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India Today Interview : Indian Versus Chinese Soft Power [1]

As if there were any doubt about India's mounting anxieties concerning its status vis-à-vis China, the July 12th issue of *India Today*, India's largest-circulation newsmagazine, includes an article on Indian versus Chinese soft power that depicts a substantial Indian deficit. This correspondent was interviewed online by *India Today*'s Shafi Rahman for the piece, " Slouching Tiger, Racing Dragon," a title which accurately sums up its concerned tone.

Indeed, Rahman proves in his fine, thoughtful article to be rather more pessimistic than I am about the soft power India brings to the global table. While Beijing has a number of enviable attributes at its disposal—not least of which is buckets of money and the willingness to dispense it liberally—China has more soft power impediments and India more advantages than "Slouching Tiger, Racing Dragon" acknowledges, my published quotes in the piece notwithstanding.

This isn't to say that Rahman doesn't make many valid points—he does—or that India should be complacent—it shouldn't. But India shouldn't be excessively bedazzled by China's high-profile public diplomacy efforts; nor should New Delhi reflexively seek to emulate or counter Beijing's policies, as opposed to devising policies based on India's own innate soft power strengths and potentialities.

With that in mind, here is an edited version of my discussion with Shafi Rahman, which took place through the miracle of the Internet on June 10.

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INDIA TODAY: China is using soft power to appeal to its neighbors and to distant countries alike. India is also making its own efforts. How do you compare the charm offensive of these two countries?

Neal Rosendorf: The term "charm offensive" strongly implies a concerted, overt public relations or propaganda effort aimed at changing or enhancing foreign attitudes toward one's state. My take is that these sorts of official state PR exercises by themselves are, to paraphrase August Babel, the soft power of fools. If they do not accurately reflect the state's realities, they are merely putting lipstick on a pig.

A current example of this kind of attempt to obscure reality via "messaging" is offered by the official Chinese Tibet and Xinjiang provincial pavilions at the 2010 Shanghai Expo, which bizarrely paint a picture of happy, peaceful, patriotic regions and completely deny their very troubled, restive recent history, as though no one is aware of what's been going on. This is silly, and a waste of money, at an otherwise impressive international exhibition

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This isn't to say that there's no place for public diplomacy efforts or international appearances by attractive leaders. The Beijing Olympics and Shanghai Expo are good examples—with glitches—of the former; Barack Obama is the current nonpareil practitioner of the latter. Manmohan Singh has proven himself effective in the past in this regard, for example with his U.S. trip last year.

IT: How has Beijing's new diplomacy altered the dynamics of China's relationships with other countries?

NR: For all of the talk over the past several years about China's burgeoning soft power (e.g. Joshua Kurlantzick's 2007 book on the subject), I am skeptical that China's public diplomacy efforts have fundamentally altered for the better any other state's view of the Middle Kingdom. Countries the world over know without being told that China is the current economic marvel of the world, that it has a rising and dynamic middle class, and that it has a venerable and aesthetically beautiful culture.

But no matter what Chinese public diplomacy does, outsiders are also keenly aware, for example, that the country is an autocracy with severe limits on information flows and public speech, and severe penalties for transgressors; that millions of minority group members consider themselves oppressed; that that the law is not universally applied and corruption is rampant, with sometimes catastrophic results like school building collapses in earthquakes; that almost three-quarters of the country still lives in poverty; and that Beijing is propping up the grotesque North Korean dictatorship.

Neighboring countries still worry about China's economic and potential military power. Japan's prime minister recently had to resign when he sought to pull his country out of its security alliance with the U.S. and move closer to Beijing—the Japanese public still fears China far more than it resents the U.S. South Korea, like Japan, may feel ambivalence toward the U.S. but still values the American security umbrella as a hedge against Chinese regional hegemony—and of course Seoul is constantly annoyed by China's coddling of Kim Jong-Il.

Vietnam is eternally wary toward the hovering giant, as demonstrated by Hanoi's response to China's purchase of Russian high-tech "Kilo-class" diesel attack submarines, which was intended to counter American Western Pacific naval superiority: the alarmed Vietnamese were spurred to purchase their own "Kilo" subs in turn in order to counter China, a ready illustration of the Law of Unintended Consequences. While Russia sees value in partnering with China to check U.S. global dominance, Moscow is concerned about losing economic, not to mention demographic, standing in Asia. And the worried tenor of the questions in this online interview underlines India's sense of anxiety as well as competitiveness toward its neighbor.

Concerning developing world states, China's combination of avoiding expressions of moral opprobrium toward strategically valuable mischief makers and human rights malefactors like Venezuela, Iran and unpleasant African regimes while providing aid, infrastructure and contracts is arguably the polar opposite of soft power, as it reflects the most unadorned realist calculus of strategic necessity. There's nothing inherently wrong with this sort of Yuan Diplomacy, but it has nothing to do with the power of attraction or persuasion.

In the U.S., Chinese public diplomacy outreach includes such programs as government

support for Mandarin-language study in American public schools and universities, in part through its Confucius Institute program; helping sponsor the design and construction of Chinese gardens throughout the U.S., including at the national arboretum in Washington, DC; and a new "people-to-people" exchange program in concert with the U.S. State Department on the rationale, as stated by Beijing, that "[a] broader and more intensive people-to-people exchange is necessary for the building of positive, cooperative and comprehensive Sino-U.S. relations in the 21st century."

Needless to say, this last sort of program wouldn't be necessary if Americans were already positively inclined toward China, rather than apprehensive, as recent U.S. polls have indicated. But the other aforementioned public diplomacy efforts are benign at worst and may bear long-term fruit, if they are not overwhelmed by adverse Chinese policies or emergent American Sinophobia (or both).

IT: What are India's advantages over China in soft power diplomacy?

NR: Take out the word "diplomacy" and stay focused on soft power *per se*, which at its most effective is the organic product of a society and its culture rather than of a contrived government policy initiative. The answer then, in a word, is 'democracy.' Much stems from the international perception that India's culture and policies spring from the consent of the citizenry, and that relative to China there is a dependable rule of law. And substantively, a fundamentally free society is a more fertile seedbed of culture and innovation, especially concerning popular and consumer culture, than one that is repressive. It isn't an accident that, as I've written elsewhere, Hollywood is generally much more interested in partnering with Indian rather than Chinese producers.

To follow on to this point, there is an attractive "Indian idea", of stable representative democracy in a poor, then developing country, and of national citizenship and civil rights transcending ethnic, caste and sectarian divisions and hierarchies. There is no comparable "Chinese idea" (prosperity and order are desirable, but they don't by themselves fire the imagination).

It should be stressed that when India falls short on its ideals and image of stability—e.g. corruption, Hindu chauvinism, getting dragged down into the muck with Pakistan over Kashmir—India's soft power suffers.

IT: Can you also discuss role of film industries of the two countries in projecting their image?

NR: Like Hollywood, I put my money on India's film industry over China's as long as the two countries maintain their current political systems. Bollywood has a deep history and has proven both resilient and adaptive, and it has millions of non-Indian fans around the world. Indian-heritage American actors are becoming increasingly popular in the U.S. (for example Kal Penn of Harold and Kumar fame), which may in turn make Americans and other audiences that much more receptive to Indian films.

As important as any other factor is that the Indian film industry is private-sector and driven more-or-less exclusively by domestic and international market forces, which encourages the production of attractive, crowd-pleasing and potentially quietly persuasive, in soft power terms, motion pictures. And it doesn't hurt a bit that pushing the boundaries won't lead to dire

professional and personal consequences, and that official censorship is subject to legal appeal by producers who have a good chance of prevailing.

Contrast this with China's motion picture industry, in which producers have to constantly run a government gauntlet, with Beijing at least as interested in didactic propagandizing and the prestige of gigantism as in fostering a vibrant and entertaining film sector. A telling juxtaposition is China's booting of the wildly popular Avatar from local cinemas in order to guarantee screen time for a government-sponsored epic about the life of Confucius, which died at the box office. Yet China Daily recently reported that the Beijing Film Academy is going to establish a major study field in 3-D film production, with a spokesperson declaring with a risible absence of irony that "[a]fter Avatar's box office results, the central government and education authorities stressed a need to strengthen China's moviemaking level." China seems to think it can alchemize popular cultural success and its soft power benefits by fiat. It can't.

China has many enormously talented and accomplished filmmakers, with the great Zhang Yimou leading the pack. But even Zhang, who once challenged and vexed Beijing with films like Red Sorghum and Raise the Red Lantern, has more recently pulled in his horns to make pro-government propaganda movies like Hero and work for the regime on projects like the 2008 Olympics. If Zhang Yimou has felt compelled to walk at heel, what chance do other Chinese filmmakers have to innovate and entertain without Beijing pushing them about for its own purposes?

IT: What should India be doing to get an edge in the soft diplomacy battle with China?

NR: The first thing I'll say is, lose the word "battle"—it's a fool's errand to approach the global presentation of one's country as an analogue of warfare. The second thing I'll say is, the Indian government is welcome to contract my advisory services for a reasonable fee. Feel free to spread the word.
