

# How learning Business Chinese helped my career

In conversation with **Ilan Bass 白义兰**, Relationship Manager, peer to peer Board Community & Mediator



## PERSONAL AND WORK EXPERIENCE

I am from London, although quite typically for Londoners was born outside the UK – in my case in Tel Aviv. After completing a degree in East Asian Studies, I started my career in London's financial services industry and worked there until the time of the global financial crisis. Having planned to live in East Asia while at university, it was a good opportunity to leave both the industry and country, and so I moved to Beijing in 2009 to build on my degree studies and teach English.

I later found a position working at the British Embassy and after living in Beijing for over 4 years, relocated to Tel Aviv to study a master's degree in Conflict Resolution and Mediation. I worked for several academic and non-profit organisations there before returning to Beijing to join the newly established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Prior to the pandemic, I was based in Shanghai helping international companies develop and manage their operations in China. I now work for Criticaleye, a company based in London and Hong Kong that is a peer-to-peer Board community for senior business leaders. I am also an accredited mediator and during the pandemic established Orchid Mediation 义兰调解 with the purpose of helping people resolve interpersonal, intercultural and international disputes quickly, confidentially and cost-effectively using mediation.

## WHAT IS YOUR MAIN TAKEAWAY FROM LIVING IN CHINA?

The experience of living in China is so enlightening and challenging that it's hard to say what the main reflection is. One thing that I have taken from those experiences is that approaching challenges with an **open mind, humility, patience and respect** is a good foundation upon which to get a positive outcome in any situation.

## HOW DO YOU MOTIVATE YOURSELF TO LEARN MANDARIN?

If you **enjoy the learning process**, you will stay motivated to learn regularly and over the long term. So, I try to make the learning process fun. Another way is to tie it to purpose – I believe it is of vital importance that speakers of English and Chinese understand each other, and I also offer to **mediate in Mandarin**, so that motivates me to continue improving. Another way is to get involved in cultural activities. For example, I enjoy drinking Chinese tea and also practice tai chi, so this helps both to learn the language and interact with Chinese people.

## HOW DID CHINESE SKILLS HELP YOUR CAREER?

Two roles I had in Beijing required a level of Chinese language ability. At the British Embassy, I started a newly created position that required me to **interact with different stakeholders in Chinese society**. At AIIB, I was the first foreign national in my department, and so my **ability to communicate in Mandarin** allowed me to act as a conduit between the department and foreign staff coming to work in other parts of the bank. In my current role at Criticaleye, the company is growing rapidly in Asia, so I intend to put my Mandarin skills to good use by communicating with our Mandarin-speaking members and Board Mentors based in the region.

## TIPS FOR CHINESE LEARNERS

- Learn the **tones, pinyin and characters together** from the start. You can also learn the most common radicals, so that you understand how the majority of characters are formed.
- Make learning a part of your **daily routine**, so you are improving each competency (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and also not forgetting the things you have studied previously. If you use it, you will improve it!
- **Be courageous!** Making mistakes when communicating in a foreign language is part of the learning process and may even help you learn faster. Apply what you have learnt by finding opportunities that require you to communicate in Mandarin.