

Working as an expat in China

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Working in China as a Western expatriate has become more common during the last ten years, but requires adaptation to local conditions even when the employer is a multinational company. Obviously the challenge is much bigger for an expat working for a Chinese company, and especially for a state-owned enterprise (SOE).

Daily life

Even in the metropolitan areas of Beijing and Shanghai, daily life is different from that in typical Western cities. Of course, this also influences the work experience. Whether it is the noise, the crowds or the "olfactory experience" in a provincial Chinese block of flats; whether it is Chinese cuisine or – at least in provincial Chinese towns – the attention that foreigners receive while they simply go window shopping; all these aspects require a degree of *laissez faire* not necessarily in-born for Western managers or their families. Some flexibility is required. Additionally, the Chinese have a different appreciation of what is private. Thus, family status and age are among the first questions to be asked by a new acquaintance. Specifically, if westerners have to rely on local translators, this can become an uncomfortable experience: imagine having a discussion with a difficult employee or your doctor via another employee.

Communication

For these reasons, even simple communication is not always straightforward and can be a big obstacle in developing mutual trust. An additional factor is the different understanding of each other's roles. Chinese employees tend to accept the statements and actions of their superiors without question – there is a lack of critical feedback. For example, if an expat manager puts an excessive workload on one of his employees, the employee is more likely to work until after midnight than to address the problem. On the other hand, a typical



Chinese employee shows only limited initiative. It is unlikely that the employee will communicate that he has spare capacity or is aware of possible improvements.

Work and private life

For western employees the limited separation between work and private life is another issue. One has to be available for even trivial telephone calls 24/7. And for Chinese employees it is not unusual to invite their superior to a game of billiards, or whatever, on a Sunday morning. The separation between family and job are not as clear as they usually are in western cultures.

Work style

In western companies the style of work involves substantial delegation of power and responsibility to lower- and mid-level managers. They have targets to be met, but are relatively free as to how to achieve these. The experience of western expats in Chinese chemical companies, for instance, is very different. In each commercial unit

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there is usually only one decision maker. In addition, in this top-down structure, micro-management is prevalent. In the words of one western chemical manager: On his own, he "could not even order a pencil". Closely related is that the system does not encourage lower-level employees to assume responsibility, and functions on a system of punishment rather than reward.

Planning

In Chinese companies planning periods are very short, and are changed very frequently. This holds both for small issues such as the timing of the next meeting as well as for more important ones such as the complete business strategy of the company (if one exists!). Furthermore, at state-owned chemical companies the targets pursued in reality are not the same as the officially stated ones, and are often not based on simple commercial considerations.

Instead of optimising profitability, the focus is on securing jobs and increasing the production capacity (and thus the importance of the company).

Generally, western expats still have consulting roles in Chinese chemical companies and thus, generally, are not part of the dominant line organisation (matrix organisations seem to be rare in Chinese chemical companies). Support from the levels above and below is often half-hearted. This limits the expat's influence and can lead to frustration – "the real work is done by the locals anyway".

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties in simple communication, the lack of transparency of the structures within the Chinese company (at least for the westerner) and the lack of measurable success, many find a few years in China a positive experience. A westerner should not necessarily believe he can succeed in a Chinese company as he would in a western one.

This article is an abridged version of one online at: www.madal-training.com. The authors would welcome feedback.

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