

Chinese Soft Power 2.0: The Politics of Fashion

Written by Michael Barr

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MICHAEL BARR, APR 10 2013

China has a new star – or, to be more accurate, it has an old star cast in a new role.

Peng Liyuan joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at age 18 and went on to become a popular soprano, known for her folk songs and operas celebrating the bravery of Chinese soldiers. She holds an honorary rank of major-general but her fame is hardly limited to China. In 2005 she performed at the Lincoln Center in New York; two years later she appeared at the Vienna State Opera House. In 2011 the World Health Organization named Peng their Goodwill Ambassador for Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.

Now Peng Liyuan is better known as China's First Lady – the wife of newly appointed Chinese President Xi Jinping. There are many noteworthy aspects to Peng's newfound status. I shall focus on only one: her sense of fashion. As the New York Times puts it, some view the First Lady as 'roughly equivalent to Michelle Obama: modern, outgoing, intrigued by fashion'. Other media outlets referred to her as 'China's Kate Middleton'.

Certainly reaction within China has confirmed this. The outfits and accessories (e.g. handbags, peep toe court shoes, scarfs, trench coats) that Peng wore during her state visits have become highly sought after items. According to Xinhua News Agency, the First Lady's appearance sparked a notable rise in the clothing and textile sector of China's stock market, bucking an overall downward trend. Beyond her own apparel, Peng also promoted Chinese brands by presenting her foreign counterparts with skincare products made by Pehchaolin, a Shanghai based company.

One label whose stock certainly rose is Ma Ke, one of Peng's favourites. Trained at Central Saint Martins in London, Ma is now based in Guangdong province. Her line is known for its simple, minimalistic style, weaving fabric with Chinese loom technology dating back to the 19th century. In contrast to usual haute couture, her fashion shows are open to the public and held outside, using modern dancers and tai-chi performers instead of models. Ma says she wants the label to redefine the meaning of luxury away from Western materialism.

Why are Peng's fashion choices politically significant? First, they underscore one of her husband's leading policy initiatives: the need to curb corruption. Giving foreign luxury items to government officials is a normal part of doing business in China. But aware of the danger corruption poses to the future of the Party, Xi has vowed to crackdown on these practices. Peng's choice of less glitzy domestic brands can be seen as part of this campaign. It is no accident that Chinese netizens have praised her understated style.

Second, Peng's attire plays well to another of her husband's goals: the promotion of Chinese national identity. In a move widely perceived to go beyond the empty ideological slogans of his predecessors, Xi has not been shy in promoting nationalism as a force for social cohesion. He often talks of national 'rejuvenation' and the 'revival of the Chinese nation'. Whilst this may be a risky strategy internationally, at home it plays well – as does the First Lady's fashion sense. What nationalist can complain about Peng the way they do about other famous Chinese women who cover themselves in foreign designer brands?

Third, and perhaps most important, Peng's choice of labels gives life to China's efforts to move from a manufacturing economy with cost as its greatest competitive advantage to a creative economy with innovation as its main source of competitiveness. Tired of being the world's factory, Beijing's new motto is not 'Made in China' but rather 'Created in

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China'. Coupled with this goal is the attempt to promote greater domestic consumption to help ease a reduction in demand from traditional export markets. Again, Peng has played beautifully to these wider initiatives. As a number of Chinese intellectuals have noted, who better to represent the nation's best brands and mentor China's fledgling fashion and creative industries than an iconic singer, PLA hero, and now First Lady?

All this shows that in the end, Peng's greatest strength may not be – as some have suggested – her ability to soften China's international image. In fact, her reception abroad has already been blighted by the appearance of a photo showing her singing to PLA martial law troops following the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. Ultimately, her soft power importance may lie more within China than it does overseas. Last year on e-IR I blogged about how Chinese soft power must be understood in light of China's domestic politics as much as its international standing. The case of Peng Liuyan shows that this remains as true as ever.

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Michael Barr is Lecturer in International Politics at Newcastle University. He is author of *Who's Afraid of China?* (Zed, 2011) and, *Green Politics in China* (with Joy Y. Zhang, Pluto, 2013). He is also an associate editor for the journal *Politics*. *Read more of CSI-Newcastle.*

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