

Panda-Huggers and Dragon-Fighters

Tips and Tricks for Professional Communications in China

In China, the language for any communications is Chinese. Even if some media are published in English, the lion's share of online and offline information is published in simplified Chinese characters. In 1956, the People's Republic of China (PRC) simplified its characters. Each of the approximately 20,000 characters has its own meaning and many words are a combination of characters. You will need to know about 3,000 characters to read a Chinese newspaper. The same is true for Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and other locations where Chinese live – but outside of Mainland China, they use traditional characters that are more complicated.

To make things even more complicated, spoken Chinese has many dialects. This can even be a challenge in communications amongst Chinese. For example Cantonese, spoken in the South, e.g. in Hong Kong and Guangdong province, has nine different tones. Standard Chinese, also known as Mandarin, has "only" 4 tones. Hence, these two dialects are in some ways two different languages.

Even if you need an interpreter in China there are some general concepts that can help you enjoy easy and successful face-to-face communication with Chinese. By the way, you yourself should choose your interpreter carefully so that you know what they say is actually what you mean.

Size & Diversity

China is about 27 times bigger than Germany and expectations, customs and behavior of a conversation partner can be very different. In addition, there are many categories of Chinese such as ABCs (American-born-Chinese) who are fully Westernized. Be well prepared for any situation and inform yourself in advance about these pre-conditions. One basic principle to remember is: high-quality gifts "Made in Germany" are much appreciated by Chinese business partners. Don't be too shy; a gift can sometimes be a bit "bigger" than considered customary in Germany or other Western countries. But make sure that the highest-ranking person for sure gets the most valuable present.

Hierarchy

Most Chinese are very careful when it comes to respecting rank and protocol. This is an age-old practice based on Confucianism and is an integral part of China's cultural tradition. Be aware that the ability to reach agreements and personal commitment are dependent on a clear understanding of the hierarchical level of the Chinese conversation partner, and that they are communicating according to their hierarchical level. You have to know in advance the level of hierarchy of the Chinese you are interacting with in order to present the same or similar structure in your own team. In a best-case scenario, you have a hierarchically matching contact person for each position in the Chinese company you are dealing with.

Power distance is a concept that underlines this basic 'protocol' for meetings. Being the "boss" is communicated much more clearly in China than in the West. In a worst-case scenario, a Chinese business partner won't participate in a meeting because no partner of equal rank is available and therefore they feel unappreciated. Even if these formalities are gradually on the decline and managerial principles of meeting efficiency and agenda-focused approaches are finding their way into Chinese day-to-day work, the ideas of Confucianism still determine many forms of behavior in daily life and business.

Trust

China can be described as a no-trust, trust-based society. While that sounds like a contradiction, for Chinese it is very logical and simple. The inner circle of those you know and their families define the nucleus of the network of trusted relationships of every Chinese. These relationships are your *Guanxi* – your opportunity to influence others and/or to reach success. So it is important to build Guanxi and thereby trust. If no trust has yet been developed, the first step is to show interest in the personal situation of your conversation partner. Eating and drinking together is therefore an integral part of Guanxi and trust building. An ambitious and focused conversation, which is "efficient" according to Western standards, could turn out a flop because there was no phase of trust-building earlier on.

Criticism and Praise

Historically in China, making a mistake creates a good deal of shame – almost like a punishment -- from a Chinese perspective. Therefore, the concept known as “saving face” drives the behavior of many Chinese,, making it difficult to set up a culture of “learning by mistakes.” Most importantly, as a precondition when establishing a feedback-based communications structure, never criticize someone in front of others. Even in a face-to-face conversation, it can be difficult to point out mistakes. Interestingly, the Chinese word for “problem” also means “question.” Ideally you can use questions to gracefully and indirectly point out mistakes and thus continue to build Guanxi while causing no loss of face. Praise is another way to improve Guanxi. Chinese often appear somewhat "modest" during communication. To praise someone at the right time will leave a deep impression and be beneficial to your business.

Surprises and Flexibility

When stock prices are rising the numbers are red and when they fall they are green. That's normal for Chinese but not for Westerners. Be well prepared for surprises and stay flexible – while nobody can foresee everything, a good deal of street-smarts and common sense will help manage many situations. Keep in mind: if you think things have to be perfect according to German/Western standards, it will take at least twice the effort to achieve in China what you did back in the West. Due to cultural and sociological differences, coordination with multiple Chinese players can be especially time-consuming, with more time spent on briefing, re-briefing, feedback sessions and conveying to them precisely what is and what is not wanted.

Circle vs. Line

While Germans and most Westerners like to approach questions and problems directly and tend to discuss the main points at the very beginning of a meeting, Chinese are used to waiting. They believe that many aspects of a situation have to be considered in order to reach a smart decision. According to their understanding, these aspects may not always be visible at first glance. Their method of operation is often described as circular. While this requires that Western communications partners display a lot of patience, Chinese do get to their goal – but in a different way. It is very important that you therefore never lose sight of

your own goals! What is nowadays described as *Agile* or *Scrum* strategies in management circles is a smart approach to use in such situations.

Germany and other Nations

People, companies and products from Germany and many other Western nations enjoy a high reputation in China. Chinese respect and appreciate Westerners, including Germans, and they expect to enjoy the same respect from them. Especially within the last two decades national pride in China has become quite strong. It is considered quite unfortunate for a Chinese to mistakenly be taken for a Japanese. So it is advisable to know the basics about bilateral relations within Asia and thus understand the antipathies and sympathies. For example, from the Chinese perspective there is only one way to view the Taiwan question. Tip: Be cautious with political questions. This does not mean it's dangerous to talk about it but it may not be that good for your business.

Competition

Anyone who has been to China knows that its urban centers are crowded. There are a lot of traffic jams, and also fierce competition amongst the Chinese ranging from little things like seats in the subway all the way to better jobs and better salaries. Already kids are taught to strive to be first. You can see this phenomenon everywhere in daily life: *active queuing* is a virtue for every Chinese. This perspective also plays an important role in business life and competition amongst each other is high. Be aware, the agendas of your counterparts may not always be clear to you in the beginning. Take your time and make the effort to find out about it. Try to be ahead of the field in the spirit of active queuing.

Environment and the Future

Increasingly, Chinese cooperation partners are concerned about the effects of environmental pollution and especially about food safety in China. For many Chinese, as a foreigner you are lucky because you can leave the country any time you want and work in a different part of the world. That means to them that you have a choice to be at a place with good air, fresh water and uncontaminated food. Don't be surprised if you are asked questions about it. Have an understanding of your Chinese counterparts and try to find the balance between being a panda-hugger (China positivist) and a dragon-fighter (China negativist).