

The Paradoxes and Limits of Chinese Soft Power

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September 2012: President Hu Jintao and his Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visit the port of Dalian to attend the launch of the first aircraft carrier delivered to the Navy of the Popular Freedom Army. Dalian is China's third biggest port, located in the province of Liaoning, in the North-East of the country, at the heart of ancient Manchuria that was invaded by Japan in 1931. *Liaoning* is also the name of the aircraft carrier – 300 metres long, weighing in at 67 000 tonnes. That day, China became the tenth country in the world and the last of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to own an aircraft carrier. The *Liaoning* is to be “*of great importance in inspiring patriotism, national spirit and promote the technologies of national defence. It will also be of great importance for the reinforcement of the power of the country's defence and general strength.*” (Wen Jiabao). This show of force is in line with the continued increase in Chinese military spending (an increase superior to the GDP growth annually). If the trend continues, according to the EU's Institute for Security Studies (ISS), China's defence budget will equal that of the U.S. in 2050¹.

This aircraft carrier sums up the vision China has of itself: the country, inspired by a traditional approach to international relations

(more “hard” than “soft power”), is not concealing its intentions to reach strategic equality with the United States². The 18th party Congress (November 2012) was dominated by the affirmed will to make China a “great maritime power”. Beijing's objective is to reach the status of second world naval power, overtaking Japan and rivalling the United States.

Global influence strategy

At the same time and quite paradoxically, the concept of “soft power” (in Chinese *ruan shi li*: 软实力, that can mean “weak power”) is very much in fashion in China³. This theme started to appear very regularly in official speeches from 2007⁴ onward, as the Olympic games of 2008 and the Shanghai Universal Exhibition of 2010 were in preparation. At a time when the economic power was projecting everywhere around the world and where its military power was being consolidated at no inconsiderable price, China estimated that it needed a more global strategy of influence. This charm offensive came in the form of a spread of Chinese language and culture (hundreds of Confucius Institutes were set up around the world for a number of years), registering a growing number of students from all over the world in Chinese universities (240 000 in 2010, as opposed to 36 000 ten years earlier), the media coverage (massive investment in external audiovisual and English language programming), sports (The 2008 Olympics, the annual Shanghai Grand Prix as part of the Formula 1 World Championships...), cinema, gastronomy, fashion, luxury or contemporary art (all markets where China intends to manifest its influence on a worldwide scale, with a few spectacular success stories and as many failures...).

The notion of *soft power* is naturally part of the “harmonious” vision of international relations that China officially defends, a vision

that relies on some ancient philosophical references: “*The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting*” (Sun Tzu). “*I think we can find the expression of ruan shi li in Lao Tseu to signify that the weak can overcome the strong*”, as Jean-Luc Domenach⁵ points out.

This approach fits, above all, in with a realistic analysis of worldwide power struggles: “*Even though China’s GNP will outstrip that of the US in the next decade, China remains far behind the US in terms of global power. In addition, the United States are also way ahead of China in a number of areas, such as the capacity for sustainable development, scientific and technological innovation, financial solidity and cultural soft power*”, according to Chen Xiangyang, Deputy Director World Politics Research Institutes, affiliated with the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations⁶.

Cultural expansion and State propaganda

One year before the inauguration of the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier, the sixth plenary session of the 17th Central Committee of the CCP (October 2011) adopted a directive for the promotion of China’s *soft power*. In line with these main themes, the ex-President Hu Jintao presented an inspired variation on this theme during the party congress in November 2012: “*The country’s cultural soft power should be improved significantly. (...) the cultural sector should become a pillar of the economy. Even greater progress should be made in taking Chinese culture to the global stage. By taking these steps, we will lay a more solid foundation for developing a strong socialist culture in China. To complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects and achieve the great renewal of the Chinese nation, we must create a new surge in promoting socialist culture and bring about its great development and enrichment, increase China’s cultural soft power, and enable culture to guide social trends, educate*

the people, serve society, and boost development. We must promote the construction of a socialist culture. Culture is the lifeblood of a nation, and it gives the people a sense of belonging. To complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects and achieve the great renewal of the Chinese nation, we must create a new surge in promoting socialist culture and bring about its great development and enrichment, increase China’s cultural soft power, and enable culture to guide social trends, educate the people, serve society, and boost development in the service of « the constant reinforcement of the prestige of Chinese culture on the international stage”. (Speech by the President Hu Jintao at the 18th National Congress of the CCP, November 17th 2012, source: Xinhuanet.com).

Making China a great cultural power, “*planning the reform of the cultural system in order to reinforce China’s soft power*”⁷, is the mission that has been officially given to Liu Yunshan, elected member of the Permanent Committee of the Political Bureau, supervisor in charge of ideology at the CC’s central committee in November 2012. So how important is culture in Chinese foreign policy? Does China have the intention to export cultural product all over the world?

The most famous living Chinese painters (Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun...) have been at the top of the pile in contemporary art in recent years, but these success stories are individual. However, culture is certainly an export product if we take a “star” pianist like Lang Lang, whose receipt of the title of *Doctor Honoris causa* from the Royal College of music from the hands of Prince Charles, the first Chinese national to have done so, has left no-one in Beijing indifferent. In January 2011, Lang Lang was invited to the White House during an official dinner in honour of President Hu Jintao. On that occasion after improvising a four-hander with Herbie Hancock, Lang Lang played *My Homeland*, a famous piece of music from the Chinese repertoire that

is also on the soundtrack of the 1956 film *The Battle of Shangganling Mountain*, that tells of the Chinese victory over American GIs during the Korean war. Chinese web users rejoiced in this “*trick played on the Americans*”, that the “*musical message meant that China no longer feared any other power*”⁸.

Chinese financiers invest heavily in the film industry, and notably in the United States, but contemporary Chinese cinema has yet to reach the level of huge international success that corresponds to the effort involved. Directors such as Zhang Yimou may use Hollywood actors (*The Flowers of War*, with Christian Bale, 2011), nothing changes: Hollywood manages to fill cinemas all over the world with imaginary references to China (*Kung Fu Panda*, 2008). Very often, Beijing invests huge sums of money in “patriotic blockbusters” created to improve its image, but which don’t have any success whatsoever outside the borders of the country: *The Foundation of a Republic*, for the 60 years of communist China in 2009 or the *The Start of a New Renaissance* for the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Party (two films directed by Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin)... The masters of contemporary Chinese cinema often work outside China and are largely ignored at home (Chen Kaige, Jia Zhang Ke, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Lu Yue...).

An incomplete “Renaissance”

China’s efforts are far from enjoying the worldwide success of South Korea in pop culture terms: thanks to its films, television series and pop stars, purveyors of K-pop, the *hallyu*, the Korean wave has taken over Asia since the nineties and is now conquering Europe and America. “Gangnam Style” by Psy (the most watched clip on YouTube with over a billion views) is a recent reference. Through its cultural industry, Korea has acquired a level of notoriety that has enabled it to speed up its transition from emerging power to just plain

power. Fifty years ago, Japan also managed to infiltrate Western pop culture with *Sukiyaki Song*, a worldwide hit that sold millions of copies, in particular in the U.S. (1963).

For now, Beijing’s efforts in its “cultural renaissance” strategy have been considerable but still slightly awkward in their attempts to do everything as well as the west. Museum building in China, as a result, seems to be a race to break records: one hundred new museums open every year! The Beijing National Museum is proud to announce today that it is “the world’s biggest museum” (250 000 square metres as opposed to the Louvre’s 210 000 square metres). The same goes for the frenzied construction of theatres and operas, multiplex cinemas and the establishment of symphony orchestras (20 new orchestras created in 20 years)⁹. But these figures are an accountant’s view of the “Chinese renaissance” expressed when the Director of the Nations Commission for development and reform announced in August 2012, that “national renaissance” was 62% complete (“as opposed to 45% in 2008”).

However, we would be wrong, and the Chinese authorities are not fooling themselves about this, to over-evaluate China’s capacity to drag the rest the world along in their “Chinese dream”¹⁰. The hypothetical “Beijing consensus” (a world vision dominated by the “non-interference” in others’ affaires, tolerance toward non-democratic forms of government...) has not yet replaced the “Washington consensus” incarnated by the IMF and the World Bank, even though the so-called “Washington consensus” is in bad shape... As for the vitality of Chinese culture, this is not a strong enough argument to draw conclusions about the country’s “immaterial” influence: “*Let us not confuse the notion of soft power with the attribution of the Nobel prize for literature Gao Xinjiang in 2000 or to Mo Yan in 2012, that would be far too simple*”, points out the China expert François Godement¹¹.

No totalitarian soft power in 2013

“It would appear that China has the means to seduce the world: a history that spans thousands of years, a brilliant and refined culture, an extremely rich architectural heritage, a vital film industry, a capacity to organise events on a global scale (2008 Olympics, 2010 Universal exhibition)... However, the seduction it exercises is paradoxical in as much as it emanates from a totalitarian system where the ruling party won’t budge an inch on civil liberties and is a faithful ally to some of the worst dictatorships on the planet”, writes Barthélémy Courmont, author of a book on Chinese soft power¹². *“Chinese young people study English from primary level, drink Coca-Cola and get their coffee in Starbucks, both American global brands. But we are a long way from seeing American or European youths drinking Chinese tea or chatting in mandarin when they travel the world”*¹³.

The way dissident artist and writers are treated in China, the lack of freedom of expression that means anything, and the repression in Tibet or in Xinjiang, not to mention the still fresh memories of the events at Tian-An-Men square in 1989, are preventing China for the time being to exude values and a message that appeal to all. By restricting the circulation of ideas and by controlling the Internet, the Chinese authorities are discouraging intellectual exchange with the rest of the world. The most popular Chinese figures in the world today are, for the most part, opponents of the regime: Liu Xiaobo, Nobel Peace Prize 2010, currently in Prison for “subversion”, the artist Ai Weiwei, under some serious pressure in his country, the lawyer Chen Guangcheng now exiled in the United States, the activist Hu Jia and many others...¹⁴

The bubbling under of civil Chinese society shows traces of another “Chinese dream” that doesn’t correspond to the official version. The latest example: the mobilisation of web users against censorship that appeared on January

1st 2013 in the *Nanfang Zhoumo*, China’s most influential liberal newspaper. This text called on China for political reform, and notably the respect of the basic freedoms laid down in theory by the constitution. This editorial was reworked in depth on instructions from the Guangdong (south) province’s propaganda office, where the publication is based. If the wave of protest did not manage to prevent censorship, it nevertheless put out a universal message for freedom of expression that was relayed all around the world.

Controlling minds and spiritual renewal

The notion of Chinese *soft power* is thus filled with paradox. In practice, the Chinese authorities are on the defensive and are aiming to adapt their discourse, which is completely off kilter relative to a liberal or “wild” economy, and totally contrary to the ideals of the Communist party. In the Internet and social network era, the task is also a technical one: it is estimated that the regime employs tens of thousands of web users to censor content on the web that is considered to be not in compliance with the rules. President Hu Jintao thus explained, in an article published in January 2012, that international forces “were intensifying their efforts” in an anti-Chinese plot, and the “ideological and cultural domains were the main channels through which this long-term infiltration was occurring”¹⁵.

China is not trying to replace American soft power. It doesn’t have the means and has other priorities. The latter can be summed up as the control of minds within China itself, not abroad. The 2008 Olympics and the Shanghai Universal Exhibition of 2010 seem to have been aimed for the most part at “making the Chinese proud again”¹⁶, if they didn’t manage to impress the rest of the world. The results of the 2008 Olympics in terms of soft power for China were relatively mediocre: *“Plenty of medals, yes, but very few in the sports that are*

important in media and financial terms on an international level”, according to the People’s Daily (August 14th 2012).

An effort to renew the regime’s ideology is evident in this context. An intellectual quite close to the regime such as Kang Xiaoguang feels that Chinese ideology must take more inspiration from Confucian culture. Born in 1963, Kang Xiaoguang became a “Confucian militant” after reading Samuel Huntington’s *The Shock of Civilisations*. “*The Chinese spiritual universe has been totally destroyed. The people have lost their ability to follow ideals, a moral and a meaning of life, and are incapable of imagining or understanding such concepts. Greed, indifference, and mediocrity run our spiritual universe. Beyond money, power and sex, we don’t know what to turn to... and ideals, morals and principles are very often disdained. In this consumerist era, we need the power of imagination and courage to imagine, we need to search for ideals, and to encourage the quest for these ideals. In other words, we need a utopia*”¹⁷.

The current pressing issue for Beijing is to renew its propaganda system to make its vision compatible with today’s communication vectors (internet) and the industries of distraction. Near Shenzhen in the Guangdong province, a very well known theme park was built around an old Soviet aircraft carrier, the “Minsk”, about which the film maker Xiao Xing Cheng made a documentary (*Minsk World*, 52 minutes, 2006). Millions of Chinese tourists come every year for a particular type of relaxation: to have their photo taken wearing a Soviet military uniform, to shop and watch a parade with young women dressed in fatigues like Lara Croft, in a spirit of relatively harmless martial nationalism. We are a long way from Disneyland, which was one of America’s most powerful soft power vectors.

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1. Philippe Régnier, *Le Temps*, September 26th 2012.
2. On this subject, read François Godement interviewed in *La Croix* (November 16th 2012).
3. Thank you to Pierre Haski and Jean-Luc Domenach for their learned advice on this point of translation.
4. *New York Times*, January 17th 2012: Joseph Nye, “Why China is weak on Soft Power”.
5. Email correspondence with Jean-Luc Domenach, February 2013.
6. “Interaction, not confrontation” (*The People’s Daily*, October 30th 2012).
7. *The People’s Daily*, December 26th 2012.
8. Arnaud de la Grange, *Le Figaro*, January 26th 2011.
9. Sheila Melvin, “The Road to Cultural Rejuvenation”, *Caixin*, January 12th 2013.
10. “Aujourd’hui ce n’est pas la force de l’Amérique qui constitue une menace pour la Chine, c’est celle du rêve américain” (Dominique Moïsi, *Les Echos*, November 12th 2012).
11. “Soft Power” programme on France Culture, Sunday January 27th 2013.
12. *Chine, la grande séduction. Essai sur le soft power chinois*, éditions Choiseul, 2009.
13. “Chine-États-Unis, le match des superpuissances”, François d’Alañçon, Pierre Cochez and Dorian Malovic in *La Croix*, November 7th 2012.
14. On this subject, read an article by Zachary Keck: “Destined to Fail: China’s Soft Power Push” (*The Diplomat*, January 2013).
15. *Le Figaro*, January 3rd 2012.
16. On this subject, listen to “Soft Power” a programme on France Culture, Sunday January 27th 2013 with François Godement.
17. David Ownby, “Kang Xiaoguang et le projet d’une religion confucéenne. Itinéraire d’un intellectuel engagé”, *Perspectives chinoises*, December 2009. Available online: <http://perspectiveschinoises.revues.org/5369>