

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

The United States, China, and Intellectual Containment ^[1]

During the past several years, Chinese audiences have flocked to see American movies such as *Kung-Fu Panda*, much to the alarm of China's political leadership, which has recently made clear that it is not inclined to surrender any terrain on the global cultural battleground.

In an essay published in the magazine *Seeking Truth* (which was founded by Mao Zedong), China's president Hu Jintao wrote, "We must clearly see that international hostile forces are intensifying the strategic plot of Westernizing and dividing China, and that ideological and cultural fields are the focal areas of their long-term infiltration." Hu added, "We should deeply understand the seriousness and complexity of the ideological struggle...and take forceful measures to be on guard and respond."

How China will respond to Hu's call for action is uncertain, but in light of China's assertiveness the United States should develop its own soft power strategy for what promises to be a long-term cultural contest. For those attentive to the ongoing intellectual Cold War between the United States and China, Hu's words suggest the need for an American equivalent of George Kennan's "X" article of 1947 that underscored the importance of containing the Soviet Union's ambitions during the aftermath of the Second World War.

A soft power approach does not mean ignoring hard power realities. China's military growth should not be taken lightly, and recent statements by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton have made clear that the United States will contest China's efforts to expand its influence within the greater Pacific region. But the world has hopefully moved beyond the time when such duels were based on major powers' amassing nuclear arsenals and otherwise flexing military muscle. In an era dominated by the tools of mass communication – ranging from cinema to Twitter – less dangerous, but nevertheless intense, competition will determine global political influence.

The United States must become more adept at diplomacy grounded in strategic intellectual competitiveness, particularly in the relationship with China. The Chinese government's assertive public diplomacy includes committing the equivalent of US\$6 billion to expanding its international broadcasting and spending many additional millions on its more than 300 Confucius Institutes (including nearly 100 in the United States), that are designed to reshape perceptions of China by teaching the Chinese language and showcasing Chinese culture. In addition, China is trying to buy hearts and minds by bankrolling projects in the developing world, such as the newly opened US\$200 million headquarters for the African Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The U.S. State Department is certainly aware of all this, and its cultural diplomacy projects are admirable. But given China's intensity in its own efforts, U.S. programs must be upgraded to a level that allows the United States to contain the impact of China's outreach. If such a

blocking strategy is successfully employed, the freedom embodied in American culture will certainly overshadow China's efforts. To some degree, this is just a matter of time. As long as the Chinese government remains intolerant of cultural freedom, just as the Soviet Union was intolerant of political freedom, the seeds of self-destruction will take root and grow.

For the United States, this is not a matter of a single policy initiative or of simply spotlighting America's almost limitless array of cultural riches and the freedom they nurture. As Kennan wrote, this is "a question of the degree to which the United States can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which...has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time."

American intellectual diplomacy can do this. Its cultural efforts have been mostly tactical, rather than strategic, featuring commendable singular projects, such as the Jazz Ambassadors who traveled to the Communist bloc during the 1950s and today's hip-hop emissaries to the Muslim world. To a certain extent, American culture can connect with publics that otherwise would be untouched by U.S. foreign policy initiatives.

Intellectual containment also has the advantage of being low-risk in the sense that if it doesn't work it is unlikely to provoke a hard-power response. It also has the even greater advantage of being able to use the growing array of media tools that can reach global publics – including the Chinese public – in ways that were impossible during earlier contests such as the Cold War.

As China expands its soft power activity in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere, the mandate for U.S. policymakers seems clear. Lacking, however, is recognition that intellectual containment, just like military pushback, requires comprehensive, thoughtful strategic planning. Undertaking this would be an important next step for U.S. foreign policy.
