Expatriates Working in China Year 2015

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Literature Review

Expatriates working in China

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Introduction

Nowadays I think that having work experience in China is almost a must [at top managerial levels]. Now having spent some time in China has to be part of your CV. This has changed compared to 15 years ago when China was something different and exotic. I think going to China or India, but China especially, has become compulsory work experience. Almost compulsory. (Quoted by Rebecca in Boncori, 2013, P. 38)

The above is a reply from one of the interviewees who was an expatriate working in China. Since China began to adopt its policies of the reform and opening up to the outside world in 1978, the country is becoming more and more apparent as the ‘factory of the world’ and the ‘global manufacturing centre’ (Yeoh & Loh, 2008). Many expatriates like Rebecca reveal the insides of working in China and the obstacles foreigners may face in a new culture. It is reported in Shanghai Daily (2013), that the number of foreign citizens living in Shanghai exceeded 173,000 by the end of last year, a 6.7 percent increase compared to 2011, officials said yesterday. The burgeoning of western companies and China’s affiliations with the outside world unravels the complexity and fragility between the Chinese and the West. The Chinese are, from bitter experience, wary of the influence that foreigners bring. Contact with the outside world can bring instability and chaos, two things that most Chinese fear most of all. (Ambler, Witzel & Chao Xi, 2009).

In Chinese society, culture, values, beliefs and rules play a key component in how the Chinese people function as a collective group. Becoming an efficient and high performing expatriate in China is likely to require individuals to develop an in-depth understanding of cross-cultural matters (Boncori, 2013). Lasserre and Schutte (1995) stated that in China,
business is influenced by two main concepts, the first is a homogenous concept of social organization, and the pervasiveness of Confucian values such as hard work, thriftiness, obedience, benevolent leadership etc. It is therefore important to note the working culture in China and further research is needed to find out what are the various key business etiquettes so that foreigners entering the China market are able to assimilate and have a better working experience with their Chinese counterparts.

Previous books and research in the area of foreigners working in China have typically been either very general or focused on specific countries. Other than the studies done by (Boncori, 2013) who did qualitative interviews on Italian Expatriates in China and (Lam, 2000) who focused on qualitative interviews of thirty-six Chinese expatriates who worked as middlemen for Americans, there is limited ethnographic literature towards this topic. Thus, this literature review will leverage more on the scholarly works of the aforementioned authors as well as other journals and articles that reveal the culture and values of China. From these findings, it will allow the identification of overall trends in China’s working culture as well as future research possibilities.

**Literature Review**

In a largely competitive society, China’s fast paced working environment might seem to be a ‘Cultural Shock’, a term coined by Oberg (1960) which is used to explain ‘the frustration and confusion that result from being bombarded by uninterpretable cues’ (Adler 1981: 343).
In Fan (2000) The Classification of Chinese Culture, she highlights the cultural values which the Chinese people hold and how their beliefs and behaviour are rooted in these values. These values shape the working culture among the Chinese people and are often difficult to be understood by outsiders. This is especially so among the Westerners due to the differences in their beliefs and values. Chinese culture is more collective rather than individualistic (Ying Fan, 2000). In this sense, the interests of the group have a heavier weighting against personal gains (Boncori, 2013). Chinese workers are brought up to suppress self-interest in favour of group solidarity while expecting ‘social benefits’ in exchange for the loyalty and conformity offered (Boncori, 2013). At the same time, the Chinese are much less concerned with political and civil rights; they value individual choice and freedom of speech much less (Hong, 2015). There is strong consensus and solidarity among the Chinese people and this creates an invisible divide with the western expatriates who are more oriented towards self-expression and individual autonomy.

The term *guanxi* is a salient point to note in the everyday relationships and communication between the Chinese people. Pye (1982: 101) refers to *guanxi* as a special relationship between two people that can be best translated as ‘friendship with implications of continual exchange of favours’. According to Wong (1998), there are four main elements of *guanxi*: trust, favour, dependence and adaptation. It is not easy for outsiders especially *laowai* to learn the tricks of the trade as they are required to nurture the relationship and ‘invest’ for future use which might not be comfortable for them. Most interviewees believe that American representatives are too legalistic, not well-prepared, not good at relationship building, and arrogant. (Lam, 2000). The Chinese people are more likely to have closer relationship ties with their family, relative and friends. To cultivate and establish *guanxi* (Boncori, 2013) with
the right people is difficult and much more challenging for a foreigner as they are *shengren* which requires much more time and commitment in establishing relations.

Moreover, within the *guanxi* system, *mianzi* is also an important aspect in everyday business practices. The word mianzi, refers to the concept of “face” [which] refers to the respect, pride, and dignity of an individual as a consequence of his or her position in society (Tse et al., 1988: 83). In china, taking into account mianzi in everyday practices is very important to maintain group harmony and effective relationships at work (Boncori, 2013). *Mianzi* is a driving force in establishing effective *guanxi*. The challenge for expatriates is the unclear line between giving too much and giving too little. With little experience and knowledge of the Chinese culture, expatriates in China will need to research more on the norms and expectations to avoid any loss of face or offending of their Chinese counterparts.

Using quantitative approaches, both Boncori (2013) and Fan (2000), have identified traits and values for expatriates and the Chinese people respectively. These findings show reinforce the stark differences between the West and the Chinese. In (Boncori, 2013), it states the loss of any feeling of western superiority and arrogance and Abandonment of their western mentality as the top 5 traits expatriates need to have to be successful in China. This is based on the clear assumption that Western beliefs are at the flip side of the coin as compared to the Chinese beliefs. In Fan (2000)’s list, I have picked a few values to show the differences with the West, namely, conformity, deference to authority and attaching importance to long-lasting relationship not gains. It is particularly important for team leaders with international experience to have a higher degree of cultural awareness and empathy in order to reduce conflict, improve the dynamics of the team, avoid biases and establish a common ground
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(Boncori, 2013). With cultural differences between expatriates and their Chinese colleagues, it is necessary for both parties to take steps towards understanding the other.

Another key component of culture is language. Language in China forms not only the foundation of their culture but is also a problematic maze of meanings. Not being able to speak Chinese while in China is almost like having a handicap, quoted by Giovanni in Boncori (2013). Imperfect translation and interpretation are generally regarded as a shared problem. These problems often cause misunderstandings, conflict, and failure in negotiations. (Lam, 2000). Expatriates who are not given prior language training will find themselves caught in an uncomfortable situation in China where language and gestures have different meanings which may get lost in translation. This problem would be even more so when it comes to the guanxi and mianzi where translation will not be able to cover related nuances of meaning and cultural connotations (Blenkinsopp and Pajouh, 2010).

**Conclusion**

The research in this literature review suggests the challenges and difficulties of westerners and outsiders in the Chinese working environment. The trend is consistent with other scholarly articles which emphasize the polarities between the Chinese and the West in terms of their beliefs, values and behavior. There has been a growing number of research done in business relations and culture in China and it is most likely going to garner more sociological interests in this period where China is growing exponentially and becoming more globalized. However, majority of the literature on this topic gives a generalized and somewhat xenophobic view towards the outsiders (westerners) and there is little evidence to show the positive side of foreigners working in Chinese society (if any). Perhaps, for future research, it would be
sociologically interesting to explore the working culture in the perspective of the Chinese people towards westernized Chinese-speaking expatriates.
References


