

Overseas Education



A speech to remember

Out of the Box

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trade issues, but perhaps also around other political issues surrounding China recently.

So it was a surprise to me that he spoke basically on only one issue: defending economic globalization.

Belt and Road was mentioned but only briefly and only as part of the rubric of globalization. It turns out to be the right topic at the right time from the leader of China.

Soon after he began, it became clear to me that he was speaking to then US president-elect Donald Trump, but without mentioning his name. Trump had accused China of stealing US jobs and threatened China with trade retaliation.

I was listening with a sense of disbelief, telling myself that if I closed my eyes and only listened to the English simultaneous translation, I could have mistaken Xi for Barack Obama or Theresa May!

The supreme irony of the leader of the CCP defending globalization at the shrine of capitalism that is the WEF, and speaking to a future US president

President Xi Jinping's appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos marks the first time that a Chinese leader has attended the event. AFP



who was going to be inaugurated in a few days, was noticed by everyone there and around the world.

The speech has been widely reported. The most mentioned quote is: "No one will emerge as a winner in a trade war" – perhaps as a warning to Trump. But my favorites are: "Pursuing protectionism is like locking oneself in a dark room; while you keep the wind and rain away, you also keep the light and air away too," and "we cannot return to harbor whenever we encounter a storm – we'll never reach the other shore."

Perhaps a bit of Chinese philosophy.

Xi defended China's contribution to world trade. He said China signed up for globalization when it joined the WTO and has benefited from it, but China has also contributed significantly to the world economy through it. The accomplishment of Chinese development has been earned by Chinese people through blood and tears. There is no free lunch – China cannot rely of the generosity of other countries.

Xi started by making several references to Western cultural icons, perhaps subtly trying to make a cultural connection with the Western audience:

- Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Timely given the state of the world.
- "Globalization was once viewed as the treasure trove in the Ali Baba fable but has now become a Pandora's box."
- Red Cross founder Henry Dunant: "The real enemy is not your neighboring country, but hunger, poverty, ignorance, superstition and bias."

He also used several Chinese proverbs to describe the challenges of globalization: 甘瓜抱苦蒂, 美齋生荆棘 ("Honey melons hang from bitter vines; sweet dates grow in thistles and thorns"); 小智治事, 大智治制 ("Small-minded people focus only on trivial matters; visionary people attend to governance of institutions" – a not so subtle criticism of Trump?); 積力之所舉, 則無不勝也; 眾智之所為, 則無不成也. ("Uniting our muscles will make us always win, uniting our wisdom will let us accomplish anything"). In fact, the speech is better when heard in Chinese as the nuances are often lost when translated into English.

As WEF executive chairman Klaus Schwab said in his closing remarks: "In a world marked by great uncertainty and volatility, the international community is looking to China to continue its responsive and responsible leadership in providing all of us with confidence and stability."

Not so long ago, the majority of the audience would never have thought that the world would be turning to a Chinese leader for confidence, stability and to defend world trade.

Maybe we are witnessing a historical tipping point.