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agenda

Talking the Talk Beijing's top communicators

- The art of networking
- Training your mate
- The world's most persuasive chef
- Beijing's best brunches



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Ben Bravery makes science as easy, and palatable, as pie

CHINA'S KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Science Communicator Ben Bravery

Everybody knows that science is critical to modern life, but to many of us it can be quite daunting, with all of its jargon, formulas, and worst of all, math. Fortunately, there are people like Ben Bravery who, along with fellow science communicator Tim O'Mahony, have been building bridges between the scientific community and ordinary folk with their company Kexue Communications. Not only does this dedicated duo help scientists communicate, but they also help the wider world get acquainted with the

discoveries and innovations going on right here in China. Their work involves them with anyone from high-level researchers to schoolkids, and ranges over a vast territory of knowledge, from biology to physics, and from zoology to climatology. **Agenda** sat down with Ben Bravery to get schooled on the hard stuff.

What is science communications?

Science communication refers to any aspect of disseminating science and scientific findings to an audience.

"Of all modern countries, China is the most clear-eyed about the importance of research and development for its future prosperity. High-yield crops, renewable energy, medical advancement and environmental protection are all high on the agenda"

The science could really be anything: why the sky is blue, how giant pandas talk to each other in the wild, which genes in a virus make it a virus, and so on. The audience could be someone reading a newspaper, watching TV or listening to the radio, children at a school, or scientific researchers at a conference. The public needs to have access to scientific findings in order to make informed decisions. For instance, understanding why a V8 engine is more environmentally damaging than a hybrid helps us to make an educated choice about our next car.

We're used to hearing a lot of fuss about China's growing economic and political might, but what really excites me is that China is becoming a scientific superpower as well. In 2008 China produced over 280,000 research papers. That's about 11% of all papers published. It's also 60 times more articles than 12 years ago, and now China only trails the United States in research volume.

Of all modern countries, China is the most clear-eyed about the importance of research and development for its future prosperity. High-yield crops, renewable energy, medical advancement and environmental protection are all high on the agenda. Our job is to make sure these findings don't fall on deaf ears by communicating them to the rest of the world.

How did your company get established? I first came here to do research on endangered deer on Hainan Island. Some time later I took up a position with the Institute of Zoology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, China's national scientific agency. There I discovered that Chinese researchers were desperate for help preparing their manuscripts in English and communicating their findings to non-scientists around the world. Being a zoologist, I find talking about animals rather easy, so I founded Kexue Communications initially to help Chinese zoologists.

These days, however, we don't just edit papers about animals. Some of our recent projects have included performing science shows in Chinese schools in Beijing and Guangzhou, promoting Chinese research to journals like *Science and Nature*, appearing on radio to discuss science, and attending scientific conferences and reporting on them. We have even started birthday party science shows and workshops throughout Beijing.

In many countries, enthusiasm for science is instilled in kids at a young age. Do Chinese kids have scientific "heroes"? China has a rich history of scientific achievement, which is littered with superstars. Modern schoolkids are taught, for instance, about the ancient physician and naturalist Li Shizhen, the mathematician Zu Chongzhi and the polymath Zhang Heng, who, among other things, invented the first seismometer, wrote poetry and mapped and described over 2000 stars. Chinese students are also encouraged by achievements of the rocket scientist Qian Xuesen, the internationally renowned physicist Deng Jia, and the father of hybrid rice, Yuan Longping.

"China has a rich history of scientific achievement, which is littered with superstars"

While science communicators like the USA's Bill Nye the Science Guy, Australia's Dr Karl, Canada's David Suzuki and the UK's Richard Dawkins are well known outside China, some great personalities are popularising science in China too. Zhao Ming was the editor of *Little Edison* and has also published a series of science books for kids, and Ji Shisan, founder of Science Squirrels, fosters science networking and disseminates scientific findings in an interesting way.

You've worked closely with one of China's top panda researchers. What's the real story about China's panda population? Have

"If communities are going to initiate change, then asking these questions like these is the first step, and China is increasingly moving towards an inquiry-based system of science education that promotes questioning and investigation"

you learned anything encouraging? Giant pandas are very high-profile animals internationally, and everything the Chinese government does in terms of their management and conservation is monitored with interest around the world.

The number of giant pandas left on Earth is somewhere around 1,600. There is room for that number to expand though, not because giant pandas are recovering in the wild, but because our methods for counting them are becoming more accurate. A major survey of giant pandas is going to commence next year, and after that we'll have the most comprehensive estimate to date.

I am very encouraged by the work going on here in China to protect and conserve giant pandas. The old threats of hunting and deforestation have been halted, and

significant environmental challenges, and its national spending on research and development to combat these issues is growing. Early this year, China established the National Energy Commission, which is tasked with ensuring that the country can better respond to climate change through the increased use and development of renewable energies.

A scientifically engaged community is able to make informed decisions about everyday life. For example, how do light bulbs work? What type of light bulb should I use? How does using a light bulb affect atmospheric carbon dioxide? How does carbon dioxide affect the Earth's temperature? If communities are going to initiate change, then asking questions like these is the first step, and China is increasingly moving towards an inquiry-based system of science education that promotes questioning and investigation.

Will there be a reverse brain drain?

China's youth are scientifically literate and knowledgeable. I first noticed their attention to detail and desire for facts during the Olympic Games when numerous TV programs would go through the nuts and bolts of a sport, down to the dimensions of the mesh on a ping pong net.

We have a program of science shows and workshops called Kexue Kids, and through this we've seen a high level of enthusiasm for science and a good understanding of difficult concepts from an early age. When we did school shows on electricity and the physics of music, the kids were sometimes ahead of us when it came to the theoretical explanations for how these things work!

Interview by Nikolaus Fogle