

Shanghai Daily

上海日报

4 November 2011

Great insight into Chinese culture and way of thinking

Sophie Turton

As East and West become more and more interlinked and China's position in the global economy advances, cultural understanding is becoming more of a prevalent issue. Yang Liu's depiction of cultural differences in "East meets West" demonstrates, through a series of graphics, the major differences in thought, behavior and image between the two sides of the world. Having lived for many years in Germany, Yang Liu takes her experience of the German culture and psyche and compares it with that of her native China. What results is an evocative and easily-digestible pocket book which, for anyone who has experience of these two contrasting cultures, is amusingly accurate. Although a book of limited words, "East meets West" is thought-provoking in its seeming simplicity. The book doesn't target one culture as being "different" but instead shows attitudes of both and allows the viewer to form an opinion. A personal favorite is the section entitled "waiting in a queue" which shows an orderly line of dots on the blue German page and a large unorganized cluster on the red Chinese page; it is simple and yet, in my experience, culturally astute.

Over the past 25 years, China's influence on the world, particularly in the context of business, has grown considerably. It is becoming increasingly important to understand the cultural nuances of the Chinese people. One of the biggest factors ingrained within Chinese culture and history, dating back to before the age of Confucius, is the concept of *mianzi* — the preservation of face. This is of paramount importance in every single aspect of Chinese life and is a crucial factor when building relationships with the Chinese, whether it's on a business, personal or base level. As a Chinese proverb states, "A person needs a face like a tree needs bark." To lose face is to lose social status and respect, yet it is something that is misunderstood or completely overlooked by many foreigners who come into contact with the Chinese.

Saving face in China

I recently had the privilege of interviewing author and journalist Anne-Laure Monfret about her first book, "Saving Face in China," which has recently been translated from French into English. The first of its kind, "Saving Face in China" deals with the complexities of *mianzi* with the aim of building more of an "understanding, respect and openness toward those who do not necessarily work or think the same way you do, or share the same values," Monfret said.

Monfret lived in Shanghai for eight years and her love for China could not be more evident. When asked to summarize what she feels she's learned from her time in China, she states: "I really feel attached to China and the people, China is really a big part of my life. If I see someone losing patience or getting angry I see it as a sign of weakness. I wasn't like that before."

This concept is a resonating theme of the book, which teaches through a series of amusing encounters, interviews and commentaries, that the biggest factor in *mianzi* is mutual respect. "This is a universal concept," Monfret says. "No one likes to be disrespected or criticized in public, but in China it's so much more important."

Indeed, while reading the book, I often found myself thinking about the complicated and heavily interwoven concept of *mianzi*. "Saving Face in China" covers all of the main areas of importance and these areas span a surprisingly large breadth — some examples being truth, gift giving and respecting hierarchy.

The book is very well researched, consisting of interviews with a variety of nationalities and professions, conducted over a series of years. In addition to being informative, it is an uplifting book to read as it provides a level of context to situations that all foreigners living in China have experienced at one point or another.

It allows you to "reflect upon the experience of others," Monfret states, "to learn from it and, last but not least, to have a great read."

An interesting point Monfret made regarding the



SAVING FACE IN CHINA
By Anne-Laure Monfret
164 pp, Xlibris Corp,
US\$19.99

research of her book was that, "it was very easy to find contacts. People are very open and receptive, Chinese and Western combined. Getting in touch with people probably would have been more difficult in France for example."

This idea is also shown in the section of "East meets West" entitled "lifestyle." The blue German page shows a single person, while the red Chinese page shows a line of people holding hands; inherent within the Chinese culture is the concept of community, family and the importance of building relationships.

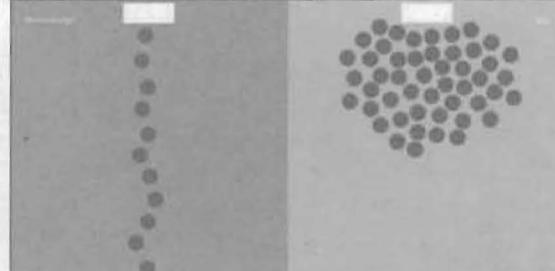
Additionally, through use of Chinese proverbs and a variety of stories and Chinese jokes, Monfret enriches her book with examples of Chinese culture which are poignant and often beautiful.

"The Proud Goldfish," a children's story used to highlight the Chinese importance of modesty, is of particular merit when warning against an arrogant approach to business and personal relationships. These also add dimension to the book, steering away from a preaching "how to" guide and toward an understanding of a culture that the author obviously holds dear.

On a personal level, reading "Saving Face in China" has instilled a further level of respect for the Chinese and has made me think much more about my behavior in social situations.

Although both books highlight the differences between our cultures, this is with the purpose of informing understanding; through use of humor and experience, this intention is effectively realized.

"Saving Face in China" is a particularly useful and entertaining read, which allows insight into a culture so frequently misunderstood.



How to stand in a line



How Germans and Chinese see one another



EAST MEETS WEST
By Yang Liu
100 pp, Verlag Hermann Schmidt Mainz, US\$19.44