

Made in China – Safely

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Introduction

“If we are to feel at home in the world...we shall have to admit Asia to equality in our thoughts, not only politically but culturally. What changes this will bring about, I do not know, but I am convinced that they will be profound and of the greatest importance.”

--Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (1946)

Through 24 dynasties and 5,000 years, China has endured. When the most populous country on Earth joined the World Trade Organization in December, 2001, China opened its borders to become the manufacturer for the world. In only twenty-five years, China has transformed itself from a 100 per cent state-owned financial system to a market driven economy.

International companies have been key participants in this expansion, relying upon dirt cheap land, nonexistent environmental laws, and an inexhaustible labor supply to drive costs down and profits up. China's economy has expanded at the rate of 8-12 percent per year, building a middle class of consumers and a burgeoning market for many of the goods made in China.

East Meets West

Western manufacturers have moved to China not only to obtain cheaper labor, but also to gain a foothold and serve the gargantuan Chinese market free of trade barriers. Their footholds have had positive ramifications for U.S. exports. According to the U.S. Commerce Department, nearly 90% of all goods made abroad by U.S. manufacturers are sold to foreign markets. A 2004 study by the Heritage Foundation noted that U.S. companies that manufacture goods for both domestic and foreign consumers produce 56% of all U.S. exports and generate 21% of America's total economic output.¹

When U.S. companies hire skilled or semi-skilled workers in China, they pay far less in wages. Monthly wages for a skilled worker in America generally run \$3000 to \$4000; a Chinese counterpart earns about \$150. The company is required to pay into a Chinese government-sponsored pension plan that covers healthcare, housing and retirement benefits. At least a third of the skilled Chinese workers' wages covers these benefits. Limited health services (by Western standards), China's naturally holistic approach to individual health (diet and exercise) and the absence of malpractice suits keep the costs of healthcare low.

What about the millions of workers at the lower end of the skill spectrum in China? Many unskilled laborers are left holding the fuzzy end of the tang wu lu (lollipop). Legions of peasants have migrated from rural to industrial zones and construction sites, lured by the prospect of work. Because they are not legal residents, under Chinese law, they have no rights outside of those written into their employment contract. Unfortunately, few ever receive an employment contract from their employers, who are competing against everyone else in what has been dubbed “the race to the bottom.” As a result, these workers are forced to live and work in egregious conditions—lacking the ability to garner even the money necessary to return to the farm. The few lucky ones are paid wages on time and in full.² The unlucky ones are not, or worse, fall victim to accident or illness at rates that shock our Western collective consciousness.

One particularly gruesome story was reported by China Central TV (CCTV) in 2006. Female workers at the Huizhou Xianjin battery manufacturing plant in China’s southern Guangdong Province were repeatedly exposed to harmful substances, most notably cadmium. Cadmium has a nasty way of interacting with the human body—it gradually dissolves bones. At least one female worker gave birth to a baby whose skin is blackened, undoubtedly caused by exposure to toxins while in the womb. Other workers have suffered kidney problems, and an unfortunate number of them have died from kidney failure brought on by cadmium poisoning.

Current Conditions in China: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

This grizzly scenario has been repeated in multiple industries in most parts of China. But the future doesn’t have to be like the present and recent past. We can arm ourselves with the facts, wrap ourselves in a blanket of concern for others and get involved to ensure that it doesn’t. A good first step is to understand the current good, bad and ugly of working in China in order to effectively impact worker safety and health there.

The Good

- China continues to experience rapid industrial development, which has significantly raised the level of income and the standard of living for a large portion of its citizens. These citizens form the growing middle-class of China, and have become the new consumers of goods and services that the world has to offer.
- China’s annual GDP continues to grow at a mind-blowing pace and is targeted to reach 4 trillion U.S. dollars by 2020, quadrupling the figure from 2000.
- To handle the large number (est. 300 million) of Chinese moving from farms to cities over the next 15 years, China will expand its urban infrastructure at the rate of adding a Houston to its landscape every month. As a result, China is currently using 40% of the world’s concrete and 25% of the world’s steel.³
- The 2008 Olympic Games and the 2010 World Expo will showcase China in a way that the world has not seen before, along with China’s commitment to safety and health.

The Bad

- More than 136,000 workers died in work-related accidents in 2004.⁴ The number of worker deaths in 2005 and 2006 are estimated to be at least as great, especially with the number of mining catastrophes occurring in each of those years.
- 700 million people live on approximately two dollars a day.⁵
- However, unfortunately, with so many replacement workers instantly available, workers' lives become devalued. In a swipe at China, Japan Today speculated that the Chinese government treats their industrialization like the Chinese Red Army—"throws the infantry at the machine guns until they run out of ammo"—an unspeakable method where human life is treated as an expendable commodity.
- Too often, workers place a higher value on their employment and economic status than they do on their own personal safety
- In some circumstances, the cost of providing safety equipment is more expensive than hiring a new worker that has been injured.

The Ugly

- The drive for gainful employment is a powerful force, attracting the aforementioned peasant-workers from rural areas to China's 660 cities (160 of which have at least one million residents), especially cities that promote industrial and commercial employment in the rapidly-growing Pearl River Delta and the Yangtze Delta regions. While these workers are all Chinese, the differences in rural vs. urban language can be formidable, as well as the gaps in cultural expectations. Basic levels of literacy can differ wildly. These are just some of the challenges and differences that are presented to employers.
- Accidents are frequently blamed on workers' mistakes or supervisors' negligence. However, whenever analyses are performed, the root causes are generally determined to be insufficient training and attention to safety.
- China's culture of reporting incidents through vertical ministry/agency chains is slow to transmit information and decisions concerning worker safety. With all of the projects that China is saying grace over in its race to catch up, its commitment to improving safety is proceeding at a much slower pace than its pace to complete badly needed infrastructure. Clearly, more awareness is needed. More enforcement of Chinese laws is needed—especially in the mining sector—the ugliest of the ugly industries in China that could use an overhaul in how it conducts its business.

Hope on the Distant Horizon

The Chinese government has acknowledged that "sudden public incidents," including industrial accidents, social safety accidents and natural disasters, cause more than one million casualties and the loss of six percent of China's GDP every year.⁶ For the first time, China is conducting an open dialogue about how the nation can respond better to disasters and how the current level of industrial development can be sustained. Although there is hope, the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel will not become visible without leadership from those (inside and outside China) whose sensibilities can no longer stomach this overwhelming and senseless loss of humanity.

What can Westerners do to speed up the process of achieving a safe work culture in China? First, Westerners need to look realistically at the current scenario in China as it is. Not having safety training as part of everyday life impacts how a Chinese worker is perceived and treated by his employer. Likewise how workers are valued as a commodity impacts their performance. Not understanding these problems, and the diverse workforce encountered, could be disastrous.

When diversity is not embraced, it becomes a convenient excuse for shortcomings and accidents. Companies that learn to embrace diversity – diversity of backgrounds, cultures and experiences— are more likely to thrive. Workers of both genders and differing ages, points of view and educational levels contribute to the workplace, although their contributions often take on a different appearance than those of their Western counterparts – this could manifest itself through a lack of opportunities to advance and grow in an organization.

Secondly, employers should avoid adopting a “One Size Fits All” approach to industrial training in China. For example, simply translating from English into Mandarin is, at best, a stopgap solution and will likely result in a misunderstanding of the fundamental cultural and workplace differences between East and West.

The Challenge of Communication

The Chinese expression for crisis is the same as for transformation, which is comprised of the two symbols for danger and opportunity. The safety and health of workers is a holistic matter. People are more likely to be safer when they have a focus on safety at all times. Yet, because Chinese people are generally circumspect towards outside sources of information, they must be allowed to process safety information through an eastern subjective perspective, as opposed to the traditional western objective perspective.

People from all nations tend to think in a certain way based on their physiological “hard wiring” and the culture they are immersed in. Understanding this is one of the key areas for achieving the successful integration of safety into the workplace – and helping it to remain in place.

The basic elements of inculcating a safety culture hinge on understanding peoples’ backgrounds and cultural instincts. Successful training understands and incorporates this into every foundation and phase of training so that—like alchemy—it becomes an inseparable element of the delivery and the body of the training itself.

An increase in industrial activity almost always produces a corresponding increase in injuries, whether related to mining, manufacturing, petrochemicals or construction. Employers in China must communicate openly about the most effective ways to promote safety and health in the workplace.

Ah, but there’s the challenge. Communication is fundamentally different in Eastern countries than in Western countries. Before we can even talk about the broad differences in cultural patterns between East and West, there must be a basic recognition that each Eastern country has its own distinctive basic culture, not to mention numerous sub-cultures. This paper attempts to address only the main values and cultural patterns shared by the majority of Chinese people, and in the process, compare them to the main patterns shared by people from Western cultures.

Low Context and High Context Cultures

Fortunately, an effective frame of reference exists for comparing East and West cultures in perception and communication. Through the terms “Low Context and High Context,” we are able to objectify cultural differentiation.

Cultures are categorized as either 'low context' or 'high context,' depending upon the degree to which meaning comes from the settings or from the words being exchanged.⁷ A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already contained in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message. A low context communication, on the other hand, is just the opposite: most of the information is contained in the coded message.⁸

Because of their history and traditions, high context cultures—such as the Eastern countries—do not change much over time. The Halls have observed that “For most normal transactions in normal life, they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth, background information.”⁹ Meaning is not necessarily conveyed through words. Information is provided through nonverbal channels, such as posture, gestures, facial expressions and even silence.

Conversely, low context cultures—found in the Western nations—rely heavily on verbal channels to convey information. In low context cultures, the population is less homogeneous, and tends to compartmentalize personal contacts. The Halls explain that this lack of a low context pool of common experiences requires that “each time they interact with others, they need detailed background information.”¹⁰

In the following diagram, we can see where the various nations fall on the continuum of high context to low context cultures:



Figure 1: Cultures Arranged According to High or Low Context Dimension

The three Asian countries—Japan, China and Korea—represent high context cultures. Japanese, Chinese and Korean people are homogenous with respect to their experiences and their networking, i.e., how they transmit and receive information.

In Western countries, however, information is not gleaned from either the context or the participants, so most of the information must be transmitted verbally. To a Westerner, the Asian method of communicating may seem indirect, implicit or even incomplete, yet Asians have no problem understanding each other. To Asians, Westerners need to say everything, because they are less aware of their surroundings and the wealth of information inherently available in nonverbal communication.

Collectivism and Individualism

In the United States, we value individualism. A “rugged individualist” is valued above all. The basic notion of individualism has been around for centuries, although British philosopher John Locke wrote in greater detail during the 1600’s. Locke stated that each individual is unique, special, completely different from all other individuals, and “the basic unit of Nature.”¹¹ Comparatively, collectivism has its roots in Asia thousands of years ago. The great Chinese philosopher Confucius (B.C. 551 – 479) stated “If one wants to establish himself, he should first help others establish themselves.”¹²

In the Eastern collectivist culture, identity is based on the social system; each individual is tied emotionally to his/her family, and to a lesser extent, institutions and affiliations. Group decisions are trusted to be correct. Concern for others and an awareness of how one’s own actions impact the group are common in a collectivist culture.

When applying these distinctions to worker safety, Westerners might say “Okay, collectivism is well and good, but at some point, every worker has to take personal responsibility, gain an understanding of individual consequences and be able to identify real and potential hazards.” True, but all of this is done through the collective culture—not an individual one. Only then can each Chinese worker become proactive in safety procedures. Maintaining a safe culture is achieved in the same manner as attaining it—through an awareness and incorporation of China’s collective culture.

Equality and Hierarchy

In any Western democracy, it is critical for each individual to be considered an equal. In familial relationships, this notion of equality prevails, especially in the United States. Some American children may even have an equal say in some family matters, including where to vacation or live. In China, however, Confucius says it all regarding the importance of hierarchy: “Junjun, chenchen, fufu, zizi,” which means “King is King; subject is subject; father is father; son is son.” Thus, everyone should behave according to his status within society.

When traditional kinship relationships are highlighted, one is always obedient to one’s parents, and is made aware of the debt owed to those parents. Every individual is concerned about the responsibility to uphold the good name of one’s relatives, especially those who came before, including relatives who are no longer alive. Even in educational settings, all students remain subservient, asking few questions and showing great respect to the teacher.

In Chinese organizations, power is concentrated in more centralized locations. More layers of supervision, and more overall supervisors, are the norm. Anyone who has ever flown a plane in China recognizes this when they must show two boarding passes at different points after leaving the gate. Similar extra supervision is also noticed after deplaning before collecting the luggage.

Conclusion

“We Are All Connected.” –Albert Einstein

Employers would be wise to recognize these fundamental differences between Western and Eastern perceptions and communication before reaching out to Chinese workers and training them to be safe. Powerful cultural norms exist in China for workers to save face and maintain harmony at all costs. A successful training program will acknowledge these cultural dynamics and fully integrate them into its safety-training curriculum.

“Once the world has been flattened and the new forms of collaboration made available to more and more people, the winners will be those who learn the habits, processes and skills most quickly...”¹²

In the past, nations have successfully collaborated on issues involving world trade, environmental concerns and responding to natural disasters. It is imperative that we are able to collaborate on safety and health concerns as well. An entity cannot afford to proceed as a Lone Ranger in trying to manage the safety of its workforce, nor should Chinese government entities be viewed as regulators who simply set standards and enforce laws. For foreign companies to be successful in China, they must adopt workable systems that reflect local cultures and work rules. Only through the new forms of collaboration alluded to by Thomas Friedman can we understand that we are members of one integrated community with interdependent interests and needs. Only then can we make a safer workplace in China and a safer world for us all.

Footnotes

¹ Heritage Foundation Study, 2004. *Job Creation and the Taxation of Foreign-Source Income*.

² Greenfield and Pringle, 2002. *The Challenge of Wage Arrears in China*, in Valesco (ed), *Paying Attention to Wages*.

³ Fishman, Ted, 2005. *China Inc.: How the Rise of the Next Superpower Challenges America and the World*, Scribner.

⁴ Figures released by Chinese Government, as reported by AFP, 25 November 2005.

⁵ M2 Communications Presswire, 2 December 2005.

⁶ Wenran Jiang, Edmonton Journal (Alberta), 11 December 2005.

⁷ Hall, E.T., 1976. *Beyond Culture*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, p. 74.

⁸ Hall and Hall, 1976, p. 79.

⁹ Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 6.

¹⁰ Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 7.

¹¹ Stewart, E.C. and Bennett, M. J., 1991. *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Yarmouth ME: Intercultural Press, p. 133.

¹² Samovar, L. A., Porter, R.E. & Stefani, L.A., 2000. *Communication Between Cultures*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, p. 68.

¹³ Friedman, Thomas, 2005. *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 123.