

Nov 04, 2016 by [Cari E. Guittard](#)

Empire of the Sun ^[1]

I'm finally cleaning out and catching up with my Netflix queue, working on a relationship I've neglected for far, far too long. As a foreign and political film junkie, I may be one of the few people my age who has only just watched *Empire of the Sun*, the 1987 Spielberg film initially set in 1940s Shanghai, where a group of privileged and protected Westerners have built their lives in China since the British first arrived in the early 19th Century.

Based on J. G. Ballard's autobiographical novel, the film follows a British boy, Jim "Jamie" Graham, who, after being separated from his parents, is captured by the Japanese and taken to the Soo Chow confinement camp. Stripped of every comfort and surrounded by sickness, disease, and death, Jim attempts to rebuild his former life, while bringing hope and dignity to those around him. The film is ultimately about survival, the enduring strength of the human spirit, and the idea that even in times of war, we all have more things in common than the ones which separate us.

I was profoundly and deeply moved by this film. In part, I was drawn in by Spielberg's visual imagery and layering. At every turn I felt as though I were there, witnessing history unfold. The underlying themes and cross-cultural nuances throughout, though, are what truly left an indelible impression.

From the very beginning, I was struck by the excellent manners young Jim possessed. He was *composed, observant, sensitive to others needs, incredibly self aware*, and treated everyone with *dignity and respect*. Let me repeat that – he treated *everyone* with dignity and respect. His most outward displays of sensitivity, deference and respect are shown in several poignant scenes with his Japanese captors. He takes several tense, potentially violent moments and diffuses them with the flair of a seasoned diplomat when he smiles broadly and genuinely, speaks in Japanese, and bows to the ground. He stays bowing until the Japanese give him instruction to rise. At another particularly moving point, while observing the Kamikaze rituals, he salutes and begins singing with the pilots.

The timing of watching *Empire of the Sun* is rather appropriate, as I am due to deliver remarks at the *International Protocol Officers Annual Education Conference* in Long Beach, CA at the end of this month. It is always an intimidating thing to be surrounded by an audience of protocol and etiquette professionals, especially for a native Texan. But I never miss a chance to be with them, as I love the energy of this group and their almost evangelical approach to their craft. I wish more were aware of the power of protocol and etiquette – traditional vestiges

of diplomacy, and an area many consider to be within the soft power realm. I touched on this in my prior post, '[The Five Tool Corporate Diplomat](#)', but I feel compelled to underscore the importance of protocol and etiquette as essential global skills, which are absolutely critical to building trust and operating effective cross-culturally.

Which brings me back to young Jim in the film. Jim was born into a privileged, global elite, which was well versed and schooled in the ways of the world and how to operate within the echelons of power. Many will look at that film and even at modern practitioners of diplomacy, etiquette and protocol, and say that understanding such cross-cultural nuance and learning how to deftly navigate oneself in a global environment is passé in a world where technology, access and speed are pre-eminent.

If one delves deeper, though, in any environment – whether government, corporate, or societal – where power and influence are concentrated, successful relationships develop slowly over time and are carefully crafted by how one positions and maneuvers within such structures. Access is granted and influence developed by those who are able to operate effectively, with sensitivity, respect, and acute awareness of those around them. This is where etiquette and protocol, or in plain English, good old fashioned manners, make all the difference. Why then are so few young people, especially Americans, educated systematically in the art and craft of protocol and etiquette? In a globalized world where we are all increasingly competing with the world for jobs, positioning and influence, these skills should be part of every child's basic education.

“Amatus sum, amatus es, amatus est”

Towards the end of the film we hear Jim reciting the Latin phrase “*Amatus sum, amatus es, amatus est.*” Translated, it means: *I am loved, you are loved, he/she is loved.* The phrase (and more broadly, the film) speaks to the universality of the human condition and how each of us possesses the capacity to bring grace, humility, courage, and hope to those we engage with every day. It's a lesson we should all embrace.

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