

Westerner working in china cultural studies essay



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" An insight into the main difficulties of a westerner working in China" Pablo Cancelo Serrano International Human Resource Management ESCP Europe, Paris Campus

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-ABSTRACT-

In this report I aim to give a general approach to Human Resource Management in China from the perspective of a westerner. For my research I have used several business review magazines and Human Resource Management books to back my findings up with theory. However, the main inspiration for the project has been my friend Pablo (yes, we share the same name) whom I met six years ago on top of a hill in the middle or rural India. I have included parts of the interview I made him in the report. His testimonies have played an essential role guiding me through the vast

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literature on the topic. I hope you enjoy reading this work as much as I enjoyed writing it and struggling to find solutions to make the life of a friend somehow more bearable.-Pablo Cancelo Serrano

-AN INTRODUCTION: PABLO AND I MEET (India, 2007)

Pablo and I first met in 2007 in Pune, India. I was a 16 years old student who had just received a scholarship to study the International Baccalaureate in a United World College. United World Colleges are a network of twelve schools located all over the world. Their aim is to use education as a force to unite nations and build peace. Committees scattered all over the world are in charged on finding national sponsors and to select the students who best fit their criteria. Pablo was selected in 2005 and sent to the school in the U. S. A. I was selected two years later and sent to India. When we met Pablo had just finished his two years of Baccalaureate and he was waiting for a scholarship to study Engineering at Brown University in Providence, U. S. A. In the meantime he had decided to come to India to work in my school as an English professor in the villages that surrounded the college. We first started talking because we were both from Spain. However, we were very different. Pablo was efficient and very idealistic. I was not. He argued that his experience and my experience studying abroad were very similar. I argued the opposite. Even though we both studied in an international environment surrounded by students who were highly motivated and looking forward to learn and to change things; the country where you live does shape how you perceive things, as Pablo finally recognized within a few months in the Asian

subcontinent. He was used to lead social work initiatives in the back in the U. S. A., however, things were way more difficult in India, not only because of the nature of the problems (much more complicated) but also because of the nature of its customs and traditions. Pablo especially remembers one anecdote: While raising health awareness in rural populations he told some families to place stones on the floor, just in front of their doors. This way they will avoid having mosquitoes around the puddles created by the monsoon. The families gathered and replied, " Why don't you send some students to do it for us?" Pablo did not know what to do. This kind of problem is often faced by expat managers dealing with local teams, but this is not all. Managers repeatedly fail to address cultural difference lacking sensitivity and being unable to obtain their goals. In Asian countries things usually take their time. From my personal experience working in India I especially remember the problems we encountered when we were in charge of developing an HIV/AIDS awareness plan for English speaking high schools in urban locations. We were not allowed to mention anything related to sexual practices. How could we raise any effective awareness then? Well, it actually took us several sessions to convince the headmaster to ask for parental consent. When we got it we then had to split the group into male and female students. Female instructors addressed the girls and male instructors the boys. Patience was the key for success.

- CONTINUATION; PABLO GRADUATES (U. S., 2012):

a) " A THIRD CULTURE KID" During his four years degree in Brown, Pablo managed to learn Mandarin Chinese. He spent a year in China studying at Tsinghua University where he dated a Chinese-American girl. He also spent a

summer in Beijing and a term travelling around the world on the "Scholarship", an ocean going study abroad program taking place on a boat. He was the Director of Cultural events during his stay and he won a certificate of excellence for his active participation. He believes this experience increased even more his abilities to lead international teams. During the summers he also did an internship in an American company working in Beijing and in a company in Thailand (see attached CV at the end of the report). His education had been truly international but now that it was officially over, for the first time in his life, he did not know what to do. "Where should I find a job?" and "where is home for me now?" were the main questions that hammered his mind. He wanted to settle down and find a place to call home, however he was also coping with the restlessness to move again and discover new horizons. During the early 1950s a new term was coined: "Third culture Kids". A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is "a person who has spent a significant part of his developmental years outside the parents' culture. He would frequently build relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background"[1]. Pablo realized he was one of them. He decided to find a job in China.

b) FINDING A JOB

This is a transcript from a short questionnaire I sent to Pablo.

Q-How did you find "the company"[2] or how did they find you? A-I applied directly; I emailed my CV to the Asian headquarters.

Q-How was the selection process? What do you think they were looking for? A-It was quite "easy" and fast. After emailing them I got the job in 15 days. The name of the university matters a lot in Asia; they are usually impressed by big names from the western culture.

They didn't ask any technical question at all. Not common in the US. They loved that I could speak Chinese and that I am used to their culture. Q-Why do you think you were selected for the job? A-I spoke Chinese, I have lived in China before and I graduated from Brown. As we can see from Pablo's answers, "the company" hired him regarding his international experience. He left home when he was fifteen and from that moment he had always been in international surroundings. However, the company failed to realize that he was no longer going to be in an international media but in a purely Chinese one. As we previously said, "third culture kids" "would frequently build relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any (...) although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background". The Chinese employees under Pablo's supervision did not share a similar background with him, not at all.

-PROBLEMS START (Shenzhen, China; 2012)

"America is a nation built on migrants, but China can't say the same." For many years now, Pablo had spent his days in circles where careers like his were the norm. His high school, his universities and his internships in foreign countries were always in contexts where situations like his were the norm and not the exception. In his entirely Chinese team the bonds were made of blood and history and no longer of shared habits, context or enterprise. He is now a foreigner, a stranger. As Gianpiero Petriglieri, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD states for "the Harvard Business Review", "no one wants to follow a stranger. Without some sense of home, nomadic professionals don't become global leaders. They only turn into

professional nomads. Leaders need homes to keep their vision, passion and courage alive — and to remain connected both to the people they are meant to serve, and to themselves²". Moreover, " Global leaders must learn to live in and between two homes — a local and a global home. Become familiar with local and global communities, and use neither to escape the other[3]." It was time for Pablo to develop a purely Chinese identity. These are some of the answers to the questions I sent him: Q- What have been the main difficulties you have encountered with your Chinese employees? A- It has been relatively easy but it's because I speak Chinese. People are surprised so they praise me a lot, it can get annoying sometimes. However, employees think I am here in China for fun, just for the exotic experience. They do not think I am here to build my career, they see me as a come and go type of employee. Especially at my level no one thinks I am planning to stay and I am not given a lot of responsibilities because they do not know what to expect. I also feel that clients many times do not want to have foreigners in the projects because it puts pressure on them as if they would have to change the way they do things. Q- What do you think you still need to improve? A- At this point I think there is very little I can improve. I can get used to things that might annoy me but I will never be able to fit in Chinese society. Even if Chinese becomes my second language I will not be perceived as one of them. I will always forever be a " laoway" (tourist). At work, I still need to learn more technical vocabulary and learn how to write formal reports (however to be honest, I think will never be able to get to that level). Q- Did you receive any traineeship before leaving or upon arrival? A- NoQ- When it comes to working in China, what have you learnt you did not know? A- China is very diverse culturally. Even though during high school Chinese <https://assignbuster.com/westerners-working-in-china-cultural-studies-essay/>

are the most hardworking students you can find, once they graduate from University they do not exhibit a lot of professionalism. They do not plan things as much as I was used to in the US. For them everything that comes from the outside is directly of better quality. They have strong inferiority complex mixed with a strong sense of patriotism. Q- How open is " the company" if you ask them to go on a specific direction? A- " The company" is very open and extremely flexible. It wants employees to strive for the best. However I think things in China are much more rigid. Seniority matters more than anything even in a company like " the company". Q-How do you think " the company" could increase its efficiency when it comes to its human capital management? What failures have you perceived? A- " The company" gives a lot of freedom to its employees and it places a lot of self-responsibility and high morals on the employee. Chinese people don't value these as British and Americans do so this management style might not be the one that produces the highest efficiency. Chinese employees are told what to do and how to do it, so when you are not constantly giving them tasks; they either waste time or perform poorly. Being such a multidisciplinary company (they always brag about it) I don't think people really work with people from other disciplines or learn anything about the expertise in other departments, which to certain extend are very related to their work. People work in metaphorical cubicles where they don't see the project as a whole but as small block. They only worry about their part. Q- Has the company organized any sort of activities, talks, weekend programs, etc. to facilitate your adaptation? Which ones? Were them useful? A- All graduates have an induction that lasts for one week and takes place in Hong Kong. It serves for graduates to adapt to " the company" and get to learn its

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culture. At the same time, the office unofficially organizes dinners (normally the big bosses invite). Moreover, there is an annual dinner organized by the company, where we can invite someone. The newcomers are supposed to perform in groups of eight and there is a raffle at the end of the night (the best prizes were an I-Pad and a MacBook Air). Also for graduates we have monthly lectures organized by the older graduates and led by a senior staff where we discuss technical topics and sometimes we talk about the logistics of the office (phone, book rooms, fill timesheets, etc.) In the interview, Pablo pointed out several issues upon which experts agree relating to Chinese society as well as some important organizational dysfunctions in human resource management. Some of the most relevant points he raised are: a) CULTURAL-WISE" Employees think I am here in China for fun, just for the exotic experience"" I will always forever be a " laoway"" Clients many times do not want to have foreigners in the projects because it puts pressure on them"" Once they graduate from University they do not exhibit a lot of professionalism (...) they have strong inferiority complex mixed with a strong sense of patriotism"" Seniority matters more than anything even in a company like " the company"" b) MANAGERIAL-WISE" Chinese people don't value freedom at work as British and Americans, they are told what to do and how to do it, so when you are not constantly giving them tasks; they either waste time or perform poorly."" People work in metaphorical cubicles where they don't see the project as a whole but as small block. They only worry about their part."" I received no training prior to my departure"" The office unofficially organizes dinners (normally the big bosses invite)."" We have monthly lectures (...)we discuss technical topics and sometimes we talk about logistics"

-ON WORKING IN CHINA AND IN " THE COMPANY"

In today's China, expectations for expatriate managers are sky-high among employees, business partners, and officials. As Chinese workforce rapidly acquires competence in international business and management practices, the demands placed on expatriate managers are also increasing rapidly. Multinationals still need foreigners but the available jobs are mostly mid to senior-level and even the top ones are becoming more local, with only 6 percent of multinational executive positions in Asia going to candidates from outside Asia, according to the Wall Street Journal[4]. As for Chinese companies, plenty seek English speakers to interact with clients overseas or Caucasian faces to parade before investors says Michael Thorneman, partner and head of China operations for Bain & Co[5]. The bar is rising for expatriate managers. When they go to China, the local people expect them to come with skills and knowledge that are lacking locally they need to add the value they could not find inside his borders in order to be accepted and respected." The Company" was Pablo's first employer so it was especially difficult for him to proof his value, because of his youth and lack of expertise. Their inferiority complex and high levels of patriotism led to a situation in which employees would follow Pablo's orders with low motivation and distrust. However, they would never address him privately or question him since respect for authority was the base of its culture. Pablo started harboring the suspicion that he was not as well-regarded by his local Chinese staff as he hoped he would be. All of the over 20 staff members were local Chinese. They began their careers with the firm either as fresh college graduates, or with a few years of experience working with local Chinese firms. The top ones found themselves having to baby sit his boss,

familiarizing Pablo with different aspects of the offices operations, helping him with Chinese bureaucracy and checking his reports in Chinese searching for any grammatical mistakes. Some even had to help Pablo finding a big (western) sized mattress for his apartment. While they knew they could easily perform Pablo's task they also knew they failed at one thing, dealing with the offices in the U. S. A. and London. Some of the staff felt that every three or five year a new foreigner was parachuted from the central headquarters and they had to repeat the adaptation process again and again." The company" was clearly failing at managing a work team and at keeping high the moral of its local workers. If they did not come with a solution for this they would not only face the risk of facing Pablo but also the risk of losing its top workers, tired of not learning anything interesting from their bosses and not getting any promotions. These people would likely join competitor companies and this is a risk a pioneering engineering company like " the company" must avoid. a) DEALING WITH THE " I-CAN-DO-BETTER-THAN-MY-BOSS-SYNDROME" The I-can-do-better-than-my-boss syndrome might have been better addressed if the company had put in place a well-structured career path for Pablo and for every other boss who had been there previously." The company" clearly fails at training its expats. Pablo did not receive any course prior to departure and once in Shenzhen he only attended dinners with big bosses and meeting to talk about logistics and technical stuff of the office. There was no preparation and no bonding initiatives taking place between Pablo and his team. Opportunities for training would increase the time bosses last in China, giving stability to the working force. It takes time to build up knowledge and familiarity with business practices in China. Forging the right " guanxi" or connections

cannot be rushed either. A well structured career path, where promotions are detailed and fixed upon performance seems to be a key tool to keep workers motivated and to discourage them from exiting the company. Between 10% and 20%^[6] of all U. S. managers sent abroad return early because of job dissatisfaction or difficulties in adjusting. More problematic, one-fourth of those who completed an assignment left their company, often to join a competitor, within one year after repatriation. It seems that " the company" is not aware of this. Core employees are closely associated with the activities that generate valued returns and usually have more opportunities to create value. They can improve the performance of the company by keeping costs low and identifying new market opportunities. Multinationals firms should improve their ways to access and to maintain " talent pools" to find advantage against competitors. b) UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE MENTALITY FROM A HH. RR. PERSPECTIVE In " Mr. China: A Memoir", Tim Clissold describes touring China with a fellow western investor. After days of stress, greasy banquet food and hangovers, Clissold suffered a heart attack. In China, dinner often gives way to karaoke. Alistair Nicholas, president of AC Capital Strategic Consulting however argues that foreigners should not feel obligated to sing, " it is precisely when you ignore your own culture and principles that you risk losing face or risk your Chinese partners thinking you are so weak you can easily be taken advantage of^[7]." His point is most relevant; one should not reject his own identity when trying to fit in an Asian one. As we said before, a good leader must learn to live in and between two homes, a local and a global home. Become familiar with local and global communities, and use neither to escape the other. However, " losing face" has in fact become one of the most relevant notions when

westerners describe the Chinese culture and managers need to be especially aware of this. " Mianzi" (saving face) is a critical element of the Chinese social structure. We can relate it to the embarrassment we feel when our flaws or failures are publicly exposed. The Chinese and many other eastern nations) have super-sensitive radar for this. Negative performance feedback will almost certainly cause a loss of face, so Pablo avoids this by simply not giving any. He is challenged trying to navigate through the complicated maze created by " mianzi" as he can easily appear as harsh and hurtful, inciting fear and silence from his employees. When Pablo talks about their " inferiority complex and strong patriotism" in the interview he is most likely talking about " mianzi". Pablo needs to acknowledge that he is now living in a high-context communication environment. Chinese " embed their important information in the context of the conversation rather than in the explicit words. Because high-context communicators seek to avoid confrontation or embarrassment, their actual words may seem to obscure instead of clarify their meaning".[8]Talking about obscurity we need to mention Chinese bureaucracy, from murky customs forms to opaque transport regulations. Corruption is institutionalized at the majority of the government's layers. Pablo sometimes felt that clients did not seem comfortable having a westerner working with them[9]. Non-clear practices are the cause of this. Clients think that Pablo would scrutinize and judge any bribery or illegal practice. Pablo must understand that China is a people-based and not a law-based culture. Related to this last point we encounter one more difference between the eastern and western way of doing business. In Europe or the U. S. A., where the legal system is largely enforceable, it is relatively safe to meet strangers, sign contracts with them

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and quite speedily start doing business. China is people-based rather than a law-based. People in China build trust by " profiling" one another. They observe one another's behavior over time before they'll do big business. That is why it takes longer to get things done there and why dinners often lead into karaoke sessions and hangovers. Chinese people are conditioned by centuries of dynastic histories to obey their political leaders the way they obey their parents. The Chinese political system is a one-party system. People have learned not to challenge their political leaders. Chinese employees can be different from western ones, specifically in their attitude towards the business for which they work. In the west, employees are raised in a culture of individualism and democracy, so when an employee has to complete a task, they are not only thinking about completing the task but also about how the task relates to other aspects of the business. In China, because Communism does not carry individualistic characteristics and because there are so many people who are in need of jobs, a person is taught to do exactly as he/she is told. Chinese employees are sometimes afraid to do more or even to express personal opinions, because they do not know how it will be received with their superiors. Pablo clearly outlined this issue during the interview. c) THE PROBLEM: ONE PROBLEM LEADING TO THE NEXT ONE Pablo complained about three main things: clients' suspicion on him, lack of initiative and lack of a holistic vision of the project. Let's address his complaints. Making suggestions to an eastern worker without making him " lose face" has never been easy in China. Taking instructions at work from a younger supervisor or colleague has never been easy anywhere in the world, but this situation is even worse when managing Chinese employees for whom age, seniority and even gender have a strong bearing on cordial

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relationships. When Pablo was asked about " the company's" flexibility he said that it was hindered by seniority issues." The company" has an important problem and it is all linked:-Young employees are the best prepared ones and often the most innovative. Their fresh ideas should be taken into account by a pioneering multinational engineering company.- However, employees lack a holistic vision of the project and only worry about the part they were assigned. Overall contributions to the whole project become impossible to make.-Seniority and a high respect for hierarchy pulls young employees backwards when it comes to speaking up.-There is an " i-can-do-better-than-my-boss-syndrome"-Pablo is unable to correct his employees without making them feel miserable. In conclusion, the performance of " the company" is not at its full potential. We need to encourage friendliness in the working space and we need to set a horizontal alignment. A horizontal alignment exists when " all the policies and practices of the firm are consistent with each other so that they present a coherent message to employees concerning how employees should behave while at work"[10].

-CONCLUSION: THE SOLUTIONS

a) INDIVIDUAL APPROACH: WHAT CAN PABLO DO? Pablo must get used to always use a passive tone and voice. For example, instead of saying " You are wrong", he should try " This is not completely your fault". It will take him time to do it automatically but it will be also useful for him when he needs to decipher what a business partner really wants to tell him. He also must learn to speak slowly. The Chinese consider it impolite to ask someone to repeat themselves. While the Chinese place great stock in meeting the top person

in a company (the status thing again), they tend to only want to communicate with the people in a company whom they have met face-to-face. For Pablo the first option would be very time consuming. He needs to learn to delegate responsibility on his top employees. He should introduce them formally to his contacts, especially in person. This will also increase the level of responsibility of Chinese top employees, working against the aforementioned " I-can-do-better-than-my-boss" syndrome and thus reducing the risk of them joining competitors. Business cards should be exchanged at every introduction, foreigners must be sure to include their business title, as well as a Chinese translation on one side of the card. Always get legal advice. He can't control his clients' practices but he can definitely control his. While bringing lawyers to his meeting would be perceived as an offence by the Chinese (they might think he is trying to outsmart them), Pablo should never sign a document without previous legal consultation. He can take advantage of the non-explicit communication code and easily get away with vague sentences like " I need more time", " maybe" or " this has not been discussed enough".

b) A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: WHAT DOES " THE COMPANY" NEED TO DO? The company has to undertake a more personal approach while managing Chinese employees. Such an approach would have to take into account the Chinese perception of guidance, care and concern on the part of senior family members, and trust, respect and to a lesser extent, deference on the part of junior family members. A western flexible approach where employees initiative is highly value is useless if you do not transform first the mentality of the workers. The company needs to foster the bonding among the employees and Pablo. He did not receive any course prior to departure and

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once in Shenzhen he only attended dinners with big bosses and meetings to talk about logistics and technical stuff of the office. "The company" efforts are not going in the right direction and they are increasing even more the gap between the "Big bosses-Hong Kong Headquarters-Pablo" triangle and the employees. Organizing get-togethers, sport tournaments or social work weekends would not only increase trust and harmony between the members of the office but also facilitate Pablo's adaptation to the city. As we said when we addressed the "I-can-do-better-than-my-boss" syndrome, a well structured career path, where promotions are detailed and fixed upon performance seems to be a key tool to keep workers motivated and to discourage them from exiting the company. From here onwards, one method that might work would be to conduct a brief meeting every time a new person is hired. The meeting will help re-affirm the job responsibilities of staff members and the chain of command within the company. It will also assuage the sense of uncertainty among current employees, and help ease the new employee into the company. On a more abstract level, companies nowadays count with a wide range of firms specialized in human capital consulting. Some companies fail to see expenses in the human resource management structure as an investment and they portray them as cost. This is especially true in engineering companies where managers are used to think of their assets as tangible ones. The efficiency and competitive gains that "the company" would obtain from optimizing its human resource matrix would definitely offset the costs of a professional diagnosis. Some consulting companies have developed what they call the "Global Competencies Inventory test" in charge of measuring three key capabilities of potential international managers. The three characteristics are explained as it

follows:- "Perceptual management": understanding of the world through other peoples' eyes. This factor also assesses a person's exposure to, and experience with, other cultures.- "Relationship management": developing relationships with them. As we have seen, everything is done through relations in Asian countries. Interpersonal attributes that help nurture and maintain relationships, and awareness of our self-concept and the impact our behavior has on others are highly valuable.- "Resilience": adaptation to the foreign environment and its people yet be able to maintain a stable sense of self in order to remain mentally and emotionally healthy. Passing this test to all the team members would help identifying the weaknesses and strengths of each member and to individually assess them. One more method that this consultancy firms have developed is the MPI (Map Bridge Integrate). It consists of three steps that try to create synergies from cultural differences, leveraging the pros and cons of different cultures. As we have seen before, every con can be turned into a pro with the right perspective. Pablo can make use of a high context environment to easily avoid signing contracts or showing a specific point of view. He can also take advantage of the importance face-to-face meetings have in China to delegate responsibilities on his employees keeping them motivated...MPI dynamics are carried by coaches under retribution. That is why companies that do not work in the services field where human contact is the base of its operational system are often reluctant to hire their services. The MPI first maps particular values that influence the behavior of the group. Then they report them to the rest of the group. The members would now step out of that frame and go to somebody else's frame (decenter). Now they would recenter highlighting what's similar and looking at differences as an asset and not as liability. In <https://assignbuster.com/western-working-in-china-cultural-studies-essay/>

this way " the company" can develop a framework of rules for everyday interaction, creating synergies from the differences and fostering their overall performance.