

Communicating Confidence

China's Public Diplomacy

Gary D. Rawnsley

While the so-called “China miracle” has lost its momentum since the first edition of this Handbook was published,¹ China’s engagement with the global economy continues to expand, influencing the trade and investment strategies of other countries around the world and, through the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, opening trade routes that are reminiscent of the old Silk Road.² Since 2014, China has been the world’s second largest economy behind the United States. Moreover, China is still an active participant in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, while cooperating with the United States on North Korea, Syria, and Iran. Not only a member of the World Trade Organization, in 2001 China took a lead in setting up the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and remains a key player in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group of emerging powers. In short, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is now firmly embedded within, and more tolerant of the interdependent global environment.³ China’s renewed confidence is reflected in the way it engages and communicates with the world. For example, Jian Wang and Shaojing Sun have commented on the connection between China hosting the 2010 Shanghai Expo and the country’s growing stature. The Expo, they insist, was not just about China projecting a vision of itself to the world, but allowed Chinese visitors to the pavilions to understand the world better: “This is important,” say Wang and Sun, “because the prospect of China being a global power depends as much on how the Chinese will come to view what’s beyond the Middle Kingdom as on how other countries will choose to deal with its rise.”⁴ China’s integration into the international system, celebrated during the 2008 Olympics, matured during the Expo.

Under Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (since November 2012) and president of the PRC (since March 2013),⁵ China has grown in confidence, pursuing a more nationalistic agenda around the “China Dream,” the “One Belt, One Road” program, and the revitalization of Chinese culture. This confidence is personified in the new Politburo Standing Committee announced after the Communist Party’s National Congress in 2017, which was “packed with foreign affairs experts.” One of those experts was Wang Huning, the “chief architect” of the China Dream, and one of the first scholars to introduce the concept of soft power to China. Commenting on the apparent turn to foreign policy suggested by the new Standing Committee, Shi Jiangtao noted:

Pundits say the overhaul and strong line-up of foreign policy officials underlined Xi’s eagerness for China to emerge as a global power and project its political and economic clout far

beyond the Asia-Pacific region at a time of U.S. retreat from world leadership under his American counterpart Donald Trump.⁶

More than at any time in the past, the Chinese government is now investing significant resources into developing a public diplomacy strategy to communicate a narrative of strength, self-assurance, affluence, and political responsibility that can challenge the popular impression of China as a revisionist power that routinely violates human rights and threatens regional and global stability. While President Donald Trump considered withdrawing the United States from the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change in the first half of 2017, Xi Jinping repeated assurances that China would work with other governments to lower carbon emissions. Speaking at a BRICS summit in September 2017, Xi noted that, “Some countries have become more inward-looking and less willing to take part in international cooperation, and the spillovers of their policy adjustments are deepening.”⁷ At Davos in January 2017, Xi called the Paris Agreement a “hard won achievement” that “all signatories must stick to,” and pledged China will fulfill its obligations.⁸ At the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, Xi said that China is in the “driving seat” when it comes to “international cooperation on climate change.”⁹

Xi Jinping’s statements affirming China’s commitment to work with other governments to tackle climate change demonstrates the country’s growing confidence and strength—what we might call China’s “soft power”—at a time when US soft power is experiencing a downturn under President Trump. China’s position on this issue also reflects the key objective of its public diplomacy strategy, namely to correct a “distorted” understanding of China in the West and to reverse perceptions of China as an international problem; China has long been cast as a principal source of damage to the climate. Zhao Qizheng, former director of the State Council Information Office (SCIO) and China’s most visible and vocal advocate for public diplomacy, has observed how “the image of China in world opinion is seriously inconsistent with the actual situation in China. All these background conditions,” he said, “magnify the urgency and importance of ... China’s public diplomacy.” Zhao called on China to “present an accurate picture of itself to the world.”¹⁰ In 2010, Wang Guoqing, the vice director of the SCIO, explained to the World Economic Forum that China’s priority was “to find a way accepted by other nations to tell China’s story and help the international community understand China.”¹¹ This is echoed in the quotation from Xi Jinping in note 2 of this chapter and is central to discourses about the so-called “China Dream” we will discuss in detail.¹² The connection between telling China’s story and overseas communication was established in 2011 when a plenary session of the Communist Party Central Committee described China’s public diplomacy instruments, including Confucius Institutes, the Xinhua news agency, and China Central Television (CCTV) as creating

new methods of *xuanchuan* [propaganda] to strengthen our international right to speak, respond to foreign concerns, improve international society’s understanding of our basic national conditions, concepts of values, road of development, domestic and foreign policies, to display our country’s image of civilization, openness and progress.¹³

However, China still attracts severe rebuke from the international community because its leadership remains committed to the preservation of authoritarian rule. Stories about human rights violations, the absence of democratic processes and institutions, tightening censorship, and growing intimidation of Taiwan and Hong Kong challenge the more positive narrative Beijing would like to disseminate. In February 2018, Chinese media reported that the clause in the country’s constitution requiring the president to serve just two terms of five years in office would be revoked, making Xi Jinping not only president for life (theoretically), but also the strongest leader since

Mao Zedong.¹⁴ So China's public diplomacy must learn how to square its ambition, confidence, and its desire to reverse a "distorted" picture in the West with the more questionable character of Communist Party rule.

Chinese Approaches

Three years after it first appeared in the United States and introduced the term "soft power," Joseph Nye's *Bound to Lead* was translated into Chinese and published in the PRC. Since then, China has accepted and appropriated with unrivaled enthusiasm the theory and exercise of soft power, leading Wang Yiwei to observe how "few Western international relations phrases have penetrated as deeply or broadly into the Chinese vocabulary in recent years."¹⁵ This enthusiasm has been converted into programs of public and cultural diplomacy that have attracted extraordinary amounts of government investment: an estimated US\$10 billion per year is devoted by Beijing to the design and execution of China's global outreach.¹⁶ The pace of development has been extraordinary. After the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 and the international isolation that followed, Deng Xiaoping decided China should adopt a low profile. This was embodied in the so-called *tao guang yang hui* doctrine, which specified that China should "coldly observe, secure our positions, cope calmly, conceal our capabilities and bide our time, keep a low profile, never take the lead and make a contribution."¹⁷

President Jiang Zemin was the first Chinese leader to recognize the value of public diplomacy (rather than propaganda), calling in 2008 for the creation of "a publicity capacity to exert an influence on world opinion that is as strong as China's international standing."¹⁸ Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, acknowledged the value of soft power, described its accumulation as China's "paramount state mission," and identified "culture" as the main instrument to project China's soft-power capacity and to create a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) at home and abroad:

We must keep to the orientation of advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress.¹⁹

The Chinese government considered soft power an essential part of its integrated approach to building "comprehensive national power" (*zonghe guoli*),²⁰ defined as "the sum total of coercive, economic and ideational power of a nation."²¹ In 2006, Hu Jintao connected comprehensive national power to China's growing strength: The "enhancement of China's international status and international influence," he said, "must be reflected both in hard power including the economy, science and technology, and national defense power and in soft power such as culture."²² Hu Jintao then committed to building China's soft power in his report to the 17th Party Congress in 2007. The themes of "harmonious society" and "harmonious world" echoed discourses in public diplomacy of China's "peaceful rise" that linked traditional civilization with the values needed in the twenty-first century. (The original "China's rise" was replaced by "China's peaceful rise" to offset the more threatening tone of the original, just as, in 2014, the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party became known in English as the Publicity Department. Clearly, China is becoming far more sensitive to the way labels can project positive and negative images.) In 2009, one year after the Chinese claimed the Western media of anti-China bias in their coverage of the 2008 Olympic torch relay (see below), the government committed c.\$6 billion to its "going out" plan that was designed to help shape and change current narratives about China. It aimed to "foster a much friendlier atmosphere for global media coverage of China's

ongoing modernisation and development agenda without creating ideological tensions or disputes.”²³ The main beneficiaries of this investment were CCTV, whose international presence increased considerably after 2009 with the opening of broadcast centers in Africa and the United States, and an expansion of language services to strengthen CCTV’s 24-hour English language news service.

Xi Jinping has continued to emphasize China’s cultural strength. In his opening remarks to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, Xi promised China “will improve our capacity to tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance the country’s soft power.”²⁴

Yet this commitment to expansion has been matched by Xi’s determination to manage the supposed threat posed by “cultural infiltration” (*wenhuashentou*)—the flow into China of foreign cultural products. By doing so, Xi is maintaining the sense of danger first presented by Hu Jintao who considered culture part of a “plot” to “Westernize” and “divide” China, and who called on China to “remain vigilant and take forceful measures.”²⁵ This vigilance was included in Xi’s 2014 “comprehensive national security perspective,”²⁶ while the president has also called for a “cultural renaissance” to revive Chinese values and moral superiority over Western values, and to renew what he called “cultural self-confidence.”²⁷ Xi’s well-documented extension of censorship runs parallel with such high-profile events as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo,²⁸ while the “China Dream” and the “One Belt, One Road” project will define the Xi Jinping era.

The China Dream

For Xi, the China Dream—becoming an official slogan in 2012—“is the inner meaning of upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics.” It is designed to create “a rich and powerful country, revitalizing the nation and enhancing the well-being of the people.”²⁹ But its purpose extends beyond policy. The China Dream allows the Chinese government to project and celebrate an inevitably bright future, while also embracing the contribution of the past. The China Dream connects explicitly China’s history with present strength and future ambition. Xi’s China Dream is the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” which means, “achieving a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people’s happiness.”³⁰

History has left a “deep impression”³¹ on Chinese national identity and has helped maintain the Communist Party’s legitimacy.³² From an early age, the Chinese are taught about the decline of China’s status through narratives of the “Century of Humiliation” (from the 1840 Opium War to the victory of the Chinese Communist revolution in 1949).³³ Under Xi Jinping, the China Dream creates

a master narrative that copes with transformation, reform and transition while maintaining commitment to the statement of a coherent, overarching mission is important ... The Party has to appeal not just to people’s material expectations, but their ideals, aspirations and hopes.³⁴

Since, in the words of the foreign minister, the Chinese see “diplomacy as an extension of domestic politics,”³⁵ the domestic program of nation building, ensuring stability and harmony, and maintaining the CCP’s authority all explain China’s outreach activities. Edney notes that the “efforts to promote Chinese culture internationally and to increase China’s international voice are undertaken primarily in order to shape a public opinion environment conducive to the pursuit of the CCP’s domestic political agenda.” He concludes: “Analysis of China’s soft power

policies therefore needs to consider not only the foreign propaganda work the party-state is undertaking abroad, but also how it manages its propaganda work at home.”³⁶

Here we can identify a clear conceptual divergence from Western approaches to soft power and public diplomacy. The latter focus on understanding communicative activities among foreign audiences and say almost nothing about domestic opinion. However, the Chinese embrace both domestic and foreign audiences, including the Chinese diasporic communities.³⁷ Liu Dexi identified the possible appeal of the China Dream narrative to overseas audiences:

China wishes to share its development experience and foreign philosophies with all countries, realizing the China dream and recalling the fine civilizations of other countries in the world; helping Japanese civilization, Indian civilization, Islamic civilization, African civilization and all other civilizations to rejuvenate or retain their splendour, while at the same time studying the valuable parts of them.³⁸

The China Dream narrative, designed for multiple audiences inside and outside China, is an attempt to reconcile the need to communicate both the economic modernization of the country and the attraction of traditional themes, while also explaining and justifying the CCP’s continued grip on power. Yet, the China Dream is also presented as a stark contrast to the American Dream, especially its perceived selfishness, and this explains Xi Jinping’s commitment to contain China from impure Western culture and values.³⁹

One Belt, One Road

The China Dream connects with the new Silk Road initiative, known as the One Belt, One Road program and launched by Xi Jinping in 2013 during a visit to Kazakhstan and Russia. Planned as an economic “belt” linking China with Western Europe through central Asia, Iran, Turkey, and the Balkans, it complements the “Maritime Silk Road” linking China to the Mediterranean through the Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf. Often described as a Chinese “Marshall Plan,”⁴⁰ One Belt, One Road connects China to over 60 countries.

One Belt, One Road is an extension of China’s long-standing commitment to economic diplomacy, but it also challenges the more ideological basis of previous programs. In the early 2000s, the so-called “China model,” emphasizing market-led development and authoritarian politics, was attractive to many developing nation-states around the world, but especially in Southeast Asia and Latin America.⁴¹ In word and deed, therefore, China offered an alternative approach to development, countering Western perspectives that connected prosperity to democracy.⁴² The value of such engagement, based on the possibility of mutual benefit to China and recipient, is captured in a comment by an African ambassador to China scholar, Deborah Brautigam: “China gives Africans more respect than they get from the West.”⁴³ This connects to the wider narratives of China’s public diplomacy since, as we have seen, commanding, or more accurately recovering, respect and status has “consistently been a major objective in foreign policy decision-making.”⁴⁴ In 2009, China became Africa’s largest trading partner, and even established its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017. In the 2009 edition of this book, I argued that China’s attraction in Africa was limited to regimes that were already practicing authoritarian-style government.⁴⁵ I also observed the costs of this model to China’s public diplomacy following international criticism of a “neocolonial” agenda that impacted negatively on local workers, especially in Africa through China’s “excessive and obsessive focus on extractive industries and raw materials.”⁴⁶ And it is certainly the case that China’s image in some African countries—most notably Kenya, Ghana, Senegal, and Tanzania—is increasingly negative. When Donald Trump, the president of the United States, referred to some African nations as “shithole countries” in January 2018, it is easy

to see why Africa may see China as the source of greater respect than some other powers, but the outcry over the ill-conceived portrayal of Africans in China's 2018 Spring Festival Gala, broadcast to 800 million viewers, branded China as racist, and mobilized many Chinese netizens to take to social media to apologize.⁴⁷ As Viola Rothschild noted in a blog for the Council on Foreign Relations:

The skit utilized the same imagery that has been used for decades to represent China's paternalistic relationship with ethnic minorities within its own borders. For a country that seeks to present itself as global leader in a new era, in some respects, it appears as though little progress has been made. Indeed, depicting Africans as a homogenous group of colorful tribesmen grateful for Chinese handouts doesn't play well in the ... era of ascendant Afrofuturism, cultural pride, and self-determination.⁴⁸

Rothschild notes that the Chinese government "failed to take any responsibility. Instead," she says, "authorities stifled discussions on the web and attacked those who raised it, labelling them as conspirators seeking to sabotage the China-African friendship."⁴⁹ Deciding to respond by not responding is a public diplomacy faux pas the Chinese continue to repeat.

The One Belt, One Road program is already enjoying public opinion success within those countries that will benefit from engagement with China. Some in Pakistan's business community, for example, see China "helping developing countries restore physical and human infrastructure." China has been described as "the adhesive that is resuscitating ancient trade routes, including more countries and regions, honing each country's comparative advantage, promoting mutual interests, and setting an example for cooperation."⁵⁰ This resonates with public diplomacy messaging that seeks to assert China's economic power can be valuable for partner countries, while also encouraging profitable political and strategic relations.

The 2008 Olympic Games

The Beijing Olympics were billed as China's coming-out party, a global and spectacular announcement of China's arrival on the world's stage.⁵¹ In an article for the *New Republic* in July 2008, the American sinologist, Andrew Nathan, captured the atmosphere. Foreign visitors to Beijing, he said would "see an edited Beijing, the way its governors and many of its residents would like it to be seen, a world capital with its exotic side under control."⁵² The scale of that editing—from concerns about migrants, the poor spoken English of Beijing taxi cab drivers, and the move to "green" the capital city, to the need to challenge any subversive activity, control the official narrative, and maintain stability and order—is described in detail by Jaques deLisle who examines what he calls "the contest to define the Beijing Olympics."⁵³

Hosting the Olympics was a huge risk for both the PRC and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as the IOC soon realized after it announced that the 2008 Games would be held in Beijing. Evan Osnos summarized this nervousness in an article for the *Chicago Tribune*. Awarding the Games to Beijing was, he wrote,

a gamble for everyone involved: for the International Olympic Committee, which staked its reputation on holding China to promises of a spectacular, transparent and inclusive Olympics; for foreign governments, which bet that supporting China's games would make it a more cooperative player in international affairs; and, above all, for China's government, which is opening its doors wider than ever before with the hope that a China the world knows is better than the China it does not. None of this is a sure bet.⁵⁴

With the world's spotlight focused on Beijing, and an estimated 20,000 journalists descending on China to cover the Games, the potential for embarrassment was almost palpable. One of the problems was that these were the first Games of a new media age. Not only would journalists in China, representing the world's major media organizations and television stations, be pressed to satisfy a 24/7 demand for live news, but for the first time the Olympic Games were captured on mobile phone cameras, and transmitted around the world on YouTube. The Chinese found it more difficult than ever before to control both the national and international media spheres, as suggested by claims and counter-claims about the level of control and censorship of the foreign press corps in China,⁵⁵ despite (cautious) promises made by Premier Wen Jiabao in 2006.⁵⁶ Foreign journalists are public diplomacy assets, and claims about censorship served to undermine the more positive messaging about the Games at the early crucial stage. The controversy over the torch relay gave a hint of what might happen; an outbreak of violence in Tibet reverberated around the world, and for a time it appeared that the Chinese did not know what to do.

As the torch relay got under way, our television screens showed us how the pro-Tibet movement might hijack both the Olympics and the news agenda. While the especially appointed torch guards in their blue tracksuits jostled with protestors, Chinese around the world were mobilized to protest against the demonstrations and what they saw as anti-Chinese bias in the Western media. As an exercise in public diplomacy, the Olympics got off to a shaky start, and it was very clear that this would be a case of the world watching the Chinese watching the world watching the Chinese.

So from the start it seemed that we would have reason to concur with Ann-Marie Brady's description of the Olympics as a "campaign of mass distraction."⁵⁷ There had been negative coverage since the IOC awarded the 2008 Olympics to Beijing; the cost of hosting the games—in monetary terms, but also the cost to Beijing's heritage with the destruction of the city's *hutongs*, and the cost in human life during the construction of the Bird's Nest stadium—was almost a daily feature of Western press coverage. Combined with criticism of China's attitudes towards human rights, democracy, Taiwan, and Tibet, selling the Olympic Games was destined to be an uphill struggle. Andrew Nathan considered it a

mystery why the Chinese leaders and the IOC ever thought they could get away with throwing a party to celebrate China's accomplishments at which no one would mention China's shortcomings. Why did China put its face out to be slapped? And why did the IOC abet them in doing so? Evidently both parties were blinded by the charm of their own blarney, the line that sports is only sports.⁵⁸

Sports is only sports is the cornerstone of Olympic philosophy, but it isn't that easy to practice. From the 1936 Berlin Games through the tit-for-tat boycott of the 1980 and 1984 Olympics by the United States and the Soviet Union, to the discussion about North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics in 2018, the modern Olympic Games have always been as much about politics as about sport. Hosting the Olympics can raise the profile of an international actor; it attracts the world's attention, especially the media, and suggests legitimacy, acceptance, and confidence; and, as China found out, losing the right to host the Games can also be interpreted as a political rebuke for political reasons.

However, hosting the Olympics also projects an image of national strength and virility. The Chinese clearly understood this. Consider, for example, the Chinese export and brand name Yao Ming, star basketball player with the Houston Rockets, who helped to project a new softer image of China. Brook Larmer has described how "a new demographic of Asian fans has flocked to stadiums to watch the giant stride across court, offering an image of China that has nothing to do with Chairman Mao or massacres at Tiananmen Square."⁵⁹ Thus the Games allowed the

PRC to continue to try change the global conversation about China; hosting the Olympics and all the responsibilities that came with it, including the rapid building of the required infrastructure, helped the narrative of a physically strong and technologically advanced society that was comfortable also with its past:

For a lot of foreigners, the only image of China comes from old movies that make us look poor and pathetic. Now look at us. We showed the world we can build new subways and beautiful modern buildings. The Olympics will redefine the way people see us.⁶⁰

Moreover, the 2008 drummers who began the opening ceremony with chants of “It is glorious to receive friends from afar,” taken from the Confucian *Analects*, continued the turn in narrative that used tradition to communicate China’s peaceful rise. The spectacle told the story of China’s vast historical riches and the country’s contribution to the modern world, and that in fact China had been the engine driving much of the world’s progress in science, navigation, printing, and the military arts. Anyone wishing to experience the China Dream, its historical gaze and present ambitions, would do so at the opening ceremony, seen by around 91,000 spectators in the stadium, plus another billion viewers worldwide. China’s rich cultural heritage was on display alongside China’s modern high technology, thus suggesting the need to reconcile the projection of China’s economic modernization and the resonance of traditional cultural themes, a dilemma that goes far beyond the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games.⁶¹ In an interview with the *Liberation Daily*, Zhang Jigang, the deputy director of the opening ceremony, explained the spectacle’s aim:

I really hope that the people of the world can get to know the Chinese culture ... to get to know China, to understand China, to love China, and to desire China. This Olympics is the best opportunity. ... What will they see about China? I think the most important thing is to see that Chinese people are happy.⁶²

However, they are more than “happy”; China is successful because of the effort and dedication of the Communist Party. The Beijing Olympics, and especially the opening ceremony, was designed as much for the home audience as much as for those watching around the world. Ye Hailin captured the significance of this single narrative for two audiences:

The Games proved not only the existence of the China model, but also its success ... At the opening and closing ceremonies ... athletes, volunteers, the audience and even local residents all sent one clear message that the Chinese people act according to their own mode of conduct and will not succumb to any allegedly superior Western values.⁶³

So, in the 2008 Beijing Olympics we see the themes of China’s public diplomacy strategy converging: the China Dream; the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation; pride in the past and ambition for the future; the alleged success of the China model of governance; the purity of Chinese culture and values; and, above all, the need to challenge the West’s supposed distorted image of China. These ambitions were clearly reflected in the choice of official slogan for the Games: “One world, One Dream” (*tong yige shijie yige mengxiang*).

The other themes of the Games, namely “Green Olympics” and “High-Tech Olympics,” were likewise for the domestic as much as the international audience. The “Green Olympics” was particularly important, as China has often been cast as a major source of the world’s environmental problems. The ambition to stage a “High-Tech Olympics” reflected plans to communicate China’s achievements in science, technology, and innovation. This was most visible in the

remodeling of Beijing, including building the world's largest airport terminal, new subway lines, and the famous Birds Nest stadium and Water Cube—all built at impressive and enviable speed. Unfortunately, the positive narrative was challenged by stories of the harsh conditions among construction workers and the destruction of Beijing's heritage architecture, especially many of the traditional *hutongs*, and the subsequent displacement of their residents.

The Confucius Institutes

Today, China's outreach is centered within the Confucius Institutes, established by the Ministry of Education to teach Mandarin and communicate Chinese culture. They are joint ventures, located within universities, and partner schools in China send teachers to help run programs. Their curriculum is approved by *Hanban*, the Confucius Institute Headquarters in Beijing. The aims of the Confucius Institutes include forging "strategic alliances with business, industry, governments and other institutions with an interest in closer and more productive ties with China and the global Chinese diaspora," as well as working "with the academic faculties in encouraging students to develop a sound knowledge of China," and promoting "an awareness of the Chinese language amongst the wider community."⁶⁴ Hanban says Confucius Institutes are "committed to providing Chinese-language and cultural teaching resources and services worldwide, it goes all out in meeting the demands of foreign Chinese learners and contributing to the development of multiculturalism and the building of a harmonious world."⁶⁵ They reflect the ambition of former premier, Wen Jiabao, to use culture as a more strategic instrument of China's outreach and engagement: "Cultural exchanges," he said, "are a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of all countries and an important way to project a country's image."⁶⁶ The first Confucius Institute opened in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004: as of October 2017 there are now over 500 in 142 countries (with over 100 in the United States alone). In addition, over 1,000 Confucius Classrooms have been created in schools across the world to bring Mandarin and Chinese culture to school-age children. The governing council is chaired by Liu Yandong, former head of China's United Front Work Department that is the Communist Party's main institution for spreading influence overseas, while the director general of Hanban is Xu Lin, vice minister of the PRC. She describes Confucius Institutes as the "brightest brand of China's soft power."⁶⁷

However, criticism of the Confucius Institutes and their alleged political agenda has been growing, with actions speaking far louder than words. On July 22, 2014, at the annual conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS) in Portugal, Xu Lin ordered all copies of the conference program impounded and refused to release them until organizers removed pages she considered offensive. What was so distasteful for Xu was an acknowledgment that Taiwan's Chiang Ching-kuo (CCK) Foundation and the Taiwan National Central Library sponsored part of the conference. Several pages, including an advertisement for the CCK Foundation, were ripped from the program. Roger Geatrex, the EACS president, ordered all copies of the excised pages be distributed to participants and issued the following statement: "Providing support for a conference does not give any sponsor the right to dictate parameters to academic topics or to limit open academic presentation and discussion, on the basis of political requirements."⁶⁸ At a time when the role of the Confucius Institutes—long celebrated as a shining example of China's public and cultural diplomacy—was scrutinized closely and debated across the world (especially in the United States), Xu Lin could not have picked a worse time to assert her imaginary authority. It is not surprising that headlines in Western media adopted critical, sometimes hostile language in reporting and commenting on this news from Portugal: "Censorship at China studies meeting"; "China fails the soft power test"; "Beijing's propaganda lessons: Confucius Institute officials are agents of Chinese censorship."⁶⁹ Academic institutions now had reason to be more suspicious of Confucius Institutes, while those who had long

suspected their political agenda enjoyed far more credibility. Xu Lin had the opportunity to communicate her concerns and explain her behavior in an interview with the BBC's John Sudworth in December 2014, but she declined to do so.⁷⁰ It is noteworthy that, back in China, Xu Lin was considered a hero for standing up for China against Taiwanese independence, demonstrating again the importance of appealing in propaganda to the domestic constituency.⁷¹

In light of complaints about political interference in teaching and suspicion of funding arrangements—the contract signed between the Hanban and the host university states that their activities “shall not contravene ... the laws and regulations of China”⁷²—a number of high-profile Confucius Institutes have closed, including at the Universities of Chicago and Pennsylvania State in the United States, Stockholm in Sweden, Lyon in France, and McMaster in Canada. In London, Professor Christopher Hughes launched a spirited and high-profile debate about the role and impact of the Confucius Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science, attracting much media interest in the possibility of Chinese influence on British higher education.⁷³ While Hughes is interested in the impact of Confucius Institutes on the academy, veteran China watcher Willy Wo-Lap Lam is in no doubt about their purpose as far more sinister than the spread of Mandarin and the promotion of Chinese culture. “The Confucius Institutes,” he noted in early 2018, “serve as a base where Beijing’s experts in propaganda and united front work can ‘infiltrate’ their host universities and shape the opinion of scholars and students.”⁷⁴ In this way, Confucius Institutes are often perceived as exercising far less soft power than their advocates suggest, and in external communications audience perception may be everything.

International Broadcasting

International broadcasting continues to be an important instrument of China’s public diplomacy, based on confidence in the ability to influence the global conversation about the country. In 2001, the State Administration of Film, Radio, and Television (SARFT) announced it was important to

have Chinese voices heard in any location where major Western outlets are able to present their audio and visual images, and let our radio, TV programs and films have significant international impacts, and substantially improve the current unfavourable situation that Western media is strong but Chinese media is weak in the international arena.⁷⁵

Then in 2009, Liu Yunshan, the director of the Propaganda Department of the CCP, claimed that “a more powerful communication capability” means more “effective global governance”:⁷⁶

It has become an urgent task for us to make our communication capability match our international status. Nowadays, nations which have more advanced skills and better capability in communications will be more influential in the world and can spread their values further.⁷⁷

In a report published in 2011, Zhang Lisheng, China Central Television’s director of research and development, was very clear about the challenges his station faced: “CCTV,” he said,

is not high status among international media. World-class media is evaluated by four indicators: international influence, ability to run operations, ability to scale, and new media influence. CCTV is only beginning to influence international opinion, and it cannot yet set the international agenda.⁷⁸

The rebranding of CCTV's international service that occurred on December 31, 2016, with the launch of China Global Television News (CGTN), was a direct attempt to address the challenges Zhang identified.

CGTN remains the country's only English-language television service with a global footprint, with CGTN Africa (from a production center in Nairobi) and CGTN America (from Washington, DC) established in 2012. CCTV-4 carries Mandarin-language programming to an international audience, while two new channels were created in 2004, CGTN E (Spanish) and CGTN F (French)—later joined by CGTN Russian and Arabic—to expand the number of language services. While many Western television networks are closing their foreign bureaus and international radio broadcasting, offering ever-diminishing numbers of language services, is shifting to the Internet the Chinese government is investing heavily in expansion. Not to be outdone by their competitors, CGTN Digital broadcasts the station's output online and makes sure CGTN has a strong presence in the social media (though many of the platforms used, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are unavailable to viewers inside China).⁷⁹ The rebranding reflects the station's ambition to be seen as a serious 24-hours news channel working to high standards of professional journalism. Indeed, the government has long expressed its ambition to create a Chinese version of CNN or Al-Jazeera.⁸⁰

Moreover, China's media have entered into strategic partnership with other media groups across the world. By June 2010, CCTV co-operated with 279 organizations and had created 373 projects for broadcast by the foreign media. Chinese media have also offered free content to local news organizations and have designed training programs for journalists, especially in Africa, a major destination of Chinese public diplomacy as well as economic investment:

More than 200 African government officers received Chinese training between 2004 and 2011 in order to produce what the Communist Party propaganda chief, Li Changchun, described as "truthful" coverage of development supported by China's activities. This has been backed by an extensive programme of infrastructure development, with everything from satellite equipment for Ugandan television, to building work for Equatorial Guinea radio.⁸¹

Clearly the authorities in Beijing believe that public diplomacy depends on making sure Chinese sources are the principal source of news about China: "At CGTN," reads the station's website, "we cover the whole globe, reporting news from a Chinese perspective. Our mission is to create a better understanding of international events across the world, bridging continents and bringing a more balanced view to global news reporting."⁸²

The challenge for the Chinese media is one of alignment—of platforms and content. As the boundaries between domestic and international tumble, news media are speaking to multiple audiences simultaneously. Hence, any inconsistent messages or contradictions across platforms or geographic targets may collide with the source's credibility. The commitment in China of separating propaganda intended for Chinese audiences at home (*duinei xuanchuan*) and foreign audiences in China or elsewhere (*duwai xuanchuan*) is no longer persuasive. What is said in the news on CCTV-1 in Chinese for Chinese audiences must be consistent with programming on CCTV-4 for overseas Chinese, on CGTN for English-speaking audiences, and with the Twitter feeds of CCTV-America and the *People's Daily*.

The credibility of China's public diplomacy is also tested by the media's relationship with, and location within the state architecture via (until 2018) their responsibility to and management by three principal institutions: the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT, formerly the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, SARFT); the Communist Party's Office of External Propaganda; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As Kingsley Edney has noted:

While it is often those within the foreign affairs community who are the most enthusiastic about assessing and improving China's soft power ... the bulk of the work ... is not primarily controlled by the foreign affairs bureaucracy but rather by the propaganda authorities.⁸³

This is confirmed by changes announced in March 2018 that see the CCP's Propaganda Department taking direct control of broadcasting throughout China, dissolving the SAPPRFT. Three national radio and television bodies—CCTV, China Radio International, and China National Radio—would merge to become the single “Voice of China,” one of the world's largest broadcasters with dozens of bureaus around the world producing output in more than 60 languages. According to Xinhua, the Voice of China will “guide host social issues, strengthen and improve public opinion, push multimedia integration, strengthen international communication and tell good China stories.”⁸⁴ That the name echoes the Voice of America is not a coincidence and suggests a clear turn from ambitions to create China's CNN or Al-Jazeera. The move also marks the formation of a single, centralized media outlet to streamline communications operations and allow the Communist Party total control over news, information, entertainment, and culture—both inside and outside China. In 2016, President Xi said: “The media run by the party and the government are the propaganda fronts and must have the party as their family name.”⁸⁵ By early 2018, following the consolidation of his power, Xi was in a strong position to push through his ambition to make the party and media one.

The expansion of international broadcasting as a tool of public diplomacy by the Chinese governments reflects an unshakable confidence in the power of media and communication to surmount and possibly change the attitudes of audiences: that greater exposure to news, information, and culture will reap soft-power rewards, and that intangibles can be transformed into tangible benefits. There is an urgent need to help shape and manage global conversations about, and to remedy alleged defects in the understanding of China by Western media and in global opinion. “To know us is to love us,” a common soft-power maxim, lay behind the strategy that asserted the Chinese public diplomacy campaign was “not big enough.”⁸⁶ With multiple voices in the international media and the creation of the Voice of China, its public diplomacy is now certainly “big.” The challenge now is to convert that access to the media sphere into credibility and trust over the long term, and this depends more on other political factors, such as the government's behavior at home and abroad and the sense of how the perceived rollback towards a harder authoritarian political culture under Xi Jinping will contradict and invalidate the more positive themes Chinese public diplomacy would wish to communicate.

Conclusion

China's enthusiastic embrace of public and cultural diplomacy and the government's commitment to expanding outreach activities and programs reflects strong confidence in the possibility of “moving the needle” of global public opinion; and there is evidence of possible tangible outcomes for China's foreign policy. Wen Chen records how the 2010 Shanghai Expo, with 192 countries participating and attracting 73 million visitors, may have helped ease tensions with both Taiwan and Japan.⁸⁷ China's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Ma Zhaoxu, observed how “having visitors from Japan to communicate and build friendship with the Chinese people at the Shanghai Expo is important to the improvement of bilateral relations.”⁸⁸ However, such evidence is rare. Rather, while China is far more familiar to us today than at any time in the past, this does not necessarily translate into foreign policy success.

In the 2009 edition of this Handbook, I concluded my chapter on China by highlighting a contradiction in Chinese politics that limited that country's public diplomacy, namely the ambition to be part of an independent world that recognized the value of engaging with China; and on the

other hand, “Chinese political discourse is often characterised by a fierce nationalist rhetoric that is reinforced by the Communist Party’s determination to maintain authoritarian rule.”⁸⁹ As I write this in the spring of 2018, it seems that China is becoming far more nationalist and the government under Xi Jinping far more authoritarian than we could have imagined a decade earlier.

In her article for *Foreign Affairs*, “Life in China’s Asia: What Regional Hegemony Would Look Like,” Jennifer Lind describes how China is “playing hardball for soft power”:

Hollywood studios regularly seek Chinese funding for their projects, as well as distribution rights in China’s vast market. Wary of offending the CCP, studios have started preemptively censoring their content. Censorship has also begun to infect the publishing industry. To gain access to China’s vast market, publishers are increasingly required to censor books and articles containing specific words or phrases (for example, “Taiwan,” “Tibet,” and “Cultural Revolution”). Prominent publishing houses, including Springer Nature—the world’s leading academic book publisher—have succumbed to Beijing’s demands and are increasingly self-censoring.⁹⁰

The most prominent example of China playing “hardball” occurred in 2017 when Cambridge University Press (CUP) first agreed and then, under pressure from the international academic community, refused to censor the *China Quarterly*, the world’s leading journal for the dissemination of China-related research, for the Chinese market. How China’s *Global Times* responded to CUP’s reversal is revealing:

China has blocked some information on foreign websites that it deems harmful to Chinese society. This is for the sake of China’s security and is within the scope of China’s sovereignty. China is also trying to strike a balance between opening itself up and preventing harmful external information from penetrating into Chinese society, to realise steady and sustainable progress. Western institutions have the freedom to choose. If they don’t like the Chinese way, they can stop engaging with us. If they think China’s Internet market is so important that they can’t miss out, they need to respect Chinese law and adapt to the Chinese way.⁹¹

Moreover, the turn towards less benign soft-power activities highlights the hard-power character of the One Belt, One Road initiative and China’s growing attempts to influence governments through creating pro-Beijing lobbies and classic United Front propaganda techniques.⁹²

Whatever Xi Jinping and other members of the Chinese government may say, the China Dream is less about public diplomacy activities, and more about providing the mechanisms for the Communist Party to maintain power (with Xi Jinping changing the constitution to remain leader for life). China is more confident than ever before, but confident that economic power and market access will always be the priority. The contradictions in Chinese public diplomacy—a commitment to soft-power strategies that will change the global conversation about China while engaging in the kind of behavior that undermines those very strategies—persist.

Notes

- 1 In March 2018 the Chinese government announced an economic growth target of 6.5 percent. At the height of the “Chinese miracle” in 2007, growth hit 14.2 percent.
- 2 “Chinese President Xi Jinping has pushed for China to ‘rejuvenate’ its role on the global stage, introducing in 2016 the doctrine of the ‘four confidences’—a call for the country to show confidence to the world in the path, political system, theories, and culture of Chinese socialism.” In “Chinese Culture Ministry Merger in the Works in Renewed Overseas Soft Power Push,” *South China Morning Post*, March 12, 2018.