When Soft Power Turns Hard: Miss World, Coercion and China's Cultural Diplomacy

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CAYLAN FORD, MAR 3 2016

Over the last decade, the promotion of "soft power" has become a major preoccupation for the government of the People's Republic of China, which spends an estimated $10 billion USD annually on external propaganda to bolster its image and promote its "advanced socialist culture." Among the most prominent examples of China's public diplomacy efforts are the establishment of some 1,000 Confucius Institutes and classrooms on foreign university campuses and schools; co-productions with Hollywood film studios; the expansion of its flagship state-run television and print media into foreign markets; and hosting major international sporting and cultural events.

Joseph Nye defines soft power as a society's ability to influence others based on the appeal of its political values, culture and foreign policies, rather than through force, threats, or payment. This presents a challenge for authoritarian nations, whose political systems lack intrinsic appeal, and where individuals lack the freedom to create cultural goods. As Nye observed, "what China seems not to appreciate is that using culture and narrative to create soft power is not easy when they are inconsistent with domestic realities."

China's solution to this soft power deficit is to invest mightily in state-led cultural diplomacy. As David Shambaugh writes *in China Goes Global: The Partial Power,* "the Chinese government is approaching soft power and public diplomacy as it constructs high-speed rail or long-distance highways: by investing money and expecting to see development." It has also sought to contain information on those "domestic realities" that reflect poorly on its political system. In so doing, Chinese authorities routinely revert to coercive and heavy-handed tactics, as the plight of a young Chinese-Canadian beauty contestant demonstrates.

Anastasia Lin was crowned as Canada's representative to the Miss World pageant last May (full disclosure: Ms. Lin is a personal friend). The 26-year-old was born in China's Hunan province, but gained Canadian citizenship after emigrating at age 13. She hoped to use her platform in the beauty contest to draw attention to human rights abuses in the country of her birth, including media censorship and the repression of religious minorities.

Soon after her coronation, however, her previously supportive father in China became skittish. He implied in veiled terms that he had been visited by security agents, and warned that if she did not stop her human rights advocacy, he would have no choice but to sever their relationship.

Ms. Lin was undeterred: in a Washington Post op-ed, she condemned the Communist Party's intimidation tactics and its attempts to silence dissidents abroad, and then went on to testify before U.S. Congress about the torture and extralegal imprisonment endured by practitioners of Falun Gong—a spiritual meditation practice that has been suppressed since 1999. Her dedication to her cause might have served her well in a beauty pageant whose motto is "Beauty with a Purpose," except for one thing: the Miss World Pageant was to be held in Sanya, China.

China has played host to seven of the last 13 Miss World Pageants—six of them in Sanya. The city built a tiara-shaped convention hall for the pageant, and in 2003 it reportedly paid the Miss World organization $4.8 million USD for the privilege of holding the contest. It is one of many international events that China is hosting in an effort to boost the country's prestige and global relevance—and, apparently, to gain leverage over critics. Unlike the other Miss

World contestants, Ms. Lin did not receive an invitation from Chinese authorities to participate in the pageant. When she tried to go anyway, she was declared a *persona non grata* and barred from boarding her connecting flight out of Hong Kong.

Back in Canada, she learned that her Toronto-based dress sponsor had come under pressure from the Chinese consulate, causing them to cancel their backing. The state-run *Global Times* newspaper denounced her, declaring that she must "pay a cost for being tangled with hostile forces against China."

Ms. Lin's saga is indicative of many things: the brittle ego of an aspiring superpower; its willingness to reach beyond its own borders to intimidate critics; and the challenges faced by democratic governments whose Chinese émigré populations continue to live under the shadow of Beijing. It also highlights the notable role of coercion and threats in China's public diplomacy efforts.

Examples of this phenomenon are many: earlier this month, an exhibit by a Tibetan artist was censored in Bangladesh at the request of the Chinese embassy. In November, a Taiwanese beauty contestant was ejected from the Miss Earth pageant in Vienna after she refused to swap her "Miss Taiwan ROC" sash for one reading "Miss Chinese Taipei." In 2014, a Chinese government official demanded that an academic conference in Portugal redact the conference program book to remove references to a Taiwanese sponsor. August news organizations such as Bloomberg and the Washington Post have allegedly spiked stories after coming under pressure from the Chinese government; others have encountered sustained cyber attacks or visa problems in response to critical coverage.

When exposed, revelations about Beijing's efforts to suppress free expression undermine its efforts to project a non-threatening image to the world. Chinese authorities' attempts to intimidate Ms. Lin appear to have backfired: had she been allowed to participate in the pageant unimpeded, she—and her cause—would not have attracted a fraction of the media attention that she has.

But in many instances, the Chinese government's efforts to enforce censorship beyond its borders are successful. For the Western institutions with dealings in China—be they universities, news organizations, film studios, governments, or beauty pageants—tolerating the occasional display of authoritarianism is simply the cost of doing business. Over time, these organizations may internalize Beijing's red lines, engaging in pre-emptive acts of self-censorship or hardening themselves to the realities of the country's bleak human rights situation.

In Ms. Lin's case, the London-based Miss World Organization remained silent as one of its contestants was excluded from the pageant for her stance on human rights. It made no public statement about the harassment of Ms. Lin's father by security agencies, or the intimidation of her dress sponsor by the Chinese consulate. And there is no indication that it will stop hosting its pageants in China, though perhaps it will be more cautious in future years about selecting politically outspoken contestants.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) provides another useful case in point. The first time the IOC awarded Beijing the Olympic Games in 2001, it was with the understanding that Chinese authorities would improve protections for basic rights and freedoms ahead of the 2008 Olympics. Instead, human rights groups observed a regression in rights, as China's security agencies used the Games as a pretext to tighten the screws on dissidents and religious and ethnic minorities. When the IOC announced that the Olympics would be returning to Beijing in 2022, it was without even the pretext of concern for human rights.

Partners in China's public diplomacy initiatives should take heed. Soft power projects are rarely political at first glance: and there is nothing inherently problematic about holding beauty contests in Sanya, or hosting the Olympics in Beijing. The directors of China's Confucius Institutes give assurances that they are merely language instruction centers with no political agendas, just as one imagines that Hollywood producers see no ethical implications in their willingness to engage in co-productions with government-backed film studios.

But at some point, politics finds a way to intrude into even the most innocuous of things: a beauty pageant contestant will see her father threatened by security agencies; a language instruction center will demand the censorship of art

exhibits, speaker events, and academic conferences; a film studio will be made to alter scripts to avoid offending the Communist Party. This is because China's soft power push is as much about squashing unpleasant truths as it is about promoting positive images. Organizations cooperating with Beijing would do well to remember this.

About the author:

Caylan Ford holds an MA in International Affairs from the George Washington University, and is currently pursuing a MSt in International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford. Her research interests include human rights, dissent, and the rule of law in China. She has testified before the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China regarding China's treatment of Falun Gong, and her writings have appeared in the Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor, and the China Quarterly, among other publications.