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Taiwan's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

Gary D. RAWNSLEY

Abstract: This paper analyses how Taiwan exercises “soft power” and uses public diplomacy to engage with the international community, and to compensate for the absence of formal diplomatic relations with major powers. The research suggests that Taiwan’s strategies of international engagement are constrained by its external and internal political environments. The international system (structure) has locked Taiwan into a set of challenging arrangements over which it has little control or influence, while Taiwan’s public diplomacy architecture and the activities organised and undertaken by its government agencies in Taipei and its representatives abroad (agency) reveal, at best, a misunderstanding of how Taiwan’s soft power might be exercised more effectively. The strategic thematic choices of legitimacy (invoking Taiwan’s international status) versus credibility (which in soft power terms offers the most benefit), and the decision to privilege cultural over political themes in international communications, all have profound effects on the success of Taiwan’s soft power.

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Keywords: Taiwan, public diplomacy, soft power, communication

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Context

Do changes in ruling parties matter? The theme of this topical issue is appropriate for considering Taiwan's soft power and public diplomacy, given that the strategic choices made by successive governments about what soft power means, the objectives of exercising soft power and engaging in public diplomacy (the communication process that helps realise soft power ambitions) and the themes to communicate have all been decided by the political colour of whichever party resides in Taipei's Presidential Palace. Research has shown that the domestic political environment plays a particularly influential role in determining Taiwan's soft power strategies, and we could even go so far as to argue that democracy has been both a blessing and a curse. While the electoral system and the consolidation of democratic procedures can showcase Taiwan as the "first Chinese democracy" (Chao and Myers 1998) and challenge the theory of "Asian values", the polarisation of parties and the volatility of electoral politics on the island restrains the communication to international audiences of more compelling themes and narratives.

Taiwan has no formal diplomatic relations with major powers and does not enjoy membership of the principal international organisations, which led Gerald Chan (1997: 37) to describe Taiwan as "financially rich, but diplomatically poor". Such difficult circumstances have convinced Taiwan's governments, diplomats and foreign policy elites that a programme of strategic international communications may persuade audiences around the world to pay more attention to Taiwan, sympathise with their predicament, and support their political agenda. To achieve this ambition, successive governments have decided on and communicated a distinct set of narratives that they think may appeal to international audiences that are largely unfamiliar with Taiwan.

However, we must be mindful that a focus on political parties and government agencies presents only a partial picture. In fact, any soft power strategy benefits from distance from government in order to counter suspicions regarding motive, and is especially important in helping avoid the pejorative association of government communications with the (highly misunderstood) label "propaganda". Taiwan has a rich public diplomacy environment that is expanding beyond government and embraces not only the cultural industries, but religious and humanitarian organisations, non-governmental organisa-

tions (NGOs), student societies and other forms of activity extending from Taiwan's civil society.

Since the introduction of democratic institutions and processes in 1987, Taiwan's international communications have shifted from a model based on a style of propaganda associated with authoritarian governments (rationalised by the prevailing Cold War context that structured the Taipei–Beijing relationship) to one of public and especially cultural diplomacy (Rawnsley 2000). When in power, both the Kuomintang (KMT, Guomindang) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have embraced the idea of soft power – defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye 2004: x) and as

a form of national power that is based on ideational and cultural attractiveness, which is intentionally or unintentionally realized by actors in international relations to achieve strategic imperatives (Lee 2011: 11)

– to help meet the international challenges Taiwan faces. This is a rational calculation: Given Taiwan's liberal–democratic credentials, soft power should demonstrate the congruity of the political system's values with those of the major Western powers and help offset authoritarian China's own “charm offensive” (Kurlantzick 2008). This is consistent with Joseph Nye's observation that values, especially democratic ones, are an important soft power asset:

A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it (Nye 2004: 4).

As one American diplomat told political scientist Shelley Rigger, “Taiwan has grown into a society that represents most of our important values that we try to promote elsewhere in the world” (Rigger 2011: 189).

However, this demonstrates that we still depend far too much on Anglo-American approaches to soft power rather than adopting perspectives that are sensitive to local cultural understandings and political practices. Hence the urgent need to engage in the “de-Westernisation” of soft power and public diplomacy, which expands the discussion about these concepts beyond the dominant paradigms. As more and more governments are turning to soft power as a cost-ef-

fective instrument of statecraft, we must appreciate the way in which meanings of power and soft power are embedded within, help shape and are shaped by distinct environments. In this way, de-Westernisation attempts to provide a more culturally aware and nuanced understanding and explanation of the different theoretical and conceptual perspectives we may encounter beyond Europe and North America. Taiwan exists within a particular set of internal and external (political, cultural and strategic) environments that shape its understanding of and approach to international communications and the exercise of soft power. It combines the democratic values of Western soft power theory with the projection of Chinese culture, as well as a powerful and attractive economy that was recognisable long before China embarked on its own remarkable process of modernisation (deLisle 2010). In Taiwan's public diplomacy narrative, we find a distinctive blend of the traditional and modern that is particularly appealing to tourists from mainland China who are now able to visit the island and appreciate first-hand the similarities and differences on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Structure

In order to appreciate the limits to Taiwan's soft power capacity, we must address the "distinctive kind of environment" in which it is located (Lukes 2005: 485). This connects with Nye's (2011) observation that states operate within "enabling and disabling" environments that are familiar to anyone with knowledge of Taiwan's politics and political history. These environments are as follows: Taiwan's position in the triangular relationship with the US and China; the scarcity of official diplomatic relations with major powers and exclusion from the foremost international organisations (including the United Nations); at home, a contested national identity; an international news environment that chooses to disregard Taiwan except when it is hit by an earthquake or threatened yet again by military intimidation from Beijing; and vigorous electoral competition between parties pursuing very different political and strategic agendas (which means foreign and China-related policies are subjects for political contestation, and each party must calculate the precise consequences of unpopular decisions on electoral support). Accordingly, any discussion of Taiwan's international activity (communicative or otherwise) must

acknowledge the electoral volatility and the clear polarisation of parties that, in part, revolve around issues of identity and relations with the PRC. Moreover, interviews conducted in 2011 and 2013 with key actors in the government agencies responsible for Taiwan's international projection reveal apprehension about China's likely reaction to specifically political themes, including questions of Taiwan's status or identity. These anxieties do impose penalties on Taiwan's public diplomacy, for the understandable reluctance at all levels of government to confront the issue of identity impedes the design of communication strategies that might have international appeal, but would disturb domestic supporters or the authorities in Beijing. These considerations also impact on Taiwan's capacity to decide on, manufacture and sell a consistent brand image and profile. In short, Taiwan's public diplomacy is based on an ideological position, which is why changes in ruling parties matter. Ma Ying-jeou's (Ma Yingjiu) administration overturned the more provocative style of government that characterised Chen Shui-bian's (Chen Shuibian) presidency (and some may even say this provocative style began in the democratic era with Lee Teng-hui (Li Denghui) and his insistence on "two states" when dealing with Beijing). Ma Ying-jeou has adopted a more conciliatory approach, and this has fed into the style and content of Taiwan's international communication programme, which is formed around benign themes such as culture, rather than more appealing but also more incendiary themes such as democracy.

The connection between the PRC's claims on Taiwan and Taiwan's public diplomacy is important because it raises issues of legitimacy, authority and credibility and how these concepts are addressed in communicated narratives. As Nye has noted:

Not only do actors try to influence each other directly and indirectly through soft power; they also compete to deprive each other of attractiveness and legitimacy, thus creating a disabling environment either in public opinion, and/or in the eyes of relevant third parties (Nye 2011: 99).

The diplomatic competition between the PRC and Taiwan (which has abated since a diplomatic "truce" was declared after the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou was elected president in 2008) has revolved around the question of legitimacy and trying to persuade third parties to support one side of the Taiwan Strait over the other. When Taiwan is competing with the PRC for legitimacy, it finds itself in an unstable and

unpredictable position because it is trying to operate within a disabling environment. This is because legitimacy is offered or denied by the diplomatic community for a number of reasons that are beyond Taiwan's control or influence. It is largely a systemic issue that is determined outside Taipei. On the other hand, when the issue is credibility – the linchpin of any communicative act (Nye 2011: 101) – Taiwan, as a successful liberal democracy, has far more soft power capacity than the PRC. This is because credibility works within and helps shape an enabling environment, and the PRC is denied access to this environment because of the authoritarian nature of its political system. However, one could also argue that because Taiwan's foreign policy has focused overwhelmingly on legitimacy which provokes such questions as: Which is the "real" China? Is Taiwan's flag recognised? Why isn't Taiwan a member of the United Nations? Hence, the object itself becomes a hindrance to the further success and contributes to the creation of a disabling environment.

Agency

Environmental and structural considerations are only one explanation for the limited success of Taiwan's soft power activities. Working within these environments, agents – both governmental and non-governmental – must design and execute strategies that will compensate for and ultimately overcome the problems imposed by the configuration of the international system. However, this requires attention to a number of issues, including: Why do we need to exercise soft power? Who is responsible for planning and undertaking public diplomacy activities? Who is the target audience? What are the objectives? How will we know when we have achieved them? My research, conducted in 2011 and 2013 through interviews with members of all the government agencies responsible for Taiwan's international communications and outreach programmes, indicates that the government bureaucracy collectively misunderstands how soft power works and overlooks (for party political reasons) the strategies that might best project Taiwan. There is widespread acceptance that Taiwan must exercise soft power (however it is defined), but there is a fundamental lack of insight or consensus within government departments about why this must be done. The aims and objectives of Taiwan's international outreach remain largely unstated and unknown

and, therefore, un-communicated. In the absence of any agreement on objectives, it is impossible to measure the impact of soft power programmes. How will you know when you have met your ambitions if you don't know what you are trying to achieve?

Such problems reflect the deficiencies in the bureaucratic architecture designed to facilitate Taiwan's public diplomacy. The absence of a coherent strategy among the myriad and dispersed government agencies responsible for Taiwan's international outreach prevents central coordination and the communication of consistent themes and messages. The need for a coordinating body has been discussed for some time, and almost all the interviewees for this paper conceded that the lack of a single co-ordinating unit for Taiwan's public diplomacy is a serious impediment to the success of their work. Despite this, the government instead decided to dissolve the Government Information Office (GIO) and relocate its functions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and a new Ministry of Culture. Interviewees in both the GIO and MoFA were aware of the problems facing American public diplomacy following the closure of the United States Information Agency (USIA. See Cull 2012) and they worried that Taiwan's public diplomacy would face similar difficulties. Members of both agencies interviewed in 2011 and 2013 believed that the decision to move public diplomacy to MoFA was a mistake because each government agency had different perceptions of what can be achieved and how. MoFA's commitment to traditional diplomatic practices sits uneasily with the urgent requirement for a more co-ordinated public diplomacy strategy.

Moreover, changing structures and systems is not a panacea because the disabling environment continues to restrain Taiwan's international outreach. Rather, the government and its bureaucracy must understand how to work better within the confines an international system they cannot change and create more "enabling" conditions. As Nye has observed:

As a first step in any game, it helps to start by figuring out who is holding the high cards and how many chips each player has. Equally important, however, is that policymakers have the contextual intelligence to understand what game they are playing. Which resources provide the best basis for power in a particular context? (Nye 2011: 9)

First, Taiwan must acknowledge that China holds the high cards: the PRC enjoys diplomatic relations with the major powers, international legitimacy and an enviable amount of media attention. By the same token, Taiwan has far more credibility than the PRC, and its democratic values are Taiwan's greatest soft power asset. These are Taiwan's most precious resources, and it is the responsibility of Taiwan's over-cautious and rather conservative bureaucracy to use these resources in the most effective way. However, the absence of frequent surveys of international public opinion about Taiwan and the restrained activities of its overseas representatives, together with the alarming deficiency in coverage of international news by the local media and the discouraging relationship between the public diplomacy machinery and foreign journalists stationed on the island (one of Taiwan's most important soft power advantages), indicates the prevailing indifferent attitude towards "contextual intelligence". If one public diplomacy ambition is to persuade the world to listen to Taiwan, Taiwan must begin to listen to the world.

Of course, a state-centric approach only reveals a partial story. In addition to understanding the public diplomacy architecture that is assembled within the government bureaucracy, it is necessary to consider how actors beyond the state engage in soft power and "new" dialogic public diplomacy (Melissen 2007) to create an enabling environment. Detached from the government and standing apart from its political agenda, actors within civil society enjoy far more credibility and trust among audiences than agencies that act on behalf of the government. Public diplomacy from civil society and among NGOs can be considered a by-product of a nation's soft power because their work reflects a democratic culture that encourages pluralism, diversity and charity. They are also largely immune from changes in ruling parties and their ideological positions. For this reason, Taiwan's civil society offers soft power advantages over the PRC where the government manages the non-governmental sector, and therefore lacks the kind of credibility that would make it an agent of soft power.

Moreover, the non-governmental sector is able to forge and sustain meaningful long-term relationships with groups and individuals overseas. Taiwan's Youth Ambassador Programme has developed close personal relationships between the participants and their peers in Taiwan's diplomatic allies. This initiative was launched in 2009 by the Ma Government, but the programme and its participants remain

appropriately distant from government involvement: The state, as with most of the best public diplomacy that occurs in the non-governmental sector, is a facilitator rather than accomplice. The programme despatches teams of university students to those countries that still formally recognise Taiwan (22 countries at the time of writing) to meet and engage with young locals their own age. The participants in the programme do not consider their activities political, nor do they recognise the label “public diplomacy” to describe their mission. Instead, they see their travel as an opportunity to make new friends and share cultural experiences. Not only is their autonomy from any political involvement the programme’s principal asset, but they also help breach the most significant “last three feet” of direct person-to-person communication, where trust and credibility can be generated.

Another example of this style of public diplomacy, one that encourages an inward traffic of visitors to the island, is the Say Taiwan! programme, which was designed and promoted in 2011 by the Council of Cultural Affairs to coincide with the centenary of the founding of the Republic of China (ROC). The programme encouraged foreign visitors to live with local families and then narrate their experiences and impressions of Taiwan on social media sites. In this way, Say Taiwan! encouraged a relational and dialogical style of public diplomacy without imposing any particular political agenda on visitors. The participants were left alone to construct and relate their own meanings and interpretations of Taiwan in the confidence that their experience would be sufficiently positive.

The non-governmental sector has also contributed to Taiwan’s soft power by offering humanitarian aid to areas overseas suffering from the consequences of natural disasters. This is public diplomacy of the deed, recognising that actions will always convey a far more convincing and compelling narrative than words. Particularly noteworthy is the global outreach of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation (Yao 2012), while the generous assistance offered by Taiwan to Japan after the latter’s earthquake of March 2011 – amounting to 10 billion JPY – has been commemorated by a public of message of thanks from the Japanese people to “our Taiwanese friends” in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. While Taiwan has a long history of providing humanitarian assistance and aid to developing nations, and engaging in rescue work in crisis-hit areas (Chan 1997; Rockower 2011: 122),

the activities of the non-governmental sector again add a level of credibility that a state-sponsored programme might never achieve.

A Cultural Agenda

Under President Ma, the thematic priorities of Taiwan's soft power push have changed. Between 2000 and 2008, when Chen Shui-bian and the DPP governed the island, Taiwan's international outreach revolved around a strategic agenda that highlighted the historic achievement of democracy and the vibrancy of Taiwan's political society. Just as the KMT defeated the DPP in the 2008 presidential election, Wang and Lu (2008) observed that "most Taiwanese [...] emphasize democracy as being the most valuable soft power asset that Taiwan holds internationally"; and that "compared to China, proponents of soft power in Taiwan place less emphasis on traditional culture in their arguments" (Wang and Lu 2008: 432). Since 2008, these remarks have been completely overturned. Even though President Ma pledged that "the most important asset" of Taiwan's foreign policy "is our democracy, our way of life, our willingness to maintain cross-strait stability, and our determination to fulfil our obligations to the international community" (*Taiwan Today* 2008), after 2008 the government hastily decided to promote Taiwan as "the preserver of traditional Chinese culture" (which is how, in interviews, individuals and members of government agencies involved in public diplomacy referred to Taiwan's identity), and that this would be the main aim of the island's public diplomacy work. Part of the suggested strategy involved despatching exhibitions of traditional Chinese calligraphy around the world. However, while this reinforces the theme of Taiwan as the preserver of traditional culture, it is unlikely that the exhibition would appeal to or have relevance among audiences that are not already familiar with Taiwan and its political history. Placing the exhibition in context would require juxtaposing the traditional and simplified characters, which would immediately politicise the issue.

The actors responsible for Taiwan's public diplomacy, interviewed for this research in 2011 and 2013, agree that this change of narrative is easily explained. They say that culture is far less politically sensitive than the story of Taiwan's democratisation, and this sensitivity is reflected in anxiety: first, about how the supporters of each party would acknowledge a distinctly political narrative; and second,

about how the mainland Chinese would tolerate themes that privileged Taiwan's democracy and democratisation. Given the strained relationship between Beijing and Taipei during the Chen Shui-bian era of government, it seems only fitting that the KMT administration after 2008 should choose to de-emphasise a "green" agenda and promote a less provocative "blue" narrative'. Moreover, the self-styled diplomatic "truce" that in 2010 paused the fierce competition between Taipei and Beijing for diplomatic allies in favour of closer economic ties (via the signing of the Economic Co-operation Framework Agreement, ECFA) and greater scope for traffic between the two sides (including direct flights and tourism), also dampened enthusiasm in Taiwan for the communication of political themes that might trouble the PRC.

While the strategic reasons for privileging culture are reasonable, the agents responsible for Taiwan's public diplomacy still need to address several interconnected concerns. The first relates to the difficulty of measuring impacts as opposed to outputs. It is easy to count the number of international visitors who pass through Taiwan's airports or the box-office receipts for a movie that is made in Taiwan and shown at an international film festival. It is far more challenging to measure the response of individuals who encounter Taiwan in a cultural mode and determine whether their attitudes or behaviour towards Taiwan have changed as a consequence of engaging with a specific cultural product. After all, culture is highly subjective, and what may appeal to one member of the audience may not appeal in the same way, if at all, to another (Liebes and Katz 1993). In fact, there is a distinct possibility that the audience may reject the cultural product altogether as a threat to their own social values (as per "cultural imperialism"; Lee 2011: 22). In other words, the audience may interpret the cultural product in an entirely different way from what was intended. This means that the outcomes of soft power strategies are "more in control of the subject than is often the case with hard power" (Nye 2008: xiii) and, therefore, there is no guarantee that cultural interest will translate into tangible soft power outcomes; there is no certified direct correlation between consuming a cultural product and a change in opinion or behaviour toward the source (McConnell 2008; Nakano 2008). This is particularly the case when cultural products are being exported around the world for viewing by audiences who may have no or very little cultural understanding of

what they are seeing. Hence, it is necessary to understand the audience for such outreach programmes; to determine with whom one wishes to communicate, why and how.

One final consideration, which again relates to the colour of the ruling party, is the question of who has the power to define Taiwan's culture that is communicated to the international community. Given the issues of identity that continue to inspire political decisions, discourses and outcomes (Chinese, Taiwanese, New Taiwanese, indigenous communities), whose cultural narrative dominates and why? As suggested above, the DPP administration tried to privilege the Taiwanese culture over the Han Chinese, while the KMT has reversed this position to focus on traditional Chinese culture. Which Taiwan is being represented in Taiwan's international outreach?

Conclusions

This paper has briefly addressed some of the core issues connecting changes in Taiwan's ruling parties and the government's soft power strategies. The principal theme is that the colour of the party in power has influenced and determined the narrative that Taiwan's public diplomacy narrates to the world. The KMT has chosen to represent Taiwan as the preserver of traditional Chinese culture and to refrain from referring to specifically political issues, such as Taiwan's democracy, which may disturb the delicate relationship with the PRC. Although this decision is understandable, it is possible to conclude that these cultural themes have little soft power impact beyond the mainland tourists who are visiting Taiwan in ever-greater numbers. As discussed above, cultural approaches have several inbuilt problems. Moreover, Taiwan's political values are consistent with those of other liberal democracies and challenge both the PRC and the propaganda disseminated during Taiwan's 40 years of authoritarian rule by the KMT. Perhaps a narrative highlighting Taiwan's democratic achievements and the coincidence of its political values and culture with those of other liberal-democracies might secure more soft power pay-offs.

If we lean towards pessimism, we might conclude that the Taiwan case study highlights a fundamental flaw in the soft power thesis; namely, that international recognition is a precondition for successful soft power projection, and therefore recognition and legitimacy

trump the soft power capital of democratic values. Is soft power only really meaningful as a practical arrangement of statesmanship – a “luxury” (Layne 2010) – for governments who possess power in other areas?

This would be a rather depressing conclusion that removes agency from the equation. In addition to considering the structural constraints, the discussion has also alluded to problems with the government's public diplomacy system. My observations of Taiwan's public diplomats indicate a worrying passivity, an acceptance of the “disabling environment” and the limitations it imposes on their activities. Perhaps the government – whichever party it represents – needs to be much clearer about the objectives of Taiwan's soft power strategy (“cultural influence” and “persuading people to know Taiwan”, two ambitions that several interviewees mentioned, are far too vague and beyond measurement), and to design a public diplomacy system that will allow for greater consistency, integration and, above all, much-needed co-ordination.

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