Communicating across cultures: the Arts shape world-views

Exploring the role of the Arts in international cultural relations and the growing need for China’s contribution

2008 will be China’s year. Astonishing growth rates supported by world class-centres of learning and thousands of years of history are contributing to ever growing confidence. Plus, this summer’s Olympics are a perfect opportunity to project your achievements and culture to billions of people.

Culture is one of the best ways there is to break down barriers between peoples, to open doors and to build bridges. And that’s not just wishful thinking.

The British Council has over 70 years’ experience of using culture and the arts to create mutually beneficial relationships between the people of Britain and those of other nations.

Today I want to explore how the process of building mutually beneficial relationships through the arts works in practice and how it brings rewards to both sets of partners in the exchange –and to urge you to take greater advantage of the opportunities it offers.

Right now there is a real hunger in the UK, and in the world, to learn more about China’s culture.

In London the First Emperor exhibition is drawing huge audiences to see the largest display of terracotta warriors from Xi’an ever to be shown outside China itself.

The British Museum, which is hosting the exhibition, has even had to extend its opening hours to midnight to meet the demand.
It’s a wonderful show. But we want more! We want to see more than China’s artistic legacy from the first century. We want to see what China’s artists are doing in the twenty-first century.

The terracotta warriors give us a glimpse of the immense sophistication of China’s culture two thousand years ago – and that’s of great value in helping people in Britain to build up a vivid picture of China’s past.

But it’s not enough. We have the appetite to see more of what China’s new generation of artists are creating.

Next month Britain hosts the biggest ever Chinese cultural festival. It’s called China Now. It will run for 6 months and there will be around 800 exhibitions and performances. They’ll include classical Chinese dance, a big display at the prestigious Victoria and Albert Museum in London celebrating the best of Chinese design, and – demonstrating that the organisers are prepared to take some risks – important exhibitions of Chinese art, including some of China’s best and most challenging practitioners.

The arts shine a strong light on the society from which they spring. And because they do that, they can give us deep insights into what is going on in those societies. They show us what is happening now and – perhaps even more important – they can show us the direction those societies are taking.

The great English romantic writer Shelley once said that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”. And what he meant was that the greatest creative artists have always been visionaries, voyaging into the future, and returning with insights that change and shape the way their audiences think and feel.

The lesson from that is if you want to discover where a society is heading, don’t just ask an economist, look at what its best artists are doing. It’s a lesson that explains why the contribution of artistic exchange in building understanding between nations can be so immense.
In its long life, the British Council has developed considerable expertise in using the arts as a way of developing relations between peoples.

We work with all art forms: painters, sculptors, photographers, musicians, dancers, actors, video-artists, and writers - and enable them to reach across national boundaries and develop work that crystallises the central issues of our time.

For 70 years we have supported high-profile international arts projects such as the British pavilion at the Venice Biennale; and for the last 10 years we’ve presented the Edinburgh Showcase at the Edinburgh Festival [in Scotland], which brings together innovative British drama companies and international theatre promoters.

At the same time we want to deepen our arts work across the Council, developing new programmes using the arts to create dialogue between peoples and continuing to act as a resource for the UK arts and creative industries as well as bringing the best world talent to the UK. In this way our arts work will remain what it has always been - absolutely central to delivering the British Council’s strategic priorities.

Why is this?

There’s a fundamental principle underlying all the British Council’s work. We call it mutuality. It means an open-minded recognition of what both sides offer – it’s a way of beginning a dialogue that can turn into a long-lasting relationship.

In a world of global interdependence effective engagement between peoples can only be based on two-way conversation based on trust and respect.

Arts work provides a uniquely productive setting for those kinds of conversations – and that’s why it is so central to our cultural relations activities.
The essence of what creative artists do is to stimulate us - to see, hear, experience and understand more of what if going on within us and around us.

Sometimes what artists do will delight. Sometimes it will inspire. Sometimes it will disturb. But at its best it will lift us out of ourselves and connect us.

Since Deng Xiaoping’s era of reform and opening up, China has devoted great energy to demonstrating to the rest of the world it’s a country of great cultural as well as great economic significance. State-supported arts organisations have been encouraged to travel abroad.

But the return on investment has not, perhaps, always been as great as expected.

Could this be because the kinds of “official” arts activities showcased by China internationally have not always been the sorts of art likely to satisfy the hunger of international audiences to understand better the direction in which is China is moving as the 21st century unfolds?

By contrast, look at the international acclaim generated by the work of that vibrant group of visual artists in China who have made their names since the 1990s.

These artists have sometimes been explicitly critical of developments and changes in Chinese society. But has this destabilised China? Certainly not.

Internationally, the existence and success of these artists is seen as evidence of a culturally strong and confident China, able to reflect openly on the negatives as well as the positives of rapid changes in society.

Earlier I mentioned the British Council’s long association with the Venice Biennale, one of the great international showcases for cutting-edge contemporary art.
In 2005 the Chinese government supported the first ever official China pavilion at the Biennale. Its curators featured artists such as Xu Zhen. In last year’s Biennale, artist Cao Fei showed a video called *iMirror*, based on the online virtual world of Second Life, which was widely interpreted as a critical commentary on some of the effects of the market economy. Using international events, like the Biennale to showcase China’s culture sends a power message about contemporary China. And my own view is that this is a very healthy sign.

Effective cultural relations are not about nations exchanging blasts of propaganda through loud hailers. Where the arts are concerned, they’re about exchanging the fruits of what our best artists are creating – and by definition, that won’t always be an entirely comfortable process.

In other words, this isn’t a process without risks.

But from our experience, the risks are worth taking. Let me give an example of what I mean.

A few years ago the British Council invited a group of young photographers to record aspects of Muslim life in the UK. They were free to choose any area of life they wanted. We made no attempt to guide or censor their images. Not surprisingly, some of their pictures showed the bleaker side of Muslim life in the UK.

The resulting exhibition, called Common Ground, opened in Indonesia and Malaysia, and has since toured to many parts of the Arabian Peninsula and Near and Middle East. It has created a real stir, prompting vigorous media debate.

Part of the success of the exhibition was that the images were plainly authentic. The photographers had taken full advantage of the creative freedom we had offered them. The fact that some of the work painted a less
than rosy picture of some aspects if life in the UK today was appreciated by audiences in the Middle East. They felt that they were not being patronised.

But the real impact of the exhibition was that it opened many eyes. Many people in the Middle East had no idea that Britain even had a Muslim population - let alone one supporting hundreds of mosques and dozens of Muslim schools - or that Islam is the second most popular religion in the UK.

So there were strongly positive messages here – and their effect was magnified because they were not presented as propaganda. We took risks with this exhibition, but by doing so we brought a good return for Britain.

Is China ready to take the same kinds of risks? To take part in an honest and open cultural dialogue with other peoples of the world?

I hope so. The truth is that, these days, the most effective way of getting your own message heard is by being open to dialogue.

In the late 90s in Korea there was a strong push to develop Korea’s international engagement in the Arts as a way of broadening the country’s international competitiveness and profile. The British Council awarded scholarships in arts management at a UK university for staff at the Contemporary Art Museum and in the Seoul Arts Centre. At the same time we arranged contact with UK artists and designers for a range of leading art galleries and the Kwangju Art Biennale, as well as the first large scale exhibition of contemporary British artists in Korea. This has resulted in collaborative work in art and design between UK and Korea with major exhibitions of both UK and Korean artists and designers in both countries, which is still very active today. The government of Korea now also actively promotes Korean arts abroad and consulted the British Council when developing a department to do this.

In the connected world we are entering, the world of Web 2.0, of interactivity, of globally available instant communication, the expectation of any
engagement between people is that it will be two-way: that you will be as interested in what I have got to say, as you expect me to be in what you have got to say.

People are no longer prepared - if indeed they ever were – to sit passively, meekly absorbing the influences of others, politely receiving today’s message. They don’t want a message, they want a conversation – and they want to make their contribution to that conversation, and to have the value of their contribution recognised by the other participants.

So a very tangible and pragmatic benefit of an open approach is that your own message is more likely to be listened to as well.

So in our own approach to China our work is based on a desire to facilitate cultural exchanges rather than dictate the form they should take.

We concentrate on helping individual artists, curators and venues develop their own relationships and projects. For example, for the ‘Get It Louder’ design exhibition that reached 175,000 visitors in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing in 2007, we organised a trip to the UK by the Curator, Ou Ning, to meet a group of potential partner curators.

We were happy to provide support and we made no requirement that the project should deliver a particular message. What we wanted to achieve was a real conversation between design talent in both our countries – and we trusted in the curators’ ability to select work most likely to produce this outcome.

From 2003 – 2006 we worked with Arts Council England on a project called Artist Links. This gave rising artists in the UK and China an opportunity to spend time living in the other country.
Once again, we made no attempt to influence or dictate outcomes. But the conversations that were started as a result of the project have already led to many projects in both countries.

For example, the UK-based arts collective D-Fuse created a video work about Shanghai, called ‘Brilliant City’, which has been shown at events across Europe and North America over the last three years.

The “Connections through Culture” project, a partnership with the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, takes a similar approach in linking cultural organisations.

We provide opportunities for people from a wide variety of cultural organisations in the UK and China to come together, and our specialist staff in China provides funding and practical help in the early stages of setting up projects between institutions.

As I said earlier, we want to see more of China’s best art and artists.

The eyes of the world are on China. We know that the art China produces will give us important insight into how China is developing, in ways that no amount of economic or social analysis will ever achieve. Let’s build on that and develop a deeper, wider dialogue between our peoples. The real prize here is much greater mutual understanding – a prize worth taking a few risks for.

The British Council, as an international champion of the arts, stands ready to help in any way we can.