

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

China's Embrace of Cultural Diplomacy ^[1]

SHANGHAI --- Zhao Qizeng, China's leading proponent of public diplomacy, wrote, "Culture is the soul and life of a nation." That concept is the driving force behind much of China's exercise of soft power, and other countries that deal with this superpower need to understand the value the Chinese place on their language, traditions, and other cultural elements of their national life.

This is nothing new. Confucius spoke of the power of attraction in relations with other states. Although China's soft power strategy is based on encouraging citizens of other countries to admire and emulate China, the nature of modern Chinese society can make such efforts problematic. At a recent public diplomacy conference in Beijing, Chinese diplomatic scholar Wang Yiwei observed that as a secular nation China does not consider itself to have a "God-given exceptionalism," such as the United States has with its "city on a hill" self-image. This means that China's cultural outreach can sometimes be rather bland.

To compensate for lack of passion, China pours money into its cultural diplomacy. Today, China sponsors more than 300 Confucius Institutes worldwide (about 80 of which are in the United States), offering instruction in the Chinese language and showcasing performing arts, traditional Chinese medicine, and other elements of culture. China has also amplified its global voice, making a multi-billion dollar investment in its international broadcasting services. Educational exchanges are another significant part of China's cultural diplomacy strategy, with well over 200,000 foreign students now studying in China. Further, more than 250 million Chinese are learning English.

These are conventional elements of cultural diplomacy, but "culture" is much more than language and the arts. Culture affects attitudes toward human rights, environmental matters, and many other issues, and public diplomacy planners in the U.S. government and elsewhere should develop strategy based on this broadly drawn approach to culture. If culture is exported thoughtfully and if it accurately reflects values, it will affect its recipients in ways beneficial to the source country. At the heart of this process should be recognition that cultural diplomacy, like other elements of public diplomacy, exists not to create feel-good relationships but rather should be designed to advance the national interest.

The Chinese certainly recognize this. During discussions over the past two weeks in Beijing and Shanghai, I found a business-like attitude toward all aspects of cultural diplomacy. Pride in heritage is abundant, but not to the point that it supersedes determination to use culture to elevate China's political standing.

Competition without conflict is a reasonable goal for those shaping the U.S.-China relationship. The cultures of both countries will influence the likelihood of achieving this outcome, and so it is the responsibility of public diplomacy practitioners to elevate the political sophistication of cultural diplomacy.
