

# CHINA'S QUEST FOR "SOFT POWER": IMPERATIVES, IMPEDIMENTS AND IRRECONCILABLE TENSIONS?

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## Abstract

From establishing Confucius Institutes all over the world to mounting an advertising blitz in New York's Times Square, the Chinese state's multifaceted endeavour to strengthen its "soft power" has been highly visible and the subject of much recent political, journalistic, and scholarly attention. This paper locates the Chinese state's "soft power" quest within historical and geopolitical contexts and explores the profound contradictions in its underpinning political economy and cultural politics. While this campaign's state, industry, professional and moral imperatives appear self-evident and there are converging elite and popular interests in the project, its structural impediments seem to be insurmountable.

Furthermore, there are irreconcilable tensions between a drive to pursue an elitist, technocratic, and cultural essentialist approach to global communication and a capacity to articulate and communicate an alternative global political and social vision that appeals to the vast majority of the world population in a deeply divided and crises-laden domestic and global order.

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A decade ago, communication research was preoccupied with issues relating to transnational media expansion in China and its (potentially democratising) impact on Chinese politics and society. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 marked a pivotal moment in this line of research. Since then, however, there has been a rapid shift in research orientation. Rather than focusing on Western media penetration in China, the Chinese media's "going global" strategies and the global implications of the Chinese State's quest for "soft power" has become the hottest topic of the day.

Analysts within and outside the academy have offered varied perspectives. One of the earliest and widely discussed books on the topic, published in 2007 by Joshua Kurlantzick, a fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations, carries the alarmist title *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Kurlantzick 2007). A September 2010 report prepared for the National Endowment for Democracy explicitly added a darker twist to Kurlantzick's analysis: "As the Chinese government propagates a less-than-free model of journalism and assists undemocratic regimes by supporting media that buttress them, advocates of free media and democratic government should take note" (Farah and Mosher 2010, 26). The scholarly community, meanwhile, has offered sober analysis of China's "soft power" drive. Suisheng Zhao's following assessment is representative: "In spite of its initial success, China's current approach to soft power lacks a contemporary moral appeal and therefore is hardly sustainable in the competition with the United States to inspire the vision of building a free and prosperous world" (2009, 247). Written from a media studies perspective, Wanning Sun (2010) has similarly pointed out the limits of the "transmission view" of communication embedded in China's soft power drive and argued that a more effective approach would call for a "ritual view" stressing the representation of shared beliefs. Affirming the observation that "China's deficit of soft power" ultimately rests in a failure in "the articulation of values that the rest of the world can aspire to and emulate" (Bandurski 2009 cited in Sun 2010, 67), Sun concluded that China's soft power quest might be a "mission impossible."

Behind this cacophony of scholarly and interest group voices are real and imagined shifts in the geopolitics of global communication. U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton underscored this shift in her widely-known testimony in front of the U.S. Foreign Policy Priorities Committee on March 2, 2011: "So we are in an information war. And we are losing that war... Al-Jazeera is winning. The Chinese have opened up a global English-language and multi-language television network. The Russians have opened up an English-language network" (Committee for International Broadcasting 2011). Amidst a growing discourse on U.S. decline and China's rise in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 U.S.-originated global financial crisis, and to the extent that China is still under the CCP's control, China's soft power drive has rekindled a Cold War-era preoccupation with Chinese propaganda on the part of the U.S. political establishment. The topic of an April 30, 2009 U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Committee Congressional Hearing was telling: "China's Propaganda and Influence Operations, Its Intelligence Activities that Target the United States, and the Resulting Impacts on U.S. National Security."

Rather than offer yet another assessment on the likely success of China's soft power drive, this paper takes a more holistic approach. After briefly mapping the multiple dimensions of China's soft power drive, I locate it in the historical

contexts, and examine its imperatives, and impediments as well as its potentially irreconcilable contradictions. The analysis foregrounds the conflicting nature of this drive as a manifestation of both the profound domestic tensions in China's ongoing transformation and intense contestations over China's place in a crisis-ridden global capitalist order.

## A Brief Overview of China's Soft Power Initiatives

"Soft power," according to Joseph Nye, who coined the term in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead*, is the ability of a country to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Suisheng Zhao (2009, 248) cited a Chinese source as saying that the term first appeared around 1997 in Chinese scholarly discourse and has become a popular phrase since 2001. According to him, "China has readily embraced the concept of soft power not only because it is compatible with many aspects of Chinese traditional and strategic thinking but more importantly because the concept offers a ready solution to ease the anxieties around the world about China's rise" (S. Zhao 2009, 248).

There is no question that China's dominant political and intellectual elite have unabashedly embraced this U.S.-originated concept. Concerted efforts at both the policy formation and implementation levels can be clearly documented. In the field of media and cultural policy, this effort can be traced back to the Chinese media industry's "going global" project starting in 2001 in response to Western media entry into the Chinese market, and higher level strategic articulations in key documents such as the January 2006 CCP Central Committee and State Council guidelines on "deepening cultural system reform," and Hu Jintao's report to the 17th CCP National Congress in October 2007 (Y. Zhao 2008). Former CCP propaganda chief Li Changchun's following remarks have been widely cited as a paradigmatic expression of this drive: "In the modern age, whichever nation's communication methods are most advanced, whichever nation's communication capacity is strongest ... has the most power to influence the world" (cited in Farah and Mosher 2010, 7).

In practical terms, China's soft power initiatives encompass a whole range of efforts, from the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms all over the world since 2004 to increased state funding to official media outlets with an explicit objective to expand their global reach, including the widely publicised 2009 announcement of a 45 billion Yuan investment in main state media outlets to strengthen their international news coverage and global presence. Some of the highlights of leading official media outlets' expansionist moves have included: the rapid expansion and the constant re-vamping of CCTV's transnational satellite broadcasting, from the September 2000 launch of CCTV9 as a 24-hour English channel to its April 2010 re-launch as CCTV News, and the February 2012 official launch of CCTV America; Xinhua News Agency's rapid bureau expansion, the relocation of its North American office to Times Square, as well as its July 1, 2010 launch of CNC World, a 24-hour English news channel through satellite and the Internet (Guo 2011; Guo and Lye 2011); China Radio International's (CRI) all-out efforts in overseas landing through local partnerships and its addition of 6 new languages to its broadcasts in September 2009, so that it now broadcasts in 61 languages, the greatest number of languages among all international broadcasters. For its part,

*China Daily* is both expanding its overseas distribution and its overseas bureaus, while the *Global Times*, a market-oriented subsidiary of the *People's Daily*, launched an English edition on April 20, 2009 to become the second English language national daily. Underscoring the scope of the media expansion drive and the determination to be in the campaign for the long haul, even the CCP's theoretical journal, *Seeking Truth*, launched an English edition in July 2009 in an attempt to "make the core values of the party more understandable to Western societies, especially in the theoretical and academic circles there" (Shanghaiist 2009). To be sure, profitability is not a top concern, and the leaders of this endeavour "are aware that Western readers may give the cold shoulder to the theories and socialist dogma in the magazine"; nevertheless, the main purpose at the outset "is to secure a footing in the Western media and allow the party's voice to be accessed and understood by mainstream Western readers" (Shanghaiist 2009).

There has also been an expressed interest in global media governance. This was most recently articulated in Xinhua Director Li Congjun's June 1, 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article, "Toward a New World Media Order" in which he outlined an imbalance in global information flows and argued that "[w]e need a mechanism to coordinate the global communications industry, something like a 'media UN'." A related effort centres on public diplomacy and officially-sponsored media conferences aimed at improving understanding between Chinese and foreign media. For example, Xinhua News Agency co-hosted a high-profile 2009 World Media Summit in Beijing with leading global media organisations such as News Corporation, AP, Reuters, and the BBC. Yet another dimension is increased media-development assistance to developing countries, from offering media infrastructure such as radio transmitters to content-sharing agreements with foreign media outlets (Farah and Mosher 2010). Finally, China's soft power drive also encompasses professional, educational, and scholarly dimensions, from celebratory news reports on Chinese journalists' professional pride at their final arrival at the hottest global news spots, to a specialised degree program at top journalism schools aiming to train qualified personnel (Guo and Lye 2011, 12), and to the paradigmatic scholarly article on how to improve China's national image abroad and how to increase China's soft power.

### Historical Contexts: Continuities and Changes

As I have argued in the context of China's WTO accession, China's post-Mao "openness" was not new from a longer historical perspective. After all, the PRC was open to the USSR and the socialist bloc in the 1950s and it later rivalled with the USSR for leadership in the international communist movement (Y. Zhao 2003, 60). Even since its early days of forging the Chinese revolution, "external propaganda" has always been an integrated part of the CCP's revolutionary strategies. Edgar Snow and other progressive Western journalists were some of the CCP's effective "third party" communicators during the pre-1949 revolutionary era. Moreover, the Cold War era witnessed the great China-USSR ideological debate of 1963-1964, as well as the spread of Maoism as a revolutionary ideology and a "third world" socialist alternative to both Western capitalist modernity and Soviet bureaucratic socialism. Even today, Maoism continues to inspire armed struggles in certain corners of the world, including parts of India, widely known as the world's largest democracy.

However, the embracing of the concept of “soft power” (*ruan shili*) as such is new, along with a profound change in the dominant logic of the CCP’s cultural politics from one of “national liberation” to one of “national power.” First, that this “made-in-the U.S.A.” terminology has been taken up explicitly by the ruling Chinese elite is significant. In the context of reduced American support for the Voice of America, the Chinese state’s appropriation of a strategy offered by Nye to the U.S. state as a sitting hegemon has rightly added fuel to alarmist claims about U.S. decline and Chinese ambition as an aspiring global hegemon.

There has also been a concomitant shift in strategy. Rather than foregrounding ideological contestation between capitalism and socialism, China’s current soft power drive, consistent with the CCP’s suppression of domestic debates on ideology during the reform era, downplay or even explicitly suppress ideological differences in the global symbolic arena and focus on image-building instead. Similarly, rather than championing a notion of culture as a site of struggle between antagonistic social forces over the fundamental directions of society – after all, Mao named his last revolution the “Cultural Revolution” – the soft power drive foregrounds an (apparently) depoliticised notion of “culture.” It is precisely within this context that one can appreciate the celebration of essentialist “Chinese” cultural values such “harmony” and the promotion of Confucius as China’s “cultural ambassador” abroad. Concomitantly, there has also been a new and more instrumentalist understanding of culture not as a way of life, but as being “strategic” and “industrial,” or even as a resource to be “mined.” Fusing culture with business under the new mantra of “cultural system reform,” then, is the objective of building up cultural soft power through the market-oriented expansion of Chinese cultural industries. Hollywood as both a capitalistic money-making machine and as the embodiment of American soft power serves as the ultimate model for China’s cultural planners. As Yu Hong put it, “not only does the state rhetorically embrace the slogan of soft power, it also supports national champions and market-oriented ‘go-out strategies’” (2012, 4). She cited Cai Wu, then Minister of Culture, as saying that although the state “used to see culture in propaganda terms,” in the future, “we are going to use culture trade to occupy the market, to increase competitiveness, and to attract audiences” (Hong 2012, 4).

In terms of the mode of delivery, if the Maoist era promoted the ethics of “self-reliance” and emphasised substantive argumentation – the CCP’s great ideological debate with the USSR between 1963 and 1964, for example, was executed in the form of nine *People’s Daily* editorials – Chinese national image making and soft-power projection, consistent with the logic of neo-liberalised global media production and the consumption of the spectacle, relies on slick productions, technological innovations, private-public partnerships, as well as the mobilisation of domestic and transnational advertising and public relation machines. CNN, for example, was the advertising platform of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce in 2009 and then the Chinese State Council Information Office in 2011. The high-profile Times Square billboard promotion, displayed between January and February 2011 in support of then Chinese President Hu Jintao’s tour to the U.S., however, was ordered by the State Council Information Office and produced by the Shanghai Lintas advertising agency, a joint-venture between Guangming Daily and the London-based international advertising agency Lowe & Partners, which in turn is a unit of the Interpublic

Group, one of the world's four largest advertising agency holdings conglomerates. Moreover, contrary to the generic figures of Chinese workers, farmers and soldiers in national image-making in the Mao era, the Chinese nation is now represented by celebrities and successful individuals such as film star Zhang Ziyi, NBA basketball star Yao Ming, pianist Lang Lang, film director John Woo, hybrid rice scientist Yuan Longping and Alibaba founder Jack Ma.

### Imperatives: Converging Statist, Market, Elite and Popular Interests

Behind the drive is a convergence of state, industry, elite and popular interests. As reflected in the above-cited article by Xinhua's Li Congjun, the CCP leadership has long perceived an imbalance in global communications and China's weak position in the global symbolic arena. A widely-shared argument has been that China's discursive and cultural power has not been commensurate with its rapidly expanding economic status. The following statement, attributed to Yu Guoming, a leading Chinese media scholar at Renmin University, articulated this argument well: "the strength of our voice does not match our position in the world. That affects the extent to which China is accepted by the world. If our voice does not match our role, however strong we are, we remain a crippled giant" (cited in Guo and Lye 2011, 14). Even more frustratingly for China's ruling elites, as the contradictions of the global economic system intensify and as China becomes more deeply integrated into the system, it seems that China is increasingly being blamed for its domestic shortcomings and global threats, from human rights abuses and media censorship to environmental threats and global resources grabs. Western media coverage of the 2008 Olympics Torch Relay revealed to the Chinese leadership the extent of foreign media "hostility" and the gap between negative Western opinion and the Chinese elite's desire to showcase the country's final restoration to its "rightful" place as a respected and dignified global power. Huang Ping, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, put China's new problem in this way: in the first 30 years of PRC history, China solved the problem of being beaten up; in the second 30 years of PRC history, China solved the problem of being hungry; now, China faces the problem of being condemned (Ma 2008). Thus, if it is true that the post-colonial state aimed to "find for 'the nation' a place in the global order of capital, while striving to keep the contradictions between capital and the people in perpetual suspension" (Chatterjee 1986, 68), the Chinese state seems to have done exactly so. But this is a damned place in the global order of capital. Apart from and perhaps precisely because of the mounting global political economic crises that China found itself in after 30 years of global economic integration and break-neck economic development, China has become the target of critique in a global public opinion arena dominated by Western-based transnational corporate media. Above all, the liberal human rights discourse has become the ideology by which the West condemns China (Y. Zhao 2009). To defend China and explain China has become a paramount statist objective.

The media industry's organisational interests and its market imperatives are also quite evident. To the extent that China's state-own media outlets have now all become market-oriented business conglomerates, they share the same expansionist logic that underpins the outward market expansionist imperative of Western

media conglomerates. Thus, outward and global expansion is as much a business strategy of China's state-owned media companies and the results of the dynamics of market competition as a statist mission. As Guo Zhenzhi and Lye Liang Fook put it, China's media organisations are keen to ride on the state-endorsed "going out" strategy "to extend their reach to a wider audience. It is very much about the intense competition among these media players to gain a bigger market share" (2011, i). The Xinhua News Agency's intention to get into the television market, for example, had long been frustrated by the Chinese media system's bureaucratic monopoly because the state's television market regulator, then under the name of State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), protects the domestic monopoly of its affiliated CCTV (Y. Zhao 2008). Judy Polumbaum was thus quite correct in characterising Xinhua's expansionist efforts, especially its quest for a television outlet, as "empire-building" (Polumbaum 2009). Taking advantage of the state's soft power agenda, Xinhua eventually managed to establish its television service CNC World by over-stepping the SARFT's authority to obtain permission from the central leadership (Guo and Lye 2011, 5). At the same time, by initially targeting the external market, Xinhua avoided head-on competition with CCTV for the domestic audience at the onset. Thus, as Guo and Lye observed, there is an "often overlooked internal dimension in the Chinese media's 'going out' drive." In fact, leading state media organisations such as Xinhua, CCTV and the People's Daily have turned the statist strategy into "a resource competition game" (Guo and Lye 2011, 11), or a way for them to secure more political prestige and financial resources.

Statist and media organisational imperatives enmesh well with the professional and personal interests as well as the cultural sensibilities of China's upwardly mobile and globalising media managers and professionals. As expressed so powerfully in *River Elegy*, one of the most influential media texts of the 1980s that nurtured a whole generation of Chinese media managers and professionals, China's intellectuals and media professionals have long had a desire to have a genuine dialogue with the West. Such an objective overlaps but cannot be reduced to the statist objective of mobilising Chinese soft power to conquer the hearts and minds of the world. Here again, Polumbaum's observation is pertinent: "In terms of broad objectives, some agencies and actors producing media content aimed at foreigners genuinely hope to explain China's policies and programs to 'outsiders' and engage in conversation with them" (Polumbaum 2009). Moreover, to the extent that members of China's urban middle class, in the context of a rapidly globalising and polarising consumer society, are increasingly casting their gazes outwards (more specifically toward the West), rather than downward, i.e. to communicate with the domestic lower social classes, there are strong reasons why expanding foreign media operations and strengthening external communication – specifically with an elite Western audience – resonate with the cultural sensibilities of media managers and professionals. On a personal level, many of China's state media managers have their single child studying in the West. Some have even migrated to the West themselves or maintained "flexible citizenship" by travelling back and forth between China and Western countries. The media's "going global" strategy thus fits in quite well with the patterns of transnational mobility of Chinese media managers and professionals.

Last but not least are the growing nationalistic sentiments of China's urban middle class as a whole. Here, it is necessary to make an essential, though difficult

and messy, distinction between parochial nationalism or even Chinese chauvinism, and a politics of national recognition and dignity in a global order that continues to be characterised by uneven political economic and cultural relations. As I have written elsewhere (Y. Zhao 2008; 2009), Chinese nationalism is a complicated, fluid, and multifaceted phenomenon. The dominant discourse of nationalism has typically advanced from the perspective of the “national interests” of an aspiring nation aiming to achieve more parity in global power relations. Much of the current discourse on China being in a “weak” position or carrying a “deficit” in the area of soft power is anchored in this realistic framework of increasing China’s “comprehensive national power.” Some strands of Chinese nationalism also probably express chauvinistic or xenophobic tendencies, perhaps even reflecting “an arrogant overconfidence in the over-privileged” in response to China’s economic ascendancy (Sklair 2001, 29).

However, there are also Chinese voices of opposition against the forces of Western hegemony, capitalistic exploitation, and racial prejudice. The transnational Chinese movement in protest against Western media coverage of the unrest in Tibet in March and April 2008 is a powerful manifestation of the desire on the part of Chinese society for its voice to be heard on the global stage. In this movement, the overseas Chinese and China’s Internet savvy urban youth of the reform era have taken the lead in defending Chinese sovereignty over Tibet in the realm of global public opinion, in struggling for the dignity of the Chinese nation, and in exposing the Western media for their apparent biases and distortions in their coverage of the protests in Tibet. In the global, media-studies literature, the “active audience” thesis was developed to discredit the cultural imperialism thesis. However, in this case, an active transnational Chinese audience mobilised themselves to fight against what they perceived to be the bluntest manifestations of cultural imperialism and racism in the Western media. As Wang Hui has argued, to simply characterise the whole movement as “parochial nationalism” is clearly to miss its substance, that is, “the logic of the politics of dignity and equality” (Wang 2011, 226) that underpins it.

Thus, the top-down statistic drive of boosting China’s soft power at least partially resonates with the bottom-up inspirations of parts of the globalised Chinese middle class, especially its youth. For example, one of the widely circulated YouTube videos, “Tibet Was, Is and Always will Be Part of China,” was produced by a second-year Chinese university student studying in Canada. The famous website anti-cnn.com (now known as April Media) was launched by Rao Jing in 2008, then a twenty-three year old Tsinghua University graduate in Engineering Physics and an Internet entrepreneur. Against domestic, liberal-intellectual characterisations of them as belonging to the “fifty-cent party,” that is, being paid by the state to put out pro-state online messages, these individuals proudly call themselves members of the “self-financed fifty-cent party” or “the fifty-cent party that packs its own meals” (*ziganwu*). A fuller understanding of China’s soft power drive must take into account the complicated and dynamic accommodations and tensions between statist and popular initiatives. Again, Wang Hui is insightful in this regard:

*Today, when a mainstream Chinese media under the control of a small group nonetheless constantly declares itself to be the voice of the people, the power that the students demonstrated – whatever one thinks of it – provided a powerful instance of just what the voice of the people consisted*

*of. This has been a turning point, a point where a new generation of people might gain a new understanding of China and of China's antagonisms and predicaments – it is a moment where one can gain an understanding of China's true position in the world's contemporary order (Wang Hui 2011, 226).*

## Impediments and Irreconcilable Tensions?

Although the Chinese leadership's strategy has been to stress business and market relations, to foreground an ostensibly depoliticised notion of culture, and to downplay ideological differences, it is simply impossible for China's soft power drive to escape global geopolitics. Nor can it avoid Western ideological resistance. The Chinese information technology company Huawei, for example, has met repeated setbacks in trying to expand its business in the West through acquisitions due to the "national security concerns" of the U.S., Canadian and Australian states. In 2010, when the Washington Post company put up the money-losing *Newsweek* for sale, the Nanfang Daily Group teamed up with Borui, a Chinese private media company, and a group of "pure financial investors," to put in a bid. However, the bid was rejected at the onset, and the reason has nothing to do with the tendered price (Zhu 2010). In the end, Sidney Harman, the 91-year-old audio equipment tycoon and husband of U.S. Congresswoman Jane Harman, was able to buy *Newsweek*, which he described as a "national treasure," for a nominal amount of just a single dollar (Clark 2010). Clearly, the media business is no ordinary business and money does not always talk, despite all the wishful thinking or pretensions on the part of China's market reformers.

Nor should one underestimate the competitive imperative of the Western media. Here, nothing is more effective than to undermine the credibility of the Chinese media in the global marketplace by continuing to portray them as merely an extension of the Chinese state, or even part of the Chinese intelligence system. Is Xinhua a spy agency? This was an interview question posed to me as a potential expert source by a Canadian journalist in early 2011. Beyond the issue of institutional credibility (Sun 2010; Guo and Lye 2011), a problem that the Chinese media system may not be able to overcome unless and until it reshapes itself in the image of the Western system, the political straitjacket and ideological complicity of the Chinese media make their content hardly appealing to the Western political and intellectual elite, the "opinion leader" strata that China's soft power drive aims to appeal to as a matter of priority.

Moreover, despite growing state investments in expanding China's news-gathering capacities overseas and in improving Chinese journalists' professional competencies, there is still a heavy dependence on the part of Chinese news outlets on Western news agencies such as APTN and Reuters for their coverage of international affairs (Jirik 2008). Behind this is a serious personnel problem. Although the reform era saw an explosion in Chinese journalism schools and although there has also been a steady flow of "sea turtles" – individuals with Western education – back to China, individuals with the perfect combination of foreign language skills, journalistic training and global affairs expertise, remain rare commodities. Moreover, a job in the Chinese state media is still not as desirable as one in government, other sectors of China's transnationalising economy or transnational corporations operating in

China. In short, it remains a challenge for Chinese media organisations to recruit and retain the best available talents to work in their international departments.

Nor does the elitist orientation and blatant class bias of the Chinese media in general fare favourably in projecting an open and inclusive China in the global arena. If one of the objectives of the Chinese soft power drive is to counter the Western media's persistent critique of human rights violations in China, then it is up to the Chinese media to showcase a China where different social classes have flourished, or where "the logic of the politics of dignity and equality" has been extended to "all social relationships in Chinese society, including ethnic relations, and not limited merely to protest against the unfair words of the Western media" (Wang 2011, 226). However, as far as the domestic class orientation of China's soft power projectors are concerned, it is perhaps fair to hypothesise that the China they have in mind is one that has largely excluded its underclass and marginalised populations. For the same reason, the "national interests" that the Chinese media aim to promote abroad are those defined by the dominant political, economic and cultural elite. Ironically, it is the Western media that have often cast themselves as champions of China's lower social classes. This is driven home by the contrast between the Chinese state's Times Square commercial, which features economic, social and cultural celebrities in a highly individualistic fashion, and *Time* magazine's 2009 featuring of Chinese workers as a collective entity on its cover.

This, in turn, raises profound and perhaps irreconcilable tensions in China's soft power drive. To be sure, to the extent that this drive aims to ease global anxieties about China's rise and underscores the Chinese state's commitment to "peaceful development," it constitutes a pro-active and desirable strategy in international politics. However, critics have pointed out that Nye's dichotomous categorisation of the source of power into hard power and soft power is inappropriate (Li 2009, 6). Moreover, to assume that the U.S. has been able to project its "soft power" without the backing of imperialist military and economic power is simply naïve, and worse, an ideological smokescreen for imperial domination. In a sense, the "soft power" concept is based on circular reasoning. Culture, ideology, and values are not inherently attractive, persuasive and appealing in nature. They could result in "resentment, repulsion, hostility and even conflict." On the other hand, "hard power can also produce attraction, appeal, and amenity in certain circumstances" (Li 2009, 4).

Moreover, to the extent that China's soft power drive is also very much a reactive move aiming at counterbalancing external critiques against the negative political and social consequences of China's capitalist integrationist/market-authoritarian developmental pattern, and to the extent that it aims at "image-making" and winning favourable global images for a fundamentally flawed developmental path, this drive is perhaps not only "mission impossible" but also highly problematic, even reactionary in some of its dimensions. To be sure, the Western media have been caught in their own ideological prison in so far as China's protracted post-Mao transformation has posed an ideological challenge to the Western myth that capitalism and liberal democracy go hand in hand. Although many of China's ruling elites desperately want the Chinese state to be seen as a member of the "global community" as defined by the West, the Western media continue to describe it as "the goon state" (*The Economist* 2011). This will continue so as long as the Chinese state remains in its current form, and as long as it acts as an agent of inter-capi-

talist rivalry, trying to advance the interests of domestic Chinese capital vis-à-vis transnational capital. Indeed, whatever gain the Chinese state's image-making and legitimacy-enhancing soft power drive has achieved in the past few years seems to have been undone by early 2012, when the May 14, 2012 issue of *Time* magazine splashed its cover with the title "The People's Republic of Scandal" in the aftermath of the ouster of CCP politburo member Bo Xilai and the human rights drama surrounding the blind legal advocate Chen Guangcheng's escape into the U.S. Embassy. Contrary to Hilary Clinton's fear, the U.S. is not only winning the "information war" with China in these cases but is also able to win unprecedented economic concessions from Chinese state managers in the aftermath of the Bo and Chen scandals (Y. Zhao 2012).

### Concluding Remarks

As I discussed at the onset, critics have rightly noted the inability of the Chinese state to articulate an appealing set of values as the biggest problem. I wish to go beyond a nation-state-centric perspective to argue that, in a deeply class-divided and crisis-ridden global capitalist order, the question is not so much about Chinese soft power but a fundamental conflict between competing global political economies and cultural imaginaries. In the final analysis, there is a choice between a Confucius capitalist China that is trying to integrate with a socially and ecologically unsustainable planetary capitalist order and a renewed socialist China that is leading a post-capitalist and post-consumerist, sustainable developmental path as part and parcel of an alternative globalisation. From this perspective, there is also fundamental tension between charming the global elites and winning the hearts and minds of the vast majority of the global population with alternative visions to capitalist globalisation, that is, between the 1 percent and the 99 percent, to borrow from the "Occupy Movement."

To be sure, there are emergent intellectual and popular articulations of a renewed struggle for socialism, although they are typically dismissed by domestic liberal intellectuals and the Western media as well as the mainstream Western scholars as "pro-state" and "nationalistic." The popular book *China Rises: Our Future, Destiny and Spiritual Independence* (Mo 2009), for example, argued that it is time for China to move from "connecting with the global track" (i.e. capitalist re-integration) to "changing track," or even compelling the West to "change its track," i.e. to embark on a sustainable developmental path that radically transforms the Western-dominated, "high energy, high consumption and highly exploitative" model of development. *A Just Path for Humanity* (Hu, Wang, Zhou, Han 2011), written by four leading left-leaning scholars, went further with an affirmation of the country's Maoist revolutionary past, a balanced yet critical assessment of thirty years of capitalistic integration, as well as a call for surpassing the capitalist "market society." Concurrently, as He Guimei (2011) has summarised, there has been a growing intellectual ferment over "cultural self-consciousness" and the "China" narrative, that is, a way to re-imagine "China" and the "world" that at the same time transcends the "China versus West" dichotomy and critically engages with the core issues of capitalism, state, nation, and democracy.

Yet it remains a profound challenge for this critical intellectual awareness to become the basis of a new reform consensus in a crisis-ridden China. As I have

demonstrated in my analysis of the communication war over the unfolding political drama centring on Bo Xilai, not only are there deep fissures at both the elite and the popular levels over the future directions of China's transformation and its role in the global society, but there are also complex dynamics of domestic and global media articulations and elite coordination that go beyond national politics and national image-making. In fact, the nation-state-centric "soft power" concept can hardly describe the substantive patterns of domestic and global communication surrounding the Bo Xilai saga (Y. Zhao 2012). Any "soft power" drive that aims to project a unified set of values to the world is doomed to fail when there is not even elite, let alone national, consensus over the future direction of the country and its place in the world.

The point is not about returning to China's "red" past, Maoist "third worldism," let alone the Cultural Revolution, as Bo Xilai's quest for red soft power inside China has been charged. But Confucian values are certainly not going to save China, let alone the world, and it remains necessary for China to come to terms with the revolutionary, egalitarian and internationalist legacies of the Chinese revolution on the one hand, and to engage with the planetary problems of global capitalism on the other. Unless and until China's "soft power" drive is articulated with a critical political and cultural self-awakening, leading to a post-capitalist and post-consumerist, sustainable, developmental path, or is at least reflective of both internal and external debates and struggles between dominant and alternative visions of the global order, it is doomed to be yet another means to enfranchise the Chinese media and cultural segment of what Leslie Sklair has called the "transnational capitalist class." After all, soft power is inextricably linked to class power, and foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy.

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