

Quiet

THE POWER OF INTROVERTS
IN A WORLD THAT CAN'T
STOP TALKING

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SOFT POWER

Asian-Americans and the Extrovert Ideal

In a gentle way, you can shake the world.

—MAHATMA GANDHI

It's a sunny spring day in 2006, and Mike Wei, a seventeen-year-old Chinese-born senior at Lynbrook High School near Cupertino, California, is telling me about his experiences as an Asian-American student. Mike is dressed in sporty all-American attire of khakis, windbreaker, and baseball cap, but his sweet, serious face and wispy mustache give him the aura of a budding philosopher, and he speaks so softly that I have to lean forward to hear him.

"At school," says Mike, "I'm a lot more interested in listening to what the teacher says and being the good student, rather than the class clown or interacting with other kids in the class. If being outgoing, shouting, or acting out in class is gonna affect the education I receive, it's better if I go for education."

Mike relates this view matter-of-factly, but he seems to know how unusual it is by American standards. His attitude comes from his parents, he explains. "If I have a choice between doing something for myself, like going out with my friends, or staying home and studying, I think of my parents. That gives me the strength to keep studying. My father tells me that his job is computer programming, and my job is to study."

Mike's mother taught the same lesson by example. A former math teacher who worked as a maid when the family immigrated to North America, she memorized English vocabulary words while washing dishes. She is very quiet, says Mike, and very resolute. "It's really Chinese to pursue your own education like that. My mother has the kind of strength that not everyone can see."

By all indications, Mike has made his parents proud. His e-mail username is "A-student," and he's just won a coveted spot in Stanford University's freshman class. He's the kind of thoughtful, dedicated student that any community would be proud to call its own. And yet, according to an article called "The New White Flight" that ran in the *Wall Street Journal* just six months previously, white families are leaving Cupertino in droves, precisely because of kids like Mike. They are fleeing the sky-high test scores and awe-inspiring study habits of many Asian-American students. The article said that white parents feared that their kids couldn't keep up academically. It quoted a student from a local high school: "If you were Asian, you had to confirm you were smart. If you were white, you had to prove it."

But the article didn't explore what lay behind this stellar academic performance. I was curious whether the town's scholarly bent reflected a culture insulated from the worst excesses of the Extrovert Ideal—and if so, what that would feel like. I decided to visit and find out.

At first blush, Cupertino seems like the embodiment of the American Dream. Many first- and second-generation Asian immigrants live here and work at the local high-tech office parks. Apple Computer's headquarters at 1 Infinite Loop is in town. Google's Mountain View headquarters is just down the road. Meticulously maintained cars glide along the boulevards; the few pedestrians are crisply dressed in bright colors and cheerful whites. Unprepossessing ranch houses are pricey, but buyers think the cost is worth it to get their kids into the town's famed public school system, with its ranks of Ivy-bound kids. Of the 615 students in the graduating class of 2010 at Cupertino's Monta Vista High School (77 percent of whom are Asian-American, according to the school's website, some of which is accessible in Chinese), 53 were National Merit Scholarship semifinalists. The average combined score of Monta Vista

students who took the SAT in 2009 was 1916 out of 2400, 27 percent higher than the nationwide average.

Respected kids at Monta Vista High School are not necessarily athletic or vivacious, according to the students I meet here. Rather, they're studious and sometimes quiet. "Being smart is actually admired, even if you're weird," a Korean-American high school sophomore named Chris tells me. Chris describes the experience of his friend, whose family left to spend two years in a Tennessee town where few Asian-Americans lived. The friend enjoyed it, but suffered culture shock. In Tennessee "there were insanely smart people, but they were always by themselves. Here, the really smart people usually have a lot of friends, because they can help people out with their work."

The library is to Cupertino what the mall or soccer field is to other towns: an unofficial center of village life. High school kids cheerfully refer to studying as "going nerding." Football and cheerleading aren't particularly respected activities. "Our football team sucks," Chris says good-naturedly. Though the team's recent stats are more impressive than Chris suggests, having a lousy football team seems to hold symbolic significance for him. "You couldn't really even tell they're football players," he explains. "They don't wear their jackets and travel in big groups. When one of my friends graduated, they played a video and my friend was like, 'I can't believe they're showing football players and cheerleaders in this video.' That's not what drives this town."

Ted Shinta, a teacher and adviser to the Robotics Team at Monta Vista High School, tells me something similar. "When I was in high school," he says, "you were discouraged from voting in student elections unless you were wearing a varsity jacket. At most high schools you have a popular group that tyrannizes the others. But here the kids in that group don't hold any power over the other students. The student body is too academically oriented for that."

A local college counselor named Purvi Modi agrees. "Introversion is not looked down upon," she tells me. "It is accepted. In some cases it is even highly respected and admired. It is cool to be a Master Chess Champion and play in the band." There's an introvert-extrovert spectrum here, as everywhere, but it's as if the population is distributed a

few extra degrees toward the introverted end of the scale. One young woman, a Chinese-American about to begin her freshman year at an elite East Coast college, noticed this phenomenon after meeting some of her future classmates online, and worries what the post-Cupertino future might hold. "I met a couple of people on Facebook," she says, "and they're just so different. I'm really quiet. I'm not that much of a partier or socializer, but everyone there seems to be very social and stuff. It's just very different from my friends. I'm not even sure if I'm gonna *have* friends when I get there."

One of her Facebook correspondents lives in nearby Palo Alto, and I ask how she'll respond if that person invites her to get together over the summer.

"I probably wouldn't do it," she says. "It would be interesting to meet them and stuff, but my mom doesn't want me going out that much, because I have to study."

I'm struck by the young woman's sense of filial obligation, and its connection to prioritizing study over social life. But this is not unusual in Cupertino. Many Asian-American kids here tell me that they study all summer at their parents' request, even declining invitations to July birthday parties so they can get ahead on the following October's calculus curriculum.

"I think it's our culture," explains Tiffany Liao, a poised Swarthmore-bound high school senior whose parents are from Taiwan. "Study, do well, don't create waves. It's inbred in us to be more quiet. When I was a kid and would go to my parents' friends' house and didn't want to talk, I would bring a book. It was like this shield, and they would be like, 'She's so studious!' And that was praise."

It's hard to imagine other American moms and dads outside Cupertino smiling on a child who reads in public while everyone else is gathered around the barbecue. But parents schooled a generation ago in Asian countries were likely taught this quieter style as children. In many East Asian classrooms, the traditional curriculum emphasizes listening, writing, reading, and memorization. Talking is simply not a focus, and is even discouraged.

"The teaching back home is very different from here," says Hung Wei Chien, a Cupertino mom who came to the United States from Tai-

wan in 1979 to attend graduate school at UCLA. "There, you learn the subject, and they test you. At least when I grew up, they don't go off subject a lot, and they don't allow the students to ramble. If you stand up and talk nonsense, you'll be reprimanded."

Hung is one of the most jolly, extroverted people I've ever met, given to large, expansive gestures and frequent belly laughs. Dressed in running shorts, sneakers, and amber jewelry, she greets me with a bear hug and drives us to a bakery for breakfast. We dig into our pastries, chatting companionably.

So it's telling that even Hung recalls her culture shock upon entering her first American-style classroom. She considered it rude to participate in class because she didn't want to waste her classmates' time. And sure enough, she says, laughing, "I was the quiet person there. At UCLA, the professor would start class, saying, 'Let's discuss!' I would look at my peers while they were talking nonsense, and the professors were so patient, just listening to everyone." She nods her head comically, mimicking the overly respectful professors.

"I remember being amazed. It was a linguistics class, and that's not even linguistics the students are talking about! I thought, 'Oh, in the U.S., as soon as you start talking, you're fine.'"

If Hung was bewildered by the American style of class participation, it's likely that her teachers were equally perplexed by her unwillingness to speak. A full twenty years after Hung moved to the United States, the *San Jose Mercury News* ran an article called "East, West Teaching Traditions Collide," exploring professors' dismay at the reluctance of Asian-born students like Hung to participate in California university classrooms. One professor noted a "deference barrier" created by Asian students' reverence for their teachers. Another vowed to make class participation part of the grade in order to prod Asian students to speak in class. "You're supposed to downgrade yourself in Chinese learning because other thinkers are so much greater than you," said a third. "This is a perennial problem in classes with predominantly Asian-American students."

The article generated a passionate reaction in the Asian-American community. Some said the universities were right that Asian students need to adapt to Western educational norms. "Asian-Americans have

let people walk all over them because of their silence,” posted a reader of the sardonically titled website ModelMinority.com. Others felt that Asian students shouldn’t be forced to speak up and conform to the Western mode. “Perhaps instead of trying to change their ways, colleges can learn to listen to their sound of silence,” wrote Heejung Kim, a Stanford University cultural psychologist, in a paper arguing that talking is not always a positive act.



How is it that Asians and Westerners can look at the exact same classroom interactions, and one group will label it “class participation” and the other “talking nonsense”? The *Journal of Research in Personality* has published an answer to this question in the form of a map of the world drawn by research psychologist Robert McCrae. McCrae’s map looks like something you’d see in a geography textbook, but it’s based, he says, “not on rainfall or population density, but on personality trait levels,” and its shadings of dark and light grays—dark for extroversion, light for introversion—reveal a picture that “is quite clear: Asia . . . is introverted, Europe extroverted.” Had the map also included the United States, it would be colored dark gray. Americans are some of the most extroverted people on earth.

McCrae’s map might seem like a grand exercise in cultural stereotyping. To group entire continents by personality type is an act of gross generalization: you can find loud people in mainland China just as easily as in Atlanta, Georgia. Nor does the map account for subtleties of cultural difference within a country or region. People in Beijing have different styles from those in Shanghai, and both are different still from the citizens of Seoul or Tokyo. Similarly, describing Asians as a “model minority”—even when meant as a compliment—is just as confining and condescending as any description that reduces individuals to a set of perceived group characteristics. Perhaps it is also problematic to characterize Cupertino as an incubator for scholarly stand-outs, no matter how flattering this might sound to some.

But although I don't want to encourage rigid national or ethnic typecasting, to avoid entirely the topic of cultural difference and introversion would be a shame: there are too many aspects of Asian cultural and personality styles that the rest of the world could and should learn from. Scholars have for decades studied cultural differences in personality type, especially between East and West, and especially the dimension of introversion-extroversion, the one pair of traits that psychologists, who agree on practically nothing when it comes to cataloging human personality, believe is salient and measurable all over the world.

Much of this research yields the same results as McCrae's map. One study comparing eight- to ten-year-old children in Shanghai and southern Ontario, Canada, for example, found that shy and sensitive children are shunned by their peers in Canada but make sought-after playmates in China, where they are also more likely than other children to be considered for leadership roles. Chinese children who are sensitive and reticent are said to be *dongshi* (understanding), a common term of praise.

Similarly, Chinese high school students tell researchers that they prefer friends who are "humble" and "altruistic," "honest" and "hard-working," while American high school students seek out the "cheerful," "enthusiastic," and "sociable." "The contrast is striking," writes Michael Harris Bond, a cross-cultural psychologist who focuses on China. "The Americans emphasize sociability and prize those attributes that make for easy, cheerful association. The Chinese emphasize deeper attributes, focusing on moral virtues and achievement."

Another study asked Asian-Americans and European-Americans to think out loud while solving reasoning problems, and found that the Asians did much better when they were allowed to be quiet, compared to the Caucasians, who performed well when vocalizing their problem-solving.

These results would not surprise anyone familiar with traditional Asian attitudes to the spoken word: talk is for communicating need-to-know information; quiet and introspection are signs of deep thought and higher truth. Words are potentially dangerous weapons that reveal things better left unsaid. They hurt other people; they can get their speaker into trouble. Consider, for example, these proverbs from the East:

The wind howls, but the mountain remains still.

— JAPANESE PROVERB

Those who know do not speak.

Those who speak do not know.

— LAO ZI, *The Way of Lao Zi*

Even though I make no special attempt to observe the discipline of silence, living alone automatically makes me refrain from the sins of speech.

— KAMO NO CHOMEI, 12th Century Japanese recluse

And compare them to proverbs from the West:

Be a craftsman in speech that thou mayest be strong, for the strength of one is the tongue, and speech is mightier than all fighting.

— MAXIMS OF PTAHHOTEP, 2400 B.C.E.

Speech is civilization itself. The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact—it is silence which isolates.

— THOMAS MANN, *The Magic Mountain*

The squeaky wheel gets the grease.

What lies behind these starkly different attitudes? One answer is the widespread reverence for education among Asians, particularly those from “Confucian belt” countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. To this day, some Chinese villages display statues of students who passed the grueling Ming dynasty-era *jinshi* exam hundreds of years ago. It’s a lot easier to achieve that kind of distinction if—like some of the kids from Cupertino—you spend your summers studying.

Another explanation is group identity. Many Asian cultures are team-oriented, but not in the way that Westerners think of teams. Individuals in Asia see themselves as part of a greater whole—whether family, corporation, or community—and place tremendous value on har-

mony within their group. They often subordinate their own desires to the group's interests, accepting their place in its hierarchy.

Western culture, by contrast, is organized around the individual. We see ourselves as self-contained units; our destiny is to express ourselves, to follow our bliss, to be free of undue restraint, to achieve the one thing that we, and we alone, were brought into this world to do. We may be gregarious, but we don't submit to group will, or at least we don't like to think we do. We love and respect our parents, but bridle at notions like filial piety, with their implications of subordination and restraint. When we get together with others, we do so as self-contained units having fun with, competing with, standing out from, jockeying for position with, and, yes, loving, other self-contained units. Even the Western God is assertive, vocal, and dominant; his son Jesus is kind and tender, but also a charismatic, crowd-pleasing man of influence (*Jesus Christ Superstar*).

It makes sense, then, that Westerners value boldness and verbal skill, traits that promote individuality, while Asians prize quiet, humility, and sensitivity, which foster group cohesion. If you live in a collective, then things will go a lot more smoothly if you behave with restraint, even submission.

This preference was vividly demonstrated in a recent fMRI study in which researchers showed seventeen Americans and seventeen Japanese pictures of men in dominance poses (arms crossed, muscles bulging, legs planted squarely on the ground) and subordinate positions (shoulders bent, hands interlocked protectively over groin, legs squeezed together tight). They found that the dominant pictures activated pleasure centers in the American brains, while the submissive pictures did the same for the Japanese.

From a Western perspective, it can be hard to see what's so attractive about submitting to the will of others. But what looks to a Westerner like subordination can seem like basic politeness to many Asians. Don Chen, the Chinese-American Harvard Business School student you met in chapter 2, told me about the time he shared an apartment with a group of Asian friends plus his close Caucasian friend, a gentle, easygoing guy Don felt would fit right in.

Conflicts arose when the Caucasian friend noticed dishes piling up in the sink and asked his Asian roommates to do their fair share of

the washing up. It wasn't an unreasonable complaint, says Don, and his friend thought he phrased his request politely and respectfully. But his Asian roommates saw it differently. To them, he came across as harsh and angry. An Asian in that situation, said Don, would be more careful with his tone of voice. He would phrase his displeasure in the form of a question, not a request or command. Or he might not bring it up at all. It wouldn't be worth upsetting the group over a few dirty dishes.

What looks to Westerners like Asian deference, in other words, is actually a deeply felt concern for the sensibilities of others. As the psychologist Harris Bond observes, "It is only those from an explicit tradition who would label [the Asian] mode of discourse 'self-effacement.' Within this indirect tradition it might be labeled 'relationship honoring.'" And relationship honoring leads to social dynamics that can seem remarkable from a Western perspective.

It's because of relationship honoring, for example, that social anxiety disorder in Japan, known as *taijin kyofusho*, takes the form not of excessive worry about embarrassing oneself, as it does in the United States, but of embarrassing *others*. It's because of relationship-honoring that Tibetan Buddhist monks find inner peace (and off-the-chart happiness levels, as measured in brain scans) by meditating quietly on compassion. And it's because of relationship-honoring that Hiroshima victims apologized to each other for surviving. "Their civility has been well documented but still stings the heart," writes the essayist Lydia Millet. "'I am sorry,' said one of them, bowing, with the skin of his arms peeling off in strips. 'I regret I am still alive while your baby is not.' 'I am sorry,' another said earnestly, with lips swollen to the size of oranges, as he spoke to a child weeping beside her dead mother. 'I am so sorry that I was not taken instead.'"

Though Eastern relationship-honoring is admirable and beautiful, so is Western respect for individual freedom, self-expression, and personal destiny. The point is not that one is superior to the other, but that a profound difference in cultural values has a powerful impact on the personality styles favored by each culture. In the West, we subscribe to the Extrovert Ideal, while in much of Asia (at least before the Westernization of the past several decades), silence is golden. These contrasting outlooks affect the things we say when our roommates' dishes pile up in the sink—and the things we don't say in a university classroom.

Moreover, they tell us that the Extrovert Ideal is not as sacrosanct as we may have thought. So if, deep down, you've been thinking that it's only natural for the bold and sociable to dominate the reserved and sensitive, and that the Extrovert Ideal is innate to humanity, Robert McCrae's personality map suggests a different truth: that each way of being—quiet and talkative, careful and audacious, inhibited and unrestrained—is characteristic of its own mighty civilization.



Ironically, some of the people who have the most trouble holding on to this truth are Asian-American kids from Cupertino. Once they emerge from adolescence and leave the confines of their hometown, they find a world in which loudness and speaking out are the tickets to popularity and financial success. They come to live with a double-consciousness—part Asian and part American—with each side calling the other into question. Mike Wei, the high school senior who told me he'd rather study than socialize, is a perfect example of this ambivalence. When we first met, he was a high school senior, still nestled in the Cupertino cocoon. "Because we put so much emphasis on education," Mike told me then, referring to Asians in general, "socializing is not a big part of our selves."

When I caught up with Mike the following autumn, in his freshman year at Stanford, only a twenty-minute drive from Cupertino but a world away demographically, he seemed unsettled. We met at an outdoor café, where we sat next to a coed group of athletes erupting regularly in laughter. Mike nodded at the athletes, all of whom were white. Caucasians, he said, seem to be "less afraid of other people thinking that what they said was too loud or too stupid." Mike was frustrated by the superficiality of dining-hall conversation, and by the "bullshitting" that often substituted for class participation in freshman seminars. He was spending his free time mostly with other Asians, partly because they had "the same level of outgoingness" he did. The non-Asians tended to make him feel as if he had to "be really hyped up or excited, even though that might not be true to who I am."

"My dorm has four Asians in it, out of fifty kids," he told me. "So I feel more comfortable around them. There's this one guy called Brian, and he's pretty quiet. I can tell he has that Asian quality where you're kind of shy, and I feel comfortable around him for that reason. I feel like I can be myself around him. I don't have to do something just to look cool, whereas around a big group of people that aren't Asian or are just really loud, I feel like I have to play a role."

Mike sounded dismissive of Western communication styles, but he admitted that he sometimes wished he could be noisy and uninhibited himself. "They're more comfortable with their own character," he said of his Caucasian classmates. Asians are "not uncomfortable with who they are, but are uncomfortable with *expressing* who they are. In a group, there's always that pressure to be outgoing. When they don't live up to it, you can see it in their faces."

Mike told me about a freshman icebreaking event he'd participated in, a scavenger hunt in San Francisco that was supposed to encourage students to step out of their comfort zones. Mike was the only Asian assigned to a rowdy group, some of whom streaked naked down a San Francisco street and cross-dressed in a local department store during the hunt. One girl went to a Victoria's Secret display and stripped down to her underwear. As Mike recounted these details, I thought he was going to tell me that his group had been over the top, inappropriate. But he wasn't critical of the other students. He was critical of himself.

"When people do things like that, there's a moment where I feel uncomfortable with it. It shows my own limits. Sometimes I feel like they're better than I am."

Mike was getting similar messages from his professors. A few weeks after the orientation event, his freshman adviser—a professor at Stanford's medical school—invited a group of students to her house. Mike hoped to make a good impression, but he couldn't think of anything to say. The other students seemed to have no problem joking around and asking intelligent questions. "Mike, you were so loud today," the professor teased him when finally he said good-bye. "You just blew me away." He left her house feeling bad about himself. "People who don't talk are seen as weak or lacking," he concluded ruefully.

To be sure, these feelings were not totally new to Mike. He'd experienced glimmers of them back in high school. Cupertino may have an almost Confucian ethic of quiet, study, and relationship-honoring, but it's subject to the mores of the Extrovert Ideal all the same. At the local shopping center on a weekday afternoon, cocky Asian-American teenage guys with spiky haircuts call out to eye-rolling, wise-cracking girls in spaghetti-strap tank tops. On a Saturday morning at the library, some teens study intently in corners, but others congregate at boisterous tables. Few of the Asian-American kids I spoke to in Cupertino wanted to identify themselves with the word *introvert*, even if they effectively described themselves that way. While deeply committed to their parents' values, they seemed to divide the world into "traditional" Asians versus "Asian superstars." The traditionals keep their heads down and get their homework done. The superstars do well academically but also joke around in class, challenge their teachers, and get themselves noticed.

Many students deliberately try to be more outgoing than their parents, Mike told me. "They think their parents are too quiet and they try to overcompensate by being flauntingly outgoing." Some of the parents have started to shift their values too. "Asian parents are starting to see that it doesn't pay to be quiet, so they encourage their kids to take speech and debate," Mike said. "Our speech and debate program was the second largest in California, to give kids exposure to speaking loudly and convincingly."

Still, when I first met Mike in Cupertino, his sense of himself and his values was pretty much intact. He knew that he wasn't one of the Asian superstars—he rated himself a 4 on a popularity scale of 1 to 10—but seemed comfortable in his own skin. "I'd rather hang out with people whose personalities are more genuine," he told me then, "and that tends to lead me toward more quiet people. It's hard to be gleeful when at the same time I'm trying to be wise."

Indeed, Mike was probably lucky to enjoy the Cupertino cocoon for as long as he did. Asian-American kids who grow up in more typical American communities often face the issues that Mike confronted as a Stanford freshman much earlier in their lives. One study comparing European-American and second-generation Chinese-American teens

over a five-year period found that the Chinese-Americans were significantly more introverted than their American peers throughout adolescence—and paid the price with their self-esteem. While introverted Chinese-American twelve-year-olds felt perfectly fine about themselves—presumably because they still measured themselves according to their parents' traditional value systems—by the time they got to be seventeen and had been more exposed to America's Extrovert Ideal, their self-regard had taken a nosedive.



For Asian-American kids, the cost of failing to fit in is social unease. But as they grow up, they may pay the price with their paychecks. The journalist Nicholas Lemann once interviewed a group of Asian-Americans on the subject of meritocracy for his book *The Big Test*. "A sentiment that emerges consistently," he wrote, "is that meritocracy ends on graduation day, and that afterward, Asians start to fall behind because they don't have quite the right cultural style for getting ahead: too passive, not hail-fellow-well-met enough."

I met many professionals in Cupertino who were struggling with this issue. A well-heeled housewife confided that all the husbands in her social circle had recently accepted jobs in China, and were now commuting between Cupertino and Shanghai, partly because their quiet styles prevented them from advancing locally. The American companies "think they can't handle business," she said, "because of presentation. In business, you have to put a lot of nonsense together and present it. My husband always just makes his point and that's the end of it. When you look at big companies, almost none of the top executives are Asians. They hire someone who doesn't know anything about the business, but maybe he can make a good presentation."

A software engineer told me how overlooked he felt at work in comparison to other people, "especially people from European origin, who speak without thinking." In China, he said, "If you're quiet, you're seen as being wise. It's completely different here. Here people like to speak

out. Even if they have an idea, not completely mature yet, people still speak out. If I could be better in communication, my work would be much more recognized. Even though my manager appreciates me, he still doesn't know I have done work so wonderful."

The engineer then confided that he had sought training in American-style extroversion from a Taiwanese-born communications professor named Preston Ni. At Foothill College, just outside Cupertino, Ni conducts daylong seminars called "Communication Success for Foreign-Born Professionals." The class is advertised online through a local group called the Silicon Valley SpeakUp Association, whose mission is to "help foreign-born professionals to succeed in life through enhancement in soft skills." ("Speak you [sic] mind!" reads the organization's home page. "Together everyone achieve [sic] more at SVSpeakup.")

Curious about what speaking one's mind looks like from an Asian perspective, I signed up for the class and, a few Saturday mornings later, found myself sitting at a desk in a starkly modern classroom, the Northern California mountain sun streaming through its plate-glass windows. There were about fifteen students in all, many from Asian countries but some from Eastern Europe and South America, too.

Professor Ni, a friendly-looking man wearing a Western-style suit, a gold-colored tie with a Chinese drawing of a waterfall, and a shy smile, began the class with an overview of American business culture. In the United States, he warned, you need style as well as substance if you want to get ahead. It may not be fair, and it might not be the best way of judging a person's contribution to the bottom line, "but if you don't have charisma you can be the most brilliant person in the world and you'll still be disrespected."

This is different from many other cultures, said Ni. When a Chinese Communist leader makes a speech, he reads it, not even from a teleprompter but from a paper. "If he's the leader, everyone has to listen."

Ni asked for volunteers and brought Raj, a twentysomething Indian software engineer at a Fortune 500 company, to the front of the room. Raj was dressed in the Silicon Valley uniform of casual button-down shirt and chinos, but his body language was defensive. He stood with his arms crossed protectively over his chest, scuffing at the ground with his hiking boots. Earlier that morning, when we'd gone around the room

introducing ourselves, he'd told us, in a tremulous voice from his seat in the back row, that he wanted to learn "how to make more conversation" and "to be more open."

Professor Ni asked Raj to tell the class about his plans for the rest of the weekend.

"I'm going to dinner with a friend," replied Raj, looking fixedly at Ni, his voice barely audible, "and then perhaps tomorrow I'll go hiking."

Professor Ni asked him to try it again.

"I'm going to dinner with a friend," said Raj, "and then, *mumble, mumble, mumble*, I'll go hiking."

"My impression of you," Professor Ni told Raj gently, "is that I can give you a lot of work to do, but I don't have to pay much attention to you. Remember, in Silicon Valley, you can be the smartest, most capable person, but if you can't express yourself aside from showing your work, you'll be underappreciated. Many foreign-born professionals experience this; you're a glorified laborer instead of a leader."

The class nodded sympathetically.

"But there's a way to be yourself," continued Ni, "and to let more of you come out through your voice. Many Asians use only a narrow set of muscles when they speak. So we'll start with breathing."

With that, he directed Raj to lie on his back and vocalize the five American English vowels. "A . . . E . . . U . . . O . . . I . . ." intoned Raj, his voice floating up from the classroom floor. "A . . . E . . . U . . . O . . . I . . . A . . . E . . . U . . . O . . . I . . ."

Finally Professor Ni deemed Raj ready to stand up again.

"Now, what interesting things do you have planned for after class?" he asked, clapping his hands encouragingly.

"Tonight I'm going to a friend's place for dinner, and tomorrow I'm going hiking with another friend." Raj's voice was louder than before, and the class applauded with gusto.

The professor himself is a role model for what can happen when you work at it. After class, I visited him in his office, and he told me how shy he'd been when he first came to the United States—how he put himself in situations, like summer camp and business school, where he could practice acting extroverted until it came more naturally. These days he has a successful consulting practice, with clients that include Yahoo!,

Visa, and Microsoft, teaching some of the same skills he labored to acquire himself.

But when we began talking about Asian concepts of “soft power”—what Ni calls leadership “by water rather than by fire”—I started to see a side of him that was less impressed by Western styles of communication. “In Asian cultures,” Ni said, “there’s often a subtle way to get what you want. It’s not always aggressive, but it can be very determined and very skillful. In the end, much is achieved because of it. Aggressive power beats you up; soft power wins you over.”

I asked the professor for real-life examples of soft power, and his eyes shone as he told me of clients whose strength lay in their ideas and heart. Many of these people were organizers of employee groups—women’s groups, diversity groups—who had managed to rally people to their cause through conviction rather than dynamism. He also talked about groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving—clusters of people who change lives through the power not of their charisma but of their caring. Their communication skills are sufficient to convey their message, but their real strength comes from substance.

“In the long run,” said Ni, “if the idea is good, people shift. If the cause is just and you put heart into it, it’s almost a universal law: you will attract people who want to share your cause. Soft power is quiet persistence. The people I’m thinking of are very persistent in their day-to-day, person-to-person interactions. Eventually they build up a team.” Soft power, said Ni, was wielded by people we’ve admired throughout history: Mother Teresa, the Buddha, Gandhi.

I was struck when Ni mentioned Gandhi. I had asked almost all the Cupertino high school students I met to name a leader they admired, and many had named Gandhi. What was it about him that inspired them so?



Gandhi was, according to his autobiography, a constitutionally shy and quiet man. As a child, he was afraid of everything: thieves, ghosts, snakes, the dark, and especially other people. He buried himself in books

and ran home from school as soon as it was over, for fear of having to talk to anybody. Even as a young man, when he was elected to his first leadership position as a member of the Executive Committee of the Vegetarian Society, he attended every meeting, but was too shy to speak.

"You talk to me quite all right," one of the members asked him, confused, "but why is it that you never open your lips at a committee meeting? You are a drone." When a political struggle occurred on the committee, Gandhi had firm opinions, but was too scared to voice them. He wrote his thoughts down, intending to read them aloud at a meeting. But in the end he was too cowed even to do that.

Gandhi learned over time to manage his shyness, but he never really overcame it. He couldn't speak extemporaneously; he avoided making speeches whenever possible. Even in his later years, he wrote, "I do not think I could or would even be inclined to keep a meeting of friends engaged in talk."

But with his shyness came his unique brand of strength—a form of restraint best understood by examining little known corners of Gandhi's life story. As a young man he decided to travel to England to study law, against the wishes of the leaders of his Modhi Bania subcaste. Caste members were forbidden to eat meat, and the leaders believed that vegetarianism was impossible in England. But Gandhi had already vowed to his beloved mother to abstain from meat, so he saw no danger in the trip. He said as much to the Sheth, the headman of the community.

"Will you disregard the orders of the caste?" demanded the Sheth.

"I am really helpless," replied Gandhi. "I think the caste should not interfere in the matter."

Boom! He was excommunicated—a judgment that remained in force even when he returned from England several years later with the promise of success that attended a young, English-speaking lawyer. The community was divided over how to handle him. One camp embraced him; the other cast him out. This meant that Gandhi was not allowed even to eat or drink at the homes of fellow subcaste members, including his own sister and his mother- and father-in-law.

Another man, Gandhi knew, would protest for readmission. But he couldn't see the point. He knew that fighting would only generate retaliation. Instead he followed the Sheth's wishes and kept at a dis-

tance, even from his own family. His sister and in-laws were prepared to host him at their homes in secret, but he turned them down.

The result of this compliance? The subcaste not only stopped bothering him, but its members—including those who had excommunicated him—helped in his later political work, without expecting anything in return. They treated him with affection and generosity. “It is my conviction,” Gandhi wrote later, “that all these good things are due to my non-resistance. Had I agitated for being admitted to the caste, had I attempted to divide it into more camps, had I provoked the castemen, they would surely have retaliated, and instead of steering clear of the storm, I should, on arrival from England, have found myself in a whirlpool of agitation.”

This pattern—the decision to accept what another man would challenge—occurred again and again in Gandhi’s life. As a young lawyer in South Africa, he applied for admission to the local bar. The Law Society didn’t want Indian members, and tried to thwart his application by requiring an original copy of a certificate that was on file in the Bombay High Court and therefore inaccessible. Gandhi was enraged; he knew well that the true reason for these barriers was discrimination. But he didn’t let his feelings show. Instead he negotiated patiently, until the Law Society agreed to accept an affidavit from a local dignitary.

The day arrived when he stood to take the oath, at which point the chief justice ordered him to take off his turban. Gandhi saw his true limitations then. He knew that resistance would be justified, but believed in picking his battles, so he took off his headgear. His friends were upset. They said he was weak, that he should have stood up for his beliefs. But Gandhi felt that he had learned “to appreciate the beauty of compromise.”

If I told you these stories without mentioning Gandhi’s name and later achievements, you might view him as a deeply passive man. And in the West, passivity is a transgression. To be “passive,” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means to be “acted upon by an external agency.” It also means to be “submissive.” Gandhi himself ultimately rejected the phrase “passive resistance,” which he associated with weakness, preferring *satyagraha*, the term he coined to mean “firmness in pursuit of truth.”

But as the word *satyagraha* implies, Gandhi’s passivity was not weakness at all. It meant focusing on an ultimate goal and refusing to

divert energy to unnecessary skirmishes along the way. Restraint, Gandhi believed, was one of his greatest assets. And it was born of his shyness:

I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts. A thoughtless word hardly ever escaped my tongue or pen. Experience has taught me that silence is part of the spiritual discipline of a votary of truth. We find so many people impatient to talk. All this talking can hardly be said to be of any benefit to the world. It is so much waste of time. My shyness has been in reality my shield and buckler. It has allowed me to grow. It has helped me in my discernment of truth.



Soft power is not limited to moral exemplars like Mahatma Gandhi. Consider, for example, the much-ballyhooed excellence of Asians in fields like math and science. Professor Ni defines soft power as “quiet persistence,” and this trait lies at the heart of academic excellence as surely as it does in Gandhi’s political triumphs. Quiet persistence requires sustained attention—in effect restraining one’s reactions to external stimuli.

The TIMSS exam (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) is a standardized math and science test given every four years to kids around the world. After each test, researchers slice and dice the results, comparing the performance of students from different countries; Asian countries such as Korea, Singapore, Japan, and Taiwan consistently rank at the top of the list. In 1995, for example, the first year the TIMSS was given, Korea, Singapore, and Japan had the world’s highest average middle-school math scores and were among the top four worldwide in science. In 2007, when researchers measured how many students in a given country reached the Advanced International Benchmark—a kind of superstar status for math students—they found that most of the standouts were clustered in just a few Asian countries. About 40 percent of fourth graders in Singapore and Hong Kong reached or surpassed