

## ELTAS Event Review

Author: *Augusto Vieira*

WHEN EAST MEETS WEST: CHINA BEYOND THE "DOS AND DON'TS LISTS" WITH DR. INES BÖHNER  
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As little as one year ago, I would have laughed at anyone who said that China and its culture would one day be important to me. It should go without saying that it is. Being a teacher working at companies like Daimler and Bosch, I find myself more and more with German students who wish to improve their English to work in China, and with Chinese students looking to improve their English to work in Germany and around the world. For this reason I attended the ELTAS seminar titled China: *Beyond the Dos and Don'ts list*.

This was my main reason for attending the seminar, but I wanted to know more specific problems that other people have with Chinese culture. Our trainer, Dr. Ines Böhner, initially asked us to write down some specific cultural questions or queries, and here are a few:

- Are they really very materialistic?
- I just don't understand them.
- They make what seems like the same mistakes but I don't see the pattern.
- How does one trust the Chinese?

- Are the Chinese really so focused and industrious?

- They seem to have a permanent smile despite the situation. I can't figure out where to merit their seriousness or anxiety.
- Why do they prefer to stick to themselves?
- What exactly is respect in Chinese culture?
- How do you complement the Chinese?
- Why are the Chinese so quiet?
- Do Chinese trust westerners?
- How do you criticise the Chinese?

We did get some answers alright, but understanding a culture is not easy. To understand the various levels of difficulties, we had that familiar but useful iceberg analogy. At the top we have what is easy to see. In the middle we have what requires a little contemplation to understand. At the bottom we find what most of us really want to find out; however, to understand such things one has to be immersed in the culture for a long time.

At the surface of Chinese culture we see things that can be analysed with a certain level of ease in order to improve our understanding.

One such obvious element is their language. The Chinese word for crisis is comprised of two separate characters; one means a 'time of danger' and the other a 'time of opportunity'. This shows a very important characteristic of Chinese culture — the two sidedness of all things — 'Ying and Yang'.

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One participant pointed out the experience of seeing a group of Chinese laughing at a bus accident; one explanation for this behaviour is their perception of the good and bad in that event.

To understand the middle level we were provided with some academic concepts to help us peer through the veil. An example of this is the work of Edward Hall. He divided cultures into two groups titled 'high context' and 'low context'. High context cultures are collective. In the high context Chinese culture no one sticks out. Individuals have their place in the group. Whereas in low context cultures, individualism and self-realization are more prominent; in such cultures people are more direct people who speak their minds.

And here is where things get difficult, all the way at the bottom. Most of us do not have the time, among other things, to spend years in China.



Therefore, a more viable solution is to learn about the inner-workings of their culture through study. At the top of your list ought to be both Laozi and Confucius.

Aside from the structured frameworks provided, we were also encouraged to evaluate ourselves and how prepared we were to handle another culture. One's inter-cultural readiness is measured by our sensitivity to other cultures, and awareness of and attention to signals. One has to actively listen and adapt to different communication styles and build commitment and relationship. So when trying to adapt or learn about any culture, be open to exploring cultural diversity and enjoy the process of discovery. ■



When I arrived in Germany in 2012, my goal was to learn German in 1 year and return back home with the same feet that brought me here. After more than 2 years in Germany, I am now bracing myself for another 3. Yes folks, my sole purpose in Germany is to learn German. In Canada I was into Event Management. I consider teaching and new career and am very happy with and intent on continuing with it.