



WEARING CHINESE GLASSES: HOW (NOT) TO GO BROKE IN CHINESE ASIA

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GREG BISSKY

Book Design by Greg Bissky
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Wearing Chinese Glasses: How not to Go Broke in Chinese Asia
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To

three generations of women in my life,
Elsie May, Carol and Katya May,
mother, wife and daughter.

It wouldn't have been as much fun without you.

Thanks ladies.

About The Author

Greg Bissky arrived in Chinese Asia in early 1985, planning to stay for eighteen months then to return to Canada for a Ph.D. His plan changed, and, to his surprise, he returned home fourteen years later, bringing Chinese wife, young daughter and list of Chinese clients with him. He now lives in Canada but works in Chinese Asia, traveling often and living in the Chinese time zone.

Greg knows the Chinese like few others. Business owner as well as consultant, he negotiates and implements contracts, leading region-wide productivity-improvement projects (reengineering, performance management and balanced scorecard). He is as comfortable on the factory floor as in the boardroom, and as familiar setting region-wide strategy as he is implementing it at the lowest levels. Greg has been there and done that.

An accomplished teacher, since 1988 he has taught Chinese his 3-day *Logical Thinking and Communication* workshop. Teaching logic gives him a unique view into Chinese thinking and communication. Greg also teaches cross-culture to Chinese and Westerners, teaching Westerners how to overcome Chinese complaints and Chinese how to deal with Western complaints. Working both sides of the street is a virtuous circle: the more he teaches one side the more he learns about the other.

Greg is an optimist, and believes that working with the Chinese is not as mysterious as many think. If you know how to make a marriage work or how to make a best friend in your hometown, you already know how to succeed in Chinese Asia. The key is the ability to *see* things as Chinese see them. A cultural optometrist, he wrote this book to give you a pair of Chinese glasses. Don't wear them and you do business in China blind, and that is never good.

Greg never did the Ph.D., attaining instead an MBA (Masters of Business in Asia).

Contents

Preface

i

Part 1: Getting Chinese Glasses (Learning the Rules)

1. My First Pair of Chinese Glasses 1
an unexpected 14 years in Chinese Asia • my first Chinese glasses • accepting three invitations to dinner • what is a Westerner • where is Chinese Asia • a common language is not enough • disagreeing without disagreeing • objections vs. disagreements
2. It Is All About How You See 15
'going broke' relationships • like satisfying customers • some good news • Chinese are not a mystery or a puzzle • a word about learning • you need more than tips and suggestions • don't try to become Chinese • Chinese are the home team
3. In China, History Is Now 25
China is unique • the China effect • the superior Chinese • everlasting China • Westerners and the end of everlasting China • missionaries • traders • diplomats • cultures clash • China too successful to change • China unravels • Japan and China: two ways to modernize
4. Should You Market or Sell Messages? 53
the audience is more important than the speaker • difference between selling and marketing messages • selling your message • assumptions are dangerous • who decides what is reasonable • marketing your message • faxing frustrations • which way is right • marketing and communication
5. What is Chinese Culture Anyway? 73
are we all the same • tends to • what makes us Western • what makes a Western hero • initiative and mistakes • what makes Chinese, Chinese • goals and rules • lessons from a Chinese hero • two meanings for relationships • the dynastic cycle • guanxi, the un-relationship • law or relationships
6. Rules of Communication 101
Western: be truthful • makes things relevant • offer information freely • don't make people guess • get to/keep on the point • make disagreements openly • Chinese: don't disagree openly • don't embarrass people • don't ask questions • communicate negatives indirectly • garbage in, garbage out • content, delivery and culture

Section 2: Using Chinese Glasses (Applying the Rules)

7. Communicating and Building Relationships 133

Western polite and mixed messages • no sarcasm in China • no Yes or No in Chinese • but he didn't disagree • living with uncertainty • every word has meaning • be direct • high and low context languages • but their answer was irrelevant • make one point at a time • listen with more than ears

8. Managing and Motivation 151

three times to a meeting • good and bad meetings • getting honest opinions • alternate ways to get input • separate the person from the problem • using a go-between • make it a public secret • give one job at a time • initiative vs. 'more better' • measuring performance

9. Contracts and Negotiation 171

translating ideas and actions • Westerners are selfish • what is a contract • contracts and Western business • marriage and Chinese business • Chinese and contracts • legal remedies • negotiation stages • when problems happen • hidden back office problems • corruption Chinese style • slow for sure

10. Becoming A Good Westerner 192

has China changed • have the Chinese changed • changes in Chinese Asia • continuity in Chinese Asia • modern China: change or continuity • not my Chinese • good, bad and ugly Westerners • become a cute barbarian • a good Westerner • living with frustration

Endnotes 207

Maps, Diagrams, Tables, Case Studies and Tips

Map 1: China's Isolation.....	28
Diagram 1: Chinese World View.....	31
Diagram 2: Chinese Fax.....	66
Diagram 3: Western Fax.....	67
Diagram 4: Western History.....	77
Diagram 5: Chinese History.....	82
Diagram 6: Law and Relationships.....	92,176
Table 1: What is a Westerner? Where is Chinese Asia?.....	15
Table 2: Objection vs. Disagreement.....	23

Table 3: Japan and China: Two Routes to Modernization	50
Table 4: Selling Your Message	59
Table 5: Marketing Your Message	65
Table 6: Marketing and Communication	70
Table 7: Tends To	75
Table 8: Western Rules of Communication	102
Table 9: Chinese Rules of Communication	107
Table 10: Two Parts to Every Message	119
Table 11: Western and Chinese Rules of Communication	121
Table 12: No Sarcasm in Chinese Asia	127
Table 13: Language Systems	133
Table 14: Peeling the Chinese Onion	136
Table 15: Requests You Don't Want To Do	142
Table 16: Listen With More Than Your Ears	150
Table 17: China's vs. Western Ideas of Business Relations	177
Table 18: Marry Your Business Partner?	184
Table 19: When Do You Negotiate?	186
Table 20: Is Chinese Asia Changing?	195
Table 21: Good, Bad and Ugly Westerners	198
Case Study 1: Western Polite	126
Case Study 2: Didn't We Decide That?	129,130
Case Study 3: What Does She Really Think?	137
Case Study 4: What Do They Always Agree?	155
Communication Principles	204
Greg's Tips	204
Rules To Live By	204

It is only the wisest
and the most stupid
who cannot change

Confucius

PREFACE

For Those Who Just Want Things To Work

Friends, clients and family pushed me for years to write this book. My standard excuse was I never had time. A shift in career focus a few years back changed that. For my 50th birthday present to myself I stopped leading projects in Chinese Asia and returned to my first love, cross-culture.

Leading projects is game for youngsters, especially when you live 15 times zones from your team. No more working Chinese hours and two-hour conference calls at 3AM, no more trying to cope with outrageous policies, decisions and deadlines made in a HQ office 5000 comfortable miles away from the Chinese front lines, no more struggling to get Chinese from different departments, locations and countries to work together, or work period. Held responsible for results with nothing but the power of persuasion to force action is ... tiring. A job best left to the young.

I had time on my side, finally a 9-5 job, comfy in my home office. I had time to write. Sure I did. I discovered old clients don't give up easily, and *no* projects became *few* projects. But I still had time, loads of it. Where to start, what to write? Easy I thought. Just go to my "ideas" file, scribbles made on scraps of paper over the years, ideas I'd had in airport lounges, dinners-for-one or boring meeting. What I found were strange drawings and cryptic sentences that no doubt were brilliant when I'd made them but now were just so many lines and words. They just added to my confusion. Where to start?

This took the better part of a year, puttering, stuck in neutral. Then a brainstorm: why not write like a teacher, not a writer. Ah.

Something I knew how to do. My focus on teaching explains the book. I have treated the pages as minutes, parts of an all-day class I am teaching. I have looked at the book exactly as I look at a room full of people—I may never see them (you) again, and this is my one chance to pass on what I know.

I dislike jargon. In Graduate school we students were asked what we planned to do with our degree. Trembling, we said pollster, organizer, aide, teacher, even lawyer, all respectable, predictable *Political Science* (my department) professions. My turn: “I’d like to write a magazine on international politics sold beside the tabloids in supermarket lineups. I can explain international politics using backyard politics as examples, a neighbor’s tree on your property, fixing a common fence, loud music at night. The principles are the same.” Professors were not amused. I have followed that approach, using everyday examples to explain complicated subjects, in everything I have done since, including this book.

Every day airplanes land in Chinese Asian airports full of Westerners who just want to make a buck. Every day the internet hums with emails from back office staff who just want to make sense of the latest message from their Chinese partner, supplier or vendor. Every day Western managers of Western companies in Chinese Asia just want to figure out how to manage and motivate their Chinese organization. This book is for them, the Westerners who just want to make what they are doing **work**.

Putting my ‘teach, not write’ focus and my everyday examples and language together explains the conversational tone I hope I have managed throughout the book. As one kind friend put it, “It is just like you are standing there in front of me speaking the book.” That familiarity is certainly what I have tried to achieve: instead of just ‘reading’ the book, I have tried to make it as if you and I are just talking about things Chinese. To paraphrase Martha Stewart, I hope you consider that a Good Thing ... especially when I ask questions.

Finally, I am the first to recognize that I repeat myself, explaining the same key points in different ways in different chapters. Blame the teacher in me, my desire to make sure that you leave the class (er, book) with a pair of Chinese glasses of your

own. This is a book on the fundamentals, Chinese 101, and your understanding of certain themes is far more important than wading through a long list of specific techniques, strategies or dos and don'ts. My hope is that after this book, after you've put on your Chinese glasses, you will be better able to benefit from learning advanced techniques, the dos and don'ts. I certainly was.

Greg Bissky

Room 901, Hotel Royal, Hsin Chu, Taiwan

November 1, 2005

CHAPTER ONE

My First Pair Of Chinese Glasses

The plane rolled to a stop at Chiang Kai-Shek airport in Taiwan and the fasten seatbelt light went off. People surged out of their seats, opening overhead bins, hoisting luggage and struggling to be first off the plane. I sat, nervous and unsure of what to do next. It was just before midnight on January 10, 1985, and here I was, my first time to Asia. Alone. I did not know one person, could not speak Chinese and had no idea what to do next, how to get to Taipei or even where to stay that night. Making things worse, I had bought a one-way ticket across the Pacific. I did have money in my pocket, but not enough to buy a ticket home. I was not nervous. I was scared.

Chinese friends and professors at my universities had told me not to worry, that the Chinese were very friendly and that it was easy to find work and to make friends. They were right. Phew. I was teaching English three days after arrival. After three weeks I was living with a Chinese family and had made two groups of Chinese friends. I started to relax. Life was good. It did not last.

In the sixth week I deeply offended the family and one group of friends, and had no idea why or how I had done it. I was embarrassed but even more I was confused. What had just happened? Answering that question changed my life and is the real start of this book, and my career. Not knowing what happened bothered me for two years; it took me that long to figure it out. By then I was hooked on trying to understand the Chinese-Western divide.

My original plan was to stay one year in Taiwan then six months in China to learn the language, then to return to the West

to do a Ph.D. in modern Chinese politics. Like all plans it changed, and I ended up living in Chinese Asia for 14 years. Why? Within six months I realized what I had learned in books about the Chinese was ... not quite right. The deeper I got into life in Chinese Asia the more I realized that life on the Chinese street was different from life described in books about the Chinese. Not wrong exactly, just not quite right.

An Unexpected Fourteen Years in Chinese Asia

I decided as my goal was to learn how the Chinese *really were* then to act as bridge between West and East, the smarter thing to do was to learn about the Chinese by living with them, not by returning to the West and learning from books. I gave up the Ph.D. idea and plunged into life in Taiwan. I married a Chinese woman then divorced her. I started my own company and built it to 25 people then went spectacularly bankrupt. I started over with nothing in a new career as a management consultant/trainer, and built a successful niche firm that has led to travel and work throughout Chinese Asia, Europe and North America. I married another Chinese woman and had a daughter. In 1998 I moved our little family back to Canada but kept working in Chinese Asia, traveling frequently and working the Chinese time zone. Now past the 20-year mark, I look back and smile at that scared young man on the airplane, wondering what would happen once he got the courage to get off the plane. Life ended up good.

It was not always good. During my years in Chinese Asia I had incredible highs but even more incredible lows. I made almost every mistake imaginable, found myself in difficult, often bizarre situations. A client sued me and, alone and in Chinese, I defended myself (successfully) from a charge of criminal fraud. I ran afoul of Chinese gangsters over money borrowed to keep my first company afloat. For a friend I organized an all-day outdoor rock festival, one of the first ever in Taiwan. I hired the bands, arranged MTV to cover the event, begged (and bribed) various levels of government to let us use a municipal stadium, worked with artists and PR types to design the posters, logos and bus ads, planned and made proposals to potential corporate sponsors then baby-sat them once signed, and hired and managed the security and event

staff. A huge effort, the concert finally went ahead, only to be *ty-phooned* by Tim. As concerts should, it ended with a bang, just one band early. The grand finale was Typhoon Tim flying the stage decorations up in the air then crashing them down on top of the drummer. Spectacular.

There are more tales to tell but you get the picture. I can't say I did it all, no one can, but I did do a lot in my years in Chinese Asia. I learned from each experience, often the type of lessons that money can't buy (but you sure can pay for!). Each lesson, each mistake (and each success) added to my understanding of how Chinese think, work and communicate, what motivates them and what turns them off, what works and what doesn't. I still don't have 20:20 vision wearing Chinese glasses, but each lesson helped me see a little bit more clearly. What I saw through my Chinese glasses helped me understand *why* things happened as they did; without understanding that I surely would have burnt out early as most Westerners do. Without Chinese glasses, I never would have stayed as long as I did.

Getting My First Chinese Glasses

How I got my first pair of Chinese glasses is a story in itself. I had been in Taiwan about two years and had just started my first business. I was in a taxi heading to a meeting. As usual, the taxi driver was auditioning for *Death Race 2000* and I was cowering in the backseat (my plea to drive slower only made him drive faster). He ran a red light and ... I saw the car coming and ... my life flashed in front of my eyes, certain I was going to die. Somehow, he avoided an accident. As my heart raced and I caught my breath, a thought popped into my head, that 'Chinese have their own rules for doing things, for acting and for communicating, and that these rules are different than my (Western) rules.' It sounds simple, but that thought changed my life. In retrospect, I should have tipped the taxi driver.

'Hmm,' I thought, 'if Chinese have their own way of thinking, of looking at things, then in order to understand them I need to learn how Chinese see things.' There they were, my first pair of Chinese glasses. Once I put them on I began to see things in a new way, began to understand why this had happened, why that

hadn't worked and why I had made so many mistakes. It was an amazing if also humbling experience. Best of all, I began to understand how I had offended my Chinese family and friends way back at the beginning, and was finally able to remove the pebble in my shoe that had been bothering me for two years. Figuring out what had happened changed my feelings towards the Chinese and put me on a new path, a path I still travel. I start every workshop, speech or discussion, for Chinese and for Westerners, with this example, the story of three invitations to dinner.

Accepting Three Invitations To Dinner

I was in Taiwan for six weeks, living with a Chinese family and with two groups of Chinese friends. All conversations below happened in English; after only six weeks of Chinese lessons all I could say that Chinese understood was, "I don't understand." Chinese New Years (CNY) was coming soon. I knew it was important, the most important Chinese cultural holiday of the year.

CNY dominated the conversations, them explaining New Year's traditions and me comparing their traditions to Western Christmas traditions. There are an amazing amount of similarities, like special foods and music, decorating the house and gift giving. Each conversation followed the same pattern, with my friends or the father of my Chinese family; during each I asked similar questions and received similar answers.

Sometime during each conversation the subject of CNY Eve came up. I was told New Year's Eve was the most important night of the (14-day) holiday, that this was the night when the family **had** to be together for dinner. Each group told me that there were no stores open on New Year's Eve, no restaurants open, nowhere for me to eat dinner, a situation that would last for 3-4 days. Intrigued and eager to make friends, I hoped one of the groups or the Chinese father would invite me for dinner.

Before I go on, a question. Say I am in your hometown during Christmas, alone in a hotel. Being nice, you think no one should be alone at Christmas, so you decide to invite me to join your family for Christmas dinner. How would you invite me? Not would you

phone or ask me face to face, but what words would you say to invite me?

Being polite, you would probably start by asking if I was doing anything that night. Discovering I was free you would likely say something like, “Well Greg, no one should be alone at Christmas. Would you like to join my family for Christmas dinner?” This is a yes/no question, a question with only three possible answers: ‘yes, I’d love to,’ ‘no, I can’t,’ or ‘I am not sure right now; I will call you tomorrow and let you know.’ Every Western invitation uses a yes/no question format, includes a ‘would you like to?’ type of sentence. It’s black and white: without a yes/no question there is no invitation, period. Westerners can hint about an invitation, sure, but the invitation itself must use a direct yes/no question. No yes/no question, no invitation, no exceptions.

What is a Westerner?

By Westerner I mean people born and educated in Europe, Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand. It has nothing to do with skin color or ethnic background. Anyone can become a Westerner.

Where is Chinese Asia?

Chinese Asia includes the four Chinas, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, and, as far as communication and most values, beliefs and actions are concerned, Korea and Japan as well.

Are there differences between Americans, English, French and Dutch, or between China, Singapore and Taiwan Chinese, or between Chinese, Japanese and Korean? Yes, of course. Nevertheless, on the subjects in this book, especially communication, these groups are far more similar than different.

Table 1: What is a Westerner? Where is Chinese Asia?

Back to the story. After each group told me there were no restaurants or stores open on New Year’s Eve, each then asked if I was doing anything that night. Expectant that an invitation would soon follow I eagerly answered no, that I was free that night. Each group then told me something about what would happen at their homes that night, how much fun CNY Eve would be. By now I was on the edge of my chair, waiting for the question, ‘Would you like to ...?’ Waiting to hear it, jump up and say Yes! But the question never came. No one, not friend nor father, asked anything like ‘Would you like to’ I was never able to jump up and say Yes.

I was confused. It was almost like the Chinese were *playing* with me, getting me all excited about an invitation ... then not in-

viting me. I knew I still had a lot to learn though, and decided maybe there was some tradition that said only family could join for New Year's dinner, that my friends were just being polite to me, something like that. Whatever, the morning of Chinese New Year's Eve I woke up with nowhere to eat dinner that night. I figured I would just buy some chips and beer and eat alone in my room. (Pre- 7/11 Chinese convenience stores are another tale.)

The telephone rang at 11:00am. It was my Group A friends (to make things clear I call them my Group A and Group B friends). The conversation went, "Greg we will pick you up for dinner at 6:00 tonight." Their meaning was not, 'Dinner is at 6:00. Can you come?' It was, '[Greg, we've already invited you, you've already said yes] we are now confirming the pickup time.'

I was both surprised and confused, but kept both to myself. I answered, "6:00. Great." I put the phone down, lit a *Long Life* cigarette and thought, 'When did they invite me? When did I say yes?' I was happy I had somewhere to eat dinner that night, but, still, when did they invite me? When did I say yes? I thought over all of our conversations but with no success: I could not recall any invitation, or where I had said Yes to anything. 'Oh well,' I thought, 'I must have missed something. No big deal. At least I have somewhere to eat dinner tonight!' I finished the cigarette and put it out happy, thinking about going out and buying some flowers. You can't go to dinner without a gift.

I stayed happy for 30 minutes, until the telephone rang again. It was my Group B friends. "Greg we will pick you up for dinner at 6:30 tonight." Huh? Group B's call was not to invite me. Like Group A, both their invitation and my acceptance seemed (to them) to be a done deal. This call was just to set a time and place for pick up. Huh?

I had to say something; I now was going somewhere else so I had to speak up, plus I was confused. "James, I'm sorry, I can't go with you tonight; I'm going somewhere else."

"But we invited you Greg and you said yes." Huh?!? Just when were these invitations happening?!? When was I saying yes?

A few more words and I hung up, more than embarrassed. I knew all about the Chinese opinion that Westerners are impolite,

the 'ugly Westerner,' and was determined never to be ugly. Yet here I was, being the ugliest of Westerners possible, accepting an invitation *to the most important night of the year* and then, at the absolute last moment, saying, 'oh yeah, sorry, I have decided to go somewhere else instead.' A long way from home, lonely and desperate to make friends, I had just done something unlikely to gain new friends. I lit another Long Life cigarette, sat back and tried to puzzle it out. *What* had happened? *How* had it happened?

I went over every conversation with both groups. I had beers with both, but used to play rugby and I knew how to drink. There was no way that I was so drunk I missed an invitation, not one I had been fishing for. Certainly not twice! It was not a language problem; sure, they spoke 'Chinglish' (Chinese English) but it was good Chinglish and I understood every word. I was 100% sure that no one had invited me to dinner, absolutely certain there was never a chance to say 'Yes.' I sat there in the living room, chain smoking, trying to figure it out. A bad situation, right? It was about to get worse.

The father of my Chinese family had good English, and had listened to my side of both telephone conversations. As I sat chain smoking and scratching my thinning hair he came up to me and, with a real long face, said, "But Greg, you said you were having dinner with us tonight." Huh?!? What!?!

Not once, not twice, but *three* times I had been invited to the most important dinner of the year. All three times the Chinese thought I had understood the invitation and had clearly said Yes. In all three times not only did I not know I had been invited, *I had no idea I had said Yes!* How did that happen? Why did that happen? These questions plagued me for two years. Not until I put on my first pair of Chinese glasses did I even begin to answer them.

So, what happened? I pose this question to my Chinese and Western workshop students. Westerners usually look up with a blank expression; most have no idea. Those with the most wrinkles on their China hands sometimes suggest it happened because of culture and Chinese being polite, but that's as far as they go. The question and the example puzzle Westerners. Interesting though, when I ask if anyone has a similar type of experience in

Chinese Asia a few always raise their hands. Chinese are a little more forthcoming but still dance around the subject, offering the same ‘because of culture’ suggestions. The best answer, that I had not say no. “True,” I replied, “but how could I say No when there was no invitation, no yes/no question to say No to?” No answer.

A Common Language Is Not Enough

I answer the ‘what happened’ question in detail later in the book; for now let me just stress once again that it was not a language problem, i.e., not a grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary problem. It was a ‘way language is used’ problem. This is a crucial distinction.

People think all that you need for successful cross-culture communication is a language in common. Any language works, as long as both parties understand it. Without a language in common (or a translator, another subject covered later in the book) you can’t do business. While body language can work for a bar-type conversation, it is impossible to negotiate the terms and conditions of a contract without spoken/written language.

When cross-culture communication problems happen—like Smith-Chen in the next chapter—both Westerners and Chinese tend to think it is because their language skills are not enough. Language skills are important, true, and poor skills often do cause communication problems, but most cross-culture communication problems come from using language the wrong way, not bad spelling, grammar or pronunciation.

Every culture has unique Rules of Communication, a set of Rules on proper language use. We learn these Rules as children from parents and teachers, learn how to be polite when communicating. Once out in the real world the Rules determine how we communicate with coworkers, bosses, friends and family. The best way to introduce the Rules of Communication concept to you is to examine the difference between Chinese and Western Rules about an everyday issue, what to do when you don’t know something.

The Western Rules of Communication in this case is ‘ask questions if you don’t understand,’ the Chinese Rule is ‘don’t let people know you don’t understand something.’ I see the effects of

this Rule every time I teach a class or lead a meeting. Westerners raise their hands often, usually not embarrassed to ask questions in front of others. Chinese tend not to raise their hands, even when I ask if there are any questions. Instead, Chinese wait until a break and then, alone with me, ask a question.

This Rule has a dramatic effect on how Westerners manage meetings in Chinese Asia (and many other areas as well). The Westerner (usually the boss) makes a point or outlines a policy and asks if there are any questions. If no one asks a question she assumes that everyone understands and/or agrees, so moves on to the next point. After the meeting the Chinese attendees meet and ask each other, "What do you think she meant by that? What do you think she wants us to do?" If the Westerner is lucky, and creates the opportunity by making herself available, the Chinese will come by themselves to ask a question in private. If unlucky, say she leaves right away and doesn't create an opportunity for Chinese to speak in private, the Chinese will not ask a question. This creates two ways to lose: the Chinese will be unsure what to do (so may do the wrong things) and the Westerner will think the Chinese know what to do (so will not think to offer help or further explanations).

This is the start of a 'going broke' relationship. What will likely happen when the Western boss discovers the Chinese are not doing the right thing ... as they *agreed* to do (silence means Yes in the West)? The boss will ask why. The Chinese answer, 'I didn't understand what to do,' will not be very satisfying. Their answer to the next question, 'Why didn't you ask me,' likely an embarrassed silence or a sheepish 'I don't know,' will be less satisfying. Relationships need trust to succeed, and the Western boss might start to wonder if she could trust Chinese staff to ask questions if they did not understand something. If the Westerner forces the issue, say making a big fuss about asking questions and such, especially (as usually happens) in a group situation so that everyone gets embarrassed, Chinese might in turn start not to trust the Westerner as 'she doesn't respect our feelings.'

I examine how to deal – as best you can – with this situation in a later chapter. For now I just want you to notice that this 'no

questions' problem has nothing to do with language skills. Both sides understood the words said, they just had different ideas about how to use language to deal with asking and answering questions. The Westerner thought questions should be asked openly, Chinese thought questions should be asked in private. Neither side was wrong, they just used their own Rules to communicate, not the other sides' Rules. They wore their own glasses, not the other culture's.

This small example illustrates the key problem in West-East communication. Unaware of the Chinese way of using language, of the Chinese Rules of Communication, Westerners listen to spoken words with Western ears, read written messages with Western eyes and supply meaning to words by applying Western Rules of how language is used. Chinese do the same, only with Chinese ears, eyes and thinking. Both sides use only their own glasses. Still confused? Here is another example, another mistake of mine. Sigh.

Disagreeing Without Disagreeing

After about two years in Taiwan I was ready (so I thought) to start my own business, offering high-end, professional business English, management training and management consulting. A management consultant only really needs two things to be successful, a tie and a briefcase. The client has everything else; the consultant just takes the client's information, repackages it then sells it back to the client. The ties and briefcase are needed for appearances: you make a wrong first impression walking into the client's office in a T-shirt with your papers in a plastic, supermarket bag. I already had a tie. This is the story of buying my first briefcase.

First, let me ask you question. Say you and your wife (or husband) were shopping. You choose a briefcase to buy and ask her opinion. She *totally disagrees* with your choice, and wants to *make sure* you *don't* buy it. How does she tell you not to buy it? Does she simply hint the 'don't buy' message, hoping you figure out what she means, or does she come right out and say some type of a clear, "I don't think you should buy it" direct sentence?

Most Westerners say their (Western) wife or husband would disagree openly, using some type of a direct sentence. It might start out being quite polite, maybe some hints about not to buy it. If the hints were not understood though, direct words would follow. If it is important to them that you don't buy it, your spouse will eventually be clear and direct with disagreement. Why?

In the West more important than being polite is being clear: results matter more than form or style. The spouse will judge communication success by whether you understand the message—did you buy the briefcase or not—not by how polite the message was. The stronger your spouse disagrees the clearer disagreement will be. No matter the final words used, one thing is sure: before finished, you will know your spouse thinks you should not buy the briefcase. Disagreement would be clear.

On with the story. It was a momentous time for me, about to start my first business and just recently married. My Chinese wife was a graduate of Taiwan Normal University, English Department, and was a High School English teacher. You would think this meant her English was good, but ... let me just say her knowledge of grammar was better than her spoken English (a common combination). To help her improve her spoken English (to talk to my family and friends) we normally spoke English to each other, as we did in this story.

My wife and I went to a local leather-goods store. While I looked at briefcases, she examined the purses. Finding what I liked I called her over, showed her my choice and asked, "What do you think?" She looked at the price tag, then at the price tags on other briefcases, and replied, "It's more expensive than the other ones, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I don't think that is most important." I explained why, that it was only a little bit more expensive than the others but was better quality and would last longer, thus a better value. I added that it was also a successful-looking briefcase, important in creating that key first impression. After I finished explaining, I asked her what she thought now. "It's pretty small isn't it?"

"Yes, that is one reason I want it." I said that no matter the size you always fill your briefcase (or purse), making a large brief-

case a heavy briefcase, which I didn't want. Adding some humor, I then explained another point in favor of a small briefcase, that tends to be true, the higher your position in a company the smaller your briefcase. A big boss does not carry a briefcase; he is followed by assistants who carry his briefcase. As I was Boss of my new company (delivery boy too) I wanted a small, boss-size briefcase. I finished my explanation of why small was good, turned and asked, "What do you think?" She was silent. I thought that meant she agreed. I bought it. A big mistake.

Three steps out of the store she turned to me and, angrier than I had ever seen, yelled, "Why did you buy that briefcase? I *told* you not to!" Surprised, my immediate response was, "No you didn't." "Yes I did." *No you didn't! Yes I did!! Didn't! Did!* We argued about it for three days. So much for the honeymoon.

In a formal or ideal Western sense, did she tell me, *Don't Buy It?* I don't think so. My wife maybe hinted at disagreement, but certainly did not make her disagreement clear. Viewed through Western glasses all she did was raise two objections: maybe it was too expensive and maybe it was too small. I dealt with each objection in turn.

I first explained that I thought better value was more important than the slightly higher price, and then asked what she thought. That gave my wife two choices. If my 'better value' argument did not convince her (did not satisfy her objection), she could move from objection to disagreement, words like, "Well, I still think it's too expensive. Don't buy it." Her other choice was to signal agreement (I had satisfied her objection) by being silent or by changing the subject. She changed the subject.

We then repeated the process. I asked her what she thought, then tried to satisfy her 'too small?' objection with my 'small is good' argument. That gave her the same two choices: go from objection to disagreement, or to express agreement by agreeing, changing the subject or being silent. She was silent. I took her silence to mean she agreed, to mean I had satisfied her objections. Not once did I think she disagreed (my side of our marathon argument). Since then others have told me I could have been more

sensitive to her – I agree – but most Westerners still say my wife never clearly *disagreed*.

Chinese students think otherwise. When I say the ‘price’ part of this example women in my Chinese classes start to smile; when I tell the ‘too small’ part the men start to smile: when I ask if my wife ‘disagreed’ with me, almost all Chinese say she did. Clearly disagreed too. Huh?

Objection vs. Disagreement

An objection is actually a request for more information before you can make a decision. Let's say I propose a course of action in a meeting and ask if there any questions. A person asks if I could offer more information about X. I do, and wait: if my explanation satisfies him about X he says so or is silent; if it doesn't he tells me so, and thus will move from raising an objection to disagreement, maybe by saying, "Well, I still am not convinced about X so I can't agree." Objections are fluid, disagreements are final.

Sure, office politics can be so bad that people won't disagree openly when asked their opinion, and then later disagree behind the scenes. Most Westerners think behind-the-back disagreement is bad manners (or worse).

Another Western Rule of Communication is "state your opinion, even if you disagree." This Rule is why Westerners consider silence to mean agreement.

Table 2: Objection vs. Disagreement

My wife thought she had clearly disagreed with my buying that briefcase, and I had refused to listen to her, that I *defied* her! This was why she was so angry. I did not understand (then) how she could say that, especially as I thought I had included her in the decision, each time asking, "What do you think honey?" This was why I argued back so strenuously: How could she accuse me of defying her when she had never told me she disagreed, and I had been so nice? This argument was the start of our relationship moving to the ‘going broke’ stage: she began to think that I would not listen to her and I thought she was accusing me of doing something I knew I had not done. Eight stormy months later we separated, and divorced soon after.

Who was wrong? What happened? How could my wife (and my Chinese students) think she clearly disagreed? The problem was the glasses we wore. While we used English words, my wife followed the Chinese way of using language to communicate disagreement. Unaware of this, I listened to her words with Western ears, analyzed the meaning of her message with the Western way of using language. I never heard the disagreement she tried so

hard to express. A sidebar to the story, she disagreed because she wanted me to wait until next payday to buy it, that's all. Nothing about size or price! If she would have just told me that I would not have bought it and, who knows, maybe we would still be married.

Still confused? Welcome to life in Chinese Asia. In the following sections I explain how Chinese use objections as a way to disagree, just one of the many ways Chinese say no without saying 'no.' Here I want to make the point, again, that communicating with Chinese, or across any two cultures, depends upon more than simply having a language in common. Without also having a way of using language in common, a way of thinking about language in common, communication success is difficult.

Themes and Lessons

People worry about the wrong things when they come to Chinese Asia, about whether they can use chopsticks properly or pass a business card with two hands. While it is nice to know Chinese methods, habits, traditions and such, most problems happen because of innocent communication mistakes. Westerners don't realize Chinese have a different way of using language than Westerners do. This difference has nothing to do with vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation or other language skills, but is caused by each culture using their unique Rules of Communication.

1. It is easy to give offense without realizing it. In most cases you can recover though, as long as you are willing to ask questions and apologize for what you did. Being able to laugh at yourself helps a LOT.
2. All cultures have unique ways of using language, called Rules of Communication.
3. Every culture uses language in different ways to achieve identical goals.
4. Chinese don't need to use a direct, yes/no question (Would you like to? Do you want to?) to extend an invitation.
5. Chinese don't need to use clear 'disagree words' (don't) in order to communicate disagreement.
6. Successful West-Chinese (all cross-culture communication) depends on two things: both sides having a language in common and a way of using language in common.
7. You must pay close attention at all times to what is being said and what the Chinese message might be rather than to what those words would mean to a Westerner. You must listen to Chinese talking with Chinese ears.



Chinese see everything with Chinese eyes. Success depends upon seeing things as Chinese see them.

You need to wear Chinese glasses. If not you work blind, a certain waste of time and money.

The problems are not what you think.

Should you be polite to Chinese? Of course, except if you are Western polite the Chinese will think you are impolite. You need to know how Chinese see polite.

You need more than good intentions.

Are relationships important to Chinese? Yes, except if you use Western ideas about relationships you will fail. You need to know how Chinese see relationships.

Don't worry about making mistakes.

Chinese don't care if you pass business cards with two hands or use chopsticks well. They expect you to make cultural mistakes. All non-Chinese are barbarians.

Chinese meet Good, Bad and Ugly Westerners.

You have to be a sensitive, flexible barbarian. Be polite, try things the Chinese way: after all, you are in China making Chinese money. A little respect goes a long way.

You have to understand *why* before *how*.

Tips are only useful if you know why Chinese think and act as they do. Chinese ways make sense... to Chinese. The key to success is knowing why they make sense.

You already know what to do.

If you have a best friend back home, if you are married, you already know how to succeed in China. Everything in Chinese Asia is built on making good relationships.



About the Author:

Greg Bissky knows Chinese like few others. Business owner as well as consultant, since 1985 he has negotiated contracts, led Chinese teams, hired, fired and managed Chinese staff, and worked for numerous Chinese clients and bosses.

A very successful teacher, since 1990 Greg has taught *Wearing Chinese Glasses* in Europe, N. America and Asia, and *Logical Thinking & Communication* to Chinese. Teaching logic gives Greg a unique and valuable look into Chinese thinking.

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