

**THOUGHTS ON CULTURAL AWARENESS,
COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND VOCABULARY
FOR INTERNATIONAL AND CHINA FOCUSED BUSINESS
DEALS AND EXCHANGES IN THE CONTEXTS
OF A COMPLEX GLOBAL SYSTEM AND THE BELT
AND ROAD INITIATIVE: ILLUSTRATED BY PERSONAL
STATEMENTS WRITTEN BY ECUPL STUDENTS**

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Abstract: Global business and other activities of Chinese enterprises and stakeholders have been increasing in number, variety and significance – against the backdrop of the crucial importance and attractiveness of the Chinese market for MNCs and new actors from BRI countries, and overall ever more interconnected and complex global environment (further complicated by the pandemic and various other developments in the past years) and also influenced by landmark initiatives such as 17+1 (which constantly evolved) and the Belt and Road – of high importance to China but somewhat of a mystery to non-Chinese stakeholders. Communicating internationally in English in ways that achieve intended objectives is crucial but often affected by the widespread use of cliches and expressions that are not optimized to “speak” to the intended audience. Beyond examples from my practice, Chinese publications in English and foreign publications about Chinese business activity and the Belt and Road Initiative and identifying key differences between them, the negative outcomes they lead to, pointing out some communication and culture gaps and propose some solutions, I also look at straightforward primary examples – the Personal Statements prepared by over 200 ECUPL seniors.

Keywords: China, BRI, Misconceptions, Diversity, Business, Cliches, Cultural Issues.

China related matters have never been covered in foreign media as much as in recent years, and also, there has never been as much effort on part of Chinese media to produce international related content and content targeting western viewers. and there has never so far been as much Chinese media in English and targeting international audiences. Coverage in general and professional publications has increased but to the general non-Chinese public China and its complexities are not of immediate interest – and there is little incentive for media outlets to produce balanced/comprehensive China content – the casual China watcher lacks the tools to critically evaluate news and stories from and about China – and does not have the skills to ask

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the right questions in business situations. This is a problem which is exacerbated by lack of “vocabulary” for successful communication between Chinese and foreign parties and by differences in expression styles and patterns that need to be the focus of closer attention, so that any communication can be approached with awareness for the potential pitfalls.

China is the world’s most populous nation, the second biggest economy, one of the top recipients of FDI, the major source of outbound tourists and an engine of global developments and initiatives. Its increasingly proactive role in various processes, from technological developments, financial instruments to entertainment, paired with its market size and overall “power” (soft and otherwise) has led to new levels of urgency in bridging the gaps in knowledge when it comes to China, the need to build an effective vocabulary and communication toolbox and models to move forward in an increasingly interconnected (if not “globalized”) world. To give an example regarding one of the aforementioned sectors, in the past few years preceding the pandemic, China has been the fourth most visited country in the world (after France, Spain and the USA) – with 2019 data showing about 140 million leisure trips to China. China is also the biggest source of outbound international tourists – about 134 million such trips were taken by Chinese travelers last year. The domestic market is equally impressive – about 5.5 billion leisure trips within China were reported by tourism authorities for 2019¹. The pandemic obviously affected all that – but there are indications that a return to “normal” at least in tourism context is imminent.

China is also communicating for the first time with nations and consumers beyond the usual – for the last 15 or so years its more hands-on investment and international activities have increasingly diversified in type and in terms of target jurisdictions. Beyond the “black box”² of political decision making and considerations attributed to China, the need to effectively communicate so as to achieve desired results is evident – i.e., slip-ups and “mistakes” naturally will continue to play a role in international exchanges, but they should be limited to deliberate ones.

Buzzwords when it comes to China and the world also paint a picture that indicates the potential danger zones – in a world that is not moving toward the idea of shared values, yet is exceedingly interconnected (as clearly and unfortunately illustrated by the pandemic of 2020 – its spread showing levels of travel never seen before, and the constraints present when it came to nations, international organizations and other actors to communicate and work meaningfully together without resorting to literal name calling).

The not-so-Chinese living in interesting times cliché does nicely pairs with the also not-so-Chinese idea that the word for crisis contains both danger and opportunity – an opportunity to reset and redesign communication and reduce and minimize cultural deadweight going forward.

The factors even before the pandemic fall into the natural categories of objective (external to the main actors) and subjective, or actor created. They included the idea of

¹ <https://www.statista.com/topics/1210/tourism-industry-in-china/>

² <https://www.policyforum.net/inside-the-black-box-of-chinese-policy/>

technology and exchanges, population growth and (man-made) or otherwise climate change creating a “New Normal” era, which came with the awareness that desirable outcomes are harder to come by, opportunities need to be maximized and that image and perception more important than ever before. In relation to China, it is true that China is “foreign” to most westerners, mass interest is often random and there is no basis for critical thinking on China. Often westerners “fetishize” selected elements of Chinese culture – such as traditional practices. As a result, non-specialized media coverage does not allow for informed business decision making in relation to China and there is ample space for “demonization” of the country (the focus and topic of my 2008 Fudan University MA graduation thesis – since then the context has changed, but the core of the issue remains present).

The Belt and Road Initiative represents China taking center stage on attempted own terms – but yet again, lots of blank spaces and blind spots exist, despite demonstrated willingness of various stakeholders to harness and take advantage of the momentum. Moving forward, especially after pandemic limitations and special measures have ended, restarting and rebuilding should take into account these historic deficiencies and focus on the areas of tourism and education – where exchanges are less politically colored and are economically feasible, with faster payoff than other alternatives such as infrastructure, innovation and technology exchanges and investments. If nothing, the pandemic years has emphasized how communication and media coverage are more important than ever. The segmentation and compartmentalization in relation to China, and the lack of opportunity for various stakeholders and opinion leaders to exchange and work together are key issues for China related exchanges underperforming. After a number of years of Going Global, a less cohesive initiative than the BRI, as well as various regional initiatives such as China and Central and Eastern Europe 17+1, establishment of Free Trade Zones, various exhibitions and platforms, calls for general innovation and technological leadership, regardless of strong central planning and control and the ability to plan longer term, Chinese assets are located overseas, and that further complicates communication and the room for miscommunication going forward. The deals that get the most attention are not among those representing the majority of deals – many succeed or fail without strong media interest, but communication is still key for their success or lack thereof, with the caveat that particularly unsuccessful communication and “hot topics” get disproportionate attention.

To outline the China stakes, even after the pandemic brought virtually any activity with an international element to significant disruption, however despite years of calls for reciprocity and a rise in US–China tensions and a slowing economy in 2019, according to the AmCham Shanghai 2020 China Business Report American businesses in China remained profitable, with 78.2% of companies reporting profits, marginally ahead of recent years. US companies remain committed to the China market, with 78.6% of companies reporting no change in their investment allocations, a 5.1 percentage point increase compared to 2019. The vast majority – 70.6% do not intend to shift production out of China. The EU Cham 2020 Position Paper called for increased market access, but also indicates that European companies by and large remain committed to China market.

With just some of the stakes, factors and considerations enumerated above, it is imperative to think about effective communication. There is an axiom of international business that when you are selling, you need to speak the language of the buyer, and when buying, you have every right to expect the seller to speak yours. Thus, “vocabulary” becomes key, and awareness about its importance is among the first step toward achieving fruitful communication and desired business outcomes.

“Vocabulary” issues and expression patterns are illustrated by the following two texts:

- “Beijing is a large and beautiful city. It is the capital of our ... motherland. (...) Tiananmen Square is in the center of the city. The monument to the people’s Heroes is at the south of the square. On either side of the square there is a magnificent building. One of them is the Great Hall of the people. It is one of the best and largest buildings in Beijing. Beijing is advancing vigorously. Many modern factories are springing up. Beijing is not only the political and cultural center of our country, but also an industrial city. The people all over the country love Beijing.”

- “Shanghai – an interesting city. Shanghai is in the east of China. It is an international city. Shanghai is famous for its night views. It is one of the largest cities in the world. (...) People’s square is known as the center of shanghai. If you go there you will see a huge open area with green grass, trees, fountains and pigeons. There are many new buildings around the square. You will find Shanghai grand theatre and Shanghai museum there.”

The similarities are evident – in style, wording, rhythm, content and depth. The former comes from a 1968 Cultural Revolution Era English textbook, and the latter from a middle school textbook currently in use in Shanghai public schools. Over 50 years between them, the texts “normalize” a stilted, suboptimal expression patterns that are unfortunately also present the works of my students from leading Chinese universities.

Here are some examples from the personal statements of over 200 juniors and seniors from a Top 5 law school in China – East China University of Political Science and Law. The instructions given were to produce a personal statement for further study (which most students end up using ultimately, as the vast majority continue their studies post undergrad). I asked the students to write memorably, to “sell themselves” and try to stand out. Against these instructions, they did not fully deliver.

- “Chinese culture is broad and profound”
- “The Chinese nation possesses a noble character and infinite wisdom”
- “dictatorship is an insurmountable fortress of ideology”
- “the prestigious faculty, distinguished students and distinctive university make the law school exceptional” (multiple examples)
- “I am a timid and shy girl” (multiple examples)
- “I want to gain professional knowledge and broad understanding of some core areas of business”
- “to prepare for the ferocious job market in China, I self-studied...”
- “studying ... will add wings to the realization of my career goal”

- “although I suffered from exhaustion, I could ultimately taste the joy of overcoming what you have been afraid of”
- “take a deep breath, summon every ounce of courage and look straight ahead”
- “I want to expand my vision, enrich my life and realize my desire to achieve the values of life”
- “My undergrad study was fruitful and colorful” (multiple examples)
- “A wise professor told us a golden saying”
- “The important phenomena of political, economic and social life”
- “The cutthroat competition, we were acquisitive, aggressive and very ambitious”
- “My intense passion for the law developed in my childhood when I became extremely fascinated by its charm”
- “I unconsciously cultivated my sympathy for the vulnerable and a sense of impartiality and justice”
- “I got to know some basic cardiac surgery for the first time”
- “I boast intellectual maturity that helps in whatever I do”
- “in high school I realized my prospects were dim while the road was full of twists and turns”
- “I am a person with great patience, ample creativity and persistence ... – I firmly believe in “no pain, no gain”
- “I am nervous and worried because the future is unpredictable”
- “Mature educational technologies and advanced information will help me achieve remarkable academic success
- “Literature is a rigorous subject I am intensely attracted to”
- “Everyone is subconsciously a part of the media world”
- Education is “fruitful” or “colorful” (virtually all)
- The Steve Jobs dots metaphor (i.e., relating different moments in one’s lifetime) – present in almost 10% of papers

The issues in expression as shown above I summarize in the following ways – expressions are often conclusory – rarely “evidence based” or developed enough; there is little depth to the content, pointless information is common; the style is either bland and lifeless or inappropriately dramatic and emotional; needless evaluations are common; the content lacks “special effects” or originality that sell the message and/ or engage the reader. The biggest issue I identify is the prevalence of clichés – of various origin, from inappropriately translated Chinese slogan-like language to “prepackaged” expressions out of context from English books or movie and TV shows in English. It is also worth emphasizing that more abstract terms that are often used give people of different backgrounds varying associations – thus terms such culture(文化), innovation (创新), entrepreneurship (创业), tradition (传统), culture and tourism as combined in the Chinese word(文旅), internationalization (国际化), “universal/ global” (全球化), diversity (多样化) and many others are themselves markers for blind spots and should be clearly defined in the context of each project and communication.

I would like to share an example from my own practice – I wrote two articles on China and CEE (the 17+1 initiative, key BRI region and an initiative that slightly predates the BRI), one on the annual 17+1 exhibition in Ningbo for Ningbo Daily, and the other for one of Bulgaria’s leading business publications, Manager Magazine during the first China CEE prime minister level meeting in Sofia. Both articles were requested by the publications, similar in content and summarized recent exchanges in business, investment and trade, based on my practice and interviews with various stakeholders. Both of my original headlines had to do with disappointing progress but persisting optimism. Ningbo Daily ran their version of the article under the headline “The exhibition in the eyes of a foreigner” (said foreigner was mostly impressed by Ningbo after the editorial intervention) and Manager Magazine’s headline was “Who will grab the big Chinese money”. There isn’t very much nuance or interest to go beyond the basics on both sides, which causes missed business opportunities and wrong understanding about China at a time when there are higher than before opportunities within the market for SMEs from “non-traditional” for China countries and the global stakes are also very high.

My experience in consulting in China shows that there are real world negative consequences as a result – and due to the lack of context or critical thinking, both positive and negative reporting results in negative business outcomes.

Outcome 1 – negative type stories without context lead to unreasonable business behavior – businessmen often become victim to fraudsters or dishonest business partners by accepting that bribery (often made up) is the norm in China – stories about corruption in China are common in western publications and clients have fallen victim to those – they accept from Chinese partners unreasonable requests that they wouldn’t otherwise entertain (e.g. we are buying from you but to get your money on time we need to split the bribe for the bank and no, you have to wire your part in advance of the transaction). Commercial fraud is not exclusive to China but the narrative of China being “unknowable” and the business environment being uniformly corrupt, seems to allow Chinese fraudsters to get away with more. Another aspect of that type of coverage is that some businesses “expect the worst” and don’t take steps such as registering their IP before attempting to develop their presence in China – “what is the point, everyone knows China is horrible with IP rights” – however China is not horrible with IP rights as long as you have treated your own IP with “respect” in a “first to file” jurisdiction like China. A more balanced approach that does not focus on the most negative (and often rare) business practices perpetuates them for the reasons above. (Could give a couple of examples from practice)

Outcome 2 – overly positive coverage of deals sometimes causes businessmen/entrepreneurs to be overly optimistic and to invest unwarranted resources in trying to develop China market opportunities – e.g. importing a large quantity of products to a FTZ because similar products have had (supposed) success and there is an urgency in relation to China. This is also a self-perpetuating trap – as it seems that other similar brands have been successful, many SMEs do not wish to be compared unfavorably, and while a few trips to China might all be disappointing, with each

next visit they become less likely to share their “failure”, presenting it instead as a success – both out of pride and because they also come to understand that much information doesn’t “travel”. SMEs in many of the “emerging” for China partner countries lack the toolbox for critical reading of reports about China success stories – and these might be the only stories in Chinese English language media, and in foreign media after high level meetings and summits in relation to China (in Eastern Europe for example after each such event deals are announced that are in the range of billions of euros and it is politically useful to report (non binding) MOUs as done deals). Within the region (CEE) that’s made even worse by the “competition” between the countries in the region – each feels like the others are getting better deals and more opportunities and businesses put pressure on government agencies to “deliver” China opportunities. The governments often find it easier to deliver and recycle stories about those. Again, as China is not of high importance to the general readers of such countries, media reports by and large just “go” with the government “version” – instead in countries that claim that cooperation with China is a priority (like many of the CEE 17), media representations should give local businesses the tools to ask the right questions and evaluate information – and also the ability to pinpoint when professional support is needed.

The issues and examples listed above are a part of larger media, communication and business and investment decision making study and are by no means exhaustive – they aim to mostly highlight the issues. The media aspect is particularly complex, also due to many other issues beyond the scope of this paper – such as access to various platform, social media habits, political considerations and lack of diversity in the teams creating content. Just to mention two recent examples of advertising campaigns backfiring – the Dolce and Gabbana commercial featuring a model eating pizza with chopsticks commercial annoyed the Chinese publics as being disrespectful and cost the brand cancellations, delays and losses. A Chinese washing powder commercial around the same time featured a dark skinned, potentially African man, being washed with the detergent and coming out of the washing machine a different, light skinned person. One has to hope that if the teams that made such decisions were diverse, these wouldn’t have been possible.

A balanced and useful for business decision making portrayal of China would not only be beneficial for all stakeholders – the opposite is dangerous and leads to conflict and economic losses. While contemporary media does not necessarily identify as an “interpreter” of cultural differences or a bridge builder, usefulness of the information should be of some concern. Western media, especially in countries with business communities aspiring to expand their China exchanges should develop strategies to highlight a balanced view on opportunities and business difficulties. Chinese media should overcome its deficiencies and self-censorship when it comes to foreign focused content – even in English language publications and TV productions targeted toward western audiences meaningful non-Chinese input is lacking and the content often does not “speak” to foreign audiences.

Stakeholders should work on identifying and remedying unintended gaps in understanding and being selected about where their China information is sourced. That can be achieved by relying on focused / industry reports, sourcing customized information from reputable sources and making sure they are informed enough to ask the right questions.

Rediscovering our shared history, culture and exchanges is a faster way to find common ground and foster understanding, thus promoting tourism, trade, investment and other exchanges – i.e. Festivals are where a lot of our shared history, traditions and culture is found. Relating to and “liking” a place is a prerequisite for developing deeper and business ties with it.

Managing communication might sometimes mean minimizing culture – and while “innovation” has been a buzzterm for the last few years, especially in China, the most important innovation at this stage should communication related – i.e. discovering new and feasible ways to learn from each other’s best practices and (sometimes, when applicable) success stories, understanding differences in business culture and being flexible in doing so. Innovation can also be telling an old story in a new way or to a new audience, and in such context, taking advantage of proper cliches in creative ways can be a sound foundation for actionable branding of projects, locations, products and destinations.

Xi Jinping himself has in general directed state media to do more to “enable the world to see a multidimensional and colorful China.” While that has not meaningfully happened yet, approaching the issues at hand with awareness and creativity could minimize the potential for misunderstandings and losses.

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