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## China's Soft-Power Push

**The Search for Respect**

*David Shambaugh*

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# China's Soft-Power Push

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## The Search for Respect

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*David Shambaugh*

As China's global power grows, Beijing is learning that its image matters. For all its economic and military might, the country suffers from a severe shortage of soft power. According to global public opinion surveys, it enjoys a decidedly mixed international image. While China's economic prowess impresses much of the world, its repressive political system and mercantilist business practices tarnish its reputation. And so, in an attempt to improve perceptions, Beijing has mounted a major public relations offensive in recent years, investing billions of dollars around the world in a variety of efforts.

Although Beijing's publicity blitz began in 2007 under President Hu Jintao, it has intensified under President Xi Jinping. In October 2011, as Xi was preparing to take power, the 17th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) devoted a whole plenary session to the issue of culture, with the final communiqué declaring that it was a national goal to "build our country into a socialist cultural superpower." And in 2014, Xi announced, "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world." Under Xi, China has bombarded the world with a welter of new initiatives: "the Chinese dream," "the Asia-Pacific dream," "the Silk Road Economic Belt," "the Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road," "a new type of major-country relations," and many others. It is easy to dismiss such talk as "slogan diplomacy," but Beijing nonetheless attaches great importance to it.

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*In China, “propaganda” is not a derogatory term.*

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China is fleshing out these rhetorical salvos in proposed institutions, such as the New Development Bank (a project organized by China together with Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific. All of these would supplement a host of regional bodies that China has already created in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and central and eastern Europe. Through these institutions, China is meticulously constructing an alternative architecture to the postwar Western order.

And it is backing up its soft-power ventures with serious money: \$50 billion for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, \$41 billion for the New Development Bank, \$40 billion for the Silk Road Economic Belt, and \$25 billion for the Maritime Silk Road. Beijing has also pledged to invest \$1.25 trillion worldwide by 2025. This scale of investment is unprecedented: even during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union did not spend anywhere near as much as China is spending today. Together, these recent pledges by Beijing add up to \$1.41 trillion; in contrast, the Marshall Plan cost the equivalent of \$103 billion in today’s dollars.

China’s diplomatic and development schemes form just one part of a much broader agenda aimed at enhancing its soft power in media, publishing, education, the arts, sports, and other domains. Nobody knows for sure how much China spends on these activities, but analysts estimate that the annual budget for “external propaganda” runs in the neighborhood of \$10 billion annually. By contrast, the U.S. Department of State spent \$666 million on public diplomacy in fiscal year 2014.

Clearly, Beijing is using the strongest instrument in its soft-power toolbox: money. Wherever Chinese leaders travel these days—and between them, Xi and Premier Li Keqiang visited more than 50 countries in 2014—they sign huge trade and investment deals, extend generous loans, and dole out hefty aid packages. Major powers always try to use their financial assets to buy influence and shape the actions of others; in this regard, China is no different. But what is striking about China’s investments is how low a return they appear to be yielding. Actions speak louder than words, and in many parts of the world, China’s behavior on the ground contradicts its benign rhetoric.



*Tell it like it isn't: a Xinhua reporter in Beijing, August 2008*

### THE MESSENGERS

The father of soft power, the political scientist Joseph Nye, defined it as emanating largely from society—specifically, cultural, political, and social values. Nye also allowed that a country's political system and foreign policy could earn respect and thus contribute to its soft power. But this definition is premised on the clear demarcation that exists in democratic societies between state and nonstate spheres. In China, the government manipulates and manages almost all propaganda and cultural activities.

The Chinese communist system has always accepted that information must be managed and that people must be indoctrinated. In China, “propaganda” is not a derogatory term. As the country has opened up to the world, the state has had to try harder to maintain its grip on information, and its efforts on this front have become more sophisticated. Now, however, Chinese authorities are trying to control information not only inside China but increasingly outside, too.

The institutional nerve center of this operation is the State Council Information Office (SCIO). Located in a Soviet-era building in central Beijing, it looks like and plays the part of the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The SCIO, which forms part of a broader propaganda apparatus, coordinates various propaganda efforts, and it boasts a large staff, a giant budget, and a great deal of bureaucratic

clout. Because the SCIO is a key censor and media watchdog in China, the mere mention of its name brings a concerned look to the faces of many Chinese, particularly intellectuals and journalists.

Every December, the SCIO convenes an annual conference at which it outlines guidelines for China's external propaganda work for the coming year. As Jiang Weiqiang, the SCIO's vice minister, explained to me in 2009, the blueprint covers "exhibitions, publications, media activities, exchange programs, 'Year of China' festivals abroad, and other activities." Jiang also called the guidelines "our soft-power strategy." Secret at the time of adoption, the plans are subsequently published in a volume called *China Media Yearbook*.

In addition to its main role of overseeing the media and coordinating all of China's external communications, the SCIO acts as a messenger in its own right: it employs spokespeople, holds press conferences, publishes magazines and books, and produces films. It has even developed an app that provides users with one-stop shopping for all of the government's white papers. Some of the SCIO's propaganda targets Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities—all high-priority audiences for Beijing. And some of it targets visitors to China, including foreign residents, tourists, and business travelers, through publishing houses such as the Foreign Languages Press and newspapers such as *China Daily* and the *Global Times*. The SCIO is also involved in controlling Internet content, including approving all applications for websites. But the SCIO's principal responsibility is to define the ideas to be propagated abroad and keep other Chinese institutions on message.

## **THE MEDIA AND THE MESSAGE**

A major part of Beijing's "going out" strategy entails subsidizing the dramatic expansion of its media presence overseas, with the goal of establishing its own global media empire to break what it considers "the Western media monopoly." Most prominent among these efforts is the Xinhua News Agency, China's official state news service. From its inception, Xinhua has had a dual role, both domestically and internationally: to report news and to disseminate Communist Party propaganda. Altogether, Xinhua now employs approximately 3,000 journalists, 400 of whom are posted abroad in its 170 bureaus. And Xinhua is expanding the staffs of its existing bureaus and beefing up its online presence with audio and video content.

Xinhua's global expansion is motivated not just by concern for China's international image but also by money. Xinhua sees an opportunity to compete head-to-head with the main Western newswires, such as the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, and Bloomberg. The goal, as one Xinhua official I spoke with in 2010 put it, is to become a "real world international news agency." Xinhua even harbors ambitions of becoming a modern multimedia conglomerate, competing with the likes of News Corp, Viacom, and Time Warner. And once its online video presence expands, it will try to steal market share from 24-hour news channels such as CNN, the BBC, and Al Jazeera.

In its quest for profit, Xinhua publishes descriptive news reports that it markets as a cheaper product than what the Western wire services offer. In 2010, Xinhua had 80,000 paying institutional subscribers, which produced a strong revenue stream. The agency is targeting the developing world in particular, where Western media have a smaller presence and where there is no real domestic competition for international news. Xinhua's inroads there also help fulfill its goal of telling China's story to the world.

China's premier state television channel, CCTV, or China Central Television, has also gone global. It launched its first 24-hour English channel, CCTV International, in 2000 and now broadcasts in six languages around the world. The network is trying to alter its stilted and propagandistic flavor and package its content in more viewer-friendly formats. In 2012, CCTV set up new production facilities in Nairobi, Kenya, and in Washington, D.C., where it unveiled its ambitious CCTV America channel. The Washington operation, CCTV says, will become the global hub of its newsgathering and broadcasting operations.

China is also stepping up its penetration of foreign radio waves. China Radio International, formerly known as Radio Beijing, was founded in 1941 as a wartime propaganda tool against Japan but now has far greater reach. With its headquarters in Beijing, it broadcasts 392 hours of programming per day in 38 languages and maintains 27 overseas bureaus.

These media outlets constitute the major weapons in what China considers a "discourse war" with the West, in which Beijing is pushing back against what it perceives as anti-China sentiment around the world. But other official organs are also playing a direct role in these skirmishes. Chinese embassies now regularly issue press statements rebutting foreign media characterizations of China, take out full-page

ads in foreign newspapers, and attempt to intimidate universities and nongovernmental organizations that sponsor events deemed unfriendly to China. Their ambassadors publish op-eds.

There is a harder edge to these efforts, too. The Chinese government now monitors foreign China watchers' and journalists' writings more carefully than ever before and has stepped up its efforts to intimidate the foreign media—both inside and outside China. In Beijing, the SCIO and the Foreign Ministry often call foreign journalists in for “tea chats” to scold them for articles deemed unfriendly to China. The government has refused to renew the visas of a number of journalists (including some from *The New York Times*) and has refused to issue visas for American and European scholars on its blacklist. Outside China, embassy officials sometimes warn newspaper editors not to publish articles on subjects that might offend Beijing.

Thus, like its propaganda apparatus, China's censorship machine is going global. And it appears to be having an impact. In a troubling trend, foreign China scholars are increasingly practicing self-censorship, worried about their continued ability to visit China. The Chinese government has penalized major media outlets, such as Bloomberg, for publishing certain articles. And it has blocked the Chinese-language websites of leading U.S. and British newspapers.

### **CHINESE LESSONS**

Another weapon in China's arsenal is education. About 300,000 foreign students now study in Chinese universities (the vast majority learning the Chinese language), with additional numbers in vocational colleges. Every year, the China Scholarship Council offers some 20,000 scholarships to foreign students. Chinese government ministries, meanwhile, administer a variety of short courses for officials, diplomats, and military officers from developing countries. These classes do teach students tangible skills, but they also try to win hearts and minds along the way.

Chinese universities have yet to break into the global elite, however. Only three mainland universities—Peking, Tsinghua, and Fudan—appear in the *Times Higher Education's* ranking of the world's top 100 schools. The impediments to academic renown are serious. The CCP continues to restrict free thought and inquiry, particularly in the humanities and the social sciences. Chinese universities are rife with cronyism, false credentials, plagiarism, and intellectual property theft. Innovation, the Chinese government's top economic priority, requires

open-ended intellectual exploration to incubate, but Chinese educational pedagogy has yet to escape its historical emphasis on rote memorization and censorship.

China's Confucius Institutes—centers charged with teaching Chinese language and culture abroad—form another key part of the effort to build up China's educational soft power. With 475 centers operating in 120 countries, the Confucius Institutes have established footholds worldwide. (By contrast, Germany's long-established Goethe-Institut has 160 centers in 94 countries, and the British Council maintains some 70 centers in 49 countries.) But the Confucius Institutes have come under sharp criticism. In the United States and Canada, professors have called on universities to close down existing Confucius Institutes or not open new ones on the grounds that they undermine academic freedom. And at a Chinese studies conference in 2014 in Portugal, European Sinologists were rankled when Xu Lin—the director of the Ministry of Education organ that oversees the Confucius Institutes—ordered that pages in the conference program that mentioned Taiwan be torn out. As in the United States, media outlets and legislatures across Europe are now scrutinizing Confucius Institutes, and at least one, at Stockholm University, has decided to shut down as a result.

On another front, Beijing is assertively promoting its culture and society abroad through sports, fine arts, performing arts, music, film, literature, and architecture—and making considerable inroads. Art exhibitions of China's rich imperial past have always been popular around the world; indeed, China's 3,000-plus years of civilizational heritage may be its strongest soft-power asset. Chinese martial artists and other Chinese performers also attract audiences, as does China's growing corps of world-class classical musicians, led by the pianist Lang Lang. Chinese films continue to struggle for international market share, but Chinese authors and architects are more popular than ever. In 2012, Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature and Wang Shu won the Pritzker Architecture Prize. Even though China's professional basketball, hockey, and soccer teams remain far less competitive than their North American and European counterparts, Chinese athletes are racking up Olympic medals in a wide range of events.

China is also engaging in what it calls “host diplomacy,” holding countless governmental and nongovernmental conferences. Large-scale conclaves—such as the Boao Forum for Asia (China's Davos), the China Development Forum, the Beijing Forum, Tsinghua University's World



Peace Forum, the World Forum on China Studies, and the Global Think Tank Summit—bring leading figures from around the world to China every year. Some events are real extravaganzas, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, and the 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting. In 2016, the G-20 summit in Hangzhou is expected to be an equally elaborate showcase.

Then there are the government-affiliated exchange programs. The CCP's International Department (and its front organization, the China Center for Contemporary World Studies) convenes an annual conference called "The Party and the World Dialogue" and brings a steady stream of foreign politicians and intellectuals to China for all-expenses-paid tours. The Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has long engaged in similar outreach. Programs like these offer an astute way for the CCP to cultivate relationships with up-and-coming politicians around the world. The Hong Kong-based China–United States Exchange Foundation, meanwhile, amplifies the voices of Chinese scholars through its website and promotes the positions of the Chinese government through the research grants it gives to American institutions. To date, China has not endowed university research centers or faculty professorships. If and when it does, it will learn that in the West, there are real limits to buying political influence on campuses and in think tanks.

The Chinese military maintains its own outreach organizations: the China Institute of International Strategic Studies and the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies. Both are affiliated with military intelligence and serve as the principal conduits for inviting foreign security specialists to China. These two institutions both broadcast and receive: in addition to explaining China's positions on strategic and military issues to foreigners, they collect views and intelligence from foreign experts and officials.

Several of China's foreign policy think tanks perform a comparable dual function. The most important of these include the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, the China Institute of International Studies, and the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies—all of which are attached to various parts of the Chinese government. To a lesser extent, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences do the same thing, but on a much broader range of issues. In 2009, private donors

established the Charhar Institute, which focuses specifically on improving China's overseas image. Taken as a whole, this conglomerate of well-funded institutions and initiatives aimed at boosting China's reputation around the world is a testament to the priority Beijing attaches to the effort.

### **CAN'T BUY ME LOVE**

Yet for all the billions of dollars China is spending on these efforts, it has yet to see any demonstrable improvement in its global image, at least as measured by public opinion surveys. In fact, the country's reputation has steadily deteriorated. A 2014 BBC poll showed that since 2005, positive views about China's influence had declined by 14 percentage points and that a full 49 percent of respondents viewed China negatively. Surprisingly, as a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project indicates, China's soft-power deficit is apparent even in Africa and Latin America, precisely the regions where one would think the country's appeal would be strongest.

In spite of these meager results, Beijing is still expending enormous effort and resources to change perceptions. Why the disconnect? The answer is that the Chinese government approaches public diplomacy the same way it constructs high-speed rail or builds infrastructure—by investing money and expecting to see development. What China fails to understand is that despite its world-class culture, cuisine, and human capital, and despite its extraordinary economic rise over the last several decades, so long as its political system denies, rather than enables, free human development, its propaganda efforts will face an uphill battle.

Soft power cannot be bought. It must be earned. And it is best earned when a society's talented citizens are allowed to interact directly with the world, rather than being controlled by authorities. For China, that would mean loosening draconian restraints at home and reducing efforts to control opinion abroad. Only then could the country tap its enormous reserves of unrealized soft power. 🌐