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# London

## Business Matters

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## Yintong talks with...

Barbara Wang, programme director and China representative, Ashridge Business School



I first met Barbara Wang last year when I was helping with the PR training of 40 Chinese participants at Ashridge Business School. I was particularly impressed with the school's innovative teaching methods as well as its historical background and beautiful setting. Having read Barbara's book *Chinese Leadership*, I couldn't wait to talk further with Barbara about Ashridge and her views on executive training for Chinese leaders.

### Education

It is well-known that education is the number one priority for Chinese people. While China is sending nearly 100,000 students to the UK each year, senior management is also growing in its thirst for further executive development. It is not surprising therefore that the country has become the largest Executive MBA market in the world, with more than 10,000 EMBA students graduating from 60 business schools every year.

According to Barbara the executive education market has experienced significant change over the last few years. Executive development was hardly heard of in China five years ago and was seen as a perk, combined with a relaxed fact-finding and sightseeing opportunity or, for some, a chore, simply viewed as 'sitting in a classroom' time that was imposed by the organisation. Senior management did not understand the necessity of learning Western-style management that is so different from China in terms of its social and cultural system.

However, the generations born in the 70s and 80s have now grown up to be today's senior management. They may already have had

a Western education, so when Chinese leaders encounter new challenges in driving business forward, leading the workforce, or realising their visions of westward expansion, they are quick to turn to executive education for new skill sets. At the same time, the growing number of companies and entrepreneurs in China are in a profitable position to invest in training and education.

Recent and long-standing clients that have enjoyed their time at Ashridge include large Chinese organisations such as SinoPec and Cheung Kong Business School. I asked how Ashridge had maintained its competitive edge and what other business schools could learn from its experience.

### Top rated

"At Ashridge our priority is to provide clients with the highest standard of teaching. Our customised courses are top rated in the Financial Times and this is a very important element for our Chinese clients. We treat all our students as our customers and we go out of our way to ensure their learning experience is memorable in every way."

I learnt that the college carries out lengthy and detailed discussions to ascertain exactly what clients require and need, then works with faculty members who have at least 10 years' business experience who tailor the best package for the group. For senior business leaders across the board, it is essential that the courses are innovative and interactive, and the Chinese are no exception. However, it is not always the most effective approach to give clients what they want. People can't ask for things they don't know. Barbara and her colleagues therefore have to take initiatives when designing the courses based on their experience and in-depth understanding of the clients' needs.

I raised some issues that a typical 'old school' Chinese manager would ask, for example: what was the relevance of British training within a Western management framework to a state-owned Chinese organisation? Also: many lecturers are not all familiar with China so how can they deliver the courses to satisfy Chinese minds? "The key difference between a Chi-

nese education and Western-style training is that the education at Ashridge is designed to help the participants find the answers themselves. Through our training, they become equipped with a different skill set and an open mind to new ways of thinking.

### Insights

"At the same time, Chinese executives welcome the knowledge and insights specific to Western teaching. In some ways, the more original, the better. China's economy is growing vertically as well as horizontally into the global sphere.



**"At Ashridge our priority is to provide clients with the highest standard of teaching."**

Leaders' and managers' skills sets are stretched to the limit. Often they are puzzled by the Western business mentality, challenged by HR issues affecting their branch offices overseas, or tested by other practical matters based in the West. What they require from Ashridge is not knowledge necessarily applied to their existing Chinese businesses, but practised in the West and applied to their vision for the future." At the same time, Barbara pointed out, "Chinese people are very practical and adaptable. They extract the essentials of the teaching and create their own model which they then apply to their work environment."

An additional draw for Chinese delegates is the fact that Ashridge is located in an idyllic woodland setting and boasts a Royal heritage, having once been a residence of

Queen Elizabeth I. With Chinese people's strong sense of history, this element is a real bonus.

I ask Barbara about Ashridge's vision for the Chinese market. And what opportunities China has in store for British executive education companies.

China, she believes, offers the greatest opportunities. "Culturally, Confucianism is still deeply-rooted in Chinese people's mentality. Education will remain a top priority for many people – parents, individuals, and entrepreneurs. They believe in progression through education and the reputation of British education is highly regarded in China. Our business has been generated over the past few years through word of mouth. Even though Ashridge frequently tops the Financial Times Executive Education ratings, we are relatively unknown in foreign markets such as China. However, with our alumni and our new marketing drive, I am sure in time we will become a high profile and prestigious name in the Chinese business community.

"As for the future, as China is continuing its quest to expand internationally and to become the largest economy in the world, its needs for executive development will continue to grow at a substantial pace, albeit changing its requirements along the way. Our thought leadership and in-depth knowledge about international business means that we are well-placed to work with clients to solve their issues and continue to be at the forefront of change."

Chinese Leadership by Barbara Wang was published by Palgrave, Macmillan in 2011

Yintong Betsler is a marketing and communications specialist in the Anglo-Chinese community and the author of a series of books on doing business in China and the UK. She is managing director of ACTIVE Anglo Chinese Communications

[www.activeukchina.com](http://www.activeukchina.com)