



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 86 | December 7, 2010

Chinese Domestic Debates on Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

BY MARIA WEY-SHEN SIOW

Maria Wey-Shen Siow, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and East Asia Bureau Chief of Channel NewsAsia, explains that “Chinese officials understand the primary aims of soft power cultivation as largely utilitarian. Furthermore, they recognize the value of soft power as a means to helping China improve its ‘comprehensive strength’ and meeting its national objectives.”

Western debates and discussions surrounding China’s soft power are more widely known than the discourse within China itself. While the broad parameters of Chinese discussions are fundamentally similar to those of their western counterparts, there are some variations as to how the Chinese perceive soft power. Soft power is after all a largely western concept that has only in recent years made inroads and found widespread acceptance within Chinese policy-making circles. However, broadly speaking, Chinese scholars and analysts agree with the definition of soft power as espoused by Joseph Nye, which is the use of attraction and persuasion in foreign policy, and the appeal of a country based on its culture, values, beliefs, policies, and way of life.

Recognizing that soft power is an area that China needs to work on, Chinese officials understand the primary aims of soft power cultivation as largely utilitarian. Furthermore, they recognize the value of soft power as a means to helping China improve its “comprehensive strength” and meeting its national objectives. These include creating a peaceful international environment and securing resources for growth and development, presenting China as a reliable friend and partner, creating a circle of like-minded allies, and even isolating Taiwan. It also includes helping to reduce misunderstanding, countering misconceptions, deflecting criticisms about a “China threat,” and raising China’s international prestige. China even hopes that the elevation of its soft power can help strengthen cultural identity and national pride amid its own citizens. These discussions on soft power are clearly linked to the country’s efforts to improve its national image and increasing its public diplomacy efforts. Indeed, there is widespread internal agreement that China needs to balance between developing both its hard and soft power. There is a realization that soft power needs to be carefully nurtured; it is not automatic that soft power develops in tandem with a country’s economic, military, and technological progress.

Nonetheless, the discourse on soft power in China has also increasingly taken on distinct Chinese characteristics. Whether it is improving the country’s economic international competitiveness, defense and military capabilities, education, human capital, rule of law, or even ensuring better protection of intellectual property rights or its cultural relics, the concept of soft power is ever present. For example, some have argued that the country needs to strengthen its arts and culture industry, especially in film, multi-media and animated products. Doing so would enhance the country’s soft power, and also go some way towards ensuring that audiences worldwide do not mistake “Mulan” or even the Kungfu Panda, as depicted in Hollywood movies, as uniquely American icons.

Another significant component in the Chinese discourse on soft power revolves around the growing pride in China’s rich historical and cultural heritage. Whether it is Chinese philosophy, literature, aesthetics, ethics, or ancient military warfare, Chinese scholars argue that these rich and diverse traditions from one of the world’s greatest and oldest civilizations should be more widely shared with and appreciated by the rest of the world.



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Other aspects include ancient Chinese philosophies such as 以和为贵 (*yi he wei gui*), the importance of harmony, 和而不同 (*he er bu tong*), harmony amidst diversity, and 以德服人 (*yi de fu ren*), winning the respect of others through virtue. This desire for Chinese civilization to be admired overseas stems partly from the genuine belief among Chinese that their treasure trove of traditional Chinese culture and wisdom is universal and relevant to the modern world, and thus can constructively contribute to the development and enrichment of humanity. A growing narrative also suggests that China wants its culture and civilization to be admired and worthy of veneration, or to put it in plain speech, China is increasingly hoping to induce the “wow” factor among the rest of the world.

Another element that has frequently cropped up in the Chinese discourse on soft power is the need for China, as a growing power, to obtain *hua yu quan* (话语权), which means the power of discourse, or being given the podium to assert one’s voice. This partly explains recent attempts by the Chinese media to reach a global audience so that Chinese voices can be better heard, and its image and position more accurately portrayed. Obtaining the power of discourse is also a reaction to counter what many Chinese see as US “hegemony.”

There is also growing Chinese awareness that the country must adopt different approaches in projecting its soft power, especially in making a better distinction between boisterous internal and more subtle external propaganda. As veteran Chinese diplomat and current president of China Foreign Affairs University Wu Jianmin explained, soft power should be able to, borrowing a line from the ancient Chinese poet Du Fu, “随风潜入夜，润物细无声” (*sui feng qian ru ye, run wu xi wu sheng*), “seep into the night with the winds, and quietly nourishing all,” instead of the loud and strident publicity that sometimes leads to distrust, suspicion and, at worst, misunderstanding.

Internal discussion on soft power is also marked by both positive and negative comparisons with other examples elsewhere. The former include when Germany tried to project its people as happy, delightful and humorous when hosting the 2006 World Cup. On the other hand, America’s almost unilateral decision to go to war with Iraq followed by the ill-treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay have often been cited as negative examples attributing to the corrosion of soft power. The concept among Asian countries that Japan has refused to apologize for its wartime atrocities during World War II has often been used as a negative example of the erosion of soft power.

Even so, there is widespread acknowledgment regarding China’s difficulties in projecting its soft power. These include the inability to tap into the strength and diversity of non-government organizations, the lack of renowned Chinese brands comparable to Apple, Microsoft, and McDonalds, combined with negative news stories concerning human rights, tainted food products and governmental corruption that consistently come out of China. The current period of internal transition that China is experiencing makes it difficult to come up with a firm set of modern values. However, there are also many who believe that China’s developmental model, widely termed the “Beijing Consensus,” can serve as a good example to developing countries in Africa and Latin America.

Overall, the Chinese debate on soft power fluctuates somewhat between two bipolar extremes. On the one hand there is immense domestic pride in Chinese growth and the historical depth of Chinese civilization. On the other hand, there is a tremendous awareness of China’s inadequacy in effectively communicating Chinese development as benign, and this has, in part, resulted in a sense of inferiority. Furthermore, taking into account China’s lack of universal values, ideology and cultural icons, this country still has a long way to go in improving its international image, and thus being simultaneously admired, and respected, by its peers.