Critical Issues Confronting China:  
China’s Pursuit of Soft Power  
in the Era of Donald Trump and Xi Jinping  
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Stanley Rosen, Professor of Political Science at the University of Southern California, examined China’s pursuit of soft power from the lens of its recent movies and other marketing and publicity efforts. He identified several ironies and raised an intriguing question at the end.

On the one hand, China spends billions of dollars to promote its positive image and culture, by, for example, placing enormous advertisements of Chinese high achievers on the billboards in Times Square in New York, and by establishing hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the world. On the other hand, the sudden withdrawal of Zhang Yimou’s latest film, One Second (一秒钟), about the Cultural Revolution (1966—76), from the Berlin Film Festival for “technical reasons” left observers mystified about the real reason.

China is obsessed about foreigners’ perception of the country, consciously evaluating which foreign countries are “friendly to China” and which are not. The Chinese newspaper, Global Times, published a survey at the end of 2017, which ranked Australia the “least friendly country to China.” Yet, China is apparently willing to sacrifice its soft power for other purposes. China’s arrest of two Canadian citizens for an alleged “national security threat” soon after Canada’s apprehension of Meng Wanzhou, the chief financial officer of Huawei, a multinational telecommunications equipment and consumer electronics manufacturer, on a U.S. extradition request, sends chilling signals to all foreigners in China, undermining confidence in China’s general business environment.

Through many examples, Rosen revealed a pattern. If it is Chinese individuals who speak for China, then it is generally successful. If people feel that the government’s motive is behind everything, then everything positive about China is perceived merely as government propaganda. Since the government actively promotes “socialist core values,” individual voices are often smothered. After Li Na (李娜) won international tennis competitions and Mo Yan (莫言) won the Nobel Prize in literature, the CCP attributed their success to, and shared their honors with, the country and the society in which they grew up. Mo Yan’s village in Shandong Province played up his award and became famous in China. But such public fanfare does not enhance China’s soft power, whereas Fu Yuanhui’s (傅园慧) explanation, in front of a TV camera, of her
personal health situation for not doing well in the 2016 Olympic swimming competition won public sympathy.

Rosen felt that America’s soft power in China is quite strong even though the American government does not actively promote it. He compared the Chinese dream with the American dream. Whereas the American dream is more about the success of the individual in terms of material wealth and social status through equal opportunity and self-effort, the state-promoted Chinese dream embodies more of state-sanctioned values such as self-sacrifice for the greater good. But if you ask any young Chinese what his or her own dream is, you’ll find much more resemblance to the American dream than to the official version of the Chinese dream.

The TV series *House of Cards* was a sensation in China. To the Chinese, does this series play into their hands to vindicate their prior view that “democracy is overrated”? Rosen thought not. Some Chinese naturally wondered how the American Ministry of Propaganda could allow this show to air publicly. This line of questioning leads the Chinese to understand the de facto freedom of expression and publication in America, however implausible it may seem to the Chinese.

Rosen pointed out that too much state control is counter-productive to China’s soft power. For example, the state discourages the Chinese celebration of the American April Fool’s Day because it does not want Chinese to use the occasion to spread rumors or anything negative about the image of the state. But such an order only contributes to the prevailing perception that China’s state power is pervasive throughout the society in every way.

With this entrenched perception, even a Chinese blockbuster science-fiction movie, *The Wandering Earth*, the highest box revenue generator during this Chinese New Year season, can be interpreted to mean “only the Communist Party, or only Xi Jinping Thought, can save the earth.”

China’s particular set of state-society relations gives rise to an American perception that China has posed an existential threat to the U.S. Even the moderately conservative *New York Times* columnist, David Brooks, wrote on Feb. 14 of this year, under the title “China Brings US Together,” that China has become the only issue that unites the left and right of the American political spectrum.

While Rosen thought the Chinese government too active in promoting China’s image, China’s ads on prominent billboards arouse more fear of China’s buying up Times Square than admiration for China’s achievements in various fields. He questioned some international rankings on soft power which ranked China very low. These included Portland Soft Power among 30 countries and the World’s Most Valuable Brands; he thought the very methodologies used in these rankings already determine the results.
On China’s role in the international order, Rosen cited Xi Jinping’s speech at the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2017, in which Xi portrayed China as a bedrock of stability of the liberal international system and a champion of an open market economy. But Rosen thought that China’s international behavior could be better explained by trying to build a community of mutual interest, regardless of values. In many ways, China has succeeded in recent years. Soon after Xi took the helm of the Communist Party, The Economist ridiculed him on the cover of its issue in July 2013 with the headline, “Let’s Party like It’s 1793.” But by now, China has been widely recognized as a major power to be reckoned with. In conclusion, Rosen asked, “Does soft power matter when China can influence other countries with its increasing hard and sharp power?”