


How RSM business school in the Netherlands is strengthening its links with China by **George Bickerstaffe**

DOING BUSINESS IN CHINA

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China was the obvious choice when Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM), a leading European business school based in the international port city of Rotterdam, moved to the next strategic step in its international development.

Chinese universities and business schools have developed a strong interest in collaboration with international institutions and this is expanding beyond traditional English-speaking markets.

European business schools are creating stronger footprints in foreign markets, national systems have become more open and students now go in both directions for study exchanges and in their study choices.

RSM's appointment of Dr Ying Zhang as Associate Dean for China Business and Relations in June 2014 is a sign of the school's serious intent. Her selection recognises the need for an entrepreneurial and proactive approach to developing relationships, bridging the differences in culture and administrative systems using a mix of skills, awareness and knowledge.

Zhang's career displays highly suitable credentials for the role. After excelling in her classes in secondary and university education in China, she came to the Netherlands as a masters student of engineering and completed her PhD thesis, *Entrepreneurship Development in China by using a Multilevel Approach*, at United Nations University-MERIT and Technology University of Eindhoven in the Netherlands.

Her current research includes entrepreneurship and innovation, examining how Chinese firms catch up, globalisation, corporate social responsibility, project management, business school development, international academic collaboration and organisational change.

In a recent research project with KPMG (which is now a Harvard Business School working paper), Zhang analysed approaches to project management by Dutch and Chinese managers and highlighted the value of understanding cultural differences.

Understanding how to do business in China is often included in business school curricula but many higher education institutions still struggle with the differences and expectations. Zhang says it is vital to identify what is important for both sides and how value is created in a relationship.

"Not only are business students from China important to the school but the involvement of a highly-ranked European business school in China is important for China too," she adds. "With China's rapid economic development, there is an intensive demand for highly qualified human capital and a broad range of high-quality business education is clearly needed. American and European business schools can both contribute and such collaborations will lead to extensive mutual learning, benefiting both sides." Zhang says that understanding Chinese policies in higher education and following an effective strategy in working with Chinese partner universities are very important.

"Working on China-related ventures without thorough consideration of culture and social norms is harmful for an organisation's internationalisation progress," she says. "It's a long-term orientation and you will need to have a thorough understanding of the whole spectrum of both cultures, and be able to connect these."

Confucianism influences Chinese business practices and one of the manifestations is an aversion to conflict, the maintenance of proper demeanour and the preservation of "face".

"Difficulties are always there," says Zhang. "This job is very exploratory with high levels of responsibility. Everything is from scratch. We must bear in mind the difficulties and challenges at every moment. And while every job has those, my challenge is to solve the problems and recreate the harmonious conditions at an institutional level."

RSM's China strategy began in 2009 with the launch of an MSc programme in Chinese Economy and Business, which it ran jointly with Leiden University in the Netherlands for five years with Zhang as programme director. This provided low-risk experience for RSM and a better understanding of its brand impact in China and the attraction it might have for Chinese students.

Another example is the Global Executive OneMBA programme consortium, which includes RSM and three other founding partner business schools in Mexico, Brazil, and the US, joined by the School of Management at Xiamen University in China in 2014. Chinese students are being recruited to the OneMBA and all programme participants travelled to Xiamen for joint projects in May 2015.

The contribution of mainland Chinese professors and students in such a globally orientated programme provides great benefits to all participants, in particular because all students have senior roles in their organisations and can enhance mutual understanding of doing business across borders. The appointment of Zhang as Associate Dean also facilitated RSM's role in the Alliance of Chinese and European Business schools (ACE), which alliance consists of 10 European and 10 Chinese business schools supported by EFMD as an important initiative to encourage collaboration between Chinese and European business schools. Regular meetings and sharing of ideas are a great platform for collaboration.

RSM's active approach has given quick results as relationships of trust are built and negotiations take place with a good understanding of culture and values.

In October 2014 RSM went public with its China strategy by announcing a series of double masters degree programmes. In a five-year agreement with the College of Business at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics (COB SUFE), SUFE students will now follow the MBA programme in China at COB SUFE in the first year of their study and spend their second year taking an RSM's MSc programme.

In December 2014, RSM confirmed its relationship with Lingnan (University) College at Sun Yat-sen University with the same model. The two schools previously worked together to host the former MSc in Chinese Economy and Business and have been



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successfully exchanging students for several years. This model has been moved forward with Beijing Jiaotong University, Tongji University, Sun Yat-sen Business School, and Southwest University of Finance and Economics. RSM will also take a selection of its MBA modules in logistics and international business to COB SUFE Shanghai.

"Our modules will differ from those offered in Shanghai and from other western business schools," explains Zhang. "We will tap into local expertise and relate to local businesses. And we'll take our own faculty members with knowledge of China."

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This is provided through regular activities all over the world as well as events in Rotterdam and Amsterdam and regular publications to keep them in touch with the school and new business knowledge.

"Our China-based alumni are very keen to contribute to our network through mentoring, programme involvement, projects and through personal recommendations", says Zhang. "They have discovered RSM, the city of Rotterdam and the Netherlands are great facilitators for their future success, and our partnerships with Chinese business schools and with Chinese companies such as the international telecommunications company Huawei give further pride and recognition to their degrees."

As RSM prepares for its new cohort of Chinese students in autumn 2015, Zhang is enjoying facilitating the process of bringing RSM and China closer together. Her passion for joining the different parties to be able to take advantage of opportunities between Europe and China is matched by her commitment to research the challenges and opportunities for China itself.

"I'm at my happiest when I can see delegates from industry and governments engage with our research and our students," she says. "I guess I really follow my own advice to them – that you can build a successful strategy of collaboration between China and Europe by investing in mutual understanding, insight and value creation. Our students and alumni will be the proof of our success – their active role in building the RSM brand in China is also the main way we can grow and sustain our footprint in China."