

IRONIES OF SOFT POWER PROJECTION: THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

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In an internal speech in October 2011 at a Central Committee plenum, which was only given wide publicity upon publication in a major Communist Party journal in January 2012, Hu Jintao railed against the penetration of Western culture into China, and noted that the West and China were engaged in an “escalating war”. China, he noted, must respond to the “strategic plot” to Westernize and divide the country, with the ideological and cultural fields seen as the “focal areas of [the West’s] long-term infiltration”. In contrast to the strong culture of the West, the international influence of Chinese culture “is not commensurate with China’s international status.”¹ Publicizing the speech in January was a strong signal that one of the key initiatives in 2012 would be the promotion of Chinese culture worldwide and, indeed, the state has spent billions of dollars in pursuit of soft power promotion, although the Chinese state has been pursuing soft power internationally for many years, and the subject has received a great deal of scholarly attention and debate within China.² For example, there were 358 Confucius Institutes worldwide by the end of 2011³, the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the Shanghai Expo in 2010 attracted a large number of visitors and garnered worldwide praise, China Radio International has 24 hour programming as does China’s cable news channels, and in 2009-2010 Beijing invested \$8.9 billion in publicity work overseas.⁴ Yet for all this state attention and investment, it is widely acknowledged – and not just by then Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao – that China’s soft power success has been less than stellar.⁵ To take just one indicator, according to the first *Blue Book on Chinese Soft Power Research*, published in February 2011, the Chinese

¹ Edward Wong, “China’s President Lashes Out at Western Culture,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 2012 (online). The speech appeared in the Party theoretical journal *Qiushi* [Seeking Truth].

² Li Mingjiang, ed., *Soft Power: China’s Emerging Strategy in International Politics* [Lanham, MD, 2009]; Li Mingjiang, “China Debates ‘Soft Power’,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2008, pp. 287-308.

³ Chinadaily.com, June 8, 2012. For a detailed study of the development of Confucius Institutes from 2004-2010, see Cai Huiqing, “Report on the Development of Confucius Institutes,” in Zhang Guozha, ed., *Report on the Development of Cultural Soft Power in China 2012* [Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2013], pp. 204-236.

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “China’s Soft Power Deficit,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2012 (online).

⁵ Bates Gill and Huang Yanzhong, “Sources and Limits of Chinese ‘Soft Power’,” *Survival*, Vol 48, No. 2, 2006, pp. 17-36; David Bandurski, “Rigid Thinking Beggars China’s ‘Soft Power’,” *China Media Project*, May 24, 2012 (online); Frank Ching, “China’s Search for Soft Power,” *Asia Sentinel*, February 9, 2012 (online); *Soft Power in Asia: Results of a Multinational Survey of Public Opinion* [Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012].

cultural industry takes up only 3% of the world market, with American culture making up 43%, the European Union 34% and Japan at 10%.⁶

Hu's analysis of the success of Western, particularly American, soft power is accurate. What is striking, however, is that American soft power has been remarkably successful in China despite a general disinterest in soft power promotion by the American government, a strong aversion to American foreign policy and the belief that such foreign policy is designed to keep China weak and maintain American hegemony, and Chinese government efforts to impede the American success. American government neglect of soft power promotion is due, in part, to the nature of the American political and electoral systems, and in part to the belief that America is strong enough to do as it pleases with or without approbation from outside its borders. When the recent and bipartisan Bowles-Simpson Commission came up with proposals to stem the burgeoning federal budget deficit, the cuts were concentrated in areas the American public already questions, for example the State Department and America's foreign operations, not entitlements, military expenditures, or changing the tax system, where the real money is located. As one Congressman told Joseph Nye, the academic who coined the term soft power, "You are right about the importance of combining soft power with hard power, but I cannot talk about soft power and hope to get re-elected."⁷ The cuts in funding to the Voice of America China programs – what one critic called "unilateral disarmament" – have been widely reported and lamented.⁸ WikiLeaks has released cables from the American Consulate in Shanghai pleading for government support for the American pavilion at the Shanghai Expo, warning that "the U.S. business community ... is not enthusiastic about a 'national' pavilion that must be 100% funded by the private sector". On the verge of informing the Shanghai authorities that the Expo would

⁶ *Blue Book on Cultural Soft Power: Report on Chinese Cultural Soft Power* [Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2011]. It is important to note, however, that PRC soft power has been very successful in many countries in its Chinese language broadcasting. With an increasing component of the Chinese diaspora consisting of overseas Chinese who have emigrated from China relatively recently, the PRC has made substantial efforts, using both hard and soft tactics, to penetrate and control these markets, often driving out competing voices. Australia and New Zealand are instructive cases. For Australia, see John Garnaut, "Toeing the Line," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 13, 2011 (online). The trend noted in this article has continued since (personal communication from Garnaut).

⁷ Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The War on Soft Power," *foreignpolicy.com*, April 12, 2011; Nye, "The Decline of America's Soft Power," *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2004 (online). For Nye's classic texts see *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* [New York: Basic Books, 1990] and *'Soft Power': The Means to Success in World Politics* [New York: Public Affairs, 2004].

⁸ Joseph A. Bosco, "Why Voice of America Is Losing To Voice of Communist China – At Home and Abroad," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 27, 2012 (online).

have to go forward without U.S. participation, American diplomats warned Washington that in addition to the inevitable damage to US-China relations, “the damage to the U.S. public image will be global.”⁹

If it seems ironic that American soft power has been successful in China and elsewhere despite the indifference of the U.S. government, it is equally ironic that the massive Chinese governmental effort as part of its “go abroad” (*zouchuqu*) strategy has yet to make similar inroads in the U.S. and most countries outside the Third World. However, there is an explanation for this seemingly surprising outcome. American soft power, it could be argued, has been successful precisely because it is *not* linked to the American government, whereas the Chinese promotion of soft power hardly exists apart from the efforts of its government. Chen Shengluo, a Chinese academic who does surveys on university student attitudes toward the U.S. and other countries, noted the existence of “two Americas” in the minds of Chinese students, a “hegemonist” America on the international stage and an America in which a high level of development has been achieved at home because of its values and social system.¹⁰ American culture could succeed in China only because the students could accept this separation. Indeed, when the NATO-led U.S. bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in May 1999 during the war in Kosovo, the Chinese media tried to link the hegemonist U.S. with the cultural U.S., asserting that everything from American blockbuster films to the promotion of human rights and globalization, not to mention “Western civilization” more generally, was part of a deliberate conspiracy by America to control the world.¹¹ Surveys done in China soon after the bombing strongly suggested, however, that such governmental efforts were unsuccessful, that popular disillusionment toward U.S. culture was short-lived.¹²

The most familiar area of American success of course is cultural, although cultural soft power is only one dimension, with some surveys measuring soft power along economic, human

⁹ “Grim Outlook for Expo Participation,” Cable 08SHANGHAI430, SBU (<http://wikileaks.org/cable/2008/09/08SHANGHAI430.html>). In the end the \$61 million funding was provided by around 60 multinational corporations.

¹⁰ Chen Shengluo, “Two Americas: How Chinese College Students View the United States,” translated in Stanley Rosen, ed., *Chinese Education and Society*, Vol. 36, No. 6, November-December 2003, pp. 7-31.

¹¹ Among many sources, see the series of articles in *Beijing Youth Daily* [*Beijing qingnian bao*], May 15-20, 1999.

¹² Zhao Dingxin, “An Angle on Nationalism in China Today: Attitudes among Beijing University Students after Belgrade 1999,” *China Quarterly*, Number 172, December 2002, pp. 885-905.

capital, political and diplomatic dimensions, in addition to culture.¹³ It is therefore important to understand that the problem suggested by General Secretary Hu is far more serious than the fact that American films took 63% of the Chinese box office in the first half of 2012 and Hollywood films topped the charts for 23 straight weeks¹⁴, that Lady Gaga and Beyoncé are as popular in China as they are in the U.S. or, as one recent Chinese book title put it, “We don’t have Avatar”.¹⁵ As it seeks to compete with American, European, Japanese and Korean soft power throughout the world, particularly beyond the other authoritarian systems, the constraints China faces reflect, most fundamentally, the nature of the Chinese political system, Chinese government policies, and the continuing influence of traditional Chinese culture. Robert Cain, in analyzing why South Korea, despite its smaller size and more limited state investment, has a far greater global cultural impact than China, pointed to five reasons.¹⁶ First, China has invested in hard assets such as production and post-production facilities, but not in the kind of training that would nurture creative talent. Second, the political regime has remained deeply antagonistic toward true artistic expression. Third, Chinese story-telling emphasizes the collective over the individual, while American blockbusters succeed by emphasizing heroes or even anti-heroes who succeed by ignoring the rules. Fourth, censorship tends to be unpredictable, with government suspicion and interference possible at every stage, stifling creative and innovative ideas. Fifth, the educational system emphasizes obedience to authority and discourages idiosyncratic expression.¹⁷ Other analysts have noted that Chinese soft power “lacks credibility,” that the projection of soft power needs to be matched by deeds.¹⁸ Massive state funding cannot compensate for the fact that China lags far behind in those areas Joseph Nye has identified as most important for soft power projection: a dominant culture and ideology close to prevailing norms; credibility enhanced by domestic and international performance; and access to multiple

¹³ These five separate indices were used in the “Soft Power in East Asia” survey, conducted in various countries in 2008. See Marshall M. Bouton and Gregory G. Holyk, “Asian Perceptions of American Soft Power,” in Sook Jong Lee and Jan Melissen, eds., *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011], pp. 191-222.

¹⁴ Robert Cain, “China’s Box Office: An Excellent 2012 So Far,” *chinafilmbiz*, July 8, 2012.

¹⁵ Han Heyuan, *We Don’t Have Avatar: The Crisis of Chinese Soft Power* [Beijing: China Development Press, 2011]. Han addresses the different definitions and uses of soft power, including its role as a foreign policy and a cultural instrument (e.g., pp. 193-201)

¹⁶ Robert Cain, “The Korean Conundrum: Why South Korea Has Greater Global Cultural Impact than China, Part 1 and Part 2,” *chinafilmbiz*, October 11 and 17, 2012.

¹⁷ Cain, *chinafilmbiz*, op. cit., October 17, 2012.

¹⁸ Ingrid D’Hooghe, “The Limits of China’s Soft Power in Europe: Beijing’s Public Diplomacy Puzzle,” in Lee and Melissen, op. cit., footnote 13, pp. 163-190.

channels of communication, which enables the framing of issues.¹⁹ While China is addressing some of this deficit, particularly with regard to expanding its communication channels, the state's self-imposed limits on what can be communicated remains a serious obstacle.

The emphasis on the collective over the individual that Cain suggested was strikingly evident in the response within China to Chinese writer Mo Yan's success in winning the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature. As the first "mainstream" Chinese writer to be accorded such an honor, which has also eluded scientists who are citizens of the PRC, it was not surprising that Mo Yan's victory was front page news within China. However, while Mo Yan noted that it was an individual prize and suggested that it was unlikely to have a lasting impact on Chinese literature or even the popularity of his own works²⁰, local officials in his hometown of Gaomi in eastern Shandong province emphasized the value of the prize for the larger community. Within a week they announced plans to spend 6.7 million RMB (\$107 million) to transform Mo Yan's home village into a "Red Sorghum Culture and Experience Zone", and have local residents cultivate the red sorghum that had already been proven to be unprofitable. As a local official noted to Mo's 90-year-old father, "Your son is no longer your son, and the house is no longer your house" since your son is now the pride of China. "It does not really matter if you agree or not."²¹ An official from the local tourism bureau explained that provincial authorities ordered Gaomi to execute the tourism program regardless of how Mo Yan and his family felt about it.²²

The "Chinese problem" has been highlighted in recent survey work done by Chen Shengluo, which explicitly compared China and the U.S. in the sensitive area of politics, finding, to his great surprise, that elite university students in Beijing had a decided preference for the American political system over the Chinese system. In particular, they admired the separation of powers. In his sample of 505 students at Beijing's best universities, 31.7% liked the separation of powers a great deal and 43% liked it somewhat. When those who chose "so-so" (*yiban*) are

¹⁹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], cited in D'Hooghe, p. 187.

²⁰ Fiona Tam, "It is Hard to be Happy Even in Joy, Mo Yan Says," *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 2012, p. 7.

²¹ "Mo Yan jiaxiang yi tou 6.7yi hengyang hong gaoliang wenhua; guanmin jun kangfen [Mo Yan's Home Village Will Rely on an Investment of 6.7 million RMB to Promote Red Sorghum Culture: Officials are all Very Excited], *Xin Jing Bao* [New Beijing News], October 18, 2012 (online); Malcolm Moore, "China to Spend 70 Million Pounds Sprucing Up Nobel Prize Winner's Hometown," *The Telegraph*, October 18, 2012 (online); Perry Link, "Does This Writer Deserve the Prize?" *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 2012 (online).

²² Raymond Li, "Mo Yan's Hometown Is Looking to Cash In," *South China Morning Post*, October 19, 2012, p. 7.

added, the total comes to 95.8%, with only 4.2% choosing “somewhat dislike it” and not a single student choosing “entirely dislike it”.²³ Chen interpreted these results as an indication that the students felt the Party’s monopoly of power would never be able to solve the problem of official corruption – the number one grievance in Chinese society according to many surveys – and that the American system did a better job in this regard. His findings are congruent with an internal government survey done among Chinese university students that found well over 80% agreeing that Western visual culture products propagate Western political concepts and lifestyles, but only 17% noting they “don’t identify with them”.²⁴

The 2012 American presidential election and the political transition in China, occurring at virtually the same time (November 6 and November 8), also offer some valuable lessons on why American political soft power has been more successful than its Chinese counterpart, which can be seen from the reaction of the Chinese media and Chinese citizens to the operation of the two political systems. While there was a virtual blackout in the Chinese media on the Chinese transition, and the focus on the American election included some discussion of the familiar “China-bashing” that has been a feature of many American presidential elections, the general public appeared to be less interested in the actual issues and more excited by the process through which the candidates sought to attract votes.²⁵ Bloggers responded to critiques of the American election campaign in the state media. Reacting to articles mocking the enormous costs of American presidential elections, one blogger, using the figures provided by Wang Xixin, a researcher for the standing committee of the National People’s Congress, noted that the costs for Chinese officials eating and drinking at public expense, official trips abroad, and the use of official cars (the so-called “three publics” or *san gong*) for one year could fund American presidential elections for 390 years, concluding satirically that in this regard at least China was a superpower!²⁶

²³ Chen Shengluo, “Chinese University Students’ Perceptions of the Political Systems of China and the United States,” in Stanley Rosen and Chen Shengluo, eds., *Chinese Education and Society*, Vol. 44, Nos. 2-3, March-June, 2011, pp. 13-57. Chen’s work of course cannot be published openly in China, but it has been internally circulated among Chinese officials.

²⁴ Cited in Stanley Rosen, “Chinese Youth and State-Society Relations,” in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen, eds., *Chinese Politics: State, Society and the Market* [New York: Routledge, 2010], p. 166.

²⁵ Nicole Liu, “Chinese Media: Quiet on Communist Party Congress, Gaga for U.S. Election,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 2012 (online blog).

²⁶ Sina micro blogger “E-magazine,” October 25, 2012. Official state media accused Wang of creating false rumors.

