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Exporting Chinese "Culture" [1]

China's relationship with the world continues to expand in intriguing ways – a blossoming of activity that gives the impression that the country is embracing an expanding role of responsibility and engagement. Throughout the developing world, infrastructure projects like Costa Rica and Ghana's new national stadiums are offering more cultural means to connect with foreign publics. The country's recent deployment of a Navy medical vessel to Jamaica is another example of its growing humanitarian efforts around the world. There is even some fresh thinking in the China-Africa relationship, with 400 diplomats, policymakers and business leaders calling for increased private sector activity and investment in the continent.

Yet for all its gains in the developing world, there appears to be a widening disconnect with the Western public's impression of China and the image it seeks to present. While the establishment of a Confucius Institute at Stanford University should have provided an opportunity to engage America's intellectual community, any hope at progress was undone when the Chinese government placed one restriction on the funding: no talking to Tibet. Donations continue to roll in for Ai Weiwei, the dissident artist whose stature has reached new heights simply because of Beijing's insistence on tax evasion and public indecency charges. To cap off the month, the Confucius Peace Prize, China's homegrown alternative to the Nobel Peace Prize, was awarded to the true epitome of peace and diplomacy, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

"His iron hand and toughness revealed in this [Chechen War of 1999] impressed the Russians a lot, and he was regarded to be capable of bringing safety and stability to Russia," the *New York Times* quotes the English version of the Confucius Prize committee's award statement. (It should be noted that the Chinese government, while supportive of the Prize's initial creation, urged the committee to not give this year's award.)

While Chinese public diplomacy has had its successes and (avoidable) failures, the nation's continuing image problems have been labeled by some as its " third affliction." With the country's first and second afflictions (poverty and foreign aggression, respectively) quickly becoming issues of the past, negative perceptions of China appear to be mounting. It would seem a ripe moment for the national leadership to shift its thinking about China's role in and engagement with international society.

And that is exactly what Beijing recognizes…though the cure for this ailment may do more harm than good.

While the country's economic success has led to a natural growth in the domestic arts and culture scene, creating a veritable wealth of public diplomacy resources, the Chinese government has instead elected to explicitly define "culture" as a tool for strategic and political gain. At October's plenary session of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party, the nation's leadership unveiled its next five-year plan, choosing to focus on the urgent need to

promote “its cultural sector to boost its soft power.” According to the government’s viewpoint, culture is an official means of international influence, a resource to be cultivated for its competitive value rather than an organic development that naturally enriches perceptions of the country around the world.

While all countries seek to emphasize those aspects that make their nation attractive to the rest of the world, in China’s case, the notion of government supervision and control is precisely the opposite for Western audiences. One of the most valued aspects of U.S. culture lies in its freedom from regulation; there is an obvious and cherished separation between the official state and public society. Though others may not value that separation to the same extent, it certainly remains a sticking point for the American public. For better or worse, the nonstop criticism of the U.S. government in the public sphere provides outside observers a more honest view of the diversity of American society. While China’s political system intrinsically limits such perspective, the government’s decision to officially label culture as something to be exploited for international competition only further ensures its public diplomacy efforts will have the taint of authority.

China’s leaders are quick to note that the country’s economic future depends on its ability to nurture creative industry. Relativity Media’s $100 million fund and partnership with Chinese film companies shows at the very least a desire to develop the cultural economy through international cooperation. However, when cultural products are viewed as the means to a political end, their potential impact is diminished. Whether valid or not, there is a tendency to dismiss China’s public diplomacy efforts as propagandist. This only makes it that much more likely.
