You Don’t Have To Be Chinese To Understand The Chinese Mentality

This may sound surprising to you, but the sight of the Shotzer Rebbe of Ashdod, Rav Dovid Moskowitz shlita, walking down the street in China does not raise any eyebrows, nor does it cause any commotion. On the contrary, he feels quite at home in the empire where he has spent the last 20 years overseeing a kashrus organization that has become the go-to address for anything related to kosher food production in the region. Over those years, Rav Moskowitz has become recognized as the kosher community’s biggest expert on food production in China, and is highly sought after as an authority on the Chinese mentality. Due to his experience in the region, even businessman who travel to China for reasons unrelated to kashrus seek him out to ask his opinion on how to deal with their Chinese counterparts. As he relates, “China is unlike any other country. It has its own societal rules. One who is unfamiliar with these rules will end up overpaying for the wares he wants to purchase.”

We met with Rav Moskowitz, the Admor of Shotz, in his office, located next to his busy Bais Medrash in the Rova Zayin section of Ashdod. The sounds of Torah learning from the Bais Medrash reverberated in the background as we began our discussion, which touched on many fascinating contemporary topics.

While his main field of expertise is kashrus, he is well-versed in a myriad of topics and is a fount of knowledge regarding Chinese culture and everyday life in the Chinese Empire. He spices our fascinating conversation with insights, stories and anecdotes – and, before I know it, several hours have flown by!

There is only one problem – only one obstruction to the pleasure of this captivating conversation. The telephone! It is constantly ringing. Every few minutes, another call comes in. It seems that just as we are getting to the meat of a story, and I am on the edge my seat, hanging on his every word, the ringing of the phone puts a temporary halt to our dialogue and leaves me hanging in limbo. Most of the calls are from Mashgichim, calling from China with pertinent questions. However, I also was witness to numerous calls coming in from Rabbanim around the world who addressed their kashrus concerns to Rav Moskowitz and asked for his expert guidance and for practical information. Several calls also came in from businessmen in China, asking for assistance and advice in dealing with the authorities on various official matters.

Even before our conversation, I had already heard from many others that Rav Moskowitz is known to be a foremost authority on the best way to deal with the Chinese mentality in all areas. He relates, “I have witnessed many instances where businessmen lost huge investments solely because they did not understand how to conduct themselves in a place like China. I am not only talking about novice travelers. I am talking about men who have traveled the world and have seen success in many countries. However, they failed to realize that China is truly unlike any other place. In China, all the rules are completely different. If you want to succeed there, you must first and foremost learn how to conduct yourself in this unique land.”

After 20 years in the region, Rav Moskowitz knows exactly what to look out for and what to be strict about. All of the companies that produce foods that are certified by his certification, Shatz Kosher Services (SKS), know that before they begin any kosher run the entire factory must be inspected with a fine-toothed comb. No previous inspection or written document of certification will be relied upon at all. If you think the reason for this can be explained away as being because – as some are wont to say – the Chinese are “cheaters”, then, as Rav Moskowitz explains, you obviously do not understand the Chinese.

Rav Moskowitz understands and speaks Chinese excellently. “I speak Mandarin Chinese,” he explains. “That is one of 30 common dialects of the Chinese language. Some of these dialects are so different than others that the speaker of one dialect often finds it hard to understand the speaker of another. Mandarin, as opposed to Cantonese for example, is the most common of all the dialects.”

However, just understanding the language is not enough to actually understand the Chinese. Rav Moskowitz clarifies, “To understand the Chinese, one must understand Chinese culture and the Chinese mentality. One must be able to hear what they are saying ‘between the words’, and what they are saying with their body language.”

He continues, “Knowing the language is, of course, important, but it is not the most crucial aspect of dealing with them. Even if one does not understand the language, he can always hire a good interpreter. But if one wants to know how to deal with Chinese and do successful business with them, one must understand the people. No interpreter can help you with that.”

So, what are the rules of Chinese culture that one who wishes to do business with them must be aware of in order to avoid costly misunderstandings?

**The Chinese Way of Speaking:**

Rav Moskowitz begins by explaining, “Many people say that the Chinese are liars, that they are cheaters, that you cannot trust them when they say what ingredients they put into products they make. But this is simply not true. My experience is that misunderstandings that arise during productions are merely the result of misunderstandings that could be avoided with a little effort.”

He adds, “When I say ‘misunderstandings’, I don’t just mean not understanding their language. I mean a lack of understanding of their mentality and their priorities – which are very different than what we consider important priorities. I would put it like this: The Chinese mind is wired differently than the way our minds are wired”

There are many examples of this. Rav Moskowitz starts with one: “The leader of a large kashrus agency recently came to me with a shocked expression on his face. He related that one of his Mashgichim had just uncovered what he thought was a scandal in a factory he was certifying. Inside the factory, he found a large container with the words ‘Wine Concentrate’ written on it. Because of this find, he wanted to disqualify the entire batch of food as containing ‘Yayin Nesech’. When confronted, the owners of the factory did not deny that this ingredient was used in the food and that it was made in their factory. The head of the agency then turned to me, because his feeling was that the cause of the problem was some sort of misunderstanding with the factory. He felt that perhaps he was missing something about the Chinese way of speaking.

“After a moment of thought, I realized that I was familiar with the factory that he was talking about, and I knew that this factory did not have the technical ability to produce any sort of wine. So what was this ingredient that was causing the whole tumult? The answer was that in China all alcoholic beverages are sometimes referred to by the generic name ‘wine’. It doesn’t matter if this alcoholic brew is made from corn or plums, they simply label it ‘wine’. Thus, this mysterious ingredient actually had no grape wine in it.”

I ask: Are you saying that Chinese people never lie? If so, does that mean that we never have to suspect them of anything?

“The primary characteristic of the Chinese people is that they are truthful to a fault,” Rav Moskowitz affirms. “However, you’ll find cheaters and opportunists in any country, and China is no exception. I can honestly say that the amount of swindlers is lower in China than in most other places. Still and all, as I have explained, you simply have to understand that there are major cultural differences at play. Therefore, even when they are being dishonest, you have to know how to deal with them according to their culture.”

An example of this occurred in a factory that produced canned mushrooms. The owner of the factory attested that he would produce eight large containers of mushrooms a day. "I immediately realized what he was trying to do,” says Rav Moskowitz. “I knew it was impossible to produce so much in a day. The reason he was saying this was because he wanted to cut costs by claiming that it took much quicker than it really did. Since he said that he produced eight containers a day, he could claim that the whole operation would last only two or three days – rather than the week or so it would really take – and in this way he thought he could get the hashgacha to sign on to supervise the run for the amount it would cost for a two or three day job.”

Could we confront him and call him a liar to his face? No way! Such a thing is never done in China. We had to work this out in a diplomatic fashion.

“I told him, ‘Okay. But we first want to check out the operation.’ Before we even began looking at the kashrus aspects, we returned the next day to see how much volume was produced in one day. When we got there the next day, we saw that the factory had already made two full containers by that early time of day.

“I didn’t say a word as I approached the assembly line. I made a quick calculation that 8 containers would be the equivalent of about 1,000 boxes. If 1,000 boxes could be made in a day – with each box containing 15 individual cans - that would equal 100 boxes an hour. The problem with this was that the machine we were standing next to – the machine which sealed the boxes - could at most seal one box every two minutes, which, of course, would equal only 30 boxes an hour. He showed us that he had another such machine. But this one also could only do a small amount in an hour. After the full tour, he finally admitted that he could not produce such a large amount every day – and it would take a full week to reach the amount he had claimed he could make in two or three days. We got all of this information without having to insult his honor by accusing him of lying.”

“When I say that the Chinese are a truthful people, I don’t mean to say that I implicitly trust them,’ Rav Moskowitz is quick to add. “The opposite is more accurate. When I arrive at any factory – it doesn’t matter if it is owned by a Jew or a Chinese person – I fulfill the Talmudic dictum of ‘honor, but suspect’, with the emphasis on the word ‘suspect’. In the hashgacha business, you have to start from the ground up. You can’t rely on anything you haven’t checked out yourself. You have to make sure everything is clearly in writing, but you also have to make sure to see everything with your own eyes. That’s the fact of the business. But, as I said, cheats and fraudsters are not any more prevalent in China than in Israel or anywhere else.”

Another story occurred while on a visit to a factory that produces canned fruit. Rav Moskowitz explains that each visit takes a different route – sometimes starting from the warehouse, sometimes from the production line etc. – in order to keep the workers on their toes and not allow them to anticipate his movements. As he made his way through the factory, he suddenly noticed what looked like the packaging from a container of gelatin. This raised a red flag because he had been given a list of the ingredients and products from this factory, and the list made no mention of gelatin. In general, whenever any ingredient is found that is not supposed to be there, this is seen as a sign of possible trouble that necessitates a complete investigation of the entire operation.

Of course, in China one must be careful never to insult anyone or accuse them of something to their face. It has to be done with extreme tact. “I asked to see the warehouse, where I searched for any remnant of gelatin, but I couldn’t find any. I then went to the laboratory, where there was supposed to be a sample of everything made that day. After searching for a while, I succeeded in finding a sample of gelatin. When I inquired about it, they admitted that there had been a time when gelatin was produced there. In this way, I got them to admit it without confronting them directly. As an aside, I discovered that this gelatin had no kashrus concerns, however I know saw that I had to watch them very carefully.”

In another instance, Rav Moskowitz visited a factory, only to discover that no factory actually existed on that site! “We were approached and asked to give a hechsher on a factory that produces juices. I traveled for 6 hours on the roads, followed by 6 hours on an almost non-existent dirt path. Towards evening, I finally arrived at the site, only to find that the entire operation consisted of just a few run-down rooms. I asked where the machinery was, and was shown one small piece of equipment. As soon as I saw it, I knew there was no need to ask any questions. This machine could not produce any juice – certainly not the amount of juice they claimed to be making. I knew that this machine was only enough to make samples of the product.”

A new tactic needed to be used to deal with this issue. “I asked to be shown around by the owner. During the tour, I turned to him and asked: ‘How many factories do you think I’ve visited in my life? Give me a guess.’ He threw out a number, which was way lower than the actual amount. I told him, ‘I have inspected 1,800 factories, and 80 of them belong to you. I can list exactly which ones are yours, and can relate every detail about them. I know that this is no factory. Don’t try to tell me that it is!’ The owner saw that he was cornered, and admitted that nothing was produced there. This was just an office for the company, but the product was produced in a location an hour away. We drove to that location, and found a factory that I had visited not long before to supervise the production of a different company’s products. This factory produced strictly kosher products, and my visit was almost superfluous.

“So, why did they give me the runaround? To answer this, you have to understand the Chinese mentality. They often do not want anyone entering their factories because they are scared that the visitor might reveal that their facility is not perfectly clean. In general, they don’t like having anyone ‘under their feet’. To get rid of unwanted visitors, they might make up all kinds of stories. But if you understand the Chinese mentality, you’ll know when something fishy like this is going on.”

**A Friendly Culture:**

Rav Moskowitz has nothing but praise for the Chinese culture. He says, “The Chinese are an intelligent and industrious people. They are very warm and welcoming to guests. I have been to many far-flung areas deep inside China, and, every time, within two minutes someone approached me to see if he could assist me in any way. China is a very safe country, and one can walk safely and unafraid at night in almost any neighborhood.”

However, it is vital to remember that honor is of utmost importance to the Chinese. One word taken as insulting is often enough to undo years of friendship. On the other hand, if you show them respect they will, in turn, respect you. One way they have of showing honor is giving guests a glass of warm water. This custom arose during the times when the water was unclean, and needed to be boiled before drinking. Today, the water is quite clean, but the Chinese palates have become accustomed to warm water and they are not very fond of cold water. Therefore, offering a glass of hot water is considered a form of honor.

Rav Moskowitz relates, “They have a special respect for Jews. I walk around there exactly as I always dress – with my ‘rebishe’ bekeshe and wide hat. No one says a negative word to me. In fact, they offer me the highest respect.”

What about the common perception that the Chinese are known to only produce cheap, low-class imitations of the real things?

“This is also an untrue stereotype,” explains Rav Moskowitz. “In fact, this actually is a biproduct of the code of honor that the Chinese possess. For example, if you would go to China and ask a factory to make you a shirt for a dollar, they will make you a shirt for a dollar. They won’t tell you they can’t do it for that price. Rather, they will find ways to cut costs to get it done. They will use cheaper materials to be able to fulfill their task and produce a $1 shirt. If you go and give them a more realistic price, they will produce it with much higher quality material.

“Once, when I was on a plane, I met the head buyer for Walmart. I asked him how his dealings went with the Chinese. Did they ever send him low-quality merchandise? He answered, ‘I have never had any experience with the Chinese sending us merchandise that were below the standards we expected. If you know what you want and give them a realistic budget, they send you high-quality products. People only have problems with the quality of the merchandise when they come with unreasonable expectations and want to purchase products for dirt cheap.”

But haven’t there been stories where people ordered one thing and received another?

“Certainly, this has happened,” Rav Moskowitz confirms. “This happens when people get into the market without understanding it or knowing what to look for. I know one story where an individual ordered 100,000 shtenders from a Chinese factory. He brought them a sample of what the shtenders should look like – which happened to have his son’s name imprinted on it. What do you think happened? He got 100,000 shtenders with his son engraved on the4m.

“Another time, a person ordered book jackets for a sefer. The Chinese workers saw the letter ‘hei’ on the jacket, and thinking that part of the leg of the letter had been omitted, filled it in for him – thus turning every ‘hei’ into a ‘ches’.

In yet another instance, someone once ordered hats. The sample he sent had some pieces of torn sponge that he had placed in the inner ribbon. The hats they sent him had pieces of sponge inserted in the inner ribbon – exactly as the sample had.

“One who understands how to speak to the Chinese knows that everything has to be explained and looked over. I give this advice to anyone who asks for my guidance because I have seen how this affects my area of expertise – kashrus – as well. Don’t take anything for granted. Investigate every detail and make sure everything is understood!”

Today, most imported candies and sweets are manufactured in China. Do you trust the Chinese not only in kashrus but also in hygiene and production quality?

The Rov responds, “I would divide my answer into two parts: About kashrus, as I said before you, should never base kashrus on trust itself. Everything needs to be checked, inspected, and supervised thoroughly. Even after production, the product need to be signed and coded in such a way that no unsupervised products should be added to the kosher products and stamped as kosher when loading the container. This is how the latest kosher production of candies with the brand ‘Izzy and Dizzy’ was done.

“Regarding production quality and hygiene in factories in China: In my kosher professional life, I have been in more than 1,900 factories of all sorts in many different countries. I can tell you for a fact that the Chinese can be proud of their production quality. All factories there have the highest commendations of the best international quality product certifications.”

**Out In The Hinterlands**

Rav Moskowitz is known as an expert in all areas of kashrus. However, he is best known as the go-to expert in kosher food production in China. His kashrus organization, the SKS, has at least five trained Mashgichim on the ground in China at any given time. They are spread out throughout the length and breadth of the vast country, as well as in many other countries around the world, from Malaysia to Colombia and beyond. How did Rav Moskowitz end up becoming the head of this universally respected organization that operates wherever kosher food is produced?

“The answer to your question is very simple,” he says after a bit of thought. “My father, the Admor zt”l, was recognized as a great sage in Torah, yirah and chasidus. He also had another notable trait: He was accustomed to study every topic and investigate it to the deepest depths. When he was asked to give kashrus certification, he would personally travel to the facilities, often taking me along. As a 5-year-old, I was already going along to factories and commercial kitchens, where my father would explain to me every detail of the operation with extraordinary patience. Even then, he would often repeat to me the rule that has become a motto of mine for all areas of life: ‘Whatever you do, be the best at it. Whatever job you accept for yourself, learn it well, delve into its depths, put your entire being into it, and leave no room for error.”

Shortly after his wedding, Rav Moskowitz’s revered Rebbe, the Admor of Belz shlita, appointed him as a Mashgiach for the Belz hechsher, Badat”z Machzikei Hadas. Rav Moskowitz jumped into the work, characteristically immersing himself into it completely. He relates, “When I first started as a Mashgiach for Belz, I thoroughly studied the principle laws of kashrus, such as the laws of meat and milk, arlah, terumos and ma’asros, etc. I then began working in bakeries, and learned the laws related to that field and also acquired a knowledge of the technical aspect of that business, such as how the machinery works, how the sifting process is done, and the new technology that is now used. I learned something new every day, and I still do.”

Eventually, Rav Moskowitz assumed a position in the Hod Hasharon kashrus organization. When products began coming from China, he was called upon to give certification to these products. Already on his first visit to China, it became evident that his vast halachic knowledge, combined with his technical knowledge, inquiring mind, and keen ability to spot things others would not, would render him a natural authority on the Chinese kosher market. From then on, the demand for his certification from Chinese manufacturers has steadily grown.

Does the pace of change in Chinese society affect the level of kashrus in the country?

“And how!” declares Rav Moskowitz. “Change is happening very quickly in China. In China today, you can find remote areas that had no paved roads just ten years ago. The abandoned homes in these areas were quickly replaced with major highways. This can have a great effect on kashrus. For example, in the past Chinese people did not drink wine. Wine was not part of their culture, and they did not produce it. Today, they have begun to drink wine. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that any alcohol they use in a factory is not wine-based. Milk products are also new for China. In the past, they did not have these products, but now they have been introduced to them. Therefore, it is important to make sure the factories do not use non-cholov Yisroel milk.”

Furthermore, the changes to the general food production throughout the world have affected China as well. As Rav Moskowitz explains, “The world today is shifting towards using organic and natural ingredients. Whoever thinks this would simplify production is mistaken. As an example, until recently red food coloring was made from chemicals, which had no kashrus concerns. Today, it is often made from insects. In general, food products today have many more ingredients than in the past. It used to be that the only ingredients in bread were water, yeast and flour. Today, there might be tens of ingredients in a simple loaf of bread. In China, in particular, the factories often guard their recipes like a state secret and are very reluctant to reveal what ingredients they use.”

How can one possibly keep track of all these changes in the field?

“For this reason,” answers Rav Moskowitz, “it is vital to have constant supervision from trained Mashgichim. This is not easy. In China, nothing is a given. Anything can be changed. It has happened many times that I’ve sent a Mashgiach to take a flight to the other side of the country. Suddenly, the flight is delayed for six hours. We are told that the delay is because, ‘The atmospheric conditions of the destination are not good for landings.’ But we have people at the destination, and we know this isn’t the real reason. The real reason is the army closed off the airspace for security reasons, which is a common occurrence in China. Instead of flying, the Mashgiach has to travel on a crowded train car for many hours. Quite often, such delays force a Mashgiach to spend Shabbos in a remote location, with only some wine and matzohs as provisions. This has happened to me numerous times. But this is part of the job I have accepted upon myself to ensure that the food Jews eat around the world is 100% kosher.”

The central office for the SKS in China is located in Shanghai. In addition to being the center for kashrus operations throughout the length and breadth of China, it is also a haven for Jews travelling through China for various reasons. They come there for a hot kosher meal, to put on tefillin and learn some Torah, and to consult with Rav Moskowitz about any number of topics. For Shabbos, the crowds go to Beijing, where the Chabad House welcomes them. “I often go there exhausted after a long week of work,” relates Rav Moskowitz, “and once I arrive there I come face to face with groups of Jews who didn’t see another Jewish soul for the entire week. They fall upon me like a thirsty man who just found a well of water. It is a true kindness just to speak with them and give them some attention.”

Not all of these encounters are one-time deals. Many of these travelers know the Rov well and consult with him about all their business in China. Furthermore, the Rov is often contacted by other kashrus agencies who seek answers to their questions about products from China. He confirms, “We work hand-in-hand with the other kashrus agencies and share information with each other. Even if the leaders of these organizations do not share relationships with each other, here on the ground everyone works in tandem with each other.”

**Avoiding Pitfalls:**

It is very important that anyone who ever visits China be made aware of the fact that China is still a communist country. Says Rav Moskowitz, “It is true that China has become much more liberal regarding business practices, however, from a political perspective, it is still a fully communist state. There is only one political party in the government, and the supreme council chooses the leaders. Every guest staying in a hotel has his name documented in a list, and his details are delivered to the police. It has happened more than once that I have arrived at my hotel late at night, only to be greeted by the police who want to know why I was so late in coming back. As an aside, there are many hotels that do not have accommodations for foreigners at all.”

For this reason, it would be a terrible mistake to talk about politics with the Chinese. “The Chinese are very patriotic,” the Rov explains. “It is forbidden to speak badly of the government. It is actually forbidden to speak negatively about China or Chinese people at all. Not long ago, there were tensions between China and North Korea when the Koreans put up American anti-missile systems to protect their country, which angered China. At that time, the sale of Korean cars went down by 60%. There also once were tensions with Japan, and the Chinese went out in droves to protest against the Japanese. In China, when the government decides something no one may question or complain about the decision.”

From the outside, the country seems free and open. But this is only the outside appearance. “The computer system, for example,” says the Rov, “is continuously monitored and watched. There is a special army unit of 20,000 people that monitor everything on the system. They know everything anyone writes and to whom. They refer to this as, ‘The Second Great Wall of China’. So too, nothing is ever printed in any form of media that has not gone through a censor.”

Incidentally, in China there is no such thing as someone born outside of the country becoming a Chinese citizen. Similarly, anyone born in China who obtains a citizenship from any other country automatically has his Chinese citizenship rescinded. Thus, it is impossible to hold dual citizenship with China and any other country. “The Chinese guard over their culture very fastidiously,” says Rav Moskowitz. “They carefully attempt to keep out any outside influences that they believe may be detrimental to upholding their culture. Therefore, although they allow Jews to enter the country for business purposes and treat them with respect, there officially are no Jews living n Chinas because the government does not recognize any organized Jewish community there. For this reason, they are very suspicious of Muslims. There are communities of Chinese Muslims near the Russian border. The Chinese allow 10,000 of them to make the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca. However, they are only allowed to go in organized trips that are funded by the government, and are accompanied by guards throughout the trip who ensure that they do not get any foreign influences along the way.

“For this reason, the Chinese are very possessive of the products made in their country. If any item is manufactured in China, they do not allow any version of it to be imported from abroad. I once met a Jewish man who wanted to make hot microwavable meals and market them in China. I advised him not to do this because there is a factory in China that already makes similar products. He did not take my advice and produced the meals. They were confiscated in China, and he lost $100,000.”

**A Country That Has Respect For Jews:**

Did you ever experience either anti-Semitism or anti-Israelism in China?

“Not once!” is the immediate reply. “As I said, the Chinese respect the Jewish people. I can go to a remote area where no one has ever seen a Jew, and when they just hear the words that I am a Jew, they are awed and amazed. Many times, they have told me, ‘So you are one of the smart Jews who have so much money!’ These words are not said with hate. Rather, they are said with respect and admiration for what they perceive as the Jews’ success. This is in sharp contrast to Europe, where the locals often spit out the words, ‘You Jews have so much money’, with hate in their voices and in a manner that conveys their feelings that the Jews acquired their money through thievery and deceit.

“More than 30 books have been printed in China that attempt to delve into what they call, ‘The Secret of Jewish Education’, and how they can incorporate it into the Chinese educational system.

“In general, I, as a Jew with a distinctly Jewish appearance, feel more comfortable strolling the streets of China than the streets of the United States where I was born. Keep in mind, however, that this is all on the personal level. On the political level, if the government decides to support the Arab position against Israel, no one would even think of disagreeing.”

China has always been known for the low cost of production because of the low wages the workers are paid. Has that changed now that their products became more in demand?

“Although wages are still relatively cheap in China, they have gone up significantly,” explains Rav Moskowitz. “Eventually it may no longer be worth it to manufacture there. This has already come true somewhat. American cars were mostly made in China for years, but the factories have already moved back to America. The wages I pay to the workers in my office have gone up about fourfold over the years. Rent has gone up fivefold. And prices are only going up as apartments and houses become more in demand. Furthermore, there used to be no taxes in the country. Today, there are numerous taxes that one must pay. Wages are still about 20-30% lower than in the West, but expenses are on the rise.

“Still and all, I believe that people will continue manufacturing in China, even if the costs are no longer substantially lower. This is because of the conscientiousness and industriousness of the Chinese workers. In India, the average worker has the mindset of: Why do today what can be done tomorrow? But in China, the workers come ready to work – not just for the money. They have the mindset of: Why push off to tomorrow what you can do today?”

The Rov concludes whimsically, “It is not easy to reach a real understand of the Chinese mentality. It takes years of work to get there. Looking back, I never imagined that I would find myself spending so much time in China. But If I can help Jewish people – and certainly if I am able to make sure that the food coming from China is reliably kosher – I feel that I am fulfilling the mission that is incumbent upon me at this time.”