Essay

Essay from Expatriate in China

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1. Introduction

I was assigned to HC Operations at KYB Industrial Machinery (Zhenjiang) Ltd. (hereinafter, "KIMZ") in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province, China, for approximately four years from February 2021 to December 2024. At KIMZ, I worked on cylinder design. Throughout my time there, I grew professionally through numerous experiences. This article presents the insights I gained from my work at KIMZ and from living there.

2. Returning to China After 13 Years

After graduating from a university in Shanghai, China, in 2008, I came to Japan to study. I spent two years studying Japanese at a language school and majored in mechanical engineering at Tokyo University of Science. After completing my master's program, I joined KYB Corporation in 2012 and have since been involved in the design of hydraulic cylinders.

I lived in Japan for approximately 13 years, from 2008 to 2020. This assignment gave me the opportunity to live in China again for an extended period, during which I realized how much China has changed in the last 13 years.

2.1 Convenience of Transportation (Photo 1)

Before 2008, China had virtually no high-speed rail lines. Air travel was the main way to reach distant locations. However, airfares were expensive, making frequent travel difficult. Traveling by car was time-consuming and tiring.

Today, the situation has completely changed. As of the end of 2023, China's high-speed rail network had grown to approximately 45,000 km in length, making it the world's longest. High-speed rail provides comfortable rides and high speeds, offering the convenience of being able to go anywhere. Fares are also low, about one-third the price of Japan's Shinkansen.

Shanghai's subway system comprises 21 lines, totaling approximately 898 km, making travel within the city extremely convenient. Driverless subway trains have also begun operating, further enhancing convenience. Additionally, as of April 2025, Shanghai had over 6.2 million registered automobiles.

China's transportation infrastructure has evolved dramatically over the past decade, greatly improving daily life.

Photo 1 The Bund in Shanghai

2.2 Glories of Chinese Brands and Their Global Reach

(1) Changes in the Chinese smartphone market and my personal experience

Before 2008, foreign brands such as Nokia, Motorola, Samsung, and Apple dominated the Chinese smartphone market.

However, the brands dominating the Chinese market in 2024 are Vivo, Huawei, Apple, Honor, OPPO, and Xiaomi. With the exception of Apple, all of these brands are Chinese, which is highly symbolic.

I used to use Apple smartphones, but now I'm a fan of Huawei and Xiaomi. The appeal of Huawei and Xiaomi, in particular, is as follows:

- Lightweight and easy to carry
- Excellent, user-friendly operating systems
- Large screens that comfortably display documents and videos (foldable models)

Once you try them, you will never go back to older models. I'm currently using the Xiaomi MIX Fold 3. This foldable model has a screen size about twice that of a standard smartphone. Despite this, it weighs almost the same as a typical smartphone. It's incredibly convenient and truly changes your life.

(2) Changes in the Chinese automotive market

Before 2008, the Chinese automotive market was dominated by foreign brands from Europe, the United States, and Japan.

Today, however, the market is being driven by companies such as Tesla, BYD, Geely, Li Auto, and Xiaomi. With the exception of Tesla, all of these brands are Chinese, which is a highly symbolic shift.

Chinese brands' strength lies in their ability to accurately grasp consumer needs and quickly update their models in response to those demands. Consequently, their car designs, interiors, and smart features surpass those of foreign brands.

In particular, Xiaomi's cars are stylish and affordable. I find them so appealing that I'd like to buy one myself.

2. 3 Convenient Online Shopping

In the past, people usually went to electronics stores or large shopping malls to shop. Comparing and purchasing products was time-consuming and labor-intensive. In provincial cities especially, choices were limited. Today, however, the situation has changed dramatically. With the rise of online shopping, there is hardly any need to visit physical stores anymore. We have entered an era where nearly all shopping can be done with just a smartphone.

The Chinese online shopping market is dominated by Taobao and Tmall, both of which are operated by the Alibaba Group, as well as by JD.com. JD.com, in particular, operates according to a business model similar to Amazon's, but I think it actually surpasses Amazon. As an expatriate in China, I frequently used JD.com and I was amazed by how convenient and fast it was.

JD.com's most notable feature is its lightning-fast delivery. Many products are eligible for "same-day delivery" or "next-day delivery," and it' s not uncommon for items ordered in the morning to arrive by evening. This demonstrates that the logistics network has been developed and streamlined across China's vast expanse. Even compared with Japanese online shopping services, the speed is overwhelming. I was truly amazed the first time I experienced it.

Furthermore, the quality of the after-sales service is exceptionally high. If a product malfunctions within the warranty period, JD.com will replace it with a new one, and the process is surprisingly simple. All you have to do is submit a return request via the app, and a delivery driver will come to your home to pick up the item. There is no need for tedious paperwork or phone calls — everything is handled online. This efficiency stems from a system designed with consumer convenience as the top priority. When I used the service myself, I was impressed, thinking, "Is it really this customer-centric?"

Platforms like JD.com and Alibaba do more than just sell goods. They integrate all the services necessary for daily life, including financial services, insurance, travel bookings, and pharmaceutical sales. As a result, users can manage their entire lives through a single app. We are truly in the era of "super apps."

These advancements in online shopping offer more than just convenience. They are transforming Chinese consumer culture itself. While shopping at physical stores is increasingly becoming a special experience, everyday consumer behavior has shifted entirely online. As logistics technology and AI-driven demand forecasting continue to evolve, we can expect services to become even faster and more personalized.

2. 4 Life with Just a Single Smartphone

In China today, we have entered an era where we can manage our lives with just one smartphone. Mobile payments are available wherever you go, and opportunities to use cash are scarce. In fact, over the past four years, I have virtually never used or seen cash.

Unlike in Japan, Chinese apps integrate multiple functions into a single app. For example, Alipay supports payments, taxi reservations, automatic payments for utilities, purchasing movie and event tickets, booking hotels, arranging airline tickets, and more.

It's so versatile that I find myself wondering, "What can't it do?"

In addition, payments via facial recognition have begun. This technology has also been introduced in KIMZ vending machines, which allow customers to purchase items without a smartphone or cash. It's truly "invisible payment." I am deeply impressed by the evolution of this technology.

3. Establishment of HC Engineering Dept. at KIMZ (Photo 2)

3. 1 Background of the Establishment

The KIMZ cylinder plant (formerly KYB Hydraulics Industry (Zhenjiang) Ltd.) was established in Zhenjiang City, Jiangsu Province, in 2004 to manufacture KCH hydraulic cylinders for excavators. Initially, the plant operated solely as a production facility without an engineering department. Recently, the cylinder industry has experienced intensified price competition due to the increase in domestic Chinese manufacturers. In order to maintain competitiveness and secure profits, accelerating cost-reduction efforts became indispensable. Therefore, an engineering department was established as a countermeasure. Three people were assigned to begin establishing the engineering department: one employee in charge of motor-related operations, one executive, and myself.

3. 2 Challenges at the Establishment

Building an engineering department from scratch presented many challenges. We had to build the operational foundation from the ground up, including purchasing printers, introducing drafting software, and establishing drawing submission rules. Throughout this process, we received tremendous support from relevant departments at KIMZ and engineering departments in Japan.

Photo 2 Dinner party of the engineering dept.

3. 3 Scope of Work of HC Engineering Dept.

The HC engineering department was primarily responsible for providing technical support and promoting cost-reduction activities for motors and cylinders manufactured by KIMZ and serving as the contact for technical issues related to KYBJ hydraulic products. The department was also responsible for conducting on-site measurements of these products.

The department operated with a staff of eight, including local employees. Each staff member contributed to improving local technical capabilities and operational efficiency, fulfilling roles based on their area of expertise. Following the establishment of the engineering department, cost-reduction activities were accelerated by approximately 50% compared with previous levels.

3. 4 Initiatives to Accelerate Cost-Reduction Activities

(1) Improve operational efficiency and strengthen organizational capabilities through human resource development

In the short term, I could handle all cylinder technology-related tasks alone. However, this approach was insufficient in the long term and raised questions about organizational continuity. We then welcomed two excellent employees from the local quality assurance department to the engineering department and focused on developing their specialized knowledge and problem-solving skills. We provided education that went beyond mere instructions on work procedures, focusing on mindset training. Specifically:

- Creating schedules and managing progress
- Analyzing root causes and formulating logical solutions when problems occur
- Promoting interdepartmental coordination and improving communication skills
- Recognizing the importance of verifying facts

We emphasized the importance of verifying facts the most. Rather than relying on assumptions or vague judgements, we prioritized clarifying exactly what was verified and what evidence was used to reach a conclusion. This mindset is essential for quality assurance and cost improvement.

A year of repetitive training enabled them to independently drive projects forward. They have grown enough to manage multiple projects simultaneously and propose solutions to problems as they arise. This human resource development has significantly contributed to improving the productivity of the entire engineering department and accelerating cost-reduction activities.

(2) Increase efficiency in meeting management to save time and make faster decisions

Previously, cost-reduction meetings were held once a week within KIMZ, and meetings with relevant KYBJ departments were held once a month. Each session took approximately 1.5 hours. A significant amount of time was spent in these meetings confirming the progress of each project and sharing issues. The workload burden on participants was a major challenge.

To address this, we first eliminated the weekly KIMZ meetings and reduced the monthly meetings with relevant KYBJ departments to 30 minutes or less. We established a system in which the engineering department acts as the command center, assessing the status of all projects in advance and preparing meeting minutes. During the meetings, we reported progress concisely and focused discussions on specific issues.

These improvements reduced meeting time by approximately 70% compared with previous levels, significantly lowering the workload on each department. Additionally, these changes dramatically improved decision-making speed and further boosted the momentum of cost-reduction activities.

(3) Systemize the early detection and resolution of issues

To accelerate cost-reduction activities, it is essential to establish a system for the early detection and prompt resolution of issues. To this end, we introduced the following rules: For each project, we create a schedule and assign a document control number for management. We review progress weekly based on the schedule and check for any issues. If a problem occurs, we immediately determine "what the problem is," "whether it can be resolved," and "whether support from other departments is needed." If necessary, we conduct on-the-spot consultations and coordinate accordingly.

These steady efforts have enabled us to minimize the risk of delays and proceed with projects as planned.

Advancing these three initiatives simultaneously—human resource development, meeting efficiency improvements, and systematization of problem resolution—has accelerated cost-reduction activities by approximately 50% compared with previous levels. Going forward, we will continue to strengthen the capabilities of our local staff and optimize business processes to further enhance our competitiveness.

4. Lessons Learned at KIMZ in China

Over the past four years, I have worked alongside many exceptional local and expatriate staff members at KIMZ in China. Working with people from different cultures and with different

values taught me not only technical knowledge, but also valuable insights into working methods and ways of thinking. The following summarizes the most impactful lessons I learned.

4. 1 Importance of Teamwork

KIMZ promoted close collaboration between departments. Each department notably demonstrated a positive attitude toward cooperation, particularly with regard to cost-reduction activities. In the projects I managed, multiple functions, including design, procurement, production engineering, and quality assurance, worked together. This enabled us to advance more than 20 improvement initiatives simultaneously. This was achieved not merely through a division of labor, but through a strong, shared mindset of solving problems together.

I was impressed by the fact that when a problem arose in a department, the other departments also collaborated to find solutions together rather than merely pointing out the problem. Culturally, Japanese people tend to think that the relevant department should take responsibility for a problem, but the Chinese tried to solve problems together. After experiencing their stronger cooperative mindset, I realized that the essence of teamwork is taking the initiative to work toward a common goal rather than merely cooperating.

4. 2 Prompt Work

Chinese companies, especially KIMZ, respond very quickly. They consistently met deadlines for clear requests. Even when we made requests to other departments within the company, we often received responses the same day. Their decision-making process is significantly faster than that of Japanese companies. Our Chinese business partners also responded quickly to requests for prototyping, from fabrication to submitting quality assurance data. Their flexibility in responding to projects, even with tight deadlines, was impressive.

This prompt work is not merely a matter of quickness but is also backed by strong decision-making and execution capabilities. While Japan has a culture of repeated, careful deliberation, China has a culture where people take on challenges without fear of failure, saying, "Let's just try it first." I believe this difference directly impacts not only operational efficiency, but also the speed of innovation.

4. 3 A Mindset of Taking on New Challenges

Despite a limited budget for capital investment, we implemented many new improvement activities. One example is the introduction of a picking system (parts management system). Instead of using an expensive Japanese-made system, we purchased only the main equipment and did the wiring and programming in-house to reduce costs by sourcing locally. Through collaboration with our business partners, we acquired necessary knowledge and built the system through repeated trial-and-error tests.

This effort went beyond mere cost reduction. Through on-site improvement activities that strengthened our collaborative relationship with local staff, I witnessed their flexible thinking and ability to execute. I learned the value of taking action first rather than striving for perfection. I strongly believe that such challenges contribute to the growth of the entire organization.

4. 4 Learning from Other Expatriates

Working overseas provides an opportunity to collaborate with exceptional employees from other departments and locations. During this assignment, I worked with senior colleagues in production technology, engineering, sales, and procurement, and gained a great deal of insight. The lessons that left the strongest impression on me are as follows:

(1) Work visualization and management

I learned a method for listing all tasks to clarify issues and prevent oversights. This dramatically improved efficiency in advancing multiple projects simultaneously.

(2) Challenging tasks are valuable

Keeping in mind the philosophy that "tasks anyone can do have no value," I developed a positive attitude toward tackling difficult challenges. I believe this mindset is crucial for career development.

(3) Importance of responding calmly

Based on the principle that "getting angry solves nothing," I learned the importance of controlling my emotions and responding calmly. Calmness is key to building trust.

5. Life in China

5. 1 Sports (Photos 3, 4, and 5)

After work, I regularly played basketball, badminton, and table tennis with KIMZ staff members. Sports were not just entertainment, but were also a valuable opportunity to build relationships with colleagues from different backgrounds. Sports played a major role in fostering teamwork and trust.

KIMZ regularly held sports events to promote employee health and boost motivation. These events encouraged interaction between departments and served as more than just competitions. I actively participated, particularly in the badminton tournament, in which I placed second in men's singles and third in men's doubles. These results were the fruit of daily practice and collaboration with my teammates. It was an experience I am very proud of.

Through sports, I learned to balance competition and cooperation. I recognized that trying to win while respecting one's opponents and remembering to have fun is an important value that carries over into my work. Furthermore, these activities were highly effective in relieving the stress of living abroad and were essential for maintaining my physical and mental health.

5. 2 Traveling Within China (Photos 6, 7, 8, and 9)

In August 2024, I visited Chengdu, the capital of China's Sichuan Province. Chengdu is a major metropolis that represents western China. While it is rich in history and culture, the city is also developing into a modern metropolis. With an abundance of tourist attractions and culinary delights, it is a very lively city and an attractive destination for travelers.

Photo 3 Badminton tournament

Photo 4 Badminton tournament

Photo 5 Basketball

One particularly famous place is the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. This world-renowned panda conservation facility is a must-visit spot for tourists in Chengdu. Its vast grounds offer a natural environment that allows visitors to observe the pandas living leisurely lives up close. During my visit, I saw several pandas eating bamboo and resting in trees. Seeing the cute pandas in person is even more heartwarming than seeing them in photos or videos.

Photo 6 Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding

Photo 7 Panda

Photo 8 Glasses-free 3D

Furthermore, Chengdu is famous not only for its pandas, but also for its historic landmarks and as the home of Sichuan cuisine. Visitors can spend a leisurely time in the city while exploring ancient temples and traditional teahouses. Sichuan cuisine is characterized by its spiciness and mala flavor. We enjoyed authentic local flavors such as hot pot and Dan Dan Noodles. The spiciness was more intense than I had imagined, but I was impressed by the depth of flavor.

Photo 9 Sichuan hot pot

6. In Closing (Photo 10)

My nearly four years at KIMZ were a valuable experience. Working with colleagues with different values and experiencing the rapidly changing Chinese market firsthand have become major assets in my career. Thanks to the support of the local staff, expatriate colleagues, business partners, the support division, and many other related parties who worked tirelessly alongside me, I completed my assignment without any major problems. I would like to take this opportunity to express my heartfelt gratitude to them.

The local staff's flexible thinking and execution skills, as well as the expatriate staff's high level of expertise and sense of responsibility, made a particular strong impression on me. Working with them to overcome challenges taught me valuable lessons, such as the importance of promptness, a mindset of taking on challenges, and the essence of teamwork. I am convinced that these values are more than mere knowledge or technical skills and will be major assets in my future work.

Moving forward, I plan to apply what I learned at KIMZ to take on even more challenging technical issues. Specifically, I will strive to balance cost reduction with quality improvement and incorporate new technologies into my designs. I also aspire to become an engineer who can succeed on the global stage while maintaining a global perspective and respecting different cultures and values.

The experiences I gained over the past four years are not just memories, but a significant step toward the future. The challenge has only just begun. By continuing to learn and grow, I hope to create even greater value.

Photo 10 Commemorative photo before returning to Japan

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Took present post after working as a transferred employee at KIMZ.