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## INSIDE THE CHINESE MIND

### Tips to get you started

1. Preview how you've chosen to structure your argument to help your audience follow your line of thought more easily. Just because it's logical to you doesn't mean it will be to others. Support people's listening by ensuring key phrases are repeated.
2. Make the links or transitions from one point to the next very clear. Say things like, "I've now finished outlining the first point in my argument. My second point concerns ...". Again, your aim is to make the way you are thinking clear to others who may not think in the same manner. Make sure you summarise the main points you've just made.
3. Make sure your conclusion is full and complete. For a Chinese audience, your conclusion should be slightly more detailed than you might normally provide. Don't worry if you feel you're repeating yourself a little. People who are used to the main point being located towards the end can be more attentive at this stage. They may now pick up something they missed earlier.
4. Encourage listeners to share how they're thinking by using questions such as:
  - Can you help me follow your line of thinking here?
  - What do you mean specifically?
  - I'm not sure that I follow your thinking. Can you explain...?

### *A vital meeting goes badly wrong*

Working with Chinese trade officials in Beijing, I (*Margaret, from the UGM team*) had a unique opportunity to observe a series of high level negotiations to identify the challenges confronting our Chinese clients when dealing with Westerners. In one meeting, some Australians wanted to be convinced that the aid part of the 'trade + aid' package under discussion would be implemented using gender equity principles. "Convince us", they demanded. The lead Chinese negotiator stated bluntly that, since 1949, men and women had been equal in China. The Australians didn't accept this statement as constituting a 'convincing argument' and asked the question again.

A momentary display of annoyance flashed across several faces on the Chinese side of the table. "Under our constitution," the most senior negotiator explained in a flat monotone, "Men and women have equal rights." He looked satisfied that a 'convincing argument' had now been provided.

But the Australians glanced at each other, looking frustrated. "I'm afraid, we're going to need a bit more than that to convince us," said Bill, the most senior Australian present. So, they put the question a third time. Now the Chinese couldn't hide their exasperation. The senior person banged the table loudly with the flat of his hands. "Mao has said: women hold up half the sky!" The Chinese all walked out shortly afterwards, closing the meeting abruptly.

The Australians then turned to me, as I hurried to follow my clients out of the room, "You see what we're up against, Margaret!" they said. "The Chinese continually block us!" I nodded but said nothing. In the next room, the agitated Chinese team gathered round me, as I joined them, "You see what it's like for us, Margaret! They're so aggressive!"

### *What's gone wrong here – and why?*

Many texts on communication offer a simple 'transmission' view of what happens when people communicate. It's implied that, if we state things clearly, the Chinese should be able to understand our point. Such texts offer virtually nothing in the way of assistance! The obvious problems which occur are attributed to insufficient knowledge of English.

But Chinese and Australians tend to bring to their interactions certain unstated, culturally-based ways of perceiving and responding. The two cultures differ radically in their approaches.

Many of these differences go unrecognised, with each cultural group assuming that, since their own norms are experienced as obvious and 'common sense', they must be universal. The result is negative evaluation of character and ability.

### *Designing an argument in the West*

Ways of organising information and presenting an argument vary across cultures and reflect both the values and linguistic traditions of a society. In English-speaking societies, Aristotle's views on the proper construction of arguments have had a profound effect on our ideas about what is logical and convincing. He set down a preferred way of arguing, where points are developed in a linear sequence to build a deductive argument. He believed people must first state their position and then prove it.

From Aristotle, we also get what has been termed our 'argument culture'. A positive value is given to bringing disagreements to the surface, in the belief that this will be productive and even enrich relationships. People are encouraged to 'lay their cards on the table' and 'clear the air'.

Reason, logic and intellectual rigour are privileged over empathy and intuition. Notions of persuasion are predicated on the prospect of verbal confrontation between equal individuals. Unsurprisingly, it's metaphors of war and combat which dominate this discourse. People *establish their position*. Then their argument can be *defended, challenged, attacked or destroyed*.

### *The Chinese way*

The contrast with Confucian thought is critical. The 'Analects' make it clear that, for Confucius, an agile tongue shows a shallow mind and, as reflection deepens, so silence should develop. Near the end of his career, he said, "I wish to speak no more." Confucius taught that action was the crucial means of persuasion, much more important than speech or writing. "The gentleman is ashamed of his word outstripping his deed." Even today, Confucius is a major influence still. If we ignore his work, we are missing the single most important key that can give us access to the Chinese mind.

Throughout the 'Analects', Confucius advocates that words should be used to convey an implicit or inferred meaning. Instead of extended arguments that bring things to a tight close, a succession of related images is balanced to suggest the main point. The proverb, "When you draw a dragon, you paint in the eyes last", indicates the Chinese view of logical order! Their unique ways of sequencing information and highlighting points causes Australians to see them as indirect and even inscrutable.

These two quite distinct mind sets - Chinese and Western - can produce business meetings fraught with misunderstanding and mutually-held, negative judgments. Then these mismatched expectations can quickly turn into bias and stereotypes, with trust and rapport becoming 'lost in translation'!