

About the Author/MIA DOUCET

Mia Doucet, author of the award-winning book, *China In Motion*, facilitates executive retreats with companies that want to increase revenues in Asian Pacific. A major automotive client describes Mia as an “innovative strategist, whose genius is her ability to combine her vision, research, and insights to spark money-making ideas.”

Visit her at <http://www.chinainmotion.com> to learn more. Be sure to sign up for her free weekly ezine, “China in Motion: 20-second bits of wisdom.” Her book, *China in Motion*, is available at Barnes and Noble, Indigo, and other bookstores.



“Yes” Does Not Mean “Yes” or Negotiate to a “Yes” That Means “Yes”

The Chinese often answer with a very quick “Yes” whenever you ask a question. This happens even when we know they haven’t thought about the question long enough to even answer. Why do they say “Yes” when they can’t possibly mean it, and what do you do when this happens?

When Westerners do business in China, confusion often arises over the word “Yes” in response to our questions. We tend to assume that “Yes” means “I agree.” This can have serious consequences when negotiating agreements.

Automatic Response

The Asian “Yes” is a habitual response. For that reason, consider it a neutral constant. Train yourself to not hear “Yes” as meaning agreement. Make it mean nothing in your mind until you have had a chance to confirm what “Yes” means in the specific context of your conversation.

Context is important, because when a Chinese person says “Yes,” it can mean any number of things. Several Asian cultural factors come into play with the word “Yes.” Culture affects every business conversation, and not just the formal negotiation that secures the sale — mannerisms, trust, face, respect and outlook.

Most Chinese people, especially those who don’t have a lot of opportunity to talk with English speakers, use a sound (“Yeah,” “Yes,” or “Oh”) to keep the conversation going. It does not mean “I get what you’re saying.” It does not signal agreement. It just means “I’m listening.”

Where there is confusion, they feel that if they can keep you talking long enough, then there is a good

chance they will finally get your meaning. So hear it as *acknowledgment* that you have asked a question, and not as a response to your question.

“Yes” Increases Trust; Protects Face

In the Chinese culture, it is considered an honor to be asked to do something. They are happy to help, and eager to prove that they are the best person to assist. Eagerly saying “Yes” will deepen the trust you have placed in them. Knowing this will prevent a feeling of *dis-trust* from developing when we encounter a “Yes” that comes too quickly by Western standards.

Where there is a risk of losing face (yours or theirs), the Chinese will often pretend to understand your meaning. Surprisingly, this happens often, due to the language barrier. Especially when other Chinese are also present, the one who is supposed to have the best grasp of the English language may feel ashamed at not understanding your question. Further, by an interesting cultural twist, your unclear communication has the potential to cause you loss of face.

A Chinese engineer who negotiated multi-million dollar deals for integrated software systems across China, explained the thought process: “Usually, in our culture, the Chinese pretends to understand. I can’t always say, ‘Sorry,’ ‘Sorry, I don’t understand,’ or I will lose face. The Westerner will think, “*Why can’t you understand?*” So I just fake to understand. I say, ‘Yes.’ ‘Yes.’ If I can do that, I give you face. Even among Chinese people where they use the same language, they like to say ‘Yes’ during the conversation.”

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“No” Ends the Conversation

Beware! If anyone says “No,” the conversation is over. The same applies in the negotiation context. If a person says “No,” the negotiation is over.

Avoid the Dumb Questions

When you are uncertain whether you got your point across, it is a mistake to ask the question, “*Do you understand?*” For one thing, it’s condescending. For another, it creates a double bind. No Chinese will ever confess to not understanding. It’s an embarrassment. Why would you want to humiliate them by asking them to acknowledge a lack of understanding?

Similarly, the question, “*Do you have the authority to make a decision?*” begs a “Yes” response. They are aware that Westerners want a quick decision and don’t want to waste time with someone who can’t make that decision. Chances are, they’ll say “Yes” so that you will not look down on them for not having the ability to decide on their own.

So be careful not to put your colleagues in that impossible situation. Do not ask questions that invite a “No” response.

“Yes” Equals Respect “No” Equals Disrespect

The Asian need for honor and respect governs all business activity. Consider for a moment, the implications of the word “No” in Asian culture. “No” is considered rude and confrontational. Even shaking the head to mean “No” signals disrespect. It hurts the relationship. And it can lead to loss of face.

That is why Asians will not openly challenge your opinions with a “No.” The concern is that if they cause loss of face through what they consider to be rejection (“No” is a rejection), that will lead to loss of trust. Loss of trust results in lost opportunity.

While it is bad manners to reject directly, indirect communication is totally acceptable. The meaning of “Yes” becomes ambiguous. The word may then mean any number of things, including “maybe,” “back up,” “I’m thinking,” “give me time to prepare,” or “let me get back to you with an answer.”

The Chinese Greet the World With a “Yes”

Some people greet the world with a “Yes,” some with a “No.” Some cultures do the same.

In the “can do” Chinese culture, the first response is always “Yes.” The easiest thing in the world for a Chinese to say is “Yes,” and then figure out how to do the thing later.

This is one of the ways which Chinese differ from

Japanese. The Japanese will tend to first respond in the negative. But that is the subject of another article.

A large part of learning how to negotiate for Asian business is getting to a “Yes” that means a definite “Yes.” A bit of cross-cultural savvy will go a long way toward achieving that goal. Small changes in the way we ask questions will have a huge impact on reducing friction and increasing productivity through clear communication.

Ten Ways to Assure That “Yes” Means “Yes”

1. **Ask how to communicate.** “How do you want me to communicate with you? Do you want me to send emails? Or do you prefer that we talk over the phone?”

(Of course, if the person says “Yes,” you may need to start the dialogue again!)

2. **Plan your message.** Take the time to plan your conversation. What words will most easily put your point across?

3. **Warm up the brains.** Before the call, send an email outlining your key points to provide a context for the

conversation.

4. **Prepare questions.** Frame your questions so that they cannot be answered by a simple “Yes.” Use open-ended questions that begin with the well-worn Who? When? Why? Where? and How?


5. **Give permission to ask you to repeat.** At the start of every conversation, ask them to stop you and ask you to repeat if they are not exactly sure what you said.

6. **Slow down.** Leave space between your sentences to allow your words to sink in. There is always a time lapse when translating from one language to another.

7. **Simplify and clarify.** Use easy words. Avoid slang, sports metaphors, and humor because they don’t translate well. When you want to say something complicated, find different ways of saying it.

8. **Signal your intent.** Start your sentence with words that let the other person know what to expect next: “The main point is...” “In other words...” “I have three questions to ask. The first question is...”

9. **Check for comprehension.** Make sure you were understood. “What is your understanding of what we have agreed upon today? If a commitment was made, politely ask how they plan to accomplish the task. If appropriate, you may want to ask what steps they will take to assure a quality process.

10. **Follow up in writing.** Prepare a written copy of your essential points. Where it’s important, ask for a written confirmation of agreement. 

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