

How to avoid offending China

In light of the NBA's recent troubles in China, a few thoughts from someone with 20+ years of experience in China on how to avoid these kind of situations



The NBA just stepped on a landmine in China. Decades of investment in building brand awareness and fan interest are at risk because the general manager of the Houston Rockets, the team for which Chinese legend Yao Ming played, which regularly wears uniforms with Chinese characters, tweeted a message in support of the protestors in Hong Kong. Sponsorships have been pulled. Broadcasts have stopped. Rockets merchandise has disappeared from online stores. Fans on social media are calling for a boycott of the entire league.

This article deals mostly with Chinese nationalism, which seems to be the primary way, but not only way, to offend China.

The NBA isn't alone. Many companies have felt heat from China's nationalism.

The NBA certainly isn't the first company to pay a price for running headlong into Chinese nationalism. Airlines and apparel companies have had similar problems simply by printing a map or referring to Taiwan in a way that offends Chinese sensibilities. Japanese and South Korean companies have lost billions in sales as a result of boycotts related to geopolitical issues that irked China's nationalistic consumers (territorial dispute over the Senkaku islands for Japan and THAAD anti-missile systems for South Korea.)

Below are a few points that any company or anyone involved in China should keep in mind if you want to avoid the trouble that has beset the NBA.

Hot button issue: Foreign relations is to China what race is to America

TAKEAWAY: *When dealing with China, take as much care with national pride as you would with race relations in the US.*

The Manchu's, foreign tribes from the north, invaded China in the mid-17th century to establish the Qing Dynasty. Foreigners, beginning with the British, forced the Chinese to allow them to sell opium in China, resulting in 2 Opium Wars, both of which China lost. Eight foreign powers

established foreign concessions in China, places that they basically controlled as their own territory. Japan invaded and occupied two-thirds of the country. Mixed in with these foreign incursions were the fall of the emperor, the failure of democracy, breaking into parts controlled by warlords, the communist takeover, the great famine, and the Cultural Revolution. It is one of history's most tragic tales and helps explain why Chinese take such pride in the country's rise from the ashes. Seared into the collective memory of the Chinese is that foreigners played a key role in China's fall. ***Largely because of this, domination by foreigners is to China what race is to America—a historical reality that has become a political lightning rod.***

Few countries have ever been bullied as China was during its three centuries of decline.

Not everyone is ready for Democracy. Don't assume everyone agrees.

TAKEAWAY: *If advocating for "freedom and democracy," don't assume other people see it the same as you do. Freedom and democracy are an acquired taste and just one of many priorities for most societies.*

Unless you've been exposed to something different, there is a tendency to think that most people think as you do. Those who spend their lives in a democracy think the yearning for freedom and democracy is universal. In fact, while that might be true in the long run, it is also true that such a yearning is not innate. It must be developed

and cultivated. Historical experience and research suggests that traditional societies, prior to economic development, have much less interest and attraction to the principles of democracy. Development changes the culture and alters people's priorities in ways that make democracy more compelling. Given a situation like Hong Kong, it is tempting to think that the people of China side with those in Hong Kong because they side with freedom and that the main problem is the government. As relates to China and Hong Kong, that is definitely not the case.

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China's experience with freedom of expression is limited

TAKEAWAY: *The Chinese can be very thin-skinned, like America often is around certain topics that relate to "political correctness," however you define that term.*

Related to the point above, China does not have much experience with freedom of expression. We often interpret that as people not feeling empowered to speak up. It also means people aren't accustomed to free-flowing criticism and disagreement. In America, for the most part, we get

used to all kinds of opinions being expressed. We not only learn the "sticks and stones" lesson but that the best approach is to focus on expressing your point of view more effectively. (Yet, even America is in the midst of a vigorous debate relative to freedom of expression on US campuses.) China has little experience with this. In this regard, compared to those living in a democracy, Chinese tend to be thin-skinned and ultra-sensitive.

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Social Media makes everything worse

TAKEAWAY: *Social media's ability to amplify negativity makes cross-cultural sensitivity even tougher to navigate.*

Social media has no doubt enhanced life in many ways. But its most impactful attribute might be its ability to function as a platform for complaints, insults, and overall negativity. While the points above explain China's disposition, without social media stirring the pot, the risks emanating from that disposition would likely be lower.

Consider the other side

TAKEAWAY: *Trying to anticipate possible negative reaction can help you better tailor your message.*

Before expressing an opinion, take a minute to consider what the possible reactions might be, even reactions you might think are unreasonable. Hong Kong is a good example. Many who support Hong Kong's fundamental desire to protect and advance the democratic elements of its society lament the violent turn the protests have taken. In China, while sympathy for Hong Kong's

democratic yearnings might not be universal, it is the violence of the protests, destruction of property, and desecration of Chinese national symbols that has drawn the ire of the Chinese. Any expression of support for the Hong Kong side should take into account that, just because the protestors are right in principle, doesn't mean they are completely in the right. Sensitivity to this point might have led to a different comment by the NBA executive.

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Is political advocacy a good idea for a business?

TAKEAWAY: *Engaging China while adhering to the highest ethical standards is the best contribution business can make to China and the US-Sino relationship. While ignoring political developments overall is not necessary or even possible, overt political advocacy should be left to institutions made for that purpose.*

Being a good corporate citizen (transparent, accountable, fair and honest, etc.), treating all stakeholders with respect, playing a proactive, positive role in the community are all valuable and desired attributes for a company. But is

political advocacy, beyond issues related to business, the right role for business? Google famously advocated a unique corporate culture in which staff members (Googlers) were allowed and encouraged to speak freely and advocate political positions on company message boards, chatrooms, etc. Recently, Google has announced curbs and restrictions relative to this type of activity because it has found that Googlers can be rather divisive and uncivil in their exchanges. Could we not say the same about society overall? It is not that political and social issues are not important. But does it really make sense to inject politics into every sphere of life? Is it not better to have some spaces where commonalities are emphasized, not differences, and where collegiality and accommodation are the norm, not divisiveness? Contrary to what some say, economic engagement with China has helped China make progress beyond economic growth. Although China is far from full

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democracy, it is much closer than it was before reform began. The Chinese people are freer now than forty years ago. They have more control over their own lives, make more decisions for themselves (about work, education, travel, consuming, investing, etc.). History has shown that economic empowerment leads to political empowerment.

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Continued economic engagement will be good for China as a whole, not just China's pocketbook. There are other channels for advocacy of political issues, including government, NGO's, individuals, and academia. Each has its role to play. Those societal elements can't do what business does and vice versa. Each should play its role.

Choose your words carefully.

TAKEAWAY: *Think it through before you speak (or tweet)!*

This article is already too long and there is much more to say because this is a complex topic. To bring this to a close, the final point to make is simple—choose your words carefully.

When approaching any potentially political or controversial topic overseas, particularly in a country as different as China, imagine you are in a room with a diverse set of

Americans and are going to address the issues of race, abortion, and guns. Your goal is not to score political points but to avoid offense and facilitate dialogue. Most of us, even if we feel strongly on any particular topic, would know we must choose our words carefully around such “hot-button” topics. That is the mindset to apply to a place like China. Think it through. Consider all the angles. Put yourself in the other guy's shoes. Bounce it off a few Chinese friends or colleagues first. (If you don't have any Chinese friends or colleagues, well, you might want to consider that a red flag.) Frankly, if you avoid shooting from the hip, that's probably half the battle.

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