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Lifestyle

Hong Kong body language expert on Donald Trump, Carrie Lam and Barack Obama, and how micro facial expressions reflect our true emotions

Forensics specialist Kiki Wong says 93 per cent of communication is non-verbal and that US President Donald Trump is a perfect case of what not to do. If you can read micro facial expressions that occur within a fraction of a second it can help with negotiation situations, she says.

Topic | Nina Wang



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A face-to-face interview with Kiki Wong, a forensics specialist who has spent years researching body language, micro facial expressions and lie detection, is a daunting prospect.

“I don’t intentionally seek out information when I meet someone, but there are things that I subconsciously pick up on,” she says. “I’m a pretty good gauge of what kind of person you are. You seem relaxed, not very conservative.” So far, so good.

“People might be surprised to learn that 93 per cent of communication is non-verbal,” she continues. “Body language and facial expressions are the main ones, but there are things many people are not aware of. We judge people on looks and the way they dress – that’s just the society we live in. But there are other non-verbal signs, from the way we sit and the sound of our voice to how quickly we talk and move.”

The way we use technology also speaks volumes. “Social media accounts, what profile picture you use, how a message is composed and whether you use emojis, to punctuation and font style, all these send signals about what type of person you are,” Wong says.



Forensics specialist Kiki Wong is an expert in body language, micro facial expressions and lie detection. Photo: Jonathan Wong

Wong and her husband Anthony Tsang are founders of The Silent Company, which provides training for corporate and government organisations in body language, micro facial expressions and lie detection. Her clients range from fresh college graduates keen to improve their confidence for job interviews to chief executives wanting to learn how to lead a team without coming across as arrogant.

Six months ago she worked with the Hong Kong Police Force's public relations team to help improve the force's image following accusations of police brutality during anti-government protests that saw violent clashes between police and protesters.

"We looked at videos of officers presenting at press conferences and picked up on the good and bad. Things we drew attention to [included] how not to show disgust or contempt if asked questions they don't like. This does nothing to improve relations with the public," she says.



She ... comes across as cold, but as a leader you can't be seen as too emotional. She has a tough balancing act
Kiki Wong on Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam



"I want to help Hong Kong and truly believe not all police are bad. We can't judge the entire force by the actions of a few bad apples."

It is common practice for celebrities, politicians and other public figures to have body language coaches, Wong says. US President Donald Trump, however, is a perfect case study on what not to do.

“Donald Trump is the best subject for us to analyse,” Wong says. “His tone is bad and he can’t hide his anger, his real feelings. It’s not a matter of right or wrong, but whether it’s appropriate behaviour for a leader.”



On the other end of the spectrum is former US leader Barack Obama. “He comes across as genuine, always speaks clearly and shows his fun, family side.”

Fellow US Democrat Hillary Clinton comes across as cold and unnatural, Wong says. “Hillary finds it tough to strike a balance between having a heart and not being robotic.”

What about Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor? “She also comes across as cold, but as a leader you can’t be seen as too emotional. She has a tough balancing act, but it’s better to be cold and composed than too emotional.”

One area of training in which Wong specialises is how to spot micro facial expressions that occur within a fraction of a second – so fast that most people can't see them in real time.

Micro facial expressions reflect our true emotions about how we feel about a person or situation, she says.



Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam at a press meeting at the government headquarters on May 12. Photo: Sam Tsang

And while emotions are universal – “around the world from Australia, to Africa to Hong Kong, smiling is happiness” – there are, however, cultural differences with body language.

“Take Japanese culture. It’s conservative, especially for women, who are often expected to sit quietly and act demure. To laugh loudly might be considered rude, while in the US it’s OK to be loud. In the Philippines and Italy, exaggerated hand gestures are normal.”

But in terms of “reading” people, micro expressions are a reliable starting point because we cannot fake them. “If you can read them, it can help with negotiation situations, especially when locking in a deal price.”



Wong’s clients include fresh college graduates who want to improve their confidence for job interviews. Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Born in Hong Kong, Wong went to Britain to study at the age of 11. With a degree in forensic science from King's College London under her belt, she landed her first job at London's New Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police, where she spent seven years specialising in fingerprint analysis.

“Forensic science is in my DNA. My father is a Queen's Counsel barrister [in Hong Kong] who specialises in criminal law, so I've had a long fascination with forensics.

And New Scotland Yard wasn't like what you see on [US TV programme] *CSI*. We occasionally visited crime scenes but I spent most of the time behind a desk,” she says.

In 2011, after starting a family – she has two children, aged eight and 10 – Wong returned to Hong Kong, where she set up The Forensics Company, which she still operates.





Wong says former US President Barack Obama comes across as genuine.
Photo: AFP

One high-profile case she worked on in 2012 involved Chinachem boss Nina Wang Kung Yu-sum, who was Asia's richest woman before she died in 2007 at age 69.

The case involved will-forgery allegations against self-styled feng shui master Peter Chan (then known as Tony Chan), who claimed to have been Wang's lover. After Wang's death, Chan, 23 years her junior, produced a document claiming she left her entire US\$4 billion estate to him.

"People were asking how could she leave all the money to him. To us, it didn't matter how rich she was, what work Chan did, or whether they were having an affair. There was no moral judgment. We had to block out the media frenzy surrounding the case and focus on the evidence.

"The police had done their job and we had to find out if the will had been forged. The claims were that Nina's signature, as well as [those of] two witnesses, [both] Chinachem staff, were forgeries," Wong says.

“We had to examine the company chop; that was upside down. You have to ask why would an important legal document not have a chop the right side up? We also looked at the DNA that their skin cells left, as well as testing for fingerprints of any of the witnesses and Nina.”

Chan lost the case and was sentenced to 12 years in jail.



Nina Wang and Tony Chan in an undated photo. Photo: Courtesy of Tony Chan

With more people working from home, Wong is receiving a growing number of inquiries about digital body language, as firms turn to Zoom meetings and web conferences.

“Be aware of your background when you’re in a Zoom meeting. You don’t want dirty knickers in the background,” she says, adding that a good camera angle, lighting and sound are also important.

“‘Sorry I can’t hear you’ and ‘can you hear me?’ have become common catchphrases since meetings went online. I read about one man who stood up after a Zoom meeting wearing only underpants below and the camera was still on.”

As well as better wardrobe choices, Wong says be conscious of children and animals running around in the background. This is when knowing your audience is crucial.

“If kids are running in the background and you’re dealing with someone who doesn’t have children, they might not like that. Women tend to be more nurturing, and might think it’s great that you’re juggling work and parenthood, but some – men and women – might not be so understanding. They might question why a kid is present when talking business?”

“That’s why it’s very important to know your audience.”

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