Import Business Guide

FREE CHECKLIST

First Import from China: The Checklist I Follow

I import from China on Alibaba as a **private individual in Portugal, with no company**. This is the checklist I follow on every order, from the first search to the box at my door. Every step comes from my own orders. Tick the boxes as you go.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Search with filters	Shortlist 3–5 suppliers	Clear first message	Sample first	Pay with Trade Assurance	Production: 3–4 days	Agent in China sends photos	DDP by sea: ~1.5 months

How my last order went (200 hinges and 150 handles, September 2026): no quality problems, no delays, no bill at the door.

1 Before you search

- [ ] **You don't need a company.** I import as a private individual and hired my own shipping agent myself.
- [ ] **Write down exactly what you want:** type of product, material, size, use, style and the customer you have in mind. It takes five minutes and makes every next step easier.
- [ ] **Think about shipping now, not last.** On my first order (50 phone chargers), shipping and VAT added almost as much as the chargers cost. The product price is almost never the real cost.
- [ ] **Plan for the wait.** By sea, my orders take about a month and a half door to door.

Read: How I Import from China as a Private Individual (Step by Step)

2 Choosing a supplier

- [ ] **Use specific keywords**, e.g. “soft close cabinet hinge”, not “hinge”. Reuse the words good listings use, try synonyms, and try image search.
- [ ] **Turn on the filters: Verified Supplier**, **Trade Assurance** and **MOQ** (then price range, once you know what normal looks like). That's how I found my own hardware supplier.
- [ ] **Don't trust the first listings** or the cheapest price. If one supplier is far cheaper than everyone else, ask why.
- [ ] **Don't be impressed by Gold Supplier.** It's a paid membership, not a quality check.
- [ ] **Open the supplier profile:**
  - what was actually verified
  - years active (3+ is a decent baseline)
  - response rate (above 80% is good)
  - reviews: enough of them, with detail, spread over time
  - a focused product range; manufacturer or trading company
- [ ] **Shortlist 3–5 suppliers.** Note the link, price range and MOQ, badges, years and reviews, and anything unclear.

Read: How to Search Properly on Alibaba · Alibaba Badges Explained

3 Your first message

- [ ] **Message all 3–5 suppliers on your shortlist**, not just one. Comparing replies is the easiest way to decide.
- [ ] **Be specific:** link the listing, name the model, size, material or colour, give an estimated quantity and say where it's going.
- [ ] **Ask the key questions:** MOQ, price for your quantity, sample, production time, customisation, payment methods.
- [ ] **Using your own agent? Say so early.** Ask for the EXW price and the cost of delivery to your agent's warehouse in China (mine was 5 USD).

> A FIRST MESSAGE YOU CAN COPY
>
> Hello, I'm interested in this product: [link or model].
>
> I'm a small buyer in [your country]. I'd like to know your MOQ, sample availability, production time and customisation options.
>
> My estimated quantity is [number]. Could you send me your price for this quantity on EXW terms?
>
> I use my own shipping agent in China. What would delivery to my agent's warehouse cost?
>
> Thank you.

Red flags in the reply: vague or copy-paste answers, ignoring half your questions, pressure to move fast, and above all **asking you to pay outside Alibaba**.

Read: How to Message Suppliers on Alibaba: What to Write and What to Ask

4 Sample first

- [ ] **Order a sample before the main order.** I did this with my hardware supplier.
- [ ] **Check it in your own hands** before you buy in quantity.
- [ ] **Confirm in the Alibaba chat, in writing:**
  - exact product, quantity and price
  - terms (e.g. EXW) and what the price includes
  - production time and packaging
  - delivery address: your agent's warehouse

5 Paying safely

- [ ] **Pay through Alibaba's checkout**, so Trade Assurance covers the order. I pay by card.
- [ ] **Never** pay by a bank transfer sent by email or through a chat app.
- [ ] **Check Trade Assurance is active** on the order before you pay.
- [ ] **Write down the production time.** Mine was about 3–4 days; yours may be longer.

Read: Why I never skip Trade Assurance

6 Shipping: my own agent + DDP

- [ ] **Find an agent through recommendations** from people who already import, then compare a few quotes.
- [ ] **Ask how the commission works.** Mine is a fixed fee, so I know it in advance.
- [ ] **Ask what's included:** taxes and duties, delivery to your door, extra fees (I had a remote-area fee), and a tracking code.
- [ ] **Give the supplier your agent's warehouse address in China.** The agent takes it from there.
- [ ] **Ask the agent for photos.** Mine opens the order, photographs the goods and waits for my OK before anything leaves China.
- [ ] **Always ship DDP** (Delivered Duty Paid): taxes and duties included, customs handled, no bill at the door.
- [ ] **Follow the tracking code** until it's at your door.
- [ ] **Sea or air?** Sea cost me about **€2.73/kg** (~1.5 months door to door); air was about **€7–8/kg**. Weight matters as much as the rate.

Read: How I Ship My Alibaba Orders with My Own Shipping Agent · What Is DDP Shipping?

7 Landed cost check (before you pay)

- [ ] **Goods:** unit price × your real quantity, not the lowest price in the range.
- [ ] **Delivery inside China** to your agent's warehouse.
- [ ] **International shipping:** rate per kg × estimated weight.
- [ ] **Taxes and duties:** included with DDP; without DDP, add them yourself.
- [ ] **Every extra fee:** remote-area fee, agent commission, anything else on the quote.
- [ ] **Convert to one currency and divide by the number of units.** Then compare with what people actually pay where you'll sell. My rule: if the selling price isn't at least double the landed cost, the product is risky.

My September 2026 order: 200 hinges + 150 handles, 32 kg	Cost
Goods (EXW price): 216 USD	≈ €190
Express delivery to my agent's warehouse in China (5 USD)	€4.41
Sea shipping, DDP: €2.73/kg × 32 kg	€87.36
Remote-area fee	€14.77
Agent commission (fixed fee)	€24.00
Landed cost for 350 pieces (a little over €0.90 per piece)	**≈ €321**

Getting the goods from the factory to my door added close to 70% on top of the goods, even with cheap sea shipping.

Read: How to Calculate If an Alibaba Product Is Worth Importing

Importing into the UK? A few quick notes

I import into Portugal, not the UK. The China side is the same; only the border changes. Summary of the official GOV.UK guidance for Great Britain:

- **£135 rule:** up to £135 per consignment, UK VAT is charged at the point of sale. Above £135, import VAT (and possibly Customs Duty) is due before delivery.
- **VAT is usually 20%.** Check your product's duty rate on the UK Trade Tariff.
- **Shipping DDP?** Ask your agent to confirm in writing that UK VAT and duty are included.

Read my UK guide · gov.uk: tax and duty on goods sent from abroad · UK Trade Tariff

Import Business Guide: importing from China to Europe, from a real importer. More guides at importbusinessguide.eu.
This checklist shares my own experience as a private importer. It isn't legal or tax advice, and prices, fees and rules change, so always check before you order.