But it is only now that the Chinese people themselves are finally, little by little, gaining the freedom necessary to learn and adhere to the lessons first taught so many centuries ago.

There is also a warning in the *Book of Changes* about the loss of unity that applies to people everywhere. Unity, like everything else in life, flows in cycles. What goes up must come down. Unity must therefore be continuously nourished and recreated to stay in harmony with the times and not deteriorate into chaos.

9

变

Bian

(Bee-enn)

"Stay Loose and Win"

"Bending with the bamboo" has long been a Chinese concept for the kind of behavior that is essential for survival and success in any area of life, from dealing with nature and the bureaucracy to operating commercial enterprises.

This belief has philosophical foundations in the Chinese acceptance of fate as a major factor in their lives. From earliest times, the Chinese viewed the world as in a constant state of interaction between positive and negative forces. The best of all worlds was a balance between these two forces, but achieving that ranged from difficult to impossible.

Chinese have always been at the mercy of the weather and their governments, with no choice but to endure the idiosyncrasies and rages of both, taking what they could get when they could get it.

There have, of course, been many occasions during the long history of China that the people reached a breaking point and rebelled against local warlords and bureaucrats and even against the Imperial throne itself. But in every case, the succeeding powers soon lost any virtue they may have had in the beginning, and began anew the cycle of repression and abuse.

Sun Tzu, China's most famous military theorist, made the concept of flexibility—of sudden change—one of the pillars of his strategies for winning wars. He taught that in order to win at war the general must be ready to change his tactics and goals at a moment's notice.

Sun Tzu incorporated this concept into the term *bian* (bee-enn), which includes the idea of both anticipating and adapting to changing circumstances as they occur. In his book, the commander who was not prepared to modify his tactics as the situation changed was unlikely to be victorious.

This meant that the general had to have up-to-the-minute intelligence, know his own strengths and weakness thoroughly, and know *when* and *how* to take advantage of the circumstances.

All Chinese businessmen are steeped in this stratagem of war, and some are skilled at putting it to good use in their negotiations and ongoing relationships—particularly when dealing with foreign counterparts because foreigners more easily fit the definition of enemy.

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