

Nov 04, 2016 by **Falk Hartig**

## **What China loves about Germany: soccer, cars and Hitler** <sup>[1]</sup>

Talking to a Chinese taxi driver is always interesting as they know what is rotten in the Middle Kingdom and speak up candidly. Sometimes these conversations are also interesting for students of public diplomacy, especially when concerned with the image and impression of a country.

In this regard I just had a typical conversation with a taxi driver while stuck in Beijing traffic – typical at least if you are German. As soon as you tell the driver where you come from, he or she turns around, starts to smile, sometimes with the thumbs up, and shouts out: “Deguo hen hao” (Germany is great).

This was exactly the reaction of my driver. First of all he told me how much he likes German soccer. He was impressed how Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund won their UEFA Champions League semifinals against Barcelona and Madrid, which not only leads to the first ever all-German final in Europe’s premier soccer competition, but also commands respect from the rest of Europe. Especially Bayern Munich, a brand similar too Manchester United or the New York Yankees, is quite popular amongst Chinese soccer fans. It has a Chinese website with about one million regular visitors. And as the German Bundesliga is broadcasted in China for some years now, a lot of Germany’s best soccer players are very famous in China.

Next to soccer he showed great excitement for German art of engineering, especially German cars as he was driving a Volkswagen. When I asked him about VW’s recent problems in China (CCTV reported about engine problems and the expose prompted the car maker to recall more than 380,000 vehicles), he just asked rhetorically “Who believes CCTV?” and told me that he never had problems with his VW.

So far, so good. After these typical examples of German attraction, which can be adopted by other countries as well (Michael Jordan, David Beckham, Coca Cola or Prada), chances are good that quite a few Chinese come up with another image shaping factor, which, is rather strange in the German understanding because they want to share their enthusiasm for Adolf Hitler. Being in China for the first time this can be really dazing, but it remains puzzling every time it happens. And it is getting even stranger when they want to persuade the German and explain why “Xitele” was good. What amazed my taxi driver and other Chinese – of course not all of them – is the fact that Hitler made Germany strong and powerful while cultivating German fighting spirit.

Interestingly enough, another aspect related to World War II also shapes Germany’s image in China nowadays, namely the way Germany dealt with its guilt after the war. This accounting for the past is something very much appreciated by the Chinese, especially in comparison to the Japanese which, from the Chinese point of view, still don’t handle this part of their history

appropriately.

After we discussed these almost classic components of Germany's good image in China, my taxi driver added some new image shaping factors, which I first could not understand in the context of our discussion. After several minutes of flip-flopping I realized that he was talking about a number of German politicians who in recent years had to quit their job because they cheated on their doctorate dissertations.

In March 2011, former defense minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg resigned following the plagiarism scandal and earlier this year education minister Annette Schavan also stepped down after her university stripped her of her PhD for plagiarism as well. This not only made headlines in the Chinese press and especially the Internet, but also helped to raise Germany's profile amongst Chinese people. Why? First of all, as some Chinese friends told me, the idea that it is possible to unseat a politician is appealing as such. But what was much more interesting from the Chinese point of view were the cases themselves: high ranking politicians losing their jobs because they cheated with their PhDs. In China nowadays plagiarizing seems quite normal for politicians and other bigwigs and some observe academic corruption (*xueshu fubai*) in this regard. Against this background, Chinese citizens praise the control function of German society and media, which eventually works in favor of Germany as a "good country."

Although all these examples very much helped to shape Germany's image in China, not a single one was actually initiated by the German government to charm the Chinese, or anyone else in the world.

This, of course, is not to say that the German government is inactive in China. For example, the German Foreign Office put six million euros (almost eight million US dollars) into a year-long "Art of Enlightenment" exhibition, held from April 2011 to March 2012 at the National Museum of China on Tiananmen Square. However, this exhibition, the biggest German overseas exhibition ever, did not really have the hoped-for effects: it not only led to heated debates in Germany on whether it was appropriate to organize cultural projects with undemocratic China, but also visitor numbers were rather modest for China. In total some 450,000 people came to the exhibition organized by curators from Berlin, Munich and Dresden's State Art Collections.

What does this have to do with public diplomacy? All this, it seems, is a perfect example of what one does when one is not doing public diplomacy and that, at times, the best public diplomacy just happens alongside.

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