

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gary D. Rawnsley*

# **A Survey of China's Public Diplomacy** <sup>[1]</sup>

*This is the first of what I intend as a series of occasional postings about public diplomacy and soft power in and towards Asia, focusing principally on the People's Republic of China. This site is understandably concerned with western approaches to, and practices of, public diplomacy, especially as they relate to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the challenges of international terrorism. My aim is to draw attention to non-western perspectives that acknowledge, but are not dominated by, events in the Middle East. In this first posting I offer some preliminary thoughts about Chinese public diplomacy, a brief and general survey to set the ball rolling.*

China has a long, distinguished and reasonably successful history of public diplomacy, a subject best saved for a future posting; but the current Chinese leadership has conceded the value of public diplomacy and soft power in a way that their predecessors, locked in an ideological straitjacket, never could. This renaissance is made possible by, and is extremely significant because of, China's embrace of economic approaches to globalization, its opening to world commerce, and its greater involvement in international regimes. China is no longer an insular power, but is now firmly embedded in, and more tolerant of, the interdependent global environment.

China's participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, unimaginable under Mao Zedong, is just one example of this new activism which has direct consequences for China's public diplomacy. Furthermore, China's foreign aid budget increased in 2006 by 14% to \$1.1 billion; in 2002 China gave \$150 million to aid Afghanistan's reconstruction; \$83 million in 2005 to Asian countries hit by the tsunami; and even offered \$5.1 million to the US after Hurricane Katrina. Such actions, representative of China's approach to soft power, demonstrate China's quest to be seen as a benign and responsible world power that can contribute to the international stability required for its further economic development. Focused in the new Confucius Institutes, established by China's Ministry of Education, efforts are so-far concentrated on cultural exports, particularly Mandarin language tuition. These are the recognizable Chinese equivalents of the British Council, the Goethe Institute and the Maison Française with the stated goal of selling abroad the image of a benign China.

The Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, recently underscored the importance of these endeavors to Chinese foreign policy: "Cultural exchanges," he said, "re a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of all countries and an important way to project a country's image," and added that China needs to use public diplomacy 'in a more effective way.' To this end, China Central Television (CCTV) has organized a conference on the theme of selling China overseas, while media regulators have decided to let Chongqing Television launch an international service to supplement that of CCTV 9, currently China's only English-language television service with a world-wide audience.

In September an exhibition of Xian's famous Terracotta warriors will arrive at the British Museum and organizers hope it will have the same impact as the legendary Tutankhamen

exhibition in the 1970s. In their quest to export their culture and language the Chinese have also managed to upset the French: their embassy in Washington DC is unhappy that Chinese is now replacing French in American schools, amid complaints that teachers are given free trips to China to impress and persuade them to adopt Mandarin as a school subject.

So far, so pedestrian. For those of us following China's forays into public diplomacy, there is little here to set the heart aflutter, and by concentrating on culture and language it is difficult to see how China's soft-power resources might contribute to its desired foreign policy objectives. However, China is starting to demonstrate a more mature understanding of public diplomacy that is committed to identifying its profitable connection with foreign policy objectives. This is suggested in reports of a meeting organized by the Communist Party's Propaganda Department in early 2007. In addition to the expected inventory of directives to the media on what they can or cannot publish ahead of the 17th Party Congress and the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the meeting provided recognizable indicators of how the Chinese practice of public diplomacy and soft power may develop.

First: "Do not criticize foreign affairs without prior authorization. Everything needs to be considered for possible domestic or international impact...." This is normal practice that highlights the relationship between foreign policy and public opinion. But until the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 destroyed China's global public image, and even during the first outbreak of SARS in 2003, this correlation was poorly understood.

Second: "Care needs to be paid to propaganda regarding 'the year of the pig' in the traditional calendar; extra effort needs to be made to prevent hurting the feelings of the Islamic brotherhood nation." China has so far not played an active role in the war on terror, but given its problems with Muslim separatists in Xinjiang, and the potential instability that would undermine China's goal of regional stability, Beijing is sensitive to the possibilities of aggravating Islamic extremism.

Third: "China is currently making diplomatic efforts to break the stalemate with Japan. For this reason, propaganda declarations must be careful, very careful, not to stir up anti-Japanese sentiment." This is particularly interesting for it demonstrates an explicit connection within Chinese foreign policy between "traditional" and public diplomacy; a recognition that misguided remarks can have serious consequences for foreign policy, especially when state and non-state relations are unstable. Despite the importance of memory and the theme of victim-hood in popular discourse China is expected to downplay commemoration of the 7th July Marco Polo Bridge Incident that triggered the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, representing a dramatic turnaround from the government-encouraged pro-nationalist anti-Japanese sentiments of only two years ago.

Fourth, such public diplomacy is aimed not just at Japan, but has a distinct regional focus. China is determined to demonstrate its commitment to a peaceful foreign policy as an important contributor to its further economic development and regional leadership. This is suggested by China's involvement in the Six Party Talks on North Korea and its explicit role in defusing a potential nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula in October 2006. Even in Taiwan, China has combined its notorious "stick" -- 700 missiles aimed at the island and anti-cessation legislation that guarantees military intervention if Taiwan moves towards independence -- with "carrot", including inviting prominent opposition party leaders from Taiwan to visit the Chinese mainland, granting extra tuition benefits for students in China from Taiwan, and removing tariffs on imports of fruit from the island. These measures do not accomplish China's fundamental policy objective of the (re)unification of Taiwan and the mainland; neither do they

imply that the public in Taiwan are more sympathetic to China or its aspirations. But in helping to prevent independence and at least preserving the status quo, their contribution to better cross-Strait relations should not be overlooked.

So, with Chinese public diplomacy apparently having embarked on a positive and successful trajectory, does it encounter any constraints?

The principal limitation is the difficulty in converting resources and effort into achievable policy aspirations. China devotes enormous amounts of resources to its distinct style of cultural diplomacy; to humanitarian assistance; and to contributing to the creation of a stable and peaceful Asia-Pacific. China's economic power and commercial potential are undeniable, and this makes it an attractive destination for global investment and entrepreneurship. However, it is difficult to persuade the democratic international community to look beyond economics and to perceive China as a credible diplomatic and political power. Cultural and economic diplomacy do not easily or necessarily translate into the realization of foreign policy objectives.

The Chinese leadership has apparently also overlooked Joseph Nye's description of soft power that includes "attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideas and policies." Despite its economic success China still attracts severe criticism from the international community and NGOs across the world because of the absence of human rights, democratic institutions and processes. Communist-dominated political ideas, policies and methods are only attractive to brutal dictatorships like Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe; in fact, the close personal relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and Mugabe's regime actually damages China's credibility and undermines much of its public diplomacy.

Finally, the continued domination of China by the Communist Party presents its own institutional problems for public diplomacy. Granted, some decisions are worth noting: the appointment of a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman in 1984; the creation of the Information Office of the State Council in 1991; and the renaming of the Propaganda Department as the Publicity Department in English only (and therefore for purposes of public diplomacy -- "propaganda" is accepted even by this ostensibly communist state to have pejorative overtones abroad; in Chinese it is still called the Propaganda Department). Yet the recent SARS and Avian Flu epidemics reveal that public diplomacy is essentially reactive rather than pro-active; defensive; secretive; potentially dishonest; and, for purely political expediency, too cautious and slow in responding to crises that have increasingly already been reported in the foreign media.

Chinese efforts at public diplomacy are admirable and use a variety of methods that have been tried and tested by other states, but they are inadequate to achieve the leadership's desired foreign policy outcomes beyond establishing China as a cultural and economic power. In other words, Chinese public diplomacy, like these postings, is definitely work in progress.

---