

## **China's Media Initiatives and Its International Image Building**

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### **Abstract**

China has embarked on a national effort to build up a positive image of itself on the international stage. This paper focuses on some of the key media initiatives that China has undertaken to proactively shape how others view it. The author argues that these media initiatives are best understood within the context of China trying to lay the foundations of its soft power. This, however, will require much time and effort to carry out, and the challenges are numerous. China is fully aware that given the vagaries of the international environment, there will be ebbs and flows in how others view China. However, China is determined to be involved to actively shape this process.

**Keywords:** *media initiatives, image building, soft power, news briefing and spokesman system, Olympics, international presence*

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, China has proactively been shaping a positive image of itself on the international stage. China wants others to view itself as a progressive, prosperous, culturally advanced and peace-loving country. The underlying message that China seeks to convey is that its rise neither threatens the existing international order nor is directed at any country. To this end, China has focused on promoting the softer or non-threatening aspects of its power as opposed to its harder facets such as economic prowess and growing military presence.

There are several reasons behind China's preoccupation with how others perceive it. Foremost among them is that China's rapid rise on the world stage in virtually all spheres – political, diplomatic, economic, social-cultural and even military – does not appear to be supported by a corresponding or commensurate positive image. While some are receptive to its rise, many others are critical of it. They have variously criticized China for its apparent

lack of democracy, alleged abuse of human rights and lack of press or religious freedom. More significantly, China's spectacular economic rise under an authoritarian political system undercuts the traditional capitalist model that combines the merits of democracy and market economics. The model that China is blazing, though officially denied, seems to offer an attractive, alternative path forward. This has understandably elicited jitters, even concerns, in a number of developed countries that the traditional capitalist model may eventually lose its legitimacy. What China does or does not do has suddenly come under even tighter scrutiny. A serious mismatch thus exists between China's new found status and its perception by others.

In the past, China could pay little heed to external perception as its involvement and interdependence with the international community was minimal. Today, China's participation is regarded as critical in addressing several worldwide issues such as tackling global warming, restoring world economic recovery, fighting international terrorism and piracy. Also, any actions taken by China have implications for other countries. There are now more substantive reasons for China to be more attuned to how others view it.

This paper examines one important dimension of China's international image building – the media initiatives undertaken by China that are intended to positively influence how others view China and hence relate to China. Media initiatives in this paper broadly refer to those media-related actions sanctioned or approved by either the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or state and carried out by either the CCP or state or their approved bodies that are geared towards shaping a positive image of China. The platforms use may include various media channels such as televisions, radios, publications, Internet and even institutes of learning.

For purpose of analysis, these initiatives can be divided into external media initiatives, i.e. those that are carried out beyond China's borders, and internal media initiatives, i.e. those that are launched within China. As the term implies, the external media initiatives are essentially directed at foreign audiences. As for the internal media initiatives, they are invariably also intended for the external audience in addition to meeting the needs of the local audience. In today's inter-connected world, whatever is implemented within the shores of one country would have implications beyond one's borders. In this regard, China is fully aware that whatever media initiatives it introduces within the country will be closely scrutinized by foreign audiences for signs of progress or backtracking.

The central argument of this paper is that these media initiatives can be better understood within the context of China trying to lay the foundations of its soft power. Already, these media initiatives are driven by a national and long-term effort to proactively shape how others view China. They are necessary to address perception gaps or counter negative views of China as

China is involved more and deeper on various issues in the international arena. However, rather than expect a big bang approach, China will proceed in its international image building in an incremental manner. The process will not be smooth and China will find itself criticized by others along the way.

After the introduction, this paper is divided into four sections. Section 2 will examine how China's quest to improve its international image falls under the current debate on China's soft power. The author is of the view that although China has embarked on a concerted effort to favourably influence how it is being perceived, this is not tantamount to having soft power per se. Rather, a more accurate description of China's current efforts is to argue that China is laying the foundations of its soft power. Section 3 will highlight the major external media initiatives that China has introduced. These include holding international media-related outreach conferences, encouraging its media bodies to establish a stronger international presence and promoting its language and culture overseas.

Section 4 will look at the key internal media initiatives that have been launched. These include introducing and improving the news briefing and spokesman system, and introducing regulations to improve the overall environment for foreign journalists in the country. The media authorities have also shown greater openness in managing ad hoc events that show they are more conscious of how China would be perceived by others. Section 5 will elaborate on some of the main challenges that China faces as it strives to improve its international image. This would suggest that the road ahead remains wrought with challenges. Nevertheless, China will most likely press on with this unenviable task.

## **2. China's Soft Power: Myth or Reality?**

Joseph Nye has described soft power as "indirect or co-optive power behavior", which is to get others "to want what you want" rather than "to do what you want". It is in contrast to the traditional type of command power that rest on inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks). The soft power as defined by Nye is derived from "intangible power resources" such as culture, ideology and institutions (Nye, 1990: 31-32). In another publication, Nye further argues that the soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye, 2004: 11).

This paper uses Nye's definition of soft power to refer to the intangibles power resources mentioned above and which may also include the component of ideas that other countries find attractive and would want to adopt and follow. Among the three resources mentioned by Nye, that of culture is

particularly relevant here since the discussion is focused on China's media initiatives and how China is perceived by others.

How then are China's efforts at international image building related to soft power? To be sure, merely having a foreign country or organization possess a positive image of China does not equate to China having soft power. It can more accurately be described as a step forward in the direction of having soft power. In other words, having a positive image of China is a necessary (but not sufficient condition) for other countries and parties to want to understand China more, i.e. how and why it does things in a certain way.

By promoting a better understanding of China via the various media initiatives, China would like these foreign audiences to be more receptive to China or even to view China more on its own terms rather than through tinted lens. In this manner, China is laying the groundwork for others to view its culture, ideology, institutions and all that it stands for in a more "objective" light as viewed by China. Ultimately, and perhaps the most important objective of all, China would want to be able to convert its soft power resources (particularly the appeal of its culture) to realized power by effecting a change in behaviour on the part of other countries in a direction that these countries would want and which would also be in China's interest. In short, for others to have a positive image of China is only half the battle won. But to succeed in having others want what China wants is tantamount to securing an unmitigated victory.

In this paper, I argue that China is still some distance away in making others want what it wants. While China's rise, in all sense of that word, has been spectacular and indeed has engendered much awe, it is still at the nascent stage in building up its soft power. After more than three decades of open door and reform policy, China has only in the past few years openly talked about the importance of soft power. This is meant to assuage foreign concerns that China's rise would pose a threat to their interests. By stressing its softer side, China seeks to convince others that its rise would bring about mutual benefits to other countries and the international community. Hence, China has embarked on a concerted effort to lay the foundations of its soft power through various means and in particular via several media initiatives which is the focus of this paper.

To be sure, the building up of China's soft power has been sanctioned at the highest levels by the CCP and the government. In February 2007, in an article published by the *People's Daily* (the CCP's mouthpiece), Wen Jiabao 温家宝 said that China should "expand cultural exchanges with other countries". In his view, "cultural exchanges are a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of people of all countries and an important way to project a country's image".<sup>1</sup> Later in the same year, in a keynote address to the 17th CCP Congress in October 2007, General Secretary Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 said that

“culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength”. Hu added that China must “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests”. He expressed confidence that the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture”, and that China will publicize the fine traditions of Chinese culture and enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, in his work report to China’s National People’s Congress in March 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao vowed to attach more importance to cultural development and promote cultural exchanges with foreign countries so as to enhance the international influence of Chinese culture. In addition to this external orientation, Wen also stressed the importance of strengthening and promoting the cultural industry within China. In his view, to develop China and rejuvenate the nation, China must not only be “economically strong, but more importantly, be culturally strong”.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, from the perspective of its leaders, the basis for an influential China cannot rest on hard economic prowess alone but will have to be buttressed by a strong cultural element.

In a report by the Chinese Academy of Sciences, an official government think-tank, China was ranked 7th (ahead of the US, Germany, England, France, Italy and Spain) in terms of cultural influence among 131 countries assessed in 2005. This was a marked improvement from 1990 when China was ranked 11th. Over the same period (1990 to 2005), China’s ranking in Asia in terms of cultural influence rose from 2nd place to the 1st.<sup>4</sup> One may question the degree of validity of such an overly optimistic assessment, but it does indicate an incontrovertible trend – China’s rise has positively enhanced the appeal of Chinese culture. And this has created favourable conditions for China to lay the foundations for its soft power (of which culture is an integral part).

However, the growing appeal of Chinese culture does not necessarily mean that other countries or organizations will necessarily have a positive view of China. In fact, a few studies have shown that the perception of China has fluctuated over time.<sup>5</sup> According to a Pew Research Center Survey, the percentage of respondents from a list of surveyed countries who have a favourable opinion of China has experienced both ups and downs in 2010 compared to 2005 (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> Those countries that witnessed a rise in their positive perception of China over this period include the US, Pakistan, Brazil, Argentina, Jordan, Poland, Kenya and Nigeria. Among these countries, Pakistan (85 per cent), Kenya (86 per cent) and Nigeria (76 per cent) have a favourable rating of China of above 75 per cent in 2010. The countries that have experienced a drop in their favourable rating of China in 2010 compared to 2005 include Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey,

Table 1 “Do you have a favourable or unfavourable view of China?”  
(Percentage Responding Favourable)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	% Change (comparing 2010 with 2005)*
China	88%	94%	93%	95%	95%	97%	7%
<b>Europe</b>							
Russia	60%	63%	60%	60%	58%	60%	same
Britain	65%	65%	49%	47%	52%	46%	-19%
France	58%	60%	47%	28%	41%	41%	-17%
Germany	46%	56%	34%	26%	29%	30%	-16%
Spain	57%	45%	39%	31%	40%	47%	-10%
Poland	37%	N.A	39%	33%	43%	46%	9%
<b>Central Asia &amp; Middle East</b>							
Lebanon	66%	N.A	46%	50%	53%	56%	-10%
Egypt	N.A	63%	65%	59%	52%	52%	-11%
Jordan	43%	49%	46%	44%	50%	53%	10%
Turkey	40%	33%	25%	24%	16%	20%	-20%
<b>Africa</b>							
Kenya	N.A	N.A	81%	N.A	73%	86%	5%
Nigeria	N.A	59%	75%	79%	85%	76%	17%
<b>South America</b>							
Argentina	N.A	N.A	32%	34%	42%	45%	13%
Brazil	N.A	N.A	50%	47%	50%	52%	2%
Mexico	N.A	N.A	43%	38%	39%	39%	-4%
<b>East, Southeast &amp; South Asia</b>							
Japan	N.A	27%	29%	14%	26%	26%	-1%
South Korea	N.A	N.A	52%	48%	41%	38%	-14%
Indonesia	73%	62%	65%	58%	59%	58%	-15%
India	56%	47%	46%	46%	46%	34%	-12%
Pakistan	79%	69%	79%	76%	84%	85%	6%
US	43%	52%	42%	39%	50%	49%	6%

Note: \* For % change over time, the comparison is usually between 2010 and 2005 figures. If 2005 figures are not available, then the next available figure will be used.

Source: Pew Global Attitudes Project 2009 – Key Indicators Database at <<http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=24>>.

Mexico, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and India. Among these countries, Turkey (20 per cent), Japan (26 per cent), Germany (30 per cent) and India (34 per cent) have the least favourable rating of China in 2010 of below 35 per cent.

A separate poll by the BBC World Service indicates that negative perception of China among the public across 21 countries has generally increased in 2009 compared to 2008.<sup>7</sup> The results show that public perception of China has eroded substantially so that views are now generally divided compared to 2008 when they were predominantly positive.<sup>8</sup> The poll showed that negative views of China have grown most notably in European countries, including France, Italy, Germany and Spain. Other countries that have seen views of China worsen considerably include Turkey, the Philippines, Egypt and Australia (see Figure 1 and the Explanatory Notes in the Appendix). No reasons were given for these results.

Although not exhaustive, the results of the Pew Research Center Survey and BBC World Service Poll show that a considerable gap exists between China's new found status as an international player and how other countries and organizations view it. The results further reinforce the point made earlier that while China's rise may have enhanced the appeal of Chinese culture, they do not automatically mean that China has soft power. China will need to do more to build up its soft power. Already, it has realized the importance of making a concerted effort to shape how others view it. It has further launched a number of media initiatives, both externally and internally, over the past few years to proactively shape its international image.

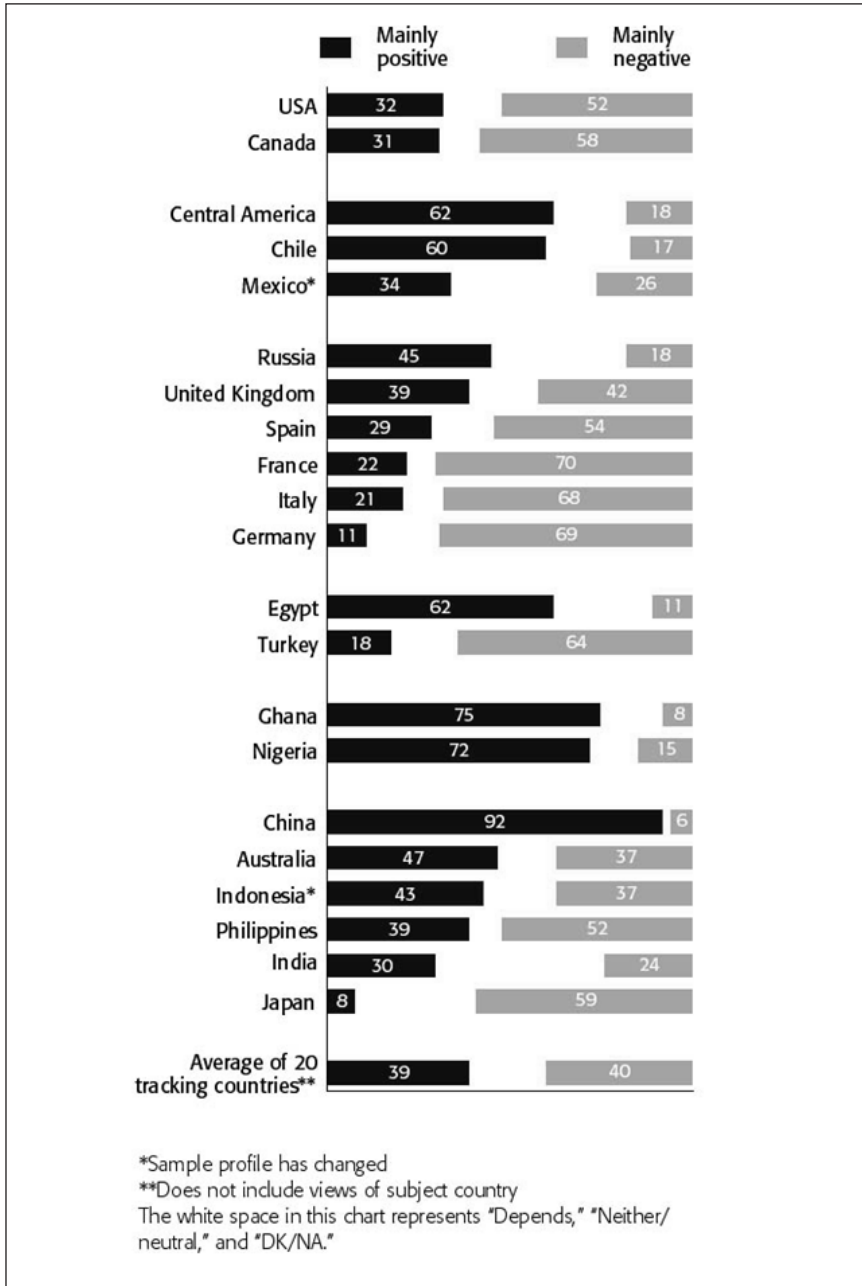
### **3. China's External Media Initiatives**

For the purpose of analysis, China's strategy to improve its international image can be divided into both external and internal dimensions. This section will highlight the key external media initiatives that China has undertaken in this regard. These initiatives include proactively engaging the international media organizations, building up an alternative Chinese perspective and expanding the reach of Chinese language and culture.

#### ***3.1. Engaging International Media Organizations Proactively***

One of the key initiatives that China has launched is to proactively engage international media organizations in an effort to urge or cajole them to be more professional or "objective" in their reporting on China. Most notably, Xinhua News Agency (China's official state media) hosted the first ever World Media Summit in October 2009 attended by about 300 representatives from more than 170 media outlets from around the world.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1 Country-by-Country Perception of China's Influence (January 2009)



Notes and source: Please refer to the Explanatory Notes in the Appendix.



Underscoring the importance China attached to this summit, President Hu Jintao gave the opening speech where he urged the world media to respect “each other’s practical situations, respond to each other’s appeals through consultation, take into account each other’s interests, keep a balance between competition and cooperation, and strive to be mutually complementary, helpful and beneficial”.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Hu was making a pitch for the world media to understand China on its terms and to be more objective in their reporting on China.

The exhortation by Hu Jintao comes in the wake of past incidents of perceived unfair reporting of China by foreign media organizations. Most notably, during the unrest in Lhasa (Tibet) in March 2008, there were instances of foreign reports that “unfairly” portrayed developments there. CNN had a footage that showed army trucks moving into the streets of Lhasa, giving the impression of a military crackdown. In reality, the footage had been cropped, leaving out dozens of Tibetans pelting stones at the army trucks. Separately, N-TV (a German television news channel) used TV footage showing police manhandling protestors in a report on the unrest in Tibet. In reality, the footage used was shot in Nepal, and the police were Nepalese.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, “unfair” reporting of China has been a common occurrence, with a tendency by foreign media organizations to highlight negative news to boost sales. What is new is that China has taken it upon itself to counter such biased reporting by engaging the foreign media organizations instead of shunning them or engaging in diatribe against them. It has further sought to buttress its cause by appealing to the universal notion of reporting the facts and not fabricating them.

### ***3.2. Building Up an Alternative Chinese Perspective***

Complementing its efforts at reaching out to foreign media organizations, China has simultaneously tried to build up an alternative Chinese perspective to the Western-dominated view of the world. It has actively supported its state-controlled media organizations to strengthen their international presence. Augmenting its existing English, French and Spanish international channels, CCTV launched an Arabic channel on 25 July 2009, targeting a viewership of nearly 300 million people throughout the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. Less than two months later, on 10 September 2009, CCTV launched its Russian channel with a potential viewership of an additional 300 million in the 12 nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. In December 2009, CCTV launched a national Internet television service with the domain name of CNTV.cn. Available in all five foreign languages and Chinese, the Internet television service boasts the ambitious tagline of “one click, one world”, meaning that users of this service

can understand the world by just clicking on the news, entertainment, sports and video products offered.<sup>12</sup>

Separately, Xinhua News Agency announced in July 2009 an ambitious plan for a 24 hour international television news service known as China Xinhua News Network Corporation (CNC). Described in some quarters as the Chinese version of America's CNN, the goal is to broadcast both domestic and international news round the clock to viewers worldwide through various platforms such as TV stations, websites, outdoor screens and mobile phones.<sup>13</sup> CNC began broadcasting to the Asia-Pacific region and some European countries in Chinese from Beijing in January 2010.<sup>14</sup> Since July 2010, CNC launched its worldwide English language television service (known as CNC World) that broadcasts English news programmes 24 hours a day, covering breaking news and major political, economic and cultural events worldwide. The purpose of this television service as stated by Xinhua President Li Congjun was for CNC to "present an international vision with a China perspective. It will broadcast news reports in a timely way and objectively and be a new source of information for global audiences".<sup>15</sup>

Changes have also been introduced at the *People's Daily*, the CCP's mouthpiece. In April 2009, *Global Times*, a publication under the *People's Daily* that focuses on international news, launched its English edition nationwide. Instead of a translated version of its Chinese newspaper, the English edition prides itself on carrying accounts of international news based on an independent team of local reporters, editors and foreign experts.<sup>16</sup> Also, the *People's Daily* underwent a revamp on 1st July 2009<sup>17</sup> by increasing from 16 pages to 20 pages, adding three pages on domestic and international news, and one page on theoretical studies, art and literature reviews. It also plans to beef up its 72 domestic and overseas branches.<sup>18</sup>

The overseas expansion initiatives by the CCTV, Xinhua News Agency and *People's Daily* described above are reportedly supported by a war chest of 45 billion yuan (US\$6.6 billion) provided by the government to boost China's global image and media influence.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, *China Daily*, the official Chinese government English newspaper that reaches 105 countries, has undergone a revamp with changes to its editorial, content and design since 1 March 2010. The most obvious feature is the new masthead. The Chinese characters "中国日报" (*Zhongguo Ribao*), previously in red and appearing prominently above the English name "China Daily", has been significantly reduced in size and relegated beneath the English name. Also, the Chinese name now appears in blue, a more neutral color as opposed to the original red color that is closely associated with the CCP.<sup>20</sup> In terms of layout, the revamped newspaper has a cleaner look, with more use of white space that creates a visually more appealing page layout.<sup>21</sup> In terms of content, the revamped *China Daily* has fine-tuned its

reporting mix, giving breaking news and instant updates to its website and beefing up in-depth investigations and analyses for its print version. Going beyond its previous slogan of being China's "national English language newspaper", *China Daily* has set the goal of being a "world-class newspaper commensurate with China's global stature". All these changes are intended to make *China Daily* more appealing to English speaking audiences within and outside China.<sup>22</sup>

China Radio International (CRI), China's external radio station, has also opened up more channels in Australia, the United States and Mongolia in 2010.<sup>23</sup> In the US in particular, CRI has been broadcasting since 1993 usually by buying one or two-hour chunks of air time on local stations. However, in January 2010, CRI scored a milestone by leasing a KGBC radio station in Galveston (Texas, US), thereby becoming the first radio station in the US to begin broadcasting 24 hours a day.<sup>24</sup> CRI had reportedly made a lucrative offer which the owners of the KGBC radio station found hard to resist as it had not been able to secure enough financial support from advertisers.

### 3.3. Expanding the Reach of Chinese Language and Culture

China has further been active in expanding the reach of its language and culture. For instance, it was invited as Guest-of-Honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October 2009. China reportedly pumped in US\$7.5 million, including putting up an impressive-looking pavilion (featuring a winding wall made of thousands of books or what is known as the "Olympics of books")<sup>25</sup> and sponsoring the translation of more than 100 Chinese books into German and English for sale at the fair.<sup>26</sup> Although there were some disagreement between China and the German organizers on the Chinese writers that could best represent China at the fair, the event underscored growing overseas interests in China's language and culture. China lost no time in leveraging on this valuable platform to promote its rich traditions and culture.<sup>27</sup>

Most notably, the Confucius Institute, another important platform for the spread of Chinese language and culture, has opened up more overseas branches. Table 2 shows that there were 282 Confucius Institutes and 272 Confucius Classrooms (making up a total of 554) in 88 countries and regions by November 2009.<sup>28</sup> Between 2009 and 2008, the number of Confucius Institutes and its classrooms witnessed impressive growth in the US, Central and Latin America (225 per cent), Europe (24 per cent) and Oceania (20 per cent). To extend the reach of the Confucian Institutes, scholarships have also been offered since 2009 to train non-native Chinese language teachers as well as students.

Many foreign scholars and observers hold the view that China's promotion of its language and culture especially through the setting up of Confucius

Table 2 Number of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms

Countries	Confucius Institutes and Classrooms 2008	Confucius Institutes and Classrooms 2009	Percentage increase in 2009 over 2008	Confucius Institutes 2009	Confucius Classrooms 2009
Americas	81	263	224.7%	87	176
Europe	103	128	24.3%	94	34
Africa	21	23	9.5%	21	2
Asia	90	97	7.8%	70	27
Oceania	10	12	20.0%	10	2
Others*	0	31	N.A	0	31
Total	305	554		282	272

Note: \* Burma, Mali and the Bahamas have independent Confucius Classrooms, not affiliated with an institute.

Source: Various publications of the Confucius Institute at [http://college.chinese.cn/en/node\\_1974.htm](http://college.chinese.cn/en/node_1974.htm).

Institutes and Classrooms are attempts at projecting its soft power. It is hard to deny that there is an element of truth to their assertions and especially when top leaders in China have emphasized the importance of projecting China's soft power. The issue is whether the projection of China's soft power is intended to be aggressive in orientation and whether China seeks to become a dominant superpower. At this juncture, this does not appear to be so.

Putting the issue of soft power aside, one should not deny the fact that the growing interest in learning Mandarin has a certain practical value – that it would help those with mastery of the Chinese language to open doors when they conduct their business in China. Indeed, Madam Xu Lin, the head of the Confucius Institute in Beijing, has asserted that China has never wanted to influence others or sought supremacy over the rest of the world through the setting up of these institutes and classrooms. Instead, China wants the world to know “what sort of country it really is by promoting the learning of its language, culture, history and the values the Chinese people have lived for centuries”.<sup>29</sup> In other words, China's emphasis is on promoting a better understanding of China.

#### 4. China's Internal Media Initiatives

Complementing its external media initiatives, China has introduced internal media initiatives that are also intended to improve its international image. These initiatives can be examined from the institutional perspective, the regulatory perspective and the authorities' ad hoc response to events.

#### 4.1. Institutional Innovations

At the institutional level, China has improved the news briefing and spokesman system (新闻发布制度) introduced in 2004 to provide timely and accurate information to the foreign media and public.

Table 3 shows that the number of news briefings (comprising regular and impromptu ones) conducted by the central and local government and party organizations have steadily increased over the years. In 2009, there were a total of 1,646 press conferences, compared to 1,587 in 2008, 1,408 in 2007, 1,321 in 2006, 1,088 in 2005 and close to 900 in 2004. The number of press conferences held at the provincial level is also noticeably on an upward trend, increasing from 789 instances in 2007, to 983 in 2008 and to 1,013 in 2009. This indicates a greater effort by local governments to disclose information of interest to the public.

In May 2008, the erstwhile secretive Ministry of Defense unveiled its first ever press spokesman who immediately got to work by informing the public of the disaster relief measures the People's Liberation Army was taking to help the victims of the Wenchuan 汶川 earthquake in Sichuan province.

At the CCP level, improvements have also been made to the news briefing and press spokesmen system over the years. In 2006, the Party took a significant step forward by announcing the names of the press spokesmen for six departments under the Party. Most recently, in June 2010, Wang Chen, Director of the International Communication Office, introduced the spokesmen for all 11 departments of the CCP.<sup>30</sup> This move is intended to make the Party more open and transparent in its affairs.

China has also continued the practice of publishing white papers on major issues which are of much interest to the international community. In June 2010, it released the first ever white paper on the Internet in China. It describes the state of the Internet development in China, China's basic policies on the Internet and stand on related issues.<sup>31</sup> In 2009, China published five white papers on national defense, disaster prevention and reduction, ethnic policy, development and progress in Xinjiang and democratic reforms in Tibet.<sup>32</sup> In 2008, there were four white papers published on promoting the rule of law, the effort on drug supervision, policies and actions in addressing climate change and the protection and development of Tibetan culture.

#### 4.2. Regulatory Improvements

At the regulatory level, the general trend appears headed in the direction of a more conducive environment for foreign journalists operating in China. For instance, in the run-up to and during the Olympic Games in August 2008, China permitted foreign journalists to travel freely to most parts of China for interviews as long as they had the prior consent of the interviewees.<sup>33</sup>

Table 3 Overview of China's News Briefing and Spokesman System

Year	No. of Press Conferences Held			Party Organizations	Total No. of Press Conferences Held (A+B+C)
	State Council Information Office (A)	Various Departments under the State Council plus Party Organizations (B)	Provincial Governments <sup>†</sup> (C)		
2010	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	All 11 Party Organizations with 11 spokesmen	N.A.
2009	60	573	1,013	As below	1,646
2008	83	521	983	As below	1,587**
2007	72	547 (involving 74 departments with 96 spokesmen)	789 (involving 31 provincial governments with 60 spokesmen)	Involving 6 organizations with 7 spokesmen*	1408
2006	58	506 (involving 74 departments with 91 spokesmen)	757 (involving 31 provincial governments with 52 spokesmen)	Involving 6 organizations with 7 spokesmen*	1321
2005	68	390 (involving 69 departments with 86 spokesmen)	630 (involving 27 provincial governments)	Nil	1088
2004	60	270 (involving 62 departments with 75 spokesmen)	> 460 (involving 23 provincial governments)	Nil	Close to 900
2003	41	N.A.	N.A.	Nil	N.A.

Notes: <sup>†</sup> Provincial governments here refer to the provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities.

\* The six Party organizations here include the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the United Front Work Department, the International Department, the Taiwan Work Office, the Literature Research Center and the History Research Center.

\*\* This figure excludes the more than 300 media briefings related to the Beijing Olympics and Paralympics in 2008.

Source: Authors' own compilation from the China Internet Information Center at <<http://www.china.org.cn/e-news/>>.

Previously, foreign journalists had to go through a more laborious process to apply for permission at the local foreign affairs office. This liberalizing measure was regularized after the Olympic Games.<sup>34</sup>

During the Olympic Games, China also went all out to make foreign journalists feel at home. Foreign journalists were offered a one-stop service centre by the Beijing Olympic Media Centre that allowed journalists to have access to enquiry, application, review, approval and reply services under one roof. They were also given a service guide containing useful information such as accreditation, custom clearance for reporting equipment, driving in China, radio frequencies, insurance and taxation. The high standards set by China in handling foreign journalists will serve as a benchmark for future similar events. Barring any unforeseen circumstances, China is expected to maintain these standards.

#### **4.3. Ad hoc Adjustments**

There have also been noticeable changes in China's handling of ad hoc events. During the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 for example, China broke new grounds when it allowed foreign and local media a relatively free hand to report on developments in the disaster zones.<sup>35</sup> State media channels such as Xinhua News Agency and CCTV led the way by round the clock reporting on the latest developments in the disaster area. As expected, their reports prominently played up the government and Party's committed response to the earthquake and efforts to help survivors.

China's State Council Information Office also held numerous press conferences involving officials and experts from the relevant ministries and agencies as well as Sichuan leaders to provide up-to-date information on the disaster and disaster relief efforts.<sup>36</sup> Such pro-activeness stands in stark contrast to China's almost dismissive response in the 1976 Tangshan earthquake that reportedly claimed over 240,000 lives and left millions more injured or homeless. At that time, Xinhua News Agency reportedly only made a cursory mention of a quake that occurred in a city 180 kilometers to the west of Beijing.<sup>37</sup>

There have also been some changes in China approach to handling the ethnic unrest in Xinjiang in July 2009. It has been observed that Chinese state media channels such as Xinhua News Agency and CCTV were quick to report on the unrest to put forth their version of events.<sup>38</sup> Separately, Human Rights Watch (HRW), which has been generally critical of China's human rights record, has admitted that the Chinese government allowed "significantly greater foreign media access to Urumqi following deadly rioting there on 5-7 July 2009, than it did to Tibet during the unrest that began there in March 2008".<sup>39</sup>

## 5. Putting Things in Perspective

While the various media initiatives outlined above are to be welcomed and indeed show how far China has progressed, they should be set in context. For one, China is still a highly authoritarian state that maintains a relatively tightly control over what can and cannot be carried by state media organizations. In particular, the government and especially the CCP will only liberalize at a pace they are comfortable with and will not want to be seen as giving in to external pressure.

In the run-up to and during key anniversaries, such as the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen incident and the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2009, Beijing noticeably tightened its control over the media. Also, at important events, such as President Obama's visit to China in November 2009, restrictions were imposed to ensure that the impact of any sensitive remarks made by him in public would be limited. For example, Obama's question and answer session with students in Shanghai was not broadcast live on China's official state network.<sup>40</sup> In the lead-up to the transition of power from the fourth generation to the fifth generation leadership in 2012, we can expect the relevant authorities to tighten the political atmosphere in the interest of ensuring a smooth leadership transition. During these sensitive periods, stability would triumph over all other considerations.

Beijing is also prepared to punish those it regards as deliberately trying (and even working with foreign elements) to erode the Party's authority. In February 2010, a Beijing court rejected an appeal against an 11-year jail sentence for "incitement to subversion" meted out to Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波, a prominent Chinese human rights crusader. Liu had co-authored Charter 08 (零八宪章), an online petition for political freedom and an end to the ruling Party's monopoly of power. By mounting a public campaign, Liu had overstepped the line. Critics have conveniently seized on this example to argue that little has changed in China.

Most recently, Google's decision in March 2010 to shut down its Chinese-language search engine (*google.cn*) in mainland China had presented another public relations challenge to China.<sup>41</sup> Commendably, China has maintained a level-headed response to Google's decision to shut down its Chinese-language website. While the US State Department and even the White House have weighed in on this matter, the Chinese have cast it as a commercial issue which should not affect Sino-US relations. China has further argued that while it welcomes foreign businesses to China, they have to abide by Chinese laws. This episode seemed to have past for now as China has renewed the operating license for Google in China for another year following Google's decision to stop the automatic re-directing of users to its unfiltered Hong Kong website.



Despite China's more restrained response, it still faces an uphill battle to convince its critics. In its 2010 World Report, HRW has observed that Chinese citizens "face significant limits on freedom of expression, association, and religion; government surveillance and censoring of Internet communications is far reaching". It further said that while China's international profile and economic clout are growing, "it is also drawing increasing international scrutiny for a foreign policy that fails to prioritize civil and political rights", a reference to China's diplomatic and financial support of dubious regimes like Burma, Zimbabwe and Sudan.<sup>42</sup>

In its 2009 Press Freedom Index, Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) gave China a dismal ranking of 168 out of a total of 175 countries. It observed that although the foreign press is supposed to enjoy freedom of movement and interview rights, they find themselves obstructed and even becoming targets of violence as soon as they begin to take an interest in sensitive matters like Tibet, dissidents or the Aids epidemic. RSF said the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China "recorded 178 cases of interference with foreign media during 2008, 63 of which were during the holding of the Olympic Games". The Chinese authorities also "threatened several foreign correspondents with non-renewal of their press visas at the end of 2009".<sup>43</sup>

To be sure, there remains a strong "anti-China" bias in other countries' perception and foreign media coverage of China. The effort to counter this bias is wrought with challenges as many players and factors are involved that could easily skew their perception of China. Foremost among them is the fact that China is not a democracy and will constantly have to grapple with the penchant by foreign governments, non-governmental organizations and even individuals to judge what is happening or will happen in China according to certain established Western standards or norms. China will have its hands full to convince them that there is indeed a Chinese way forward, one which will go against their existing value system and beliefs.

The strong state role behind the overseas expansion plans of China's state media organizations, while ensuring that there is strong political support and financial muscle, actually has a downside. It reinforces the impression that these media agencies are not driven primarily by commercial reasons (unlike other foreign media organizations) but are conscious agents of the state. In this sense, there will always be doubts about the actions and real intentions of these corporations.

Despite these challenges, China appears determined to press on with this unenviable task. As compared to the past, it now has more resources and stronger reasons to shape an international image that is commensurate with its new found status on the world stage. It is fully aware that given the vagaries of the international environment, there will be ebbs and flows in how others view China. The most important is for China to be involved in actively shaping this

process. It is realistic of what it can achieve in the short run and will be patient enough to wait for more favourable results to come to bear in the future.

There are two major events occurring in China where Beijing will want to put its best foot forward. The first is the Shanghai World Expo that began on 1st May and will last till 30th October 2010. It is the largest event ever since the Olympic Games to again showcase China, together with the progress it has made, to the world and to its own people. It also provides an important platform to build better understanding among the more than 200 countries and international organizations participating at the expo. The number of visitors to the World Expo has so far exceeded 20 million.<sup>44</sup> Another event is the 16th Asian Games 2010 to be held in Guangzhou from 12th to 27th November 2010. The Guangzhou Asian Games Organizing Committee is expecting 10,000 media representatives.<sup>45</sup> China will want to be a good host to participants and spectators from the region.

## 6. Final Remarks

This paper has examined the media initiatives China has undertaken to improve its international image. These media initiatives are driven by a national and long-term effort to proactively shape how others view China. They can be divided into external media initiatives, i.e. those implemented beyond China's borders, and internal media initiatives, i.e. those introduced within China. Even for those initiatives that are internally directed, they are also intended for the external audience.

The author has argued that these media initiatives can be better understood within the context of China trying to lay the foundations of its soft power. Officially, China has asserted that its soft power is intended to show that China's rise will not be disruptive but will instead bring about mutual benefits to the rest of the world. However, its critics are convinced that China intends to use its soft power to influence others or worse, to seek supremacy over the rest of the world. At this juncture, it is hard to assess which view will ultimately prevail. What is definitive is that China is determined to build up its soft power regardless of the views of the naysayers.

Many of these media initiatives are still in their nascent stages and are in the process of being strengthened. It is premature and unrealistic to conclude that they have succeeded in portraying a positive image of China. For one, the building-up of a country image, and for that matter a positive one, will require much time and effort. Also, the process may not necessarily proceed in a linear direction. Along the way, challenges or events will crop up that may either set back the process or push it forward. Whatever the challenges ahead, China will most likely press on with this gargantuan task of improving its international image.

## Appendix

### Explanatory Notes to Figure 1: Country-by-Country Perception of China's Influence

(The China portion below is extracted from the BBC World Service Poll Report)

While views of China were predominantly positive in 2008, they have eroded substantially so that views are now generally divided. On average, in 2008, 45 per cent had a positive view while 33 per cent had a negative view. But now positive views have slipped six points to 39 per cent, while negative views have risen to 40 per cent. While in 2008 16 countries had a predominantly positive view and five had a negative view, now 10 countries' views of China's influence are mainly positive, while in nine they are mainly negative and in one, they are divided.

Negative views have grown most significantly in European countries over the past year, including France (70 per cent, up from 46 per cent), Italy (68 per cent, up from 50 per cent), Germany (69 per cent, up from 59 per cent), and Spain (54 per cent, up from 32 per cent), with corresponding drops in positive views. Positive attitudes among Britons have also dropped (39 per cent, down from 48 per cent) while 42 per cent now say China has a negative influence in the world, making attitudes in the United Kingdom divided.

Other countries that have seen views of China worsen considerably include Turkey, the Philippines, Egypt, and Australia. Turkey has shown a dramatic decrease in positive views of China (18%, down from 30%) while negative views have increased (64 per cent, up from 58 per cent). A majority in the Philippines now sees China's influence as mainly negative (52 per cent, up from 30 per cent), while positive views have dropped also (39 per cent, down from 48 per cent). Egyptians have seen positive views of China drop 20 points (62 per cent, down from 82 per cent), though negative attitudes remain stable (11 per cent). While Australians most commonly still see China as a positive influence, positive attitudes have decreased (47 per cent, down from 60 per cent), while negative attitudes have grown (37 per cent, up from 28 per cent).

Attitudes about China in the United States have remained somewhat stable. While a majority (52 per cent) in the US continues to view China's influence as mainly negative, there has been little change in both positive and negative attitudes over the previous year.

Eight countries continue to show positive views of China's influence, including large majorities in Ghana (75 per cent, up from 56 per cent), Nigeria (72 per cent), and Central America (62 per cent). A majority in Chile has a favourable view (60 per cent), while Mexicans lean positive (34 per cent positive to 26 per cent negative), as do Indians (30 per cent positive to 24 per cent negative). In Russia, attitudes have remained largely stable with most saying China has a positive influence rather than negative (45 per cent positive to 18 per cent negative).

Source: "Views of China and Russia Decline in Global Poll", 6th February 2009, BBC World Service Poll at [http://www.globescan.com/news\\_archives/bbcntryview09/backgroundunder.html](http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbcntryview09/backgroundunder.html).

## Notes

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  4. The report used three major indicators to look at cultural modernization, namely, the index of cultural life modernization, index of cultural competitiveness power and index of cultural influence. In terms of the cultural life modernization index, China's ranking rose (from a lower base) from 77th place to the 57th from 1990 to 2005. In terms of the cultural competitiveness index, China's ranking fell from 22nd to 24th place from 1990 to 2005. See "China Modernization Report 2009: Study of Cultural Modernization", *China Development Gateway*, 24th February 2009 <[http://en.chinagate.cn/dateorder/2009-02/24/content\\_17327414.htm](http://en.chinagate.cn/dateorder/2009-02/24/content_17327414.htm)>. See also "How to Improve China's Soft Power?", *People's Daily Online*, 11th March 2010 <<http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6916487.html>>.
  5. The author would like to thank Ms Catherine Chong, Research Assistant, East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore, for her help in producing Table 1, Table 2 and Figure 1 in this paper.
  6. The Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project conducts public opinion surveys around the world on a broad array of subjects ranging from people's assessments of their own lives to their views about the current state of the world and important issues of the day. More than 240,000 interviews in 57 countries have been conducted as part of the project's work. For further information on which countries are surveyed and sample sizes please refer to <<http://pewglobal.org/database/about/>>.

7. "Views of China and Russia Decline in Global Poll", BBC World Service Poll, 6th February 2009 <[http://www.globescan.com/news\\_archives/bbcctryview09/](http://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbcctryview09/)>.
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15. "Xinhua Launches CNC World English Channel", Xinhuanet, 1st July 2010 <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-07/01/c\\_13378575.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-07/01/c_13378575.htm)>. Programmes in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic and Russian will also be broadcast in the future.
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