

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gary D. Rawnsley](#)

## Listening and Talking Back: China's Third Generation Public Diplomats <sup>[1]</sup>

In my previous contribution to this site I offered a brief and wide-ranging survey of contemporary Chinese public diplomacy which I described as "work in progress." China's relations with such odious regimes as Zimbabwe, together with its continued intimidation of democratic Taiwan, mean that positive developments, such as its increasingly affable and sensitive attitude towards Japan and its role in defusing nuclear crises in the Korean peninsula, are obscured.

After completing my last essay I became conscious of a more assertive attempt to demonstrate how international public diplomacy is a natural and irrevocable component of Beijing's attempt to build a "Harmonious Society" in China. This was revealed by Zhao Qizheng, the deputy director of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Communist Party's Central Committee, in what we might best describe as an "op-ed" piece published in *The People's Daily*. The fact that this article first appeared in *The People's Daily*, the official organ of the Communist Party (known colloquially throughout China as *dangbao* -- literally Party newspaper) suggests it reflects current thinking among the core political elites in Zhongnanhai; or at least that Zhao's ideas enjoy elite approval. Either way, the essay's publication indicates that public diplomacy is now firmly on Beijing's foreign policy agenda.

Zhao discusses the need to extend the Harmonious Society beyond the domestic constituency and demonstrate its relevance to wider issues of China's foreign policy and international relations. A global harmonious society, he says, is "in the interest of all countries and will help improve China's position in the international environment." Zhao continues: "Public diplomacy spreads Chinese culture and political influence more efficiently, improving the world's opinion of China and safeguarding national interests." As I considered in my previous contribution, the spread of Chinese language and culture is the cornerstone of that nation's public diplomacy, as confirmed by the proliferation of Confucian Institutes throughout the world. Zhao claims this public diplomacy is designed to challenge misrepresentations of China in the West, especially the so-called "China threat" as it affects political and economic strategy abroad. "China," he wrote, "must present an accurate picture of itself to the world... China should not only listen, but talk back."

Zhao here presents a very perceptive and enlightened understanding of public diplomacy which, as I indicated above, must represent official thinking if it is published in *The People's Daily*. But as I said in my last posting this is not a new development. While for centuries the Chinese have been concerned with exporting their culture, a progressive understanding of public diplomacy first surfaced after the PR disaster of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and with the determination of a new generation of leaders in Beijing to counteract the global negative reaction to its violent suppression of the student protestors. Jiang Zemin as China's president and Zhu Rongji as Mayor of Shanghai demonstrated a greater receptivity international public diplomacy than any of their predecessors. As the core of the so-called

Third Generation leadership (following Mao Zedong as the First and Deng Xiaoping as the Second), Jiang and Zhu were not only younger, more technologically sophisticated (Jiang was trained as an engineer) and more receptive to new ideas and practices, but perhaps most importantly were also attentive to the requirements of conducting foreign policy in a 24/7 global media environment. On his 20-day, 8-stop tour of the United States in July 1990, Zhu appeared on The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour; he often spoke in English and was not afraid to appear live in the media and answer unscripted questions, some of which were predictably hostile to China. But Zhu was gifted in the art of public diplomacy: rather than being forced on to the defensive, Zhu repeatedly seized the initiative and brought up sensitive topics, such as Tiananmen and human rights, before his questioners, thus presenting a positive image of a statesman confident enough to tackle difficult issues head on. Zhu's talents were utilized again in 1999 when the final negotiations about China's entry to the World Trade Organization stalled. In response Zhu organized a public diplomacy offensive in the United States that included interviews on CNN and meeting with relevant interested constituencies to convince them that China's membership of the WTO was a win-win situation.

Jiang Zemin likewise revealed himself to be proficient in public diplomacy. Most importantly he was not Deng Xiaoping, but younger and (in the popular imagination at least) less accountable for the Tiananmen deaths. In 1990, only a few months after the Tiananmen massacre, Jiang gave interviews to the American media and even appeared on television with Barbara Walters. Better still from a public diplomacy perspective, Zhu Rongji was Mayor of a city that had experienced no bloodshed in 1989; and after all he was only the mayor of a city (few in the west realized that this position also carried the rank of Minister).

In accepting the need to engage in public diplomacy after 1989, Jiang realized the importance of knowing his audience, and therefore he spent an extraordinary amount of time learning and being briefed about the United States. But it is important to note this was only the first phase; Chinese public diplomacy intensified again after the State Department granted Taiwan's president, Lee Teng-hui, a visa to visit Cornell University in 1995. Chinese public diplomacy tried to compensate for the negative effects of official government tirades against the US decision (using the classic technique of making a distinction between the American government and the American people) that coincided with military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and the first democratic presidential elections in Taiwan in 1996. While China's official media berated both Taipei and Washington, more American congressmen and senators were invited to China than ever before. Meanwhile Jiang Zemin gave interviews to the major American media, including Time magazine and the Washington Post. Like Zhu before him, Jiang permitted live and unedited media appearances, with broadcasts for the first time to Chinese and western audiences of joint news conferences with President Clinton during the latter's visit to China in June 1998. In deciding against the advice of both prominent Americans and Chinese to accept an invitation to speak at Harvard University (therefore matching Lee Teng-hui's visit to another Ivy League university), Jiang was candid in his response to the expected sensitive questions about the events of 1989: "It goes without saying that, naturally, we may have shortcomings and even make some mistakes."

The current Fourth Generation leadership under Hu Jintao have until now been less concerned with public diplomacy than their predecessors. In many ways this is understandable because Hu does not have to be as reactive as Jiang. The international climate is far more favorable to China now than it was at the beginning of the 1990s: China is now an active member of the international community; its involvement in the WTO ties China into the global economy; this is a generation sufficiently distant from the massacre in Tiananmen Square; the west needs China on side to help deal with North Korea; and of

course world attention is less concerned with Tiananmen and with human rights in China than with the bloodshed in Iraq and the possible coming conflict with Iran.

This does not mean, of course, that the current leadership does not have to engage in public diplomacy. It must still contend with accusations of human rights abuses, the absence of democratic freedoms and procedures, and an ever tighter grip on the media and the Internet. But it has less reason to be as pro-active as the Third Generation (the Confucian Institutes notwithstanding) who revealed themselves to be accomplished public diplomats. In this context Zhao Qizheng's effort to link public diplomacy with the Harmonious Society is expected. There is something predictable about this eventual attempt to push past the domestic constituency and engage with the international community. But other than using vague expressions to sermonize about the need for a global "Harmonious Society" Zhao's essay offers no route to its achievement. Anyway, China's image will receive a boost in 2008 when the Olympic Games open in Beijing. But that's another story.

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