

Chinese officials take on media challenges

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Editor's Note:

Despite China's growing economic power, it continues to be viewed with mistrust by many countries in the West. How can China sell its image better? What lies at the root of its communication difficulties? Sameh El-Shahat (El-Shahat), president and co-founder of China-I Ltd, which advises Chinese government departments and State-owned companies on implementing the right communication strategy, talked to Global Times (GT) reporter Lu Jingxian, on those issues.

GT: What do you see as the biggest challenges to China's communication attempts?

El-Shahat: China has grown so much in the last 30 years, but for a long time Chinese people were sometimes too busy growing their country to consider the effect China has on the outside world and how that world sees them. What shocked us is just how badly China was seen.

According to Western wisdom, China as it is should not exist because Communism has no place in the world. But this country actually is creating a system which has provided quality of life. It is a country that in many ways is defying stereotypes.

In the case of China, you are dealing with something horrible called the China bias. The China bias is overwhelmingly part racism, part envy, and part fear on the part of the West. However it has also been in small part Chinese passivity in action. This is now changing.

Your government has recognized this image deficit as a serious problem and is dedicating a lot of thinking, energy and resources to public diplomacy as a way to counter this problem. This is where we come in.

GT: Besides economic growth, what else can China show the world?

El-Shahat: I was born in Egypt and moved to the UK at early age. I grew up in a region dominated by three religions, Christian, Islam and Judaism, which have always been at each others' throats. I came to China, a country with 56 ethnic groups. You also have Buddhism, Muslim, Christians and so many other groups, you have that concept of harmony. It is something you need to explain better. Otherwise it just sounds like a slogan.

China is a country where religious extremism is something people find difficult to understand.

I find this a very refreshing notion. Everywhere else in the world, religious extremism has become very widespread. Most Chinese don't understand what it means. For a long time, China has had that multicultural and multi-ethnic mix, which is a unique contribution.

The China bias says China has different values, that's untrue. The Chinese have a lot of values in common with the other people of the world.

GT: What's the central message of Chinese value in your eyes?

El-Shahat: Can you really sum up 5,000 years in one idea? There are many ideas that can come from China. There is harmony, for example, that can be explained in many different ways.

Harmony can be the opposition of extremism. It can be that group interest still matters that it's not about pure individualism. Harmony can be the nature of your foreign policy. Yet China, which doesn't have an army occupying a foreign country, is seen as aggressive.

At the same time, the US army is in a lot of countries, but the US is seen as "protecting their freedoms."

Odd? No. That's because many people in the world have bought into the idea, true or not, that US values are universal.

The US makes a better emotional connection. Put differently, the US has a better brand. So China needs a good brand. When your brand is not strong, all sorts of problems happen. For a start your good actions can backfire. So every time China tries to reassure the West by saying it is not a threat, it has the opposite effect, because the message hasn't been packaged well. It's like every time I see you, I tell you I am not a threat. What would you think? If you already don't like me, you won't believe me. What you say and how you are heard become disconnected.

The West overreacts, but sometimes China spends too much time worrying about the reaction of others.

China then ends up reacting to this overreaction. Our work is to help Chinese entities, government and corporate, build strategies for communications. Otherwise, most Chinese reactions would seem knee jerk.

We create such strategies, and in doing so we help China connect with foreigners more efficiently.

The Chinese message is a good one. We help package it to suit the values of the audience.

GT: Some of the messages are difficult to get across. How do you manage that?

El-Shahat: We like to talk of the "empty chair syndrome." In many cases with Western media the Chinese official view is not represented. Many Chinese officials are worried about being ambushed by the Western media.

I don't blame them. In China, foreign officials get a much better treatment from the Chinese media. Chinese culture is different, and they are welcoming. Chinese officials, on the other hand, face the China bias. But if you don't sit in the chair and participate in the discussion, somebody else will, and chances are that person doesn't really like you that much and won't represent your view. But once you fill in that chair, you can build a full range of sophisticated weapons for taking control the situation.

Putting somebody in that chair is the hardest thing. I tell Chinese officials, "Don't be scared by the media, you can use it."

GT: Do you see some changes?

El-Shahat: Yes, and I commend the Chinese government for taking the initiative. I see more and more Chinese officials getting out. Just by turning up you score points.

The vast majority of the Western audience doesn't know much about China. They are waiting to be given the good news that is in China. When they see Chinese officials speak their own language, that's already a victory. The more you do it, the better you get at it. In a way it is the confidence that China needs. You sit down and have the confidence to tell people, "I'm Chinese, I'm just like you. I am all right." That's the big difference.

So you have somebody like the Dalai Lama for example. In the absence of a targeted Chinese message, he manages to get away with many untruths. A good Chinese message would unmask him. But if the message is not presented well enough, then it plays into his hands, and the West falls more in love with this guy.

He is very clever with his public image, and he manages it well. On Western media, you never see his real political and angry side.

Instead what you see is a carefully cultivated image of a gentle old priest talking about peace. So the West forgets that he is not only a king, but also a priest and a god all in one, something which people in the West would strongly object to. That's the kind of packaging China should match.

China has nothing to hide. Just use logic and don't be defensive. Being defensive, you lose an argument you should really win.

GT: Will China face more difficulties with its international image?

El-Shahat: As China grows, it will be increasingly seen as a threat by a world used to an old status quo where China doesn't really feature.

The more China speaks with a confident voice, the more it creates targeted messages, the more successfully it will fight the China bias. China deserves its rightful place in the world. The time for effective communication is now.

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