

Nov 04, 2016 by **Falk Hartig**

Public Diplomacy made it into the pantheon of Chinese party rhetoric ^[1]

On November 8, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), delivered his last major speech to the 18th Party Congress in Beijing. The speech was long, it was very long, it was so long that some older prominent party figures had to fight falling asleep and international observers were not sure whether it was 90 minutes or 101 minutes. Either way, as always, the coffee cup reading and word counting have begun. One of the most stunning examples of this decoding by counting certain words happened after Hu's speech to the 17th Party Congress in 2007, when Chinese media highlighted that he mentioned the word democracy more than 60 times without making really clear what this word means in the context of official China.

To better put his latest words into perspective, it is helpful to remember what Hu told the audience at the 17th Party Congress. In 2007, he famously introduced soft power into the pantheon of Chinese party rhetoric. Back then, he not only emphasized culture as a “more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity,” but he also spoke of the need to “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests.” Although he mentioned soft power only once, it was frequently quoted afterwards in China and abroad. As numerous scholars have pointed out, in China soft power not only has a foreign policy dimension, but also a domestic one. Hu underscored this domestic dimension as he lectured on soft power in a section entitled “Promoting Vigorous Development and Prosperity of Socialist Culture” and not in the section dealing with international affairs.

The same happened this year. Soft power was not mentioned in a foreign policy related context, but once again in the domestic context. But not just once, in 2012 it was mentioned twice (the following preliminary translations are my own because so far there is no official English version published. In 2007, it took Xinhua a stunning 9 days to release the English version and one wonders why as there was no real spontaneity in it). The first time, soft power appears under the headline “The goal is to fully establish a moderately prosperous society and comprehensively deepen the reform and opening up”. In this section, Hu first calls for a “healthy and sustained economic development”, followed by the declaration that the party would “continuously expand people's democracy” and third he calls for attempts to “strengthen cultural soft power significantly”.

In this regard, he points out that “cultural products have become richer” in the sense of being more comprehensive and that the “public cultural service system is basically established”. He says that the cultural industry has become a “key pillar industry of the national economy”, that “Chinese culture takes bigger steps in its going out strategy” and last, but not least he records that the construction of the socialist culture and power now stand on more solid ground.

The second time Hu mentions soft power is in a similar context as he did in 2007, namely when he talks about efforts to “push forward the building of socialist culture and power”. In this context, he reminds his audience that “culture is the lifeblood of the nation and the spiritual home of the people”. And in order to “comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society” it is necessary, amongst other things, to “enhance national cultural soft power”.

So what does all this mean? I’m not too sure yet. But first of all, it becomes obvious that Hu tries to convince his audience that his tenure was not a lost decade, as some critics complain, but that he achieved quite a lot, also in the context of strengthening China culturally. To make sure that his successors do not fade, he reminds them to strengthen cultural soft power significantly. This, I suppose, means that the leadership is not satisfied in this regard and that there is still a long way to go. And although he does not say it, the order to strengthen cultural soft power (note the emphasis on culture here, it seems official China understands that Nye’s other components don’t work so well for them) can also be read in the international context as China still has a cultural deficit and more importantly, that global public opinion is generally sceptical towards the Middle Kingdom.

And this brings us to the two new entries, public and cultural diplomacy. Under the headline “Continuously promoting the noble cause of human peace and development,” China’s outgoing leader reassures the world that his country adheres to the comprehensive development of friendship and cooperation with foreign countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Here, Hu lists a number of activities China aims to do in order to promote peace and development around the world; 1) China will “push forward its public and cultural diplomacy”, and 2) China will “safeguard its legitimate rights and interests overseas”. Compared to 2007, not only does he mention public and cultural diplomacy directly, but it also sounds more assertive and stronger, I suppose.

In 2007, Hu said China should strengthen cultural exchanges with foreign countries in order to draw on the fine achievements of every nation’s culture and to enhance the international influence of China’s culture. But five years later, he moves away from the more loose cultural exchange to the more official – at least in the Chinese context – concepts of public and cultural diplomacy and brings them straightforward into service for the motherland.

Taken together (although Kerry Brown is right when noting that it was not Hu’s intention to startle anyone in the audience), there were some interesting parts for people interested in China’s soft power and public diplomacy, but just a few. Overall it seems that both soft power and public and cultural diplomacy are very much seen as concepts to support the overall development of China domestically and internationally and therefore should help the CCP to stay in power.
