

Case study:

A lighthearted view of the dangers of cross-cultural training

The following short story, 'Cultural Delegate', is excerpted from Frank Moorhouse's *Room Service* (Penguin 1987, pp. 15-17).

As a cultural delegate, Blase tried always to read the protocol guides to the sensitivities and customs of other nationalities. Although he knew in his heart that he was a bad cultural delegate he did, at least, worry about protocol.

He knew, for instance, that the Chinese were punctual and took speech-making and banqueting seriously. This pleased Blase, himself no mean banqueter back home and also known as something of a speech-maker. He knew that the Chinese did not dress formally and Blase decided to confine himself to an elegantly-tailored Mao jacket and cap from Buck's of Melbourne.

He knew that, when the Chinese clap you, you are expected to clap them in return. With the Chinese you avoided excessive physical contact and boisterous behaviour. He knew about giving gifts to institutions and not to individuals and that expensive gifts such as automobiles and computers were embarrassing to the Chinese (advice which came as a relief to Blase, who liked to travel 'heavy', but not that heavy).

He knew not to tip and he knew not to give the Chinese nicknames. He knew not to display affection publicly and not to show anger either to other members of the delegation or towards the Chinese. There were to be no punch-ups. He knew there was also to be no public drunkenness and that the Chinese were moralistic about sex. And guests leave banquets ten minutes after the hot towels.

So although he was no good at inspecting things, could not remain attentive and questioning for long periods and had no interest in magnificent scenery, Blase at least knew his protocol.

Consequently, Blase went to his first banquet in his elegant Mao jacket and cap and with a pocketful of cheap kangaroo pins and was devastated when the Chinese turned up in dinner suits. They were also a bit drunk, slapped everyone on the back, threw food at each other, kissed him on the mouth, grabbed his genitals at every occasion and asked not too subtly for gifts, including automobiles and motorbikes.

He was offered sex, and the party did not stop ten minutes after the hot towels, but went on into the early hours. Later they all crept into an army barracks and stole a People's Liberation Army flag.

Next day in the bar of the Jing Jiang Club, recovering from his hangover, Blase, in his food-stained Mao jacket and cap, asked his Guide what had gone wrong. Blase had a profound sense of cultural confusion. The Guide was still drunk and they had shaken off the rest of the delegation, who were wandering lost in the alleys of Shanghai.

At first the Guide wouldn't explain, but after being given a Chinese burn he revealed that the Chinese, too, had been briefed on protocol for handling Australians. The Guide gave Blase a translation.

Australians are easy-going about time and punctuality and consider it over-conscientious to be on time. To be late is to protest against despotic employers.

Australian men like to dress up in dinner suits as a way of aping their former aristocratic rulers. Australians enjoy physical contact and there are hotels in Australian cities where men go to kiss other men and hold hands; likewise women. This is becoming the custom.

Australians like to tip and give gifts as a way of showing their generosity, as a way of rewarding good service and as a way of aiding poor nations.

Australians like to break time-honoured rules and customs as a way of showing their independence from the chains of the past -- for example, climbing to the top of a sacred monument and placing a beer can there, stealing a Chinese flag from an army barracks, diving into ponds and trying to catch century-old goldfish. This is called Larri-kin-ism.

Australians are accustomed to indulging their sexual appetites at every available opportunity, especially while travelling in other countries, which is considered to be a 'holiday

from marriage'. Singsong girls should be found for Australian males and Chinese studs for Australian women.

Australians like to make jokes at each other which is called 'taking the mick-ie'. Australian men sometimes grab each other's genitals as a gesture of comradeship known as Goo-sing.

Australian women like to take off their tops at every opportunity for sunbathing and prefer not to wear bras. But Chinese men should practise the Three Nos laid down by the last People's Congress -- 'No staring, No touching and No funny business'.

Australian language is rich in animal imagery and so they say horsing around, goo-sing, snake in the pocket, no bull-defecation and they like to go on what they call pussy hunts. Australians become angry if they think that a person is bull-defecating.

Australians are artistic people who sometimes build elaborate sculptures from beer bottles or beer cans while drinking. They will sometimes take the Guide's hat and throw it around, one to the other, but this must be seen as a need to release excess energy from a high protein diet and short working week.

Australian men are also forever fly-checking. This is not a sexual gesture but an old horse-riding custom to reassure themselves that no injury has befallen that part.

Australian men may be observed smelling bicycle seats because, as a nation of horsemen (see film, 'Man From Snowy River'), the smell of the bicycle seat reminds them of the saddle of the horse back home which they miss.

Souveniring: Australians come from a penal colony and, as a remembrance of their ancestors, still like to practise 'symbolic theft' as a gesture against the rich. They will often take things they do not need from a public place; for example you may see them trying to take a park bench home. Pay no heed.

When doing business with Australians, Chinese should beware of saying, 'I'll toss you double or nothing'.

Beware of such Australian expressions as 'Let's talk about it over lunch' (they will try to get you drunk), 'Let's leave the details to the accountants', 'Of course there is a little something in it for you', 'We don't want the taxman getting his hungry little hands on any of it', 'I don't think there's any need to put that in writing', 'One for you, one for me and one for the family trust', 'I have a little off-shore company that handles those problems', 'Something's come a little unstuck but it's all under control -- my MD does what I tell him', 'We're in a grey area but that's my reading of the investment guidelines -- let's give it a punt', and 'We'll handle the documentation at our end if you like'.

Never do business with an Australian who says 'no worries' a lot.

That the Chinese knew so much about the Australian soul plunged Blase into deep gloom and he and the Guide stayed in the Jing Jiang Club for two days playing billiards with the New Zealand Female Steeple-Jumping Delegation.