

Mia, a Chinese American private wealth manager for a major investment firm, strides into her office each morning at 5:30 a.m. Conservatively and impeccably dressed, she pushes through thick mahogany doors with a steel face and is unsurprised when she is met with the stony countenances of her colleagues. She has been dubbed the “dragon lady,” not just because she is peremptory in her manners, but also because she is Asian and successful.

The first Asian female to earn such an appellation was the Empress Dowager XiCi of the Manchu Qing Dynasty whose notorious rise to power from concubine to ruler over China (1861-1908) had been portrayed by the West as ruthless and

and pleasure-doting. To the disadvantage of many Asian American women in male-dominated industries such as law, finance and technology, fighting against such an image has created inner conflicts of not wanting to meet the pressures and expectations of such a stereotype, and yet being somewhat predisposed to deferential behavior that is inherently cultural.

Alice, a Filipina American marketing assistant turned executive, initially felt more comfortable behaving deferentially in the office. “I didn’t know that I could say ‘no’ to my boss and coworkers because I was brought up to believe that respect is expressed through obedience. Eventually, I became so overworked and stressed out,

assumptions about what was expected of her. Still, even with her new title as director of marketing, Alice doesn’t have any regrets. “It’s hard to say if I would have come this far had I not been so willing in the beginning. On the one hand, I made a lot of allies in the process, but the more boundaries I created for myself, the more focused I became. I couldn’t be a geisha in this role. I wouldn’t get anything finished!”

For some multinational firms, hiring managers find both personality types to be useful depending on the position. James, a Korean-born American executive, runs a rapidly-growing software firm in northern Virginia that predominantly hires Korean Americans. “Our executive

When Dragon Lady and Geisha Girl Collide

Grappling with the two big stereotypes career women face today.

STORY **Meme Rhee**

cunning. While more recent historical research attempts to correct the political slander inflicted by her contemporary Western adversaries, the term “dragon lady” remains a loaded eponym that suggests qualities of any Asian female as brutally opportunistic and heartless. In reality, however, the term has been unfairly used against the Asian American woman who elects not to be as docile as the West idealizes her to be.

Such an idealization can be found in the dragon lady’s counterpart, the “geisha,” who has been romantically personified as someone submissive, obedient and biddable. Originating from Japan, geishas historically functioned as skilled professional entertainers and courtesans. The portrayal of geishas in bestsellers turned miniseries/films like *Shogun* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*, have sensationalized the image of the Asian female as dutiful

but for a while I managed to keep the most beaming f—ed up smile on my face. To have revealed how I was really feeling would have been a sign of weakness.”

Through consistent high performance reviews, raises and bonuses, Alice did not think to examine the role she had taken on. When her company experienced a recession that capped her salary, however, Alice experienced an epiphany. “The financial rewards had become a convenient exchange that shielded me from having to look at the self-sacrificing geisha I had become. But suddenly, without the bonus, I was forced to examine the value of my time and it was certainly worth more than what I was being compensated.”

Soon enough, Alice began to tentatively say no to people with an apology. Noticing how well people handled her refusals, she became increasingly more confident and dispelled some of her

assistants *liaise* quite a bit with the executives from abroad, and it’s important that we position culturally sensitive people. You can call them ‘geisha-like’ because they adhere to what is socially appropriate to their culture. They greet with a bow, they rarely offer dissenting opinions and they go out of their way to be service oriented.” James sheepishly admits that he also hires for himself executive assistants who exhibit a more servile attitude. “I work really hard, harder than most of my employees, so yeah, I want someone to bring me coffee each morning with a smile and without me having to ask. And I would not get that from anyone white, black or male,” he declares matter-of-factly. “But I need both personality types in my office. Our sales staff has to meet very high monthly quotas and those jobs go to the so-called dragon ladies. My very sweet and demure

assistant would not survive out in the field, and the dragon ladies would tell me exactly where I should shove my coffee.”

While James might be accused of perpetuating a chauvinistic mindset, one Korean-born American lawyer finds that women can buy into this consciousness as well. Joanne, an entertainment lawyer in Manhattan, grumbles about having to kowtow to her executive assistant in ways that her team of male colleagues does not have to. “I was originally dubbed dragon lady because of the impression I would leave through my perfunctory email correspondence which lacked all the social niceties of ‘would you be so kind to ...’ or ‘I would appreciate if you ...’ Now I make sure to address the (mostly female) assistants in the firm with extra politeness. I have to really work at losing the dragon lady image. If I ask my assistant to make copies or type something for me, her facial expression will often reveal that she is being inconvenienced. If my male colleague asks her to do the same thing and with less courtesy, she doesn’t seem to have a problem whatsoever! I guess the assumption is that he’s supposed to be helpless and I’m expected to be self-reliant. It’s astounding. On Secretary’s Day, I made sure to wine and dine her to the nines so I wouldn’t be regarded as an ingrate.”

While Joanne struggles to lose the dragon lady image, Mia works hard to amplify this image. “I don’t think I would have survived in my early years of investment banking had I not presented myself as being aggressive and firm,” says Mia. “Being Asian, female and petite invited a lot of unwanted gestures like patting on the head. I mean really, how much of your wealth would you be inclined to entrust to someone whose head you can pat? A dollar bill maybe? Certainly not the millions I manage. I let my colleagues and clients

know early on that that sh—t would not fly with me. I wasn’t trying to be bitchy; I was only demanding the respect that was automatically offered to my male counterparts.”

In her eighth year, Mia now manages combined assets totaling over \$150 million. “I can relax a little now. I’m a little more social, friendlier and less guarded. But reputations die hard and I’m still known to be ...” — she pauses a moment with her lips pursed as if she is about to say the “b” word, but she stops herself and chooses another. “Tough,” she finishes thoughtfully.

The discomfort many Asian American women experience in being stereotyped often forces them to confront and identify personal values that may conflict with both cultural and stereotypical expectations. As such, the struggle becomes not only about learning how to address the dragon lady/geisha label when it is used against them, but also about how to work the persona in their favor. The ability for many Asian American women to adapt to, and even adopt, such projections may stem from an outcome-oriented consciousness that strives to preserve harmony as well as to produce results. Managing authentic layers of ethnicity with romanticized projections require a high degree of self-awareness, skill and resilience. Some strategies to keep in mind:

1. Be aware of your reputation. Each of us is mostly responsible for the reputation we build and earn in our office environment. Take an honest inventory of what people might say about you (hardworking, aggressive, docile, pushover, etc.). Since it’s sometimes too difficult to be objective with oneself, ask a few close colleagues. Do you have the reputation you want? If not, what actions do you need to take to improve it?

2. Identify your values. Office politics

can play a huge role in how you present yourself. Often we might find ourselves behaving in ways that work to our advantage by picking up on the praises, rewards and acceptance we experience. Is the behavior consistent with your values? For example, if you are hardworking and work a lot of overtime, but feel resentful that you’re not being appropriately compensated, explore the reasons why you do it.

3. Ascertain the verity of your assumptions. Are you afraid of saying no because you think your job is on the line? Do you have expectations of a promotion because you work extra hours each week? Investigate historical and current office politics, or better yet, ask your supervisor for guidance.

4. Act conscientiously. If you subscribe to the dragon lady or geisha persona, it’s important to know why. The dragon lady’s communication is often overt and explicit, whereas the geisha’s communiqué is covert and implicit. Are you being “geisha-like” as an underhanded way of getting what you want (promotion, raise, etc.)? If taking on the geisha role is compensatory for something else, then be clear about your goal. By acting conscientiously, you will gain more clarity about your intentions and perhaps even avoid disappointment and resentment should you not get the thing you want.

5. Be mindful of coupling personality projections. We might often find that we either buy into or become victims of personality attributes that get coupled together. For example, the dragon lady is often personified as confident and cocky, or the geisha may be regarded as deferential and passive. In reality these specific qualities of each the dragon lady and the geisha are not mutually inclusive. One can be confident and humble; deferential and proactive. ❀



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