

QUIET IS A SUPERPOWER: THE SECRET STRENGTHS OF INTROVERTS IN THE WORKPLACE

安靜是種超能力：
寫給內向者的職場進擊指南，
話不多，但大家都會聽你說

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Writing from personal experience, the high-flying non-profit executive Jill Chang describes the incredible potential of the introverted personality in work and life, and offers practical methods for realizing that potential – in ourselves or in others – to its fullest.

It is all too common for us to describe people as either introverts or extroverts, and then to make assumptions about their character based on those broad categories. Moreover, many of the traits we associate with introverts – a solitary nature, poor communication skills, et cetera – are considered disadvantages in socialized environments like the workplace. Jill Chang begs to differ.



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Writing from personal experience, high-flying non-profit executive and former sports agent Jill Chang describes the incredible potentialities of the introverted personality in work and in life, and offers practical methods for better understanding and realizing those potentialities to their fullest extent. Instead of expecting quiet individuals to learn to become social butterflies, we should understand how their personality traits make them valuable. Focus, listening skills, and the ability to inspire trust are only a few such qualities that an introverted person might easily cultivate.

After graduate school, Jill Chang entered the world of sports management, which was then entirely dominated by men. She proved that introversion doesn't in any way equate to a lack of ambition; this book is her way of reminding both introverts and non-introverts of that crucial fact. For introverted readers, it offers tools to develop their own unique skills and cement their self-worth; for non-introverts, it breaks down stereotypes and provides helpful guidelines for building productive relationships with introverted colleagues and friends.

Jill Chang 張靜仁

Jill Chang is the Asia Pacific Network Manager for the international non-profit Give2Asia. She has found success in high-level managerial positions in marketing, sports agency, and international business. A true believer of the mantra that "success is an inside job", she identifies as a full-on introvert. She was featured in Taiwan's 40 Under 40 for Girls in Tech.

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By Jill Chang

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

1. The Hard Life of an Introverted Nine-to-Fivers

San Francisco. The afternoon California sun slants through the large glass windows of a beautiful teahouse beside the art museum.

Today, the teahouse has been booked for an event, and the staff and servers rush around preparing for their guests. Outside is a meticulously cultivated park where flowers bloom in riots of color and pigeons perch leisurely beside a waterfall. People leaving jobs in the business district walk by, chatting with one another, discussing which bar to check out. Yet there in the teahouse, Jill has a frown on her face.

Jill manages a multinational team, but her natural shyness and anxiety make her dislike noisy environments, and she dreads being the center of attention. To everyone around her, she's a success. She was one of only thirty people selected from around the world to participate in a public welfare leadership program at Harvard, but she barely made a handful of friends there. When group discussions stretched past 10 p.m., she would melt like a candle and be desperate to hurry back to her room to rest. The public speech she had to give on the last day of the program cost her a full night's sleep.

Today, she faces a similar situation, but with even bigger stakes. Jill is representing her country in a forum in which she has to give a speech to her fellow participants, major investors and trustees in a competition for resources. Jill is so nervous she's slept only three hours over the last four days. Now she's running on adrenalin, jittery as a gazelle about to bolt. As the audience arrives one by one and the other speakers greet them and chat, Jill wishes she could hide behind the stage or in the bathroom and reappear only when the event gets started. She convinces herself to stay where she is, but she feels completely out of sorts.

The investors and participants chat in small groups. They are well-dressed and confident, and they speak eloquently and knowledgeably, often with a hint of humor. Jill has already memorized their names and backgrounds, but her own psychological drama continues: *Why am I here? What am I doing here with them? I'm such an introvert that even talking makes me nervous,*

whereas they all command such respect. Everybody will know I'm a fake in no time. Jill watches one of the other speakers and can't help but secretly speculate: *If I were one of the big shots, I'd want to talk with her. She's so elegant and such a good conversationalist. Her clothes and hair and makeup are all perfect. I want to be just like her! God, what am I doing here?* She decides to just try to make it through today, and then decline any event like this in the future. Then she laughs a little at herself: *You say that to yourself at least sixty times a year.*

Introspecting, Jill knows she is one of the more experienced speakers, and although she's an introvert, she has many other strengths. She prepares her speeches well in advance and practices incessantly. She is a natural listener, and everyone likes to interact with people who demonstrate a genuine interest in what they're saying. Moreover, she has a pleasant speaking voice, and even when she talks forcefully, her listeners never feel she's being too harsh. Many people have told her that they like to listen to her speak.

With that thought, Jill stops looking for an escape route and begins to prepare herself for battle.

It's just another battle. Jill feels calmer, and as she looks around the dynamic scene, she reminds herself: *Don't waste your energy or go on the offensive. It isn't time yet.* She makes her way over to her CEO's side, and uses him to block the cannon fire of social interaction until the event is ready to begin.

The program of speeches and roundtables begin. Jill gives it everything she's got and presents all of her carefully collated data to the audience, systematically describing the situation and her specific requirements. The eyes of her audience gradually light up, they lean forward in their chairs, and occasionally nod and smile. Just as her presentation is about to wrap up, a man sitting in the corner with his arms folded raises his hand slowly and asks Jill a question. "I just want to make a direct investment. Why should I go through you?" Faced with this unexpected challenge, Jill's mind goes blank as she frantically wonders how to be just as bold and confrontational as he is, and talk about profit and value, weapons blazing. But in the end, she just smiles and decides to answer in her own way, by telling a story. "Imagine for a moment that you own a restaurant. A customer comes in and orders sweet and sour chicken. But he only wants to pay for the chicken, and not the oil, salt, pepper, vinegar, and sweet peppers, or for the chef's time or rent or electricity to run the restaurant. He doesn't want to pay any of that. Let me ask you, if it were you, what would you do?"

The room erupts in laughter and applause. After she leaves the stage, people surround her and she patiently answers question after question.

When the CEO wraps up, he uses Jill's story to emphasize the value organizations bring to the table.

For three months after the event, Jill receives notes from people who were there and are interested in her expertise, including some who want to introduce Jill to other important clients. After all of it was over, it turned out that her story had been key to the success of the event, and that it was the reason many of the more conservative investors had decided in the end to buy in.

Jill has learned how to use a gentle, understated manner to express herself. Others don't find her too understated, instead saying: "It's exactly the right level of modesty. We don't need show-offs." There's no need to toot her own horn or engage in slick business-speak (and those aren't Jill's talents anyway). Instead, Jill's quiet bearing not only won the investors over, but also earned her company a lot of business and raised her visibility.

It just so happens that Jill is me. I might not dare to ask for change back at a corner coffee shop, but I have no issues in a professional setting. My colleagues even say: "As long as Jill is dealing with the clients and the portfolio, I can relax." Looking back over my career from my earliest setbacks up to today, I find that understanding who I am and how to be a successful introvert has made all the difference. Trust me, learning to be introverted will change your career, just as it changed mine.

2. Gaining Experience Breaking into the Culture of Extroversion

My first job in America was an internship in university sports marketing.

In America, every aspect of university athletics is as big as the professional scene, from its viewer base to event scale, and even the enthusiasm of fans. This might be because relatively little of it involves gambling or money, and instead it is about loyalty to the sport itself and to the excitement of competition, the same characteristics that draw many people in Taiwan to the highly-contested Japanese high school baseball tournaments. In addition, many areas in the U.S. don't have a professional sports team, so people support their local university teams instead. For example, each year during the NCAA basketball season, television ratings and betting numbers indicate that no one is watching the NBA. Even the main sports pages carry stories about college sports. Popular Hollywood movies like *Friday Night Lights*, *Remember the Titans*, and *When the Game Stands Tall*, which movie buffs know well, depict high school games as though they were world-class competitions.

In college, athletic competition becomes even more heated. I attended a Division I school, which not only recruits with sports scholarships, but is also the top choice for national champions and those wanting to do college athletics. The university administration devotes itself to selling its sports, encouraging locals to come watch the games, while also building the reputation of the school. Professional athletics is an even more enormous industry in America. According to a 2018 Forbes survey, the average team value for a professional American football team is around 2.57 billion dollars. Professional MLB baseball teams rake in about 1.64 billion on average – amazing numbers when compared to other industries.

Although sports marketing internship does not garner either course credit or a salary despite being hard, time-consuming work, the internship selection process was even more competitive than many of the interviews I experienced in Taiwan. Beginning a sports marketing internship is the first step to entering the enormous economic side of the sports industry, and as you might imagine, it is intense! Thinking back, it felt like being part of "America's Next Top

Model”, except that I wasn’t competing with a bunch of girls with super thin bodies and perfect faces, but rather with a group of fit, smiling, intimidating men and women.

Are Introverts Unsuitable to the Battlefield?

After undergoing several combative interviews and a series of training sessions, it was only on the day I had my photo taken for my employee badge that I finally relaxed and enjoyed the happiness of a survivor. I had no idea that the first test was yet to come.

After taking the photo, I found myself seated with the others in a spacious room filled with morning sunshine. The director passed around a pile of papers. *We probably just have to fill out some basic information*, I thought to myself, as the atmosphere turned solemn. My colleagues’ faces became ferocious, and soon I knew where the chill had come from. The last question on the page was: “Please indicate your top three sports, and why you should be assigned to them.”

Over the course of the year-long internship, perhaps the most important thing was your choice of sport. The right choice would lead to an impressive C.V. and a bright future, with a chance of being recruited by a professional sports team. Many believed that being assigned to an unpopular sport was a waste of time, and it was better to just go work at Burger King, where at least you could make a little money.

The crucial first battle had begun, and it was clear that some of my colleagues were prepared. They immediately began to write about their experiences working for famous athletic venues, their connections to the sports world, and other strengths. Of course, they didn’t tell me what they had written until afterward. I had to fight through my initial panic before I could begin strategizing, but managed to be assigned to two sports: baseball and soccer. Baseball wasn’t a popular assignment in Minneapolis, where it snowed six months of the year, so there were few takers. Baseball’s popularity in Taiwan also compounded my competitive advantage. As for soccer, since women’s soccer is more popular than men’s, and most marketing is targeted toward women, I had an advantage as a female applicant.

Perhaps you’ve already spotted a key element in my good fortune: the selection was through questionnaires, but not like “American Idol”, in which each hopeful star of tomorrow is called up to the stage one by one. In this battle, I had enough time to consider a strategy that would highlight my strengths, instead of impulsively throwing myself into a competition I was unlikely to win. The fact is that in Western culture, and especially in industries like marketing, introverts do not enjoy an advantage most of the time.

For example, at a packed career expo, it isn’t easy to display your own strengths while crammed into a tiny booth. At that kind of event, only real firebrands can manage to get anyone’s attention! Many businesses will conduct their initial interviews by calling candidates into a room, seating them all in a row as though they’re on a reality TV show, and seeing who can answer questions first. Or they’ll test how interviewees respond when given limited information and time to prepare. In such situations, the interviewer will probably like interviewees who are smiling

and friendly, who speak in a clear voice and answer fairly quickly without long deliberation. Such individuals respond nimbly and engage easily. I know that I can never be like that.

3. Being Introverted and Facing a Language Barrier Makes for a Travesty

America is a classic extroverted society, and the sports industry is even more so. Whether male or female, young or old, everyone breezes along like they've just guzzled a Red Bull. Meetings always feature a bunch of ideas tossed up into space, until the conference room becomes a small universe of comets crashing into one another. I often don't even have time to take cover. I can only pray that no one will "call me out", or try to figure out an excuse not to answer if I am called on. In short, I never dare enter into the discussion or offer up ideas.

In addition to my introversion, I also have to deal with a language barrier. I was born and raised in Taiwan, and when I first arrived in the U.S., my English skills were good enough to pass a test, but not enough to ask directions, as Taiwanese students say. I had no problem in class because my teachers all spoke slowly, but outside of class, my peers would forget that there was such a thing as a foreigner. Moreover, I was in the Midwest, where the vast majority of people are white, and even black people are few and far between. I was the first Asian many of my classmates and colleagues had ever met. They were nice, but would also assume that my English was just as good as theirs. Of course in terms of its effect, this was a good thing, since I was forced to frantically study English. But in the workplace, it made things difficult.

Once when I was working in sports marketing, our team played two back-to-back games, and the marketing department had to stay onsite for an entire day. After a while we all got hungry, but had gotten sick of eating the food for the VIP suites, so a few of us decided to order a pizza. I don't know if anyone had ever ordered food to be delivered to the stadium (at least, I never had); thinking back now, it seems we were asking for trouble. The stadium held 40,000 people and had eight separate entrances. Even those who knew the stadium quite well wouldn't necessarily be able to find the right place! Eventually task was given to a foreigner who had drawn the short straw – me. This was the beginning of the travesty.

As an introvert, I hate making phone calls, especially the sort that require quick decision-making, like for ordering food. If I order a pizza myself, I do it through a website. That way, I don't have to struggle to speak English to a real person, and I also have time to consider exactly what I want to order and what the best deal is. Yet smartphones weren't ubiquitous in those days, so I could only pull out my cell phone under the eager eyes of my colleagues and nervously dial the number for takeout.

"Hello, what can I get for you?" When I heard the heavy Indian accent on the other end of the line, I froze. Where had an Indian person come from in this vast white expanse? More importantly, I could barely understand a word he said! I had prepared to ask if they delivered to the stadium; if they didn't, I would be off the hook and could avoid the five hundred extra steps.

"I'm at the Metrodome, do you deliver there?"

“Where is the Metrodome? Can you give me an address?” The person on the other end responded quickly and enthusiastically.

The stadium was a 40,000-person venue in the middle of downtown, perhaps the most conspicuous landmark in the city, and they needed an address? I realized that something was wrong, and I handed the phone off to a colleague. My colleague explained for a moment, then hung up the phone: “We’d better just eat the VIP food. He doesn’t know where the Metrodome is!” Fortunately, none of it was my fault.

I’ve been in countless such situations in which my adrenalin starts pumping because of language issues and my introversion. It even happened when I ran into classmates crossing the street near campus – I just wanted to go invisible. The person surely greet me, and I’d have to answer the casual hello in the time it took for us to brush past each other. Over time, I’ve come to understand that many introverts are the same as I am, and the reason is that we use our brains in a different way.

The Secret Lives of Introverts: Inside Our Hidden World, written by the psychologist Jenn Gremann, makes two points about this. First, introverts tend to be deep thinkers, and will choose their words slowly before they speak. Second, introverts like to use their long-term memory, the memories of which are relatively indirect and require different linkages. Accessing long-term memory takes more time and involves more complex mental processes.

Imagine you are asked about a memory of kindergarten. An introvert might first see a pair of tennis shoes, before she remembers spilling a glass of milk on her shoes on the first day of kindergarten or anything else from that time. The nerve conduction mechanisms in an introvert’s brain are not designed for a quick reaction time, and when you add in the extra steps of translating from a foreign language and dealing with information about an unfamiliar environment, an introvert’s brain will often feel overworked.

Introverts Are Not Inferior

Working in American sports marketing, I saw my own failings very clearly, and even felt frustrated by own awkward personality. I always seemed to be a beat behind everyone else, and I didn’t think anyone would want to be my friend.

But looking back, I realize that everyone has to face difficulties and challenges, and becoming extroverted is by no means a panacea. In fact, introverts are far from powerless. We just need to find ways to develop our own latent capabilities. Being in an extroverted environment is not necessarily a bad thing; if one finds the right way to go about it, one can live and compete successfully.

Taking More Time and Effort to Be Seen

Confrontational, competitive jobs; overly excitable colleagues only out to win; fields that base success and failure on numbers alone – nearly all introverts will encounter some kind of hell in their place of work. When I worked in sports marketing, I suffered many different such attacks.

It must sound like a terribly savage beginning, but in the end, I was very happy with the outcome. I encountered my first professional hell when I was twenty-six years old instead of forty-six. In my twenties, I still had a lot of time and energy to slowly climb my way out of it. I worked very hard on my English, and was always prepared with three common ways of answering the question, “How are you doing today?” I forced myself to have meals with my American colleagues and classmates and meet with people one-on-one to get to know the sports clubs personnel and to form relationships. When I met one of my classmates with whom I had started my internship, and who had gone on to work in the media, she exclaimed: “Wow, your English has gotten so much better. It’s like night and day!”

After that, I realized my goal of working for the baseball team, and even had frequent opportunities to talk with the director of the sports club, who most people couldn’t get in to see. I went from being afraid to enter the stadium to knowing even the sports commentators and announcers. On the day I received my master’s degree, the electronic scoreboard at Target Field ran the message, “Congratulations, Jill Chang, on receiving your master’s degree in Sports Management.” When the announcer said, “Congratulations to our intern Jill for receiving her Master’s in sports management!” the whole crowd clapped for me. Everywhere I went, from the media box to the VIP seats and the stands, someone congratulated me, as if I done something truly remarkable. I didn’t know any of them, but they knew that during the whole season, the Taiwanese girl had been the first to arrive and the last to leave, working hard to make the game more fun.

It’s just like the American adage: What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. Although my introverted spirit had been bruised and battered, the scars were all the marks of effort, as well as my ticket to further opportunities. I had found strategies that worked, and never gave up. I might have been an introvert, but I can still find the limelight!