

# CHINA CALLING

Thibaut Helleputte General Manager  
Danone Mengniu JV  
in Shanghai  
ICHEC graduate 1997



Having graduated from ICHEC in 1997, Thibaut Helleputte has made his home and career in Asia.

He's currently general manager of a joint venture in China between Danone and Mengniu, a leader in the local dairy industry, meaning he oversees 3,500 people in 12 factories across China. He's based in Shanghai, in a part of the world he's long been drawn to.

A seasoned traveller, Thibaut has also spent time working in Japan, France and the Czech Republic. What has his experience taught him? "The first thing you learn when you move to another culture is to be humble enough to adapt," he says. "Working in a place like China or Japan, you realise that the way people there look at the world is totally different from the way we've been trained to look at it. As a European, what you might see as good or bad, for them it might be the opposite. They can look at the reality in a very different way. The most difficult thing is to be capable of adapting, to listen and to try to understand while at the same time knowing when to take risks. It's always a trade-off between giving direction and being sure of what you want to do, and being open enough to listen to what's said by your team."

He joined food company Danone 13 years ago from Unilever, with the condition that he would have the opportunity to work abroad, in particular in Asia, a region he and his wife both love. "We've travelled a lot in Asia, and we were lucky enough that after two years with Danone they sent me to Japan as a marketing director," he says. From there they moved on to Belgium, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, before settling in China five years ago, with roles as general manager first of Danone and then of the joint venture.

« JAPAN WAS AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE, HE RECALLS. IT'S SUCH A DIFFERENT CULTURE AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE THERE WAS JUST INCREDIBLE. »

Our first daughter was born in Japan, so we have an emotional connection with the country too. We travelled to China several times, and this is when we started to realise that China was a very special country. When you look at what it has achieved in the last ten years, you realise that it is totally different to what is shown in the media in Europe.

"We love it very much and that's why we've stayed here for five years. Our two little girls speak Chinese, and it's a unique experience to be exposed to this culture. Wherever we go, we will keep China with us. We'll keep the language, because we believe it's a gift."

**« THIBAUT WAS DRAWN TO STUDY AT ICHEC BY THE FACT THAT HE WOULD BE TAUGHT BY LECTURERS WHO WERE STILL ACTIVE IN BUSINESS; TEACHERS WHO COULD SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY ABOUT THEIR INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE, BROADENING THEIR STUDENTS' VIEW OF THE BUSINESS WORLD. »**

Another attraction was the chance to spend time outside the classroom: during his studies he worked in a variety of companies, something that he says really opened his mind.

He was recruited by his first employer before he had even graduated, which he attributes in part to the school's reputation. After interviews with several major companies, he opted to join the consumer goods multinational Unilever. "Many of the students who graduate from classical universities have a good brain but are not necessarily operational. When they arrive in the office in their new job, they aren't always ready," he says. "This is where ICHEC made a huge difference, because when you set out you have a notion, you understand what's going on in the business and what your place is. In class we combined theory with business reality, which meant I was very confident and ended up with lots of job interviews. You realise the reputation of the school because all these big companies are coming there, ready to sign people up even before they've finished studying."

Consumers' tastes and attitudes have evolved hugely since Thibaut began in the industry 20 years ago. There's a trend towards health in a global sense, and that's a market he believes his company is well-placed to serve. "Danone's mission is to bring health through food to as many people as possible," he says. "We believe food is the first medicine. In much of the world, there's an evolution in this direction, to eat more healthily, less fat, less sugar and so on. But you still have very big differences between countries."

His home country, Belgium, is a mature market for his company's products, and its profile makes it an ideal testing ground for health products. Actimel, one of the company's biggest brands, was developed here. "The market is well-developed and high-income, but one other thing is you have the north and the south, which are totally different to each other," he explains. "If you're able to come up with a concept that works in both regions, then the chances are you have a product that can work elsewhere."

**« AS IMPORTANT AS HIS PROFESSIONAL LIFE, THOUGH, IS HIS PERSONAL LIFE, AND HE'S CAREFUL TO DRAW A VERY CLEAR LINE BETWEEN THE TWO. »**

"I'm very disciplined about switching off from work. For me the most important thing is to have the life you want to have," he says. "I have very strict rules in terms of balancing my life between personal and professional. I will not work on the weekend, during my holiday or in the evening. I can arrive at the office at 7am and work straight through until 8pm without stopping for lunch, but once I'm at home, I'm at home. I totally disconnect."

"Besides, being constantly connected is not productive. We can't be efficient fifteen hours in a row, seven days a week. I choose to totally disconnect and be with my family, with friends, to travel and concentrate on things outside what I'm doing at work."

**THREE TIPS FROM THIBAUT HELLEPUTTE TO YOUNG GRADUATES WISHING TO EXPAND THEIR CAREER BY WORKING ABROAD:**

- Moving abroad is a personal decision. You should see it as a way to develop as a professional and as a person and not just something to do because it looks good on your CV.
- Never underestimate the challenge of working abroad: suddenly, many of your benchmarks and feelings will no longer be relevant.
- Always be clear with your company about your expectation and your willingness to move abroad.

