

Explanations

(pp. 55 -57, Turning Bricks into Jade - Wang, Brislin, Wang, Williams, and Chao) (skit characters' names substituted for those listed)

1. This is a reasonable answer. Among Chinese students who are classmates, roommates, or close friends, too many "pleases," "thank-yous," and "I'm sorry's" will be interpreted as sarcasm or coldness. In warm, comfortable, close Chinese relationships, these words that Americans rely on to make life cordial are characteristically missing. Susie's attempts to apologize for interrupting Shu-Hsien's study may have seemed too formal for Shu-Hsien. This is only a partial explanation, however. Look for another good alternative.

2. While many Chinese do have a gift for sarcasm, it is unlikely that Shu-Hsien was demonstrating it here. The plaintive tone of her questions did not suggest irony. She was probably more puzzled than irritated that Susie continued interrupting her over these trivial matters rather than just taking what she needed.

3. An unlikely explanation. Chinese students, like those in many Asian countries, work very hard to get into university, either in their own country or abroad. The college entrance examinations are extremely competitive, as are scholarships to study in foreign universities. Even so, there is no special cultural stigma attached to interrupting a roommate who is studying. Individual Chinese students, like American individuals, vary in their ability to concentrate when there are interruptions, noise, or other activity in the room. It is not the interruptions themselves that bothered Shu-Hsien, but their nature. Look for a better explanation.

4. This is the best answer. The Chinese word **jianwai** (consider myself an outsider) describes the situation perfectly. People often realize that they are being excluded from the ingroup if a counterpart is being exceptionally polite to them (Cushner and Brislin 1996). Susie's behavior of continuing to ask permission for small items was interpreted by Shu-Hsien as *jianwai*.

Remember that Susie had noticed that Shu-Hsien sometimes borrowed her things without asking first, though she found Shu-Hsien to be kind and thoughtful otherwise. Susie, like many Americans, has been raised to respect other people's private property and not to take for granted his right to someone else's belongings. Among Chinese, ideas of personal property and one's rights to it differ. There is a greater tendency to take for granted that one's close friends or relatives would want one to use what one needed other than waste time looking for it or money buying it. By asking to use such insignificant items as tape, colored pencils, and scissors, which cost Shu-Hsien virtually nothing to lend, Susie introduced a level of formality into the relationship that made Shu-Hsien uncomfortable. It also might have suggested to Shu-Hsien that Susie, for some reason, thought she was stingy.

American students are frequently very annoyed by the seemingly cavalier attitude their Chinese roommates and friends take toward their possessions, particularly relatively delicate or expensive items like CD players, tennis racquets, or musical instruments. Unknowingly, however, the Americans often invite such "invasions of their property" by insisting on what appears to the Chinese to be an extremely casual relationship. By rushing the use of first names and nicknames, treating new friends to dinner in a restaurant, and so on, Americans establish an intimacy that implies, to the Chinese, a set of rights and obligations that the American does not understand or share. In China, friendships generally form more slowly than they do between

North Americans, but once formed, the bond is strong (Gao and Ting-Toomey 1998; Y. Zhu 1999). Friends are not only people you know well and spend time with but also people you can trust and with whom you share your wealth and your intimate thoughts. The difference in ground rules for what constitutes a comfortably familiar yet respectful distance consistently causes problems between Chinese and American roommates.