

Cultural comfort zone leaves China in cold

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Illustration: Liu Rui

I have followed with great interest the work of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party. It was the first time that the sensitive issue of culture was discussed in a plenary session since 1966. China is gradually coming around to the idea that it should take a more active role in addressing its image issues. For the last three decades, China's conversation with the world has mostly been carried out in economic terms. Almost all foreigners live in homes filled with Chinese made products, yet the vast majority know very little of the culture of the soon-to-be world's biggest economy. China's international influence has not been commensurate with its economic might because it has been shy about exporting its values. China should therefore actively promote its values abroad if it wants to be heard and taken seriously.

China should be careful not to stay too much in its cultural comfort zone. Chinese politicians and people are right to be very proud of their Chinese traditional arts and cultural exports such as artifacts and acrobatics, but their positive impact on foreigners may be levelling off. Many foreigners, especially in the West, have been able to compartmentalise traditional China, which they see as safe and quaint, from modern China which they see as incomprehensible and threatening. At the most simple level, many Westerners who dislike China have never had a problem eating Chinese food. Equally, international exhibitions of Xi'an's terracotta soldiers have always sold out but they have not made China's real soldiers of the PLA more appreciated as vanguards of peace and harmony. Too much traditional Chinese culture export may mean that Chinese authorities will be actively reinforcing outdated stereotypes about China. What foreigners want to see more of is modern China with all its imperfections too.

Most foreigners cannot relate to China because they cannot relate to ordinary Chinese people, imagining them fitting simplistic stereotypes such as objects of pity living in a harsh and brutish society, or guardians of ancient oriental wisdom, or rich commercial predators. Foreigners need to see contemporary Chinese and realize how similar they are to people in London, Cairo or Santiago. Only then will China become less threatening.

Officials should bear in mind that no government initiative can have full control on China's international image. I know that within China there is always a temptation to try to overly finesse situations to create the most pleasing impression possible of China. Abroad, the fate of your image is in the hands of total strangers who will not appreciate overly packaged cultural products that are too managed.

China is not perfect and should not try to present an image of itself which is too rosy, for that often backfires. Exporting culture will be about having the confidence of sharing the Chinese experience with foreigners and allowing them to find those aspects of it most relevant to their life to adapt to suit their taste. These may not be the aspects Chinese people value most.

We should also remember that in countries such as China, the spectacular emergence of new books and publications has also succumbed to China's love of quantity. But culture is ultimately about quality. Most foreign language books printed by China are simply not produced with the suitable content, style or design to attract foreigners and satisfy their hunger for information about the world's next superpower.

Understanding the values of others more will mean producing more selective and effective promotional material where Chinese values will be transmitted not only in the language of others, but couched in their cultural terms too.

Communicating modern Chinese culture to the people of China will remain the biggest and most pressing challenge to avoid the risk of social dislocation which meteoric growth can cause. China's image can only benefit only if China gets out of its comfort zone and pulls off the odd surprise.

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