



# YINTONG TALKS WITH...

Joanna Dodd, Lawson Dodd PR



**J**OANNA Dodd has run her own public relations company, Lawson Dodd, since she set up the business, in April 1992, with her colleague Belinda Lawson. The consultancy's current client base ranges from Centric Commercial Finance and the Royal Hospital Chelsea to Lavazza coffee and the Nando chain of restaurants. Recently the firm has focussed on PR work for Chinese clients, including China Telecom, Liangtse Wellness, China-Britain Business Council and Kevin Lin, the interpreter on official visits to China for Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron.

Joanna's link and passion with China started from the time she and her husband adopted their first baby daughter from

Hubei Province in 2002 – they adopted a second daughter (from Jiangxi) three years later. As a result Joanna has both a personal and a commercial interest in encouraging the UK to gain a more objective view of China and helping Chinese companies and organisations develop an effective presence in the European market.

Both Joanna and I are founding members of China Advisers Network (CAN) and we enjoy comparing notes on how we view China issues from our different English and Chinese perspectives.

We have often talked about the key business concept of *guanxi*: a Chinese phrase which means relationships, contacts, connections, or networks. *Guanxi* has been discussed so extensively within the business world in the UK that it has now been accepted as an English word by the Anglo-Chinese business community. We decided to take a look at *guanxi* from our two viewpoints to see if we could identify some common themes:

- The level of importance *guanxi* plays in China and the UK
- How people network differently

Firstly, there is no doubt that business in both China and the UK relies on networks and has done for years. In the UK people still talk of 'the old boy's network' even though the traditional privileged social system it refers to is no longer as all-powerful as it once was. But whereas *guanxi* in China might rate eight or nine out of ten in terms of its importance to business, networking scores more of a six in the UK.

A key difference between British and Chinese networking relates to whether or how much it is personal or business. In

China, these boundaries are blurred; networking will frequently involve an executive's wife or husband and family. In the UK, networking – socially or professionally – is much easier to define.

Perhaps the core reason for this difference is the impetus behind it. In China, people get together to initiate and explore business potential through constantly working on the business friendship, preparing for future connections. It is a bad practice, almost a taboo, in China to 'use' a relationship only when it is needed, and especially when it has not been properly nurtured and consolidated. Chinese people are much less inclined to take cold calls or speak to strangers. Usually the only way in to a company is via introductions or past experience as people believe in developing a relationship with a prospective business partner before they do any business. It is almost the exact opposite of what happens in the UK where companies tend to rely more on their reputation and track record. There is even a tendency to think of any perceived personal obligation as uncomfortable, even though most business people work with people they like. Business people in the UK are generally more relaxed about meeting strangers, a reason why so many business and networking events are organised.

The format of networking in our two countries is different too. Sharing a meal is the most popular format for networking in China. In recent years other activities have risen in popularity such as meeting at a spa or massage parlour – anathema to many British people – as well as on golf courses.

Online networking is rife in the UK but far less so in the business world in China, where social networking sites like LinkedIn

are not generally used for business purposes. People far more prefer to network with each other in person, face to face or by telephone.

As the Chinese economy grows stronger, more Chinese companies are expanding to the West. The Chinese bosses start to recognise the power of local expertise and their connections to the local network. So, instead of the traditional approach of parachuting own staff in from their headquarter in China, more and more British or localised Chinese personnel are taken on.

*Guanxi* has traditionally been an essential part of Chinese culture. But will it continue as the Chinese political structure changes, businesses operations become more streamlined and increasing numbers of Chinese companies become key players on the global stage? Our guess is that it will be updated with new contents, formats and with more international flavour added to it. However, the personal elements and emotional value will remain. That's why, rather than assuming that our two business cultures must automatically be getting closer, time and energy should still be invested in learning and better understanding both the differences and the similarities between British networking and Chinese *guanxi*.

Yintong Betser is a China business specialist and the author of Active Business Travel – China [www.activeukchina.com](http://www.activeukchina.com)

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## INSIDE:



**Liz Earle**  
Beauty and the  
business ethic  
page 17

**London's new River Park**  
page 3

**LCI in the news**  
page 16



**Brazil targeted for SME exporters**  
page 15