



A Young Researcher's Guide to Research in China

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China is a burgeoning consumer market, enjoying the highest and longest sustained economic growth in history; 10% year-on-year since the 90s. To the Chinese middle class, Western brands are aspirational, luxurious and exotic. So it's come as no surprise that there is *significant* demand for consumer research into this unique market.

I recently had the opportunity to go to China for the first time as part of a global product development study. I was fascinated by my first visit to China and I've pulled together some practical and research-specific tips to help young researchers make the most out of a trip to the Far East.

1. Plan Ahead

Before you even get to China there are some practicalities for young researchers to consider. A Chinese Visa will take a minimum of 3 working days to be approved, so plan ahead. You require a permanent passport with at least 6 months of validity, and importantly, a letter of invitation from a business based in China.

While this may seem obvious, here in the UK where we're lucky enough to enjoy the ability to jump on a last-minute flight to almost anywhere. However, this sometimes means agile businesses can get complacent in planning overseas travel. It should be communicated to your team and client, well in advance, that if anyone wants to come along to fieldwork in China, they should start the Visa process as early as possible.

2. Prepare for A New Online Existence

Once you get to China, Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram, Google (inc. Google Maps) – will be unusable during your trip. You can cut it anyway you want – cleansing, limiting, frustrating or peaceful, the fact is a lot of the software you use every day in the UK will no longer function in China. To get around this you can download and install a VPN before you leave or simply resign yourself and anyone back home to some serious radio silence.

3. Rating Scales Are Used Differently

Eastern and Western cultures are different in many ways. This includes systematic differences in the way they answer some commonly used survey question formats. There is a measured effect that shows that Eastern cultures (China included) when responding to Likert-style rating questions (1-5, 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) are more likely to answer moderately (around 3) than Western consumers when it comes to opinions.

Hypothesised to be because of what's called dialectical thinking or "The nail that sticks out gets struck", Eastern consumers are averse to extreme opinions or ones that might be more likely to differ from the majority. However, this all changes when asked to evaluate new concepts.....

4. A Politeness Bias Exists

Chinese research participants are incredibly polite and very positive about anything you test. To the point they are perhaps TOO positive about concepts.

We stress tested honesty both with participants and our translators. Even then we found Chinese research participants simply weren't comfortable criticising our stimulus.

"It's too difficult to use so I've never tried it, but I would rate it a 9/10..."

In China, my advice would be to make every effort to make research participants comfortable and make it clear that honesty is what you are looking for. And even then, take the verbatim with a pinch of salt. This is especially true when concept testing.

5. Familiarise Yourself with Cultural Terms

Eastern cultures in general, have ways of expression. This is born out of culture that can be alien to Western researchers. For example, typically, Chinese men will aspire to be one of the following personality types:

Dachi: *powerful, masculine and strong, projecting his power with wealth and influence, like a well-loved king. Think Elon Musk.*

Bachi: *similarly, powerful, masculine and strong, but projects a harder power through physicality and capability. More aggressive and immediate in his presence. Think Conor McGregor.*

When discussing certain products, like watches or cars; Chinese men will use these words to describe the personality of the product, and tell us whether it's *Dachi* or *Bachi*.

When research participants express themselves in culturally unique ways about your product, brand or idea, it's important that you know what is meant. Often a quick conversation with the translator can help you understand these complex concepts, and they are often rich with meaning and worth delving into.

6. Don't Forget Your 'Please take me home card'

Once you've finished your day of fieldwork in China there's one final thing to remember! Every hotel will give you a business card, not just so you return next time, but so you can return that evening! On the card will be the hotel's name and address in Chinese characters; a priceless piece of information when you are trying to communicate with a local taxi driver. It highlights that the language barrier is vast and you should prepare well for it. The hotel's 'Please Take Me Home Card' will be your saviour after many long days of fieldwork in China.

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