



An Introduction To **China Trademark Registration**

Discover what China trademark protection involves, how it may differ to the rest of the world, and why and how to protect your business in this eBook from Hongda Business Services



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The definition of IP is that it is something which is ‘created by the mind,’ and could be anything from inventions, through to literary works such as books. IP is protected by law, which helps inventors feel that their work is secure, spurs creativity and investment, and encourages the economy as more people and organisations are willing to spend time and money to innovate. (1. Wipo.int, 2015)

1. Industrial IP
2. Copyright

As the name suggests, this IP is related to the world of industry and work. It would include patents for inventions, industrial designs such as blueprints, trademarks, and geographical indications. Most of these IP types will be familiar, but the final, geographical indications, applies to products which are characterised by the region of their origin.

Copyright

Copyright applies more to the artistic world. It is applied to literary works such as books, poems, scripts for plays, and eBooks. It also protects films, TV, radio, podcasts, and music. Finally, works of art, architectural designs, paintings, drawings, and photographs are protected.

How Does IP Apply To Our Business And Brands?

Many of our customers recognise and trust a brand, company, and its products or services through the style, colour, font, and shape of its logo or products and their packaging.

Consider the iconic 'Coca Cola' font, red and white colour, and hourglass-shaped coke bottle. All of these are specific to the Coca Cola company, and as such are protected as being part of their intellectual property. Customers don't need to taste the drink to know that the fizzy beverage inside is coke, the branding signifies this to them; it's highly unlikely that customers of Coke would buy the product instinctively were the bottle differently shaped, or the red a different shade for instance.

Since the character of our company, brands, and products can be said to be 'works of the mind' and also have a strong influence on how our company is perceived, it's completely sensible that the logo, brand, and all that comes with them are protected by law.

Since the late 1800s IP has been protected and is outlined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([2. ichrp.org](https://www.ichrp.org/), 2015) which states:

"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author."

Businesses need to feel secure that they can:

- » *Create and innovate without fear that their efforts will be stolen, copied, or taken by others for their own benefit*
- » *Rely on the law to prosecute those that transgress against them*
- » *Spend their time and resources on R&D knowing that their investment is safe*

IP protection allows the above to happen, and gives an overall benefit to humanity in terms of economic growth, the creation of jobs, industry, and the creation of new and interesting products, ideas, and innovations for people as a whole.

What Is A Trademark?

A trademark is a recognisable indicator of a certain brand or product belonging to a company. For a good example, consider the 'Golden Arches' from 'McDonald's.' If people see these arches they know that a McDonald's restaurant is nearby. Due to their recognisable quality, the trademark helps consumers to know that the product or service that they're buying is the 'real' thing and that they can be assured of its quality. Trademarks could be almost anything, be that a word, symbol, shape of package, or even a combination of colours. These things evoke the character of the company and its brands, and therefore must not be replicated by other companies who wish to 'piggyback' on the back of their success.

Companies who aim to create a similar logo, shape, font, product, or package to a trademark already in use are open to punishment as well. In this case it is clear that they are trying to fool the consumer, who is subconsciously conditioned to associate certain trademarks with specific qualities (such as good value, tasty food, high quality, fast service, etc) into believing that their brand is also the same or very similar when the only similarity may in fact be that they have created a logo, for example, that looks very similar and is perhaps the same colour as well.





CHAPTER 2.

HOW AND WHY DOES CHINESE TRADE-MARK LAW DIFFER TO THE REST OF THE WORLD?



The types of IP protection mentioned in chapter 1 are likely to be something that businesses who are, or aspire to operate in China are familiar with.

If you're an American company and hold patents, copyright, or trademarks in the USA to protect your different IP types for example, you may expect that American law can protect your ideas, inventions, logos, or works. To an extent this is true, but not overseas and in many cases it would be important to have both USA IP protection and international registration through the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) and the member country in question as well.

One exception is the EU, where registered trademarks would be protected across the union, however this kind of trademark registration is more expensive than just registering for one country.

China is a [WIPO](#) member, and so trademarks can be protected there. Indeed, like almost all countries, trademarks should be protected in China, and any country you're aiming to operate in.

The fact is that businesses who enter the China market with IP in the form of a trademark or trademarks that need to be protected cannot rely on any overseas protection to be valid. It is not.

Why IP Protection Is Different In China

In China IP protection should be **top priority** for foreign businesses with any kind of IP that could be stolen, copied, or used illicitly. The rule of thumb in China is: “If it can be copied, it will be.”

China certainly can't be accused of being the only country that breaches of IP law happen in, that would be very unfair, however what may surprise you is one of the idiosyncrasies of Chinese trademark law.

China is what is known as a ‘first to file country.’ This means that the first party to register or file a trademark will usually be granted its rights.

The United States Embassy in Beijing has this to say about trademarks in China:

“China has a “first-to file” system that requires no evidence of prior use or ownership, leaving registration of popular foreign marks open to third parties...Foreign companies seeking to distribute their products in China are advised to register their marks and/or logos with the Trademark Office. Further, any Chinese language translations and appropriate Internet domains should also be registered. As with patent registration, foreign parties must use the services of approved Chinese agents when submitting the trademark application, however foreign attorneys or the Chinese agents may prepare the application. Recent amendments to the Implementing Regulations of the Trademark Law allow local branches or subsidiaries of foreign companies to register trademarks directly without use of a Chinese agent.”

(3. US Embassy Beijing, 2015)

If you do have trademarks and do harbour a wish to enter the China market then registering them in China is something that you should be feeling very concerned with doing right about now.

According to Dan Harris from China law blog:

“By far the fastest, cheapest, easiest, safest way to make sure that you can use ‘your’ trademark in China is to register it before anyone else does. When should that be? Pretty much as soon you have both an inkling that you will need/want to use your trademark in China.”

(4. [Chinalawblog](#), 2014)



Harris’ point is incredibly pertinent, as unfortunately it is the case in China that other persons or organisations are able to register your trademark as their own, known as ‘squatting,’ before you have even had the opportunity to enter the China market.



CHAPTER 3.

WHAT CAN HAPPEN WHEN TRADEMARKS
AREN'T PROTECTED IN CHINA?



Some companies have made the mistake of *not protecting their IP* in China by Chinese law, and have found out to their chagrin that ‘squatters’ have already registered their IP, for instance trademarks, before them; and what’s more, by Chinese law are seen as legitimate owner of that trademark. Trademarks squatters commonly research new and popular brands, companies, and products, and then seek to register their trademarks as their own in China at the earliest possible moment.

But don’t think that only SMEs can be affected by such situations though. Even huge MNCs with vast wealth have been caught out by China’s unusual IP protection laws.

Take a look at these tales of caution...

Tesla Motor Vehicles

Take Tesla for example, they found that their trademarked name had been registered by a Mr. Zhan from Guangzhou in 2006, years before they even came to the China market! To make matters worse, he took them to court

“demanding that [Tesla] stop all sales and marketing activities in China, shut down showrooms and supercharging facilities and pay him 23.9 million yuan (\$3.85 million) in compensation.”

(5. Reuters, 2014)

Apple

Apple, who have China as their second largest market, were also stung in a similar way to Tesla. They believed that they had purchased the rights to use the trademark ‘iPad’ from the owner, Taiwanese company Proview Technology. However, it turned out that the rights that they had purchased were for several regions not including China. The parent company stated that their subsidiary, Proview Technology (Shenzhen), had registered the iPad trademark in China before them, and it took a lot of litigation and an eventual payment of US\$60 million before the rights to it were finally signed over to Apple.

(6. NYTimes, 2012)

Treasury Wine Estates (Penfolds Wine)

Treasury wine estates, owner of the famous wine marque 'Penfolds,' were also hit by a trademark squatter who had registered their Chinese trademark brand name, Ben Fu, before them.

According to the Australian Financial Review:

"a rival wine company has registered three variations of Penfolds' Chinese name, Ben Fu. This potentially leaves Treasury open to a hefty fine for trademark infringement and could also allow the rival to sell wine using the Chinese name for Penfolds."

(7. AFR.com, 2014)

This leaves treasury in expensive litigation and unsure if they will be fined for breaching trademark law, and if they will even be able to trade in China using their own product's famous name.

Pfizer (Viagra)

The global pharmaceutical giant Pfizer fought an 11 year battle to claim its 'Viagra' trademark which had been squatted, and lost.

Pfizer began to market its magical erectile dysfunction drug in China in 2000, but the problems had started for them two years earlier in 1998.

In fact, *"another company, Guangzhou Welman Pharmaceutical, had cleverly filed a trademark application in the China Trademark Office in 1998 to register the trademark "Weige" and was marketing its own anti-potency pills under the "Weige" brand."*

(8. ecjlaw.com, 2007)

Ultimately Pfizer lost the case because although 'Weige' was colloquially well-known in China, it was not specifically Pfizer's viagra itself that had brought this brand name into the Chinese public consciousness.

Michael Jordan

Sports megastar Michael Jordan whose brand is a sub-brand of Nike, his sponsor in his basketball playing days, recently sued for trademark infringement in China in 2012.

Advertising age tells us that the defendant Qiaodan:

“Constructed its entire brand around the former Chicago Bull’s Chinese name, “Qiaodan,” which has a pronunciation similar to “Jordan.” The company filed for trademarks using Mr. Jordan’s jersey number, “23,” and even the names of his sons, Jeffrey and Marcus, in Chinese. Its logo looks awfully similar to Air Jordan’s “jumpman” logo.”

(9. Adage.com, 2015)



A slam dunk for Mr. Jordan you would think, as Qiaodan is clearly a knock-off brand. But no. Jordan made a critical error, he waited 12 years to sue, by which time Qiaodan already had more than 6,000 retail stores and had invested heavily in advertising and building up a well-known brand in China in their own right. Ultimately, after years of law-suits and numerous appeals, Jordan failed, the Supreme Court in Beijing ruling in favour of Qiaodan. Both Qiaodan sportswear and shoes are available alongside official Jordan products in China to this day.

It is concerning to hear that even the largest businesses with very deep pockets indeed have been stung by Chinese trademark laws, notably the ‘first-to-file’ system in place there. Enterprising Chinese individuals have taken advantage of this in order to squat on their trademarks and preferably force them into some kind of financial settlement, or to perhaps take advantage of their brand’s name and reputation in order to better their own business in China.

The big question is:

“If our trademarks are open to ‘squatting’ in China, how do we protect ourselves?”



CHAPTER 4.

HOW CHINA TRADEMARK REGISTRATION WORKS



Cautionary tales taken into account, it should now be clear that businesses who are doing business in China, or aiming to enter the Chinese market should be registering their trademarks as soon as possible.

In this chapter we'll cover how foreign companies can register their trademarks in China.

What May And May Not Be Registered As A Trademark In China?

Sports megastar Michael Jordan whose brand is a sub-brand of Nike, his sponsor in his basketball playing days, recently sued for trademark infringement in China in 2012.

Typically registered trademarks in China **may be:**

- » *Words*
- » *Shapes (2 or 3D)*
- » *Letters*
- » *Numerals*
- » *Devices*
- » *Colours*

They could be just one of these elements, or combinations of them which work together.

In the case of words, such as a brand name, it's crucial to register a Chinese language version of your foreign name. The general population in China cannot speak English and also have trouble pronouncing foreign words as they require different sounds than that are commonly used when speaking Chinese.

Therefore figuring out what your foreign trademark would be in Chinese characters is even more important than registering the original version in China, and both foreign language and Chinese trademarks may be squatted, so both need attention.

The following are prohibited and **may not be** registered as trademarks:

- » *Symbols that are the same as or similar to the Chinese State name, national flag, national emblem, military flags or military decorations of the PRC, other country or intergovernmental or international organization, unless approved by such government or organization*
- » *Symbols that are the same as special names of places where Chinese government offices are located, or names or images of symbolic buildings*
- » *Symbols that are the same as or similar to official symbols or inspection imprints that indicate the implementation of controls or that give guarantees, unless authorized*
- » *Names and symbols that are the same as or similar to the Red Cross or Red Crescent*
- » *Symbols that are racially discriminatory*
- » *Symbols that make exaggerated claims or are fraudulent*
- » *Symbols that harm socialist moral behavior or have other undesirable effects*

The following are prohibited and **may not be** registered as trademarks:

- » *Contain a product's generic name, graphics or model*
- » *Merely directly indicate a product's quality, main raw materials, function, weight, quantity or other characteristics*
- » *Lack any prominent characteristics*

(10. US Embassy Beijing, 2015)



How Long Are China Trademarks Valid For?

Trademark registrations are valid for ten **years**.

They may then be renewed for additional ten year periods within the final six months of the current term of validity.

The China Trademark Registration Process

Now you are ready to register trademarks and protect your IP in China. Following we'll briefly go over the procedure.

1. Decide Which Trademarks You Will Register And In Which Categories

It is up to you which trademarks you decide to register in China, although your agency can help you decide on the Chinese versions should you need assistance from local experts by way of translation.

Typically, foreign companies should consider registering the following trademarks:

- » *Latin letter script (your 'regular' trademark)*
- » *Your logo*
- » *The Chinese translation of your foreign trademark*
- » *Other Chinese words which are extremely similar to your name*

Once you have decided on trademarks, they need to be given categories. The categories trademarks are grouped into in China follow the international '[NICE classification](#)' which offers 45 product categories: 34 covering goods, and 11 covering services.

The application paperwork will include these categories, and it's also important to know that if you do not register your trademarks in a certain category, someone else can. This may affect your future plans if there is any chance that you'd be branching out into the other categories in future.

2. Decide How You Will Apply

Assuming that you already operate a Chinese company, such as a WFOE or Joint Venture in China, trademarks must be filed directly with the [Chinese Trademark Office](#) (CTMO) at the [State Administration for Industry and Commerce](#) (SAIC).

If you are a foreign business without a Chinese company or address in China yet who intends to preemptively protect trademarks, it will be necessary to file your trademark registration through a local qualified agency in China, such as [Hongda Business Services](#). Given that China trademark registration is a bureaucratic process which takes place in Chinese, this will actually make the process faster and smoother than going it alone.

3. Search To See If Your Trademarks Have Already Been Registered

Either yourself or your agent will conduct a search using the [CTMO trademark database](#) (there is an English version). You will be looking for the same or similar trademarks to yours. Finding any issues in advance of submitting an application to register a trademark will prevent you from wasting time and money.

4. Prepare And Sign The Application Forms

If no similar or identical trademarks have been registered before then you should now go ahead and prepare the application to register your trademarks.

In order to complete the application you will need to prepare the following:

1. *1x copy of the company's certificate of incorporation*
2. *Company name and address in both English and Chinese*
3. *Signature by company's director*
4. *Print and digital version of proposed trademark (6 originals in print, size: between 5cm*5cm and 10cm*10cm, colour: 5 black and white and 1 colour)*
5. *Category of the proposed trademark (and choose 10 sub-categories)¹*
6. *Explanation of trademark²*

Now complete the [trademark registration application form](#) if applying independently, or the [PoA \(Power of Attorney\)](#) form for your agency to undertake this registration for you (if applicable).

¹ China is one of the countries who uses the International Classification of Goods and Services under the Nice Agreement. This is an internationally recognised series of 45 classifications which may be applied to goods and services.

It is necessary to file a separate application for trademarks in each of the classifications you are choosing. One trademark in one classification will not cover other classifications, and therefore your trademarks may be open for use there by others. Typically 10 items per class may be registered by default, with additional costs for each item in addition.

² Should a trademark consist of foreign words, these must be explained in Chinese. If 3D shapes are being used, this should be made clear, and they should be visually represented in 3 dimensions.

All of the supporting documents will be attached, and the forms *must* be completed **only in Chinese language**. They must also be signed and stamped with the company chop.

Should the application be successful, and no other trademark is deemed to be in conflict with your requested one, the SAIC will issue a preliminary approval and publish the proposed trademark in the 'China Trademark Gazette.' At this point third parties have 3 months to oppose the registration of the trademark should they feel that it conflicts with their own.

However, should the application be rejected you will be notified in writing of this fact. You may request an administrative review from the Trademark Review and Arbitration Board (TRAB) within 15 days of receiving this letter of notification. It will be possible to appeal this by submitting to TRAB additional proof that the trademark should be registered to you. If TRAB also reject the application they will again notify you in writing, and you may finally appeal this decision to the People's court within 30 days of receipt of the letter.³

5. Submit Application To SAIC Trademark Office In Beijing

6. Application Checked By SAIC CTMO

The China trademark office will check that your application is complete, that your proposed trademark/s are eligible, and that there are no conflicting trademarks which are already registered.

7. First Approval By The SAIC (Or Refusal Of Application)

Should the application be successful, and no other trademark is deemed to be in conflict with your requested one, the SAIC will issue a preliminary approval and publish the proposed trademark in the 'China Trademark Gazette.'

At this point third parties have 3 months to oppose the registration of the trademark should they feel that it conflicts with their own.

However, should the application be rejected you will be notified in writing of this fact. You may request an administrative review from the Trademark Review and Arbitration Board (TRAB) within 15 days of receiving this letter of notification. It will be possible to appeal this by submitting to TRAB additional proof that the trademark should be registered to you. If TRAB also reject the application they will again notify you in writing, and you may finally appeal this decision to the People's court within 30 days of receipt of the letter.

³ Litigation in this case will be very time-consuming and costly. Hongda can advise, but time scales and costs will vary in each case, so please request information on a case by case basis directly.

8. SAIC Formally Approves And Registers The Trademark

Following the three month approval period, if no third party has filed an opposition to the trademark being registered, then the SAIC will formally approve and register your trademark. Again, this will be published as a notification in the 'China Trademark Gazette.'

Overall, the time that it will take to register your trademarks will be approximately 12 to 18 months. This fairly lengthy time shows that it is important to plan ahead.

If you come to China and start operating, creating products with your trademarks, and selling or exporting them, then these will be open to abuse until the trademark has been registered. Therefore the decision to register them must be taken well in advance.



CHAPTER 5.

CONCLUSION AND SOURCES



Conclusion

Not registering your own trademarks in China opens your brand and other IP up to 'squatting.' That is to say that, by law, other persons or organisations may register them before you, taking your business, weakening your company, and costing you money in litigation or settlement payments to them in order to seize back your own trademarks!

Whereas this would almost be unthinkable in the West, the law in China is ‘first-to-file,’ meaning that the first people to file a trademark registration will almost always be granted its rights, even if the trademark doesn’t belong to them in other countries.

The best and cheapest way to avoid these terrible problems is to register your trademarks in China now, or even before you officially enter or start manufacturing in China if possible! The sooner the registration process is underway, the sooner your IP is protected.

The team here at Hongda Business Services hope that this guide helps your business to understand the reasons why China trademark registration is important even if you already have registered trademarks in your country, what can happen to those who unwittingly ignore it, and what you need to prepare in order to make a successful trademark registration application.

Having read through it and understood the procedure, if registering your trademarks in China is something that you’re interested in doing please be advised that our expert China Trademark team would be delighted to assist you with our **affordable China Trademark Registration service**.

Register Your China Trademarks Smoothly, Easily, And Conveniently

As you can no doubt see, registering trademarks in China is important, yet very time-consuming, bureaucratic, and requires excellent Chinese and knowledge of the system. By outsourcing your trademark registration to the legal experts at Hongda by choosing our affordable China trademark registration service, you will:

Typically, foreign companies should consider registering the following trademarks:

- » ***Have peace of mind** that local experts are carrying out the process and no mistakes will be made*
- » ***Be reported to in plain English** every step of the way*
- » ***Save time**, as our experts are intimately familiar with the procedure and government officials involved. They will submit documents to the correct agencies, individuals, and at the right times without delay in order to make the process as fast as possible*
- » ***Have a dedicated account manager** who will be available to advise you of what is needed in English, as well as making the application for you saving you much time, energy, and stress*

**Click here to speak with us
about registering your trademarks**

A note on this eBook

Please note that the information in this ebook, whilst as accurate as Hongda Business Services can make it, is *not* meant as official and legal advice. It is a general guide only. We advise readers to seek legal advice before registering their trademarks in China.

This ebook was created in November 2015. As you know, laws and procedures are subject to change, and so please check to see if there are any changes that you need to be aware of before undertaking China Trademark Registration.

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Official China Trademark Registration Forms

- [Trademark registration application form](#) if applying independently (Chinese only)
- [PoA \(Power of Attorney\) form](#) if applying through an agency (English)



About Hongda Business Services



Hongda Business Services has been assisting foreign companies with setting up and managing businesses in China and Hong Kong since 2007, focussed on Mainland China's PRD region which borders Hong Kong and includes the megacities Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

We are based in Luohu, the commercial centre of Shenzhen, one of China's fastest growing and wealthiest cities.

Hongda is a stone's throw away from the Hong Kong - China border. We also have a branch office in the regional capital, Guangzhou. Our locations in Guangdong offer your business unparalleled access to the PRD manufacturing hub, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia.

Our local China and Hong Kong business experts, some of whom have more than 15 years experience in dealing with foreign companies doing business in China and Hong Kong, are fluent in English and Chinese and specialise in the disciplines you need. Our services that may interest business who wish to start operating in China include: China company setup, outsourcing China accounting and taxes, annual accounting auditing, China trademark filing, HR and staffing assistance, and more...

By working with us you will:

- » *Have the peace of mind that no financial mistakes will occur*
- » *Be able to communicate in English with experts who understand the issues you face, and know the solutions to them*
- » *Gain extra time spent on dealing with business administration to spend on getting better business results in China and Hong Kong*
- » *Feel secure that you're cooperating with a team of experts who are intimately familiar with Chinese and Hong Kong laws and their frequent changes*
- » *Benefit from simple cost-effective China and Hong Kong business services with none of the risk of hiring full-time local staff to undertake them*
- » *Be guaranteed success with your company setup in China or Hong Kong, with Hongda's 100% success rate*
- » *Gain business visas and work permits with a clear and easy process and expert support*

We're proud to be cooperating with hundreds of foreign companies, ranging from international giant Lenovo, through to a myriad of SMEs plying their trade here in China and Hong Kong.

Please feel free to contact our team should you have any questions about starting or running a business in China or Hong Kong..

Click here to speak with us.