



## East Meets West

In America, companies like to do business with companies and individuals who often simply represent the corporations behind them. Roles and responsibilities are fairly clear and relatively uncomplicated.

However, if you are keen to harness the global powerhouse that China represents then you must be prepared to throw out everything you know about doing business in the West and be prepared for a very different kind of business relationship.

In China, your contact will want to do business with you and that means getting to know you as a person. If you are to succeed in China you will have to reconcile yourself to putting a great deal of effort into the personal side of the relationship. An appreciation of just how different that relationship can be could easily make or break a deal.

You are just as important to your Chinese counterpart as the product or service you are hoping to sell. Seemingly old-fashioned qualities like trust, friendship, openness and 'bonding' carry huge significance in Chinese business. An appreciation of some of the cultural touchstones will take you a long way in creating a long-lasting business relationship.

Take the humble business card for example. How many times have they just been tossed across a table, given a cursory glance then slipped into a wallet?

In China, your host will hand you're their card with both hands. It's a mark of respect and the start of the personal relationship building. The card represents the person giving it. You should accept it, spend a moment reading it, and then make a flattering comment.

Your Chinese hosts will want to get to know you in a social context before any deal is done. You will be wined and dined on a grand scale and getting drunk is all part of the 'bonding' process.

You can also expect some fairly probing questions covering subjects as diverse as: education, family, children, hobbies, property prices and even your salary. Don't be alarmed, this is all part of the 'getting to know you' process that is an inescapable feature of creating a long-lasting business relationships.

Chinese people are very superstitious and seemingly innocuous events are often seen as containing good or bad omens.

For example, the number 'four' should be avoided – whether it's a date for a contract signing ceremony or product model number.

It isn't the figure that is the issue. It's the pronunciation. The Chinese word for four sounds like the word for death and is very unlucky.

Similarly, if you want to impress your Chinese host with a gift, don't give an umbrella. In Chinese, the word for umbrella sounds like the word for 'breaking up' and doesn't bode well for a long-term relationship.



Also don't give your Chinese counterpart a clock as it sounds like 'to see someone at their funeral' in Chinese.

Other numbers also carry significant meanings and should be used with care. For example 'five' is negative whereas 'eight' means fortune and therefore is a lucky number.

Colours can also unbalance the unwary businessperson. While red is generally a celebratory colour, writing to someone in red in a personal relationship can signify a parting. So beware, what is acceptable in one context may be inappropriate in another. So don't amend a document using red track changes in an email.

On the plus side, water, particularly if it is flowing represents financial prosperity and fish are seen as indicating a surplus or bounty. Also, certain days are seen as more auspicious than others, so consult your Chinese colleagues or friends when choosing contract signing days, or the opening of your new office.

Chinese people are typically very patriotic and any questioning of the sovereignty of Tibet or Taiwan, is likely to generate a very vigorous debate with your host.

Understanding the cultural and social differences and respecting them will take you a long way as will a few Chinese phrases alongside having your business card translated into Chinese.

Don't send long emails. Chinese business people don't do them. If you do, don't be surprised if your carefully crafted communication is greeted by a one line reply. Your contact isn't being rude, they would simply rather talk to you.

If the worst happens and you have a dispute one way to break the impasse is to visit your partner in person rather than sending long emails in English with "without prejudice". Remember to take a gift to the person in charge. It shows that you still value the person and respect them personally.

Investing time and effort into the personal side of a business relationship may be time consuming and require a different 'mind set' but it can be hugely rewarding. The pay back will be a long lasting partnership based on mutual trust, understanding and friendship. If that sounds old fashioned, there's nothing wrong with that.

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