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## For American Workers in China, a Culture Clash

By HANNAH SELIGSON

As more Americans go to mainland China to take jobs, more Chinese and Americans are working side by side. These cross-cultural partnerships, while beneficial in many ways, are also highlighting tensions that expose differences in work experience, pay levels and communication.

In the last few years, a growing number of Americans in their 20s and 30s have been heading to China for employment, lured by its faster-growing economy and lower jobless rate. Their Chinese co-workers are often around the same age.

"The tight collaboration of the two countries in business and science makes the Chinese-American pairing one of the most common in the workplace in China," said Vas Taras, a management professor at the [University of North Carolina](#) at Greensboro, a specialist in cross-cultural work group management.

But the two groups were raised differently.

The Americans have had more exposure to free-market principles. "Young Americans were brought up in a commercial environment," said Neng Zhao, 28, a senior associate at Blue Oak Capital, a [private equity](#) firm based in Beijing. "We weren't. So the workplace is a unique learning process for my generation."

People in Ms. Zhao's generation were born around or shortly after [Deng Xiaoping](#) opened up China to the West, so China has evolved from a government-regulated economy to a more free-market system in their lifetime. Therefore, they can face a steeper learning curve.

Sean Leow, 28, founder of Nechoa, a social networking site based in Shanghai, says young Chinese employees often enter jobs with less hands-on preparation. They may also have less understanding of client services, he said.

In addition, he said, "I know a lot of my Chinese colleagues did not do internships in college," in contrast to United States students.

Managers hiring workers in China appear to be paying a premium for Western experience. Foreigners tend to earn 10 to 15 percent more than their Chinese counterparts in similar positions, said Michael Norman, senior vice president at Sibson Consulting, an American firm.

That imbalance does not go unnoticed by Chinese workers. "There is definitely the perception that Americans get paid more for the same work," said Ting Wang, 25, an associate at WildChina, a travel company based in Beijing.

The difference is a function of supply and demand, Mr. Norman said. "If you need the foreigner for their specialized knowledge of the West, companies are willing to pay a little more."

On the other hand, Chinese workers have a deeper understanding of the influences, like Confucianism and Communism, that play a part in their country's culture and economy.

It is imperative for Americans working in China to adjust, said Mr. Norman, who works on management and work force issues for multinational companies operating in Asia.

"In the West, there is such a premium on getting things done quickly, but when you come to work in China, you need to work on listening and being more patient and understanding of local ways of doing business," he said.

Ming Alterman, 25, a senior account executive at Razorfish, a Shanghai-based digital media firm, is the only American among 40 employees. He says Americans need to understand the importance of building so-called *guanxi* (pronounced GWAN-she). The word means relationships, but has implications beyond the obligatory happy hour, occasional lunches with the boss or networking.

"In China, it's really expected that you become friends with your boss and you go out and socialize in a way that doesn't happen in the U.S.," Mr. Alterman said.

The Chinese now rising in the work force were raised and educated in a system that tended to prize obedience and rote learning. Their American counterparts may have had more leeway to question authority and speak their minds. This can affect workplace communication.

When Corinne Dillon, 25, was working at a multinational company in Beijing, she noticed that her Chinese colleagues were sometimes hesitant about expressing their opinions, which she thought was rooted in views about hierarchy.

"Because foreigners are often in higher positions in companies, or even when they are not, there is sometimes an implicit respect given to them that makes Chinese people not want to directly disagree with them for fear of being perceived as impolite," said Ms. Dillon, who is now director of sales and marketing at That's Mandarin, a language school based in Beijing.

The difference cuts both ways. Ms. Zhao, of Blue Oak Capital, recalled her first experience working for an American at an American-run agency in Beijing. What her American boss perceived as directness left her feeling humiliated, she said. "I remember I was so embarrassed when my American boss told me he didn't like something I was doing, right in front of me," she said. "The Chinese way would have been much more indirect."

Communication styles, Professor Taras said, can create workplace challenges. "Americans often perceive the Chinese as indecisive, less confident and not tough enough, whereas the Chinese may see Americans as rude or inconsiderate."

This, he said, "can lead to conflicts and misunderstandings, but also affect promotion and task assignment choice, and ultimately performance."

What is similar, though, is that both the Americans and the Chinese perceive a glass ceiling.

“Most expats don’t speak good enough Chinese, so their promotion prospects are limited, and on a social and cultural level, young Chinese feel there are barriers that are hard to get past,” said Ziyu Wen, 28, who works with Americans in her job as a communications manager in Beijing.

Despite the tension, the Chinese-American pairing holds many economic and political benefits for both countries.

“China needs workers who understand China and the West, so they can develop a business presence and influence in overseas markets,” Mr. Norman said.

“Likewise, America needs people who truly understand the Chinese, in order to compete and cooperate.” Having Americans working alongside the Chinese in China, he said, “is one of the best ways to cultivate and internalize this understanding for the future.”

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