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Chaguan

Why Chinese officials like useless meetings in over-stuffed chairs

And why America may be over-reliant on conference tables

REVEALINGLY OFTEN, when foreigners meet Chinese leaders the encounter is a pain in the neck. The cause is not mysterious. For reasons that may involve both **high culture and low political calculation**, important visitors to China are typically invited to sink into one of a pair of side-by-side armchairs, at one end of a formal reception room. There the guest must sit, head twisted through 90 degrees, to see and hear a host whose opening remarks may stretch to an hour.

Foreign bigwigs planning to consult aides in such a meeting room are further out of luck. Their entourage will be trapped in their own armchairs, placed in a horseshoe pattern or marching down one long wall of the room, opposite a matching row of Chinese officials. In a recent episode of the US-China Dialogue Podcast, an oral history project at Georgetown University, Wendy Cutler, who as an American official played a leading role in negotiating China's entry to the World Trade Organisation, recalls how her Chinese counterparts used exhaustion and embarrassment to manipulate visitors. For one thing, they have a habit of beginning meetings with envoys at 10pm. Then there is the hazard of reception rooms that make it daunting to stand up from an armchair, cross yards of empty carpet and hand a boss a note about a detail of policy or tactics. Visitors have to be very sure that their message for the boss is worth the interruption, because the room makes it "very awkward", Ms Cutler recalls.

Such recollections lead Chaguan to what may seem an odd hunch. This is a moment of low trust in China's relations with the world, when many Western governments and businesses are losing hope that China's leaders will open their markets to foreigners on equal terms. This is also a moment of impatience, when Chinese practices that have long frustrated outsiders, such as state subsidies for national champions, or the use of security laws and politicised regulations to bully trade secrets out of foreign firms, feel insupportable now that China is so large. To emerge safely from these perilous times China and America, in particular, will have to learn to co-exist as competitors, trade partners and ideological rivals, at one and the same time. One way to guess whether such a rebalancing is possible is to watch the chairs.

Whenever Chinese, American or other foreign delegations meet, **if the two sides are sitting at a long table that allows for substantive, clause-by-clause negotiations, flickers of optimism may be justified. If, instead, meeting rooms feature antimacassars on overstuffed armchairs, little tables bearing teacups and large paintings of mist-shrouded mountains, gloom may be in order.**

It says something sobering about present-day China that sales of the armchairs used in horseshoe-shaped meeting rooms have risen steadily over the past 20 years. Surprisingly often, the armchairs used for such meetings are made by a single company, Tiantan (or Temple of Heaven) Furniture, founded in 1956 and owned by Beijing's city government. Business is good, says the firm.

The company traces the chairs' history back to imperial audiences granted during the Song Dynasty, almost a thousand years ago, when floor-mats and stools gave way to chairs. Running at up to \$800 each, Tiantan's bestseller is known within the company as the "Jiang-style Armchair", because it was commissioned in the early 2000s by aides to the party leader and president of the day, Jiang Zemin. Patriotism has helped expand the market for all sorts of traditional Chinese furniture, says Wang Shengli, a manager at Tiantan. In contrast: "In the 1980s, Western styles were more popular." Beyond that, there is the specific appeal of owning chairs fit for a vice-minister or provincial party secretary. Tiantan sells a lot to the government, but also to private businesses, hotels and wealthy individuals moved to imitate the look of Communist officials, in what Mr Wang calls a "follow-the-leaders" effect.

It takes 20 days to assemble a Jiang-style armchair from Chinese walnut, fine cloth or leather (red is the most popular colour) and lots of foam padding, especially in the small of the back, so that occupants can sit up straight for hours. "The chair is quite firm, as is fitting for a leader," explains Mr Wang on a factory tour, over the noise of whirring tools. Tiantan armchairs are found in the Great Hall of the People and the central leadership compound of Zhongnanhai in Beijing, and even aboard leaders' aeroplanes.

Naturally, if China does agree to businesslike meetings, America has homework to do, too. From 2004 to 2013 David Dollar represented first the World Bank and then the United States Treasury in Beijing. At too many meetings he watched American political appointees, flanked by young aides straight out of graduate school, as they tried to negotiate with the help of written records of talks involving previous administrations. Meanwhile, in the chair of honour on the Chinese side, Mr Dollar says, the chief negotiator quite possibly "used to be at the bottom of the table 20 years ago, and then they sent him off to be vice-mayor of Guiyang or whatever, and he works his way up." As a result, Chinese officials could and did cite oral agreements that they believed they had heard American officials make years earlier. In contrast, laments Mr Dollar, "The US has no institutional memory."

Striving for a meeting of minds

Just now America presents China with a particular puzzle. President Donald Trump revels in pomp, protocol and monarchical chats with fellow leaders, which should play into China's hands. At his first meeting with President Xi Jinping he happily shared a brocade sofa at Mar-a-Lago, his Florida estate, and declared his Chinese guest a great friend. But Mr Trump also feels unbound by agreements, oral or otherwise, made by previous governments, a blow to China and its elephantine capacity for remembering ancient half-promises. With globalisation in the balance, it is time China stopped using the dismal horseshoe to stall reforms. But America, too, must make better use of its seat at trade's top table