



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 186 | November 15, 2012

Chinese Domestic Debates on Public Diplomacy

BY MARIA WEY-SHEN SIOW

China's internal discussions about its public diplomacy and soft power outreach have become more focused over the past two years. What were previously seen as external affairs or events involving foreign countries are now increasingly being labeled "public diplomacy." The importance and utility of favorable Chinese public diplomacy outreach have gained greater acceptance and understanding amongst Chinese ruling elites. Some of the most visible displays of this public diplomacy in recent years include the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the hosting of the Shanghai Expo and Guangzhou Asian Games in 2010, and the airing of a pro-China video in Times Square, New York, in 2011, along with ongoing efforts to promote Confucius Institutes around the world.

Maria Wey-Shen Siow, East Asia Bureau Chief of Channel NewsAsia based in Beijing, explains that "Overall, there is widespread acknowledgement of the importance and necessity of public diplomacy and soft power in explaining China to the rest of the world."

While government efforts continue to dominate, awareness regarding positive public diplomacy has increasingly trickled down to local-level government, party-related bodies and civic groups. Local authorities in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin and Wenzhou have established Public Diplomacy Associations with the expressed purpose of explaining their cities, and in turn China, to the outside world. The Communist Youth League of China (CYL) has argued that the movement needed to make as many friends as possible—especially through new media and social networking websites—who can "argue for China in a robust manner." By sending a team of volunteers to Sierra Leone in 2010, the group claimed to have played a constructive role in public diplomacy. The Charhar Institute, established in 2009, is believed to be the only Chinese independent think tank devoted to the discussion and study of public diplomacy with the goal of providing policy inputs for China's foreign policy initiatives. The institute publishes a quarterly journal titled *Public Diplomacy*—with Zhao Qizheng, China's modern pioneer of public diplomacy, serving as chief editor.

The current state of international affairs has presented China with a new impetus for exerting its public diplomacy. For instance, African instability has given China an opportunity to propagate its vision of a peaceful China in a harmonious world. Others point out that short-term problems and crises such as the Euro debt issue and the Iranian nuclear standoff are opportunities for China to exert public diplomacy. There is also a growing consensus that Chinese companies operating overseas should exercise greater corporate social responsibility and do more to highlight their positive efforts in working with and contributing to the development of local communities.

In arguing that the exercise of public diplomacy is not new to China, some have turned to historical precedents. Chairman Mao Zedong's interviews with American journalist Edgar Snow and Premier Zhou Enlai's attempts to improve relations with Myanmar by thrice donning Burmese outfits and walking across the Chinese-Burmese border have been cited as good examples. Going back further, the famous Ming dynasty seafarer

Zheng He has been touted as a public diplomacy “ambassador” who played a positive and peaceful role in propagating knowledge and understanding about China.

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At times, Chinese domestic discussions on public diplomacy have bordered on an overarching sense of mission. This reflects, at least from an outsider’s point of view, a do-or-perish mentality and the anguished desire to see quick and measurable results, as if public diplomacy is a clinical practice where outcomes can be swiftly assessed and obtained. Public diplomacy is often cited as an important tool for China in remaining competitive in the global arena, and undertaking it well is not only “crucial,” but also a strategic and “historical mission.” While many realize the importance of “marketing” and better explaining China to the outside world, there is an increasing awareness of the need to improve the “product” itself. This includes ensuring that timely, accurate and credible information is disseminated in crisis or emergency situations—such as during the 2008 riots in Tibet—so that China will be able to “seize the leadership position in public opinion.” This means putting its own house in order by addressing problems relating to food safety and dangerous products, along with tackling a host of other domestic social and environmental issues.

There is a growing awareness that having the right “software” or model of communication is just as important as having the correct “hardware” or means of communication. It is not enough for Chinese state media outlets to have an increasing number of bureaus and networks overseas. The messages contained in news reports dispatched by these bureaus should also be tailored to the sensibilities of a foreign audience in order to ensure understanding and acceptance. As Peking University’s Jia Qingguo has noted, using “the *People’s Daily* tone” in explaining China to foreigners is counterproductive, if not meaningless. Jia said that telling China’s stories does not merely mean outlining the country’s accomplishments, but also detailing its shortcomings. Hu Wei, from Jiao Tong University in Shanghai, said China needs to embrace universal values before it can generate goodwill, which will be hard to come by if there is still widespread support for Osama Bin Laden, or if ordinary Chinese citizens are reluctant to help an elderly person who has fallen on the street. *Nanfang Daily* editor, Yang Xingfeng, has pointed to the urgency of breaking out of the traditional model and predicament of “transmit but does not get through, get through but does not ensure acceptance” (传而不通，通而不受).

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There is also a growing realization that civic and non-governmental groups can play an increasingly important role in public diplomacy efforts. A commonly cited example is the “anti-CNN” efforts during the 2008 Tibetan riots where citizens spearheaded a movement to counter what they saw as inaccurate CNN reports on China. Former Chinese ambassador to Canada, Lu Shumin, has even argued that public diplomacy is the responsibility of every Chinese citizen. Regardless, there is little doubt that anything labeled “public diplomacy” is, and will continue to be, largely controlled by the central government, partially as a result of the many bureaucratic hurdles and practical constraints concerning civic groups and non-governmental organizations in China.

Overall, there is widespread acknowledgement of the importance and necessity of public diplomacy and soft power in explaining China to the rest of the world. Many agree that China’s global clout is incommensurate with the country’s development. They believe that an improved and more positive image of China will in turn alter perceptions and reduce animosity, as well as allowing the country to achieve its objectives, gain greater respect, and exert greater global influence. The theoretical basis and what constitutes public diplomacy has been laid out. The challenge is now to put these various components and theories into an integrated coordinated national policy, with clear benchmarks to measure success. These will be two of the biggest challenges for China’s public diplomacy outreach.