



Western language helps cultures meet halfway

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IT IS in many ways unfortunate that English dominates academic discourse across the globe. On the other hand, there is some use in having a lingua franca. One clear advantage is that people from different cultures can easily exchange ideas.

Over the past three years, I have been part of two projects based in South Africa that have sought to relate sub-Saharan African values and interests to those in China. Although English has been our medium of communication, we have avoided mediating comparison of these two societies with the West.

In 2013, the Mapungubwe Institute (Mistra) began a research project titled the Philosophy of Chinese Civilisation, the primary aim of which is to understand China through the lens of values and culture in order to make it comprehensible to an African audience.

In addition, it has focused on Confucianism, the most influential world view in China and has aimed to understand the development of Chinese knowledge, politics, economics, society and international relations in light of it.

The research project includes contributions mainly from scholars based in South Africa, who have sought to understand China from the perspective of sub-

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Saharan values, interests and concerns.

Questions the contributors have sought to answer include: What might an African country have to learn from Chinese tradition of meritocracy in government? How did Confucian values of harmony, along with structural reforms, influence China’s famous economic development over the past 30 years? When interacting with a Chinese businessperson, how should a contract be negotiated? How can sub-Saharan countries appeal to values of harmony to guide mutually

beneficial interaction between themselves and the Chinese?

It has been fascinating to see how many similarities there are between Confucianism, the most influential ethic in China, and ubuntu.

For the mainstream variants of both, one’s basic aim in life should be to develop the valuable parts of one’s human nature. Both traditions deem the central way by which to develop human excellence to be to relate to others (especially, but not solely, family) with compassion, benevolence, tolerance and respect.

And both traditions often summarise the way to relate to others in terms of “harmony”.

The differences between Confucianism and ubuntu are equally interesting.

Often, Confucian harmony is hierarchical, in which a superior, one with education and virtue, is expected to do what is best for subordinates. That explains the absence of a democratic tradition in China, and instead the focus on meritocracy, when selecting rulers.

In contrast, ubuntu often has an egalitarian, or at least participative, dimension to it. It is well known that many traditional African people tend to resolve disputes by all affected parties talking under a tree until an agreement is reached, or for a king to defer to consensus among popularly appointed elders. Harmony, here, includes a sharing



Pedestrians walk past The Bund Financial Bull sculpture on the Bund in Shanghai, China. Recent research projects in South Africa have aimed to understand the development of Chinese knowledge, politics, economics and society in order to make it comprehensible to an African audience. Picture: Bloomberg

of power, unlike in the Confucian tradition.

In addition, Confucian harmony involves different elements coming together to form something new that brings out the best in each. Think of different instruments making music together, or a variety of ingredients that form a tasty soup.

Confucians tend to think that people ought to aim for something similar, with themselves, with others and with nature. For instance, a person’s emotions, feelings and beliefs ought to cohere together; and differences between people ought to be respected but integrated in a way that is good for

all. Harmony in the ubuntu tradition is much more interpersonal, not the sort of thing that a person could manifest on her own. And it is not merely a matter of people engaging in mutual aid, but also sharing a way of life, meaning that they co-operate with each other and enjoy a sense of togetherness. These latter values are not as salient in Confucianism.

The research findings of Mistra’s research project, published as *The Rise and Decline and Rise of China: Searching for an Organising Philosophy*, was launched on Tuesday at the University of Pretoria and was

pitched at policy makers and the general public.

The other project, which has sought to relate sub-Saharan African values and interests to those in China, based at the Confucius Institute at Rhodes University, enquired into how indigenous African and Chinese ethics might be similar or different and also brought those working in the African and Chinese philosophical traditions into real dialogue with each other.

It is unlikely these two important projects could have been undertaken without English serving as a bridge between speakers of Sotho-Tswana and

Nguni languages, on the one hand, and Mandarin and Cantonese, on the other.

There is no doubt that some subtle elements have been lost in translation. However, a Western language has enabled two non-Western cultures to begin to think about themselves in relation to one another and in some depth.

That is something to welcome about a globalised world where power is beginning not to be so concentrated in the hands of the US and the UK.

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