

Panel II: The Chinese Government's Formulation of National Security Narratives in Media and Public Diplomacy

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Propaganda to foreign audiences: Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

The reasons why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to practice propaganda have changed in the last thirty years, as have its objectives and the methods of its delivery. No longer are communications and persuasion occupied by revolutionary ambitions to convince the masses (at home or overseas) of the correctness of the Communist Party's direction, or by the goals of social and ideological transformation; now the propaganda is structured around three inter-connected pillars of economic development, maintaining the authority and legitimacy of the Communist party following the doctrinal demise of Communism (and avoiding a Soviet-style collapse), and consolidating the national unity of the Chinese people. This adjustment was signalled in an internal speech by a Party leader of Suixi County government in 2007 who connected economic development to the tasks of 'external propaganda' (*duiwai xuanchuan*): 'The current mission of the external propaganda is to effectively promote each region, each sector to the outside world, in order to attract outside investors' attention and build up outside investors' confidence. We can safely say that the purpose of doing external propaganda work is to attract outside investment and undertake commercial projects.'¹

There is no doubt that China is successfully exporting the economic imperatives behind its remarkable growth. By 2006 China had become the world's second largest economy after the United States with an average growth rate of 9 percent. However, China has difficulty in selling its political values except to governments in need of, or experienced in, undemocratic politics. The so-called 'China model' connecting an attainable economic paradigm with a set of specific cultural and political values – authoritarian state-led management, "Asian Values", etc. – has proven attractive to many developing nation-states around the world (even Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela, has referred to the 'great Chinese fatherland'). By contrast the liberal-democratic world is not yet convinced by the political dimension of the China model. As Huang and Ding (2006) have noted 'A country's economic clout reinforces its soft power if others are attracted to it *for reasons beyond*

¹ 'How to do propaganda work for a foreign audience,' available at http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2007/11/how_to_do_propaganda_work_for_a_foreign_audience.php, accessed 1 December 2007.

trade, market access or job opportunities (emphasis added)' ('Dragon's Belly: An analysis of China's soft power', *East Asia* Vol.24:4). So far, there is little evidence that political or ideological motivations trump the economic benefits of associating with China.

Moreover, China devotes considerable resources to foreign aid, also a valuable instrument of public diplomacy and propaganda. While the actual size of China's foreign aid budget is unknown (the PRC government does not release information about its foreign aid programmes), estimates place the totals between 2003 and 2007 anywhere between \$970 million and \$27 billion depending on which definition of 'aid' one accepts.

We should not be surprised that China pursues a political agenda through its aid programme. In September 2005, while on a visit to New York, President Hu Jintao promised \$10 billion in Chinese aid over the next three years to the poorest countries ... with diplomatic ties to China, suggesting that countries which recognise Taiwan would reap substantial economic benefits if they switched their recognition to Beijing. Here there is a clear reason to be apprehensive of claims that Chinese public diplomacy is working. The motivation for small and/or developing nations to switch their allegiance from Taiwan to China has little to do with persuading them of the intricate political and legal arguments for doing so and almost everything to do with the promise of more financial rewards than Taiwan can offer. As Taiwan's *Free China Review* noted in 1998, 'in diplomacy, you can't buy friends, you only rent them.'

It is clear that since 2004 the CCP has become increasingly sensitive to the way its propaganda work is viewed by the world outside China, as indicated by the re-branding in English (and in English only) of the Propaganda Department as the Publicity Department.² This re-classification of activities is associated with the CCP's development of new ways to engage in propaganda and censorship – in China as elsewhere it is impossible to separate the two – partly in response to the momentum of events such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and the outbreak of SARS in 2002, and partly because of the rapid and dramatic transformation of the communications landscape.

There can be little doubt that China has embraced the concepts of public diplomacy and soft power with an enthusiasm rarely seen in other parts of the world. In 2004, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade established a Division of Public Diplomacy within the Information Department. The Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs said that China needed to 'catch up with the development of public diplomacy in some developed countries'. The PRC clearly recognised that if it

² At the same time, the Chinese called President George Bush's Global Communications Office 'Propaganda Office' (*xuanchuan bangongshi*), thus suggesting that 'they' - 'foreigners' – also do propaganda. I am grateful to my PhD student, Mandy Tao, for pointing this out to me.

wanted to participate fully in a globalised international environment, present as a serious commitment its 'peaceful rise' (a nice public diplomacy slogan), challenge what the Chinese consider the distortions in the western media reporting of China then it needed to get its own voice heard, and engage more with foreign publics. Chinese discourses on soft power privilege culture as a major resource in the international arena. So, Chinese soft power tends to emphasise China's cultural traditions – language, literature, philosophy, medicine, cuisine, martial arts and cinema. In other words, there is a tendency to focus on the idea of Chinese civilisation, and especially its continuity (the Confucius Institutes, for example, which have met limited success where host organisations are suspicious of their method and motive) and the reassertion of Chinese superiority.

The problem is how to determine whether this cultural attraction translates into power and influence. The consumption of a cultural product does not necessarily mean the consumer will be attracted to the political values or ideals of the source. Governments and other actors within nation-states may be able to control the design, the message and transmission of soft power or public diplomacy, but they can exercise no comparable control over reception.

It is still too early to discuss the results of China's soft power crusade; attitudes and opinions take time to develop, and so far it is not possible to identify a positive correlation between Chinese soft power and Chinese foreign policy objectives or achievements. Also this is confusing the *principle* of soft power with the *instruments* of soft power.

In his book *Soft Power* (2004: 31-2) Joseph Nye argued that

The countries that are likely to be more attractive and gain soft power in the information age are those with multiple channels of communication that help to frame issues: whose dominant culture and ideas are closer to prevailing global norms (which now emphasize liberalism, pluralism and autonomy) and whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic values and policies.

Leaving aside the problems in this quotation – what are 'prevailing global norms' and who decides? Why are liberalism, pluralism and autonomy necessarily 'global norms' - Snow (2009: 4) comments: 'The US is at a comparative advantage with the first two and at a decisive disadvantage with the last dimension.' This book will suggest that China is at a similar 'decisive disadvantage' in all three areas. Beijing has difficulty persuading the liberal-democratic world that China's agenda is compatible, if not consistent, with the norms and values of democracies; China is only just developing the capacity

to frame stories in the global news media, but this remains limited; and China's domestic and international behaviour does not inspire confidence (though some progress has been made following Beijing's decision to become a more responsible world power. Examples here include the PRC's position and value in helping western powers in their relationship with North Korea; the so-called 'Good neighbour policy' in South East Asia; and China's growing involvement in international organisations such as the UN. However, it only takes one episode to undo any good work; continued belligerence against Taiwan, policies in the Sudan, and crackdowns in Tibet and the international repercussions during the Olympic Torch Relay have tend to undermine almost in an instant any credibility and soft power capital the PRC has accumulated in other areas.

In the US after 911 it was common to hear Americans, including President George W. Bush, ask: 'Why do they hate us?' In public diplomacy terms, this immediately begs a second question in response: 'Why don't you ask them?'

The Chinese often ask a similar question, especially of the western media: Why do they criticise us so much? Zhao Qizheng, Director of the Foreign Affairs Committee and former director of the State Council Information Office, has often talked about the need for China to develop a soft power strategy in response to the alleged demonization by the western media and the constant chatter in some quarters about the so-called China threat. 'This situation,' said Zhao, 'requires China to pro-actively establish a public diplomacy policy to improve the international image of China.' While the idea of demonization is extremely problematic – in accepting the existence of a political conspiracy among the western media one is conveniently ignoring the differences in professional news values between Chinese and non-Chinese media and audiences – this statement is intriguing because it reveals high-level acknowledgement of the need for public diplomacy and a motive for doing so, however specious and reactive that motive may be.

However, first it is important to get the image right. If the question is 'Why do they hate us?' perhaps another satisfactory response might be: 'Do they really know us?' which is immediately followed by another crucial question: 'Do we know ourselves?' Public diplomacy must begin by understanding who 'we' are before we attempt to understand the audience with whom we wish to communicate.

We cannot deny that the Chinese think they know who they are: the PRC has a strong self-identity (even though it is often contradictory, hence William Callahan's description of China as the *Pessoptimist Nation* (2009)); and this identity is increasingly based on power and self-confidence – the idea of *Zhongguo* and (inter)national recovery, rapid and widespread economic development, and increasingly (and perhaps disturbingly) a form of radical nationalism. While China's enthusiastic embrace of soft power and public diplomacy is welcome as an alternative to the dependence on

hard power, does China listen enough to a wide range of actors and institutions to understand why the international community is sometimes so critical of its actions and behaviour?

Nye has used the term 'meta-soft power' to describe 'the state's willingness to criticise itself. For Nye, such capacity for introspection fundamentally enhances a nation's attractiveness, legitimacy and reliability' (Watanabe & McConnell, 2008: xiii; see also Watanabe, 2006). Again, this is a useful criterion to measure China's success (or lack of it) for the leadership in Beijing has not readily demonstrated any capacity for national self-criticism. The problem for China is that the west has been attracted to China, but engagement with the international community also exposes the PRC to criticism. I suggest that the reaction among the Chinese that greeted the pro-Tibet protests during the torch relay demonstrates that China is having great difficulty in coming to terms with the idea that international accountability is a natural consequence of international engagement. Television pictures of the aggressive behaviour of blue track-suited torch guards against pro-Tibet demonstrators in Paris, London and elsewhere merely drew attention to the issues that Chinese public diplomacy has tried to overcome, and reminded viewers of Tiananmen Square, the absence of human rights and the denial of free speech inside China; or at least the guards' behaviour gave the western media the pretext to remind viewers about these issues. (It should also be noted that French, American and British public diplomacy – at home and abroad – was damaged by the governments and police of those countries allowing the Chinese torch guards to behave in such an aggressive manner. Only the Australian government clearly and openly prevented the Chinese police from acting in this way.) Moreover, the mobilisation by China's embassies of Chinese communities, and especially students around the world to guard the torch and protest the media bias again brought to the surface worrying questions about unchecked nationalism.

It is not yet clear if China has the capacity to convert soft power and public diplomacy resources and effort into achievable foreign policy aspirations. China bestows upon its distinct approach to public diplomacy an extraordinary amount of hard and soft power – in selling Chinese language and culture; in humanitarian assistance; and in persuading its neighbours of China's commitment to a stable, peaceful and prosperous Asia-Pacific.

China's economic and commercial power is undeniable; and it makes China an attractive destination for global investment and entrepreneurship. However, convincing the liberal-democratic international community to look beyond trade and economics and to accept China as a credible diplomatic and political power is a considerable challenge for China's public diplomacy. Cultural and economic diplomacy neither easily nor necessarily translate into foreign policy success.

The principal problems for public diplomacy are the contradictions in Chinese foreign policy. On the one hand, China yearns to be part of an interdependent world and to spread the benefits of

political, economic and cultural engagement with China. On the other hand, Chinese political discourse is often characterised by a fierce nationalist rhetoric that is reinforced by the Communist Party's determination to maintain authoritarian rule. Together with China's unconditional friendship of ostracised regimes, and the use of the military threat against Taiwan and Tibet, this undermines the idea that Chinese soft power is all about selling national and cultural *values*.

Until they are unable to overcome such contradictions it is unlikely that Chinese public diplomacy will break out of its narrow success in a few friendly areas of the world where Beijing now operates.

China's International Media

Global Times and CCTV 9

The Communist Party's launch in 2009 of a new English-language newspaper, the *Global Times* (a tabloid attached to the Communist party's mouthpiece, *People's Daily*), reveals that no matter much we observe and analyse the renaissance in China's public diplomacy, we cannot but stand by and watch as China and its champions seem to misunderstand public diplomacy, what it is and how it is/should be practiced.

First, there is a misconception: Reporting the launch of the *Global Times* English edition, AP's Christopher Bodeen wrote (20 April 2009) that this 'reflects China's recent "soft power" drive to build its global reputation, muffle foreign criticism and broadcast the leadership's particular views on issues such as democracy, human rights and Tibet'. If "soft power" means the attempt to win hearts and minds by projecting culture and values (which is, I think, what Joseph Nye intended) then this is not the way to go about it. Instead China is engaged, at best, in public diplomacy, at worse in good old fashioned propaganda. The *Global Times's* promise to present 'news from a Chinese perspective, in a fair, insightful and courageous manner' and then publish the usual accusations against the western media as being part of a large conspiracy against China does not auger well for the future of the newspaper in terms of attracting its intended audience. I have talked elsewhere, most recently in a chapter in Nancy Snow and Philip Taylor's edited collection, *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, that there is inconsistency between what China says and what China does. (China is not alone in this, of course; how else can we explain the failure of American soft power?) In other words, the message of the public diplomacy must be credible; and if there is one thing lacking in China's English-language media it is credibility. China's media are no longer the butt of jokes they once were – my favourite (and the favourite of most Chinese who know it) is 'The only thing you can trust about the *People's Daily* (the official party newspaper) is the date' – yet credibility remains a serious

problem when there is a serious inconsistency between policy and message, and when foreigners (and increasingly Chinese) have access to a range of non-Chinese media and sources of news.

The *Global Times* joins *China Daily* and the *Shanghai Daily* in trying to capture the English-language market. For those who watch TV rather than read newspapers, there is always CCTV 9, China's English-language channel. These are all parts of China's public diplomacy armoury, communicating China's story and culture and to a world eager to hear the authentic voice of the nation, its people and its government ... at least that is what Beijing likes to believe.

Why does China always get it so wrong? The English-language media are rarely consumed by their intended international audience, but are rather used as tools by Chinese to improve their own English-language ability. Stories from the *China Daily* regularly crop-up in school and University English-language examinations. Few foreigners regularly watch CCTV 9 unless they have no other option (ie. they are not staying in five-star hotels where BBC World is available) or they wish to improve their own understanding of Chinese by watching programmes hosted by the Canadian Mark Rosewell (known in China as Da Shan – Big Mountain) teaching Mandarin. Moreover, even internet-savvy Chinese can leap over the Great Chinese Firewall and access foreign news websites; why bother with the *China Daily* or news on CCTV 9 (hosted now by non-Chinese in a bold move by CCTV to boost its public diplomacy credibility) for your daily news when you can read *The Guardian* online?

And yet the CCP and CCTV remain over-confident in these media's public diplomacy potential, as brought home to me during a visit to Beijing in 2007 when I was lucky enough to be invited to tour CCTV. The obligatory bank of monitors displaying different television channels included one showing CNN, a station that ordinary Chinese are unable to access. CNN is a model and a template, if not an inspiration to these young Chinese media-types for how to package the news.

My guide was dismayed when I actually questioned the public diplomacy potential of CCTV 9. 'CCTV 9 has an audience of 45 million all over the world,' she declared proudly, repeating a mistake that can be found on the station's website (<http://www.cctv.com/english/20090123/107144.shtml>). 'No,' I pointed out politely. 'It has a *potential* audience of 45 million all over the world provided they subscribe to the satellite or cable package that subscribes to it.' CCTV is now also available in French (CCTV-F) and Spanish (CCTV-E) increasing further the *potential* but not the *actual* audience.

The *Global Times* has a future; it will survive, like the *China Daily* and CCTV 9 for two reasons: these media are state owned, and therefore do not face competition. Their political agenda and support mean they do not have to do things differently, and no matter the size of the audience, they will continue to appear. The Communist Party cannot lose face by letting them disappear.

The second reason is the most disturbing – the Chinese genuinely believe they are effective tools of public diplomacy.

The *Global Times* is attracting attention for its sometimes critical coverage of some sensitive issues that are rarely reported in the official media. However, the reason *Global Times* is able to report such stories is precisely because it does so in English (the Chinese version continues to behave *ad nauseum* as a newspaper under state control) and because it enjoys the patronage of the *People's Daily*. Journalists are not testing the boundaries of state censorship or creating new norms and routines of Chinese journalistic practice; they are following directives or clearance to report otherwise topics deemed sensitive for domestic consumption. Again, it raises the question, other than the illusion of media pluralism, what public diplomacy value is there in publishing the English-language *Global Times* and *China Daily*, both of which are connected to official organisations?

Xinhua's China Network Corporation

On 1 July 2010 Xinhua, the news agency of the PRC launched a global 24-hour English-language television channel called China Network Corp (CNC). Trial broadcasts begin on 1 May. Announcing this development Xinhua's president, Li Congjun said that 'CNC will offer an alternative source of information for a global audience and aims to promote peace and development by interpreting the world in a global perspective.' This sentence loses clarity in translation from the Chinese; not only is it confusing, but it is characteristic of the sentimental official rhetoric that Chinese officials use to mark landmark events (for further evidence, listen to the largely meaningless speeches delivered at the opening of Expo 2010 in Shanghai).

It is difficult to identify what China will gain by investing in yet another international television station: what will CNC do that CCTV9 is not already doing? Does the launch of CNC English reveal internal competition within the state system for control of China's public diplomacy strategy? Perhaps it indicates that the Chinese have finally acknowledged CCTV9's shortcomings and have decided it really is not up to the job. But will CNC fare any better?

The launch of this television station confirms that the leadership in Beijing is confident that it is possible to influence international public opinion and media coverage of China. The government has long criticised the way 'Western' media report China, accusing them of bias by focusing on human rights, Tibet and democracy, choosing to ignore differences in news values between Chinese and 'western' news organisations.

Li's announcement came on the same day that the BBC World Service published its latest poll of 30,000 adults in 28 countries which reveals that views of China have declined sharply. In 2005, 49 percent of people surveyed thought that China's influence was mostly positive (a striking 11 points higher than that of the United States). However, in the most recent survey China's standing

has dropped to just 34 percent, 6 points behind the US. The official Chinese media responded as expected, alleging that public opinion is shaped by western media organisations which 'are unsuitably seasoned with misunderstanding, misinterpretation or even bias or enmity'.

China Daily is of course correct to state that the media can affect public opinion, but the downturn of opinion is not just in 'western' countries; the surveys reveal that several Asian countries are also responding more negatively to China than in the past. Besides, when China was 'more popular' than the US, the western media did not report news from China any differently. This suggests that Chinese policy – for example, the brutal Chinese handling of disturbances in Tibet and Xinjiang – may have helped to turned public opinion against China.

All in all CNC, CCTV9 and Chinese public diplomacy has a hard job ahead; and more information or channels of distribution does not necessarily mean better communication, especially when CNC and CCTV9 are embedded within the state system and are thus viewed with suspicion by international audiences. Just because you have a message and a means to deliver it, it does not mean anyone is listening. If few people outside China or outside Chinese-speaking communities (who wish to improve their English) are watching CCTV9, what makes Xinhua think they will turn to CNC instead? CCTV9 is accessible via satellite to some 85 million viewers in 100 countries; what proportion of the 85 million *possible* viewers are *actual* viewers? Rebranding CCTV9 as CCTV News is not going to offer much help in converting these potential audiences to regular viewers. Rebranding rarely succeeds without careful market research and, if necessary, modification of the product. Given that China's international media are state owned and follow an agenda decided by the state, such a radical transformation of content is unlikely. So viewers will no doubt get more of the same under a different name.

At the end of the day the possible influence of China's international media will be offset by the actions of its government at home and abroad, and issues of democracy, human rights, Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan will continue to mar China's public diplomacy for as long as Beijing continues to avoid resolving them sensitively and to the satisfaction of the people living in these areas.