

Dr. ROSS TERRILL

**“Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review
Commission”**

“China’s Propaganda and Influence Operations...”

April 30, 2009

China's efforts to influence U.S. academics, journalists, think tank personnel and other shapers of public opinion are part of its overall aims in the world. First, to fully recover from a period of reverses to China from the Opium War to the mid-20th century. Second, to gain time for economic development to make China an influential great power to match its greatness as a civilization. The soft power thrust has two proximate goals. First, to promote the rosy side of China's self-understanding: a responsible member of the international community; with a foreign policy of peace and development; a punctilious UN member that has never aggressed and never will. Second, to conceal the less rosy side: Chinese society lacks the rule of law; China is a semi-empire; the professions in China are not autonomous; and so on.

There is nothing wrong with seeking to influence public opinion. On the international plane, it is the most desirable mode of bending foreigners to your nation's purposes, the least desirable being war. The Chinese people have as much right to influence world public opinion as the American people do. But modes of influence are crucial. I have often lectured around the world for the USIA and similar agencies, which openly seek to have U.S. positions understood in foreign countries. The tough issue comes when an authoritarian government essays this abroad, for its modes differ from a democracy's modes.

When Britain, Japan, or France seek to influence U.S. shapers of public opinion, or the U.S. does the same in those countries, the activity is transparent. It is true that money affects the weight of the efforts. But essentially it is a case of individuals making arguments to persuade other individuals in an atmosphere of free exchange of information. That is not true with China. The Chinese party-state is used to maximum control at home and this spills over into high-handed attempts at control abroad.

Currently, China's ideological chief, Li Changchun, is touring various countries with an updated message. “Communication capacity determines influence,” he said before leaving Beijing. “In the modern age, whatever nation's communication techniques are most advanced, it is that nation whose culture and core values will spread far and wide, who will have the most power to influence the world.” The target of these arrows, he said, is “the international public opinion structure.” To those with experience of the PRC, these are arresting remarks.

Chinese "public opinion" is largely hidden. On some questions a Chinese citizen will give a pollster or reporter a candid answer ("Is life easier in south China or north China?"). On others she will not ("is Hu Jintao doing a good job?"). On large political issues, domestic and international, publicly expressed Chinese public opinion reflects Chinese party-state policies. We saw this at the time of the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, and the air collision near Hainan Island in 2001. Anti-American ferocity was evoked, then it was hosed down.

Chinese people can react only to what they are told. They do not know what they do not know. They can readily detect, however, when they must amend their opinions.

It takes a Chinese student or official living in the U.S. some time to realize that the U.S. government does not control what newspapers print, that a demonstration in favor of the Dalai Lama is just as permissible as a demonstration against him, that textbooks vary widely in their content from state to state and publisher to publisher. In China, the appointment of chief editor to all media is made by the government. All book manuscripts must be signed off on by the government before publication.

Key terms reveal the asymmetry. A wrong opinion expressed by an American about China is said by Beijing to "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people." This really means the opinion hurts the interests of the Chinese government. The phrase, "Interference in China's internal affairs" is broad enough to cover U.S. law's allowing Falungong practitioners to protest outside a Chinese consulate in an American city.

The lack of equivalence between a democracy's dealings with "the other" and an authoritarian party-state's dealings with "the other" is illustrated by the Beijing newspaper "China Daily." American visitors to Chinese cities read "China Daily," little else exists in English. Few are aware that this is a government newspaper (much improved over recent years). Here is a key link between China's domestic political system and its influence on American public opinion. If Beijing through "China Daily" can spin the truth about Xinjiang, Tibet, or North Korea, opinion in the West may be influenced and U.S. policy on these issues cast into doubt. By contrast, Chinese visitors to the USA, if they read English - even if they only read the many Chinese-language newspapers published from New York to California - get a variety of views on American leaders and American policies. "China Daily's" role in influencing English-speaking visitors to China achieves what years of clumsy projects within the U.S. failed to achieve in the 1970s and 1980s.

Sometimes U.S. institutions contribute to confusion by misjudging the U.S.-China non-equivalence. Prior to the 2008 Olympic Games, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard went far down the path to offering a workshop for public

security officials from Beijing on how to handle the foreign press descending on Beijing for the Olympics. Not a workshop for Chinese journalists, but one for police on how to handle journalists. The workshop was cancelled at the last moment after Nieman alumnae raised questions. Sometimes American intellectuals are more trustful of a foreign government that puts on a good show than of our own government that operates within a cacophony of debate.

I was once invited to attend a session at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard where a visiting official from Qinghua University in Beijing proposed the idea of a journalism-school exchange between the Kennedy School's center on that subject and Qinghua. Qinghua had no background in journalism and the Chinese visitor pitched the project on different grounds. The Chinese government leadership is thick with Qinghua graduates, he said, and the Kennedy School would be plugged into some very influential people. Qinghua sought a foot in the door at Harvard's center for journalism and public policy. It had the money for the project. The Kennedy School to its credit took a pass.

Self-censorship, which is a daily necessity for journalists in China, also occurs in diluted form among American editors, academics, and others dealing with China. Folk worry about their next visa, their access to a sensitive area like Xinjiang for research, or take a Beijing point of view because of largesse available for their project from the Chinese side. One of the largest U.S. magazines a few years ago experienced Beijing's veto power over their choice of writer for a China story. The project was underway with myself as writer and a photographer lined up. But Beijing refused me a visa to visit the relevant sites. The magazine had to decide whether to cancel the story or pick another (more mellow) writer. They picked a fresh writer; he got his China visa. The article was published and its twenty million readers had no clue of Beijing's role in the selection of its author.

Do these efforts by Beijing influence U.S.-China relations? Far less than they used to. But they can keep alive an unsettling volatility in the traditional American view of China. One minute, China comes across as a victim (the Opium War, a poor Third World country that should be given special consideration in WTO...), and the American side feels sympathy. The next minute, the excited message on the lips of the American public is, "We Wuzz Robbed" (because the trade imbalance soars, China blames the U.S. for AIDS, a dangerous effort is made to hide the SARS epidemic...).

Chinese students in huge numbers are on U.S. campuses, an excellent phenomenon. The Soviet Union possessed no such human bridge into our society; no authoritarian country has ever had so many of its citizens living in the USA as China does today. The problem here is that recurrently it proves difficult for Beijing to distinguish cultural nationalism from the political imperatives of the party-state. The Chinese character "jia" is at once a term for family and part of the term for "state."

As the Olympic torch made its way through several nations, Chinese officials in embassies and consulates mobilized patriotic Chinese residents in those cities to fend off demonstrators. "Interference in China's internal affairs" is one thing. Interference in the internal affairs of France or South Korea or the U.S. is evidently another thing. The blind spot is a result of an interconnection, understandable historically, between Chinese cultural nationalism and the political imperatives of the party-state.

For a time, PRC manipulations within the U.S. were blunt because KMT manipulations were also blunt. Extremes tended to feed upon each other. The excesses of the McCarthy era inadvertently created a generation of pro-PRC academics offended by Senator McCarthy. The high-handedness of the Chiang Kai-shek "China Lobby" in the 1950s and 1960s gave an appealing underdog status to the Chinese Communists and fed Beijing's victim image long after Normalization in 1979.

Today, the more vigorously the pro-Dalai Lama forces agitate in the U.S., the stronger Beijing responds by promoting its view of "One China" and its assertion that "Tibet since ancient times has been part of China." The more blatantly an "anti-China" or "race card" message flashes from the U.S., the more strongly is PRC nationalism unleashed.

The American side sometimes exaggerates the danger from China's manipulation. A vague "race fear" of huge China (its population far exceeds that of the U.S., Russia, and all Europe combined) does linger in some quarters and this worries Beijing. The prior example of Japan in the memory of older Americans is also a background factor. Finally, Chinese civilization has a seductive power that can lead both to over-estimation and fear of China.

A paradox is that as China's influence rises, there is less need for manipulation by Beijing, but as China's muscle-power grows, more money is available for subtler forms of manipulation. The corruption of power has been familiar in all Communist systems. The corruption of money is new with China, as this extraordinary country moves away from Marxism to some unknown future.

A symbiosis occurs between Americans who benefit from business or other success with China and American institutions. Money may appear from a businessman with excellent connections in China and it is hard for a think tank, needing funds for its research on China, to decline it. But the money may bring with it major Chinese ideological input into the program of the U.S. think tank. Not all Americans realize that U.S. corporations operating internationally are far less tied to U.S. policies than Chinese corporations operating internationally are tied to Chinese government policies. In the last year or two, Chinese companies have started making healthy donations to think tanks in Western societies.

The good news is that Beijing's efforts to influence U.S. shapers of public opinion are less heavy-handed than they used to be. In the 1970s, a delegation of American scholars going to China could be canceled by the Chinese side if merely one member of the group had written an essay unacceptable to Beijing. One time, a trip by mayors of U.S. cities was cancelled because the American delegation included the Mayor of San Juan, and Beijing viewed Puerto Rico, not as a legitimate part of the U.S., but as an oppressed colony. Often the American press and Congress have been more principled in this matter than American academia. The New York Times, to its credit, never gave in to Beijing over which ads it would accept in the 1970s.

In recent years a secular improvement has occurred, helped by more enlightened Chinese policies, vigilance on the part of Congress, parts of the American press, and commissions like this one. Partly due to the many American and other Western Ph.Ds in the Chinese bureaucracy, China's sociocultural activities abroad are more sophisticated than they used to be. Almost every Chinese I know well who has spent time in the U.S., on a campus, at the Chinese Embassy, or wherever, has been substantially affected by American values of freedom and democracy.

That U.S. resistance to China's attempted manipulations is important is proved by the fact that Chinese methods are cruder towards smaller powers than toward the USA. Beijing has learned they need to be fairly prudent in the U.S., and it is to their credit that recently they have been. By contrast, when Hu Jintao visited Australia in 2003, the Chinese embassy in Canberra wrote to Australian newspapers, urging them to accept no ads from Tibetan groups; and the Chinese ambassador asked the Australian foreign minister to require two members of the Australian Senate, who had recently heckled President Bush during a speech in their chamber, to be put behind sound-proof glass for Hu Jintao's speech to the Senate. It was like the bad old days in the U.S. during the 1970s. A smaller country cannot say No as readily as the U.S. can and should.

On the whole I am optimistic about the future direction of U.S.-China sociocultural interactions. China's increased prosperity plus globalization have on balance been good for liberalization of the mind among Chinese at home and abroad. But American strength and vigilance is crucial, tomorrow as it has been in the past. We should not assume that economic boom has led China to the doorstep of democracy. We should resist China's picking of winners and losers among Americans dealing with cultural and intellectual exchanges with the PRC. We should continue to be a beacon of freedom in our own conduct and in speaking up for freedom around the world.

Filename: Terrill statement
Directory: C:\Documents and Settings\Jertman\Local
Settings\Temporary Internet Files\OLK5E
Template: C:\Documents and Settings\Jertman\Application
Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dot
Title: April 30, 2009
Subject:
Author: Owner
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 4/21/2009 5:19:00 PM
Change Number: 4
Last Saved On: 4/27/2009 9:43:00 AM
Last Saved By: M.L. Faunce
Total Editing Time: 3 Minutes
Last Printed On: 4/30/2009 8:13:00 AM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 5
Number of Words: 2,345 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 12,032 (approx.)