

Business savoir-vivre and culture: differences between Portugal and China

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Abstract

The business world is nowadays more competitive, therefore sometimes the companies are forced to expand outside the national market and seek new customers and partners across borders. In order to achieve success, it is necessary to be aware that we live in a diversified world and that we have to respect the culture of other countries. The knowledge of cultural differences is especially important while doing business in other countries, as it prevents to avoid mistakes that disrespect other cultures. This article intends to address the cultural differences between two countries: Portugal, as an example of European country, and China, as a country that raises a lot of curiosity and has completely different culture and traditions than countries in Europe. Moreover, China and Portugal carries out enhanced international cooperation and transactions. Based on the available literature, the authors

intend to emphasize the importance and concept of *savoir vivre* in business and present the major differences between these two countries.

Key words

savoir vivre, business, etiquette, culture, Portugal, China, international relationships

Introduction

Chinese economy is one of the most powerful in the world, having only the United States of America as its main opponent. As Chinese market continues to develop having a great influence on global economy, it becomes the business and investment opportunity for many entrepreneurs to set up and develop international business. The dynamic growth of Eastern market poses huge challenges to foreign companies with commercial interests in the region [China Daily, 2020]. Chinese-Portuguese economic and trade relations have very ancient roots. More than 500 years ago, Portuguese merchants arrived in Canton, China, exchanging ivory, silver, wool and sandalwood for silk from China [Mendes, 2014]. On February 8, 1979, China and Portugal established diplomatic relations, opening a new chapter in relations between the two countries. Since then, bilateral trade has taken on ever-increasing dimension [Rodrigues Santiago, 2012]. Trade volume grew from \$200 000 at the start of bilateral diplomatic relations to \$6 016 million in 2018, which was a new historical record with a year-on-year increase of 7.27%. China also became Portuguese largest trading partner in Asia [Mendes, 2014]. Since 2012, when Chinese companies such as China Three Gorges and State Grid began to develop cooperation with Portuguese companies affected by the debt crisis, a number of Chinese companies have come to invest in Portugal, which has enabled a rapid development of Sino-Portuguese investment cooperation. According to preliminary statistics, by the end of 2018, Chinese investment in Portugal exceeded nine billion euros and created 42 thousand local jobs. China achieved the fifth place in the countries that invest in Portugal, while Portugal also became one of the main destinations for Chinese investment in Europe. The investment cooperation between these two countries is marked by openness, transparency, mutual benefits and shared gains. Despite the decrease in the volume of business and the worldwide economic shock due to the COVID 19 pandemic, business cooperation between these two countries continues [Ledo, 2020].

Culture plays a very important role in trade negotiations and huge international projects, so it is a process that requires knowledge to avoid mistakes that can be damaging, since Chinese culture is quite different from European culture [Antoniak,

2020; Lima and Patah, 2016]. As a component of culture, etiquette can be a serious obstacle to the success of international negotiations. The bigger the cultural difference, the more likely the barriers to communication and misunderstandings become [Beltrán, Gulc, 2021. Consequently, learning and understanding etiquette differences between negotiating parties leads to success in intercultural negotiations [Lima and Patah, 2016; Szydło and Widelska, 2018; Czerniawska and Szydło, 2020a; 2020b].

This work aims to study the cultural aspects that can influence the negotiations of China with other countries, particularly Portugal. The article presents the differences in etiquette between China and Portugal in the context of business relations, which can help to reduce unnecessary negotiation failures and achieve the desired agreements. The most important differences in etiquette between the two cultures are in terms of giving gifts, dress code, communication, greetings, business meetings and private meetings, rules at the table, business cards and time management. In international trade negotiations, *savoir vivre* is one of the main factors. In this article, the authors used desk research of literature and internet sources as a method to obtain the data. In order to filter the data, the key words shown above were used to consider.

1. Savoir vivre in business

In the literature, there are several definitions that explain the concept of culture. In the view of Stewart, this concept expresses all the beliefs, norms, techniques, institutions and artifacts that characterize human populations [Stewart, 2006]. Another similar perspective is the Zein's opinion, who claims that culture is a set of values, beliefs, norms, customs, institutions and forms of expression that reflects the feelings, actions, thoughts and interests of individuals [Zein, 2012]. The culture involves all the adaptation issues to a certain group, in which it is inserted, but also take into account their relations. The ways of making decisions, thinking and acting of the workers belonging to a certain culture, are influenced by a whole set of common values and beliefs, which are manifested through symbols, such as rituals, legends, myths, stories and a language own and individualized [Pires and Macedo, 2006].

Globalisation has increased the need for communication between remote parts of the world, in the business context it drives the development of relationships between companies and entrepreneurs. It is essential to take into account and respect existing cultures in order to live in a society. Therefore, the concept of etiquette refers to a set of norms characteristic for good education and courtesy that aim to facilitate human relations in any situation [Stewart, 2006].

Similarly, the concept of business etiquette is typical in the business world. This idea encompasses a whole set of good manners that guide entrepreneurs to present themselves and manage relationships professionally according to different cultures and countries. The knowledge about other cultures is a crucial factor that distinguishes and highlights companies so that they can assertively communicate and make close deals anywhere in the world, building strong partnerships [Passport to Trade, 2019a].

2. Cultural differences in business etiquette

2.1. Business dress code

In Portuguese society appearance is very important. Good look is valued, people are conscious about fashion trends and believe that clothing indicates social position and success. The commercial dress code is quite formal for both sexes. Men usually wear conservative dark colored suits with shirt and tie, and women wear business suits or elegant dresses and blouses. Casual clothing may be appropriate in some modern and creative industries [Passport to Trade, 2019a].

In China it is important to dress conservatively, formally and discreetly. Usually, men dress smartly wearing suit and tie avoiding bright designs and colors. Women typically wear pastel colors or darker, dresses below the knees and abstaining from wearing low-cut tops. The high heels should not be open-ended and more than an inch or two high because it is considered rude and that is an intention to be superior to their colleagues. Usually casual clothing, such as jeans or khakis are not accepted, even in more modern companies [Santander Trade, 2020].

2.2. Gift giving

Offering gifts is an important form of social interaction. It creates a sense of connection and positive associations with a company and reinforce relationships that lead to close business relations. Both Portuguese and Chinese, pay attention and appreciate the offering the business gifts. The gifts should be connected with the national culture and are usually offered to the most senior and/or higher status person of the company, but there are some disparities between them.

The Chinese usually politely refuse a gift three times before accepting it because they consider it would be considered as greed. Once they accept the gifts, they do not open them immediately and wait until the person who offered it is not around

[Tang, 2011]. On the contrary, the Portuguese accept gifts without refusing and usually open them immediately expressing their gratitude to the givers and praise the gifts after accepting them [Santander Trade, 2020]. In terms of superstitions, for the Chinese it is important to avoid watches and sharp objects because they have negative associations in China. Gifts should also not be packed with black or white wrapping paper because they are colors associated with funerals [Corbin, 2017].

For the Portuguese, the gifts in numbers of 13 should not be offered (like flowers), because it is considered unlucky. In addition, lilies and chrysanthemums are usually given at funerals. It is also important not to give red flowers, since red is the symbol of the revolution [Passport to Trade, 2019b; Szydło and Grześ-Bukłaho, 2020].

2.3. Communication in business relationships

To succeed in the Chinese business world, it is necessary to understand the *guanxi* Wang principle in business. This concept covers the network of connections operating within the Chinese market. It is important to remember that the Chinese business culture is largely influenced by Confucianism, which represents values such as trust, mutual reciprocity, loyalty, solidarity, and harmony. Without this, the chances of establishing a business in China will be greatly reduced. In order to be a successful entrepreneur, you must demonstrate that you are worthy to be part of the network [Santander Trade, 2020; UKessays, 2015].

It is considered rude to point something with the finger, instead it should be pointed with an open hand. Eye contact is the best way to get someone's attention in a respectful way [Ehlion Team, 2019].

There are several taboos and sensitive issues that should not be mentioned in any way, such as politics and human rights. Humor in China contains many cultural references, so it is necessary to be cautious when making jokes. The lack of familiarity with Chinese symbols and metaphors makes it easy to be innocently offensive. Jokes should never be made with the marriage as that topic is considered too personal and speaking of it in a tone of joke is considered offensive [Ehlion Team, 2019].

The Portuguese business culture is characterized by the Mediterranean business culture, characterized by a tradition based on the relationship. The family is its social base, so loyalty to the family comes before loyalty to business. The Roman Catholic Church has also influenced the work ethic and the hierarchical structure of many Portuguese companies, where age and seniority are respected. The Portuguese prefer to do business with those they feel comfortable, so the persons they know and can trust. Sometimes business depends more on empathy for the person than the value

to the company. The Portuguese prefer face-to-face meetings rather than written or telephone communications, which are seen as too impersonal. The communication used is formal and based on strict protocol rules. If there are questions or concerns during a meeting, it is considered respectful to wait until the end of the intervention, so that there are no interruptions. Although Portuguese are generally honest, they do not usually give information about business unless requested, especially if remaining silent is of their benefit and interest. In addition, to be friendly and humorous, they have a more relaxed attitude towards time and do not consider deadlines as crucial as people from many other cultures [Santander Trade, 2020; Business Culture, 2019; <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/portuguese-culture/portuguese-culture-business-culture>, 06.01.2021].

2.4. Greetings and titles

Greetings are one of the first forms of contact between people, being one of the first way to make a strong impact and to make good impression and professionalism about the company. It is in the act of compliance that the manager has the first opportunity to show confidence, interest and sincerity to the another partner with whom he is interested in negotiating. The forms of treatment differ depending on the circumstances, therefore you should adopt different rules of etiquette in business depending on whether the situation is formal or informal, and also taking into account the level of closeness and trust between both parties. Titles highlight positions, ages, and levels of responsibility in a company [Communicaid Group, 2010].

In Portugal, courtesy and education are very important pillars, with older people and people in higher positions receiving greater respect. Although the Portuguese have a very friendly culture when it comes to relationships, at the first meeting and in a business context, they tend to adopt a more reserved and formal attitude. The most common form of greeting is thandshake, which should be firm to demonstrate self-confidence. According to the business precedece, the women handshake first. While greeting each other, visual contact between both parties is essential, the handshake is used to greet all participants at the beginning and end of the meetings [Santander Trade, 2020; Ediplomat, 2020; Expatica, 2020].

In a less formal meetings, when there is more closeness and trust with business partners and if they are male, the handshake is usually accompanied by a hug and a friendly warm pat on the back. Female partenrs usual greet each other with two kisses on the cheek, although this form of greeting is also used between men and women [Expatica, 2020].

Titles are important for Portuguese associates, particularly during the first contacts, however they can suggest to be treated only by the first name. The most used forms of titles are “Mr.” (Sir) and “Mrs.” (Madam) followed by the surname, in the case of scientific titles “Dr.” (Doctor) is used followed by the surname [Santander Trade, 2020].

In China it is usual, as in Portugal, to shake hands as a way of greeting, it should be light long and initiated by the Chinese dealer, physical contact should be avoided, and it is customary to keep your eyes down. Regarding handshakes, in China there are not many limitations for this gesture. Chinese associates appreciate if the interested partner uses some Chinese words at the first meeting. In a less formal and more social context, smiling, nodding, and using forward body inclinations with hand movements are also common greetings [Santander Trade, 2020; UKEssays, 2018; SBCoaching, 2019].

The family hierarchical and professional positions are extremely important in Chinese culture, so it is considered to be unkind if they are treated directly by someone’s name with a lower position. Business partners should address their Chinese associates using their professional title and surname. In case the person does not have a professional title, the expressions “Mr.”, “Madam or Miss”, for male and female, respectively, followed by the name [Santander Trade, 2020; UKEssays, 2018].

2.5. Business and private meetings

In order to establish a long lasting, sustainable professional relationship, the potential partners need time and usually long business meetings. It is important to be familiar with the culture of the business counterparts. However, if you do not know their national language, you should use the service of an interpreter.

The Portuguese are known to be very thorough and attentive to details, hence they are said to be careful and prudent business partners. The Portuguese are also expected to ask detailed information about the delivery time, currency and payment terms. When entering a meeting, the Portuguese already have in mind the outcome of the meeting, however, they do not disclose it until late into the meeting. Even so, they enter the meeting with open minds and disposition to hear the other parts positions. Written documentation is very common in Portugal and it is recommended to bring handouts to meetings [Santander Trade, 2020; Cultural Atlas, 2020; Szydło, 2014; 2018].

We can consider the Chinese partners as indirect interlocutor, meaning that disagreements will not be clearly expressed, being that they avoid saying “no” and any

negative connotations. Instead, phrases that present hardships and uncertainties, such as “Yes, probably” and “Yes, but it might be difficult” will be preferred. A smile with a change of subject or plain silence is also an indicator of a “no”, especially in meetings. When bad news needs to be delivered, an intermediary is preferred in order to soften the blow. In China, the first person who enters the room must be the highest ranked and will seat directly in front of the host, being this person the one who handles the entire negotiation. During the negotiation, only the person with the higher rank speaks. Bargaining is a big part of Chinese culture, so no one should accept proposition without bargaining, as it can be viewed as weakness. During a negotiation, psychological pressure tactics should be avoided as they can be seen as a way of manipulation.

In both cultures an appointment before the meeting should be made, if possible, at least one month in advance, preferably in writing, providing the company with information on what to accomplish at the meeting. Moreover, the meeting should be confirmed one week in advance. Another common aspect of both cultures is that the interruption to the speaker is seen to be rude and inappropriate [Santander Trade, 2020; Commisceo Global, 2021].

2.6. Rules at the table

Business meals are also a very important part of the business world and in maintaining professional relationship. Eating together is seen as a great opportunity to get to know your business partner better.

In Portugal, the meals tend to be long and less formal than actual office meetings. The most important seats are on the right to the hosts, as a seat assigned to the guests of honor. Usually, while the meeting with two businessmen, one seats on the right side and the another on the left side of the table. It is not usual for the invited guests to discuss business during the meals, unless the subject is raised by the host. Food is served in a family style. The guest of honor serves him/herself first and passes dishes around the table. It is polite to leave some food on your plate when finished eating. [Santander Trade, 2020; eDiplomat, 2020].

The Chinese tend to prefer to meet in public places rather than in their homes, especially when hosting foreigners. If you are invited to a Chinese home, you should consider it as a great honor. When you are invited to a business meal, you should wait to be seated, as there is a seating protocol based on hierarchy. The seat of honor is typically reserved for the guest of honor, who is given a seat in the center facing east or the entrance. In Chinese culture, it is important that you do not finish your meal as your Chinese counterparts will think that you are still hungry, as well as you

should not touch your food, since it is considered offensive. It is common that if you invite someone to have a meal you should pay for it, however, you should not show your money in front of the guests since it is said to be impolite. The Chinese may offer strong distilled alcohol called baijiu for toasts. There may be many toasts during a meal, one should never drink from the toasting glass unless during a toast [Santander Trade, 2020; Commisceo Global, 2021; Today Translations, 2020].

2.7. Business cards

Business cards can be used by companies or even for personal use. Its function is essentially to illustrate all the relevant contact information about the company and the CEO, serving as a communication link between the company and its future clients and or partners, in order to for example schedule the meetings. The business card are used to present the company to its potential business partners or customers, which aim to cause a first positive impact. The cards must be legible and easy to understand and may even contain some greetings or messages if the manager believes it is necessary and must be prepared with great quality and care in order to positively enhance the professional appearance (professionalism) of the company [Jacobs, 2013].

In Portugal, entrepreneurs exchange business cards quite frequently, usually after the first meeting. There are no specific protocols or correct forms when exchanging cards, however cards are given and treated with respect, which is very much appreciated by Portuguese entrepreneurs. A typical card contains your name, academic title, job title and contact details [Santander Trade, 2020; Expatica, 2020]. Regarding the exchange of business cards, in China, the businessmen follow a specific protocol. It is extremely important that the business cards are exchanged during the first meeting. The card should contain Chinese characters on one side and the English translation on the back, usually printed in golden ink. It is essential to have a good translator, so that the translation is correct. When handing the card to a Chinese member, it is important that it is given with both hands, as in Chinese culture it is considered a sign of courtesy and refinement. While presenting and handing the card, the Chinese characters should be face up. When a card is received from a Chinese member, it must be received in the same way, using both hands and never using only the left hand. It is impolite to write information on the card in the presence of the business partner. After receiving the card, it is correct to carefully read all the information printed on the card and then it must be carefully stored in a business card box and never in the front or back pocket [Corbin, 2017; Today Translations, 2020].

2.8. Time management

Time management differs between cultures and attention should be paid to the punctuality with regard to meetings and other business events, as delays are often considered to be disrespectful and may show disinterest in the business.

Punctuality is not a very important factor on the part of the Portuguese. In a meeting context the host usually arrives on time, although the other meeting participants are often late. The delay is not always seen negatively, in Portugal it is polite to arrive 5 minutes late, however more than 30 minutes is considered disrespectful and impolite and although the Portuguese are not very punctual either in a social or business context, they expect that their business partners are always on time. In case of delay, the Portuguese businessmen should be informed [Santander Trade, 2020; Expatica, 2020].

On the other hand, punctuality is highly valued in Chinese culture and viewed as a virtue, it is recommended to arrive on time for appointments or even slightly early. In case of delay, the partner should be informed and apologized for the delay. The meeting schedules are not very strict and are not always followed, as the Chinese do not like meetings that have a previously scheduled end time [Santander Trade, 2020].

Conclusions

Summing up the presentation of the customs of each country, there are differences between two countries considering cultural habits, however, they do not prevent to establish strong partnerships between the two countries.

Cultural differences do not have to constitute an obstacle to the international business. It is impossible to change or increase cultural differences, for this reason, it is extremely important that companies invest in trainings of international business managers, so that they develop their skills and become familiar with all cultures, being able to negotiate with any potential business partners.

Cultural differences cannot be ignored by managers, as globalization is inevitable and essential for the survival and development of companies. With the globalization and increasing competitiveness that rules the market, companies need to enhance their knowledge on cultural and international relations in order to be able to establish strong and loyal partnerships anywhere in the world, taking advantage of future opportunities. Awareness and knowledge of culture of different countries are the factors, which bring advantages to the companies and determine the success of the international business and the competitive advantage over other adversaries.

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Savoir-vivre i kultura w biznesie: różnice między Portugalią a Chinami

Streszczenie

Rosnąca konkurencja w świecie biznesu oraz chęć zaistnienia na rynku międzynarodowym, powoduje, że obecnie coraz częściej przedsiębiorstwa są niejako zmuszone do ekspansji poza rynek krajowy i poszukiwania nowych klientów i partnerów za granicą. Aby osiągnąć sukces na arenie międzynarodowej, menedżerowie powinni być świadomi różnorodności kulturowej oraz mieć wiedzę na temat zwyczajów i kultury partnerów biznesowych. Znajomość zasad savoir-vivre jest szczególnie ważna podczas prowadzenia biznesu w innych krajach. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu omówienie różnic kulturowych pomiędzy dwoma krajami: Portugalią, będącą przykładem kultury zachodnioeuropejskiej oraz Chinami, budzącymi często ciekawość ze względu na zupełnie odmienną kulturę i tradycje niż kraje w Europie. Ponadto, Chiny i Portugalia prowadzą bardzo wzmożoną międzynarodową współpracę handlową i gospodarczą. W oparciu o dostępną literaturę, autorzy wskazali główne zasady savoir-vivre w biznesie oraz omówili różnice kulturowe między tymi dwoma krajami w kontekście etykiety służbowej.

Słowa kluczowe

savoir-vivre, biznes, etykieta, kultura, Portugalia, Chiny, stosunki międzynarodowe