

## DEREK TILOT IN TAIWAN

# Asia in the heart, Solvay in the blood

**Derek Tilot (Ingest 2010) has followed a career that's a bit like the traffic in Asia: heading in every direction! From his childhood in Tokyo to his factory in Tainan (Taiwan), his life has been filled with challenges and adventure. Let's find out more.**

**S**ix months! That was the tender age at which Derek Tilot left Belgium for the first time. Where for? Japan, the country where he lived with his parents for no fewer than 18 years. "I come from a family of expats. My grandfather worked in diplomacy and my father settled in Japan as an entrepreneur. And I in turn moved to Taiwan in 2013." But even though the expat life runs in Derek's veins from a very young age, his move to Taiwan was a real challenge. At the age of just 26, he agreed to head up Alanod-Xxentria Technology Materials, a joint German-Taiwanese joint venture, capitalized at 95 million dollars. "The company is active in the aluminium sector, he explains modestly. Briefly, we transform very pure rolling mill aluminium by anodising and other surface treatments. Our products are then sold in a very wide range of industries: from lighting to car manufacture, electronics, architectural products and cameras. Our clients include companies like Philips, Samsung, Panasonic and IKEA."

### The living abroad bug

Before starting to send aluminium out across the world, Derek had already travelled a great deal himself: from Tokyo to Taipei, taking in Brussels, Berlin and Seoul. But let's go back to the beginning. Brought up on sukiyaki (a Japanese hot pot dish) and sencha (Japanese green tea), Derek had just celebrated his 18th birthday when he returned to Belgium to study. He had just one idea in mind: to get a degree that would open the doors to living an international

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Pictures: R.R.



### CV Express

**2004**  
French Lycée, Tokyo

**2008**  
Ewha Womans University, South Korea

**2010**  
Management engineer, SBS-EM

**2010-2012**  
Finance trainee, Electrabel-GDF Suez

**2012-2013**  
Business controller, Electrabel-GDF Suez

**2013-...**  
CEO, Alanod-Xxentria

life. So, the SBS-EM seemed an obvious choice, because although he describes himself as half Belgian and half Japanese, Derek is a Solvay man through and through. Again, it's a family connection: his grandfather (Ingest 1946!), his father, his mother and also his uncle and aunt were at Solvay before him. "I'm part of a third generation to come out of Solvay. Which explains my particular attachment to the School. And, given the quality and recognition the degree receives abroad, I had little hesitation in choosing where to study." In 2010, after a 6-month Erasmus period spent in South Korea, the young graduate started work with GDF Suez (now Engie). First as a finance trainee, based in Belgium and Berlin, and then as a business controller at the parent company in Brussels. →



**“YOUR WORK IS YOUR WORLD AND YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO SURVIVE WITH JUST THAT”**

## 4 TIPS for a successful expat life

### 1 Work at building good relationships

"In Chinese, we use the term "guanxi" that can translate as "network" but which means much more than that. Even in professional relationships, it's customary to take an interest in the family of the person you're talking to. This helps create a real relationship of trust. It's a very important factor in the Asian business world."

### 2 Keep an open mind

"It may seem to go without saying but living abroad really does require one to accept differences. But also to develop the ability to question oneself, particularly about one's own habits, which may sometimes be viewed negatively..."

### 3 Be prepared to go the extra mile at work

"There are plenty of opportunities for doing business, but you have to dedicate yourself 100%. You must be able to set aside your European habits. Which ones? The division between your professional and private life, the idea of working for a specific number of hours per day..."

### 4 Learn the language

"In spite of my knowledge of Asia and of the Japanese language, it was complicated for me at the start. Speaking Chinese is a major asset in doing business all over the continent."

"I had a great career ahead of me. After a few years with the group, I would certainly have the opportunity to move abroad. But I needed something more immediate. In Belgium, everything seemed too linear to me. I could see my whole future too clearly..." Derek recalls. It was this taste for adventure that drove him to kiss goodbye to the future he had mapped out for him in Belgium.

## A leap into the unknown

As luck would have it, Derek was approached by Alanod-Xxentria, a new company formed as a joint venture between German company Alanod and Taiwanese company Xxentria. And best of all, the post was CEO! "When I came home with the draft contract, my fiancée asked me straight away if the job was in the tropics. Yes, obviously it was. She didn't hesitate and I accepted the post", he remembers with amusement. In reality, despite the sunshine and the palm trees, what awaited him was a challenge the size of Yushan, Taiwan's highest peak



at 3,952 metres. "First, I spent a few months in Germany getting to know the company from the inside. Then it was a leap into the unknown: Tainan in the south of the island. Everything needed to be done: setting up production lines, building infrastructure, hiring staff, creating an international sales network, etc." Once on site, he got a much better idea of the scale of the task. The first obstacle was the language. Even though his Japanese enabled him to communicate with the older people (the legacy of Japanese colonisation), he didn't speak a word of Chinese. "It was complicated at the start. I could only ask older people my way around", he laughs. And from a professional point of view, he soon had to tackle the local situation. "Recruitment, for example, that was hellish. The people of Tainan live life in a very relaxed way and balk at the idea of building a career. What's more, they speak very little English. I was forced to focus on English teachers..."

## A culture shock

Accustomed to a large organisation like GDF Suez, Derek discovered a new world. Substantial responsibilities and tasks, different working codes, but also an entirely new work context where paying a simple bill (in Chinese) can become a real ordeal. In Germany, he had had no problem in attracting Germanic investors, but the hard part was still to come: persuading Taiwanese stockholders. "Generally speaking, Asians are very pragmatic: things are black or white. And at the start, I would often say grey. I arrived there with my nice suits, my smart graphics and the kind of diplomacy one is used to using in Europe. But what counts here are results", he explains. And he would find



himself in hot water several times in the first two years. "I was young and I had no management experience. And, on top of that, I didn't speak Chinese. I had to call on experience I didn't have, but three years later, I'm happy with the ways things have panned out..." Today, the company is running at full speed with five production lines, a sales network from Iran to Australia, more than 30 employees and the capacity to fight off its Chinese competitors. This success story is down to developing a great ability to adapt but also tireless effort on my part. "More than elsewhere, the boundary between your working and your private life is almost non-existent. That's the influence of the Japanese for you! A culture in which your professional status is paramount. Your work is your world and you have to be able to survive with just that." With one day in Kuala Lumpur and the next in Beijing, Derek spares no effort in meeting his customers' expectations. Whether it's a business dinner or celebrating the Chinese New Year with the entire family of one of his Chinese customers!

▲  
"It was complicated at the start: I could only ask older people my way around."

### A good quality of life

It is this frantic pace that he tries to combine with the quality of life offered by his own little corner of paradise. Because Taiwan, a diplomatic no-man's-land (its independence is not internationally recognised), sandwiched between the Pacific and the China Sea was also christened the "beautiful island" by Portuguese sailors. "I live 2 kilometres from the sea. Every morning, I get into my car to go to work and drive through fields of banana trees and then along the coast in the pleasant warmth... It makes me realise how fortunate I am to live here", he explains with delight. The island has so much to offer: the legacy of the Chinese and Japanese, a lush tropical forest, very high peaks and a wonderful coastline. Derek makes the most of all these assets to persuade Alumni to come and live there. "The "made in the EU" tag counts for a lot here. It's a guarantee of quality and seriousness. And there are still plenty of business opportunities here! So Alumni are very welcome in Taiwan, for business or even just to share a beer – Belgian of course!" ■

If you'd like to suggest an alumnus or alumna or present your project in this section, write to us at [sbs-em@elixis.be](mailto:sbs-em@elixis.be).



### The PROS and the CONS



- ⊕ "It may seem a bit of a cliché, but the Taiwanese really do believe in a culture of giving of oneself. They show an unparalleled kindness and willingness to help their neighbour."
- ⊖ "The most difficult thing must be the isolation. Being a long way from your family and friends and in a time zone that makes communication difficult. But you prepare yourself for this and end up finding solutions. Then again, I'm lucky because my father is in Tokyo and I have a brother in Shanghai!"
- ⊕ "The tropical climate. No photo can do it justice. Our winter here is the equivalent of a dry summer in Belgium. It's 15 degrees and everyone's in padded jackets! But for a Belgian, outside of the typhoon season, it's wonderful all year round: very little rain and a pleasant temperature..."
- ⊖ "I really like Asian food but I do miss eating in a good European restaurant! Enjoying some nice game, a chicken thigh in mushroom sauce or a nice steak tartare and chips, for example, without having to pay a fortune... (he sighs and laughs)."