

# SOFT SKILLS IN TOURIST PROMOTION FOR THE CHINESE MARKET

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*By adapting itself to the world of modern globalized economy,  
China has forced the rest of the world to reshape, at least partly,  
its own economy in order to adapt it to Chinese needs.*  
(Rana Mitter, Oxford University)

## 1. Introduction

In 2009, ISTAT – Italy’s main statistics institute – registered as many as 1,254,000 Chinese people travelling to Italy; at the same time, high quality Italian brands, mainly in the fashion field, started to record a majority of Asian customers, and among them the leading group was from China.

Since then, Italy has become aware that direct flights from and to China are too few, or, maybe, that the competences of stores managers all around Europe are too superficial. Although they are already used to welcoming shoals of Japanese buyers, they lack information about the best way to welcome, listen to, and offer a buying service to a Chinese client.

A major issue is at stake here: does the tourist marketing for the ‘Middle Country’ or ‘Middle Kingdom’ – as the Chinese name their country – need specific cultural connotations or is it enough if it meets the good practices of international marketing, without any form of adaptation? In other words, is the Chinese culture to be considered peculiar in its specific traits or can it be legitimately included among the cultures of the Third Millennium global society?

If it is true that the ever increasing number of ‘hard-boiled eggs’ (*jidān* 鸡蛋) – i.e. the foreigners who study the Chinese language and culture and who are so called because they look white outside but are yellow inside – is counterbalanced by an equally high number of ‘banana men’ (*xiāngjiāorén* 香蕉人) – i.e. the Chinese with international personal and professional profiles and values who, conversely, are so called because they appear yellow outside but are white inside, these questions do not have simple or univocal answers.

And what type of tourist could be the target of the tourist market in China, where social mobility is a growing phenomenon (Lu X. 2004) and where the ‘ten layers’ (*jiēcēng* 阶层) have recently replaced traditional social classes (*jiējí* 阶级)?

The tourist market can be expected to become ever more visible, and involve greater and greater ‘layers’ of population. Today, in the new Chinese society, the symbols of success include holidays and travels abroad, along with brand accessories, houses, and cars.

Are those holidays and travels status symbols that can be satisfied by offering and buying pre-arranged and standardized packages, or should tourist promotion meet specific and peculiar cultural needs and expectations?

Just to give one, though meaningful, example, contemporary Chinese artists are today very highly rated on the international art market, and, on the wake

of the success of the Factory 798 in Beijing<sup>1</sup> and the Moganshan Lu galleries in Shanghai,<sup>2</sup> districts of artists are rising up in various cities throughout the country, with a flowering of arts that is not only commercial (Clark 2010).

In such a climate, Italy, the home of figurative culture and fine arts in the world, is given the uncommon opportunity to offer high-quality cultural tourism, but this requires adequate and specific intercultural competence.

## 2. New Chinese cultural tourists in Italy

Deloitte has recently published the field report “Hospitality 2015: Tourism, Hospitality and Leisure Trends”, where it is foreseen that, owing to a growing interest of the new Chinese generation in culture and history, compared to the former generation’s interest in technology, Italy will shortly become the first destination for Chinese cultural tourists. Moreover, as a consequence of an overflow of circulating currency, the Chinese government is encouraging the Chinese people to spend their money (Mitter 2008).

In fact, China is historically afraid of inflationary trends. The 1988/89 urban protests that led to the democracy movements of Tian An’men square were a consequence of economic problems wedging in the dangerous grooves of the inflationary growth of those years which had reduced the buying power of the civil servants and depreciated their ‘iron rice bowls’ (*tie fan wan* 铁饭碗), to use the Chinese metaphoric term that refers to the poor but steady income of the employees of State-run enterprises, as well as to the system of guaranteed lifetime employment. Before that, in 1948-49, rising inflation had led to the defeat of the Nationalist Party, thus sanctioning the victory of the Chinese Communist Party and the birth of the People’s Republic of China.

Obviously, with such historical precedents, the Chinese government fears inflation and tends to adopt all possible measures to boost consumer spending. For this reason, the Government has recently added some new holidays to the calendar. These new holiday periods, along with the traditional Chinese New Year’s celebrations (*Chunjie* 春节), also called Spring Festival, the most important holiday for the Chinese, will encourage the Chinese to travel and spend money.

As the Annual Report of the Italy-China Foundation explains, in 2010, the total spending of Chinese tourists in Italy, who account for 12% of the total number of extra-European travellers, exceeded that of American and Japanese tourist (respectively accounting for 7% and 9% of the extra-European travellers).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Factory 798, also called 798 Art Zone (798 *Yishuqu* 艺术区), in the Chaoyang district of Beijing, is often compared to New York’s Greenwich Village or Soho, since it houses a wide community of avant-garde artists. The artists are located in what was once the Dashanzi Factory, a large industrial area created in 1951 following the Socialist Unification Plan of Military-industrial Cooperation between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Initially created for the production of modern electronic components and funded by the Chinese government’s First Five-Year Plan, in the 1980’s, with Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, the Factory was deprived of financial support, like many other state-owned enterprises, and was then deserted. The area gained new life in 1995, when Beijing’s Central Academy of Fine Arts, looking for a cheap workshop space, chose this place for its first Factory of Arts, initially called Factory 706 (Yang B. 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Moganshan Lu (莫干山路) in Shanghai, known also by the name of Shanghai Creative Industry Clustering Park, or M50 Art District, is another example of the artistic rebirth of old economy’s industrial areas in Chinese big cities.

<sup>3</sup> These are the results of a survey carried out by the tax-free shopping service company Global Blue for the Italy-China Foundation.

Russian tourists are at the top of the list (26%), followed by the Chinese, with an increase of 94% of sales, compared to the previous year, and an increase of 72% on the total transactions; the average receipt for the Chinese spender in Italy is of 869 Euro, after the Ukrainians' one (898 Euro), but higher than the Russians' (713 Euro).

Indeed, Chinese tourism is not only a holiday tourism, but also a shopping one, encouraged by tax-free purchasing that makes fashion products – just to make an example – less expensive if bought in Italy. Thus, as several groups of tourists from the Middle Kingdom appear in the outlets of Leccio (Florence), Serravalle Scrivia (Alessandria) or Castel Romano (Rome), the best Italian retailers are becoming aware of the fact that they lack the necessary 'passwords' to communicate with this 'new' and unknown type of customer. Even expert hotelkeepers, like the Venetian ones, are faced with this type of problem.

### **3. Chinese passion for shopping in Italy**

Fashion sales amount to 71% of the total purchases by Chinese shoppers in Italy, and jewelry sales to 23%, with a steady rising trend in watch buying which has registered an increase of 135%. Most interestingly, this rush to buying watches strongly clashes with what intercultural experts have traditionally, and so far, being teaching: "never give a watch to a Chinese person, because the word watch (zhong 钟) is synonymous with end, death (zhong 终)".

The new desire for luxury goods makes the Chinese less sensitive to superstition, even when related to unfavourable homophonies, and warns us that in intercultural communication there are no prearranged rules, but evolving skills which can be acquired by studying value orientations, linguistic environments and social changes. Thus, even in the tourist or economic environments, the soft skills of intercultural communication represent an indispensable tool, tough one which is very sophisticated and sensitive to changes.

Chinese tourists are only allowed to travel to those countries that enjoy the status of 'authorized destination' (ADS, Authorized Destination Status): the European Union member states acquired such a status in 2004. Chinese tourism in Italy is marked by an annual increase rate of 20%, and can no longer be ignored. Unfortunately, however, Chinese as a language is not considered by tourist traders and it is very rare to find information signs in Chinese.

All this represents an irremediable delay, worsened by the fact that Chinese tourists consider Italian accommodation facilities inferior to those of other countries and complain about the lack of services and facilities such as the American breakfast and kettles in the rooms.

According to a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats) survey, carried out in 2005 by the tourist promotion board (APT) in Rome, the Italian tourist offer is characterized by the following strong points: a) art routes, b) luxury products purchase, c) rich variety of tourist products. This is counterbalanced by several weak points: a) safety, b) hotels quality; c) limited number of direct flights, d) poor coordination between different types of promotional activity, e) lack of effective promotion of museums, f) poor incisiveness of information and promotion flow, g) visa problems.

The main requests from Chinese tour operators are: a Chinese-speaking assistant in international airports; information packs in Chinese; tourist guides,

museum brochures, and information leaflets in Chinese; and, last but not least, the already-mentioned availability of kettles in hotel rooms and American breakfast.

A good promotional strategy would clearly be a diversification of the offer: from honey-moons, to gastronomical itineraries, from sport events to spa holidays; but if offer is not supported by training programs for Chinese tour guides in Italy, or for Italian guides who can speak Chinese and specialize in assisting Chinese clients, this strategy, like any other, would produce unsatisfactory results.

An interesting survey on Chinese tourism in Italy, was carried out in 2005 by Agnès Fauduet from ISG (*Institut Supérieur de Gestion*, Paris). It was commissioned by AVA, the Venetian association of hotelkeepers and involved 30% of the hotelkeepers in Mestre (Venice). The survey revealed that Chinese tourism in Mestre is mainly composed of groups organized by foreign agencies, especially German ones, and that shortage of air connections makes Italy a secondary stopover for the Chinese. Furthermore, it highlighted that hotelkeepers in Mestre tend to undervalue this type of tourism, considering it a sort of ‘fill-up’, and that they strongly complain about these people’s behaviour. Indeed, hotelkeepers complain that Chinese tourists are noisy and smoke in their rooms, they spit and burp, turn up always too early at breakfast and turn the restaurant upside down.

However, despite the hotelkeepers discontent, Chinese tourists grow in number, and the Casino in Venice, for instance, records a constant stream of Chinese people who love gambling. At the same time, the hotelkeepers association was only able to print a leaflet titled “Heading for East”, which, if it is true that it has the merit of providing some good information in a world of ignorance, on the other hand, does not satisfy any need exhaustively, as a useful guide should do, ending up with being a *pot-pourri* of general information including other countries, such as India, Russia and Japan.

Those who, like the writer of this paper, have been working in the intercultural management training field for the business for over twenty years, well know the limits and perils of manuals and the validity of suitable training projects.

For this reason, both linguistic and cultural projects should be organized by university institutions specializing in the field and whose scientific coordination and experience may guarantee suitable training.

In fact, the research carried out by experts such as Wolfgang Arlt of Stralsund University (Germany), and published in his recent “China’s Outbound Tourism” seems to be much more complete and competent than “Heading for East”, and Chinese websites themselves offer surprising abundance of information and sources.

The “2010 Trend Report of Women’s Travel” registers, for example, that the expense for tourism by “well-educated and well-paid single Chinese women rose to 4,300 yuan Rmb (468 Euros) last year, up 20 per cent year on year, eclipsing the nine per cent rise in the same figure for men”. The Report was published by Qunar.com (去哪儿网), the most important Chinese search engine in the tourist field, and it also reports that Chinese women are responsible for 65% of the Chinese tourist decisions, as well as the comments and suggestions given to hotels and on websites.

This women’s behaviour appears to be less reserved and more direct than the typical Chinese style of communication, traditionally implicit (*hanxu* 含蓄). Italian tour operators should appreciate these women’s readiness to openly

express their satisfaction or discontent about services. Their comments may contribute to the improvement of the quality of tourist offer which, as said above, is not always considered adequate to the needs of Chinese clients and is usually labeled as superficial and culturally careless.

The Chinese appear more and more eager for a unique, custom-made and high-standard holiday which may be able to satisfy their new desire for luxury.

The Chinese culture is a traditionally hierarchic culture marked by high power-distance and is strongly oriented towards behaviours that are a clear indication of status and social prestige – what in Chinese cultural terms is called *mianzi* (面子), ‘the face’ (Bond 1996). For this reason, Chinese tourists look for tourist services that can grant the company of prestigious fellow travellers, famous names of the business industry, and CEOs of important multinationals.

Banking on luxury and pleasure, the agency ‘Trip TM’ in Beijing has managed to attract important clients and has organized a social forum to exchange experiences on line. This represents the modern version of traditional and mutual advantage relations networks, known with the Chinese name of *guanxi* (关系), within which the Chinese have always organized their own business (Ying L. S. & Walker, 2006). “Who you go along with is the most important thing on such tours” is what Cui Xueyan, senior trip designer of ‘Trip TM’ is convinced of and what was stated on the *China Daily* (Zhongguo Ribao 中国日报, 2010, July, 21). Cui Xueyan has recently spent a month organizing a tailor-made tour for two important clients who wanted to spend thirteen days in Italy in eighteen-century castles, to take cooking lessons with Italian chefs and learn the secrets of cooking Italian spaghetti, and spend the last part of their trip in an eleventh century building on the Amalfi coast; a 400,000 yuan Rmb (49,660 Euro) tour that included the presence of an Italian guide with a proficiency-level Chinese, learnt after studying for four years at the University of Beijing (Beijing Daxue 北京大学).

Trips abroad are networking occasions, and as Wu Lin, vice-general manager of Sun Pala, another agency in Beijing which operates in the tailor-made trips field, says: “The trip is actually a mobile Master of Business Administration (MBA) class, providing a chance for communicating and learning”.

In Italy, the tourist agency Dream Italy has copied such a model and has organized a luxury trip for ten Chinese tourists, from Montecarlo (France), to Rome: they lodged in old castles, planned stops in the best vineyards where they could drive luxury prestigious cars such as Ferrari, Maserati or Lamborghini; even a balloon was rent, in order to admire the Tuscan landscape from above and *en plein air*.

In a word, the stereotype of the poor Chinese or Asian group trips is bound to disappear forever, despite the very many prejudices which are still alive and widespread.

#### **4. Learning the Chinese language and culture: a resource for tourism**

In order to offer a suitable type of service to Chinese tourists, the presence of a tourist guide qualified in Chinese is crucial.

There are several university courses which offer Chinese classes: I teach Chinese language and culture at the University of Trento and at the University of Salento, in two very different and beautiful areas of the country with a high tourist

vocation. In Italy, the universities of Venice, Naples and Rome can boast a long history and a consolidated tradition in Chinese studies. Furthermore, the Confucius Institutes, specially created for spreading the Chinese language in the world, work side by side with university institutions, thus broadening the educational offer.

Finally, some secondary schools also provide good extra-curricular courses in Chinese, but they are usually inadequate to train people for tourist reception, in absence of study plans that could be scientifically shared.

In the end, new frontiers are being opened in business and sales training.

Recently, I was involved in a training course for Italian sellers in the fashion field. The course aimed to improve sales processes with Asian clients, and in particular with Chinese clients and began with a preliminary questionnaire which was distributed to about a hundred sellers. Their replies showed some recurring resistances and stereotypes.

According to these questionnaires, a major barrier is clearly the language. Sellers, for instance, claim that sometimes it is necessary to gesticulate to communicate with clients who do not understand English. This is a serious limit especially when it is important to describe a product and give suggestions or explain how to handle clothes and accessories. Most of the times they need the help of a Chinese guide, who speaks English, but this is not enough when a lot of people in the group want to be served at the same time.

Beside the language barrier, the cultural barrier creates even greater obstacles.

The Chinese are seen as: suspicious, nit-picking, with impolite behaviours, invasive, rude and even dirty and loutish, to use the most common adjectives found in the questionnaires. “In twenty minutes they are able to dismantle a shop” complain the shopkeepers, “they are chaotic, impatient, quick, impulsive and untidy, they claim a quick service and do not tolerate waiting, they are pretentious and always ready to bargain”.

However, after some days of training on the Chinese culture, prejudices are generally reduced, and sellers begin to understand some cultural differences. For instance, they learn that while in Italy it is not customary to bargain in luxury shops, in Asia most popular markets, including luxury shopping arcades, are characterized by a lively and joyful confusion and Chinese shopkeepers appreciate – as a cultural value orientation – the traditional habit of negotiating for a good price. Indeed, *bon ton* does not have a universal declination, but a cultural interpretation.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Italy is currently living a moment of glory in tourist marketing among the Chinese, despite the very many problems and the absence of systematic planning.

The 2010 Expo in Shanghai, revolving around life quality in the urban environment (“better city, better life”, 让生活更美好 *rang shenghuo geng meihao*), offered Italy a fantastic opportunity to advertise its technological excellence and Italy as a tourist destination. The Italian Pavillion – designed by the architect Giampaolo Imbrighi from the University of La Sapienza in Rome and realized in ‘i.light’, a newly invented transparent cement developed in the Italcementi laboratories – was a major attraction. Transparent cement was also presented at Tongji University (同济大学), one of the most important universities in Shanghai

specializing in technical subjects. The auditorium was so crowded that several students were forced to stand.

The Italian Pavillion was appreciated by the Chinese not only for its technical features, but also for its cultural sensitivity: it was composed of differently sized light structures, connected by iron bridges whose irregularity reminded of the Shanghai game when the sticks fall onto the flat surface thus simulating the disorder of vital movement against static balance. It was perfectly coherent with the perpetual movement of the *dao* (道), the cosmologic principle of Chinese philosophy, in a cross-reference of associations and symbolic intersections among cultures.

The logo on the stand reminded of the same game; there, the sticks appeared in the shape of chopsticks, as a reference to social exchange, of which the city should be the place, just like a banquet. The crossed chopsticks – also drawn in the openings of the modular structures of the stand – reminded of crossways and interwoven social courses, too. All the topics which are very dear to the Chinese culture were there. Indeed, the Italian Stand (both the container and the contents, such as events, music, catering) was voted by the Chinese people as the best foreign stand.

Excellent results of this type can only be achieved thanks to well-developed intercultural skills. Italian tour operators, hotelkeepers, sales personnel – such as all the human resources offering travel services – should gain awareness of the importance of being well-trained in Chinese culture and customs, in order to take advantage of the great opportunities offered by the Chinese incoming tourism in Italy.

Cultural competence should be the pillar where to build involvement, constancy and humbleness, personal traits which are even necessary to acquire linguistic competences.

The first to come down from the throne of euro-centrism will be the first to gain advantages from the curiosity of the Chinese people who love our Country, associating them to the legendary lives of Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci.

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