

Western elite poorly convey China's values

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As Chinese President **Xi Jinping** was meeting the Queen in London, my mind wandered down memory lane.

In 1991 when I was studying at Cambridge, China was mentioned only once during my studies. It was a reference to the Battle of the Yalu River. Given that it was an international relations degree, it would be unthinkable today that China would receive so little attention in this kind of course at a major university.

Now China seemingly appears to be the biggest story in most major countries. The story at the moment is investment and the 40 billion pounds (\$62 billion) of deals that China signed with UK firms during Xi's visit.

Britain definitely needs investment and Chinese companies have shown themselves to be patient long-term investors, as well as careful stewards of British brands. The British government hopes that China will invest heavily in infrastructure and China is frankly its only hope for the substantial funds needed.

British market is more open and less regulated than those of other Western economies. This makes it the ideal home for Chinese companies.

But Britain also offers a conundrum that has become emblematic of China's "checkbook" diplomacy, as some media have called it. Chinese investment has not necessarily led to acceptance by the wider international community. British media remains very critical of China and appears, from a Chinese point of view, exasperatingly disrespectful.

Western media has always been an elite construction created to control public opinion. Western elites see China purely as a banker. Their idea of "friendship" is opportunist because they feel threatened by Chinese values and ambitions. So they manipulate public opinion accordingly. As a result, China faces increasing social risk abroad as foreign populations become more suspicious of Chinese influence and investments.

I think it's time to break the cycle. We do that by cutting out the middle man. In this case, it's the European and American elites that China spends disproportionately large amounts of resources trying to woo without much success. They've shown themselves to be unreliable gatekeepers of foreign public opinion. Let China take a leaf out of Xi's playbook and go straight to people of the world with messages and narratives that they can relate to.

Xi has always had a gift for relating to the men and women on the street and they have repaid him with affection and adulation. China's government and companies should recognize that the biggest risks to the safety of Chinese investment are China's image issues which in turn

are caused by social risks. Therefore China should spend more time and resources acquiring a social license to operate in foreign countries. Signing deals is great, but the surest way to ensure good financial returns and stable diplomatic relationships is the acquisition of social license. Namely, getting foreign public opinion to back you.

China's next five-year plan will stress the importance of quality sustainable development. In an interconnected world, sustainable development must be accompanied by sustainable communication to the people of the world. Without it, China's development will be at risk.

Social license means creating an emotional bond between foreign publics and the notion of China and its values. If foreigners respect and like China more, they're more likely to buy your brands, and less likely to be swayed by the anti-Chinese rhetoric of local politicians. China did just that recently through another successful film called *When China Met Carolina*. It depicted how China went straight to the people of South Carolina with business ideas accompanied by Chinese values and ideas that locals could relate to.

China is a wise country. It knows money cannot buy you love, even if it's the \$62 billion in deals coming from Xi's trip to the UK. However, good, clear and targeted communication with real emotions aimed at real people can earn you respect and acceptability. That's what China really needs.

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