

The rise of China and its contest for discursive power

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Abstract

The Chinese leadership has emphasized that China is pursuing a path of peaceful development, but much of the rest of the world, especially the West, is suspicious of this claim. In order to alleviate the anxiety and fear about its rise among nations who share different systems and interests, China has devoted significant efforts to cultivate its soft power. The results have been mixed. This article examines China's bid for soft power and its public diplomacy, which, since President Xi Jinping's ascendancy to power in 2013, has shifted from assuring the world of its peaceful rise to competing for discursive power on the global stage. The implications for the global order of this shift in public diplomacy are assessed.

Keywords

China model, China's rise, discursive power, public diplomacy, rule of virtue, soft power

China became the second largest economy in the world in 2010. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF; 2015), in 2014, the gross domestic product (GDP) of China reached US\$10,380 billion. In the same year, the United States' GDP was US\$17,418 billion, it is now expected that the GDP of China will soon surpass that of the United States, making China the largest economy in the world (Jacques, 2014). Moreover, China's economic power has been accompanied by the build-up of its military. In 2015, China's military expenditure reached US\$145.8 billion, ranking second after the United States, which spent US\$597.5 billion on its military (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2016). Despite China's repeated assurance that it would rise peacefully and never seek hegemony, both the Western powers and China's neighbors are closely watching China's rise. They are concerned that China is pursuing a "revisionist" path as its predecessors did in the last century (Carter & Bulkeley, 2007; Friedberg, 2005; Ikenberry, 2008).

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Historically, the rise of a new power often ended in wars that were used to alter the status quo. Morgenthau (1985) labeled nations that seek to acquire more power than they currently possess revisionist powers because they seek to alter existing power relations and achieve greater status. He warned that such revisionist powers have historically pursued imperialist policies. The actions of Germany and Japan in the late 19th century are examples of the “revisionist” behavior of a rising power. According to Gilpin (1981, pp. 23–24), three questions can be used to determine whether a state pursues a policy that fundamentally maintains the status quo or is pursuing a revisionist foreign policy: (1) Will a state government support and follow the existing rules in international affairs, such as interstate diplomacy, regional security institutions, and international economic institutions? (2) Are state leaders satisfied with the existing distribution of power globally or regionally? and (3) How does the leadership speak and act regarding the hierarchy of prestige?

In the realist theory of international politics, a rising power has the “revisionist” tendency to alter the status quo, which then disrupts the existing international order and threatens the hegemon. The rising power often will use its force to change the status quo to meet its aspirations and interests. Alternatively, the hegemon will take preemptive actions to stop the rising power from challenging its power and privileges. According to the realist school of thought, wars often result from the rise of a new power (Gilpin, 1981; Morgenthau, 1985; Schweller, 1994).

However, another school of thought, neoliberal institutionalism, considers that cooperation between the new power and current power-holders is possible through existing institutions and international norms. This school stresses the “interdependence” between nations. The theory of neoliberal institutionalism stipulates that variations in the institution of world politics exert significant influence on the behavior of governments. States are at the center of neoliberal institutionalist views of world politics, as they are for realists, but formal and informal rules play a much larger role in neoliberal interpretations than in realist interpretations (Keohane, 1989). The rising power can learn to use the existing institutions to further its interests without disrupting the international order, and it is advantageous for all parties to cooperate through the existing order with evolutionary changes (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Martin, 1995; Keohane & Nye, 1977). In advocating the school of neoliberal institutionalism, Nye (2002) argued that in an era of interdependence, soft power becomes more important for the rising power. If a rising power increases its soft power, it will help it avoid the dangerous path of pursuing hard power. If China can enhance its soft power, according to the theory of neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane & Nye, 1977), its need to build and use hard power will be reduced.

Nye (1990) advanced the concept of “soft power” in the 1990s. He characterized soft power as the second face of power and distinguished it from military, economic, and technological hard power:

A country may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other countries want to follow it or have agreed to a system that produces such effects ... that is, getting others to want what you want ... in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength. (Nye, 1990, pp. 31–32)

Morgenthau (1985) identified nine elements of national power: geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy, and the quality of government. The last four elements could be taken as the “soft” side of power. Nye (2004) suggested that soft power “seduces” rather than “coerces.” It is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (p. x). He stressed

three major resources of soft power: culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and foreign policy (when its relationships with other nations are seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

China's bid for soft power

China's leaders are aware that soft power could help alleviate the fears of its neighbors and the West about China's rise by contributing to a friendly external environment for its economic development and governance. Since President Hu Jintao came to power in 2002, the efforts to promote China to the outside world have intensified. At the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Hu (2007) emphasized the importance of culture as a "source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength" (section vii). It was the first time that a Chinese leader referred to the idea of "soft power."

Yet, Chinese scholars had been discussing soft power as early as 1993, when H. Wang (1993), a professor at Fudan University, who later became the Director of the Chinese Communist Central Policy Office, was engaged in a comprehensive discussion of soft power. H. Wang (1993) observed that a country's political system and leadership are fundamental to the power of the country. A democratic system with diffused decision-making processes may be inefficient in policymaking and implementation, but a centralized system is more likely to make mistakes. He noted that the national morale manifested in patriotism plays an important role in a country's power. He reckoned that a positive national image, which consists of positive impressions about a country's credibility, behavior, style, and so on, would greatly enhance a country's soft power. He pointed out that a country that has a strategic plan to promote its values and ideology externally tends to wield more soft power than a country that has no strategic plan.

China's recent moves to set up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the launch of "One Belt, One Road" development strategy seems to echo Wang's call for a strategic plan to promote the country's values and ideology, demonstrate its ability to build new international institutions, and also enhance China's economic ties with other nations. H. Wang (1993) also considered that advancements in science and technology enhance not only a country's economic and military strength but also all aspects of the country's power and were the most important promoting soft power. While Nye (1990) considered economic and technological power as part of hard power, the Chinese conception of soft power differs from Nye's original formulation of soft power. Nye (2008) noted, "soft power is not merely influence ... Influence can also rest on the hard power of threats or payments." (p. 95) He thought the resources that produce soft power arise mainly from "the values a country that expresses in its culture." (p. 95). The Chinese conception of soft power, however, includes "influences" based on economic and technological power.

In 2005, Peking University established a task force to study soft power, which subsequently resulted in the publication of two books: *Soft Power: China Perspective* (Han & Jiang, 2009), and *Strategic Studies on Cultural Soft Power* (Tang, 2009). In the first book, Han and Jiang attempted to construct a universal theoretical system that divided soft power into three levels: national, regional, and entrepreneurial. The third level refers to competition in business and brand names, whereas the first and second levels refer to national and regional competition, respectively. In the second book, Tang (2009) examined the nature and structure of soft power from a philosophical perspective. In addition to Nye's three components of culture, political values, and foreign policy, the Peking University Soft Power Study Task Force (2009) identified two further components:

institutions and the quality of a people. The Task Force pointed out that the technological innovations in the West had been made possible by a series of institutional reforms. The rigorous economic growth of China in recent years demonstrated further the importance of adaptive policies and institutions. As regards the quality of people, the Task Force pointed out that Chinese people might still have indulged in thinking China as “a superior heavenly kingdom” if they had not come into contact with the West in the last century and learned about its superior military and technological power. To uphold China’s economic growth, the quality of people must be enhanced by raising their innovative ability and eradicating corruption, bureaucratism and institutional restraints in the academic and scientific circle.

Subsequently, Peking University collaborated with the *People’s Daily* (People.cn) to establish an online forum on Chinese soft power (<http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/166866/>). The forum covers the speeches presented by state leaders such as Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao on the topic of soft power. The forum is divided into various sections, such as theories of soft power, national, regional, cultural, entrepreneurial soft power, and so on. The topics vary from development of tourism, marketing of cultural products, to promotion of Confucian cultural values. Cai (2010), the Minister of Culture, for example, pointed out that Prague, Venice, and Paris were noted, respectively, for their music, cinema, and fine arts. He urged the Hainan provincial government to merge Chinese culture in tourism, construct Hainan Island into an international tourism center, and promote international exchanges. Chen (2010), the Deputy Director of the Institute of Cultural Industry Studies of Peking University, emphasized in a theoretical discussion that production of receptive content was more important than communication capacity in gaining discursive power on the international stage.

Similar to Nye’s (1990, 2008) emphasis on culture as the essential part of soft power, many Chinese scholars have considered cultural forces as the most important factors in fostering soft power. But the concept of culture among Chinese scholars embraces a wider scope than Nye’s conception. While Nye (1990, 2005) emphasized mainly the influence of cultural industries and their products in building a country’s soft power, cultural forces for Chinese scholars include cultural attraction, linguistic persuasion, moral influence, spiritual vigor, intellectual creativity, theoretical guidance, the force of public opinion, and artistic charm (G. Sun, 2015). In addition to culture, Su (2007) argued that soft power emerges in the interaction between dominant and dependent states. This asymmetric relationship is influenced by a nation’s participation in international organizations, fulfillment of international obligations, alliances, agenda-setting abilities, and international communication. According to Yan (2007), the core of soft power in political power is represented by a nation’s international attractiveness and its international and domestic mobilizing forces. He argued that in building soft power, a nation’s capacity to use its material resources, both overseas and at home, is more important than the number of resources available to it. This is similar to the “power measured in behavioral outcomes,” which is distinguished from “power measured in terms of resources,” as suggested by Nye (2008, p. 95). Guo (2009) divided soft power into internal and external layers. The internal layer consists of advanced political and economic systems as well as citizens of quality. Guo emphasized that provision of choices for different social values and institutional arrangements, such as maintaining an open media system with effective responses to crisis during the earthquake of Wenchuan in 2008, is significant to the construction of soft power. Quality of citizens, such as witnessing in them a sense of duty and service as was manifested in the earthquake, is also an important instrument for building soft power. The external layer of soft power comprises the communication of national culture and values. Similarly, Men (2007a) conceived soft power as possessing both external and internal dimensions. He grouped culture, values,

and development models in the internal dimension, whereas he placed international institutions and international images in the external dimension. After reviewing the literature on soft power by Chinese scholars, J. Huang and Ding (2010) concluded that most studies equate “cultural soft power” to “national soft power,” which is, however, created by both “cultural” and “non-cultural” factors such as social institutions, good governance, and technological innovations. They further pointed out that good governance at home is fundamental to the external influence of a nation, but Chinese scholars have long neglected this factor.

The above review shows that Chinese scholars have adapted Nye’s definition of soft power in the Chinese context. While they broadened the concept of culture to include both traditional and popular culture, moral influence and artistic charm, Chinese scholars paid less attention to the role of political values in soft power. Meanwhile, they considered that economic force was part of soft influence, whereas Nye treated economic power as part of hard power. The different conception of Chinese soft power can partly explain why China often stresses its economic achievements and cultural heritage and downplays political values in its bid for soft power.

An obvious problem that China faces in its attempt to achieve more soft power is the perception in the West that China lacks democratic freedoms and respect for human rights. The lack of attention to such concerns in China is probably due to the fact that such topics are sensitive in the one-party state. However, if discussions of the Western concerns about China’s political system and values are restricted, the chance for China to strengthen its soft power in the West, as well as among liberal democratic countries in the world, is limited. This limitation is evidenced in the largely unsuccessful bid of China to enhance its soft power in the West in the past decade.

In 2008, China strenuously promoted the Beijing Olympics as a forum to display China’s achievements in the modernization and “renaissance” of Chinese culture. In 2008, the Beijing Olympics were symbolic of China’s re-appearance on the world stage after years of seclusion. With the theme of “One World, One Dream,” the games drew the attention of the world to the development of China. However, the Western media’s coverage of the 2008 Olympics was fraught with counter-narratives, especially during the torch relay. The criticisms ranged from China’s alleged human rights abuses, claims that it repressed ethnic minorities, child labor, and environmental problems. These claims sharply contrasted with China’s preferred narratives of prosperity and order in a globalized China (deLisle, 2008). After 2 years, the Beijing Olympics were followed by another mega event, the Shanghai Expo, which attracted more than 70 million visitors (the vast majority of whom were Chinese citizens), however, and as a result the event did not seem to significantly enhance China’s image in the West (Nye, 2012).

Nye (2012) pointed out that concerns about human rights have long undercut China’s efforts in public diplomacy. Such concerns suggest that China sometimes undermines its soft power successes. For example, while the global media should have been celebrating the success of the Shanghai Expo in 2010, the jailing of Nobel Peace Laureate, Liu Xiaobo distracted it. In July 2015, just 2 months before Xi’s visit to the United States, more than 200 lawyers and associates in China were detained. Some of them were paraded on television to offer what a *New York Times* article described as humiliating confessions (Jacobs & Buckley, 2015). Stories like these overwhelm the positive coverage in the West regarding China’s economic growth, scientific advancements, cultural heritage, and so on.

In the mid-2000s, a researcher at the Central Party School of China identified three stages in China’s rise: first, to establish a leading position in East Asia by 2010; second, to play a leading role as a “quasi-world power” in the Asia-Pacific region by 2020; and third, to develop into a “world level” power by 2050 (Men, 2007b). Having emerged as a leading power in East Asia,

China seems to have succeeded in completing its first stage, which was demonstrated by its positive role in the Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program, the sailing of China's patrol boats in the waters of the Sino-Japanese disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in late 2012, and the construction of an artificial island on Mischief Reef in the South China Sea. These events demonstrated that China is a force to be reckoned with in the region.

China has also been active in organizing and participating in international organizations, negotiations, and forums, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) Summit, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)+1 (China), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), The Group of 20 (G20), Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program, World Economic Forum (Davos-Klosters Annual Meeting), Boao Forum for Asia, Beijing Forum, and so on. Kurlantzick (2007) documented the means used by China to wield soft influence, including diplomatic offensives in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, providing aid to countries without obligation, encouraging foreign students to study in China, promoting Chinese studies in other nations by establishing Confucius Institutes, and brokering differences among small states in Asia. It was reported that in 2009 and 2010, China invested US\$8.7 billion in the external publicity work carried out by China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua News Agency, and *China Daily* (Shambaugh, 2010). Despite these activities, however, China still falls short of gaining respect from the West and its neighbors.

China's image in the world

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) began conducting surveys on national images in 2005. In 2014, the number of countries tracked was increased to 21. The respondents are asked the following question: "Does the following country have a mainly positive or mainly negative influence in the world?" In June 2014, the BBC World Service POLL indicated that countries where over 50% of the surveyed population considered China's influence "mainly negative" included Germany (76%), Japan (73%), France (68%), the United States (66%), Canada (64%), Spain (59%), and South Korea (56%). The poll also found that countries in which over half of the surveyed population considered China's influence "mainly positive" included Nigeria (85%), Pakistan (75%), Ghana (67%), Kenya (65%), Peru (54%), Brazil (52%), and Indonesia (52%). These statistics indicate that China has a better image in developing countries than in developed countries.

The Pew Research Center has also conducted surveys of national images since 2002. They ask respondents the following question: "Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of Country X?" In 2014, the survey was conducted in 63 countries, including all major countries in America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Using data collected by the Pew Research Center in 2014, the images of China and the United States were compared. This comparison helped shed light on the image and soft power of the hegemon and the rising power of China (Table 1).

Table 1 shows that among the 10 largest world economies, in 2014, less than a quarter of the Russians surveyed had a favorable view of the United States, while in the other nine states, half or more than half of the surveyed sample had a favorable view of the United States. With regard to China, Table 1 shows that in Russia, more than half (64%) of the respondents had a favorable view of China, while in the other nine states, less than 50% of those surveyed had a favorable view of China. These results indicate that China had a less favorable image than United States among the top economies (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Table 1. Favorable images of China and the United States among top 10 world economies by percentage.

	Gross Domestic Products 2014 (US\$ Million) ¹	China ²	United States ²
United States	17,418,925	35%	82%
China	10,380,380	96%	50%
Japan	4,616,335	7%	66%
Germany	3,859,547	28%	51%
United Kingdom	3,056,499	47%	66%
France	2,846,889	47%	75%
Brazil	2,353,052	44%	65%
Italy	2,147,952	26%	78%
India	2,049,501	31%	55%
Russia	1,857,461	64%	23%

Sources: ¹International Monetary Fund (IMF; 2015); ²Pew Research Center (2015).

Survey question: “Do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of Country X.”

Analysts estimated that China’s annual budget for “external propaganda” runs around US\$10 billion compared with the expenditure of US\$666 million on public diplomacy in 2014 by the US Department of State. China’s official state news service, Xinhua News Agency, employs about 3000 journalists of whom 400 are posted abroad in its 170 bureaus. Xi and Premier Li Keqiang visited more than 50 countries in 2014 and signed huge trade and investment deals and extended generous loans and aid packages (see Shambaugh, 2015). These investments and other efforts, however, have not resulted in proportional gains; China’s global image, especially in Western countries, is still low.

The “China Story” and propaganda model

As Boulding (1956) suggested, “behavior depends on the image” (p. 6). If a nation’s image is positive, it tends to foster goodwill among other nations and enhance the nation’s soft power in achieving its objectives peacefully. Conversely, a negative national image reduces not only a nation’s attractiveness and soft power, but in the worst scenario, it can lead to the hostile behaviors of other nations and even result in conflict. Among the factors contributing to the construction of national image, communication is the most obvious. Carey (1989) noted that as narrative, communication signifies a cultural process whereby “reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed” (p. 18). States always try to communicate their strengths and achievements to audiences, both external and internal. Media images are often perceived as “real” by audiences, especially in situations when competing narratives are not readily accessible or may be slanted by either the choices made by governments and media outlets or the disinterested consumption of information that does not confirm pre-existing beliefs.

After examining the narratives of the Chinese and Japanese media regarding the sovereignty disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, Hollihan (2014a) observed that as a rule the legacy media portrayed its home nation as a deliberate, rational, and wise actor in the controversy, whereas the other was cast as an aggressive, irrational, and dangerous power that risked a war. If the audiences have access only to the narratives of one side in a controversy, it is very likely that they will

perceive that side to be “right” or “true.” This explains why states are concerned with their media images and public diplomacy, and why China is understandably eager to promote its’ own narratives to global audiences in order to counteract what it sees as the “Western bias” in media reporting.

Despite great efforts made by China to promote its image and wield soft influence, China has not yet received a favorable view from Western audiences, which beg the questions: Why is this so and what stories have been told by China to the world? and What went wrong with these stories?

Chinese sources always include stories about China’s economic achievements, traditional arts, cultural heritage, peaceful development, willingness to assume international obligations, altruistic sacrifices to maintain global fiscal order, and the goal of building China into a “moderately prosperous society” in 2020 (Hu, 2007, 2012; Xi, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b; Zhong, 2014). However, China’s soft power messages and narratives have not directly refuted Western concerns about democracy or human rights.

Although the so-called “Beijing Consensus” development model, which is an authoritarian government plus a market economy (see Kurlantzick, 2007; Li & Worm, 2011; Nye, 2005; Ramos, 2004), is well received in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Y. Huang & Ding, 2006), it fails to advance China’s soft power goals in the West where the idea that authoritarian rule is ever justified gains little traction.

Bandurski (2009), a Hong Kong-based China observer, argued that China’s soft power deficit is not due to its weak “communication capacity” or the hostile attitudes of the foreign press, but its failure to recognize, aspire to, and emulate the values that the rest of the world celebrates. W. Sun (2010) noted that in the absence of an oppositional style of politics, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the Chinese party-state and its media to present a convincing and sustained image of an open and transparent society.

In addition, China has used an ineffective and outmoded “silver-bullet” communication model to conduct its public diplomacy. The model assumes that the messages sent by the communicator are irresistible and that the receivers are targets, the same as bullets are to a bull’s eye (Schramm & Porter, 1982). This is evidenced in the news commentaries released by China’s official international news agency, Xinhua, which disseminates global news information 24 hours daily in 10 foreign languages through its website Xinhuanet. The analysis of some commentaries released by Xinhua will demonstrate how China’s official mouthpiece conceives its audience. My argument is that even when communicating with overseas audiences, Xinhua’s storytelling repertoire and style are effective for domestic audiences but do not appeal to overseas audiences. The challenge with such a strategy, however, is that overseas audiences have access to an array of alternative media outlets, and thus will see message inconsistencies that Chinese domestic audiences may not (see Hollihan, 2014b).

For example, on 4 August 2012, Xinhua released a commentary under the heading, the “U.S. needs to behave itself over the South China Sea.” It stated, “The establishment of Sansha city and garrison is a normal adjustment of China’s administrative and military structure and is an issue totally within China’s sovereignty ... China, in fact, is the one that has always exercised maximum restraint.” Regarding the role of the United States in the South China Sea, the commentary said,

Such double-dealing has given birth a swirl of comments that the world’s sole superpower is trying to drive a wedge between China and its neighbors so as to clip China’s wings and shore up the United States crackling pedestal in the Asia-Pacific.

It ended by stating, “China and the neighbors involved have the ability and wisdom to resolve their disputes properly without outside help” (Xinhua News Agency, 2013, pp. 188–189).

Although these messages reiterated China’s long-standing position on the South China Sea issue, they ignored the anxiety of China’s neighbors about its moves in the region, most notably those of Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan, and the Philippines. These anxieties have been thoroughly reported in global media outlets outside China, and thus, they were already well known by people outside China who paid even a modicum of attention to international news. The Xinhua coverage also ignored the fact that the United States had long-standing security commitments in the region (especially with the Philippines, which was at one time a US colony). It also ignored the fact that both Taiwan and Vietnam had specifically urged the United States to remain engaged in the region to counter China. Thus, the commentary neither alleviated the fear of China’s neighbors nor helped to persuade the United States not to intervene. The accusation that the United States was seeking to obstruct China’s rise was not very convincing and only increased the tensions in the region.

Another example is the commentary issued by Xinhua on 23 October 2012 under the heading “U.S. should learn to peacefully coexist with a rising China.” The commentary was concerned about a poll conducted by the *Washington Post* and ABC News. The poll result showed that 52% of the respondents had a negative view of China. The commentary remarked, “... some U.S. politicians, looking for political gain, have, instead of educating the public about the significance of ... China-U.S. relationships, spared no effort to manipulate this ill-founded antagonism toward China” (Xinhua News Agency, 2013, p. 116). This comment would be taken by many as “scapegoating” American politicians for the bad image of China. It also indicated the Chinese assumption that political figures in the United States had a role in “educating” the mass audience in the same way that political leaders exercise this role in China. The commentary went on to say that if Washington continued to view China’s rise as a threat, it might result in a breakdown of China–US relationship, which would become a catastrophe. “To prevent such a catastrophic scenario, the United States should learn how to coexist peacefully and responsibly with China” (Xinhua News Agency, 2013, p. 117). After reading this commentary, readers would wonder how such a “lecturing” tone could persuade the United States “to learn” to peacefully coexist with China.

Obstacles for China’s bid for soft power

In addition to employing an outmoded communication model, China also committed other errors in its public diplomacy. Cull (2010) traced the origin of public diplomacy to “propaganda” during the Cold War. However, as theories of public diplomacy have evolved, it has become clear that it differs from propaganda because it emphasizes “two-way communication.” Cull noted that states had sought to engage foreign publics for centuries, and the activities of public diplomacy, such as systematic listening, advocacy, cultural exchanges, and international broadcasting, had deep roots in the statecraft of Europe and Asia. Cull (2010) identified seven lessons from the history of public diplomacy: (1) public diplomacy begins with listening, (2) it must be connected to policy, (3) it is not a performance for domestic consumption, (4) effective public diplomacy requires credibility, (5) sometimes the most credible voice in public diplomacy is not one’s own, (6) public diplomacy is not “always about you,” and (7) it is everyone’s business. The second lesson indeed points at the core content of public diplomacy: it must be connected to policy. Cull noted, “The golden rule of public diplomacy is that *what counts is not what you say but what you do*” (p. 13).

By using Cull's seven lessons to examine China's public diplomacy, we can see that China has learned only the first lesson—listening—and has largely ignored the remaining six lessons. Since the 3rd plenary session of the 11th CCP Congress in 1978, China has been opening up and listening to the outside world. In more than three decades, China has learned much from the outside world, including economics, finance, science, technology, business management, education, public health, public administration, and even national defense. China has been open to new ideas, practices, and innovations in almost all areas except political reform and human rights, and on these topics China refuses to listen to or engage the views from the West. China has undertaken massive investments in communication infrastructure, communication personnel, international public relations agencies, and so on. Nevertheless, with regard to public diplomacy, China might benefit from adhering to the remaining six lessons theorized by Cull, especially the third lesson which emphasized that public diplomacy must not become “a performance for domestic consumption.”

China's efforts to promote its image are often frustrated by discrepancies between words and actions. Its publicity frequently has been found to be disconnected from its policy both at home and abroad. For example, China's Asian neighbors and the West are wary of China's military build-up in recent years. The actions involved in China's territorial claim over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and islands in the South China Sea have cast doubt on its assurance of a “peaceful rise,” and have worried its neighbors and the Western powers.

Likewise, although China frequently reiterates its intention “to rule in accordance with the law,” its practices sometimes suggest that the differences between China's judicial system and those of other nations are so significant that it fails to live up to Western notions of civil society. For example, China's practice of arranging detainees to confess their wrongdoings and crimes on television before trial are often criticized in Western media accounts of criminal procedures in China. One such recent case to receive extensive negative publicity overseas involved a Swedish non-government organization (NGO) worker who “confessed” on CCTV in January 2016 that he had violated Chinese laws by helping unlicensed lawyers take on cases against the Chinese government.

Perhaps an even more dramatic example that won significant attention in Western media outlets was the “abduction” of five Hong Kong booksellers who had written notorious and perhaps even scurrilous books attacking Chinese government officials (Forsythe, 2016; Phillips & Sala, 2016). The booksellers were allegedly spirited off to the Mainland by China's “forceful department” (the term used by China's *Global Times* on 5 January 2016 in its editorial denying that the booksellers were abducted and claiming that they traveled to China on their own volition). The incident was reported around the world as a breach of the “one nation, two systems” policy that China's leadership has continually assured Hong Kong would continue (Buckley, 2016; “US Calls,” 2016). One of the missing booksellers, Lee Po, while still in custody in China, was videotaped and shown on Phoenix TV (a Chinese-backed station in Hong Kong) to “clarify” that he “voluntarily” returned to China using “his own methods” to help Chinese security forces to investigate a case. On 24 March 2016, Lee Po resurfaced in Hong Kong, but he refused to disclose details about how he had crossed the border. He reappeared only to demand that the Hong Kong police cancel its investigation into his disappearance. The next day, less than 24 hours after returning to Hong Kong, Lee Po returned to China this time accompanied by a “mystery man” (Siu, 2016). This melodrama undermined the confidence of not only the people of Hong Kong, but also people around the world that China was ruled under law. The Chairwoman of the Hong Kong Bar Association, Winnie Tam Wan-chi, who had previously described the case as the “most

worrisome” event since the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, pointed out that Lee’s return to the city had not resolved anything (Au-yeung, 2016).

It is likely that China knows its actions sometimes do not match its words. Why then does China persist? The kindest possible explanation is that China simply does not understand the importance of addressing its problems in a manner that meets the civil society standards of other nations. A more cynical explanation may be that there are few consequences for being inconsistent or breaking promises, and such inconsistencies may even provide opportunities for China to display its power and authority to others. It is also the case, of course, that Chinese leaders are focused on providing convincing stories for their internal domestic public audiences. The Chinese people are constantly bombarded with narratives that are favorable to the party and its rule. Arranging detainees to confess their wrongdoings on television may seem strange to people in the West, but it is consistent with long-standing practices in China.

In addition to crafting stories with domestic audiences in mind, messages are sometimes created “abroad” for internal use. In the late 1990s, a Beijing-backed associate who formerly worked with the Central People’s Broadcasting Station acquired Phoenix TV. After 2003, Phoenix TV was the only outside station granted the right to relay its signals into China. At that time, most people in China thought that it was a Hong Kong television service, although it targeted mainland Chinese. This offered Chinese audiences the politically safe entertainment programs and pro-Beijing information from an “outside” television station and helped create the impression that the Chinese people shared the same information as did the outside world, and that China was a country admired by the outside world.

China’s public diplomacy, as already mentioned, sometimes lacks credibility. This is perhaps because China continues to adhere to the belief that the news media have a “propagandistic” function in supporting the legitimacy of the Party. In China, “propaganda” is not a negative term, it carries a connotation similar to “publicity.” The CCP has long emphasized media’s loyalty to the party and its role to propagandize the party’s policies. As early as 1948, Mao Tse-tung made it clear that party’s papers “must propagandize the Central’s lines and policies unconditionally” (“Mao Tse-tung,” 1983, pp. 155–156). This position has been held by his successors. On 19 February 2016, Xi paid a visit to the *People’s Daily*, CCTV, and Xinhua News Agency. Xi told the gathered media officials, “All news media run by the party must work to speak for the party’s will and its propositions, and protect the party’s authority and unity.” (“State Media,” 2016; E. Wong, 2016).

The central government in China exerts significant control over the reporting of news in China and in the messages sent abroad through China’s state-owned global media outlets. The promotion of China is understood as a primary goal, and message discipline is emphasized. The state is concerned about selling China in the “right” way, fearing that alternative or different voices might harm its image or disrupt its unified strategy of promoting certain themes, such as “peaceful development,” “never seek hegemony,” “the Chinese dream,” “the keen sense of a global community of a shared future,” and so on. Such a rigid adherence to message discipline has resulted in the circulation of state narratives that describe a country “too good to be true.” China should consider forsaking its monopolized one-sided propaganda approach to its messaging if it wishes to enhance its soft power in the West. The Chinese officials should also understand the Western journalistic tradition of guarding against corruption and abuse of power by government or big business. News media in the West serve as a “watchdog” of people. Media credibility is reduced if the media are too close to government or powerful elites as in China.

Could China forsake this propaganda model in conducting its public diplomacy? Perhaps not, because doing so would require some fundamental changes in the relationship between the media

in China and the state. This poses risks of course, for the party would then be subject to the demands and pressure from NGOs and the public for social and political reforms. To mobilize the internal public to promote China effectively overseas necessitates greater tolerance for dissent and transparency at home. It is not likely that, at least in the short term, the ruling party of China will offer to share power with other parties or social groups. On the contrary, after Xi took power, the party tightened its control of society and the media. Instead of forsaking the propaganda model in conducting public diplomacy, China is likely to intensify its propaganda and challenge Western values by presenting the “China model” as a viable and “better” model than the Western model of development.

The head-on contest for discursive power

Since Xi took over the reins of power in 2013, there have been signs of a shift in China’s foreign policy from one that accommodates the existing international rules to a policy that makes new rules and institutions on China’s terms. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping established the country’s diplomatic strategy of “hiding light and nurturing obscurity” (Leng & Wang, 2004, p. 1346). Deng stressed that China should keep a low profile because of the big change in the international order after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The United States had become the only superpower in the world. China did not take the lead of the Third World although some Third World countries would have liked to see that happen. Deng knew very well that China did not have the capacity to do so. He pointed out, “We have to lie low for some time in order to cultivate a larger political force, until then, China’s voice in the international arena will have more weight” (Y. Wang, 2014). In the past two decades, President Jiang Zemin and President Hu Jintao followed this policy of maintaining a low profile in international relations and quietly concentrated on China’s economic growth.

At the end of his administration, in a New Year’s message in 2002, Jiang highlighted that China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and it having secured the right to host the Olympics represented milestones in China’s pursuit of prosperity through international openness and engagement (cited in deLisle, 2008, p. 19). The Chinese leaders at that time were content with these presumably great achievements in international relations. In 2003, the first year of Hu’s reign, China signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with the ASEAN and agreed on a code of conduct aimed at reducing the risk of conflict over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In October 2007, Hu (2007) pledged “to uphold the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, observe international law and universally recognized norms of international relations, and promote democracy, harmony, collaboration and win-win solutions in international relations” (section xi).

However, by the time that Hu stepped down, the tone had begun to change. In his report to the 18th National Congress of the Party in November 2012, Hu (2012) urged the entire party to have confidence in the socialist path, socialist theories, and socialist systems *with Chinese characteristics* (section ii). It was later abbreviated to “Three Self-Confidences.” In the same report, Hu advanced 12 socialist core values: prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony at the national level; freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law at the social level; and patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship at the individual level (section vi). These core values were considered the guide for building socialism with Chinese characteristics. “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” has been China’s motto since Deng Xiaoping was in office. Nevertheless, the stress on “Three Self-Confidences” and the advancement of the 12 socialist core values signified the emergence of an

articulated narrative of the “China model.” Xi carried on this stress on “Three Self-Confidences” after he took power. The China model narrative might have targeted the internal audience at the outset, it can, however, be used to contest the Western narrative of democracy and bid for China’s soft power on the international stage.

In this newly articulated narrative, the core value of democracy was the most heavily elaborated. At the 65th Anniversary of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Committee (CPPCC) in September, 2014, Xi (2014b) distinguished between people’s right to vote and people’s right to participate continuously in political affairs. Without continuous participation, he said, the right to vote is meaningless formalism. He emphasized that in China, people are consulted about all sorts of things and at various levels. Under the leadership of the communist party, wide consultation is conducted to obtain the people’s consent as much as possible. This consultation process does not contradict people’s right to vote, but supplements it and makes it work better. According to Xi, this kind of “Chinese socialist consultative democracy” maintains the leadership of the communist party and promotes the active participation of all sectors. Consultative democracy not only maintains the principle of a people’s democracy but also fulfills the need for harmony and solidarity. China may use this narrative to argue for the superiority of “consultative democracy” over Western democracy because the latter emphasizes separation of powers, checks, and balances, which results in disharmony, social instability, and inefficiency.

After Xi’s ascent to power, the “Three Self-Confidences” and pursuit of “Chinese Dream” have been actively promoted. The “Chinese Dream” is “to rejuvenate the Chinese nation” (Fang, 2013). In his address to the 12th National People’s Congress in March 2013, Xi (“Xi Vows,” 2013) stated that the Chinese dream could be realized only by adhering to the Chinese way, that is, socialism with Chinese characteristics. In addition, patriotism and innovative reforms were needed. The solidarity of all nationalities was an invincible force to help realize the dream. This address revealed much about the direction of Xi’s administration in the following years. The address highlighted the goal of the rejuvenation of the nation and the use of patriotism, reforms, innovations, and solidarity of all nationalities as the means to achieve this end. Moreover, people needed to have confidence in the path, theories, and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

To pursue the Chinese Dream, China considers it necessary to have its own way which is different from the West. This consideration constitutes the basic tenet of the Chinese narrative in its bid for soft power. If China develops well through the “socialist path with Chinese characteristics,” and the West tries to impose its own model on China, it will show to the world that the West, under the leadership of the United States, is pursuing a hegemonic policy, obstructing China’s development and rise. This narrative can be used not only to strengthen the discursive power of the China model on the international stage, but also to promote nationalism further at home, if the Chinese way of development and Chinese dream are frustrated by the West.

Less than 10 months after taking power, Xi announced the grand strategy of integrating the economies of Asia and Europe, in the “One Belt, One Road” policy during his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013. The strategy refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which aims to promote economic cooperation among countries along the proposed Belt and Road routes. Five routes link China’s major cities through Central, Western, and Southeast Asian countries to various major cities in Europe, the United States, and Canada (Baidu, 2016). In October 2014, China launched the AIIB with 21 initial signatories, which was joined later by some US allies, including Britain, Australia, Germany, Italy, South Korea, and the Philippines. Although the bank aims to support the construction of infrastructure in Asia and the new “silk

road,” it challenges the existing international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank, which China claims are dominated by the US interests (S. Wong, 2016).

At a national propaganda-working meeting in August 2013, Xi (2013b) pointed out that China’s propaganda in the open era needs to let people understand contemporary China and Chinese characteristics objectively. Such propaganda must clearly convey the following: (1) Because China has specific situations, its development path must have specific characteristics; (2) China has a deep cultural heritage of spiritual pursuits that nourishes the growth of the nation; (3) the delicate and superb Chinese traditional culture underlies China’s profound cultural soft power; and (4) socialism with Chinese characteristics is rooted in Chinese culture and matches the developmental needs of China and the time. Xi urged the propaganda cadres to “create new concepts, new scopes and new narratives which integrate both Chinese and non-Chinese elements, so as to tell the Chinese story and spread Chinese voice well.” At the same meeting, the former Central Propaganda Department chief, Liu Yunshan, asked the cadres “to increase their initiatives and to grab the discursive power” (Xi, 2013b).

If China chooses to directly challenge the Western development model, which is based on democracy, the division of political power, the rule of law, an independent judiciary, individual freedom, the protection of human rights, and a free market economy, it will present an alternative Chinese development model that is based on consultative democracy under the leadership of the communist party, a rule of law that is enacted by the communist party-controlled legislature, the protection of human rights in accordance with the law, and a state-regulated hybrid bureaucratic–private economy. The China model will be promoted for its merits of maintaining stability while pursuing economic growth and fulfilling people’s democratic rights while attaining social harmony. Justice and fairness will be upheld by “virtuous” leaders who care for people’s interests and welfare. These leaders will have training and experience in public administration at various levels before they are selected by “virtuous” senior leaders in the CCP.

This China model is in fact similar to the system practiced by Chinese dynasties before the republican revolution in 1911 with the exception that the emperor has been replaced by a mass political party. In China’s past dynasties, the emperors also had consultative institutions, including a decision-making cabinet in the court, ministers of various executive departments, barons and kings of states, and official censors at court, all of which were appointed or approved by the emperor. The members of the National People’s Congress and CPPCC in China today are all appointed or approved by the communist party and play consultative roles that resemble the consultative institutions in ancient dynasties. Hence, it is doubtful that the China model will appeal to the West or help China wield its soft power. However, the model could certainly create an alternative discourse for China to present to the world, help it counter the dominant Western discourse, and seek soft influence, especially in developing countries.

Conclusion

Many scholars, both Western and Chinese, have argued that the lack of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and political freedom in China constitute obstacles to China’s image and soft power in the West (Y. Huang & Ding, 2006; Kurlantzick, 2007; Nye, 2012; Shambaugh, 2010; Y. Wang, 2008). Y. Huang and Ding (2006) considered that the lack of political freedom and human rights would continue to sabotage China’s efforts in building its soft power. Y. Wang (2008), current director of the Institute of International Affairs and the Center for European Studies at Renmin University

of China, noted that the chief differences between the West and China was in the domestic sphere, particularly the single-party political system, human rights, and freedom of the press. He considered that, misconceptions aside, the problem lies in the Chinese tradition of the “rule of virtue.”

The emerging China model will certainly include the component of “rule of virtue.” In fact, nearly all documents concerning communist party members’ quality and discipline emphasize the altruistic, upright, uncorrupt, and ethical qualities of party members, who must care about the interests of the masses and serve the people. Communist party members and state leaders shall all be “people of virtue.” However, Chinese history shows that the “rule of virtue” is often an ideal rather than a reality. Most emperors and high officials were far from being good, not to say “virtuous.” In China today, corruption is rampant despite repeated calls for cleanliness, honesty, and honor among party members. Hence, in a nutshell, when China starts to confront the Western model of development, it will have to present an alternative model that carries weight theoretically and is able to convince at least some people both inside and outside China.

The China model of the rule of virtue is rooted philosophically in both Confucianism (rule by “gentlemen”) and Leninism (communist party is the vanguard of the proletariat). Its political system is “democratic centralism” (based on Mao Tse-Tung’s idea). In the China model, “consultative democracy” is a better form of democracy than Western democracy which stresses the separation of powers and results in incessant internal fights that lead to gross inefficiencies. The economic system of the China model is a “socialist market economy,” which is a system of hybrid bureaucratic–private enterprises that are heavily regulated by the state.

The China model will probably not be accepted in the West because it is authoritarian despite its use of democratic and philosophical terms. However, some authoritarian states, particularly those in the developing world, might accept the model, which will help China enhance its soft power in those contexts. Nevertheless, the challenge posed by the China model to the Western model and its related values will result in an ideological clash between China and the West. Tensions will tend to soar and confrontations will escalate, motivating China to press its “hard power” eagerly when its bid for soft power fails. In fact, the tension between China and the West already has started to develop.

In response to China’s construction of an artificial island on Mischief Reef in South China Sea, in October 2015, the United States sent a destroyer, the USS Lassen, to navigate within 12 nautical miles of the emerging landmasses in the Spratly Islands. The United States described its action as the “Freedom of Navigation Operation.” In November 2015, the United States continued to press the issue and sent two US B52 strategic bombers to fly near the artificial Chinese-built islands in the area, thus demonstrating that it did not recognize the legitimacy of China’s claim of sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea. In late March 2016, it was reported that China deployed the land-based version of the 400km-range YJ-62 anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) to Woody Island in the Paracel Islands (Fisher, 2016). Obviously, this was China’s reaction to the earlier deployment of the US aircraft carrier in the region. China’s “muscle flexing” in the South China Sea signifies not only a shift in the “lie-low” policy to the “Three Self-Confidences” policy but also the intention to strengthen its military power in reaction to US pressure.

If the CCP continues to resist democratic reforms, it is unlikely to gain respect in the West. China then might advance a model that could justify its one-party rule to counteract the Western discourse on the international stage. This move would bring China and the West into a direct confrontation of clashing ideologies and cultural values. An insecure and threatened China would understandably build its capacity to express its hard power, and as it did so, it would provoke similar actions from other nations. Such moves would significantly increase the risk of a dispute

that escalates into armed conflict. In this scenario, the world would become less safe. Ironically, in contrast to the prediction of neoliberal institutionalism theory, the pursuit of soft power by a rising state could also lead to conflict rather than avert it. The reason is that when a rising state takes the stage and tells its story, the audiences below the stage might boo, yell, or leave the theater. Consequently, the rising state might be tempted to use other means to gain the respect it thinks it deserves. Muscle flexing, either through a display of its economic or even military power, is certainly an alternative means.

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