CHAPTER 3

The Chinese Debate on Public Diplomacy

Over the last two decades, public diplomacy policies and activities have become an increasingly important part of China’s foreign policy strategy and diplomatic practice. In November 2012, the importance of public diplomacy in China’s foreign policy strategies was confirmed by inclusion of the term in President Hu Jintao’s report to the 18th National Party Congress. In his report, Hu said that China’s government:

[…] will take solid steps to promote public diplomacy as well as people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and protect China’s legitimate rights and interests overseas.¹

This endorsement at the highest political level indicates that public diplomacy is in China to stay and that the government will keep expanding and strengthening related policies and strategies.

Public diplomacy and soft power are much-debated topics among scholars and officials in China. Consensus exists that developing and improving public diplomacy is a priority for the country. Public diplomacy is regarded as an important tool to ease the ‘trust gap’ with other countries, clarify misunderstandings, and boost China’s global influence. Many scholars and practitioners feel, however, that China is lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of soft power and public diplomacy strategies. China’s top leaders have for years been calling for a strengthening of China’s global outreach. “We should conduct public diplomacy in a more effective way,” said former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in 2007 in an article in China’s main national newspaper, the People’s Daily,² and this call has been echoed many times by Chinese policymakers and scholars.

However, there are many hurdles ahead. The Director of the Office of Public Diplomacy of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wei Xin, detailed the shortcomings of China’s public diplomacy as follows:

[…] the construction of the theory is in its infancy, there is room for improvement in terms of institution-building, integration of resources,

² Wen Jiabao, “Our Historical Task at the Primary Stage of Socialism and Several Issues concerning China’s Foreign Policy,” People’s Daily (February 27 2007).
and the participation of civil society organizations, think tanks, and the public in public diplomacy, and the working style and methods of the relevant government departments, the transition of the discourse system and the development of the quality of employees should all be enhanced.³

In addition to these shortcomings, Chinese diplomats often point out that cultural and ideological differences are important obstacles to enhancing understanding about China abroad.⁴

This chapter deals with the extensive and lively Chinese debate on public diplomacy and related concepts. It shows how Chinese scholars, after a phase of studying and discussing Western theories and practices, started to develop their own understanding of public diplomacy, sometimes referred to as “public diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.”⁵ The chapter thus aims to explore what kind of specific public diplomacy characteristics emerge from the Chinese debate and looks at what Chinese scholars say about the impact of Chinese culture on public diplomacy.

The Introduction of Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in China

The idea of soft power, of winning people’s hearts and minds, has been around in China for more than two millennia. A text attributed to Confucianist philosopher Mengzi (372–289 BC), for example, clearly reflects an understanding of the power of attraction:

There is a Way for getting the world: if you get the people you will then get the world. There is a Way to getting the people: if you get their hearts you will then get the people. There is a Way for getting their hearts: that which you desire, share with them in accumulating, and that which you dislike,

³ Cited in “Zhuanjia: Gonggong waijiao shi tisheng zhongguo ruan shili de zhongyao xuanze” [Experts: Public Diplomacy is an Important Option to Enhance China’s Soft Power], Jiefangjun bao (July 25 2010).
⁴ Interviews during the period 2007–2013, but see also former Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom Fu Ying’s remarks in “Chinese Ambassador on Public Diplomacy,” Xinhua Online (July 26 2009), available online at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-07/26/content_11776991.htm; and “Speech by Ambassador Xue Hanqin on China Day Seminar hosted by the Dutch–Chinese Friendship Association” (August 25 2007).