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# Understanding China... at CEIBS

~ Interview with Claus Toxvig (Global EMBA 2016)

**M**ost Chinese people know almost nothing about the Nordic country Denmark other than Hans Christian Andersen's poetry and fairy tales, and China remains an exotic place of mystery for most Danes. But Claus Toxvig (Global EMBA 2016) isn't like most Danes. He's earned the title of "China expert" after 16 years living and working in the country, including two years spent doing the CEIBS Global Executive MBA. As the Shanghai-based CEO of Swiss firm Arenco, he is an excellent example of how CEIBS non-Chinese alumni leverage their China expertise to help international firms succeed in the China market.

Arenco designs, makes and markets machines used in the lucrative fish processing industry and Claus' job is to drive growth. "My role is primarily to prepare the company for the next level of development. We are looking at acquisitions as well as other venues of growth," Claus explains in November 2018, a few weeks into his new role and less than six months after he graduated from the CEIBS Global EMBA (GEMBA). He has more time, now that he no longer spends four days a month in school, and he is using

this as an opportunity "to use and reflect on the learnings of the last 20 months". As he explains, "GEMBA fills your toolbox and makes you more confident and capable of being an effective CEO."

Today he is leading Arenco's roughly 300 employees around the world but Claus' China journey had a fairly innocuous beginning. His employer at the time, Dovista – part of VKR Holding which is one of the biggest industrial groups in Denmark with about 20,000 employees – sent him to China for what should have been a year working as a financial controller. This was in 2004. That posting lasted six years. Claus was hooked. "After that, I decided to stay longer," he recalls.

"Longer" became a decade and a half. He landed two other China-related jobs, one of which took him to Guangdong, the capital of Guangzhou, then he became Vice President of the Finnish B2B piping business GS-Hydro in 2013. What made him stay back then, and what keeps him here today – so far away from the country where he was born? After all, Denmark is not easily accessible through

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short flights from China. The trip from Copenhagen to Shanghai, for example, is almost 11 hours. Like many expats who have made China home, Claus has been seduced by the country's unique energy. “I like my home country and the Danish people very much, but from a working point of view, sometimes [working in] Denmark can be a bit boring,” he explains. “But China is always full of energy and excitement, the country keeps opening up, a lot of things are happening. I really enjoy staying here, especially in the south of China.” He lived in Guangzhou for about a decade. Today he shares his life in Shanghai with his Chinese wife and their two daughters.

Apart from his family, his two years at CEIBS are undoubtedly the highlights of Claus' China stay so far. “Precious”, is the word he uses to describe the experience.



Like all the other CEIBS programmes whose students benefit from great diversity in the classroom (whether by industry, nationality or gender), the Global EMBA encourages participants to team up with people from totally different professional and cultural backgrounds as they work on group projects. Claus likes that, because one of the things he enjoys most is working with different people. “That’s also why I decided to go back to school for an EMBA, in China,” he says.

He chose CEIBS, he explains because he wanted to expand his horizons, to broaden his view to include issues he had not previously explored in depth. It wasn’t always easy to transform into the person he wanted to be. “It’s easy to say, but never easy to do,” he says. He struggled, at the beginning of the course, to reconcile his views with different people’s opinions. It was especially challenging for him as all his Global EMBA classmates were senior executives. But he eventually learned from his mistakes.

Claus remembers one lesson particularly well. It was during a class from the Organizational Behaviour module. Professor Katherine Xin tried to explain Change Management through simulation, in the form of a ‘serious game’. “We were separated into teams,” Claus recalls. “My Taiwanese classmate Justin and I were only thinking about convincing the rest of the team that we should follow my idea, without listening to the others. Connie, a Chinese classmate of ours, quiet and indirect in communication but clever and profound in thinking, suggested another approach.”

It turned out Connie was right and their team would have fared better if they had listened to her.



“As a manager, I am so used to being talkative and always trying to convince others, sometimes all I do is collective decision making. My focus is just to push hard so others will accept my idea, rather than listening,” says Claus.

Prof Xin’s class helped him recognise the flaws in his leadership style and how he engages with others.

“A talkative and persuasive person is good at manipulating others. He or she may be a good influencer, but an influencer is not necessarily always the most competent,” says Claus about what he learnt from Professor Xin’s class, “and this often happens in multicultural teams.”

With China’s rapid pace, Claus continues to learn, adapt and evolve. And he offers this advice to other ambitious and courageous international professionals who may be thinking of working in China: “I definitely want to recommend CEIBS! It can be a gateway to your career in China.” He has been particularly impressed, he says, by the school’s strong faculty team. They have a knack, he says, of combining theory and practice in responding to international students’ curiosity about what is really happening in China.

“CEIBS is the place where questions are answered, where China is understood,” says Claus.