

China needs to sell its dreams to an increasingly skeptical world

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Illustration: Liu Rui/GT

While the debate about the Chinese dream continues to echo throughout the country, elsewhere in the world, more and more countries are expressing disenchantment with China.

In some places, this sentiment has been translated into the loss of major projects by Chinese companies who have invested billions in relatively friendly countries, only to see their efforts go up in smoke. Governments from Myanmar to Nigeria, Zambia to Kenya and others have been saying no to China.

I was recently in Myanmar and saw how anti-Chinese feeling has led to the cancellation of a major dam project and threatened a major mine project that is essential to the development and financial future of the people of Myanmar.

A few weeks ago, the central bank governor of Nigeria wrote in the Financial Times accusing China of behaving like a colonial power. While China talks of its dream at home, it appears to be experiencing a nightmare abroad.

Without doubt, China's trade and investment in Africa have been the biggest single positive factor in that continent's history in modern times. Some parts of Africa have still never really recovered from the effects of colonialism. Accusations by the West of neocolonialism against China in Africa reek of ignorance and anti-China bias, to say nothing of envy.

Chinese universalism was a powerful part of the country's historical legacy. Chinese intellectuals believed that adopting Confucian ideas was part and parcel of border peoples becoming Sinified, and

neighboring countries both adopted and fiercely resisted Chinese universalism.

However, that universalism is rarely seen in the country's publicity efforts today.

China suffered from occupation and exploitation at the hands of the same countries that subjugated Africa for centuries. Africans and Chinese have always shared that common bond.

Yet some of these African countries are now increasingly finding common cause with the West, home of their ex-colonizers, against China, using the same language of criticism. They are happy to take Chinese money and cheap goods, but feel more comfortable adopting Western concepts and ideas, even anti-Chinese ones.

My premise is that colonialism has been a great asset to the West because it has helped it create markets and brainwash entire swathes of the globe into buying the concept of Western superiority. The West is still reaping the unintended dividends of its colonial past. Western culture is universalist by definition. That means that it believes that its ideas apply to everyone on earth. Consequently, it has historically needed to constantly convert others, whether religiously, politically or commercially, to its cause.

Western-style capitalism is the rebranded heir of colonialism. Nowadays, the idea of white man's cultural superiority is sold with evangelical zeal to create commercial dominance rather than to invade territory. When non-Westerners spend their hard earned money on Prada or Christian Dior, they are buying into a beautiful dream that has its roots in the idea of the superiority of the West and the inferiority of the rest. It's the most powerful brand on earth. Chinese people are susceptible to it. I am not for one minute saying that colonialism was good. I am just saying that it has created a world where Western ideas will hold sway until China proposes global ideas and not just products. Until then, it is China that is at risk.

China mistakes universalism for intervention, so has historically erred on the side of caution. That was a mistake. When you are an economy as big of China, you are, whether you like it or not, already intervening in the economies and lives of billions of non-Chinese. To think otherwise is to engage in self-delusion. China covers the bodies of foreigners with clothes and fills their homes from top to bottom with appliances. With this degree of intimacy, these foreigners are entitled to ask China whether it has a dream or an idea to share with them, whether all these products and companies that China exports are part of a big vision. When they don't get an answer, they are disappointed and become disillusioned.

People across the world are increasingly united by one thought: "Is this all I am to the Chinese, a person to whom they can sell stuff to and make money from?"

People are vain, and they want to think they are important enough for you to want to convert or co-opt them. They want China to make them feel wanted, to confide in them a dream. They want China to make them feel that it is not just after their cash, even if it really is.

Instead, they see a China that is aloof, preferring to hide behind slogans like "win-win" and "mutually beneficial."

How inspiring is that? China is rejecting its own friends with its caution. China gives away roads and hospitals when people also want guidance and inspiration. Is it any surprise that there are no Chinese brands?

Brands are, at heart, ideas and promises. China offers the world neither. So Africa and Asia would rather buy into the Western promises, however insincere, because at least they exist. The world has not been familiarised with Chinese ideas. China is fighting to create brands and networks in parts of the world that are historically part of the cultural and commercial spheres of influence of the West. Armed with just the Confucius Institute, China doesn't stand a chance against the Western ideas arsenal. Just look how easily some countries have reverted back to the safety of the ideas of the West. The lack of a global vision risks undoing China's hard work and development of the last 40 years. This is because China has reached such a level of interdependence with the world that its future development no longer depends purely on its own skills. It increasingly needs others to cooperate with and buy into its view of the world. The more China acts timidly abroad, the more suspicious of it foreigners and their governments will become. And the proof is that despite its constant reassurances to the contrary, China is increasingly being seen as a threat. Put differently, China needs to inspire, and it needs to aggressively convert others to its own cause. My proposition is that it is not too late for China and its companies to become "universalist." China needs to stop being modest about its achievements, and needs to start becoming bolder with its ideas abroad to convert people to the "Chinese dream." China espousing universalist credentials does not mean China becoming the West. Far from it, China's exported vision must be unashamedly Chinese, but it should have something for foreigners to want to be part of. It must be aspirational and positive. It must also be disruptive, challenging existing given ideas in clever and unexpected ways. Chinese companies which followed the Western business model have underperformed simply because they are not Western. Customers just cannot relate to companies with no unique culture. It is time for China to adopt a universalist dream to get ahead. *The author is CEO of China-i Ltd, a risk and communication advisory company based in Beijing and London. opinion@globaltimes.com.cn*

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