

The British Council in China: cultural relations between the UK and China

Speaker: Martin Davidson, CEO

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It is a real pleasure to be here today in this amazing Museum, a tribute to the rich cultural heritage of the Three Gorges region and I would like to begin by thanking our host Director Li Xiao Long and his team for kindly allowing me to speak here today.

In discussing the cultural relationship between China and the UK it is particularly fitting that we should do so here in Chongqing, which has in many ways been pivotal to sustaining the cultural co-operation of our two countries. As it was here in 1943 that the British Council opened its first office in Mainland China, the 'Sino-British Science Cooperation Office'. The director of that office was Joseph Needham, a scientist from Cambridge, a man who developed a deep affinity with China and who made a passionate commitment to sharing with the world the work he discovered here through his volumes, 'Science and Civilisation in China'.

Later on our offices moved to Nanjing, though remained closed from 1949 to 1979. Since 1979, however, we have enjoyed a continuous presence in China as the Cultural and Education Section of the British Embassy and Consulates-General. We returned to Chongqing in October 2000 and have worked with countless individuals, institutions and organisations since then on a diverse range of programmes.

We now live in an increasingly interconnected world. People, ideas and resources move round the world faster than ever before. Global and local issues seem ever more connected, with increasing trade flows and increasing co-operation between governments worldwide. Nowhere is this more evident

than here in Chongqing, the engine room for development in South West China, and where in the last 15 years we have seen exponential growth in foreign trade and relations.

But as the means and opportunities for communicating with one another increase, does it follow that we naturally feel closer to other nations?

It is a paradox that, as globalisation brings the world closer than ever, the distance between people can feel ever wider. And this means we need to work harder to increase international understanding and bridge trust gaps in order to create harmony and prosperity for all. We also need to work together to bridge these gaps. Today I would like to talk about the British Council's approach to cultural relations, and the work of our partners around the world, including many of you here today in China, in building trust between people and nations, and in complementing the work of our governments to build trust and engagement between peoples.

The British Council's core mission is to build engagement and trust for the UK by sharing knowledge and ideas between people worldwide. Our 7,400 staff members work in 110 countries worldwide including some of the most challenging political and security environments. Here in China, as around the world, we help people access English language learning resources, broaden young people's international views and develop skills that will allow them to become global citizens. We provide opportunities for the next generation of political, social, educational, scientific and cultural leaders to come together and share knowledge and ideas.

Today, I want to outline how our approach to cultural relations seeks to address some of the major global issues we all face – including bridging gaps of trust that exist between countries and societies and achieving a global consensus on tackling climate change. And how by brokering a people to people diplomacy, we can work together to answer the challenges of the 21st century.

In today's world, states can choose from a range of foreign policy options to contribute to and shape the world. These options range from 'hard power', such as military action and coercion through to the softer diplomatic interventions such as aid and development assistance. Cultural relations represents another of these options. What makes it unique is that it delivers long-term sustainable and mutual engagement which leads to a platform for sustaining and developing long-term relationships between people and nations; relationships which are able to weather the short term differences which occasionally occur between nations. In short, it delivers trust between people.

Governments around the world have at their disposal a range of foreign policy interventions stretching from aid, development and technology transfers; traditional international diplomacy in the form of government to government treaties; and increasingly, responses that will influence foreign populations. All these are vital in responding to the issues which we face in the 21st Century, but none of these specifically aim to deliver trust between people. The issues we face now require people to work together openly and cooperatively - and in order for this to happen, you need trust. Cultural relations offers a way for individuals to work together on shared problems. It provides individuals with opportunities to get insights into societies and cultures that are different from their own. It respects the individual and gives them the skills and a platform to make their voice heard. In the 21st century diplomacy is no longer the preserve of governments alone and cultural relations provides a platform for other voices to be heard: a people-to-people diplomacy.

Cultural relations builds access to an international network of people who are able and willing to work for the good of all.

And whilst our mission and work in cultural relations has remained the same for 75 years, the way we practice this has changed considerably.

Take our work here in Chongqing for example. When we opened here in 1943, the British Council had a virtual monopoly on the cultural relationship

between the citizens of Chongqing and their counterparts in the UK. Without internet access or even easy travel connections between Chongqing and the UK, our office here provided a vital line of communication to share knowledge and ideas. And whilst we would not have sought to exert any kind of control over that relationship, as one of the few channels for cultural communication, by default we restricted the flow of information.

And even back in 2000, when we reopened our office here in Chongqing, we provided a vital service to organisations from the UK, looking to build partnerships in China. UK Universities, for example, often visiting Chongqing for the first time, sought our advice about how to start building partnerships, about who to speak to here and even about where to stay. And whilst we do still play a key role in brokering partnerships in higher education, with the increasing mobility of academics, those relationships that we brokered 8 years ago have now snowballed into numerous partnerships. Over the last two years we have seen a 28% increase in the number of students travelling from South West China to the UK to study and we now have 798 students in the UK Alumni network here in Chongqing.

Since President Deng Xiaoping's policies of economic reform and opening up, we have seen a gradual shift in China's relationship with the world, which has been reflected in the work of the British Council in China. Whereas 30 years ago when I first came to work in China, the bi-lateral relationship was based on aid, we now work in partnership, with China providing development assistance to many countries around the world. Similarly, where 30 years ago cultural exchange was largely a form of messaging, with Chinese and UK artists performing their work in each others countries, we now see artists working collaboratively in creating art which reflects the cultural diversity and rich heritage of China and the UK.

So against this backdrop, our role here, as in other countries, has changed dramatically. By working collaboratively with partners across the world to provide access to skills in English-language, teacher training, curriculum development, language and professional qualifications we create networks

that offer a vital international experience to participants: an experience which these participants are able to translate into creating a better, safer world for us all to live in.

These networks and this activity are important because many of the most pressing issues we face today require more than government-led solutions - they need action from individuals at both a local and international level. They require solutions which are brokered both by governments and by the people who live under those governments.

Take Climate change as an example:

We know that it will affect all of us. An effective response needs both mitigation, that is limiting climate change by reducing the production of greenhouse gases; and adaptation - preparing for the inevitable impacts of climate change. But more importantly it requires each of us to change our behaviours. This is where, I believe, cultural relations comes in.

Climate Change matters to organisations such as the British Council, because it matters to many of the people we work with. No more so than here in China, where the protection and preservation of the natural environment is vital to securing the future economic prosperity of the country.

Repeatedly, young people around the world tell us that climate change is one of the most important issues in their lives – and that they are not convinced that governments alone can solve the problem. We feel that we have a unique role to play to bring those young people together with global decision makers to make their voices heard – and to build an international consensus on tackling climate change.

Similarly, I believe there is a unique role for cultural relations to play in nurturing and developing artistic and cultural exchange, particularly in areas where the commercial sector believes the return to be limited. And in using

the common language of the arts to bridge the cultural divide between people, we can create a deeper understanding between people.

For example in China, we have recently worked with Artists from around the country on a project called *Sound and the City*. This project brought together musicians and sound artists to create new work inspired by the sounds that they found in four cities – Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Guangzhou. The project also invited the Chinese general public to describe their favourite sounds from the cities that they live in. Thus bringing art to the people, as Yan Jun, one of the Chinese Artists commented: “It speaks to the general public, not the selected public, instead of being proudly ahead of it’s time, it intervenes in the lives of the contemporary Chinese public; it encourages people to feel and share, rather than criticize.”

In order for cultural relations to build trust and to retain credibility with the publics it seeks to connect with it needs to operate independently of government. Here in China, we work in close partnership with the British Foreign Ministry and you will know us as the cultural and education section of the embassy, but in our strategy and operations we are independent of government. This is because the UK government had the foresight to give the British Council operational independence from the day we were established. It recognised in 1934, when our organisation was created, that our work would be over the long-term – seeking sustainable change in attitude and behaviour – and that we would be at our best when we acted in concert with, but not directed by government.

Our work focuses on enabling and harnessing the collective power of individuals to effect change in the communities in which they live. We help them work together in tackling the issues that are important to them to create a relationship with their counterparts overseas which is fundamentally a partnership of equals.

Without equal exchange there can be no effective engagement. It implies a willingness to learn as well as to teach, and to listen as well as to speak.

Without equal exchange there can be no building of genuine and lasting trust.

Advances in technology and the democratisation of communication, have also had a dramatic effect on the way we are able to do our work. I saw an astonishing statistic the other day that we will send two trillion mobile-phone text messages this year, every one with the potential to elicit a response, and start a conversation. This presents a tremendous opportunity for cultural relations to reach millions more people but also poses a difficult practical challenge. Cultural relations organisations have already started to take advantage of these communications channels by, for example, offering students bite sized language lessons by text message or by using Voice over Internet Protocol technology to put students in remote areas in contact with their teachers, an approach that we are also developing in our English programme for China.

The work of the British Council and its partners, with an emphasis on engagement and trust, maps well against this burgeoning demand by individuals to grow beyond their identity as passive user and become active contributor; to speak to the world as well as to receive others' messages.

It doesn't matter whether we achieve this through bringing contemporary British theatre to Chongqing as we did in November of last year; taking the next generation of climate activists, including a young advocate from Chengdu, to the G8 Environment ministers summit at Kobe; or through academics taking part in international exchanges, such as the those involved in the Higher Education Joint-research programme we have initiated here in China. Through such activity we have learnt that participants in these programmes, both those from the UK and those from overseas gain.

They gain an understanding of different viewpoints and come to see that mutual interest can exist alongside diversity.

They gain an appreciation of the new forces shaping our future and an understanding of how they can best contribute to and benefit from a more positive future.

Anthony Parsons, a UK academic, writing some time ago in *International Affairs*, described some of the benefits of using culture as a diplomatic tool.

‘It is really dazzlingly obvious,’ he said. ‘If you are thoroughly familiar with someone else’s language and literature, if you know and love his country, its cities, its arts, its people, you will be instinctively disposed, all other things being equal, to buy goods from him rather than from a less well known source, to support him actively when you consider him right and to avoid punishing him too fiercely when you regard him as being wrong.’

So building cultural relations is not a wholly philanthropic exercise, it delivers benefit for both the party which initiates the contact, but also for the party it seeks to make contact with and for the wider world. I see this as being wholly consistent. That one can derive benefit through giving and sharing is evidenced through our work.

Cultural relations creates lasting and effective influence – trust can change attitudes and behaviours.

For example to successfully contribute to tackling Climate Change, cultural relations needs to work in concert with the traditional government-to-government activity. We seek to influence policy makers – giving young people a platform to speak to global decision makers.

Our International Climate Champions project brought 38 young people from 13 countries, including 3 from China, to address the G8 Environment ministers on climate change, in Kobe. Ministers listened when those young people told they needed to act now. Similarly when we took young people to the World Economic Forum in Davos – they stole the show. World Leaders want to know what the world’s young people think.

We are also connecting scientists and energy practitioners to provide joint solutions to mitigate the effects of climate change.

And we are seeking to change people's behaviours by finding opportunities for publics to work to tackle climate change.

For example, we are working with Chongqing Medical University on the impact of climate change on health and the spread of diseases in a project jointly discussed with a leading expert from the UK at one of our workshops. The project aims to develop scientific awareness in the media to ensure that when they report on delicate issues such as climate change, what they report is scientifically accurate. We have also worked with partners here to set up informal café style discussions all around China to allow both scientists and non-scientists to debate the impact of science on our lives. Drawing on the knowledge of experts from our two nations standing side by side to consider, for example, the tools available to us for predicting dramatic weather conditions or looking at how we should manage our waste and our water.

And during our Climate Cool by Design Exhibition, exhibited here in Chongqing last January, by sharing some innovative ideas from the UK alongside some from China, we encouraged people to begin thinking about their individual response to the Climate Change dilemma. In doing so students were able to develop a more human understanding of a seemingly intractable global issue and understand that their individual actions can have a far-reaching effect.

Paramount in all the work that the British Council is engaged in around the world, is respect for the individual. We believe that action – and the programmes we deliver – create real and meaningful life-changing opportunities for people.

But, with 6 billion people and perhaps 8 billion by 2030 – the world is a big place and getting bigger. Can cultural relations meet the challenge of scale?

I think it can – but I don't think the British Council can or should be its sole practitioner.

We continue to work with partners to deliver scale and with individuals to deliver impact. Our partnerships are about developing international awareness and a critical understanding of how we communicate, work and live with one another. They're about giving people a voice, skills and the platform to use them to tackle issues that matter.

Over the last year our Connecting Classrooms programme linked 1 million young people in 900 schools around the world. And in China we work in partnership with Hanban to connect schools from all around China with their counterparts in the UK. This ensures that from a young age, children have the opportunity to speak to their counterparts overseas and to start to develop the kind of international awareness they need to prosper in the global job market they will enter.

Through activities such as these we engage with more than 112 million people each year and have face-to-face contact with more than 16 million.

The philosopher John Stuart Mill said: 'No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible until a great change takes place in the fundamental constitution of their modes of thought.'

It is the scientists, artists and leaders of tomorrow who will play a crucial part in encouraging the changes needed to meet the challenges the world now faces. We believe the education agenda needs to expand beyond borders. It must be about more than picking up vocational skills or expanding personal development – vital as those are.

Promoting education co-operation across borders has a unique capacity to open a channel for the changing the conversations of mankind – a way of building worldwide networks of trust between individuals that offer us potential

solutions to the great global challenges that seem to be beyond the capacities of more traditional approaches to international relations.

The global challenges we are seeking to address need individuals and communities to change their attitudes and behaviours. This is easier said than done and requires lasting interventions which continually articulate the wider benefits of our collective endeavour and redefine our collective global citizenship.

In conclusion, let me say this.

National sovereignty and power have been at the core of the broad principle used by nations to guide their actions in the international arena. But the great new global challenges, underpinned in part by new communication technologies, demand new foreign policy responses as the nature of the international relations environment has changed.

Diplomacy cannot be immune from this need to develop fresh approaches. The old Cold War command-and-control model of diplomacy is paying decreasing dividends because it does not map well against the growing desire of individuals to contribute to information flows, to be more than passive consumers of information.

The global response to the tragic earthquake in Sichuan province last year was a very good example of this. The tragedy was in China – but the world knew about it within hours, if not minutes, and their help was graciously received – under the immensely impressive coordination of local teams. That kind of response just goes to show how closely connected we really are – and the more we understand each other, the more we can be there to offer support and help when it is needed.

I am not suggesting cultural relations is a panacea to all the conundrums of modern international relations. But its emphasis on engaging overseas publics in long-term shared agendas does have real impact.

Cultural relations respects the individual. Through engagement it creates trust, and through trust, lasting influential networks are created that benefit the UK.

Cultural relations is a potent tool for more effective international relations - because to meet the global challenges we face we need the best will of the world as well as the best of our own will to find a path to a stable and inclusive future.

Thank you.