

Nov 04, 2016 by *Jian (Jay) Wang*

# **Public Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics** <sup>[1]</sup>

China's quest for "soft power" in recent years is a direct consequence of its dramatic economic transformation over the last several decades. It is now an all-too-familiar story of how China is vigorously pursuing image-building efforts, from the global expansion of its media properties to the rapid growth of the Confucius Institutes. This has become particularly poignant at a time when, in stark contrast, the U.S. public diplomacy enterprise is facing shrinking budgets.

The first thing to understand about Chinese public diplomacy is the domestication of the underlying idea of "soft power." Perhaps, nowhere else has "soft power" been as widely discussed, embraced, and appropriated as in China. Its domestic dimension is manifested by the inclusion in this endeavor of not only cultural development within the country, but also the home public as audience of public diplomacy.

China's international image is a key anchor of contemporary Chinese national identity. Nowadays, the Chinese public is paying greater attention to how their country is perceived and judged overseas. For them, it is a question of collective identity, prestige, and arguably, China's "face." How the Chinese leadership handles China's image abroad has serious consequences for its credibility and legitimacy at home.

Many wonder just how effective China has been in capturing the "hearts and minds" of the world. The story, so far, is mixed—with hits, duds, and many unknowns. For instance, the hosting of the Olympics has helped to broaden and reframe the international discourse about China, much to the benefit of the country's image. On the other hand, the vastly expanded Chinese state media has increased the production of news and information, but with little consumption by foreign publics. The influence of the Confucius Institutes seems subtle and will only be felt over time if the current operating model is to be sustained.

However, the positive image China hopes to project is constantly overshadowed and undermined by negative headlines on the country's policies and governance. Just recently, the exposé of yet another spate of food safety scandals prompted Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to lament in the Chinese media that, without strengthening culture and morality, "China will never become a truly strong, respected nation." These shifting political and communicative contexts underscore the grave challenges facing China's soft-power project which will not likely be an instant great-leap-forward, but a long, gradual process.

Neither should China's active outreach be viewed simply as a one-way, mechanistic process of charm offense. Since public diplomacy also has a reciprocal platform for soft power, these engagements produce ample opportunities for cross-cultural learning by Chinese practitioners, thereby potentially effecting the country's adaptation to international norms and

practices.

Above all, China's pursuit of soft power has been driven by a desire to gain and reclaim respectability for the country as an equal to the West, rather than to become, as the noted scholar Wang Jisi has put it, a "hegemon or standard bearer" on the world stage. Indeed, China's return to global prominence puts the country and the world in an unprecedented historical situation. Its outcome depends as much on how China charts a course of development and engagement as on the response of other countries to its re-emergence.

The story of China's rise and its soft power, while significant and fascinating, remains open-ended. In this sense, we are all "crossing the river by feeling the stone."

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