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DRAGON WEARING THE PANDA SUIT

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In today's world of globalization, media revolution and Information overload, nation states have become very conscious of their reputation and the image that they project. Economic and military might is no longer the sole criteria for any country to rise as an acceptable global power. This is evident, for instance, with the vast investment on "Public Diplomacy" undertaken by the United States. China, with its economic and military might, space warfare and blue water capabilities and growing brazenness in defense policies, has suddenly become very mindful of the way it has been perceived by the global community. In other words, Beijing has begun to adopt a smart strategy to communicate with the international audience and promote its national interest and project a benign image through claims like "peaceful rise of China".

As China has been making deliberate efforts to re-brand itself, there has been a lot of debate around the underlying motives of its "Panda Diplomacy."¹ But the key question here is whether there is much more to it than just an innocuous form of developing relations with other countries and celebrating their successful cooperation in Panda Protection? Or is it an effort to create a new image for itself in an attempt to make China's growth palatable to the rest of the world? Is this an attempt to create a new narrative to the rise of China, replacing the idea of "China- the land of the dragons", which creates subliminal images that indicates ideas of fierceness and power with Panda supposedly being

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perceived as harmless and friendly? The question raised above therefore fits in perfectly with PRC's attempt at creating the narrative of "the peaceful rise of China".

It is important to notice that post 1989 Tiananmen Square Uprising, the CCP under the Party Central Committee (which was later renamed as the External Publicity department in 1998) formed the Overseas Propaganda Department. This period saw institutions working at "publicizing China in an authentic, colorful, lively, and timely way" to counter the growing fears of China's rise and the image it had created in the Asia-Pacific region as that of a growing threat and an aggressor in the 90's.² Advancing this objective, in 2004, a division of Public Diplomacy was established as part of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³

Today, China is one of the world's most active exponents of Public Diplomacy spending billions of dollars on its Public Diplomacy. Chinese Public Diplomacy efforts range from trivial efforts such as publicizing its aid and disaster relief efforts to putting up a 60 seconds ad about China on electronic billboards in the Times Square in New York⁴, to significant efforts at seeping through educational institutions by establishing Confucius institutions in over 140 countries in the world.

In addition Chinese administration has also undertaken many other initiatives that bid to spread its story to the world and promote Chinese culture such as awarding festival activities that have successfully spread Chinese culture to the world, organizing programs such as "I Sing Beijing", releasing videos of The first Lady of China, Peng Liyuan congratulating the naming of the Smithsonian's National Zoo's giant Panda Cub etc.⁵ Some of the other successful examples of such initiatives are "Cultural Year" of exchanges and exposition in France, The China- Russian National year in 2005, The China- India Friend year in 2006, the three-week Arab Cultural festival in China etc.⁶



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Besides, China also has what is called the internet “Spin Doctors”. These spin doctors are trained internet users who use global social networking sites, blogs and public forums and comment favorably on Chinese policies as common citizens, shifting the debates and discussion in favour of the communist party. They are also called the “50 cent party”, because they are allegedly paid about 50 Chinese cents for each comment that they make supporting the Chinese Communist party.⁷

Ironically for China, although the government has invested billions of dollars in promoting its image, its returns however have been inadequate. This is primarily because its soft power is potentially limited by its own actions. Most of their efforts have been perceived as propaganda rather than Public Diplomacy by many countries. For example: the American Association of University professors called upon universities to end or revise their contracts with the Confucius Institutes, as incidents related to the Taiwan issue were not allowed to be brought up, which resulted in many of these universities accusing it of functioning as an arm of the Chinese state and ignoring Academic Freedom.⁸ Moreover, the Chinese concept of Public Diplomacy is considerably flawed because it is often referred to as “Dui Wai Xuan Chuan” or “Wai Xuan”, which literally translates to External Propaganda and Image Promotion.⁹ Their idea of “Tianxia”, translates to “All under the heaven”, representing a vertical relationship rather than a horizontal one has a feel of hegemonic elements to it.

According to Joseph Nye, a country develops its soft power largely from its 1) culture (in places that find it appealing), 2) its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and 3) its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)¹⁰. Although China has tapped into its cultural and economic strengths, it has not paid enough emphasis on the political aspects. This has largely undermined its Soft Power and Public Diplomacy efforts. China may have the money to carry out its message to the world, but it still grapples with issues of freedom, which impairs the existing vertical



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power structure. The example of China's reaction against the nomination of Chinese political dissident Liu Xiaobo for the Nobel Peace Prize is a case in point. For a successful Public Diplomacy it is important that words meet actions. A belligerent foreign policy can undo good Public Diplomacy efforts. As for China, its claim on Taiwan, its aggressive posturing in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean have been some of the biggest hindrances, limiting the success of its Public Diplomacy.

Among the many challenges to Public Diplomacy, the most basic yet the most complex one has been to define or gauge the success of Public Diplomacy itself. But even before grappling with this issue, there is something more important that China needs to figure out, that is, is there a right way to promote Public Diplomacy?

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])



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End Notes

¹ China owns all the Pandas in the world and leases them to zoos across the world. For more than half a century, China has used its Pandas to help foster and promote relationships with other countries as diplomatic loans. This kind of diplomacy is based on “Guanxi” loans, a Chinese term used to describe personalized networks of influence, trust, reciprocity and loyalty.

² Craig Hayden, “ *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in global Contexts*”, USC center on Public Diplomacy, p.192

³ Thomas L McFail “*Global Communication: Theories, stakeholders and Trends*”, John Wiley & Sons; 4th Edition edition, p.94

⁴ Cheng Guangjin, Ma Liyao “China makes its mark with Times square Ad’s”, China Daily, 27 February 2012, see: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/us/2012-02/27/content_14698153.htm

⁵ David Byrd, “Smithsonian Zoo celebrates Baby Panda Naming” , Voice of America, 1 December 2013, <http://www.voanews.com/content/smithsonian-zoo-baby-panda-name-bao-bao/1801479.html>

⁶ McFail, n.3, p.94

⁷ Michael Bristow, “China’s internet spin doctors”, BBC News, 16 December 2008, see: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7783640.stm>

⁸ John Sudworth, “Confucius Institute: The hard side of China’s Soft Power”, *BBC News, Shanghai*, 22 December 2014, see: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-30567743>

⁹ Nicholas J Cull, Testimony before the US-China Economics and Security Review Commission hearing: “ *China’s Propaganda and Influence Operations, its Intelligence Activities that target the United states and its resulting impact on US national security*”, 20 April 2009, see: <http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/4.30.09Cull.pdf>

¹⁰ Joseph Nye, “*The Limits of Chinese Soft Power*”, Project Syndicate, 10 July 2015, see: <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-civil-society-nationalism-soft-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-07>
