

# Understanding through culture

By **SIR VERNON ELLIS**

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**VERNON ELLIS** is Chair of the British Council. Prior to assuming this position, in early 2010, he spent all his working life at Accenture in a number of major operational roles. He is Chairman of Martin Randall Travel and of One Medicare, and is a non-executive Director of FTI Consulting Inc. He is President of English National Opera, having been Chairman from 2006-12, and is currently Chair of the National Opera Studio. He was knighted in 2011 for services to music and in 2012 was appointed Chairman of the Arts and Media Honours Committee.

The British Council started work in China nearly 30 years ago, in a bicycle shed in Beijing. Actually it was a former bicycle shed, converted into an office to house six people. We don't work out of a bicycle shed any more – it's a distant memory, like the bicycle itself in much of urban China. Nowadays we have around 300 staff in four centres across the country, and we work with millions of Chinese people, directly and through digital media, every year.

Building trust is at the heart of what the British Council does, and the central motive of cultural relations. Trust underpins the development of good relations between societies and nations. Trust also underpins relationships which are vital for political influence and security, as well as for trade and investment.

Through the UK's three great cultural assets of English, education and the arts, we bring people together from all over the world and, on behalf of our nation, work to earn their trust and that of their communities. The British Council's record in China is the result of a long-term commitment to the country: being on the ground, engaging, taking the time to understand the environment, the people, and their way of doing things.

You may remember the HSBC advertising campaign of a few years back – 'The World's Local Bank' was the slogan – in which a grasp of local culture and custom proves to be the key to clinching the deal. It was a good advert, because it told an important truth. It showed the reason that cultural relations precedes, accompanies, and in some cases outlives every other sort of nation-to-nation engagement.

Today there is probably no country where that work of engagement is more essential than China.

I haven't been with the British Council for quite as long as thirty years: I became Chair of the organisation in April 2010. My first visit to China in my British Council role was in November of that year, as part of the Prime Minister's delegation to the country. It was a great opportunity for me to see our work on the ground, and also for the Prime Minister and other ministers to see it at first hand.

Large-scale delegations to a country can achieve three things in the short term. They make a statement about the seriousness of the UK's engagement; they

provide a platform for leader-to-leader dialogue – both public and private; and they can provide a stimulus to the completion of accords and trade agreements. All these things are valuable, and they provide most of the headlines. But after the headlines, what will endure?

That depends on the depth of understanding and trust between the two countries. And beyond the immediate feel-good effect of a high-level visit, this will flow as much from social, cultural and educational links as it does from political and trade discussions. That, in a nutshell, is the argument for cultural relations. And the case for cultural relations as a method of engagement with China is exceptionally strong.

Suddenly and dramatically over the last couple of decades, we have had to recognise China's pivotal role in the global economy. But we also have come to recognise that any discussion of topics as diverse as climate change, arms proliferation, natural resources, or poverty alleviation in Africa also demands an understanding of China's position – and its participation in a solution.

China's rise has been extraordinary. It builds on a continuous 4,000 year history of cultural and economic leadership of which the Chinese people are very proud. And yet it has also emerged from 100 years of humiliation from foreign nations, followed by 30 years of socialist experimentation. Since then the dismantling of state control over many aspects of life has allowed enterprise to flourish and labour to migrate to where the work is. But this has produced huge social pressures and problems. Is it surprising that there is nervousness about letting go?

Looking ahead, China has declared that it is determined to go beyond low-cost manufacturing for export as the primary growth driver. It wants to build a knowledge economy and create a climate of innovation and creativity. But there are challenges here in a system which seeks to control and mediate access to innovation. These will reduce as trust increases.

The Chinese government also recognises the urgency of addressing some of the pressing domestic social issues. And they are pragmatic in looking for international models which can work for China, without threatening the political order. In this context, international engagement, both individual-to-individual and institution-to-institution, is fundamental to building relationships that will engender trust and understanding.

The most public event during the Prime Minister's visit back in 2010 was the official launch of the UK Now festival, the biggest ever celebration of British arts to be held in China. The Festival ran from April to December 2012 and impressively delivered nearly 200 separate events in 29 different cities across this huge country. In addition it achieved enormous reach through digital media. Two years after the launch, I returned to China and had the opportunity to see and experience some of the festival showcases for myself.

One of them was the joint British Museum/V&A/National Museum of China show: *Passion for Porcelain*. This tells a fascinating story of the interplay between China and Europe and the two-way transfers of technology, design, culture and trade. A similar interplay was on display in a cutting-edge show using fashion films. Fashion today reflects, as porcelain did in the 16th and 17th centuries, a wonderful fusion of design, cultural connections and resonances across the world, taste, branding and trade.

But I had an insight into a different sort of reach when at 7.30 on Saturday morning we went to see 887 (why just one short of the luckiest number in China?) examinees turn up at an exam centre for their IELTS test – a standard measure of English language proficiency, jointly owned and administered by the British Council. Over half a million students take this in 42 British Council centres across China each year. This requires a team of 180 full-time staff, almost 3,000 examiners and supervisors, and military precision in execution.

A different sort of reach again was illustrated by a visit to a three-day training session on Skills for Social Entrepreneurs. Since 2009, nearly 1,000 social entrepreneurs have attended this core training. The need for social enterprises and other civil society organisations is well recognised by the Chinese authorities, given the steep decline in the old welfare system that was administered through state-owned enterprises. Nevertheless, they are often regarded with some suspicion, as being possible conduits for dissent. So there is still some work of explanation and understanding to be done there, some of which I hope we will be able to provide.

Cultural relations differs from other forms of influence in that it seeks to create – as its name suggests – a relationship.

The medium of exchange is cultural, and what is created is a relationship: something that is by definition reciprocal, and hopefully long-lasting.

Much of the British Council's work in Higher Education involves supporting university exchange programmes. There are currently over 130,000 Chinese students (from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau) studying in the UK, with over 95,000 undertaking Higher Education courses. In 2012,

over 4,200 UK students came to China to undertake full-time courses or short-term programmes. The mismatch in those figures is something we should be worried about if we want to develop a relationship with mutuality at its heart; and we are working to bring them more into balance.

The reason that cultural relations typically works through language, education and the arts is that these are tried and tested ways of making an emotional connection. They create engagement in a way that the more transactional exchanges of business cannot always manage. And that is the kind of engagement that people need – wherever in the world they are.

Our two nations have very different histories, and very different scales. But they are united by a surprising amount: by trade, by global challenges, and by a shared curiosity to learn from each other.

People in large organisations often speak in abstractions. We talk about 'UK relations with China', for example, when what we really mean is encouraging engagement between individuals in the UK and individuals in China. In the end every meaningful connection comes down to the personal.

This is something for the Prime Minister and his delegation to bear in mind when they visit this endlessly fascinating nation of superlatives – and of 1.3 billion individuals. E

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Sweetmeat stand with figure of a man in Chinese dress. Modelled by J J Kändler, Germany (Meissen); ca. 1735. Purchased with the assistance of The Art Fund