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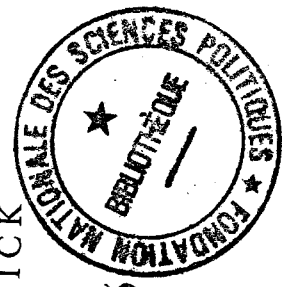
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Charm Offensive

How China's Soft Power
Is Transforming the World

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Yet Xinhua is not Reuters or another private corporation: it remains run by China's State Council, essentially an organ of the government; the Xinhua office even served as the de facto Chinese embassy in Hong Kong before the handover in 1997. Xinhua takes orders from the Party's Publicity Department, exhibiting the kind of reverence for government spin that the White House could only dream about. It cannot produce evenhanded coverage of topics sensitive to Beijing, like Taiwan or Tibet. After the death in 2005 of Zhao Ziyang, the most reform-minded Chinese leader, who was purged after the Tiananmen riots of 1989, state media published only a brief obituary, though Zhao had been one of the most important leaders in modern Chinese history. Xinhua's reporters still receive training, or indoctrination, sessions heavy in seminars on the necessary role of the Communist Party. Its journalists also still provide a kind of intelligence information service for top Chinese leaders. According to the global watchdog Reporters Without Borders, "Hand-picked journalists, who are regularly indoctrinated, produce reports for the Chinese media that give the official point of view and others—classified 'internal reference' for the country's leaders. . . . Xinhua remains at the heart of the censorship and disinformation system established by the Chinese Communist Party."⁵

The new Chinese public diplomacy also includes setting up networks of informal summits, either in China or in the developing world, designed to bring together opinion leaders. These summits allow China to subtly emphasize its role as a potential partner for investment and trade and its position as a leader of the developing world. The larger informal summits include the China-Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum, attended last year by nearly one thousand officials from China and the Caribbean; the Boao Forum for Asia,

which brings together Asian businesspeople into a Davos-style World Economic Forum-like event; and the Asean-China Eminent Persons Group, which unites former statesmen and has produced a comprehensive roadmap for the future of Southeast Asia-China relations. The Chinese government also has promoted smaller summits, making Beijing a center for meetings of international Chinese-language media and of Chinese studies associations.⁶

As China has upgraded its public diplomacy, like broadcasting and visitor programs, it also has invested in improving its diplomatic corps. Over the past fifteen years, Chinese diplomats told me, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has begun to retire older, more ideological diplomats, replacing them with a young generation of envoys who speak better English and local languages. One 2005 study suggested that one-half of the country's four thousand diplomats are less than thirty-five years old. According to another study of China's relations with Latin America, since the 1980s Beijing has actively tried to upgrade the quality of its diplomats in the Western Hemisphere. It has sent 110 young Chinese officials to a university in Mexico to learn Spanish and deepen their understanding of Latin America. It has improved the capacity of its own think tanks focusing on Latin America, ensuring that comprehensive research was available on the Western Hemisphere for Chinese officials. And China kept its Latin America specialists focused on Latin America, so that someone like Jiang Yuande, China's ambassador to Brazil in 2006, had already done thirty years of tours around the Portuguese-speaking world, in countries like Angola and Cape Verde, before he arrived in Brasilia.⁷

China can keep these diplomats in the region because, unlike the United States, which until recently allowed Foreign

Service officers significant leeway to choose postings, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs can mandate overseas assignments. Chinese diplomats say that the ministry has pushed envoys to focus on one country and repeatedly return there, rather than moving from, say, Uzbekistan to Mexico, as an American diplomat might. Top Chinese diplomats in nations like Cambodia or Thailand now often have done three or even four rotations in those countries before rising to the rank of ambassador, developing extensive contacts in the local business and political communities and building language skills to the point that locals sometimes think they are native speakers. "China sends the A team here," says one US diplomat in Thailand. "Their ambassador here is really plugged in, and speaks excellent Thai." "It used to be that the Chinese officials just stayed in the embassy, and you never saw them," says one Asian diplomat who served in the Philippines. "Now they are so skilled on the ground they know more than anyone else. If someone's wife is having an affair, they know it. If someone is having problems with their kid, they know it." By comparison, a Council on Foreign Relations analysis of Southeast Asia warned that a "critical shortfall in US regional policy is our lack of a skilled core of professionals familiar with the language, culture, and political-military climates."⁸

Beijing supports its diplomacy through constant visits by senior Chinese officials to developing nations, and through nonstop coverage in Xinhua. In a study of China's new global foreign policy, National Defense University's Philip Saunders found that in 2002 China's president and premier spent more than four times as many days abroad as they had in 1993. In Asia, a short hop from Beijing but a twenty-hour flight from Washington, the contrast in face time by senior officials can be stark. A Singaporean diplomat estimated that China sends

nearly three hundred senior-level delegations annually to the city-state, far outstripping any American efforts; many visits include the signing of new agreements on trade or investment. As one US ambassador in Southeast Asia remembers, when Southeast Asian nations last year decided to create an early warning system to prevent future tsunamis, the United States sent a low-level official to the brainstorming group. The Chinese, by contrast, sent a senior cabinet-level official, who reaped plaudits for Beijing. "It was like God had appeared at a conference," the ambassador remembers.⁹

Across the developing world, in fact, diplomats constantly complain that they do not see enough of top American officials, who have focused intensely on the Middle East. Southeast Asian nations raged that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped a major annual regional meeting in 2005. One White House policy maker bemoaned that she could not persuade America's former trade representative, Rob Portman, to make even one extended visit to Southeast Asia. In fact, when I compared visits by top Chinese and American officials—cabinet rank in America or the Chinese equivalent—to Thailand and Cambodia in 2004 and 2005, I found that senior Chinese officials made at least twice as many visits to Bangkok and Phnom Penh.¹⁰

Promotion of Chinese-culture and Chinese-language studies is a major component of this public diplomacy. As Hu Yuying, a deputy to the National People's Congress, told the *China Daily*, promoting the use of the Chinese language will contribute to spreading Chinese culture and increasing China's global influence.¹¹ "It can help build up our national strength and should be taken as a way to develop our country's soft power," Hu said.

used its influence in a vastly different way. Chinese companies, including many with close government links, have decimated Burma's northern forests, which are supposedly protected from logging, and which have been called "very possibly the most biodiverse, rich temperate area on earth."¹¹

With soaring demand for housing in China's cities, and with China's own forest cover depleted or protected, China's builders needed new sources of lumber. In Kachin State, the far north of Burma, the Chinese companies found a solution. Between 1984 and 2005, according to one report, the number of Chinese logging companies operating near Kachin State rose from four to more than one hundred. Investigators for the watchdog group Global Witness reported seeing "vast quantities of timber" stockpiled in towns along the China-Burma border. Nearly all that felled timber probably was illegally cut.¹²

China itself has some of the world's weakest environmental controls, and Beijing has repressed green activist groups, fearing they could spark broader protests against the government; in October 2005, China arrested members of Chinese activist group Green Watch. Given this background, Beijing and Chinese provincial governments seemed unlikely to intervene in the deforestation of its neighbor, though China officially had signed international bans on illegal logging. "By taking action [to fight deforestation], the government of the PRC can demonstrate that it takes its responsibility as a regional and global power seriously, and provide leadership for other timber importing countries," Global Witness argued. But China did nothing of the sort. Chinese officials seemed to encourage the illegal timber trade, with local leaders allegedly encouraging the cross-border cutting.¹³

By 2005, Global Witness reported, "large tracts of forest adjacent to the China-Burma border have been almost entirely

logged out," mainly by Chinese companies. Its estimate suggests that 98 percent of Burma's exports of felled timber to China come from illegal sources, such as supposedly protected forests. Global Witness further reported that revenue from the timber trade was funding low-intensity local conflicts inside Burma.¹⁴

Burma is not unique. Global Witness believes that half of China's total felled timber imports—wood from not only Burma but also many other nations, including Indonesia—come from illegal sources. Overall, between 1997 and 2005, China's imports of forest products more than tripled in volume, with illegal wood accounting for much of that.¹⁵

Today China is a rising power whose role in the world's future remains unclear. Beijing could wield its soft power responsibly. As one analysis by the US National Intelligence Council suggests, in the coming years China may "remain an authoritarian state . . . but respect the rules of the order, work within the existing framework [of international institutions] and seek to change it by peaceful and legitimate means." American leaders unsurprisingly urge China to go in this direction. "China has a responsibility to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success," said former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick, a longtime Asia hand, in a major policy address in September 2005. China should "recognize that the international system sustains their peaceful prosperity," Zoellick added.¹⁶

Some Chinese officials seem to agree with Zoellick. After all, Beijing argues that it wants only peace and harmony in the world; the Chinese government's 2005 white paper on foreign policy claims, "To achieve peaceful development is a sincere hope and unremitting pursuit of the Chinese people." As Fu

Ying, the former Chinese ambassador to the Philippines and current envoy to Australia, notes, "Throughout history, the rise of most of the world's large countries was inevitably the result of bullying, weakening, and exploiting other countries." China, Fu Ying argues, will be different. Or as one Chinese diplomat told me, if China is truly going to become a world leader, it will have to use its soft power to serve the global good, and it must use the United Nations and regional groups to solve serious problems.¹⁷

Yet as China's soft power grows, its influence also could prove disastrous in other countries—an obstacle overseas to environmental protection, to better labor policies, to corporate governance. Whichever way it goes, of course, in a more interlinked and globalized world, where countries can utilize much faster tools of communication, China's influence will spread faster than that of other rising powers, like the United States, Germany, and Japan, did during the early twentieth century.

China could essentially wind up exporting its own domestic weaknesses. Before China became a major player on the world stage, its internal policies were a potential nightmare for people in Shenzhen or Guangzhou or Shenyang. Today Chinese policies could be a nightmare for people in São Paulo or Guatemala City or Surabaya.

Consider China's labor policies. Most Chinese companies still do not treat their employees well at home, and developing countries have few of the tools necessary to enforce labor rules on powerful multinationals, whether from America or China. Chinese companies have no experience dealing with independent unions, since the All China Federation of Trade Unions, an organization controlled by the Communist Party, runs all unions in the country, and the government sometimes jails people who try to start independent unions.

Most Chinese corporations do not know how to interact with nongovernmental organizations, activists, shareholder groups, and other groups overseas. Many Chinese heavy industries, such as coal mining, have horrible safety and environmental records. Being a coal miner in China must rank among the world's most dangerous occupations; thousands of Chinese miners die in accidents each year, often because their employers did not purchase even minimal safety equipment.¹⁸

There are clear positive signs of how China will use its soft power. Beijing seems ready to embrace multilateral institutions. In the past decade, besides enthusiastically joining regional groups and creating its own multilateral initiatives, Beijing has sent Chinese peacekeepers or police under the UN flag to desperate places like Haiti and Liberia and East Timor. In Liberia, China has contributed some six hundred men to the UN mission, and today China has more troops participating in UN peacekeeping missions than any other permanent member of the Security Council.¹⁹

China also has begun to mediate other nations' disputes—a task of responsible great powers. This is a significant change from China's recent past, and can scarcely be overstated. If Beijing is to begin playing a role as a mediator of conflict, joining with the United States in solving many problems, it could dramatically transform power dynamics in Asia and elsewhere.

In some cases, China has proven a proactive mediator. On most days, the street outside the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, fills early with pedicab drivers shutting old women to market and Thai diplomats greeting local businessmen with modest bows. But one winter day in 2003, a far different crowd gathered outside the Thai mission. For centuries, Thailand and Cambodia have bickered over their bor-

ders, their ancient history of wars and incursions, and their modern-day politics.

In January 2003 Cambodian newspapers misquoted a Thai television pop star as calling Cambodians "worms" and questioning whether Angkor Wat, Cambodia's gargantuan ancient temple complex, should be returned to Thailand, which controlled the temple at several points in history. Stoked by the report, and by Cambodian politicians' anti-Thai comments, mobs attacked Thai-owned businesses across Phnom Penh, causing millions of dollars worth of damage and forcing many Thai citizens to evacuate the city on Thai military aircraft.²⁰

Hundreds of young Cambodian men ran toward the Thai embassy, where they smashed through the mission's glass doors. Inside, they pulled down pictures of Thailand's beloved king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, and stomped on his face. Thailand's ambassador scrambled out the back of the embassy, hopped over the guard wall, and ran down to the river, where he escaped the rioters, James Bond style, in a speedboat. Nothing angers a Thai more than an insult to the country's monarch, who has led Thailand through fifty years of political turbulence. When the Philadelphia *City Paper*, a local free weekly, once ran a throwaway advertisement for a local bar portraying the Thai king as a hip-hop star, the Thai deputy consul in America warned that the ad could disrupt US-Thai relations, and Thais from Bangkok deluged the paper's offices with angry phone calls and thousands of emails.²¹

Not surprisingly, images of Cambodians stomping and burning the Thai king's picture infuriated Thailand's population. In response, Thailand moved an aircraft carrier near the Cambodian border and threatened to send commandos into its neighbor's territory. A border war seemed possible. "Cambodia must burn," one Bangkorian told *Time* magazine. "This

is the worst incident in international relations between Thailand and Cambodia," Thailand's prime minister announced.²²

Both countries needed someone to broker their feud, and Cambodia has poor relations with the United States. So the two sides turned to Beijing. After the Chinese ambassador in Phnom Penh issued a statement asking Cambodia and Thailand to cool down, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi called in the Thai and Cambodian representatives in Beijing and helped them lay out their grievances. In private, several diplomats told me, the Chinese minister warned the neighbors to normalize relations as soon as possible, or risk angering China—something neither Cambodia nor Thailand wanted to do, since both are increasingly reliant on trade and aid from China. Chastened, the two sides began to patch up their relationship, with Cambodia's own king, Norodom Sihanouk, sending a personal apology to the Thai monarch. By March 2003, Thailand and Cambodia had reopened their customs posts, and their relationship had normalized.²³

China has started mediating even more important disputes. In October 2002, after a decade of supposedly cooperating with international efforts to monitor its nuclear program, North Korea admitted that it had been secretly enriching uranium. Soon after, a top North Korean official, Li Gun, took US Assistant Secretary of State Jim Kelly aside at a meeting in Beijing. Li Gun nonchalantly informed him that the North, one of the most closed and unpredictable countries in the world, possessed nukes and might be willing to sell them to other nations.²⁴

With few levers to pressure North Korea, and no access to high levels of dictator Kim Jong Il's isolated regime, the United States and North Korea's Asian neighbors turned to China, Pyongyang's longtime ally and major provider of aid, food,

and energy. Beijing pushed North Korea and the United States to hold bilateral talks. Later China volunteered to host six-way talks on the North Korean nuclear program involving Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo. The former US envoy to North Korea, Charles Pritchard, admitted that without China's help, there would have been no six-way talks at all. And when the North Koreans balked at coming to the table, Chinese officials engaged in rounds of shuttle diplomacy to bring them in and also handed North Korea increased aid. At the same time, top Chinese officials invited Kim to booming southern China in order to study China's economic reforms, potential models for remaking North Korea's Stalinist economy. To support reform, China stepped up training for key North Korean bureaucrats, teaching them about modern economic management.²⁵

After several rounds of discussions, when North Korea declared that it would withdraw from the six-party talks, Beijing openly expressed anger with the North. To put more pressure on North Korea, Beijing reportedly shut off an oil pipeline to Pyongyang for three days in 2003, then cracked down on North Korea's banking in the Chinese territory of Macau.²⁶ Again, China simultaneously offered new disbursements of aid to North Korea, and when North Korea tested a nuclear weapon, China agreed to the major step of imposing sanctions on Pyongyang, temporarily cut off oil exports to North Korea, and sent a high-level delegation to Pyongyang to try to defuse the crisis, bringing the North back to the bargaining table.

Beijing wasn't shy about taking credit for its diplomacy. "With respect to the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, China has worked tirelessly with the other relevant parties, and succeeded in convening and hosting" the talks, noted the 2005 government white paper on Chinese foreign policy. Even some

impartial observers agreed. "I think we should really focus on the positive aspects of [the six-party talks], including the absolutely rightful role of China," said Aleksandr Iltichev, a Russian UN expert on North Korea.²⁷

Getting Pyongyang to the table helped China's appeal with other countries, too. Since the talks began, South Korean President Roh Mun-Hyun, a former human rights lawyer who has led Seoul toward Beijing's orbit, consistently has looked to China for cues on how to handle North Korea.²⁸ Asian news outlets, meanwhile, typically portrayed China as a rational actor mediating between two angry, unbalanced nations led by madmen—North Korea and the United States.

Besides mediating disputes, China has utilized its charm in other positive ways. Over the past five years, as China has developed a serious heroin problem in parts of the country, it has worked not only with Burma but also with many other nations in battling-drugs. According to America's Drug Enforcement Administration, Chinese authorities "clearly understand the threat posed by drug trafficking." Beijing has signed several UN drug conventions, hosted major multinational meetings in China on drug control, and started training Asian prosecutors on combating transnational crime like drug trafficking. Working with Asian neighbors and with the United States, the Chinese authorities in 2003 busted one of the biggest drug syndicates, an organization known as "125."²⁹

Beijing also has taken a proactive stance on fighting trafficking in human beings. "The Chinese authorities . . . have become relatively progressive on issues of human trafficking," says Heather Peters, an expert on trafficking who has worked for several UN agencies. Peters says the Chinese government has supported her efforts to teach women in Chinese border

