Women Entrepreneurs in China: Breaking Glass Ceilings

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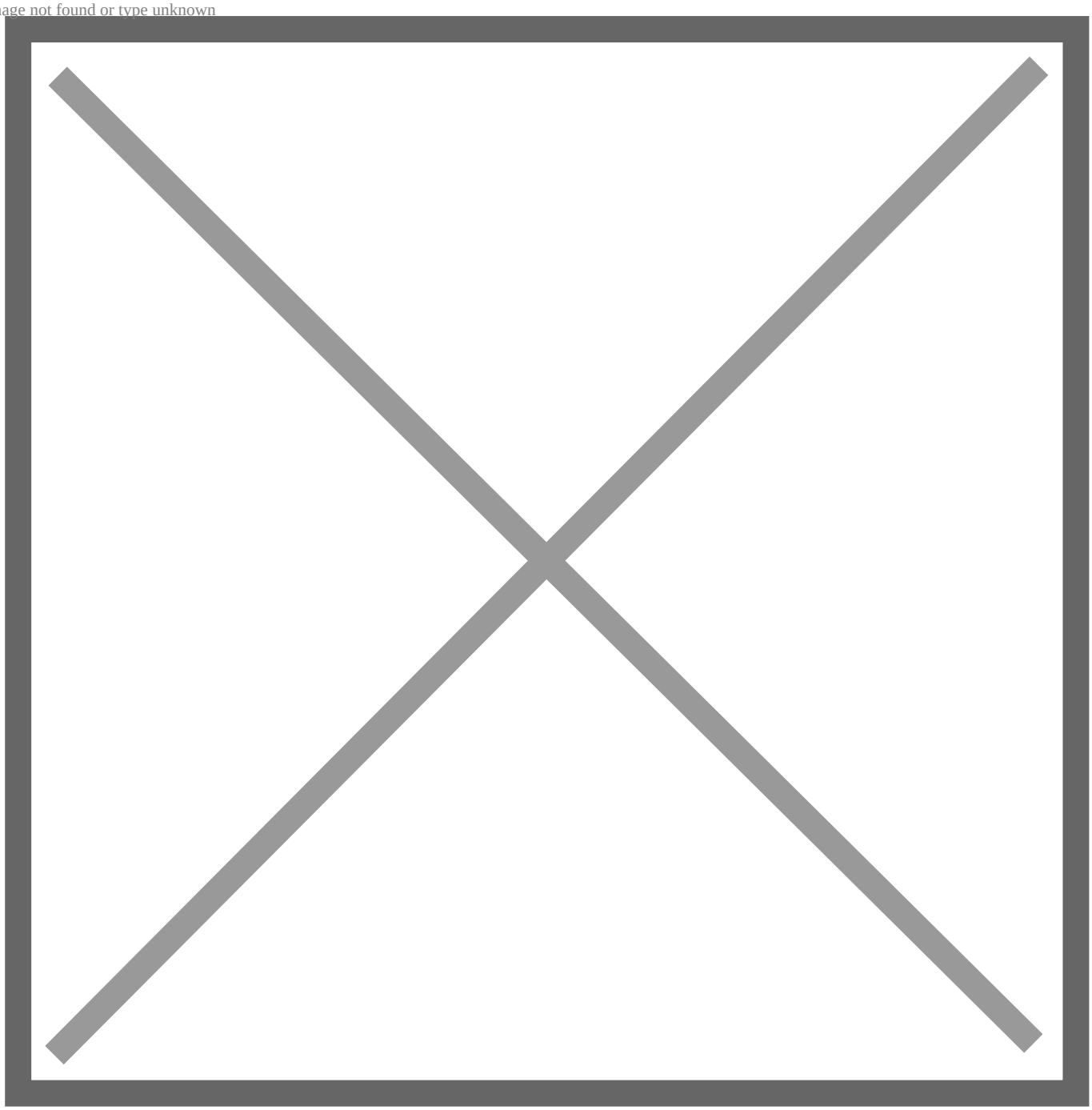

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A question that we are always asked is how difficult is it to set up a business in China? We have many women wanting to know if is it possible for them to succeed here and will they face any business obstacles because of their gender.

We recently met with three women entrepreneurs that operate successful China ventures and asked them for practical advice for women thinking of setting up a business.

Dalida Turkovic is originally from Serbia and is a Mindfulness Coach and founder of The Beijing Mindfulness Centre.

Mirjam Thieme is originally from The Netherlands and is CEO at MB it-Consulting which is an SAP HCM consultancy specialized in HR process and technology integration.

Barbara Seidelmann is Austrian and is the Managing Director at 5 Star Plus Retail Design, an interior design company specializing in the branded design of retail stores and restaurants.

These three European women help prove that gender is not getting in the way of their business success in China.

We asked these entrepreneurs a variety of questions but focused on three main ones. How did they get started in China? What advice would they have for anyone thinking of starting a business here? And finally, did you feel discriminated or disadvantaged because you were a woman?

1. How did you get started in China?

Each entrepreneur had a different path to establishing their own company. They did not start their ventures until being in China for a while and identifying a niche business opportunity.

Mirjam Thieme had been working for a Danish company that she helped establish in China over ten years ago. Mirjam had the opportunity two years ago to take control of China operations with a management buy-out. As Mirjam noted, “In my case, I wasn’t really starting my business – I joined a company that was starting this business in China and they had their organization in Denmark. However, It was like starting from scratch in China. So, looking for partners, looking for staff, how do you set up a company here in the first place – – the whole administrative side of things”.

For Mirjam setting up her company in this manner was done from her perspective, in a relatively ‘safe way’. Mirjam already had existing clients and partners when starting so this helped to minimize her business risks moving forward.

Dalida Turkovic when talking about starting her own consulting business told us, “It came somewhat like an accident. Not like a planned business. At the time in 2002, I mostly worked as a freelancer – doing part-time work. Through that work, one business opportunity became so large that it was not viable to continue under my own name so I decided to start my own company”.

When we asked Dalida what has the motivation been to keep running her company over the years, she highlighted, “really loving my work and the freedom to do what I want to do. Working for myself and by myself. Plus I want to share my knowledge and experiences with others and my work here allows me to do this”.

2. What would be your advice for doing business in China?

All the entrepreneurs stressed that no matter what type of opportunity you are pursuing business fundamentals apply. Legal, financial and business due diligence matters.

Vetting of any business partner is a given. Making sure you and your partner have common alignment around business expectations and long-term goals. You might have a three to five-year plan around business success but your partner may be thinking profitability within three to five months. You need time with any partner to fully flush out if you share the same vision and values for the business and that you are truly compatible.

Barbara Seidelmann noted, “There is a lot of negativity when people in the West talk about doing business in China. They say Chinese business people will cheat you, they don’t care about you, they are just about the short term and making a lot of money. I want to say this is not true. In my experience business people in China are very pragmatic – as long as you show trust and there are benefits for both parties, people will always support you and hold up to their end of the deal. We do business not only China but Europe, the US, and other countries and I can say trust is even stronger here than many other places”.

All three entrepreneurs told us ensuring there is a real opportunity in the space you are pursuing is paramount. Conduct on the ground research and make certain you understand your marketplace.

Dalida Turkovic noted the importance of talking to as many people as possible to allow you to get a realistic picture around the business opportunity that you are pursuing. She also highlighted that a business model that might work for you in your home country may not work here in China. Just because the business model works in London does not guarantee success in Shanghai. Therefore, spending the time to understand the local lay of the land is invaluable.

All the entrepreneurs referenced the importance of understanding the different vehicles and requirements for setting up a company in China and the benefits or the downside of each one. Spend time to consider the pros and cons. Know what it takes to not only set up and maintain your business but also understand the legal and accounting requirements to close a business. Understand how business regulations in China work and specifically how they will impact your business.

Barbara Seidelmann highlighted the importance of getting the basics right before making any major investment. Spend time in China prior to fully committing. You need to validate that a real

business opportunity for your products or services exists. You must feel confident that you like doing business in China. Also, if you are relocating, that the culture is one that will be attractive and sustainable for you over the long term.

Barbara noted, “If she were advising anyone entering the China market today the one thing she did not anticipate when starting up her business were things such as implementing processes and procedures for all aspects of your operations”. Barbara went on to say, “You need a shared vision around the business that your team understands and buys into. You also need to get an understanding of such things as how to get money into and out of China. Or how can I get my client to pay me? While getting work and clients secured is important one cannot underestimate the practical matters of running a business and making certain your banking and accounting systems are in place and conform to government laws and regulations”.

3. Did you feel discriminated or disadvantaged because you were a woman?

These entrepreneurs all stated that being a foreign woman doing business in China was not an impediment for them. In some cases, two of our entrepreneurs felt that they may even have had an advantage in being women.

Mirjam stated, “If you know your industry and are accepted in your industry for your knowledge that is the most important thing. The fact you are a woman makes little or no difference when pursuing business and sales opportunities”.

An interesting comment that all three entrepreneurs referenced was the importance of looking after your health and setting aside time for exercise and mental wellbeing activities.

Mirjam, Barbara, and Dalida all represent rather positive stories around setting up a business in China. The cautionary tale that all these entrepreneurs stated is that like anywhere else you need to take some time and effort to have an understanding of the uniqueness of doing business in China before committing fully to this market.

And hopefully, taking your time and having partners and contacts to guide you will help you succeed in any China business venture you may wish to pursue.