

Chinese Soft Power Starts at Home

Written by Michael Barr

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MICHAEL BARR, FEB 1 2012

Soft power is a slippery term to define. How can we know for certain the motives of an actor? How can we know, for example, that people are attracted to a country's values or culture for its own sake and not because of some expected material (i.e. hard power) gain? Nonetheless, despite the challenge in defining the term it is clear for nearly all commentators that the concept refers to relations *between* nations and peoples – that is, soft power is a matter of national image building on the *international* stage.

However, the case of China complicates this international understanding of soft power. Beijing's image campaign has received much attention over the past few years. Who can forget the Opening Ceremony of the 2008 Olympics when 3,000 drummers chanted the classic Confucian greeting 'Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters?' in welcoming the 100,000 spectators and millions of TV viewers worldwide to the opening of the Games?

Much of the attention directed at Chinese soft power has been highly critical. Soft power, the argument goes, cannot be a top down initiative from the Communist Party. Without freedom of speech at home, how can the government expect people to be attracted to Chinese values and ideals? This criticism contains much truth: the free speaking tennis star Li Na or artist Ai Weiwei are surely a better examples of Chinese soft power than anything Li Changchun, China's propaganda chief, could dream up.

But the issue is more complex than this. What Western analysts miss is that for the Party, soft power is not merely a tool for building international relations. Just as important, its deployment is critical at home within the country as well as abroad. In this way, China seeks to re-define the scope of the term 'soft power'.

There are many examples of this but I shall take only two. First, let's consider the case of the government sponsored national image film, which broadcast 24/7 for one month across Times Square in New York City during President Hu Jintao's US visit in 2011. The film included a series of themes including athletics, wealth, design, space travel, art, supermodels, agriculture and award-winning talent. Each theme was prefaced as 'Chinese' (i.e. 'Chinese Athletics' and so on) and each accompanied, in the background, numerous smiling Chinese personalities who have made it big in their particular field, with their names written in English next to them.

Much of the critical reaction to the image films focused on three issues. One, the image film was criticized for showcasing only a small part of China, that of a highly developed few. The piece portrayed only Chinese elites and not everyday Chinese people, which in the view of some, could have caused more harm than good to China's national image as it left the false impression that most people in China were wealthy and famous.

Second, some felt that the film drew attention to the very issues that in fact made Americans nervous about Chinese power. Indeed, by stressing China's success in areas of wealth creation and scientific advancement, the film could have inadvertently helped stoke fear of China.

The third main reaction noted that most of the celebrities in the campaign would have been unrecognizable to most Americans. One New York resident who watched the film admitted that she knew NBA star Yao Ming and some of the models but otherwise could not identify any of the several dozen other figures. All of this raises the question of who the film was intended for.

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It is here where we can see that there is a deep interconnectedness between the domestic and foreign aspects of Chinese soft power. As Christopher Heselton rightly noted in his blog on the *China Beat*, most Chinese would have had no trouble in recognizing the personalities shown in the ad. Indeed, the makers of the image piece intended to not only reach a US audience but perhaps more importantly, showcase *Chinese* achievements (i.e. Chinese government achievements) to *Chinese* people. For the Party, this was a deft move. Not even twenty years ago it would have been unimaginable that the government would have the desire and ability to take out an advertisement in Times Square showcasing China's material progress. Seen in this way, the image piece serves as source of national pride as much as an attempt to win the hearts and minds of non-Chinese. Indeed, as some have argued, it is likely that an image film which went *too far* in appealing to US audiences would have been seen as weak by Chinese and as a shameful attempt to pander to foreigners.

A second example helps re-enforce the domestic importance of Chinese soft power: the branding of Confucius. Most readers will be aware of the Confucius Institutes which aim to teach Chinese language and culture at foreign universities and schools. But in addition to this, the Confucian 'brand' has taken on many other forms: the short-lived Confucian Peace Prize (in response to Liu Xiaobo winning the Nobel Peace Prize), the 2010 bio-drama film *Confucius*, which starred the Kung-Fu hero, Chow Yun-Fat, and the China Confucius Foundation attempts to standardise the image of the sage with a politically correct portrait of Confucius to give him a single, recognisable identity around the world.

The significance of these measures cannot be understood merely in terms of Chinese image promotion abroad. Rather, the return of Confucius symbolises the new China as imagined by the government: educated, orderly, harmonious, respectful, unified. In this way, the sage is a perfect model for the type of harmonious society the Party wishes to create. The soft power of Confucius must be understood in light of Chinese domestic politics as much as its international: Confucian principles of equality of opportunity for rich and poor through education within a stable social hierarchy are obviously attractive to China's leaders who struggle to hold the country together amid unprecedented social and economic change and ethnic tension.

These examples – and many more abound – make the point that Chinese soft power has important differences from Western understandings of the concepts in terms of its domestic emphasis. These differences are significant in practice, because they reflect the underlying differences in motivation and in stages of development. China in Africa is better understood in light of China in Xinjiang; the branding of Confucius abroad must be seen as a corollary to his revival within China as a means to boost Party legitimacy; the promotion of international harmony as a core value is reflected in China's struggle to maintain territorial and cultural integrity on its ethnic frontiers; image films not only showcase accomplishments to the West, more importantly they remind Chinese of how much things have improved in only 30 short years.

Sadly these connections are often missed.

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