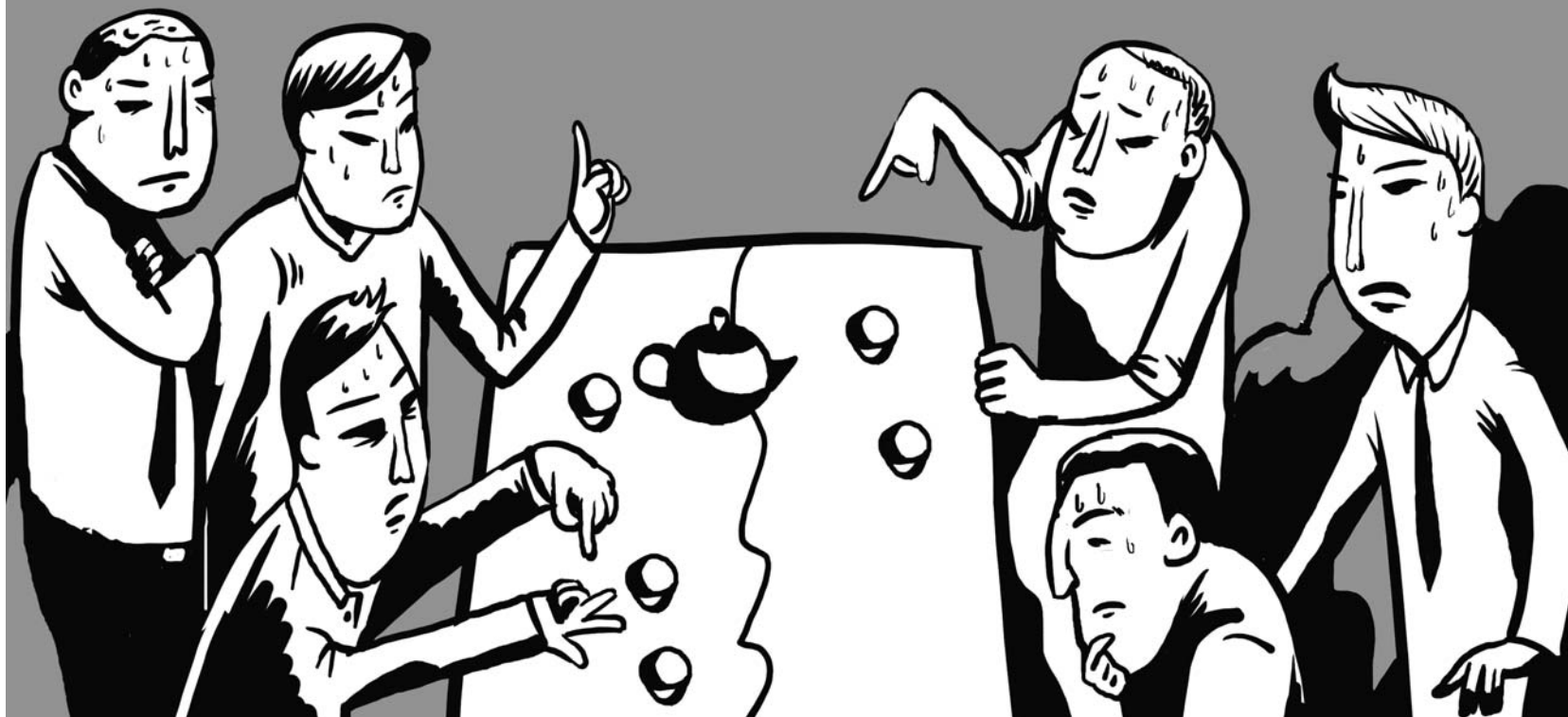


How to tear up a tearoom at lively debating club



ZHANG CHENGLIANG / CHINA DAILY

METRO learns what it means to squabble like a British Parliamentarian at Beijing Debate Society

By WILLIAM AXFORD
FOR CHINA DAILY

A typical Chinese tearoom usually invokes visions of relaxing conversation among gentle people. But on Thursday nights in the back room of the Runqiyuan Teahouse, one can hear fierce conversation going on between Beijingers.

It may seem like a cause for alarm until one realizes it's just a typical meeting for the Beijing Debate Society, where members learn how to be persuasive and analytical.

"Debating is a fundamental skill for careers like management," said American Charles Dirrig, one of the founders of the Beijing Debate Society.

"Debating helps build confidence. Half the time, people aren't listening to you when you talk to them. Even if you

said something, they may not have been understood. In this case, you start to blame yourself."

The society isn't about changing people's opinions — it focuses more on public speaking and critical thinking, offering a chance to improve any Beijinger's social skills. Dirrig compared it to a basic logic course in college, where students are taught fallacies and what makes good arguments.

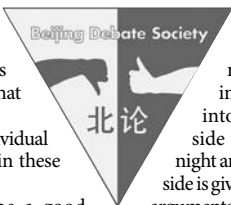
Kurt Sun is one such individual who sees potential value in these meetings.

"I thought it would be a good chance to meet people who like to debate," he said during his first session. "I've never been to a debate before, but it seems like it can be a good social skill for meeting people."

Sun also sees the society as a sound opportunity to improve his English, since he is a native Chinese.

Dirrig said that all Beijingers are welcomed to join the society, noting that perspectives from another culture makes debating more interesting.

"Perfect English isn't a prerequisite. If the idea is passed by, that's all that's needed. The debate is not focused on enunciation, just the ideas that are presented."



The Beijing Debate Society is structured around the parliamentary style of debating, which involves splitting members into two parties where one side defends the topic of the night and the other attacks it. Each side is given a chance to present their arguments and attack the other side's ideas. The debate ends with a rebuttal from each team, after which a judge decides which team was more effective.

"Debating involves a set of 'soft skills,'" said Preston Rhea, another founding

member of the society. "It's very hard to speak in front of 100 or more people. Speaking in front of six to eight people is much easier. Debating is one of the best things one can do to improve public speaking."

One of the most challenging things for members of the society is developing their arguments within 15 minutes. For added measure, topics are decided right before the 15 minutes, which doesn't allow people to research the subject before brainstorming their speeches.

"It makes you think on your feet," said Dirrig. "You can't Google or Wikipedia everything you say. The time limit forces you to framework, weaving around ideas. You create sentences on the fly around a limited time."

All members are judged during the debate as if they were in a tournament. Dirrig usually acts as the judge, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of every member. From the arguments presented to the body language used by the speaker, criticisms are given in

IF YOU GO

Address: Runqiyuan Teahouse, 65 Andingmen Dongdajie
Opening Hours: 8 pm to 10 pm every Thursday

an objective manner so that every participant can improve. A team is then chosen as the winner, concluding the night's activities.

Sun found the encounter enjoyable and said he would be back next week, where he hopes that his skills will improve with each meeting.

"It was fascinating and spectacular. The speeches were very striking. Debating exposed my weak points, which taught me that I should practice my thinking during a speech."

Any Beijinger who is looking to meet new friends and improve their social skills is encouraged by the society to come out to at least one meeting — chances are it'll be the one of the most interesting conversations heard in a usually quiet teahouse.



PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Top: A group listen anxiously as the topic of the evening is read out to them. **Bottom:** A bottle of beer sits patiently as a pair of debaters put together their case. **Right:** Charles Dirrig, organizer of the Beijing Debate Society, expresses his summary of the night's entertainment.