

Roundtable on Sharp Power, Soft power, and the Challenge of Democracy
American Association for Chinese Studies
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Dr. Bonnie Glaser, Senior Adviser for Asia and Director of the China Power Project at the Center for International and Strategic Studies, Washington, D.C., opened the discussion by defining soft power as the ability to persuade, adding that, in her view, soft power is at its most persuasive when it emanates from society, rather than being imposed from the top down. Sharp power, by contrast, seeks to influence its target audiences, through conscious distortions of facts and manipulation thereof. Its cultural programs may blur the lines between influence seeking and espionage.

Party and government deny doing such things, presenting the country's efforts as simply soft power that will better enable mutual understanding. In 2014, Chinese president and General Party Secretary Xi Jinping stated China should increase its soft power and improve its international communication. Shortly after the conclusion of China's 13th National People's Congress in March 2018, and as part of a larger government reorganization, a new broadcasting giant was created by merging China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI) and China National Radio into Voice of China. The new platform has been charged with spreading China's message internationally.

According to its founding announcement, the main responsibilities of new entity, which employs 14,000 people, are to publicize communist party theories, guidelines, and policies. In essence, the mission of the Voice of China is to sell the Chinese model of government and economic development as an alternative to Western policies. The organization overseeing this effort is the party's United Front Work Department (UFW). The UFW has a long history, going back to the days of Mao Zedong, who urged tactics that would bring together China's friends in order to defeat its enemies. In essence, Xi is reviving this effort.

In addition to broadcasting this message throughout the world, the Chinese government purchases inserts in newspapers. Some of these, such as the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, are read nationally and internationally. Others, like the *Des Moines Register*, have a mainly local focus, where issues like the effect of President Trump's tariffs on farmers, can potentially change votes in the next election.

Dr. Glaser pointed out that a major target of united front efforts is the Chinese diaspora. The aim is to get ethnic Chinese who live in, and in many cases are citizens of, another country to see themselves a part of a greater Chinese community. There are also efforts to draw in non-Chinese to internalize and publicize the PRC's message. Dr. Glaser describe Australia and New Zealand as having been thoroughly penetrated, with the United States far less so. Still, there are concerns in the U.S. as well: speaking to the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing in February 2018, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Christopher Wray said that

the use of nontraditional collectors, especially in the academic setting, whether they be professors, scientists, students, has been seen in almost every field office that the FBI has around the country, it is not just in major cities, it's in small ones

as well, and across basically every discipline.

Wray continued that the level of naiveté on the part of the academic sector about this creates its own issues. The Chinese are exploiting the very open research and development environment that we have, which we all revere. But they're taking advantage of it, so we must recognize the China threat as not just the whole of government threat, but a whole of society threat. He closed by saying that this threat must be met by a whole of society response by us.

Inevitably, this raises questions about what form this whole of society response should take in order not to destroy that open research and development that Wray believes we rightly hold in reverence. Dr. Glaser presented four suggestions:

- we must insist on complete transparency of Chinese united front efforts, financially and otherwise
- advertisements must be more clearly labeled as such
- although Confucius Institutes should be kept, the United States should find alternative funding for Chinese language teaching
- we must distinguish between influence, which is appropriate, and interference, which is not.

In response to discussions of the distinction between soft power and sharp power, **Joseph Bosco**, a national security consultant who served as China Country Director at the Office of the Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush administration and was formerly associated with the Woodrow Wilson Center, noted that Mao Zedong was unconcerned with the distinction between soft and sharp power. Citing Mao's famous dictum that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, Mr. Bosco pointed out that Mao quickly demonstrated that he meant it. During such movements as the anti-rightist campaign, Great Leap Forward, and Cultural Revolution, the Chinese people were subjected to the hardest of power. Tens of millions died through purges, liquidations, and a state-managed famine.

This was matched by the CCP's willingness to use force elsewhere. China joined North Korea's invasion of South Korea, then invaded and occupied Tibet and East Turkestan. Its next target, Taiwan would have been taken had then-president Truman not used some American hard power, sending the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to keep the communist and anti-communist dictatorships apart. China then used hard power many times thereafter, as evidenced by its border conflicts with Russian, India, and Vietnam; its shelling of Quemoy (Jinmen) and Matsu (Mazu), and its firing of missiles toward Taiwan in 1995 and 1996. Currently, it is doing so again by deploying its ships and planes around Taiwan and Japan, and by its expansionist activities in the South China Sea.

Mr. Bosco includes the ability to affect others through payment in his definition of hard power. Hence, Beijing's has bribed countries to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China and used confiscatory loans to set debt traps for poor countries in Africa and elsewhere. China has also been purchasing interests in American, European, and antipodal countries to obtain direct economic leverage with the West. He suggested an expansion of Mao's dictum: for

modern China, political power grows out of the barrel of a gun---and the size of its bank account. Paraphrasing communist icon Vladimir Lenin, whose ideology is enshrined in the Chinese constitution, the capitalists will not only sell the PRC the rope to hang them with, but will first provide the money to buy the rope.

Hard power through economic coercion includes not only financial rewards but also punishment, such as cutting off Japan's access to rare earth minerals over a maritime dispute in the East China Sea, refusing to buy Philippine bananas because of conflicting claims in the South China Sea, and imposing sanctions on Norway after the Nobel Peace Prize Committee gave its annual award to Chinese human rights activist Liu Xiaobo. [Ed. note: Liu, incarcerated after demanding that the Chinese government to live up to the freedoms guaranteed by the PRC's constitution, was not allowed to attend the award ceremony and died in prison several years later.]

Turning to soft power, Mr. Bosco observed that authoritarian powers like China are effective in using hard power because, by definition, brute force and naked cooperation do not involve ethical choices or value standards, and can be done without accountability to the Chinese people. By contrast, democracies have the upper hand with soft power, because it is neither temporary nor transactional: it reflects what those societies *are* and what values define them over time. Unfortunately for the authoritarian power, while hard power can achieve short-term gains, they can nullify its efforts to achieve soft power gains. Deng Xiaoping earned much good will in the West with his opening of China's economy in the 1980s, and the charm offensive that included donning a ten-gallon hat and being pulled around in a stage coach during a visit to Texas. Yet it was instantly wiped out on June 4, 1989, when he authorized the massacre of peaceful, mostly young student, demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

That horrific event reminded the world of the true nature of the regime as a repressive and aggressive communist state. Western hopes for peaceful evolution were dashed by the realization that the PRC was still essentially the one Mao established seventy years before. Whenever we are tempted to forget, Beijing periodically reaffirms that reality. Today's outrageous treatment of its Uyghur population, which party and government are desperately trying to keep out of the news and, failing that, to portray as benign, also reminds Westerners of the cultural genocide that is underway in both Xinjiang and Tibet. Despite such efforts as *China Daily's* colorful insets in publications like the *Washington Post* that tout the natural beauties of Tibet.

This, continued Mr. Bosco, is where China's sharp power comes in. It replicates the influence operations that totalitarian regimes employed throughout in both actual wartime and during the Cold War. In the 1980s, several books appeared that described how the Soviet Union made organized deception into an instrument of national policy. Lenin specifically said that "communists must be prepared...if necessary, [to] resort to all sorts of cunning schemes and stratagems, to employ illegal methods, to evade and conceal the truth." China's top leaders have faithfully followed this principle, stressing the importance of influencing foreign public opinion in ways that are both open and hidden. Deng Xiaoping famously advised China to bide its time and hide its capabilities, but did not say what China was biding its time for---or whether it was hiding not only its capabilities but its intentions. In 2006, then-party leader Hu Jintao called for China to strengthen the construction of foreign-related media and networks that promote China,

to develop innovative foreign propaganda methods and to strengthen external propaganda so as to increase trust and dispel doubts about China's rise. Xi Jinping is now revealing the answers to Deng's "hide and bide" in his aggressive policies in the East and South China seas, and in his mounting threats toward Taiwan, generally phrased in innocuous language of the need for peace and stability in the region---as long as China's rules are followed---and win-win cooperation.

As to the question of what Taiwan can do to meet the challenge of China's sharp power campaign, it, like other democratic nations, faces a dilemma: Taiwan cannot emulate the nefarious methods of its adversary without sacrificing its own democratic values. Of course it must be vigilant in exposing China's pernicious influence while taking all prudent measures to expose and counter it. But more than reactive defensiveness is required, and Taiwan cannot confront the challenge on its own. Just as Taiwan's physical security depends on a joint military effort with the U.S. and, potentially, Japan, the proxy war of ideas and information also demands a cooperative democratic truth campaign that takes the battle to the ideological adversary.

Using communications equipment located in Taiwan and elsewhere, Washington and Taipei should inform the Chinese people on such topics as what happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989, and what is happening now in their name and at the cost of their honor in Xinjiang, in Tibet, in Hong Kong, and in Beijing's support of North Korea. To counter China's influence operations, Radio Free Asia and Voice of America need increased funding. This is not one side's propaganda fighting the other sides: truth is not propaganda. Truth is the strongest weapon America has in the battle of ideas and information that we are finally engaging China in. In the words of Matt Pottinger, Senior Director of Asian Affairs on the National Security Council, the United States does not consider competition a four-letter word. Mr. Bosco closed with a rousing appeal to let the competition begin.

Dr. Wu Yu-shan Academician and Distinguished Research Fellow, Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica addressed the conceptual issue of soft versus sharp power, noting the tendency to characterize one versus the other in terms of the political system that exercises it. Thus attempts to influence by authoritarian systems such as China are often termed sharp power, whereas when a democratic country attempts to exercise influence, we term it soft power. To say "we have soft power, you have hard power" is, in his opinion, unfair.

In order to reduce ambiguity, Dr. Wu introduced an analytical distinction between soft and hard power, eliminating sharp power. He defines soft power as the power of attraction, leaving aside espionage, disinformation, and getting people disappeared, which belong to a subcategory of hard power. Both democratic and authoritarian countries can have the power to attract, although there are difference between the power of attraction that an authoritarian China exercises and the attraction exercised by a democratic Taiwan. The major difference between an authoritarian system and a democratic system is that the former is a closed system that does not allow political freedoms and open, multi-party political competition, while the latter is an open system that allows, and even encourages, freedoms and competition. The intrinsic advantage of a democracy is that it appeals to audiences that appreciate political freedoms.

Hence, although an authoritarian system has the power to attract, its messages will be confined to areas of the cultural realm such as Chinese language programs, and will not extend beyond that,

into the political realm. That China does not have an open political system is well known: under Xi Jinping, the PRC has become more repressive and politically oriented, and news of people who have been “disappeared” is reported on almost a daily basis. The major differences between China’s power of attraction and that of Taiwan are the source of the appeal and the content of the messages, where it has a clear advantage over China.

For Taiwan to compete with China in the realm of attraction, it is imperative to keep the liberal democratic institutions that it has fought so hard to get. Since China has been so successful in a state-sponsored capitalism that has brought about economic miracles and so savvy in using its economic power to bolster its cultural appeal through Confucius Institutes and other programs, the major area where Taiwan has an advantage is its liberal democracy, which exists in sharp contrast to the repressive regime across the Taiwan Strait. In his October 2018 address to the Hudson Institute, U.S. Vice-President Pence reminded us of the unique advantage of Taiwan to attract. Dr. Wu voiced his approval of Pence’s statement that “America will always believe that Taiwan’s embrace of democracy shows a better path for all Chinese people.”

As China’s power grows, so as well does the sense of threat in Western countries and elsewhere, thus leading to discussions of the PRC’s sharp power. At this critical time, it is particularly important that Taiwan remain politically liberal in the true sense of the word if it wants to attract and international or mainland Chinese audience, and especially if it wants to defeat China’s power of attraction in Taiwan itself. Taiwan must perfect its democratic institutions. Recently, there have been highly controversial issues that have caused Dr. Wu to worry about whether the intense political competition in Taiwan is shading into illiberal tendencies in its nascent democracy.

Salient among these are the disposition of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT)’s huge properties. These must be dealt with and, if necessary, confiscated---but only by following strictly constitutional measures. Another is transitional justice. Again, it must be pursued but only by following prudent legal norms. We must be aware that even if the procedures followed are sound, the current government is nonetheless using state power to deal a heavy, and possibly even fatal, blow to the major opposition party with which it is contesting political power. A political liberal would naturally be suspicious, cautioning the government to be very careful, and being prepared to criticize the government if it is not careful.

The controversy over the appointment of the president-elect of National Taiwan University, Academician Kuan Chung-min, is another issue of concern. NTU has long been a bastion of liberalism in Taiwan, having nurtured generations of liberal intellectuals. The right of NTU and other national universities to elect their own presidents is a great accomplishment that was achieved under the previous Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)’s administration, denying the state political control over the most important liberal institutions in the country. The Ministry of Education’s failure to appoint Kuan and leave NTU without a president for a year, for whatever reason, is, said Dr. Wu, a serious matter. Similar incidents of political intervention have occurred in Hong Kong, involving the appointment of the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong. But Hong Kong is a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China---Taiwan does not want any comparison with that.

For Taiwan to survive China's sharp power, it must appeal to domestic, international, and mainland Chinese audiences, demonstrating Taiwan's attractiveness as a genuine liberal democracy. That is the best way to deny the sharp power exercised by the Chinese communist party-state. Furthermore, it is the best way to communicate with the Chinese people on the mainland who also have aspirations for political freedoms and democracy. The competition between Taiwan and the mainland cannot be a nationalist one. It has to be a political one---and one with Taiwan firmly on the side of liberal democracy.

Dr. Jacques de Lisle, Stephen L. Cozen Professor of Law and Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania discussed Taiwan's and China's relative soft power. He noted that the internal dimension of Taiwan's soft power includes its successful democratization with peaceful transfers of power, its provisions for direct democracy in the form of referenda, its positive record on human rights and judicial independence, and its current grappling with transitional justice. In each of these areas, considerable accomplishment has been mixed with some difficulties. Transitional justice is especially challenging in Taiwan. In other countries, transitional justice often has been addressed with the former ruling party reformed but still in power, or with the former regime having been toppled. Taiwan must undertake transitional justice with the former authoritarian party persisting as the opposition party in a democratic system. Successful conclusion of the transitional justice process could have an important effect on Taiwan's soft power abroad.

Turning to the external face of Taiwan's soft power, Professor de Lisle added that Taiwan has played the values card well, and has in fact played a whole deck of soft power cards well. Taiwan has successfully touted its record on democracy and human rights. It has also flirted with playing the self-determination card, but this has the disadvantage of creating serious problems in relations across the strait. Taiwan has also effectively adopted a soft power-enhancing strategy of acting "as if" it were a member of international regimes that it is not allowed to join due to Chinese opposition. Thus, Taiwan is not allowed to join the United Nations specialized agencies or many other international organizations or major multilateral treaties such as those on human rights and climate change, but Taiwan behaves as if it were a member in good standing, thereby presenting itself as a good international citizen. He noted, however, that there were limits to how successful these efforts have been in enhancing Taiwan's international stature, especially given the limited role that "values" issues play in the U.S. and other great powers' foreign policy, especially in recent times.

De Lisle then moved to a discussion of Chinese soft power, contrasting the Chinese model, which does not purport to be universal, with those of the United States and many other countries, which do. China, he noted, has gained some soft power by virtue of its remarkable economic success and political stability. Under Xi, China has been less reticent in promoting its model abroad, and the Chinese model's luster has grown relatively as the rival Western model has dimmed with the Global Financial Crisis and the recent turmoil in democratic politics in the West. Still, the Chinese model remains limited in its ability to attract and persuade, in part because of the lack of appeal of its authoritarian political model to many potential adopters. China, thus, has turned to sharp power. It more often seeks not to persuade others of its own string points and virtues, but rather to silence or counter critical voices, rejecting foreign scrutiny of its human rights record and asserting its own alternative conceptions of human rights, insisting

that foreign hotels and airlines list Taiwan as part of China, and extending claims of sovereignty into cyberspace. Beijing adopts the stance of the wounded bully, or the powerful and victimized state, shouting that the world is treating it unfairly. DeLisle argued that China's approach threatened to destabilize several largely liberal and pro-democracy international legal and political norms and regimes that have been vital underpinnings for Taiwan's soft power strategy. He closed by saying that Taiwan has played a weak hand well, but that it needs continued support from liberal democracies. While the U.S. and other governments appeared to be gaining a clearer understanding of the threats China posed, whether they would take adequate steps to shore up imperiled institutions and norms was less certain.

Dr. Richard Bush, the Chen-fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies at the Brookings Institution, opened his presentation on Taiwan's soft power with a discussion of definitional problems, noting that there are at least four different ways that soft power has been defined---very broad, broad, less broad, and narrow. Very broad would include anything but military power and economic influence; broad, by contrast, is essentially propaganda. A case in point would be Chinese President Xi Jinping's statement that 'We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world.'

Less broad refers to culture, which Dr. Bush noted would be covered in detail by the next speaker.

The narrow definition of soft power is that of Joseph Nye: shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction. Two principal ways of doing so are, first, by setting a good example and, second, by being the rule-maker in a way that rule-takers come to accept as legitimate. Bush stated his preference for Nye's narrow definition, since it is easier to know what soft power is and what it is not. Clearly, propaganda in service of a state's agenda is not soft power, and defining soft power as non-military power leaves far too much inside the conceptual boundary.

Applying Nye's definition to Taiwan's soft power, we see that, as a small country, Taiwan lacks the ability to be a rule-maker. It must perforce be a rule-taker or, in optimal circumstances, a rule-shaper for those institutions in which it already participates. But the situation is worse than that, since Taiwan cannot be a rule-taker, much less a rule-shaper, for those institutions and regimes it has been blocked from joining. Regrettably, and for reasons we all understand, China has successfully used its diplomatic power to bar Taiwan from participation in most international fora.

Under these circumstances, the best course of action for Taiwan is to unilaterally adhere to the rules of these groupings, such as the United Nations Convention on Civil and Political Rights, as if it were a member. At a minimum, it can at least inform the international community more vigorously of the ways in which it is a good rule-taker.

Taiwan makes a good impression in a number of ways such as the Cloud Gate dance troupe and the island's Little League baseball teams. Beyond these, there are at least two ways that it goes beyond making a good impression and sets a positive example, not only for countries that are

less advanced in their social and economic development but even for those at the advanced end of the modernization spectrum. The first is the Tzu-chi Kung-te-hui Foundation, founded to support the premise that Buddhists should care for those who are less fortunate, discovering meaning in their own lives by serving others. Tzu-chi has chapters in most major American cities as well as elsewhere, and when there is a natural disaster anywhere in the world, including China, its members go into action. Tzu-chi has also had an impact within Taiwan, giving middle-class middle-aged people who may be questioning the value of their own existence a socially constructive way to validate their existence. The problem, however, is that too few people outside Taiwan know about Tzu-chi's work.

The second way in which Taiwan has set a positive example is through its democratic transition. We all know the story: in a society that had achieved social and economic modernization, pressures built for changing its authoritarian government. The transition was set in motion by President Chiang Ching-kuo and brought to fruition under his successor, President Lee Teng-hui. Impressively, and in sharp contrast to many other societies, democratization was achieved gradually and largely without violence. Since the first democratic election in 1996, there have been three transfers of presidential power. In short, Taiwan has become the poster child for third-wave democratization.

It is unfortunate that while we and other East Asia specialists know the story of Taiwan's democratization and the example it set, most other people do not. But, Bush continued, there is another problem with Taiwan's democratic example, namely that its democracy could work better to address the challenges that the country now faces. We know some of the problems: politics is sharply polarized, to the extent that each political camp, Blue and Green, tends to see the other as the enemy, and not China, which is less than ninety miles away. The public wants prosperity, greater equality, external security, good governance, and dignity, but ranking these priorities and managing the trade-offs among them is difficult.

The underlying message of the social movements that have sprung up over the past decade is that there has been a worrisome decline of public confidence in the ability of political institutions to reconcile Taiwan's various priorities while at the same time reflecting the public will. In sum, Bush stated, Taiwan's principal soft power is the example it sets as a modern, humane, and democratic ethnic Chinese society---but that achievement cannot be taken for granted.

Dr. Shih Fang-Long, Co-Director of the Taiwan Research Programme at the London School of Economics, opened her discussion in response to Richard Bush noting that Taiwan makes a good impression in a number of ways of presenting soft power. Apart from Cloud Gate (雲門) and Tzu-chi (慈濟), she discussed one more type of cultural performance which is inspired from Taiwanese local religious troupe (陣頭), by showing a video from the rock group *Chairman* (董事長樂團) entitled "All gods protect Taiwan" (眾神護台灣)) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agxe28OOOr0> [youtube.com]

Her main concern was that since performances of this kind are called heterodox (異端), as interpreted by Victor Mair in his luncheon keynote speech, religious, and appealing to supernatural power, performance, acting, art, metaphors, symbolic, could they be considered and promoted as Taiwan's soft power? Being trained as an anthropologist of

religion and culture, Shih gave her interpretation of the motivation behind the emergence of this performance. Referencing Richard Bush's point that Taiwan is too small to be a rule-maker and so must be a rule-taker, Shih continued that, since Taiwan is barred from most events and institutions, the situation is almost impossible for human beings to break, since the PRC is so powerful and its recent willingness to use sharp power is, as symbolically portrayed in the video. All the gods (such as Goddess Mazu 媽祖, The Earth God 土地公, Third Prince Nezha 三太子哪吒) have been called for help, including those godly Generals (神將) from hell (陰間地府). The two generals in the video are 官將首 (literally "The Official Front") who are 護法將軍 (Hell Generals of the Rule-Protector). They are working for the Bodhisattva of Hell-beings (地藏王). His vow is not to achieve Buddhahood until all hells are empty. When the Bodhisattva of Hell-beings is on his regular patrol, the two generals always walk in front of the patrolling troupe to sweep away the evil spirits and to guard the way out. This is usually part of a popular religious practice called the 'Peace-Praying and Fortune-Cultivating Ritual' (祈安植福法會).

Dr. Shih explained that *The Chairman* band recently performed this piece live outside Taiwan in a festival called "Passport to Taiwan" presented by the Manchester Taiwanese Association in the UK. She then asked whether the two generals would be capable of helping Taiwan to sweep away the evil spirits, smoothing the way for Taiwan to participate in sundry international communities. She challenged the audience with the question of whether the plot of the performance represented 'Chinese culture with Taiwanese characteristics' or 'Taiwanese culture containing Chinese components'. A spirited discussion ensued. One audience member opted for the latter, pointing out that the lyrics were sung in Taiwanese. Another wondered about the symbolism of appeals to supernatural powers---whether the band members thought that only the gods could save Taiwan. A third noted that the band had made its presentation through Western rock music, with no one questioning whether this was Chinese--or Taiwanese---culture with Western characteristics or vice-versa. Yet another pointed out that gods could be appropriated by cultures other than the ones they had originated with, while feeling no debt to the founding culture. The Buddha was born in India, though Buddhism had become thoroughly Sinicized in China. And, although Jesus was unquestionably a Jew, some Christians were anti-Semitic because, they said, the Jews had killed Jesus. To all these questions, Shih responded that culture in Taiwan contains various elements such as Chinese religious figures, Western rock music, and those elements have been served as the constituents for the creating and producing of a distinguish culture with Taiwanese feelings, desires and expression. As such, Taiwanese culture is cosmopolitan and sophisticated. For powerful people, not only the gods could save Taiwan. But not for those local Taiwanese, to appeal to the gods is their familiar and instant way whenever they feel frustrated at being suppressed. Finally, Shih raised more questions for further thinking: If the performance of this kind presents Taiwanese local voices and identity, how could it be transformed to and refined as Taiwan's soft power, at least, to enhance the recognition of Taiwan and its subjectivity in the international world? Could the two generals (官將首) be mediators between a rule-maker/China and a rule-taker/Taiwan, to enact the role as rule-protectors (護法者)? Inspired by this role, could Taiwan's democracy work better to not only adhere to the rules but also to take the challenge to protect the rules in the international community? At this point, due to the constraints of time, the panel ended but discussion continued afterwards in the hallways of the conference hotel and at the banquet later in the evening.

