Table of Contents

Synopsis ................................................................. 2
Playwright David Henry Hwang ............................... 2
A Conversation with David Henry Hwang ................... 4
Chinglish Definition ................................................. 6
How We Lose Things in Translation .............................. 6
Creativity for English Language ................................. 8
Culture Clash: 10 Major Cultural Differences ................. 9
Guanxi: A Realistic Backdrop for the Play ................. 10
Stranger than Fiction:
  A British Businessman’s Death Mirrors a Broadway Hit 10
An Investor’s Guide to Buying in China ....................... 12
10 Dos in Chinese Business ......................................... 14
Further Reading ..................................................... 15
Local Connections .................................................. 16
David Henry Hwang
Playwright, Screenwriter, Librettist

“David Henry Hwang is a true original. A native of Los Angeles, born to immigrant parents, he has one foot on each side of the cultural divide. He knows America—its vernacular, its social landscape, its theatrical traditions. He knows the same about China. In his plays, he manages to mix both of these conflicting cultures until he arrives at a style that is wholly his own. Mr. Hwang’s works have the verve of the well-made American stage comedies and yet, with little warning, they bubble over into the mystical rituals of Asian stagecraft. By at once bringing West and East into conflict and unity, this playwright has found the perfect way to dramatize both the pain and humor of the immigrant experience.”

—Frank Rich, New York Times

Few writers have turned issues around ethnicity and identity into a widely acclaimed and award-winning career like David Henry Hwang. This Chinese American playwright, described by the New York Times as “a true original” and by TIME magazine as “the first important dramatist of American public life since Arthur Miller,” is best known as the author of M. Butterfly. That enduring 1988 work, which won a Tony Award, Drama Desk Award, John Gassner Award, and Outer Critics Circle Award, was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. To date, M. Butterfly has been staged in over four dozen countries and was the basis for a major motion picture.

To describe Hwang as a major American dramatist is something of an understatement. His play, Golden Child, premiered Off-Broadway at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, received an Obie Award, and subsequently played on Broadway, where it received three Tony nominations. Yellow Face, which premiered at Los Angeles’ Mark Taper Forum and New York’s Public Theater, also won an Obie Award, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Other plays from his 30-year career include FOB (Obie Award), The Dance & the Railroad (Drama Desk Nomination, CINE Golden Eagle Award), and Family Devotions (Drama Desk Nomination).

Hwang’s most recent play, Chinglish, a hit comedy about an American businessman in China, premiered at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre before moving to Broadway, where it received a Drama Desk Nomination for Outstanding New Play. In 2011, it was named Best New American Play by TIME magazine.

Synopsis
Daniel Cavanaugh, a Midwestern American businessman looking to score a lucrative contact for his family’s sign-making firm, travels to the provincial Chinese capital of Guiyang, only to learn how much he doesn’t understand: his translators are unreliable, his British-born consultant may be a fraud, and he is captivated by Xi Yan, a beautiful, seemingly supportive government official.
According to Opera News, Hwang is America’s most-produced living opera librettist. He has written four works with composer Philip Glass, including *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*, while other of his libretti have been performed at the Metropolitan Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Bavarian State Opera, Lincoln Center, Spoleto Festival USA and elsewhere. The Deutsche Grammofone recording of his libretto for *Ainadamar* won two Grammy Awards after having spent time at the top of Billboard magazine’s classical music charts.

Hwang’s Broadway musicals include a new book for Rodgers & Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song*, which earned a Tony nomination. Hwang also co-wrote the book for the international hit Disney’s *Aida*, with music and lyrics by Elton John and Tim Rice. It won four Tony Awards and ran over four years on Broadway. Currently, Hwang is writing *The Forgotten Arm* with singer/songwriter Aimee Mann and Paul Bryant, based on her album, for the Public Theatre.

Hwang’s screen work is just as notable. He penned the screenplay for *M. Butterfly*, a Warner Brothers release directed by David Cronenberg; *Golden Gate*, directed by John Madden; *The Lost Empire*, a four-hour NBC television miniseries; and co-authored *Possession*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow. He is currently writing Bob’s Gang for Dreamworks Animation, as well as the movie adaptation of *Chinglish*, to be directed by Justin Lin (*Fast and Furious*).

A native of Los Angeles, Hwang attended Stanford University and the Yale University School of Drama. From 1994–2001, he served by appointment of President Bill Clinton on the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. In 2012, Hwang received the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theatre, the Asia Society Cultural Achievement Award, as well as the Steinberg Award for playwriting, the largest monetary prize in the American theater. Recently, the Signature Theatre in New York City announced Hwang will be the Residency One Playwright for the 2012–13 season. Hwang succeeds Athol Fugard, and over the course of the year, will enjoy a season-long showcase of his distinguished body of work.

A Conversation with David Henry Hwang

A few weeks before Chinglish premiered at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre in 2011, David Henry Hwang spoke with the Goodman’s Neena Arndt about his writing process and the timeliness of the play.

Arndt: You’re working with a translator, Candace Chong, to create the Mandarin text for Chinglish. Is this the first time that you’ve worked closely with a translator on a show?

Hwang: Yes, and I’m really enjoying this experience; it enables me to write a little more deeply about China without actually knowing Chinese. And to write a bilingual play without being bilingual.

A: In Chinglish, there’s a bilingual character, Peter, who’s been in China for 20 years and knows the country very well. Peter is from England, but says he feels more at home in China—unfortunately, his Chinese colleagues don’t always accept him as one of their own. In writing that character, what issues about cultural identity were you aiming to explore?

H: I’ve spent a good portion of my career writing about the dilemma of identity as it relates to Asian Americans. I’m a Chinese American, and when I’m in China, they certainly don’t consider me Chinese. And in America, there are some questions about Asians and to what extent we are either perpetual foreigners or “regular” Americans. The more I’ve gotten a chance to travel and meet people in different parts of the world, the more I realize that this is not a dilemma that is unique to Asian Americans. Especially as the world grows smaller and there’s more transnationalism and more people relocating across borders, this sense of dislocation and insecurity about identity applies to a lot of people. And I think Peter was an opportunity for me to explore these sorts of feelings of identity confusion but with the shoe on the other foot. Having spent some time with the ex-pat community in China, I would say it is more difficult for someone like Peter to be accepted as a Chinese person in China than it is for a Chinese American to be accepted as an American.

A: One of the other major themes of the play is the difference between the American ideal of marriage, which dictates that marriage should be based on romantic love and open communication, and the Chinese ideal of marriage, which relies on different values altogether. Can you speak about that cultural difference?

H: In a way I would say it’s not even an America versus China difference, as much as it is a new-world versus old-world difference. If you talk to people from Europe, they have a much more practical notion of what marriage is supposed to be—that it’s essentially an institution. It’s a partnership; the romance is going to fade and you don’t necessarily go from one marriage to another trying to chase romance. I think that’s something that older cultures, like China’s, tend to realize more. The emphasis on romance as an integral part of marriage is a relatively new idea in China. Whereas in America, I feel that romance is sort of our secular religion. Like, “All you need is love.” As our attachment to traditional religion has diminished, I feel as if what’s taken its place is this humanistic religion of romantic love, which is what all our songs and movies are about. In the Middle Ages all art was to glorify God, and now, all our art—at least all our popular art—is to glorify romantic love.

A: Art, and the value of art, is another subject that you address in the play. Some of the characters are building a cultural center in a provincial Chinese city and there’s discussion about what kind of performances will go on there.

H: Yes. Many regional capitals now have big cultural centers, which were constructed as monuments of civic pride. Cities are left with the question, “What are we supposed to do with this now that we’ve got it? What goes into the cultural center?” Certainly, traditional work—Chinese opera and traditional Chinese music—is one possibility. But on the other hand, China is moving rapidly into a market-dominated economy. And the dilemma in the play has to do with a bureaucrat who is very interested in preserving the traditional forms, which aren’t going to make the most money (the same is true in our culture). And so there’s a lot of pressure for him to use the cultural center in a way that’s going to be more market-friendly.

A: Why isn’t Chinese opera market-friendly?

H: Chinese opera is a total theatre form that involves acrobatics and singing; it has been the high art form of
Chinese theatre for 400 or 500 years. There are still a lot of people who practice it with excitement and are innovating in the form. But, much like Western opera, it’s somewhat esoteric. It’s not as accessible and not as popular as pop music and American movies. That brings up a question: if something cannot make money, is it valuable? So what do we put in the cultural center? That’s one of the questions of the play. And it’s the same question that we struggle with in Western culture in terms of how we value or don’t value the arts.

A: Another problem the characters face with the cultural center is making sure that all the signs are translated into English properly—which is often not the case in China.

H: Yes. And those mistranslations have been very much in the news—particularly in China. As they were gearing up for the Olympics there was a desire to get rid of all the Chinglish. And then there started to be a certain number of counterarticles written about how Chinglish is actually very interesting and we should preserve it. So that was in the air during a lot of the time that I’d been going over. And then as I started to think about writing a play about doing business in China, I went to a brand-new cultural center. It was made out of beautiful Italian woods and had a Japanese sound system—but all I noticed were the mistranslated signs and how ridiculous they were. It seemed like it would be fun to use that as the jumping-off point for a play about doing business in China.

This piece originally appeared in the program for the Goodman Theatre’s 2011 production of Chinglish. http://www.goodmantheatre.org/
Chinglish Decoded: How We Lose Things in Translation

by Neena Ardnt

“I like your smile, but unlike you put your shoes on my face,” reads a sign situated near a lawn in China. “The little grass is sleeping. Please don’t disturb it,” reads another similarly placed sign. “Your careful step keeps tiny grass invariably green,” reads a third. All three are attempting to communicate the same message, which in America is crisply rendered as “Keep off the grass.”

Signs like these are a common sight in China, where tourists puzzle and giggle over the mistranslations commonly known as “Chinglish.” English-speakers are directed to “slip carefully” (“don’t slip”) and to use the “deformed man’s toilet” (“handicapped restroom”). They are informed that “the civilized and tidy circumstance is a kind of enjoyment” (“don’t litter”). Any native speaker of English can snicker at these malapropisms, but most don’t know enough about Chinese language or culture to understand the factors that result in Chinglish signage.

In fact, as the character Daniel points out in Chinglish, “If you are American, it is safe to assume that you do not speak a single *%&^%ig foreign language.” Though most Americans are exposed to foreign languages during their school years, few attain proficiency. And many monolinguals, who acquired their native language in infancy and haven’t had a good reason to think about language since, operate under what linguists call the naïve lexical hypothesis: that is, they assume that differences between languages lie solely in their vocabulary, and that each word in a given language has an equivalent word in all other languages. Both Chinglish (the linguistic phenomenon) and Chinglish (David Henry Hwang’s play) are humorous but potent reminders that there’s no such thing as a direct translation and that language is usually more slippery than we expect. Translators would do well to heed the Chinglish warning: “slip carefully.”

An English speaker learning Mandarin Chinese will rapidly discover that it differs from English not only in its sound system, but also in its structure. Those who learned a Germanic or Romance language in high school will recall the arduous task of conjugating verbs in past, present and future tenses. Mandarin learners need not study up on verb tenses because Mandarin doesn’t use them; it relies instead on other cues within a sentence to indicate if something has already happened, is happening presently, is expected to happen in the future or if the speaker is using the verb as a command. Adding an ending to a verb (such as -d or -ed to indicate past tense in English) would be an unfamiliar concept for a Mandarin speaker. This illuminates, for the English speaker, how someone might cre-

Chinglish (n.)

A mixture of Chinese and English; esp. a variety of English used by speakers of Chinese or in a bilingual Chinese and English context, typically incorporating some Chinese vocabulary or constructions, or English terms specific to a Chinese context.

ate a sign that reads, “Be sloppily dressed excuse me for not receiving,” when a more apt translation might be, “Entrance may be denied to underdressed customers.” While “be sloppily dressed” sounds like a command to English speakers, a native Mandarin speaking translator could easily misunderstand the relative subtleties involved in using verbs in English.

Another significant structural difference between the two languages concerns plurals. In Mandarin, it is rare to combine morphemes—units of meaning—to create more complex words. The English word dogs contains two morphemes—dog, which means furry quadruped, usually friendly, and -s, which means that there are two or more of them. While English denotes plurality by adding -s, Mandarin often goes without denoting it at all—the listener must either infer it from contextual clues, or proceed without knowing whether her neighbor is talking about his single dog or his 50 dogs. If a speaker needs to make this distinction clear, he or she can use words like some or many, or can indicate a specific number, but this is often unnecessary. This explains why a person might create a sign that says, “Don’t forget to carry your thing,” when he is attempting to prevent foreigners from leaving their personal belongings behind: in English, we draw a (key) distinction between “your thing” and “your things,” but a Mandarin speaker could be hard-pressed to see the difference.

Of course, good translation between the two languages is possible, and the real causes of Chinglish signage are carelessness and poor knowledge of English. Some companies assign translation duties to the employee whose knowledge of English is best—but the “best” English speaker in a company may possess only partial proficiency. Unwilling to defy or disappoint her superiors by revealing her lack of ability, this employee will attempt the translation—with mixed results. In some cases, companies rely on online translators, which tend to create literal, dictionary-based translations that don’t take into account connotations or multiple definitions of words. Nor do such translators consider how each language uses metaphors and idioms differently. It may make sense, to the Chinese mind, to say that undisturbed grass is “sleeping,” but English doesn’t normally utilize that metaphor, and an adept human translator would find a more familiar phrase. (The opposite scenario—English idioms sounding odd or unintelligible in Chinese—can also be true. A literal translation of phrases like “bad egg” or “nest egg” would surely prove either disastrous or amusing.)

In David Henry Hwang’s play, as in real life, many Chinese people are ashamed of Chinglish and aim to eradicate it. Certainly tourists would benefit from clearer signage, but would also miss out on windows into the Chinese language—which, though often comical, are thought-provoking insights into a culture that so often remains elusive and mysterious to westerners.

This piece originally appeared in the program for the Goodman Theatre’s 2011 production of Chinglish. http://www.goodmantheatre.org/
Chinglish: Creativity for English Language

The Global Language Monitor (GLM) recently released a report saying Chinglish has become creative for new English words.

English, as a global language, has been affected by the rise of China. There are reports saying that many new English words are “Chinglish” such as “Long time no see,” “Drinktea,” “coolie” and “typhoon.”

The president of the GLM, Paul Payack, said Chinglish and other mixed English words have enriched the English vocabulary, which has now 986,120 words according to latest estimates. The GLM added 20,000 new words to their base in the English language last year, twice as many as last year. Twenty percent of them are Chinglish.

These Chinglish words reflect time changes in different periods of China. Words that feature ancient Chinese culture, such as Confucianism, the Four Books and Five Classics, the family contract responsibility system, knowledge economy and peaceful rise illustrate the social situation after China’s reform and opening up.

Chinglish is also a hot topic among foreigners in China. A blog, written by a German, Chinglish.de, expresses the author’s regret over China’s clean-up of Chinglish logos in public places in Beijing ahead of the 2008 Olympics. A Dutch youth set up Chinglish.com in Amsterdam to seek business opportunities given Chinglish’s expansion.

Chinglish’s influence is close related with the Chinese-language study promotion around the world. It is said there are about 30 million foreigners learning Chinese. As a symbol for Chinese teaching, Confucius Institutes play an important role in Chinese cultural communication. There are now 120 Confucius institutes in the world spread across more than 50 countries. The number is expected to increase to 500 in 2010.

Editor: Du Xiaodan
Source: China Daily | 02-26-2007 17:13
Culture Clash
10 Major Cultural Differences Between China and the USA

1. **Social Structure** • In China the social structure is formal and hierarchical. You know where you fit in the structure and you abide by the rules there. There is no crossing into other areas. In America, it is much more loose and informal. It is not uncommon to see those of various social levels socializing and knowing each other. There are very few lines that socially are not allowed to be crossed. This can cause problems in business relationships if the visiting culture is unaware of it.

2. **Confrontation/Conflict** • If you are planning on conducting business in China or expecting an extended stay, it might be useful to know that the direct way that most Americans approach issues is not the way to go in China. Direct conflict or confrontation over issues is highly frowned upon. Doesn't matter that the “truth” needs to be spoken, respect and honor to each person supersedes that. To prove a point and show yourself in the right even over business issues is considered shameful and should be avoided.

3. **Self** • The Chinese looks more at the group collective than at individualism. America has become known for its push of individualism which has been a source of conflict with other cultures that look collectively. A person from China is more prone to look at how their acts affect the whole instead of how it affects them personally. They are more willing to give up and sacrifice for the greater good. America’s individualism has been its backbone and the reason for its success as a world power, but when visiting China it needs to be reined in.

4. **Face/Reputation** • Reputation of the individual is very important in China. If an action will humiliate someone or ruin a reputation, it is avoided. When shame occurs, the person sacrifices their job or whatever it is that will heal the shame. In America, reputations come and go overnight and in the end usually does not matter. The end result is more of the focus. A person is more likely to overlook a reputation to get the job done.

5. **Business Relations** • When doing business in China, be prepared for much socializing. Business becomes secondary as the parties get to know each better. If it delays a contract, that is perfectly acceptable as long as the correct social time is allotted for. In America, business associates are usually more aloof. There might be some social gathering but the business is more important and the socializing will be sacrificed to get the job done if needed. Though there seems to be shift in America regarding this. The recognition of networking is becoming more pronounced.

6. **Morals** • Chinese society places high values on the morals of their people. Marriage is not encouraged until the late twenties. In fact, dating is discouraged early in a young adult’s life and proprieties are expected to be held up. The American culture is much more relaxed and some could even argue that there needs to be more moral emphasis.

7. **Recognition of the Dead** • One of the time honored traditions of the Chinese is the recognition of the dead. Once a year, all members of a family visit the gravesites of each ancestor and pay their respects. Honoring ancestors is very important in Chinese culture. This is in direct contrast to most Americans who rarely know where the majority of their ancestors are laid to rest. This might be due to the fact that most Americans are immigrants who either have lost the information on grave locations or the locations are in foreign countries. China’s culture is much older and the percentage of immigration is far less.

8. **Humility** • Humility is a revered virtue in Chinese culture. The success of one’s business or personal life is downplayed while in America the successes are lauded. Most Americans in the fast business world consider humility a sign of weakness. This can be an issue that hurts inter-cultural relations. Be very sensitive to comments and actions in the presence of another culture.

9. **Time Sensitivity** • Crossing cultures for business can be frustrating when it interferes with getting the job done. Most Americans are very time sensitive when it comes to meetings and deadlines. If the meeting was to commence at 2:00, then all parties are to be present at that time. The Chinese do not view time as an absolute but more as a suggestion. Concern is not expressed for a meeting starting late or ending at a different time. The same can be applied to deadlines. If a report is due on Friday, an American would be waiting for that report to be received before end of business day. The Chinese would not worry if it showed up several days later.

10. **Respect** • Being sensitive to another person’s needs is very important in Chinese culture. It is expected that you will respect the other person and treat them well. Their needs are met at each encounter. This is a characteristic that unfortunately has fallen on the wayside in most American circles.

Guanxi: A Realistic Backdrop

“Guanxi, which means, you have to take the time and trouble to build an actual relationship.”

—Quote from Chinglish by David Henry Hwang

Stranger than Fiction:
A British Businessman’s Death Mirrors a Broadway Hit

by David Henry Hwang

In my play Chinglish, which had a well-reviewed run on Broadway, a Midwestern American businessman travels to the inland Chinese city of Guiyang in hopes of landing a contract for his firm, only to become ensnared in multiple misunderstandings, from language to love. The play, a comedy, seemed to strike audiences as one small step toward greater cultural understanding.

Chinese nationals with whom I spoke after the show, however, sometimes raised one quibble about my script, which includes an extramarital affair between the American businessman and the wife of a Communist Party official. This, they said, might make for good drama, but couldn’t actually happen in China. Such a woman would never enter into a close relationship with a foreign man.

Against that backdrop, the dramatic fall of former Chinese Politburo member Bo Xilai has been particularly fascinating. The scandal is set in the inland Chinese city of Chongqing, where Bo rose to become a party leader, with a cast of characters that includes his wife, Gu Kailai, who is being investigated in the mysterious death of British businessman Neil Heywood. Bo, meanwhile, has been stripped of his government post. As the story broke, I began receiving email from journalists and China experts who had seen my show. “Chinglish à la Agatha Christie!” wrote one. “Chinglish as a murder mystery!” suggested another.

It’s true that the Bo story has taken similarities between art and life to a whole new level. The play features a British consultant who arranges for the son of a Chinese official to be admitted to an English university. Neil Heywood got Bo’s son into England’s Harrow School. In Chinglish, an official is arrested on corruption charges, which serve as a pretext for a behind-the-scenes power struggle. Similarly, the downfall of Bo and his wife is widely regarded as a bid to remove him from office in advance of a major Chinese leadership transi-
More than two decades ago, I wrote another play, M. Butterfly, inspired by the true story of a French diplomat’s 20-year affair with a Chinese citizen, who turned out to be (A) a spy and (B) a man in drag. In those days, Western nations dominated the world. A European man involved with a Chinese woman could still live the fantasy of Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, in which a richer and more powerful Western male dominates a stereotypically submissive and self-sacrificing Asian female.

Today, recession-battered Westerners seeking a foothold in booming China must assimilate to its customs and ways of doing business. I experienced this firsthand starting in 2005, when I began traveling there regularly. As a Chinese-American born in Los Angeles, I was raised with few customs from my parents’ homeland. Yet China had become interested in Broadway musicals, and I happen to be the only even-nominally Chinese person who has ever written a Broadway show, so I found myself there discussing proposals for productions. These ideas ultimately amounted to nothing, but provided me with an amazing opportunity to learn about China today.

Though I took a couple of years of Mandarin in college, I basically speak only English. Like any monolingual American, I needed an interpreter for my Chinese meetings. On one trip, I was taken to a brand-new cultural center, which featured gorgeous Brazilian wood, Italian marble, state-of-the-art Japanese sound systems. The lone flaw was the signage, which had been translated into laughable English, commonly known as “Chinglish.” The handicapped restrooms, for instance, were labeled “Deformed Man’s Toilet.” I began imagining a play about doing business in China that would deal with the issue of language. Roughly one-quarter of the dialogue in Chinglish is in Mandarin, with English translations projected onto a screen for non-Chinese speakers.

Just as the English supertitles allow Western audiences to understand what would otherwise remain mysterious, I wanted the story to illuminate differences between Chinese and American cultural assumptions. Though I’d often heard stories about foreign firms and deals gone wrong, I still had more to learn. An early draft of my play, for instance, included a scene where a British consultant visits a disgraced Chinese official in prison. Our show’s cultural advisers spoke with numerous experts before deciding that such a scenario would be impossible; no such visit would ever be allowed. So I rewrote it.

In today’s China, unlike that of M. Butterfly, a Western man involved with an Asian woman might well end up as the submissive partner. So has any news outlet suggested a sexual relationship between Madame Gu and Neil Heywood? Not in China. Between the lines, however, one can read implications: Madame Gu grew “too close” to a foreign businessman, leading to his murder, she suffered from “bouts of depression,” she apparently asked those in her “inner circle” to “divorce their spouses” and swear allegiance to her and her husband. Still, to my knowledge, no article in China has explicitly suggested a romantic affair.

The story in Hong Kong, however is different. There, on April 12, the Apple Daily published a piece headlined:

**CUCKOLDED BO ORDERED THE KILLING.**
**GU KAILAI RUMORED TO BE ROMANTICALLY INVOLVED WITH MURDERED BRITISH BUSINESSMAN.**

It read: “There are rumors that Heywood was murdered because he knew the secrets about the Bo family fortune and had an affair with Mrs. Bo. There are even rumors that Bo was angered he was cuckolded so he ordered the killing... Some reports claim that two days after the death of Neil Heywood, Gu Kailai and Heywood’s widow met at a Chongqing cafe with military police guarding the entrance and clearing out all other customers. According to these reports, people could hear Gu weeping, and in the end, Heywood’s widow agreed to forgo an autopsy. The official report would declare excessive alcohol as the cause of death, and the body would be cremated.”

That piece came two days after a government announcement that Madame Gu was under investigation for the “intentional homicide” of Heywood, and that Bo had been stripped of his party roles. The Apple Daily version of events may be sensationalized fiction. But it at least made explicit the suspicions of many people.

Still, it’s unlikely we’ll ever learn the true facts of this case. For Chinese officials, obsessed with “face,” the real scandal is that ordinary Chinese, even foreigners, have seen the inner workings of the nation’s ruling elite. Chinglish uses power struggles, plot twists and translated supertitles to make transparent what is normally hidden to outsiders. In the real China, though truth may be as strange as fiction, it is almost always less transparent.
“Seventy percent guanxi and 30 percent talent will do”
—Quote from Chinese Guanxi by Fu Shi

An Investor’s Guide to Buying in China
by Didi Kirsten Tatlow

Chinese are masters of “guanxi,” or connections, using the art of relationships — and its close companion, corruption — to secure everything from safe childbirth to a prestigious burial, taking in education, jobs, a fancy home and a Porsche Cayenne S.U.V. along the way.

That’s the popular wisdom, held by many Chinese and non-Chinese alike.

“Chinese people are good at guanxi,” said the novelist Fu Shi, whose real name is Hu Gang. “Of course, it’s not just a Chinese speciality. It exists in the West, in the United States, too. But in China, it’s just deeper.”

So why did Mr. Fu write “Chinese Guanxi,” an advice book that teaches people how to cultivate social connections with dinners, expensive gifts and “red packets,” or cash-filled envelopes? Don’t they already know?

“Some people are real masters at it, and some aren’t. Not everyone is an expert,” the novelist said by telephone from his home in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province.

“I want to help the weak ones advance and take away the oxygen from the experts,” he said.

For Mr. Fu is no mere peddler of corrupt ideals, with a dystopic solution to a serious problem. His goal is to create a new kind of level playing field, where everyone benefits from an unfair arrangement by exploiting it equally.

In other words: Fight fire with fire, and corruption with ... more corruption.

The approach reflects what experts say is widespread cynicism about the chances of curbing corruption, in the absence of independent monitoring agencies or free news media.

“Corruption is growing all the time, because people and the country are growing richer,” said Liao Ran, program officer for China and South Asia at Transparency International, a nongovernmental anti-corruption organization based in Berlin.

Despite real efforts by the government, which include regular anti-corruption drives, detailed legislation and, in December, its first anti-corruption white paper, corruption is just part of the system, Mr. Liao said.

“The Communist Party can mobilize human and financial resources to do something. It has the institutional capacity to mobilize or to suppress,” Mr. Liao said by telephone. “If it wanted to control corruption, it could do it.”

Yet, far from fearing corruption, he said, officials and businessmen “are afraid if you are not corrupt. They want you to be corrupt. If you don’t join in, if you want to be a good person, then you highlight their badness.”

Mr. Liao’s quixotic conclusion: Because of government involvement, “corruption in China is very serious and very rampant. And under control.”

Mr. Liao singled out the 2008 economic stimulus plan, which pumped 4 trillion renminbi, or $625 billion, into the economy, as a key source of rising corruption.

At least 700 billion renminbi went to the high-speed rail system in 2010 alone, with “no independent oversight or regulation,” he said.
The rail project may be “the biggest single financial scandal not just in China, but perhaps in the world,” said Mr. Liao.

Mr. Fu’s first piece of advice: Don’t be shy.

“You can use people at any time and any place. And they can use you, too,” he writes.

Chapters include: inviting powerful people to dinner (do not get your guest too drunk, he might forget what you talked about); giving red packets (de rigueur in hospitals); and giving gifts (present in person, shut the doors and windows first).

The book was published in June, and people flocked to book signings in Changsha in July, according to ent.changsha.cn, an entertainment news portal.

Mr. Fu’s first novel, “Green Porcelain,” released in 2006, about guanxi in an auction house, sold more than a million copies and was serialized by the Web portal Sina.com, earning Mr. Fu nearly 4 million renminbi, he wrote.

Corruption is morally ugly, Mr. Fu warned. It also increases costs.

“A society that relies on guanxi to get things done is a scary place,” he said.

“When guanxi becomes stronger than rules, it’s dangerous to everyone. Why? Because if you use your guanxi, I’ll use my guanxi, and in the end the price of everything rises. When there are no rules, then everything is a competition, and those with more power win,” he said.

“Guanxi is alive and kicking,” said Sarah Köchling of Whatif, an innovation consulting company in Shanghai.

As China’s economy expands and becomes globalized, she said, people ask, “Is it going to reduce in importance?”

“I think it’s going to grow,” said Ms. Köchling, who has lived in Asia for more than 20 years.

Wrote Mr. Fu: “Everyone knows that 10 years ago, success was 30 percent guanxi and 70 percent talent. Today, to succeed, you can reverse the ratio. Seventy percent guanxi and 30 percent talent will do.”

Mr. Fu sees himself as both perpetrator and victim.

A former philosophy student, he left his job in the human resources department of his alma mater, Xiangtan University, in 1992.

“Had I remained a bureaucrat, I’d definitely have become corrupt,” he wrote. “The reason is simple: Virtually everyone offered bribes.

“You can resist temptation once,” he wrote, “but not a hundred or a thousand times.”

He went into business, eventually becoming the legal representative of an auction company, which he declined to name. Bribing officials was part of the job.

By 2003, Mr. Fu had become entangled in a major corruption scandal involving justice system officials. “Friends” sold him out to the authorities. Jailed for 300 days, he thought up his first novel, he said. He has since published another, “Red Sleeve,” and plans two more — a guanxi quartet.

Each has a color in the title: green, red, black or white. Together, the words form a Chinese expression meaning “right and wrong.”

For now, absent real solutions, he says, the only hope is to publicize guanxi’s tricks. That way the socially skilled lose their advantage over the socially inept.

“Build a new set of rules,” he wrote. “Make these things more open, transparent, and, in this way, more free, equal and fair.”

10 Dos in Chinese Business

1. Greet everyone with a light handshake as it is usually regarded as a respectful and standard business practice in Chinese business meetings. One point you should not miss is that do greet the most senior person at first, and when you are greeting people, slightly lower your eyes as it is considered as a symbol of respect.

2. Exchanging business cards is also as good as shaking hands. While exchanging business cards with Chinese, it is better to present using both hands and slightly bow forward.

3. Seek for common ground between the partners. Usually the Chinese would love to establish relationship before doing business transactions. It could be anything from hobbies, interests to the same university, etc.

4. Send appropriate gifts in good attitude. Sending gifts is a common business practice in China; however, gifts will not be immediately received so as not to appear greedy. It is often refused several times. If it is refused, as the giver, you should kindly offer the gift again. Bear in mind that wrap the gift, and send out using both hands as it is considered to be more polite. Gift is usually opened later rather than in front of the giver. If you are presented a gift, follow the same process as above.

5. Take appropriate seat when dining out with Chinese in formal occasions. Usually a trip will be made to a private room of a grand restaurant before setting down into business. For traditional Chinese business meal, there is usually an elaborate seating arrangement for the host and the guest depending on the seniority. It is very important to adhere to the rules when attending the meals.

6. Drink with the Chinese. Usually when there is an informal meal, there will be alcohol. If you cannot drink, declare that you are a non-alcoholic or use medical grounds as excuses, in this way it can let you off the hook with little drinks. However, the best way is to bring a person who can drink well on your behalf.

7. Treating them to dinners, KTV or other activities would benefit a lot since most Chinese would like to know the person more before doing business. If you want to win Chinese’s trust and do successful business, it would be better to spend more time communicating with them through dinners, meetings or any other activities.

8. Give “face” to the Chinese as they attach great importance to it. During business negotiations, respect them and their desire. Do not ask anyone to do anything that they think beneath them, or else, it could ruin the relationship. Never comment, criticize or insult someone in front of too many people as it would make them lose “face” if being humiliated in the public. Instead, it is better to talk to the person when he or she is alone.

9. Nurture close relationships with Chinese counterparts. Building strong partnership can not only eliminate operational risks but also create avenues for shooting troubles when in need of help.

10. Establish intimate relationship with Chinese government officials. The Chinese government has a great impact in market movement as well as administering foreign enterprises. Lots of hiccups can be eliminated during the process of paperwork applications or local authorization if forming a close relationship with government officials for those who want to do business in China.

Adapted from Business Practices—Top 10 Critical DOs to Sustain Prosperous Business in Guangzhou
Further Reading

*Guanxi Business*  
by Yadong Luo

*The Fragile Bridge: Conflict Management in Chinese Business*  
by Andrew Hupert

*The Lowdown Business Etiquette*  
by Florian Loloum

*Think Like Chinese*  
by Zhang Haihua and Geoff Baker
Local Connections

**Chinese Consolidate Benevolent Association**  
ccbaportland.org

**Northwest China Council**  
nwchina.org

**Lan Su Chinese Gardens**  
lansugarden.org

Come visit Lan Su Chinese Gardens to get a glimpse at some of the local flowers from China, featuring floral arrangements, unique plant displays, and plant guides.

239 NW Everett Street  
Portland, Oregon 97209  
503-228-8131

**Shanghai Tunnel Tours**  
portlandwalkingtours.com/tours/underground-portland-shanghai-tunnels-tour

Come see the sights of Portland’s Chinatown, along with its seedy underground, on this great walking tour. You will learn all about the history, myths, and legends of Portland’s mysterious past.

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503-228-8131

**Chinese New Year Celebration**  
portlandchinesetimes.com/event_cny.php

Portland hosts many different events to celebrate the Chinese New Year. One of the largest is the Chinese New Year Cultural Event, which is a day full of authentic food, demonstrations, hands-on activities, and special performances.

Oregon Convention Center  
777 NE Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard  
Portland, Oregon 97232

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**Engrish.com**  
engrish.com

Did you enjoy all of the hilariously translated English and Chinese phrases? Want to see some more? Well then visit Engrish.com to see many more entertaining translations.

**Malaya Signs**  

If you are in need of a business like Ohio Signage that Daniel Cavanaugh ran, then try visiting Malaya Signs. This family owned business creates quality custom signs for local Portland businesses.

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**PSU Confucius Institute**  
oia.pdx.edu/confucius

**U.S. Wushu Center & Qian Kun Institute**  
uswushu.com