CHAPTER 8

The Reception of China’s Public Diplomacy*

The previous chapters concerned the sending side of public diplomacy; they examined why and how China develops and conducts public diplomacy. Public diplomacy policies, instruments, and messages, however, are targeted at audiences and are developed with the goal of improving a country’s image and winning foreign and sometimes also domestic audiences’ support for a country’s policies. No matter how carefully designed by the sender, it is the receiving side that determines whether or not a public diplomacy activity is successful. This final chapter therefore deals with the receiving side of China’s public diplomacy.

After a brief discussion of the challenges of evaluating public diplomacy and China’s evaluation efforts, this chapter examines global audiences’ changing perceptions of a rising China over recent decades, as they have emerged from various opinion polls. It looks at different audiences’ views of China’s major assets and liabilities for public diplomacy, including its economic strength, foreign policy, and culture. It analyzes the regional differences in views of China, and highlights the obstacles to China’s image projection. The chapter furthermore ventures into exploring the question of whether the evaluation and the changing perceptions that emerge from opinion polls can tell us anything about the effectiveness of China’s public diplomacy.

Measuring the Effect of Public Diplomacy

Developing an effective public diplomacy policy or activity is difficult. Public diplomacy policymakers generally base their policies on their ideas about how target audiences will receive a message or will be attracted by the instrument used. It is important that policymakers understand the political, cultural, and social context of the receiving side. Ideally, they should know what kind of image the targeted country or group already has about their country

or a specific policy,¹ and whether people on the receiving side will recognize
the country’s ideas or norms.² Good understanding of the receiving side is no
 guarantee for success, but a superficial or flawed understanding increases the
 chance of the public diplomacy activity being ineffective. In the public diplo-
 macy layer of monolog, the receiving side may fail to learn about the com-
 munication, may misunderstand the conveyed message, or may dislike it; in the
 layer of dialog, starting off on the wrong foot may spoil the conversation; and
 in the layer of collaboration, misunderstanding and unrealistic expectations
 may hurt the cooperation process and the end product.

In order to understand how foreign audiences look at China and its policies,
policymakers and scholars study foreign perceptions of China extensively, as
they emerge from foreign press coverage and from foreign and Chinese opin-
ion polls. Furthermore, they evaluate China’s public diplomacy strategies and
activities. Some of these evaluations have been discussed in previous chapters,
such as the evaluation of the Copenhagen Summit in chapter two, and the
2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo in chapter
six, but there are many more evaluations by Chinese scholars of China’s public
diplomacy activities.³

One example is the evaluation of the 2007 ‘China Year’ in Russia, based
on a Russian opinion poll among Russian audiences, and supplemented with
interviews by its Chinese author. It found that a majority of 70 per cent felt
that the ‘China Year’ had helped them to understand China better, but that in
most cases (67 per cent) it had not made them change their views of China.⁴
Another example is an assessment of the Confucius Institutes by a Chinese
former Director of the Confucius Institute in Manchester, UK, who discusses
various challenges for improving the Confucius Institutes as public diplomacy
instruments, including the need for more two-way communication, more
attention to promoting culture, and for a reduction of ‘the official color,’ or
governmental influence, in Confucius Institutes.⁵

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chapter 7.
² Yong Wook Lee, “Soft Power as Productive Power,” in Sook Jong Lee and Jan Melissen (eds),
³ See, for example, the section “Anli” [Cases] in the journal GGWJJK.
⁴ Liu Xiaoxiang, “Eluosi ‘zhongguo nian’ de gonggong waijiao chengxiao pinggu” [Evaluation
of the Effects of Public Diplomacy of the ‘Year of China’ in Russia], GGWJJK, No. 7 (fall 2011),
pp. 35–42, Table 1.
⁵ Liu Hong, “Kongzi xueyuan yu zhonghua wenhua de guoji chuanbo: chengjiu yu tiaozhan”
[Confucius Institutes and the International Dissemination of Chinese Culture: Achievements
and Challenges], GGWJJK, No. 12 (winter 2012).