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The New Cultural Revolution: Chinese Soft Power at Home and Abroad

Open Mic

This is part of the Horizons Open Mic Series, where we invite special guests to share their thoughts with us on emerging issues.

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Date: October 25, 2011

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soft power narratives, China is encouraging a domestic cultural revitalization attempting to win the hearts and minds of Chinese diaspora communities and promote national cohesion between dominant and minority groups in the country. Three examples of Chinese soft power to promote nation branding and building include the media, language and history...

The power of attraction

Soft power, as traditionally defined by [Joseph Nye](#), is the ability to shape the preferences of others through the attraction of one's values, culture and policies. Hard power, on the other hand, involves the shaping of preferences through the threat of force or economic coercion. Some believe that soft power has an element of economic coercion rather than just mere attraction to ideals. Others believe that hard and soft power go hand in hand (e.g. aggressive trading policies in Africa, cultural imperialism, etc.).

In the West, soft power largely relates to nation branding internationally (e.g. the export of freedom and democracy). In China, soft power is not only about nation branding, but nation building as well. Through using

Whoever controls the media, controls the mind

One of the ways to persuade the preferences and opinions of others is through the use of media. As part of its nation branding strategy, China has recently invested heavily (US\$6.5 billion) in its overseas media expansion. [Xinhua](#) is the largest news agency in China, with 107 foreign and 31 domestic bureaus. It encompasses [China Xinhua News Network Corporation \(CNC\)](#), a 24 hour television news station, and [China Network Television \(CNTV\)](#), a national Internet-based TV station, with broadcasts in many different languages throughout the world, including Arabic, English, French, Japanese, Portuguese and Russian. There has also been an expansion of the print and radio media, including the [China Daily](#), an English-language paper that provides the world with a "window into China". Xinhua's president has

indicated that the goal of the company is to break the monopoly and global hegemony of the Western media, since 80% of international news is provided by advanced countries. There is a hope that this will counter the undemocratic image being portrayed of China on issues such as Tibet, Taiwan, Falun Gong, human rights, and China as a “threat”.

Speaking the same language

China’s soft power approach also includes the promotion of its language through [Confucius Institute](#) branches abroad, which foster partnerships between the Chinese government and other institutions. Funds are provided (up to US\$100K per year for 5 years) to hire teachers, buy materials, perform outreach initiatives in communities, and so on. There are approximately 350 Confucius Institutes around the world operating in 96 countries, as well as around 400 Confucius classrooms that promote Chinese language teaching in primary and secondary schools. While there are some concerns over the number of Confucius Institutes being established in overseas communities (e.g. claims of schools being used as a front for intelligence services, being too heavily engaged within school curriculums, etc.), there is an obvious demand for such institutes, which provide a means by which China can exercise its power of persuasion. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that language is not about cultural promotion, but the means by which people define themselves – “the nation [is] conceived in language, not in blood ([Anderson](#)).”

History repeats itself

In order to help shape its reputation both at home and abroad, China has used a powerful historical reference through revitalizing the story of [Zheng He](#). Zheng was a Ming Dynasty sailor that undertook voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Africa and the Middle

East from 1405 to 1433. He was considered a peaceful navigator who travelled the world in search of trading opportunities for silver, silk, spices and other goods. On the 600th anniversary of his voyage, Beijing launched a campaign in his honour, with a clear attempt to link his motives to current day initiatives – “no guns, no slavery, just trade”. This allowed China to craft a clever soft power narrative based on history that brought out characteristics such as China’s technological prowess, peaceful development, reinforcement of vital shipping lanes and as a rising power without any colonial intentions.

From humiliation to harmony

China’s soft power initiatives have been based on a discourse regarding “[the century of humiliation](#)”, which began in the mid-19th century with the Opium Wars. This resulted in a loss of territory, surrendering trading rights, the burning of the summer palace, and a number of other humiliating losses at the hands of the French, British, Russians and Japanese. This discourse has been referred to by leaders on many occasions: in 1949 (the formation of the People’s Republic of China), 1997 (the repatriation of Hong Kong), and 2008 (Beijing Olympics). As a result, China’s image of its century of humiliation has driven its initiatives on soft power and is the reason why territorial integrity (e.g. Taiwan’s repatriation) is so strong in the national Chinese psyche.

As China shifts from its century of humiliation to a more prosperous era, and in the wake of other events taking shape in the global stage, such as the Arab Spring, China’s soft power initiatives aim to remind its people of the great success they have had in the past few years. Internationally, China’s soft power initiatives have been more receptive in neighbouring countries due to proximity, close cultural ties, trade relations, and the Chinese diaspora. Nevertheless, many countries are still hedging their bets (i.e.

nurturing relationships with the United States while not antagonizing China).

It is yet too soon to evaluate the results of China's recent soft power push. While cognizant of its rising economic and global influence, China is still exploring how it can shape the preferences of people both at home and abroad as it seeks to find its role in an emerging global order.

Although the impacts of China's soft power initiatives are yet to be determined, they

raise some interesting questions for Canada. What influence could these initiatives have on Canadians and the Chinese Diaspora located in Canada? How will Canadian perceptions of China shift as a result? What are the potential impacts on Canadian policies towards China? What opportunities are there for Canada to foster its own national brand through soft power initiatives both at home and abroad?

Additional information

Barr, Michael, 2011. [Who's Afraid of China? The Challenges of China's Soft Power](#) (Zed Books)

Barr, Michael, 2011. "Nation Branding as Nation Building: China's Image Campaign" in *East Asia: An International Quarterly* (Springer)

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PH4-135/2012E-PDF
978-1-100-21669-0

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