



The Art of Planning the TerraLex Conference in China

By Ping He

In the spring of 2005, if someone asked me what had been keeping me up at night, I would have said TerraLex. This client of Experient (formerly CGS) decided to have its 2005 annual general meeting in China. In the client agreement with Experient, I was requested to be the planner.

Just exactly what is TerraLex, and why was I challenged? I have some notes to share:

- TerraLex, one of the largest international law firm networks in the world;
- 130 renowned lawyers, plus their guests, from 93 countries;
- A conference starting in Shanghai but ending in Beijing, with a post-trip to Xian;
- Visas, air transport, ground transport, social programs, tours, and meals.

One of the founding partners from AllBright, the Shanghai host law firm, called me and said in Chinese, "This is the first international lawyers conference ever held in China, and we have some top-caliber speakers lined up. We want to do whatever we can to make it successful, so just tell us what to do." I felt honored and pressured at the same time.

Months later, after the dust of all the excitement has settled, I owe the success of the conference to the art of planning. The word "art" in this particular context means a well thought-out strategy or strategies, as in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. As a Shanghai native, *The Art of War* has had a huge impact on me because in Chinese culture, *The Art of War* was based upon decisive military strategies and tactics used during the past 5,000 years.

So profound and ingrained in Chinese culture is this philosophy that it always has been mirrored in Chinese business strategy, as it still is today. To that point, the Chinese word for both business and war, *Bing-fa*, is identical. Using war principles to dictate business actions may be anathema to the Western world, but it is ever prevalent in Asia, and it is something we need to be aware of. All negotiations, planning, and sales activity incorporate the tenants of Bing-fa. To not understand or know how to deal with this principle is tantamount to flying blindfolded.

Within the strategy development for TerraLex, I had to address several important steps. **The first step I took was to do research to identify a local destination management company (DMC) partner.** Having local partners in any country in

which one needs to entrench its business operations is mandatory. I wanted this partner to be reputable nationwide in China and to have a successful track record of handling sophisticated high-end groups. The DMC needed to be resourceful and capable enough to provide a turnkey solution for our attendees from 93 countries.

Proficiency was needed in obtaining visas and air and ground transport; staging social programs; and providing customized, individual post-trips for attendees. The DMC had to be highly creative in designing special programs; adaptable and trained to understand and meet Western standards; and finally, able to deliver the expected results. As a result of my research, one company stood the test of the rigorous interview process. It was this company that executed my plan flawlessly.

My second step was to understand what my client and host firm wanted to accomplish for their conference. In my opinion, this was crucial. By fully understanding my client's and host firm's goals and objectives and integrating the needs of the predominantly Western attendees into a fit with Chinese norms, I was able to design social programs in such a way that not only reinforced, but also helped, my client and my host firm reach their goals and objectives.

The objective of TerraLex 2005 was to provide its members with a platform to discuss and learn how to practice law in China. As a native Chinese who left China as an adult and has lived in the United States for many years, I realize that one of the most difficult messages to get across is to make people aware of the fact that there are many regional cultures within China. Because of the disparate sub-cultures and local histories, one size does not fit all.

Beijing, for example, has a history that dates back to 350 B.C. and is a city that housed many emperors in several dynasties, while Shanghai was only a small seaside town 100 years ago. I expressed my concern to my local DMC contact, and we came up with the following program, which we believed helped bridge that gap.

For opening night, we took the group to Paramount, a main entertainment venue in the 1930s, and arranged a show that covered the history when Shanghai was famous for speakeasies, overindulgence, Art Deco, and a mix of mafia and business similar to that of Chicago during the Prohibition era.

On day two, we arranged for a reception in the rooftop garden of a landmark hotel in Shanghai, the Peace Hotel. The rooftop garden provides a panoramic bird's-eye view of the Bund waterfront and the famous Huangpu River. After the Opium War, up until the 1930s, many European businesses snatched in this prime area to establish concessions, banks, headquarters, and consul houses.

Day three had us dining at Yong Foo Elite, a Western-style villa built in the 1930s, and the official residence of the British Consul General for more than 20 years.

Finally, on the last night, we bused our group across the Huangpu River to The Pudong New Business Area, where stands almost an uncountable number of newly-built modern skyscrapers. Pudong stands for Shanghai's future. From there one could see the Bund once again, which witnessed Shanghai's past. For Westerners, viewing Shanghai's Bund waterfront may have seemed as though they were visiting a city in Europe, due to the architectural similarities.

That night I received overwhelming compliments from attendees for the previous several days' arrangement. Knowing what was in store for them in Beijing, I knew attendees would get the message I wanted to get across.

My final step was to train the local DMC. A good plan will remain as good as it is on paper only if we have the right people to execute it. It is all about *Guan-xi*, relationships and connections. The reality in China today is that the meeting industry is still in its infancy. Many destination companies have a MICE (meeting, incentive, conference, and expo) division that oversees meetings and incentive business. I spent a good amount of time educating my local DMC representatives, including teaching them some basic Western and Chinese cultural differences and communicating my expectations upfront in Shanghaiese, Mandarin, and English. The training time I spent with them generated a huge return on investment for TerraLex and its attendees.

As we move forward with expansion into Asia, we must remember to partner with knowledgeable and proficient local companies. To that end, we must ascertain the relevant cultural workings and mores applicable to the venue being selected. At all times we must be fully cognizant of the profound impact that Bing-fa plays in all of our business dealings and negotiations throughout Asia.

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