

Global Mandarin: Promoting Chinese Language and Culture in an Age of Globalization*

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I'm very pleased to participate in this symposium, and I thank the Dean and the faculty of the School of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language for giving me this opportunity. I wish to use it to share with you some of my thoughts on promoting Chinese language and culture in an age of globalization.

As you all know, globalization is a vast subject that spans many disciplines in humanities and social sciences. To put it in a nutshell, globalization is the hallmark of our times. It is a dominant and driving force that is shaping a creative and chaotic form of interconnections among nations, economies, cultures, and peoples. Economic and cultural lives of people everywhere are intensely and instantly linked for better or for worse. We are all a microscopic mesh in a global web. The information revolution marked by Internetization is accelerating the processes of both economic and cultural globalization.

But, globalization is nothing new to China. I don't need to tell this learned audience how China forged intercontinental connections during the first millennium through what's called the Silk Road. Even in those days, trade and commerce flourished across national borders. China continues this tradition with deeper interest and greater intensity. Undoubtedly, China is now a central player in economic globalization; its economy is well integrated with global economy. It is the world's largest exporter and

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manufacturer. It is now the second largest economy in the world and is expected to be the largest in the year 2030. According to a recent report from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, about 20,000 Chinese enterprises are currently operating in over 178 countries; with investment projected to reach US \$150 billion by the year 2015. Global use of Yuan for direct currency trading is increasing. Only two weeks ago, China and Japan signed an agreement and accelerated this process.

We see a parallel achievement in the field of science and technology as well. China has planned to move from a manufacture-based economy to knowledge-based economy. This shifting priority is clear recognition that scientific innovation is crucial to expand China's global reach. A watchword here is "innovation." In a speech last Fall at Tsinghua University, President Hu Jintao invoked the word "innovation" 35 times. Yes, just in one speech. Consistent with this emphasis, annual Research and Development (R & D) spending is steadily increasing, and is expected to exceed that of the U. S. by the year 2023.

China's economic and scientific achievements are indeed impressive and commendable. However, they do not easily translate into genuine cultural appeal for non-Chinese people around the world. In the realm of cultural dissemination, China is faced with a much greater challenge. And that is: how to transfer the economic capital into a cultural capital that is recognized and respected at the global level? In order to address that challenge, it is necessary to understand the complex landscape of cultural globalization.

In our globalized and globalizing world, culture flows across the world without any respect for national borders. We are all in close cultural contact with one another more than ever before. Cultural images from far off lands flashed across small screens in our living rooms and big screens in multiplex cinemas have made the world "a global neighborhood." Foreign cultures are no longer as foreign as they used to be. Local communities are no longer cultural islands unto themselves. People now have a greater chance of knowing about others' way of life—the good, the bad and the ugly.

In this global cultural diffusion, some people see a threat to local linguistic, cultural and religious identities. In response, several nations and communities are accelerating their efforts to preserve, protect & promote local identities. But at the same time, they also recognize an imperative need, and develop a genuine desire, to expand their cultural horizon without

necessarily losing their core cultural values. This, in part, is what I have called cultural realism (Kumaravadivelu 2008).

There are clear indications that China recognizes the importance of culture and cultural complexity. There has recently been a distinct cultural turn in China's affairs, both internal and external. A communiqué issued by the Communist Party's Central Committee in the year 2010 declared: "More and more, culture is becoming a fount of national cohesiveness and creativity. More and more, culture is becoming an important element of comprehensive national strength and competitiveness." Three years earlier, in 2007, at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Hu Jintao emphasized the need for increasing China's soft power through cultural enhancement.

Clearly, the use of soft power is having a positive impact in the global arena. A recent report from *E & Y's Rapid Growth Market Soft Power Index* shows that China has topped a key economic index that measures the global effects delivered by a country's soft power (*China Daily* June 19, 2012). According to this *Index*, several factors contributed to this achievement. They include Chinese multinational corporations, its increasing global investment, its high-ranking Universities (including Beida), and its expanding tourism. We also know how the world admired the success of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, and the manned space mission which successfully concluded just yesterday.

In order to project China's soft power, the teaching of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages has been identified as a major source. The Ministry of Culture has been treating it as a matter "of strategic significance ..." to "enhance friendship and mutual understanding" between China and other nations, and to "elevate China's influence in the international community."

In this context, Confucius Institutes have become a symbol as well as a vehicle. Their stated goal is not merely to promote Chinese language and culture, but also to "contribute to cooperating in developing multiculturalism and working together to build a harmonious world" (Hanban). There has been a dramatic increase in the number of these institutes: from 10 in 2005 to 350 in 2011. And, according to Vice Minister of Education Hao Ping, the number is expected to reach the 500 mark in 2015. Remarkable indeed. The proliferation of these institutes is a clear

testimony both to China's commitment to expand its cultural presence, and to the world's desire to learn more about China.

In understanding the popularity of Confucius Institutes, it is important to keep in mind that most learners abroad are inclined to see Mandarin as a communicational tool rather than as a cultural carrier. Their interest in Chinese language knowledge appears to be limited to the ability to communicate with the Chinese business community, or to live, study, and work in China. Their main motivation is to benefit from Chinese economic expansion. Their interest in Chinese cultural knowledge is focused on cultural awareness, rather than cultural assimilation or cultural accommodation. However, since languages and cultures are closely linked, Chinese language education puts Chinese culture in a stronger global position, with greater chances for disseminating Chinese cultural profile.

Keeping all this in mind, I wish to present for your consideration a proposition. It is very simple and straightforward. And, that is: the Teaching of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages cannot be insulated and isolated from the forces of cultural globalization, and that it has to respond systematically and sensitively to the challenges and opportunities it has been presented with.

This proposition demands that we move away from a long prevailing view about the cultural aspect of teaching a second or a foreign language. We have all along focused on the cultural beliefs and practices of the target language community. The goal, of course, was to facilitate some degree of cultural assimilation. That is, learners should be able to adopt some of the cultural beliefs and practices of the native speakers of the language they wish to learn. This approach assumed that learners would come to us with the motivation to integrate culturally with the target language community. Clearly, this approach is too narrow and outdated for our globalized and globalizing world where most of our learners would like to stick to their cultural roots while at the same time willing to expand their cultural horizon.

If my proposition is taken seriously, then, teachers of a second or a foreign language have the responsibility to help their learners not only to learn their second/foreign language and culture, but also help them to recognize multiple cultural perspectives, develop global cultural consciousness, and strive to become global citizens. A logical question that

arises is: what are the basic principles that should inform our classroom teaching? Let me venture to make a few suggestions with particular reference to the teaching of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages.

First, make it global. That is, use the Chinese language to talk about Chinese culture as well as global cultural flows. You can draw a useful lesson from English as a global language. As I've written elsewhere, "English, in its role as a global language, creates, reflects and spreads the import and imagery of the global flows" (Kumaravadivelu 2006:1). I believe Mandarin has to do the same if its long-term goal is to achieve global recognition and global status.

Second, go beyond stereotypes. Move from the superficial to the substantial. If you surf the Confucius Institute website, you'll find a link to: "Essence of Chinese culture." What do you find there? References to Food, Festivals, Kung Fu, Art, Literature, Medicine, etc. There are bits and pieces of information about these subjects. They are necessary but not sufficient. 5,000 years of impressive and complex cultural heritage cannot be and should not be reduced to static products and stale facts that are collected, codified, objectified, and presented in the form of discrete and disconnected items. Such an approach can only create and sustain stereotypes. I believe you should focus more on cultural values than on food and festivals. Remember this: shared values, not shared food, that lead to genuine cultural affiliation.

Third, a basic requirement to avoid stereotypes about other cultures is to have an open mind that is willing and able to learn *from* other cultures, not just *about* them. Learning some cultural tidbits such as food and festival may lead to cultural literacy. But it is only learning *from* other cultures that can lead to cultural liberty. In other words, it is only an open mind that can delight in diversity; a closed mind is disturbed by it. Again, this notion is nothing new to the Confucian tradition. As the Chinese cultural studies scholar Tu Wei-Ming observed, "A healthy Confucianism is one of diversity."

Fourth, we should also learn to treat adult learners as cultural informants. The learners we have in second/foreign language classroom are not cultural *tabula rasa*. They bring to the classroom a greater degree of cultural awareness and adaptability that language teachers rarely recognize and acknowledge. All the teachers need to do is to help them recognize the multiplicity of cultural realities,

and try to develop global cultural consciousness.

Fifth, interrogate Chineseness. In order to maximize learning and teaching potential in the Chinese language classroom, explore the following questions: What is Chineseness? Can a common core of Chineseness be identified across the Chinese-speaking countries? How do people in the Chinese diaspora perceive Chineseness, and transmit it to their children? What's the role of the Internet and other social media in spreading Chineseness? Can the core characteristics of Chineseness be articulated, and conveyed through prescribed texts and classroom talk?

Finally, and most importantly, highlight the real values of "harmony" that has been the Chinese cultural tradition. A synthesis of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism has helped China develop a comprehensive view of, and a commendable desire for, "Harmony" in the individual, in the nation, and in the world. Make sure that your classroom teaching represents these values. Also remember, what will enhance credibility across the world is a clearly perceived marriage between harmonious words and harmonious deeds. The more harmonious words and harmonious actions synchronize, the greater are the chances of achieving desired goals.

Informed by these and other principles, teachers should try design classroom activities and exercises in the form of reflective tasks. By carefully designing tasks, teachers can prompt learners probe, understand, and analyze the underlying cultural connections that might bind cultural beliefs and practices from different cultural communities; provide them with case histories of cultural dilemmas, to which they critically respond; require them to write journal entries about cultural encounters and experiences; and, encourage them to use social media to discuss their evolving cultural identities with their peers/teachers, and maintain critical dialogues.

I fully recognize that doing all or even some of what I have suggested is not an easy task. It is a challenging, but a rewarding, task. I am confident that all of you, young scholars, will rise to the occasion, accept the challenge, and try your best.

I wish you success in all your good endeavors.

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