

The Human Factor

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Su Lin Chao emerged from her morning mindfulness practice with a smile on her face. She prepared a pot of Jasmine tea taking care to steep it for just the right time, and activated the work terminal by quoting her favorite line of poetry. The moment she faced the screen, she was assaulted by a stream of data that — though noiseless — shattered the serenity of the morning. Su Lin identified the data as results of job applications at SunTech, the firm she worked for. It wasn't usually her task to review evaluation data; she was one of SunTech's senior programmers and specialized in algorithms that translated real life data into meaningful numeric correlations. The only reason for the company to feed the read-out to her screen would be a malfunction of ApSel, the program that generated the data, the program Su Lin had designed. She immediately initiated numerous tests and examined the outcomes. She didn't detect so much as a glitch, let alone a malfunction. With relief and satisfaction, Su Lin picked up her cup of tea.

An unobtrusive chime signaled an incoming call and Peggy Mei's image filled the screen. Su Lin greeted her superior with a polite bow that went unnoticed as Peggy Mei had started to talk immediately.

"Su Lin," she said, "I need you to look at the data. SunTech has placed absolute trust in your program. We have, as you're well aware, eliminated all other selection methods. And this has put us in a difficult situation."

Su Lin had never seen Peggy Mei in such a state of agitation. The older woman was as immaculately dressed as usual and her movements were outwardly calm, but there was a twitch to the corner of her mouth and her gaze did not stay on Su Lin's face but drifted upward, to the right. Su Lin suppressed the urge to wipe at her forehead. She held up her palms in a calming gesture and said, "ApSel is fully operational. I've run a number of tests to confirm that in all cases applicants most suited to both the job and work environment have been selected."

"I am not criticizing your program. Since ApSel has been installed, we've had virtually no problems with our staff. And the business runs smoothly. But we've come under scrutiny. Of our 324 employees, only 59 are men. Ming Yu, one of our senior executives is going into retirement and as a result, the majority of the men working for us here in Shanghai are hired to do menial jobs. We have prided ourselves to be an equal opportunity employer and therefore we must hire a man for the junior management position."

"That is going to be difficult," Su Lin replied, "Men just don't have the necessary qualifications. Their aptitude for multitasking is below the minimum level required for management. You can't trick ApSel with a good story. The program is foolproof."

"Yes, that is why we are putting you in charge of the hiring. It is your program, if anyone is able

to find a loophole, it is you. You're to report immediately to your old office on the 70th floor. "

Her tone of voice allowed no dissent and Su Lin bowed, assuming that the conversation was over. But Peggy Mei, still staring at a spot above Su Lin's left eye, added, "Do not take this lightly. ApSel has been one of our strongest products. Our company's success has been evidence to ApSel's effectiveness and we can't be seen to be making exceptions by hiring someone not selected by the program. We have to proceed carefully."

On this note, Peggy Mei's image disappeared. Su Lin looked at her cup of Jasmine tea with regret. At the thought of having to dress in office attire and face the throng of commuters heading downtown, her good mood had evaporated.



The commute wasn't terrible. Shanghai's Rapid Transit system had been designed and built for a city with more than twice the population still living in the area. It was fast and efficient and Su Lin could be downtown in 21.56 minutes. But she would have liked to solve the problem at home — without distractions. She preferred the elegant simplicity of the world of numbers to the company of people. Numbers one could understand and work with, people, well, people had always been a puzzle to Su Lin. And although she normally loved puzzles, she preferred the puzzles she had a hope of solving.

Whenever Su Lin stepped outside her carefully organized and tidy space, she sought the comfort of numbers. She subtracted the seconds spent on the RT from the total travel time, updating the tally in regular intervals. She counted passengers and estimated daily, weekly, yearly commuter numbers based on the average number of people on the train. There were only a dozen passengers waiting for the train this morning and three of them followed her into an empty, clean compartment. Su Lin remembered boarding the train as a child and holding on tightly to her mother's hand in fear of getting lost in the crowd. But the number of commuters had dwindled along with the population. Su Lin could have easily rented a comfortable, even spacious, apartment downtown, but she preferred to live in Nan Shi where pockets of rare old buildings formed narrow streets. And where she could still buy fresh produce from street vendors and walk to the Temple of the Town God to light a stick of incense.

With nothing to count, Su Lin sat back on the cushioned bench on the subway speeding towards the center core of Shanghai and pondered the implications of Peggy Mei's message as well as her own willingness to comply. *Why, she thought, do I rush into the office to fix a program that functions perfectly? Why don't I just tell management to update SunTech's policies?* Su Lin realized that the root of these thoughts lay in her reluctance to go into the office. In her opinion, she had more than earned her right to be left in peace and work from home. Her programs were flawless. And ApSel was one of the best. For a moment, Su Lin was tempted to turn back and say she wouldn't do it. The program was aimed to select the person suited best for the job — gender shouldn't come into the equation.



"Ni hao, ni hao," Ellen Leu beamed at Su Lin. "It is so good to see you. I hope everything is

alright here?" It was clear that Ellen had hurriedly tidied up the office they used to share. The two women had been hired at the same time and Ellen had gently nudged Su Lin into a deep personal friendship and encouraged various social interactions that led to a level of comfort in social situations that Su Lin had not experienced before. But then Ellen had married and given birth to a healthy and active baby boy. When she returned from the short maternity leave (her husband stayed home and took care of the baby as was usual in urban areas), Su Lin had been promoted and worked from home. And between juggling an office job and spending time with her family, Ellen had been too busy to continue coaxing her friend into socializing on a regular basis.

Ellen pushed her too-big glasses up the bridge of her nose in a familiar gesture that brought on a rush of affection in Su Lin.

"Hello Ellen. It is good to see you too. You are looking great. How is your little boy?"

Ellen's smile grew even wider, "He is growing very fast and he started to walk. You have to come and see us again. When all this is sorted out." Ellen gestured to the screen. "The interviews are scheduled for this afternoon."

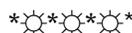
"Interviews?"

"Didn't Peggy Mei tell you? There are two applicants for the management position. Two men." Ellen noticed Su Lin's shocked expression and added, "It's going to be fine. All you have to do is select one of them. Then you can get back to your cave."

Su Lin managed a small smile as Ellen gathered up a stack of files and left. Maybe Ellen was right. She would talk to the applicants with a highest scores, tell them what was important and let them re-enter the ApSel data. With a bit of coaching, surely one of them could be hired.



Su Lin activated the screen and keyed in her security code. To get a broader sense, she compared the results of all recent ApSel process outcomes. For a maintenance job, a couple of men had made the top of the list and both had been hired. For a programming position, a male applicant had made it as far as number 8, but only number 1 had been hired. For the current management position, two men had made it to 11 and 13 on the list. Su Lin looked closely at the data of the two applicants to see if there were obvious weak points that could be eliminated by preparation, but the score was composed of hundreds of criteria. It wasn't a big gap in one area that put the men behind — it was half a point here, a quarter there, an even smaller fraction in another area. There was no easy fix to components like expertise, knowledge, aptitude, temperament, ability to work with a team and character traits. As Su Lin pored over the results, she became more and more frustrated. Why should she be held responsible for the shortcomings of the two men? She also realized that by hiring one of them, she would disregard the 10 women ApSel had deemed more suited to the job. But that couldn't be helped. Su Lin consoled herself that they were, as women, more resourceful and would likely find other work.



Su Lin was still reviewing the data when a man stepped into her office. Mr. Yu was a familiar face at SunTech. He had been on the hiring committee when Su Lin had filled out her application a few years back. And he didn't seem to have changed much in the intervening time; his hair was still the same shade of silver, his face was youthful, his bearing erect. Su Lin stood and bowed.

"You have trouble replacing me, I understand," Mr. Yu said. "I have come to offer my assistance and maybe a bite of lunch?"

Su Lin nodded her consent, even though she would have preferred to continue her work. But one didn't turn down a lunch offer from one of the founders of SunTech, especially when the food was going to be superb.



Mr. Yu guided Su Lin to a small table at the back of Ho Hong's Seafood Palace. The lunch hours when dim sum was served were nearly over, but the selection was still excellent. Su Lin had to force herself to pay attention to Mr. Yu's conversation while doing the stream of delicacies in front of her the honor they deserved. Luckily, Mr. Yu rarely required more of a reply than the occasional nod or other small gesture of acknowledgement.

"You might think that it is outdated to have a clause like 'equal opportunity employer' in our policies," he began in his pleasant and measured voice. "but it is there for a reason. As you know, until well into the 21st century, it was the women who were at a disadvantage. They were deemed less reliant because they would go off and have babies or care for elderly relatives. They even got paid less than male workers."

Mr. Yu popped a rice-dumpling filled with shrimp into his mouth. He chewed it carefully before swallowing.

"Before the Girl Effect took hold in China, and globally of course, the conditions for the genders were reversed. That is hard to believe today, isn't it?"

Mr. Yu selected another one of the same type of dumplings and ate it, before he continued.

"I am not one of those bitter old men who remember the past with nostalgia. For one thing, I was very young in those days when men held almost all positions of power. And I certainly don't miss the wars and conflicts that went hand in hand with that arrangement. No, the Girl Effect has done our world a lot of good. We've never had such an extended period of peace and prosperity. Even the environment seems to be recovering. Of course, there is a price to pay for all this. And who is paying it? It is our young men, in my opinion. I think it is important for them to re-discover a certain pride in their gender. Do you have a husband?"

Su Lin shook her head.

"A brother?"

Again she answered in the negative.

“Well, I have two grandsons. One of them has found work in an office, the other one is content to stay home with his family. They have no further ambitions and I am sad to see them like this. They are good boys but they seem to be of a lost and confused generation. I think they simply haven’t found their place in our new society.”

Su Lin took a sip of the excellent Jasmine tea and thought about the list of male employees at SunTech she had reviewed this morning: the janitors, the handymen, the messengers and the secretaries. Would she be happy with such a place in society?

When Su Lin set down her cup, she found Mr. Yu looking at her.

“I’ll do my best,” was all she could say.

Mr. Yu said, “I was going to help and it looks like I have confused you with my ramblings.”

“Oh no,” Su Lin said. “It has been most interesting to hear your thoughts.”

“Polite as always,” Mr. Yu remarked. “SunTech didn’t have ApSel when we hired you. But I knew right away what an asset you were going to be to a company like ours.”

He smiled and called for the bill. Mr. Yu insisted in walking Su Lin back to her office and told her that he was available to talk any time if she needed his advice.



“Mr. Liang Wei, please.” Su Lin called and a heavysset young man entered her office. He bobbed his head and managed a small, scared smile. Unsure of whether to offer his hand or sit down, he just stood there, looking awkward and out of place. Finally he gave a small bow — a gesture Su Lin recognized — a gesture she would have, and had, performed in similar situations. But she hoped to have pulled it off more gracefully than Mr. Wei.

“You have been briefed?” She asked.

“Yes,” he answered simply.

Su Lin went through a list of carefully selected questions. Most of them had already been covered when Mr. Wei completed his ApSel evaluation. If the questions were uninspired, the answers were predictable. Pretending to scribble notes, Su Lin frantically cast her mind for a new approach when she saw Mr. Wei’s eyes shift to look over her shoulder at the screen behind her where her screen saver, still set from the days before her promotion, displayed traditional Chinese calligraphy. Su Lin’s patience was wearing thin. This young man was overweight and had limited social skills. He had applied for a management position and now he couldn’t even stay focused for the length of the interview. She stopped scribbling, turned around and spoke a line of poetry to de-activate the screen.

“Must hop ten times.”

“To get a bite of grain.” The hapless young man completed the verse without missing a beat.

When Su Lin turned to face him, he was smiling.

“This is one of my favourites of Chuang Tzu’s poems.” Mr. Wei said. “It is quite odd, don’t you think, that he would link a one-footed man with a marsh pheasant?”

“Maybe he observed a one-footed man hopping to get somewhere.” Su Lin found herself replying. “The thing that puzzles me more is his reference to politics.”

Discussing poetry, Mr. Wei had lost his shyness. They exchanged opinions on verses and interpretations and it took Su Lin by surprise when the allotted time was up. Mr. Wei was on his way to the door when he suddenly turned and told her, “I’ve got a beautifully illustrated early edition of Chuang Tzu’s collected works I would like to show you. May I call you?”

Su Lin couldn’t help blushing. She mumbled, “I’d love to see it. Yes.”

And regardless of the outcome of his job interview, Mr. Wei left with a radiant smile on his chubby face.



Su Lin barely had time so to compose herself when the second applicant entered her office.

“Kevin Chen.” He announced and shook her hand. He was small, trim and well-groomed. Su Lin had the impression that he took charge from the moment he stepped into her office. He told her about his skills, his work experience and what type of management he found effective while Su Lin took notes. When Mr. Chen stopped, she randomly selected a question from her list that set him off on another ode to himself. Su Lin was getting tired of hearing about Kevin Chen and interrupted him, “SunTech specializes in cutting-edge technology. What do you know about its products?”

Mr. Chen looked at her and swallowed. He looked deflated. After a long pause, he said, “I can learn. Please. I need to work. I applied to more than a dozen firms since the beginning of the year. I didn’t expect to come to an interview, but I’ll learn. Give me another day, even an hour. Please.”

“Yes.” Su Lin said. “Thank you.”

She stood up and walked Mr. Chen to the door.



Ellen Leu entered her office with a pot of tea as soon as Kevin Chen was out of sight.

“He was handsome, no?” She gushed while she poured two cups. “I hope it worked out OK?”

Su Lin just shook her head, “Ellen, you know I’m no good with people. I can’t do this. This is a job for someone in management. Why would they put me in charge of the hiring?”

“Drink your tea,” Ellen said. She waited until Su Lin had taken a sip before she continued. “You designed ApSel. You have studied more than 50 application methods and combined them in one program. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the leading expert in hiring. Do you really think Peggy Mei or Ming Yu could do a better job?”

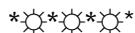
Su Lin answered with a brave smile. She didn’t have the same faith in her abilities, but she did know her research. Maybe she could make the right decision after all.

Ellen came around to her side of the desk and gave her a hug. “And you are much better at paying attention, you figure something out. Well, I am going home now. I am late already. If my husband wasn’t so hopeless at management, I would ask you to hire him so I could spend more time with Gang. Anyway, I’ll see you soon.”

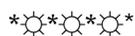
“Good bye, Ellen,” Su Lin replied. “Give your two men my regards. I’d love to come and visit.”

“Empty threats.” Ellen laughed. But Su Lin was perfectly serious. She had planned to go into a shop near the temple and buy a small statue of a laughing Buddha that reminded her of Gang. She couldn’t wait to hand the gift to the little boy.

Ellen regarded her friend for a moment. “Don’t stay too late,” she said pushing her glasses back to their proper position.



It was long after office hours but Su Lin was still at her desk. She had gone back to the ApSel read-outs and was trying to reconcile the similar scores of the two applicants. One of them had trouble speaking up; the other seemed incapable of listening. But what could she know of their ability to perform the duties of a management job? Would Peggy Mei or Ming Yu have a better chance of choosing the right person? The day had shown their different approach. Peggy Mei had ordered her to hire a man and Ming Yu had tried to make her understand why it was necessary. It was Ming Yu’s presence in the office that had always provided a balance to Peggy Mei’s no-nonsense approach. Su Lin had a good idea which of the two candidates would be favoured by which of her superiors. She also knew which of the applicants she liked. But could a right decision be made guided by personal likes and dislikes? From Su Lin’s perspective, the human factor put a question mark on every equation. Su Lin shut her eyes and stilled her breathing to reflect on the encounters throughout the day. One thought floated to the surface, clear and simple. Su Lin wrote out a number sequence that stayed with her on the commute home and through the night.



Su Lin's morning meditation, as usual, left her in a contented, energized state. She was thinking of Liang Wei when she recited the poetry to activate her screen. She immediately requested a link to Peggy Wei's desk whose forceful personality reminded her so much of Kevin Chen.

Peggy Wei had a look of surprise on her face and Su Lin realized that this was the first time she had initiated an exchange with her superior.

"Mrs. Wei, I will be working from home today." Sun Lin said. "I will work on a new version of ApSel that will take equal opportunity employment into account."

"But did you find someone for the management position?" Peggy Wei asked.

"I hope to install ApSel E by the end of this week. And then you'll be able to begin the hiring process for the management position, and any other position as well."

"This is good news, but I asked you to fill the position." Peggy Wei interjected.

"I'm a programmer. That's what I do. I'm not suited for management. Last night I have even re-entered my ApSel data to confirm that."

Su Lin added, "You can hire one of the applicants now, but I guarantee that ApSel E will do a better job."

"Of course," Peggy Wei conceded before signing off. "I speak for myself as well as SunTech when I say that we have absolute faith in your abilities."

Su Lin felt exhausted from the exchange and longed to loose herself into the world of numbers. But she felt that she had to make one more call. She found Mr. Yu at home.

"Mr. Yu." She said. "I wanted to thank you for your help. I have started to develop an updated version of ApSel. I feel that I understand now what men bring to the table."

Mr. Yu smiled. "So, you have found men's strengths?"

"Men's strengths? Oh, no. I haven't. But I have realized that there are more opportunities for growth if there are both men and women on the team. And I promise that the numbers will back that theory."

"An interesting theory." Mr. Yu nodded. "Good, good. I knew I could count on you."

After signing off, Su Lin looked longingly at her tea pot but she was impatient to get to work. Re-writing a program in less than a week would require a lot of effort and concentration, but it was an area of expertise where Su Lin had confidence in her abilities. And at the end of it, she would allow herself to share a pot of Jasmine tea with a certain young man who held a lot of potential though not necessarily for a management position.