In the West, a “black and white” situation is clear, straightforward and without nuance; in China, it is anything but. The ancient I Ching texts discuss yin (black) and yang (white) to represent the dynamic duality and balance of life. In Chinese Buddhist writings, the Ghost Festival’s Black Guard and White Guard are in charge of evil and good spirits respectively. And Deng Xiaoping’s famous allusion to black and white cats unleashed the country’s explosive growth of the last few decades.

These days, however, Chinese take the dual shades to represent totality. During the ‘China Strategy Challenge’ organised by CKGSB and IMD in Lausanne, Switzerland, Chinese cohorts described their business culture as ‘black on white’, meaning that their hyper-competitive environment saw them working night and day, weekdays and weekends, to develop the “four innovations” that would secure their organisation’s future: cost innovation; site innovation; customer focus and rapid product innovation. European companies seeking a slice of the Chinese market are encouraged to support this business culture and provide the highest levels of customer service twenty-four seven – in other words, ‘black on white’.

These insights took hold at the three-and-a-half-day summit between 2 and 5 September 2013, co-organised by CKGSB, China’s leading business school and IMD, Europe’s top ranked business school. Outstanding faculty from both institutions shaped summit themes, while ten moderators fluent in both Chinese and English managed the intensive cross-cultural interactive discussions and debates that ran throughout the programme. The European cohort asked questions about better integrating their businesses with those of their Chinese counterparts, while the Chinese cohort acknowledged their organisations would need to be cheaper, faster and more innovative, identifying the aforementioned “four innovations,” that could use European support.

Chinese companies have already set the innovative wheels in motion – achieving cost innovation by identifying and producing key components rather than buying them in, and developing site innovation by working directly with customers on solutions and/or sending them engineers. Companies championed customer innovation by helping consumers to find and embrace alternative uses for products and technology. As for rapid product innovation, the ‘Shanzai’ phenomenon describes the expansion of existing technology to deliver originality and supply an ever-growing number of market niches.

As the programme developed, and networking between Chinese and Europeans began to evolve, the implications of the China Strategy Challenge summit became clear. Chinese and European cohorts made high-level connections, both identifying and exploring opportunities for innovation beyond the ‘black on white’. Both cohorts felt that such CKGSB/IMD structured programmes constituted an excellent opportunity for stronger, better and more innovative partnerships that capitalise on the strengths and diversity of both cultures. Clearly, the global business world is no longer just black and white.

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