



The aim for *Briefings* is audacious: to provide great insights to help leaders lead. Not by telling them what to think, but what to think about.

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China: Far and Near, Same and Different

BY GARY BURNISON

From my childhood vantage point of a small town in Kansas, in the middle of the United States, nothing was more distant or unfamiliar than China. I knew it only from history books and the big world map mounted on the classroom wall. I'd stare at that map, my eyes tracing the travels I dreamed of making one day, always coming back to the huge land mass of China.

Flash-forward several decades and many life experiences, and I've had several opportunities to visit China, including one summer when I temporarily relocated my "headquarters" to Asia to more fully immerse myself—and our people and business organization—in the region across different cultures, time zones and contexts.

In a word, I loved China—its vast history through successive dynasties; its rich culture and unique customs; and its people, who were just as eager to reach "west" toward me as I was to stretch "east" toward them. Unfamiliarity soon turned to curiosity, and understanding to appreciation.

It is impossible to capture the depth of my experiences in China, let alone the enormity of this nation of nearly 1.4 billion people, home to the world's second-biggest economy. In his book, "China in Ten Words," Yu Hua wrote: "If I were to attend to each and every aspect of modern China, there would be no end to this endeavor, and the book would go on longer than 'The Thousand and One Nights.'" I face the same challenge in this column.

The best way for me to convey China—what I have experienced and what Westerners should know about doing business in or with this economic and political superpower—is through stories.

I came to appreciate the Chinese way of thinking that is grounded in Confucian philosophy, especially around harmony, on a trip to China several years ago. I started feeling ill on the long flight over, and by the time I reached Shanghai I was flat on my back. The doctor who came to my hotel room, and who spoke excellent English, blended traditional Chinese medicine of herbs and acupuncture with a Western approach of antibiotics. I was on my feet in no time.

Curiosity runs both ways. A taxi driver in Shanghai wanted to know how the Chinese New Year was celebrated in the United States (this year, the Year of the Monkey, began Feb. 8). In China, the holiday spans 10 days, a period during which many people return to their home provinces. When hearing that Americans, as a

whole, do not celebrate the Chinese New Year—that the West doesn't follow the Chinese lunar calendar—the shocked driver nearly drove into the curb.

These very simple examples bring home the profound fact that China's roots are very different from Europe's heritage and the Judeo-Christian culture of the United States. It is these very differences that have drawn Western visitors since the 13th century, when Marco Polo followed the Great Silk Road from Europe through Asia to China, where he encountered the marvels of the court of Kublai Khan.

Today, the trade and business links between China and the West are stronger than ever. Consider that by 2018, China is expected to surpass 34 European nations in its spending on research and development. Global pharmaceutical giants—including Johnson & Johnson, Sanofi, Bayer, Novartis and Roche—have invested heavily in R&D centers in China. As the country's economy increasingly evolves from mostly manufacturing and export to consumption-based services, new opportunities will open for doing business in and with China—especially for those with a global perspective and an insatiable curiosity that embraces cultural diversity.

As the leader of a global organization—now, after combining with Hay Group, having a sizable and important business presence in China and the rest of Asia—I have learned to sidestep my Western tendencies. I understand the cultural values of saying less instead of more, and the importance of nuance and the nonverbal. While the ability to articulate ideas extemporaneously is valued in the West, in China more emphasis is placed on thorough preparation, as evidenced by the Chinese business leaders who come to meetings with thick binders separated by color-coded tabs.

Trust takes longer for an outsider to build, but loyalty, once earned, is treasured. And nowhere have I been hosted more warmly and enthusiastically than in China, where my family and I were welcomed and entertained—including on the weekends. This experience was not mine alone as the CEO. While a colleague was in China, his hosts learned it



was his wife's birthday—suddenly 40 people gathered to celebrate with them. (Such experiences have prompted my colleagues and me to think about how we can be better hosts back in the States for visitors from other countries.)

Yet, there are also many ways in which East and West are alike. This, too, was brought home to me

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in personal experiences, such as when I was invited to be a guest lecturer at the prestigious China Europe International Business School (CEIBS). My audience was an attentive group of ambitious students pursuing executive education, including MBA and finance degrees. I was immediately reminded of a similar classroom I had spoken in not long before at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

From Shanghai to Chicago, there is a new generation of high-potential talent with a global perspective. They are motivated by many of the same things, including advancing themselves and their knowledge in order to make

a bigger contribution to their organizations.

For them, like a young boy growing up in Kansas, the world is depicted by different colored blocks on a map. But across the expanse of a planet that is shrinking through globalization, there are more ways than ever to reach across those artificial lines called borders and grasp a hand that is reaching back to greet and welcome you. //