



# INTERNATIONAL TRADE WITH CHINA

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### About the Author

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*He is an Australian-Chinese corporate executive who has over 60 years of cross-culture experiences in Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, China, and the South Pacific Islands Region. He has held senior executive positions with various large international companies including American, Canadian, and Australian - before establishing his own group of 15 companies in 1978. The article below is about his personal observations of some of the hidden "pitfalls" when dealing with China.*

## China's Growth

China in the past 40 years has become the dominant player in the global manufacturing market. China has attained this position by rapidly evolving its business ecosystem, offering low labour costs and taxes, and offering less stringent regulations. In recent years, however, it has shifted to higher-end manufacturing, resulting in raising costs along the way. This has further been compounded by the US-China trade war, which has prompted many companies to seek cheaper manufacturing destinations such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and India. Despite these changing dynamics, China still holds the indisputable title of being the "Factory of the World". Chinese companies are now no longer interested in just being able to make cheap merchandise but to innovate or duplicate, and upgrade the merchandise so that the high end China-made products can put up a serious challenge to the western-made products in respect to quality, design, color, price, and customer appeal. With AI technology making an important impact onto manufacturing, the desire to do export business with western foreigners is now picking momentum in China.

A foreigner doing business with China by phone and email is quite different to when it is done on a face-to-face basis. With the latter, there is the body language interpretation to help convey one's intentions or reaction.

There are no hard and fast rules as to how one should handle the negotiations in a cross culture interactions. It's global dexterity, and the ability to adopt or adjust behaviour in light of these cultural differences. And that's something that is easier said than done. Of course, not all situations are the same.

## China Trade Centre

The author established the world's first China Trade Centre in Brisbane (1988-2022) and has visited China over 46 times. In 2008, He was invited to visit Beijing to receive the Entrepreneurship Award for Overseas Chinese at the Third World Summit of Entrepreneurs. This article is based on the author's first hand experience and observation made over 40 years based on western interactions with the business culture and practices in the People's Republic of China.

It should be noted that Chinese cultures and practices in the Mainland China are quite different to those of the overseas Chinese from Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia - even though they may use the same Mandarin language.

It is not the purpose of this article to provide a comprehensive manual as to how to do business step by step with China. It is simply to provide foreigners a quick checklist of the issues that foreigners may not be aware or fail to realize the pitfalls the damage that these issues can bring. Below are some cultural facts to set the tone of the business environment that prevails in China. Like everything in life, there is the good and there is the bad. This article shall address only the "bad" aspects so as to put the foreigners on the alert.

## Rule of Law

China is not yet a country of the rule of law; it is still developing its legal system, its structure in commerce, its acceptance; and its uniform usage. So don't rely too much on your legal documents at this stage for protection because there is none that will give you the legal protection in China of the kind offered by western courts of law.

## Guanxi

In China, there is a well-developed system of favours since the days of the imperial dynastic China. The art of "Guanxi" is kindred along with the concept of "face" and personal reputation to help

ensure trust in a business deal. Today, the power of "Guanxi" resides primarily within the Chinese Communist Party. With the liberalization of China in the past 40 years, "Guanxi" has played a part in being used effectively in business equivalent to a secret currency. The "Guanxi art of persuasion" can be a very powerful competitor to conventional conduct of doing business. In other words, this unwritten element of influence may even be more powerful than what is written in agreements drafted by western lawyers.

## Title of Positions

Hierarchy in China has a major influence on the behavior of employees with their superiors. In Western culture there is less emphasis on the importance of titles, and there is a tendency to put team members on the same level, while in China there is more of a sense of respect for job titles. During meetings, employees tend to respect the senior manager's vision and ideas that accompany the job title that the person holds.

However, it is fairly normal that Chinese personnel going overseas are given a temporary upgraded title such as "Deputy General Manager" or "Deputy Director" to impress the foreigners. Unfortunately, this is only for "face value" but these title upgrades do not usually accompanied by upgraded authority or responsibility. It is basically for PR face value only.

## Face Value to Superiors

The Chinese employee usually does not show his disappointment or disagreement with his or her direct superior, especially in public. The concept of "face" is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, and employees, but also Chinese managers, do not go against and do not point the finger at showing the mistakes made by the employee, so as not to lose "face". Usually, errors and opinions are displayed privately. In official banquets, you will find subordinates of a Chinese leader will all mimic what the their leader has stated earlier. This is a form of "consensus support" of having the same words coming directly from the mouths of the subordinates. Numerous public positions carrying high-sounding titles are also used for its propaganda value by the CCP but carry very little authority.

## Mandarin

It is amazing how many foreigners are ignorant of the fact there are several different "Chinese languages" spoken in China that are not Mandarin - the official Chinese language. There are currently 23 provinces including the breakaway province Taiwan plus 5 autonomous regions (Tibet, Guanxi, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Ningxia). China is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. There are 302 different Chinese dialects spoken in China. The most common dialect used in China is the official standardized Chinese language called Mandarin ("pinyin"), which was adopted by China as the official Chinese language on 11th February 1958.

It should also be noted that there is a total of 28 "provinces or autonomous regions" - each having quite different culture, cuisine, and language. To the west, China has always been regarded as one big "China". Yes, politically China is one Peoples Republic of China (PRC); but historically and culturally, it is very different. Take a Chinese person from Guangdong and one from Beijing - this would be similar to say a European person from France and one from Hungary. The two cultures and languages are totally different. Mixing up a Chinese person's ancestry origin and background is a first step of showing ignorance and disrespect.

The downward slide in business etiquette and loss of face will start from that point of ignorance. Also the spoken Chinese language like Cantonese and Mandarin are not mutually intelligible, meaning someone who only speaks Mandarin will generally not



be able to understand Cantonese and vice versa; even though the Chinese writing is still the same.

This is the reason why Mandarin and Cantonese are said to be two different languages rather than different dialects.

## Translation

When visiting Australia, the Chinese are well aware that Australian exporters would be eager to secure a “deal” and in view of the limited time available to sign a full contract, the Australian exporters would be quite keen just to attend a “signing ceremony” for the parties to execute a Letter of Intent as an interim step. The Australian side would not hesitate to host such event - but only to find out later that the simple document written in Chinese signed at the ceremony was only an “Expression of Interest”. In drafting such document, the translation of a Chinese character into English can reflect different meanings (polysemous) depending on the context it was used and also the accompanying words have a direct bearing to the context of the meaning. It is like using the English word “hot” - is it referring to sun hot; fire hot, or chili hot?

There is no doubt that if the Australian party was aware of the difference right from the start, the signing ceremony would definitely NOT be hosted over a banquet at Marriott Hotel, but signing the EOI at a local McDonald Restaurant over a hamburger and a cup of McCafe coffee. Most Chinese translators and students in Australia are only suitable to be hired basically to provide social translations or academic translations. But when it comes to business, trade or technical translations, it would require one who is a bilingual that also has actual practical experience in the industry together with a good command of the appropriate technical and business terminology used. It is important to have a bi-linguist on your team if the matter on hand being negotiated is significant.

## Working Hours 996

Whilst the Chinese law is very clear and states that the standard working time is 8 hours per day, 40 hours per week. The actual hours worked by middle Management are far in excess of the 40 hours. The term “996” was introduced as an incentive to employees, especially in the technology sector, to help achieve high levels of growth in a short time. The 996-work culture means working from 9 am in the morning to 9pm in the evening 6 days a week. Middle management employees are encouraged or required to put in long, unpaid hours to show their commitment to their jobs and loyalty to the company.

Australians whose work ethics are different should make careful allowance when planning the logistics for the two sides as the parties have very different workloads and timeframes. It is not uncommon for some hardworking Chinese that they may even work 7 days a week until late in the evening.

## Corruption

Is there corruption in China? Yes, of course, as China is no different from the rest of the 193 member states in United Nations. China and the United States have different definitions of corruption. In China, government officials can only earn wages, and any additional income is considered corruption; the penalty could be dismissal or even imprisonment. However, it should be noted that there are different forms of corruption involved: graft, bribery, embezzlement, extortion, secret influence peddling, lobbying, networking, abuse of discretion, and favoritism, nepotism and clientelism; and of course the Chinese technique of using gratuity as an intricate part of the “Guanxi art of persuasion”.

Usually with public officials, “gratuity” is always given at the front. A cultural tradition that stems from the days of the dynasties i.e. a person seeking an audience with a Government Official has to show appreciation of the Official’s time and the importance of the

position by presenting a substantial “gift” to secure an audience.

Expression of appreciation is always made front up; irrespective whether the mission is successful or not. In the west, “gratuity” is usually given after the service or favour has been performed. Thus, in modern society in China the process of corruption is complex, blurred and sophisticated.

It would require a brain surgeon to pinpoint accurately the source of the corrupt cancer.

## Foreigners need to exercise prudence

General advice – it is essential to navigate the waters carefully when dealing with Chinese suppliers. Obviously the degree of caution depends on the nature and size of the merchandise or trade transaction and the degree its impact on the supply chain will have on the foreigner’s critical path schedule.

## Poor command of the English language

Chinese export personnel are usually young university graduates with an ability to speak English (but still considered poor by western standards). Their expression and comprehension of business matters are very limited, and frequently also very naive. To make matters worst, the Chinese bosses usually don’t have any knowledge of the English language at all. This makes the situation even worse as everything now hinges on the junior employee’s ability to deal with the inquiry correctly, and hopefully keep the bosses informed. Such language difficulty can lead to costly frustrations for the foreigner.

## Focus is on making an immediate sale

When foreigners make an inquiry regarding an item advertised in the Internet, the Chinese would respond by providing bits and pieces of information, but always focus the inquiry to deliver an order without fully listening or understanding the customer’s technical requirements. Unfortunately, the Chinese frontline employees’ main objective is to extract a sales order as quickly as possible as their earnings are frequently based solely on sales commissions.

## Respond with inadequate information

When responding to an inquiry from a foreigner on say a pre-fab modular house, more than 90% of Chinese companies failed to give a proper “fact sheet” or pamphlet detailing all technical information, floor plans, artist illustrations, photos, videos, FOB prices and itemized inclusions. Occasionally, the advertised products on the Internet may even include photos of products made by other companies, which they hope to secure an order first before they start producing it from their own factory. It is common mentality for Chinese factories to copy products manufactured by other Chinese companies that they perceived as successful in the market place. In addition, a new trend of “marketing agents” has also emerged where Chinese companies that may have experience in doing business with foreigners are now using their “so-called’ overseas expertise to allow them to sell the products via their own websites. This misrepresentation can have severe consequences on product warranties by the foreign buyer.

## Lack of understanding of western business culture

Due to the Chinese person’s limited fluency in using the English language, and also the lack of understanding of western business cultures, the foreigner would need to put in a lot more effort and time with Q & A emails before final clarification and confidence are achieved. English knowledge and industry experience gained by an export salesperson selling fashion shoes is very different to the person handling inquiries for building materials for a major

project where precise specifications and technical drawings need to be reviewed, understood, coordinated, and that specifications are adhered to correctly so as to give confidence to customer's supply scheduling, critical path planning, budget forecast, and project control. Factors such as public holidays, inclement weather, or something abnormal in China, the Chinese manufacturer will automatically feel exonerated from any liability as the Chinese do not have the same sense of responsibility (morally or otherwise) to that of a western manufacturer.

### **Senior Management may be in the dark**

Lack of interaction by Chinese company's senior management with customers due to internal bureaucratic considerations i.e. where the front line personnel wants to retain the foreigner as a sales credit to himself or herself and is reluctant to allow the foreigner to talk to others within the organization.

Such behaviour can have significant consequences to both parties as the matter could jeopardize a major sales order and where accurate technical specifications are critical. It would be best to seek an alternative source of supply, as continuing to deal with such a mindset will result in catastrophe. Chinese employees are very unemotional to financial loss, as it does not affect them directly. In other words, they would not blink an eyelid if the foreigner's order worth millions were lost because they did not refer the sales inquiry to the CEO (due to the size of the order) or the Chief Engineer (due to the technical complexity) of the sales inquiry from the foreigner.

### **Senior Management most likely is unaware of situation**

Frequently, the Chinese salesperson apart from failing to recognize the significance of the inquiry, or simply too lazy to spend time and effort to try and investigate the customers' queries further as the Chinese salesperson is more focus on his efforts to chalk up a quick sale.

Therefore, it is very common for the salesperson handing the English inquiry to ignore matters other than those that can result in a quick sale. In the author's years of experience in dealing with Chinese companies, not one single salesperson has ever referred the inquiry to upper senior management. This is a Chinese cultural trait where they prefer not to "rock the boat" with unnecessary complications and also the desire not to share credit for any sales made. It is indeed sad that in most cases, senior management is unaware of the situation in their export sales department as there is no way to make contact to the senior management. Names or email details of senior executives are usually not provided on their websites.

### **Inexperienced University Graduates - the weak "linkage"**

Most of the export personnel employed are at junior level and are inexperienced and lack professional knowledge of products & overseas business practices. Their only qualification in most cases is their university educational background where they have English as one of the subjects they have passed, but no real life experience.

These young graduates were hired by their bosses who themselves are ignorant of the English language. This could result in a dire situation on the outcome of a major trade transaction where success or failure is linked to the sales staff's competence in the English language.

This weak "linkage" in trade negotiations is a very dangerous risk factor.

### **Most export personnel lack proper training**

Most Chinese personnel dealing with export inquires from foreign corporate customers are usually not properly trained. They simply respond with the same sales materials - whether you represent a large company or just an individual; the Chinese would give the same sales propaganda on how long the company has been established, how many employees it has, photos of their factory, etc. This trait is a standard introductory propaganda commonly practiced in a Chinese communist society. China's business community has in the last 20 years been using Alibaba platform as their principal means of overseas marketing. This has taken away the need to develop individual skills that are essential to correctly handle foreign sales inquires, especially from overseas where the business culture and protocols are very different. Fortunately this is slowly changing as more and more companies are now dealing direct.

### **They just skip the question rather than to say "no".**

Belated reply to clients' queries or not answering the questions asked is another bad trait of the Chinese. They prefer to avoid the question rather than to say "no" as the Chinese salesperson would simply brush pass the items where it involve a negative response, and just concentrate in providing details on what they choose to focus.

The foreigner may have to send several emails demanding a specific response to the matter raised before finally getting an answer admitting that they don't have the product or they cannot meet the specification. This cat and mouse game is both time consuming and frustrating.

### **Follow up action**

The Chinese usually don't seem to rely much on proper follow-up after quotations have been submitted as if they don't get an order fairly quickly, they will assume the deal is dead. The Chinese salesperson would lose interest and focus on matters on hand that can result in an immediate sale. The Chinese are also not familiar with the management procedures that are required to be followed in western countries for major procurement. Foreign buyers therefore need to follow up these contacts themselves and to also make sure that all quotations previously received are updated and are still valid in all details.

### **Western business culture and protocol**

The Chinese is also not familiar with overseas business culture or protocol as they treat an inquiry from a Senior Executive from overseas the same as they treat one from say a housewife. The junior employee is insensitive to the hierarchy of a western corporate organization where different levels of management structure need to be taken into account and abide by the protocol required. The Chinese will handle an inquiry from a CEO of a major company that potentially may order 1,000 cars the same way as he or she would handle the inquiry from a housewife with a potential order of only 1 car.

### **Use of Mobile Phones - WhatsApp or WeChat**

It is quite evident that the Chinese salesperson places very little significance when dealing with westerners of different positions. They will engage in a relentless bombardment of sales materials sent via text messages to foreigner's mobile phone. This can be quite disturbing, as the Chinese have no appreciation of the fact that mobile phones in Australia are still regarded as "private space" and not to be used for sales & marketing campaign unless prior consent has been given by the person.

In China, everyone uses the mobile phone as it is their way of life. They don't differentiate much between "business space" and "private space". The Chinese don't like to use landline to make overseas calls. In China, they have to pay for this service. Their favorite preference is therefore to use the free WhatsApp or WeChat.

It should be noted that important documents and messages sent via mobile phones do not provide a proper and secure record for future reference or provide a data trail for audit or legal purposes. These data on mobile phones can be erased at any time and also when the employee leaves the company, the mobile phone goes with the ex-employee.

## Lack of individuality

Company strategies and policies seem to come from one common mold; there is hardly any individuality. This is typical of all Chinese companies. Since the opening of its economy to the outside world in 1970's, the Chinese people and their companies have no individual knowledge or experience to be different from what they have been shown by the communist government.

Therefore, it is still a trait of the Chinese to adopt the same mentality in business and everyday life. Although improving, the Chinese mindset is to remain consistent with everyone else, as China is still a monopolistic society. It should also be remembered that a high number of companies are in fact state-owned or state influenced. Therefore attitude by these employees are usually quite complacent.

## Other important considerations

The Chinese companies still do not place sufficient importance on the understanding or the appreciation of other aspects of trade apart from FOB price such as quality, reliability, credibility, warranty, and performance. The global business community now regards other morality factors are just as important - such as corporate governance, sustainability, integrity, transparency, and honesty.

The two famous phases allegedly made by its political leader Deng Xiaoping: "to get rich is glorious" and "It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white — so long as it catches the mice" have ignited the capitalistic spirit of the Chinese people so much so that by 2024, there are 814 billionaires in China.

Sadly, China also has achieved the notorious reputation of being the world's capital of fake commodities including many food products, which put the consumers' health at risk. China through its economic reforms have moved its capitalism expansion at a hurricane speed of over 100 miles per hour, but the traffic laws dealing with commerce are lagging way behind; thus China's rapid expansion in the last 20 years have been "wild west" chaos and without regulatory controls.

## Marketing by emails

Chinese companies still use ineffective methods to find customers, e.g. sending unsolicited emails with poor message or content. Recipients usually delete 90% or more of these emails as they are regarded as "junk" emails by the foreigners. Chinese management needs to urgently train their people to fully and properly understand the protocols and practices of western business culture and corporate governance. The Chinese still lack basic understanding in proper marketing. The present mindset of these salespeople in getting overseas sales order is simply to send out a bunch of emails with minimum details and just quoting a cheap price of the product. And in many cases, these emails don't even display pictures of their products or provide a website address.

## E-commerce platform

Overseas customers often receive communications from Alibaba platform and also direct communications from the suppliers, which result in confusion and waste of time. For over 20 years as companies in China started to produce and market consumer products for the huge consumer markets, both locally and overseas, the use of e-commerce platform via the Internet was the principal marketing tool adopted. Alibaba was the dominant platform offering Internet technology to the Chinese business community; this resulted in grooming a whole generation of Chinese enterprises in doing business in a capitalist environment through the Alibaba platform. The Chinese unlike other countries did not develop their business maturity first before adopting Internet technology. The Chinese manufacturers and businessmen experienced these two components concurrently.

Therefore, when venturing out to do business directly with the western world, these Chinese manufacturers are poorly equipped to handle business dialogue with the western customers. Nor have the manufacturers adopted a proper price structure to cater for different tiers of sale prices. In other words, the price structure is more or less based solely on only the retail price of products sold via Alibaba platform.

The manufacturer is then faced with the dilemma of having to provide a satisfactory price list that has been properly structured to cater for the different tiers of marketers i.e. importer, distributor, wholesaler, and retailer. As a result, Chinese companies are finding it extremely difficult to find overseas importers / distributors and wholesalers to take on their products for distribution.

For over 20 years, the Chinese have been marketing directly to the global consumers at retail or Internet price and enjoyed the high profit margins. Now they are caught in a limbo as their earlier sales achievements made via the Internet is now a barrier to them establishing a workable distribution network in overseas countries. They have sold the products at a cheap retail / Internet price and had enjoyed the sales achieved; now there is no room left in the price list for margins for distributors and wholesalers.

Unless the manufacturers increase the retail price substantially, China will be retarded severely from expanding its marketing network globally and also weakens its price competitiveness.

## Insufficient information provided

In almost 99% of cases, the Chinese has failed front up to provide the relevant information of a particular product by way of a neatly summarized fact sheet giving full details including product reference number, plans, specifications, pictures, FOB price, shipping details, packaging, weight, etc. in a simple & concise format to customers. Such informative pamphlet can save a lot of time and miss-interpretations.

Instead, they engage in a "ping pong" exchange of un-necessary transmission of emails. This behaviour is also sometimes due to the Chinese culture where a small simple matter is made into a long and complicated one in order to make the matter look more important and complex, so that it can justify the importance of the person's position involved with foreign trade.

## Front-up payments / deposits

Last but not least, is the question as to what payments are required front-up with orders. Trade transactions are usually documented in US Currency and most Chinese suppliers request a front-up payment of 25% of the value of the sales order. However, in recent times a number of the exporters have increased the deposits required and in some cases, they are even asking for 50% front-up payments to their bank account.

These funds if paid into an independent third party's bank account i.e. lawyer's trust account where some protection may be obtained.

Where funds for orders are paid directly into the Chinese manufacturer's bank account; there is no legal protection or control over the funds once the money is paid and the security of the funds becomes at the mercy of the Chinese manufacturer.

At the moment, there is no reliable mercantile report on the credit worthiness of a Chinese company that one can obtain before doing business with that company; nor is there any legal safety net to allow a foreigner to successfully make a claim on compensation if things went wrong. Legal documents drawn up by lawyers may serve as a purpose of intent between the parties; but when it comes to going to court and getting compensation, it is whole different story. The laws in civic matters can vary greatly with each Province and also there is no uniform code in commercial law in China.

It is still common practice for the Chinese suppliers to demand a deposit front up with the FOB order. Whilst it is slightly dearer, foreigners should consider using other payment formats such as C&F, CIF, and Letter of Credit when dealing direct with China. These financial instruments would at least offer a slightly better protection for the foreigner regarding actual delivery of the products ordered before part or full payment is made which, once made may never be recovered in the event of a dispute or factory having closed down.

Orders placed through reputable e-commerce websites i.e. Alibaba may offer some protection as delivery FOB can be made guaranteed. It would be best to engage professional agents in China that can check quality, compliance, and shipping arrangements before final payment is made.

## Conclusion

International trade is becoming very competitive and a much higher benchmark of governance is now required of Chinese companies if they wish to make an inroad with the overseas market. Chinese manufacturers are improving the quality of their products, and in many cases have even surpassed western standards by their innovation, price, and quality. This is the good part of the changing tide in China trade. However, the bad tide is still lurking in the shadows in the everyday life of the Chinese, and foreigners need to take precautionary steps to mitigate such risks.

Since most trade inquires with China are mainly done via Internet with emails and mobile text messages. Proper Protocols should be set up to ensure internal checks are conducted to minimize risks.

The time-honored cultural benefits of "Guanxi" influence is absent since negotiations are done directly between the two parties electronically. There is no presence of a "face" contact involved to provide an additional form of assurance. Whilst China is rapidly changing and improving its corporate governance standard that is practiced throughout China in their dealings with foreigners, it will be quite some years before general principles of proper corporate governance would become the norm.

The warning to foreigners in the meantime is to exercise caution and conduct your due diligence investigations thoroughly and be mindful of the phrase: "prevention is better than cure". Foreign companies are also advised to seek assistance from professional Agents and Consultants who are experienced in dealing with procurement matters in China.



## About the International Trade Council

The International Trade Council (ITC) is a peak-body trade organization that provides a range of services to help exporters navigate the complex world of international trade. ITC members include startups, mid-to-large sized corporations, government export promotion agencies, and government foreign direct investment promotion agencies.

The ITC provides valuable resources and support to help exporters comply with international trade regulations, find new markets, and connect with potential buyers and partners. Through its programs and services, the ITC helps exporters access trade information, training, and market intelligence, as well as providing networking opportunities and business matchmaking services. The International Trade Council is also home to the [Go Global Awards](#), the [Global Business Confidence Survey](#), the [Quality in Business Certification](#) and a [USA Business Incubation Service](#). By leveraging the ITC's resources and expertise, exporters can increase their chances of success in the global marketplace.

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