



Building Bridges between Peoples & Cultures - An Interview with Ms Xiao-Hua Shen

On 17 February 2006, Intellitrain was privileged to have Ms Xiao-Hua Shen from Beijing conduct a riveting 2-hour talk for our clients and partners. Xiao-Hua is an expert trainer and consultant in cross-cultural communication, language & business communication. A Chinese-American who grew up in China but has spent 20 years living in Europe and the US, she brings her unique experience and perspective to bear in helping the Chinese and foreigners to China understand, respect and bridge their cultural and communication differences.

Before the talk, we caught up with her for a short interview:

June:

Good afternoon Xiao-Hua. Perhaps you could give us some insight into your background and how you became involved in training and consulting in cross-cultural communication, language & business communication?

Xiao-Hua:

I never thought I would take up cross-cultural training as my new career direction. I credit this decision to my last work experience with UNESCO (THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATION SCIENCE AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION). After working with people from different countries in UN, I was finally convinced that cross-cultural competence is the basis for people from different cultures to work effectively together. Without this competence, we will constantly end up with misunderstandings, hurt feelings, inefficiency, prejudice, discrimination, and conflicts. Cross-cultural competence won't solve all problems, of course, but it can provide the insight into many intercultural problems between people, and therefore pave the ground for possible cross-cultural understanding and solutions to conflicts.

I was also led to this decision by my own joys and tears experienced over the past 30 years or so living and working in various parts of the world. I was among the very first Chinese students sent by the government to study in the West in 1978 after the Cultural Revolution. China was open to the world for the first time after many years of isolation from the rest of the world. I still remember how shocking everything was to me when I first arrived in England. Busy streets made me panic. Compliments from English boys made me blush. A minor complaint from my English flatmates made me hide in my room for many days. A joke like "If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" from my landlord made me decide to quit the rented room...

I suffered a great deal due to the lack of cross-cultural understanding. Now I see many people are struggling with this cultural blindness. For sure, I feel the passion inside me to help people overcome cultural barriers and get connected with each other. I also see need out there in every corner of the world now that the global economy requires more and more people to work with each other.

June:

What are some of the key challenges for foreigners who wish to do business in China or with Chinese parties?

Xiao-Hua:

Apart from the inevitable challenges everyone faces as a foreigner doing business in a different country, I need to add onto the list another two cultural challenges especially relevant in a country like China:

1. Cultural diversity: When learning about Chinese culture, one very often treats it as a mono-culture. Although China is not as multi-cultural as America in the same sense, the country has many strong diverse sub-cultures and regional differences between north and south, east and west. It can be dangerous to assume that people follow the same business protocol and practice within such a vast country as China.
2. The cultural complexity: It is the characteristic of Chinese culture now at this stage of history. On one hand, it is getting pride from its past, and yet pushing ahead with its modernization; on the other hand, it is drawing insight from its tradition, and yet sponging in wisdom from the west. Although the tradition is far from dying, the Chinese culture is becoming complex with the adopted parts of Western cultural values and practices.

June:

One of the oft-quoted challenges is navigating the quagmire of governmental regulations and processes at both provincial and state levels in China. What advice can you give to assist overseas investors and business people in this regard?

Xiao-Hua:

The Chinese government has been making genuine efforts to improve its regulations and processes. Progress is inevitable and credit should be given. However, due to the nature of the legal structure in China and the inherent limitations of the political system, the enforcement of regulations and processes is often challenging and disappointing. One can soon find out that the same regulations may be interpreted and applied in a different manner from one region to another or at the state level versus the local level. This flexibility in interpretation and inconsistency in enforcement presents one of the biggest challenges, but at the same, provides opportunities to others as well.

June:

More specifically, what do you see as some of the key challenges for "fly-in fly-out" Singaporeans who wish to do business in China or with Chinese parties? And are these challenges different for those Singaporeans who wish to live and work in China?

Xiao-Hua:

For Singaporeans who "fly-in fly-out" of China, they face even bigger challenges in some aspects. As their time there is short, once they commit any cultural "sins", they may not have time to notice it let alone make up for it in time. Some of the cultural mistakes may be devastating. Therefore, to know the cultural differences and learn to communicate across this cultural gap is just as important to them as to those who need to live and work in China for an extensive period of time. And because of the brief time in China, I believe some basic protocols and etiquette in business are among the essentials to acquire before one's departure for China.

Once you decide to live and work in China for a longer period of time, you need commit to learning the culture in depth. The longer you stay, the more you will experience and need to handle more complex aspects of the local culture. So to survive with a smile rather than linger on with a grin, you need to learn not only how to understand the host country's culture but also to synergise with it whenever appropriate. Only those who synergise their own cultural perspective with the new culture successfully can develop a sharper and stronger edge in their vision and in their actions.

June:

Are there any advantages or disadvantages that Singaporeans may possess over others in doing business in China? Are these advantages sustainable over the middle to long term or do you see others equally capable of learning them?

Xiao-Hua:

Yes, Singaporeans, especially Chinese Singaporeans, have a lot of advantages over others in doing business in China. These include the common language heritage, common cultural heritage, and shared ancestry and history. The Chinese culture makes a big distinction between *ingroup* and *outgroup*. All these shared heritages sufficiently qualify every Chinese Singaporean as a member of this "*ingroup*". This membership gives them many written and unwritten privileges over others. When used appropriately and creatively, this emotional and psychological linkage can open the door, pave the way, and render the result in one's business venture.

But, every coin has two sides to it. Because of this *ingroup* association with the Singaporeans, Chinese people normally expect Singaporeans to be more in tune with the Chinese culture and practice. As a result, their expectation for your cultural conformity is higher and as a result, their feelings can be hurt more deeply once you violate the cultural norm. I call this a "**cultural pillow**" which comforts you and a "**cultural trap**" that endangers you at the same time.

Part of the Singaporean's advantage is inherent and will be sustained as surely as the yellow skin and dark eyes we have in common. For example, there is the enlarged "brotherhood" sentiment the Chinese extend to all the overseas Chinese no matter where you live on this planet.

June:

In our local press recently, there were some negative reports over the behaviour of some Mainland Chinese both domestically and overseas. These reports cited behaviour such as spitting, shouting and squatting in public as projecting a bad impression of the Chinese overseas as well as damaging to the inbound tourism trade. What are your views on this? If you do see this as an area requiring improvement, what are some possible solutions?

Xiao-Hua:

I have to admit that the poor public conduct by some Chinese people is really damaging to the whole image of China and Chinese race. I am impressed by the orderliness in the society and respectful public conduct in Singapore. This is one of the areas China has a lot to learn from Singapore so as to establish a system that the Chinese people can eventually rid themselves of some of the poor habits such as spitting, shouting and squatting in public, the range of habits that don't fit in with the expectation for a civilized and modern society.

As for solutions, we should come over to Singapore and consult your people and your government.

For information about Ms Xiao-Hua Shen and her training and consulting business in cross-cultural communication, language & business communication, please visit www.waystone.net.