



Yintong talks with ...

Guo Kunzhang, Chairman of the UK Tianjin Chamber of Commerce

Guo Kunzhang is a leading figure in the Chinese business community in London running a travel and education consultancy – Eupo Business Service Limited – from Chinatown, also his base for looking after the interests of the UK Tianjin Chamber of Commerce of which he is chairman.

Guo came to London in 1986, speaking no English and without higher education or financial backing. This revelation captured my imagination as China was an entirely different place then; most people who came to the UK in that period were either highly-educated, sent by the government, sponsored by wealthy relatives, or possibly illegal.

"In the late 80s, China enjoyed a period of sudden exposure to the Western world, and we watched many foreign movies such as Jane Eyre. I was amazed how large Mr. Rochester's estate was, and how luxurious people's lives already were in England a hundred years ago," says Guo, "From a young age I enjoyed observing my surroundings, reading newspapers and thinking for myself. So it is not surprising I made up my mind, against all other opinions, to come to the UK and pursue a different life in the 'wild west'. My initial thought was very simple: work hard in the UK to make enough money, then go back to live a better life in China. People thought I was mad, as I was already married with a child. My job as a professional driver in one of the biggest textile factories in the country was well-paid and envied by many."

Connection

Through a connection with an aunt in the UK, Guo made his way to London and studied studying English. While his aunt's existence served as a good backup plan, he was acutely aware that he would need to rely on himself. He was prepared for hardship: Guo studied in the morning and afternoon,



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but had two jobs on the go – one during his lunch hour, and one after class, late at night as a kitchen porter. His greatest luxury at the time was to stroll through the London streets and admire the city in the day light.

From being a porter Guo worked his way up to a chef's position in an up-market restaurant in Kensington, which job made him a decent living and lasted until 1994. Guo talked to me about this hard-earned experience without resentment and full of amusement and pride. Life was, however, life was to take him in another direction.

To help a friend out, Guo was asked to show a Chinese delegation around London. Not only did he enjoy this experience and got paid handsomely, he was also immediately alerted to this potential business opportunity. He started to research the industry and make contacts in the field. With the influx of Chinese visitors, Guo's new

business grew rapidly. He bought Jade Travel, an historical travel company, established in the 1960s, restructured it and renamed it Eupo Business Service, offering high-end and boutique travel services. He also acquired other companies including education consultancy services for private clients and a cultural exchange platform.

Ambitions

So far, so fascinating. Guo's companies are running smoothly, but does he still have ambitions to fulfil and new dreams to realise?

Over the years, Mr. Guo has established a loyal following and a solid network of contacts in China through his business, especially in his hometown Tianjin. People trust him and he is inundated with requests for help, Guo felt his calling to build bridges and platform to do his bit for Tianjin. After a year's planning, Tianjin Chamber of Commerce was set up last October under his leadership. This development is about more than sentiment, it also a strategic and visionary move.

Tianjin is a municipal city, a 30 minutes' train ride from Beijing, which has witnessed significant economic growth in recent years. It hosts the biggest port in Northern China, and development zones such as the Binhai New Area and the Tianjin Economic-Development Area (TEDA), have positioned the city as an attractive site for investment. In addition,

the newly-established Tianjin Free Trade Zone aims to exploit the potential for economic growth in Northern China by promoting the coordinated development in the area encompassing Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei. These Free Trade Zones will promote a unified system between Tianjin and Hebei's ports and develop a transportation

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corridor between China, Mongolia and Russia by exploiting key transportation points and areas for collaboration, ready for facilitating the 'One Belt, One Route' initiatives, a key initiative of the Chinese government. Guo is confident about the role his organisation is going to play in this grand plan and is already receiving planners coming from his home country.

As we speak though, reduced Chinese GDP is causing ripples in the business world. But he is not concerned by the slow-down. "I would be worried if China hadn't calmed down a bit by now. An economy has to go through different stages before it is well established. There is no need to panic, the growth momentum is still in gear and driving China with great force. In a way, it is sign of maturity. Now is the time for companies to consolidate and recover for further development, maybe in scale or overseas. I think this is a truly golden era for businesses all round."

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