

For good Sino-US relations, the Americans must learn to listen, while the Chinese must learn to talk

PUBLISHED : Monday, 21 December, 2015, 5:33pm

UPDATED : Monday, 21 December, 2015, 5:33pm

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Tom Plate says China's government officials need to begin to speak up, and speak their minds, to foster understanding



As the influential sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas was right to lecture us: conversations continuously conducted with rationality and thoughtfulness can ferment into a kind of symphonic repertoire for the civilised polity. You learn so little by talking: only the wickedly witty Oscar Wilde could get away with claiming to prefer talking to himself on the grounds that it saves time and prevents arguments!

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That's perhaps an option for the poet or the playwright but not for the journalist; or for nations in their

interrelations. We need to talk the talk before we walk the walk. To quote Habermas: "Society is dependent upon a criticism of its own traditions." This is now as true for our global society as for any nation state; and it is definitely true of the Sino-US relationship.

Listening to others – nations as well as people – requires respect. Without it, exchanges sour into shouting matches as if between the deliberately and defiantly deaf. Respect requires humility about one's own views and modesty about the universal applicability of one's own experiences. I know I've said this before – but there are always reasons for saying it again: America will never understand China if it talks and listens only to itself.

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Sure, we have “track two” institutions (smart non-profits, heady think tanks) trying their best to engineer a two-way, 24-hour fast train to Beijing. But, overall, the project is not working well enough. Just one example: a former prime minister from Asia came to Los Angeles for a chat after an appointment-filled Washington visit. Basically depressed, he told me the American establishment will never understand the dynamics behind China’s rise as long as it’s viewing things through its usual military and adversarial periscopes. But did you not explain all this to them? “They hear but ...[he paused]... they do not listen.”

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The Chinese flag was displayed next to the US flag on the side of a building in the White House complex in Washington on the day before a state visit by Xi Jinping. Photo: AP

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Arrogance can be a substantial bar to a healthy grip on reality. Listening to others is a time-honoured method of maintaining a measure of balance between the ears – a way of getting out of one’s own head, which, as we all know, is sometimes a very strange and isolated place. All this by way of reiterating the obvious about China: if you want to understand it, you have to listen to it. But – and here’s the “but”, and it is a very big “but” – in all fairness to us in the US, it is hard to listen and learn when the other side all too often prefers not to talk.

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And, yes, I’m getting a bit steamy now on this point: when Chinese officials do decide to say something, it is usually said so long after the fact that you feel you have heard it before. China needs to open up, at the highest levels, or – I believe – it may lose out in the global civic-conversation race.

Let me explain why we should worry. Looking back on my own occasional in-depth conversations with iconic Chinese officials makes the case – to me at least – that this Chinese government ought to be doing a lot more with its VIPs. I recall one session with then vice-premier Qian Qichen (錢其琛), China’s well-respected foreign minister in the 1990s. In a Diaoyutai guest cabin in Beijing, he laid out the core elements of Chinese internationalist thinking that served as invaluable markers for me for years. Then, in a Shanghai foreign ministry office, China’s top official on cross-strait relations, Wang Daohan, offered up a riveting 90

minutes of emotional as well as intellectual context that had to be felt as well as heard. He took the listener from the depths of the Cultural Revolution to the heights of – well – the skyscrapers of Shanghai.



A journalist takes a photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping during a media conference in Pretoria, South Africa. Canned press conferences offer none of the insights that frank, in-depth interviews do. Photo: AP

journalists and media executives. Represented institutions included China Central TV, China Radio International, *People's Daily*, Sichuan Daily Group, United Media Group of Shanghai, *Worker's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency and other mainland media megastars.

The topic of our seminar was “How China’s rise is impacting its relation with regional neighbours; and China’s future as a world power’. It was a fascinating session that ended with the usual exchange of gifts. Mine were copies of the Chinese edition of my *Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew*. One journalist, noting that the book was part of the “Giants of Asia” series, asked why no mainland officials have yet been included: Is China not important – and is Singapore not so very tiny?

I answered as politely as possible: whereas Singapore and other governments reply to media requests for VIP interviews, yours

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Canned press conferences do not measure up to real deals like these. But landing such sessions is rare; worse yet, this situation doesn’t seem to be improving under the Xi Jinping (习近平) government. So when China’s top officials complain about being misunderstood, and while their complaint may well be valid, an available remedy seems not to occur to them: they should take their chances and open up. Heck, this is the globalised information age, not the Silk Road epoch of a thousand ox-carts.

Here’s another illustration: Not long ago, the much-admired East West Centre of Honolulu, in alliance with the mainland’s venerable All-China Journalists Association, brought to my university a VIP delegation of more than a dozen Chinese

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ignores them. The journos shook their heads in dismay, for they knew I was right. I understand the longstanding official mentality on media relations, but I will stick to my guns: this is no good for China.

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