

Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe Compared

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Abstract

This review critically evaluates editors Jarmila Ptáčková, Ondřej Klimeš, and Gary Rawnsley's *Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe Compared* (Ptáčková et. al., 2021). Ptáčková et al. suggest that the various sites or localities targeted by the PRC's external propaganda work (*duiwai xuanchuan*) can be read as discrete units of analysis. By evaluating the complex network of actors and motivations that make up these units, Ptáčková et al. purport to offer a more nuanced method for evaluating how the PRC adapts its propaganda work to local circumstances. While this review celebrates this method for its dedication to principles of nuance, it is critiqued for leaving out

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questions of historical complexity. While there is a lack of emphasis placed on the complex historical reasons for why the PRC remains guarded on certain topics like the Xinjiang region, it is concluded that this volume constitutes an important contribution to our understanding how the PRC conceptualizes the practice of winning over hearts and minds in a global context.

Keywords: Cultural diplomacy, Peoples Republic of China, cultural policy, propaganda

Résumé

Cette revue évalue de manière critique l'ouvrage des éditeurs Jarmila Ptáčková, Ondřej Klimeš, et Gary Rawnsley's *Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe Compared* (Ptáčková et al., 2021). Ptáčková et al. suggèrent que les différents sites ou localités ciblés par le travail de propagande externe de la RPC (*duiwai xuanchuan*) peuvent être lus comme des unités d'analyse discrètes. En évaluant le réseau complexe d'acteurs et de motivations qui composent ces unités, Ptáčková et al. prétendent offrir une méthode plus nuancée pour évaluer comment la RPC adapte son travail de propagande aux circonstances locales. Si cette étude salue cette méthode pour son attachement aux principes de la nuance, elle est critiquée pour avoir laissé de côté les questions de complexité historique. Si l'accent n'est pas mis sur les raisons historiques complexes qui expliquent pourquoi la RPC reste réservée sur certains sujets, comme la région du Xinjiang, on peut conclure que ce volume constitue une contribution importante à notre compréhension de la manière dont la RPC conceptualise la pratique consistant à gagner les cœurs et les esprits dans un contexte mondial.

Mots-clés : Diplomatie culturelle, République populaire de Chine, politique culturelle, propaganda

In Transnational Sites of China's Cultural Diplomacy: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East and Europe Compared (Ptáčková et al., 2021), editors Jarmila Ptáčková, Ondřej Klimeš, and Gary Rawnsley assemble a series of case studies which endeavour to tackle the complexity associated with examining the People's Republic of China's (PRC) global efforts at cultural diplomacy. Rather than asking how the PRC's cultural institutions have succeeded or failed to succeed in persuading a given audience - a common methodological emphasis (see Boden, 2019; Edney, 2014) - Ptáčková et al. ask scholars to evaluate the complex "network" of motivations that drive those to take part in the PRC's development programs (Ptáčková et al., 2021, p. 82). While Ptáčková et al.'s emphasis on networks is relevant to existing scholarship on the PRC - in that it decenters the typical emphasis on evaluating the operations of the PRC's cultural institutions (see Hartig, 2015) - not every chapter lives up to the collection's demands for a nuanced account of geo-political motivations. Some of the essays in this collection make policy recommendations that come across as incomplete, and this is because there is a lack of emphasis placed on the complex reasons for why the PRC remains inflexible on certain topics, like the Xinjiang region. By the same account, there is no mention of scholarship on the charged relationship between the United States and the PRC, which is of note given the collection's purported dedication to an evaluation of nuance (see Woodward, 2017; Freeman, 2012). Even still, many of the essays in this collection live up to the collection's stated goals, providing accounts of sites or relationships that are atypical relative to scholarship on the PRC and cultural diplomacy. Had these accounts more carefully considered the relationship between the United States and the PRC, the collection's call for a holistic understanding of the relationship between motivations and actors could have been even more compelling.

Since President Xi Jinping's inauguration in 2013, the rhetoric of *wenhua shentou* (cultural infiltration) has played an important role in the PRC's official national security strategy (see Lampton, 2015). Fears of foreign actors sowing discord within the Chinese mainland have pushed the PRC to take dramatic measures to protect its

populous, or so the story goes (Lampton, 2017). The Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council Information Office – which was founded in 1991 with the goal of improving the PRC's image following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests – censors the import of many foreign cultural products in the name of homeland security. In chapters 1 and 2 Gary Rawnsley, Jarmila Ptácková, Ondrej Klimeš, and Jens Damm, argue that the PRC's defensive attitude to foreign cultural products, together with its domestic controls on expression and creativity, limits the reach and effectiveness of its cultural diplomacy. They argue that by over-emphasizing the threat of *wenhua shentou*, the PRC creates a duality between its developmental rhetoric and its domestic policies. Rawnsley et al. see the PRC's resistance to principles of adaptability as an impediment to its own developmental goals. The other chapters in this volume provide policy recommendations that purport to help align the PRC's foreign policy aims with its domestic policy practices.

In chapters 3 and 4, Ondrej Klimeš and Vera Exnerová examine the PRC's wider cultural strategy in Central Asia. Klimeš begins this section by evaluating how Xinjiang's minorities act as mediators between the PRC and the rest of Central Asia, playing an important role in the PRC's ability to project "soft power" into the region. The PRC is critiqued for celebrating these minorities as important conduits for trade, while simultaneously restricting their movement under the premise of Islamic de-radicalization. Klimeš infers that by reforming its de-radicalization programs, the PRC could more closely synchronize the motivations of those that take part in its development programs - like its One Belt One Road Initiative - with the PRC's state policy. This recommendation is left somewhat underdeveloped. Why, for example, does the PRC so heavily restrict the movement of minorities in the Xinjiang region? The United States has a long history of funding terrorist organizations in the name of undermining what are perceived as illegitimate states (for an excellent account of United States-sponsored terrorism in Latin America see Rabe, 2012). The PRC, which has cited this history as one of the reasons it so heavily restricts the movement of people in the region, fears that the United States is funding terrorist activity to undermine

the legitimacy of the PRC (Consulate-General, Peoples Republic of China in Brisbane, 2021). While the PRC's justification may be wrong, there is not enough evidence provided for explaining why this justification is wrong. While it is beyond the scope of this review to provide an account of terrorism in the Xinjiang region, it goes without saying that calls for general "reform" can come across as too ambiguous for a topic as complex as the PRC's North-Western territories (for excellent accounts of the Xinjiang region see Jacobs, 2016; Perdue, 2005)

Following Klimeš, Exnerová examines the diverse set of motivations that drive those to participate in development programs like the PRC's One Belt One Road Initiative (see Xing, 2017). It is argued that those that choose to participate in these initiatives are not necessarily motivated by a desire to make the PRC's state policies "work", but rather by a desire to appear as *if* they are aligned with these policies. It is inferred that for the PRC to synchronize its state policy with the motivations of its development programs' partners, the PRC needs to align its policies with its developmental rhetorics.

In chapters 5 and 6, Jakub Hrubý and Tomáš Petru examine how the PRC's cultural diplomatic efforts in Southeast Asia often represent positive examples of this kind of synchronization. Looking at the PRC's diplomatic efforts in Malaysia, Hrubý sees the PRC's propagation of the Zheng He narrative (a historical explorer that is credited with helping to spread the Muslim faith to Malaysia) as a successful example of the PRC's efforts to portray itself as a peaceful government that promotes principles of mutual development. While this narrative is tailored to match this political end, its alignment with Malaysia's own developmental ambition, makes it a strong example of how the PRC can influence different localities through a mixture of transparency, targeted messaging, and adaptation to local circumstances. Petru echoes these sentiments, examining how the PRC's opening of satellite campuses and foreign language training centers in Malaysia has positively reinforced the idea that the PRC means what it says. He examines how the PRC, in its public willingness to renegotiate and debate developmental programs with

Malaysia, seems primed to increase its influence in the larger Southeast Asian region.

In chapter 7, Jarmila Ptácková examines how the PRC's concerns for its national security often interferes with its aim to promote principles of open trade between regions. Ptácková probes this dynamic in the context of the PRC's cultural-diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. Here, she examines the PRC's decision to create and then subsequently close *halal* food production facilities in Ningxia. The PRC encouraged foreign investment into Ningxia through its promotion of the region's Hui-Muslim identity. However, the trend of foreign Muslim's migrating to the area prompted the PRC to end this flow due to concerns over the threat of external actors radicalizing the region's Muslim minorities. Ptácková concludes that this flip-flop reveals a certain paranoia within the PRC, one that limits the kinds of diplomatic strategies available to the government.

The final two chapters in this volume stress how cultural diplomacy evolves through the dynamic interaction of transnational actors. In chapter 8, Jens Damm evaluates the relationship between the Confucius Institute in Berlin and the Goethe Institute in Shanghai. It is suggested that the cultural output of these organizations is often determined by local actors despite their officially subordinate role to the official diplomatic aims of the organizations in question. It is inferred that how a state adapts to local circumstance dramatically impacts the effectiveness of its wider image and associated diplomatic goals. This dynamic is explored in chapter 9, where Gary Rawnsley, Ming-yeh, and Ming Yu, argue that the PRC's documentary co-production model is a demonstration of how the state, in its willingness to negotiate "culture" with various state actors, can pave a path toward a more progressive model of cultural diplomacy. It is suggested that because the PRC has largely remained open to collaboration and criticism in this area, the state's documentary film and media sector has been able to flourish.

Ptáčková et al. suggest that to understand the PRC's various cultural diplomatic strategies scholars must have a holistic understanding of the complex web of forces that influence the different areas the PRC has targeted for its external propaganda work. This method yields mixed results. Both chapters 3 and 7 would have benefitted from a more solid discussion on the complex relationship between the PRC and the United States; and the reasons – either right or wrong – why the PRC takes the actions it does. A deeper historical discussion of the Xinjiang region in the form of discussion about the Qing conquest of Eurasia (see Jacobs, 2016; Perdue, 2005) would have also helped set the stage for a more nuanced account of the complex historical reasons the PRC has remained militarily guarded in the North-West. Even still, chapters 5, 6, and 9 are strong, offering accounts of the relationship between non-state actors and the targets of the PRC's external propaganda work. These snapshots offer scholars of the PRC's cultural diplomacy a look at how the PRC is changing its cultural diplomacy work to synchronize its political messaging with its factual policies. What is of central importance to this collection is the revelation that this process of synchronization is a consequence not only of negotiations between the PRC and state actors, but also non-state actors. These negotiations can be between different transnational localities or sites of the PRCs cultural diplomacy. This emphasis, and the case studies in this collection, stand as evidence for the possibility of further work on the relationship between non-state actors and the PRC. This template will be of utility to scholars interested in discussion on the PRC's evolving cultural diplomatic apparatus.

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