

How China markets its national brand in the global power marketplace (guest blog)

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'a branded space' for soft power?

China is spending billions on promoting itself across the globe but how successful is this strategy? Polis Intern Celine Lau reports on a talk by Professor Jian (Jay) Wang, Associate Professor at University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, about China's recent venture into building soft power through public diplomacy.

First, China is actively seeking respectability, status and recognition from the world. It is important not only to the government but also to the public, as it is crucial to their national identity. China is seen to be becoming more and more proactive in 'agenda framing' so to improve international opinion environment.

Second, even though soft power is an international relations concept and mostly applied by nations trying to extend their reach beyond national boundaries (such as the US), China has domesticated the idea by targeting the home audience. Soft power is believed to be an important source of legitimacy for the government.

Third, Professor Wang has identified a less-than-clear image that China is seeking to establish. There has not been a consistent and compelling narrative to mark the change from A to B. This might reflect the fluid identity of China itself – how the country is constantly in flux at the moment.

Fourth, China's soft power building process is involving a wider array of actors and programmes, including international broadcasters, cultural and educational exchanges and diaspora around the world. However, many of the initiatives remain state-centric.

Last but not least, the impact of the process has not been identified because of the lack of evaluation, which is a common problem shared by many who pursue similar efforts. However, China's determination and pragmatism in its soft power pursuits is evident, although domestic governance and policies undermine the outreach efforts (such as China's dealings with Syria).

There are two directions in the soft power building process. More attention, not only among academics but also policymakers, has been paid to how China pursues soft power through examining China's media and communication strategies. Yet, Professor Wang is more interested in how the world responds and receives China. After all, in an interactive communicative system, responses determine the outcome to a large extent. Specifically, he looks at the Confucius Institutes in the United States, which have expanded spectacularly in the last ten years. [These are based on teaching Chinese languages but have become more diverse centres of China studies, akin to the British Council or Alliance Francaise]

He believes that money and resources are not the only factors that promote the growth of the Confucius Institutes. There are also unmet needs, specifically, growing demand in Chinese language and culture, that are not satisfied. The motivation and agency of host, partner institutions and individuals and an effective entry model, together with a

receptive political opinion environment are other factors.

On the other hand, Professor Wang also presented his research on nation branding effects of the Shanghai Expo 2010. Coming from a corporate background, Professor Wang has fused the branding concept in business with communication studies to come up with the idea that each national pavilions can be seen as a branded space, in which visitors go in and experience it as an 'experiential goods'. As a whole, the Expo is a site of production and consumption of national brands and visitors' experience of the pavilion has the potential to impact their perception of a nation.

This report by Polis Intern Celine Lau

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