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PD Lessons from a Chinese New Year Gala

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Last weekend marked the Chinese Lunar New Year as we begin celebrating the Year of the Tiger. Chinese people have a tradition of watching the [China Central Television \(CCTV\) New Year Gala](#) on television on New Year's Eve. Some compare the New Year Gala to the Super Bowl game in terms of how much each event attracts peoples' attention. It is true that almost every family has their New Year's dinner with the TV Gala on, and it has become a must-do activity of that night. The Gala can also be viewed as a microcosm of Chinese society — provided you watch it closely enough, given that it serves as another channel for the government to deliver messages. Internal propaganda? Definitely. But I see it as a way of paving the road for public diplomacy.

CCTV is one of the official mouthpieces of the Chinese government, reporting directly to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Needless to say, most of CCTV's programs, if not all, are politically deliberated. The Chinese New Year Gala is a perfect platform for internal propaganda because of its high viewership and influential nature.

This year, at the very beginning of the Gala, Uyghur dancers appeared before other dancers. Such a display is unusual because no such arrangements have ever occurred previously. Next, there was a show in which two Uyghur singers sang a song praising the Party's policy in Xinjiang. Only Uyghur singers and dancers performed in it, which is also very rare. This was followed by a stock show featuring Chinese minorities dancing altogether which was supposed to symbolize the harmony of the ethnic groups, living with the majority Han community. These programs reminded me of the riots in Xinjiang last July.

While I was not attracted to this particular program, I was able to appreciate it as a Chinese government effort to educate the public. When it comes to public diplomacy, the role public diplomacy can play domestically is often ignored. But when internal propaganda works, the diplomacy efforts gain public support in a variety of ways, and especially with activities involving citizen diplomacy.

Another phenomenon that caught my eye was that the United States was mentioned several times in comic talk shows and sketches when comparisons were made between the U.S. and China. The actors read lines such as: "Chinese should not lose face in front of Americans" and "See the U.S. even comes to us for money," followed by the sound of applause. Chinese people like to hear such patriotic language which reinforces the "China Rising" era. These sketches demonstrate where China positions itself in the world and how the Chinese see the U.S. in this period of economic downturn.

This year's Gala theme may reflect the fact that many Chinese welcome nationalistic sentiments right now, especially among the post-80s generation. The targets of this nationalistic sentiment are Japan, India, South Korea and the U.S. Recently, many issues,

such as the sale of weapons to Taiwan by the U.S., the Google-China quarrel, and the Dalai Lama's White House meeting, have complicated the relationship between the U.S. and China. Regardless of the message offered by the Chinese government and the international community's human rights agenda, the Chinese people themselves may have different viewpoints on such issues. Good public diplomacy is about trying to listen to the voices of the Chinese people and trying to understand what shapes these sentiments.

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