




Patrick Dransfield speaks to an intercultural consultant about helping businesses avoid Lost In Translation issues in China.

Asian-mena Counsel: You've spent a decade in the UK in the field of intercultural communication and training between China and the UK. What has changed in both China and the UK — and what has remained the same — in those years?

Baozhen Shi: The development of technology really has changed how we do business. For example, the development of WeChat [a Chinese messaging app like WhatsApp] means we can have face-to-face meetings very easily, it reduces the need to fly a lot, as most issues can be communicated this way. We also know that we can almost get a reply instantly no matter what the time is, as people in China are always on WeChat.

Another example is digital marketing. We can run an online campaign for the China market from the UK very easily, thanks to the fact that most people are into Chinese social media in China. We can get our marketing messages to our potential clients efficiently.

However, despite the fact that modern technology provides convenient channels for communication, the challenge of understanding each other across cultures still stands. In the past, businesspeople often had to fly to China to get things done, and they might blame their failures on jet leg, strange dinner banquets or just how different China is. But now that the logistics of communication are so much easier, the cultural roots of failure to reach a common understanding are even more apparent. This means technology hasn't removed the need for intercultural communication support and training.



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AMC: You studied Chinese language and English studies in Inner Mongolia and also a UK law degree — all three disciplines seem interwoven into your present work. Did you ever imagine it would lead you to where you are now? Why have you chosen this particular path?

BS: I never imagined that they would lead me to my current career. I chose to study them because I love them, and I enjoy finding out more in these areas. I am always fascinated by different cultures. When I came to the UK, it seemed that doing a law degree would be a great way to learn about a country's structure and how it operates. I started my work in Cambridge as a Mandarin Chinese teacher and an interpreter when I first moved there from Inner Mongolia, China. I worked with many individuals and companies in Cambridge, and noticed a gap that needed to be filled helping UK companies to work with Chinese companies. Both sides needed to

understand each other not only from a language point of view, but also from a cultural point of view, from a practical side of view — how things are done in China can be different from the UK. From there I started working as an intercultural business consultant. Often where there is a deadlock, it might be that there are practical issues or worries one part has, which stop them from cooperating with one another and for understandable reasons they fail to communicate those issues. As long as we can get to the bottom of the issues, we should be able to provide remedies in most cases and help the cooperation to continue, even stronger than before.

AMC: Can you provide examples of where your strategic commercial insight has significantly benefited parties in a deal?

BS: A common cause of problems between UK businesses and their Chinese partners is that expectations that are taken for granted in the UK are not made explicit when agreements are made. One client, a manufacturing firm based in the UK, had commissioned design and production of a component of one of their main products. The Chinese suppliers assured them that the design was progressing well, but when the British engineers asked for a beta of the firmware for interim testing, the Chinese side were offended and were afraid the Brits were trying to avoid paying. The relationship rapidly became difficult and the project came to a halt.



I facilitated a series of meetings including a site visit to the Chinese firm's plant outside Beijing. The expectations of both sides were put on the table and discussed openly, and trust was re-established.

Through the discussion, a new timetable for development of the project was agreed and the Chinese engineers promised to hand over the relevant design material and prototypes according to a schedule.


AMC: A number of your clients are in the technology and scientific research space — as a non-scientist do you find it easy to understand the underlying issues in these lines of businesses?

BS: It might be a bonus if anything else, as I would ask a lot of very basic questions, I assume nothing, and this provides no room for misunderstanding. When it comes to detailed technical matters, I work side by side with technical directors or VPs for China and when we need to discuss detailed technical issues they will fill in to talk, and I will act as an interpreter when this happens, and then switch back to the intercultural consultant to help them to find a solution when the technical issues are clear.

AMC: What five insights can you share for British businesspeople considering commercial ties with China? And the same for Chinese entities?

BS:

1. Establish guanxi (your ties with your Chinese colleagues, for example, going to dinner banquets is an import factor for establishing guanxi)
2. Communicate with the key decision-makers when multiple contacts were given, like the CEO or the person who has the power to say yes or no
3. Communicate regularly, especially if two technical teams from the UK and China are working together, set monthly or weekly meetings, set clear agendas before the meetings
4. Don't reply on emails too much unless specifically discussed beforehand. When in Rome, do as the Romans do, so WeChat is usually a good place to start
5. Assume nothing, ask directly, especially if it is the norm in your industry in the UK — it might not be in China



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AMC: How energised are you about the commercial opportunities opening up relating to the new foreign investment law in China for international businesses?

BS: On one hand, British companies thinking of investing in China will be encouraged by the significance of regulations and by investing in China directly without having to engage in complex ownership arrangements to the same extent they have had to until now. On the other hand, without local expertise to advise on local standards and help to establish and maintain good relationship with officials and business partners, foreign firms will still face significant challenges.

AMC: How can Britain specifically benefit from greater cultural ties with Inner Mongolia — and vice versa?

BS: There are a lot, I will take dairy products as one example — people in both the UK and Inner Mongolia love and use a lot of milk, dairy products.

AMC: You were brought up on a farm in Inner Mongolia. What skills did your childhood experience provide for you in your present line of work?

BS: My parents couldn’t give me much guidance on how to live a life in the UK, or any cities in China, but one thing they taught me is to work hard and have a dream (or a few if you achieved the first one), and then get on and do it.

AMC: What is your hinterland?

BS: I go the gym at 6.30 every morning on weekdays. This is really important for me, it sets me with great energy for the day and makes me feel happy, grateful and confident.

Shi is the founder of The China Mix, which focuses on cultural awareness training and advice, as well as other business support

services. Before that, she set up and ran Chinese in Cambridge, a business training researchers and businesspeople in Mandarin Chinese, and also previously worked for the Holiday Inn, training staff in English language and intercultural communication. <https://chinamix.co.uk/>