Meeting Summary

The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power

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22 September 2011
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There are varying definitions of soft power. I will therefore begin by explaining how I define soft power. I follow Joseph Nye’s definition of soft power as the ability to get others to ‘want what you want’ without using force or inducement. I.e. I do not define soft power to include economic inducement though I do recognise the inherent troubles, as Shaun Breslin has recently pointed out, in knowing an actor’s true motivation. Soft power is based on the attractiveness of a culture, political ideals, and policies. Power is a capacity to enact something, and neither the exercise nor the vehicle of that capacity.

In this discussion I will make two main arguments.

First, I argue that Chinese soft power is different from that of the West because it has a domestic aspect. China’s soft power is both inward and outward looking. China stresses domestic cultural development and therefore has a large cultural industry. In other words, there is a connection between China’s nation-building and nation-branding. For example, some questioned the utility of a large Chinese advertisement featured in Times Square, New York showcasing prominent Chinese figures, such as Yao Ming, since many Americans, and other non-Chinese individuals, could only identify a few of the figures featured in the advertisement. However, I argue that the advertisement may have been trying to showcase the Chinese government’s achievements to its own public rather than to American, and other international, audiences. There are many examples within China of how soft power is used to serve CCP domestic needs, including, anti-corruption measures, ethnic relations, and so forth.

Second, I argue that Chinese soft power has an effect on others as it forces a process of self-examination. This is one key reason why China’s soft power hits a nerve. I am less concerned with the success or failure of China’s attempts to utilise its soft power, but rather with what others’ reactions to China’s attempts signify. Using the examples of: a) the public exhibitions put on by the Chinese government to celebrate the 600th year anniversary of Zheng He, who commanded famed naval voyages during the Ming Dynasty; b) reaction to the spread of Confucius Institutes, which are now located in approximately 96 different countries; and c) the considerable expansion of CCTV and China’s media ambitions, I have argued that beneath all the hard power concerns about China lie soft power anxieties.

In sum, the domestic aspect of Chinese soft power differentiates it from the soft power of the West. These differences are significant in practice, because they reflect the underlying differences in motivation and in stages of
development. China in Africa is better understood in light of China in Xinjiang; the branding of Confucius abroad must be seen as a corollary to his revival within China as a means to boost Party legitimacy. Moreover, Chinese soft power, it seems, hits a nerve in the Western psyche not because its so-called model may appeal to other nations but because its actions reflect the West's own ambivalence to modernity and uncertainty over the proper role and limits of state power. The impact of Chinese soft power is further analysed in my new book Who's Afraid of China? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power (Zed, 2011).