



# Roundtrip to China

There is plenty of amazement on both sides when the harmony-seeking Chinese – and their minimal use of gestures – meet the Danes, with their love of discussions and plenty of arm movements. That is why the University now offers courses in cultural bridge-building and understanding. This is especially beneficial for the business community.

**W**e don't really feel like we hit it off with our Chinese customers, says Annemette Krogh, Director of All Denmark Relocation. For 11 years, the company has relocated foreign business people to Denmark, helping them with Danish Civil Registration, enrolment in schools and daycares, bank accounts and daily challenges like grocery shopping.

Bent Nielsen listens and nods. On a normal day, Nielsen is a postdoctoral student in Chinese philosophy at the University of Copenhagen. But today he is also a cultural consultant for half a day. All Denmark Relocation wants to gain a better understanding of Chinese culture, to improve staff-customer relations.

"We have three hours. I suggest that we start with a quick all-around tour of China. The history, culture and language, and how they see themselves and others. Then we can cover the challenges you experience in your work," says Nielsen.

## Little Colour TV

Over the next hour, Bent takes the four consultants on a breakneck trip through time and place. He enthusiastically tells stories about *Zhongguo* – the region in mid-China that, like the Grecian city-states, shared civilisation and language and considered people outside barbarians. About the rise and fall of dynasties. About the enormous Chinese navy, that could have rounded the Cape of Good Hope decades before the Europeans actually did, if it hadn't been docked for domestic policy reasons. About the Chinese empire that was the largest technological power in the world until 300 years ago. About Chinese religion, which reflects the Emperor's enormous bureaucracy, with all of ten departments in Hell. About modern China and its frenzied growth. About the liberalisation in the 80s and 90s that allowed many families to have a second child, which they might actually call "Little Colour TV" as a loving reminder of what they had to give up to afford another child. About the prosperous Chinese coastal areas with housing estates the size of Zealand.

## Body language?

And now we return to the challenges, the misunderstandings, the Chinese nods that are not always an expression of comprehension.

"I can see why you're confused about receiving a 'yes-yes', when your clients haven't understood you," says Nielsen.

"It's because they don't want to put you in the uncomfortable situation that you haven't expressed yourselves clearly enough. The Chinese insist on maintaining harmony regardless of the cost. As Europeans, we have a hard time understanding how important that is for them."

"Does that mean that appearance and 'face' are important for the Chinese, while we in the West can find it superficial," contributes one of the course participants.

"Yes. It's because we are used to thinking in oppositions that exclude each other: day-night, man-woman, good-evil, true-false. So we often conclude that a person who considers appearance important is without substance," explains Nielsen.

He goes on to explain *feng shui* as an expression of the Chinese aspiration to bring landscaping and interiors into harmony with the universe. About how the Chinese often get uncomfortable when the person they are speaking to uses too many gestures, because they are raised to avoid such behaviour in the public sphere. And about how an agreement or a contract is often still up for negotiation in China, even when it is considered concluded in Denmark.

China-Denmark in three hours is starting to have an effect.

"I can see how our extremely rational and effective way of doing things can seem almost stressful to the Chinese. Our Western clients appreciate it, but I understand now that it doesn't seem like conscientious service to the Chinese," concludes Annemette Krogh. ■