How 21st-Century China Sees Public Diplomacy As a Path to Soft Power

By Zhou Qingan & Mo Jinwei

China’s stunning economic growth in the last 30 years has not resulted in positive public feelings abroad for the country as misunderstandings over many issues, including territorial disputes, have generated negative sentiment, write Qingan Zhou & Jinwei Mo.

But the Chinese have in recent years experimented with discreet public diplomacy strategies to help paint the way toward a more effective use of soft power as a way to build up the country’s image.

The 2008 Summer Olympics hosted by Beijing were a showcase of these efforts.

Although China’s approach to soft power is still evolving, government officials and academics are using it as a way to integrate international communications, public diplomacy and cultural exchanges. China’s academic community realizes that with the country now the second largest economy in the world, it faces growing challenges in terms of its image and power despite rapid economic growth, rising per capita incomes and deepening involvement in public diplomacy over the past 30 years. It is particularly striking that from 2010 to 2012, uncertainty over China’s image and intentions emerged in the Asia-Pacific region and some African countries, due to disputes over adjacent seas and misunderstandings over foreign investment, respectively.

Chinese scholars have been studying Joseph Nye’s influential concept of soft power for some time as it touches on values, communication techniques and the confidence of one's civilization. Therefore, China has gradually realized that public diplomacy acts as a way to achieve soft power. This has placed public diplomacy at the center of Chinese foreign relations by the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

A Strategic Choice for Public Diplomacy

Academically speaking, the emergence of the concept of public diplomacy appeared in China in the late 1990s among a group of youthful scholars. They began to research public diplomacy, which had already been influential and popular in the West for many years, using case studies such as the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the strategic propaganda efforts used by the US and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War era. With a heightened awareness of the importance of public diplomacy in the 21st century, researchers have begun to pay more attention to the uses of information, and a number of scholars have participated in developing a national public diplomacy strategy, meaning that the discussion has become much more focused on the needs of the nation.

Despite having a very long diplomatic history, until the beginning of economic reforms and opening, China didn’t put public diplomacy in an important position and concentrated propaganda efforts mostly on Third World countries after the 1949 revolution. The 1989 incident of the Tiananmen Square demonstrations made the Chinese government aware of the necessity of image building and international discourse as part of the reform process. Thus, in the 1990s more attention was paid by Beijing to dialogue and exchanging information in the field of diplomacy. But the Chinese government did not see the full value of public diplomacy until the 21st century. The epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 prompted the establishment of a government spokesperson system and enhanced the development of Chinese public diplomacy. More recently, during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games China used its public diplomacy channels to improve its image. Over the past five years public diplomacy has been gaining popularity in Chinese society and shown its face in various ways.

Generally speaking, however, the more subtle strategy of soft power in China remains discreet, which is somehow due to traditional Chinese customs and the features of China’s public diplomacy. In Chinese tradition, rulers highlighted principles of harmony and leniency and officials respected cultural diversity. On the other hand, conforming to the public diplomacy principle of “keeping a low profile,” a key factor in the reform period, China has emphasized not only its own cultural uniqueness, but also the importance of respecting other cultures and political systems. What’s more, China’s discreet decision-making in the public diplomacy arena has also been influenced by the actions taken by the US after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

A Triple Approach

The fact that China shares a land border with 14 different countries, more than any other nation, influences China’s public diplomacy, but there are three principles: First, enhance public relations with countries like the US, Russia and Western countries to build a positive image in the international political system; second, stabilize public relations with neighboring countries — that became an acute concern in 2011 and the first half of 2012, when China had disputes with countries in the South China Sea concerning sovereignty issues; third, reinforce a positive image in the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

China should confront and rebut the accusation of “neo-colonialism” raised by the Western media. A great number of government-sponsored Confucius Institutes have been established and a “going abroad” strategy has been formulated for the Chinese media. The Confucius Institutes, similar to the Alliance Francaise, the British Council and various US initiatives, are a way to spread public diplomacy. With more than 7,000 Chinese teachers and volunteers going abroad annually in co-operation with more than 100 countries, China has established more than 350 Confucius Institutes and 500 Confucius Classrooms around the
world. At the same time, more attention has been paid to international communication — for example, China Central Television (CCTV) has established new branches in North America and Africa. Another 11 international CCTV channels will be opened soon and five central reporting bureaus and 50 smaller bureaus will be set up around the world to broadcast from the field.

Recently, an advertisement about China’s national image was shown on a big screen in New York’s Times Square on a space rented by the official Xinhua News Agency; this was seen as a world-class public diplomacy platform in one of the highest-profile public spaces in the world.

Meanwhile, the public opinion controversy raised by the 2008 riots in Tibet demonstrated for Chinese scholars the true power of the Internet. As a result, academics predict that the Internet will play a growing role in the field of public diplomacy, according to a recent survey conducted in China. There have been numerous videos posted on YouTube to espouse China’s view, for example, including one posted in March 2008 of a young boy saying that “Tibet is a part of China.”

INCONSISTENT IMAGE

From the perspective of national development, China’s image is still not consistent with its economic growth. International news coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo show the gap between China’s cultural image and its political reputation. Problems in China’s political system, social development, economy and the widening disparity between the rich and poor, separate China from its traditional virtuous image. What’s more, things like Tibet and debates over human rights have been thorny and complicated communication issues for China since the 1990s. Since 1997, Chinese scholars have paid a lot of attention to foreign media coverage of China’s image and this has played into the decision-making process in terms of public diplomacy. For China, international media coverage and overseas polling and survey data are two important areas to use when analyzing the impact of its public diplomacy.

China has an urgent need to reinforce its soft power, but the reality is that it uses soft power cautiously. China’s public diplomacy tends to be defensive, discreet and stable, but in the current environment, new strategies need to be developed. In September 2011, a white paper on peaceful development defined the national core interests and international responsibilities for the first time, both of which need to work hand-in-hand with public diplomacy.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Certainly, the world’s understanding of public diplomacy is still very different from what is found in China. Although the original academic concept of public diplomacy seems to have originated in the US during the early post-Cold War period, historical attempts at public diplomacy have been seen from many different cultures.

World War I saw the beginning of the concept of public diplomacy. Although not tagged as public diplomacy, similar concepts were applied by the Chinese government shortly after 1949, when the new government started to use “propaganda” as a major instrument for international communication and national image building. This approach, however, came under increasing criticism after the Cold War era.

As a way of building a positive national image, and increasing transfers of information through non-governmental channels, public diplomacy is gaining popularity among researchers and practitioners in China. In a 2007 newspaper interview, Zhao Qizheng, the then director general of China’s State Council Information Office, said, “Public diplomacy is a major channel for cultural communication aimed at an overseas public. It is an international activity that provides explanations about national conditions and policies. It is an international activity that provides explanations about national conditions and policies. It complements formal government diplomatic activities. Government foreign affairs departments only play a minor role in public diplomacy activities in China, while NGOs, universities, media, religious organizations and influential individuals play a more important role by approaching overseas NGOs, and even governmental organizations in various arenas and on different interfaces, expressing national conditions and policies from various angles.”

This definition is widely accepted by the Chinese government.

One of the commonly accepted definitions of public diplomacy is the 1965 work of Dean Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He defined public diplomacy as the “cause and effect of public attitudes and opinions which influence the formulation and execution of foreign policy.”

In the 1990s the US Information Agency defined public diplomacy as an activity that “promotes US national security, economic and other interests by seeking to understand, inform and influence foreign publics and policy makers and by broadening the dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.” When borrowing from the USIA definition, Chinese scholars focus on two aspects: the goals of public diplomacy and the strategies to achieve those goals.

At present, there are two major forms of public diplomacy in China: Overseas communication through traditional media — newspapers, magazines, radio and television — has a longer history, and more recently the Internet has been added to the mix. Communication activities in this category are heavily government-influenced, with major communication channels all being state-owned, including the International Publishing Group, China Daily Newspaper Group and China Central Television. This is partly due to media administration and management in China, but this is not unique to China, and we find similar patterns of government involvement in international communication in other countries — for example, Voice of America and other state-owned communication channels.

OLYMPIC IMPACT

During the last 30 years of reform and opening up, people in China have seen a dramatic increase in international exchanges. As more Chinese travel overseas, cultural exchanges with other countries,
in the form of entertainment shows, joint-degree education programs, international sporting events, and, in some cases, cross-border business activities, all become new channels for public diplomacy. The hosts of these activities may have either political or commercial backgrounds. The Confucius Institutes, which many consider a landmark of Chinese public diplomacy, are a good case in point. As a non-profit organization, the institutes were under the jurisdiction of the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, which was set up in 1987. Despite this governmental element in its background, Confucius Institutes are in practice run through government contracts communication consultant for the Beijing Olympic organizing committee (BOCOG).

There were criticisms. “In what way can an international communications company benefit the country, given ideological differences and that the majority of international reporters are not informed about Chinese society?” Some more liberal media went a step further and advocated that the government-corporate joint mechanism should also be applied to domestic politics: “The invitation for a PR company to participate in government activities is a sign of a shift from traditional government omnipotence as government begins to recognize and embrace a professional division of labor and professional values.”

When examining the media attention given to China during the Beijing Olympics revealed three overarching themes, or characteristics.

First, traditional Chinese cultural symbols were used as national symbols. This is in contrast to the symbols of power that the Western media commonly use to represent China, such as the image of armed police gazing at the Palace Museum in Tiananmen Square. However, the largely negative overseas connotation of the communist political system has been a major weakness for conveying a positive national image, and the whole category of communist symbols is usually avoided in Chinese diplomatic activities. For the Olympics, cultural symbols prevailed, especially during the opening ceremonies. A preliminary analysis of 50 influential newspapers reveals that 67 percent ran photos of the opening ceremony on their front pages for Aug. 9, 2008, and among these three-quarters chose pictures with cultural rather than political symbols such as an old scroll, performers in Chinese traditional outfits, a blue globe and so on.

Second, there is a focus on majestic icons and structures as a feature of modern Chinese culture. Majesty is one of the key features of modernity, and is considered to be nationalistic. However, it also has been employed by ancient Chinese dynasties as a means of expression. The Great Wall and the grand palaces that were built 2,000 years ago all embody such majestic aesthetic values. International events such as the Beijing Olympics, Shanghai World Expo and 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, all demonstrate the majesty paradigm in the construction of Chinese symbols. With stunning visual impact, these symbols help to form some kind of cultural identity and to bring symbols of Chinese culture to an international audience.

Third, Chinese faces that are familiar to the Western world are needed for public diplomacy. For the Olympics, cultural and economic diplomacy do not easily or necessarily translate into the realization of foreign policy objectives. However, we cannot overlook the importance of the role that the Beijing Olympics played in the history of China’s public diplomacy. On the one hand, the event enabled more visitors to China to see the complexity of its society and the impressiveness of its culture; on the other hand, it made more Chinese people aware of the fact that public diplomacy is playing an important role linking China to the world. The latter point is of historical significance.

Qingnan Zhu is Associate Professor and Deputy Director, Epstein Center for Global Media Studies, Tsinghua University. Jinwei Mo is a Research Assistant at the Epstein Center for Global Media Studies.

The largely negative overseas connotation of the communist political system has been a major weakness for conveying a positive national image, and the whole category of communist symbols is usually avoided in Chinese diplomatic activities.