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MEET CHINA'S LATEST MEDIA CELEBRITY. HE DOESN'T SPEAK CHINESE.

BY JENNIFER BRAGG • JUL 22 • 2016

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

There's more to China than smog and economic domination.

On a Wednesday morning in May, Robert Kuhn arrives at the penthouse suite of an office building in Beijing. A gym, pool table, office and living room await; the décor is classically Chinese faux-tastic luxury. Kuhn, a short, bespectacled, seventy-something American, sports a dark suit and striped tie. The agenda: an interview with a deputy from the Chinese Communist Party's Cadre Bureau. The topic is sensitive, but Kuhn negotiates the questions deftly.

Kuhn is host of *Closer to China With R.L. Kuhn*, which airs in an unlikely place — Chinese state television, CCTV News — and reaches 85 million homes worldwide. He's been on the air since last January but has been doing the work of unpuzzling China for much longer. Kuhn covers everything from China's foreign policy to a controversial organ-donation program. And he says he's given remarkable autonomy from the state, except for the occasional government request. It helps that his purview is explanatory rather than investigative: He sees his job as giving “a

sense of meaning and intent of what China is trying to do.” He’s also the author of a number of books, including a 2005 biography of former president Jiang Zemin, which sold 1.5 million copies. His position has placed him to rival Henry Kissinger (<http://www.ozy.com/true-story/the-night-i-almost-peed-on-henry-kissinger/69423>) when it comes to knowing China intimately. Yet somehow this *laowai* (foreigner) speaks almost no Chinese.

Robert Kuhn’s tips on doing business in China:

1. However long you think it will take to make a deal, double it.
2. Once deals are made, trust the Chinese to follow up with continuity, loyalty and stable relationships.
3. Companies need a “politico-strategic framework” — aligning what the company is doing with Chinese policy, particularly Xi Jinping (<http://www.ozy.com/pov/can-xi-jinping-have-it-all/38878>)’s five development priorities for the country. Know the Communist Party, its key players and decision-makers.

China is the world’s largest media market, hosting the most online users. The media and entertainment industries (often intertwined) are worth about \$180 billion and rapidly growing, according to data from the Wharton Business Council and the

Council on Foreign Affairs. An explosion of e-trepreneurs is hungry to cash in. Experts say that, though the government, too, wants to capitalize on this trend, it continues to filter out anything deemed too sensitive to Chinese interests. Most media remains state-owned, with a few independent outlets, all subject to scrutiny from Big Brother. It's a delicate balance that Kuhn avoids thanks to his intuition about the very fuzzy line, pushing the envelope gently wherever he can. Being a friend of China's leadership certainly helps. He is among only a **handful of media personalities (8)** who've figured out and negotiated that ambiguous balance.

Kuhn and business partner Adam Zhu's relationship with political leaders has earned criticism over the years, from the Hong Kong press and some American experts, including accusations that Kuhn is in the pocket of the Chinese government. Both deny this. Kuhn says most of his income comes from consulting with companies doing business there — an explanation, in his mind, that disproves the notion that he profits off governmental nepotism. He could, if he wished, walk away.

Kuhn understands China better than his counterparts in the U.S.

— Zhang Weiwei, director of the China Institute at think tank Fudan

And contrary to Western stereotypes of the Great Chinese Firewall dampening all free speech, Asian financial news veteran and editor in chief of *Asia Times* Doug Tsuruoka says biased reporting on China and a cutback in American news bureaus in Asia has drowned out valuable voices like Kuhn's. "The value of Robert, who is not a propagandist, is he understands the Chinese psychological nuances, the complexity of the culture and the politics," says Tsuruoka. He does, after all, have a scientist's flair for objectivity, reflected in his PBS show's title, *Closer to Truth*.

We might chalk up Kuhn's success less to the government and more to partner Zhu. The 51-year-old, who straddles L.A. and Beijing, is the Sundance Kid to Kuhn's Butch Cassidy. He says Kuhn communicates with him at 2 or 3 a.m., inciting the occasional ire of Zhu's wife. The two met during Kuhn's first trip to China, when Zhu was a young government attaché. Later they traveled together, scouting business opportunities. Zhu introduced Kuhn to people across the political,

academic and cultural spectrum; Kuhn asked questions and earned people's trust. They began mapping a changing China. Today these connections provide a trove of experts in Kuhn's Rolodex.

Since his first visit in 1989, Kuhn has traveled to over 100 cities, befriending everyone from the average Zhou to the president. An avid reader and writer, he spends a lot of time writing op-eds and appearing on television explaining China's perspective on a trend or event. "There is so much misperception and misunderstanding of China today," says Zhang Weiwei, director of the China Institute at Fudan, a think tank in Shanghai. But Kuhn, she says, "understands China better than his counterparts in the U.S.," and he explains it better too.

Kuhn's background is an unusual cocktail: science and investment banking. The former earned him an invitation to China from the government's head honcho to adapt the science industry to a market economy, away from the traditional mash-up of academic, business and scientific research. He eschewed politics. But something about the spirit of change and opportunity captured his imagination — and for 27 years, he's continued coming back.

So if Kuhn is the go-to guy for China, we would be remiss not to ask him: Is it really going to dominate the world one day? His answer is surprising, and it doesn't sound like a propagandist's: "It doesn't want to. It can't. It has enough problems of its own."