

Nov 04, 2016 by **Di Wu**

Made in China: The Recent Rise of Chinese Culture in Public Diplomacy ^[1]

In the past month, Chinese cultural diplomacy has gained great media attention. While Chinese state-owned media has always been in favor of publishing articles about soft power and cultural diplomacy as a weapon to fight against the idea of a “China threat,” recently, Chinese cultural diplomacy has adopted a new impetus. The sixth plenary session of the seventeenth Chinese Communist Party’s annual Central Committee (CCP) held in October unexpectedly set its dominant agenda on culture. As the ruling party for the world’s second largest economy, CCP realized the urgent need to promote the “socialist core values” so as to build a prosperous nation with strong soft power. From the official standpoint, an article in *China Daily* explained the propulsion to promote culture in detail. In practice, China has been encouraging cultural diplomacy in many forms. For example, the second China National Festival Summit was hosted in Beijing to award festival activities that have successfully spread Chinese culture to the world. In addition, China will also set up a special arts fund of 200 million yuan (US\$31.54 million) to support cultural activities that improve the country’s cultural soft power.

Although the determination to promote Chinese culture seems very ambitious, China is facing various problems when it comes to implementation. A *New York Times* article made the case that international public opinion is not in favor of China because Chinese culture and values do not have the capability to compete with Western values. The Chinese government is trying to change this situation by improving communication with foreign publics. Early last month, *China Daily USA* hosted a discussion on public diplomacy and media in Washington DC. In addition, China has launched two major advertising campaigns in the United States to engage with the American public: the Chinese Ministry of Commerce produced a “Made in China” television campaign and several China national publicity films shown at Times Square in New York. According to a Chinese scholar’s recent research findings, the “Made in China” advertising had mostly positive feedback while the views on the publicity film were negative. However, it appears these efforts have not yet proved successful. A recent BBC Poll showed that American negative views of China’s growing economic power rose from 45% in 2005 to 54% in 2010 and 2011. There is no doubt that China has been very active in initiating public diplomacy, but it still needs to overcome the problems that lie in communication and other areas.

Another interesting topic worth noting is Chinese Microblogging, which has become a tremendously influential tool for public diplomacy in China. Chinese “netizens” have started use microblogging platforms such as Sina Weibo to express their concerns and pressure the government to change policies. The *Wall Street Journal* published an article about Chinese bloggers using an unofficial online vote to pressure the government to measure Beijing air pollution more accurately. Microbloggers not only have touched upon environmental

problems, but they have also successfully influenced other issues like corruption and injustice. On the other hand, many foreign celebrities opened microblog accounts either to boost their popularity or to publicize their work. For example, IMF managing director Christine Lagarde registered a Sina Weibo account in early November . Some international institutions and governmental organizations including the U.S. Embassy, the United Nations, and the British Council have also been actively engaging with the Chinese public through microblogs. Moreover, the U.S. Ambassador Gary Locke also gained his fame among Chinese “netizens” through Sina Weibo.

While Americans are debating funding cuts to the education system, more and more Chinese middle class parents are paying expensive tuition for their children’s overseas studies. A *New York Times* article raises questions about this large boom of Chinese students in the U.S. On the one hand, they bring in money to universities that have experienced budget cuts; on the other hand, their arrival requires American universities to make adjustments in some areas of education and service. Exchange diplomacy advocates would welcome this trend, because the more foreign students that come to the United States, the more public diplomacy opportunities Americans have. However, instead of seeing a harmonious exchange of ideas, in certain instances it is rather a “clash of civilizations”. Chinese students are not so welcomed on American campuses and are frustrated with cultural and language barriers. These will not be good memories when they return to China. Exchange diplomacy may sound exciting, but the adjustment for students and universities has a long way to go. How should China deal with culture shock in exchange diplomacy and how should they equip every involved institution and organization with training in public diplomacy? These are questions public diplomacy practitioners need to consider in the future.
