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Abstract

The paper explores some of the reasons for the apparent incommensurability of interpretative attitudes in the consumption of Chinese media products in the West. It also addresses the difficulties faced by existing audience theories in explicating cross-cultural media communication, especially as it applies to the cultural and political divide between China and the West, a phrase I use non-reductively as no more than an abbreviation. The focus of ‘Politics of Reception’ is on the different ‘horizons of expectation’ that inform that politics. I do so by a cross-cultural analysis of the reception of such ‘soft-power’ products as the films of Zhang Yimou; the reception in the West of China’s Confucius Institutes; and the Chinese intervention in the Kadeer incident in Australia. The paper concludes with a theorization of the principles that inform the politics of Chinese and Western critical and evaluative attitudes.

Keywords

Chinese soft power; audience research; media reception; horizon of expectations; Confucian obedience; normative nominalism; critique.

The way China is represented is always conditioned by the way the West is representing itself, and the two representations subsequently reinforce each other.

(Barr 2011: 3)
**Introduction**

Cross-cultural reception is a complex phenomenon and yet, in spite of a large corpus of literature on mass media audiences, there is very little that seriously addresses this complexity. In this paper, I deal with cultural exchange between China and the West, a phrase to be understood non-reductively. I do not approach my topic from the position of ‘cultural essentialism’ or ‘culturalism’. Differences in political systems do play a significant role in the communication between China and the West; so much so that many Chinese soft power products are viewed as propaganda in the West simply because they issue from a Communist regime. What I wish to emphasize is that apart from the question of political systems and ideologies (Imperial China, China’s Republic, China under Mao Zedong, reform era Communism, or a possible future liberal democratic Chinese society), there are certain historical strands of thought in Chinese culture which we can distil from the various historical forms Confucianism has undergone since the *Analects* and which still exert an influence on Chinese society today and which, if left unaddressed, weaken our cross-cultural as well as political analysis.

Since the ‘politics of reception’ highlights the fact that we cannot easily separate media reception from politics, I will focus initially on the way different political systems respond to cross-cultural media products, with an emphasis on how Chinese media products are consumed in the West. ‘Reception’ in this sense is to be understood as a ‘politics of media consumption practices’. Such a politics is likely to reflect not only the immediacy of audience responses to foreign media messages, but also the differences between the political and cultural systems from which those responses emanate. As to my second theme, the politics of audience research, Chinese media production and its readings in the West highlight the fact that, with some exceptions, (Chilton 2009; Hallin and Mancini 2003; Curran and Park 2000; Mughan and Gunter 2000) the bulk of audience research is only marginally useful since it primarily addresses national, domestic media consumption. (Oates 2008; Staiger 2005; Ross and Nightingale 2003;
Gunter 2000; Morley 1992) In the arena of media reception, the cross-cultural perspective is a game changer. Media producers in the national arena are able to steer the expectations of their audience in a way that is not possible across cultural divides, where there is neither a shared history of values nor the benefit provided by ratings and audience feedback. Cross-cultural audience expectations are difficult to gauge, especially across the divide that still separates Western societies from China.

The paper makes two claims. (1) Whatever the fine-grain differences between Chinese and Western cultural and political attitudes, there is still a deep chasm separating Chinese and Western ‘horizons of expectations’ in the reception of cultural products. (Jauss 1982: 44, 88f., 141f.) This incommensurability is likely to diminish in the future; for the time being at least it profoundly informs the ways China’s media products are viewed in the West. In light of this incompatibility, the paper analyses not only the exchange of media products between China and West, but also the motivation underlying their reception. (2) The bulk of media audience research is ill suited for cross-cultural analysis, both in its theoretical premises and research methods.

**Chinese media and soft power products**

In light of these opening remarks I ask, What is Chinese soft power? And what is it for? According to Joseph Nye, an early theorist of the concept, soft power is the ability to ‘shape the preferences of others’ by means of presenting one’s own culture as attractive and persuasive. Soft power includes anything that makes societies ‘want what you want’. (Nye 2004: 5) Soft power is a means to ‘seek influence through “culture”’. (Chua 2012: 119) As such, the mastery of soft power is crucial to the CCP’s ‘efforts to win the hearts and minds of the people’. (Montogery 2010:2) These efforts have been effective also to
the extent that they have captured ‘much of the world’s attention in the past decade’. (Keane 2007: 34)
The success of China’s emerging ‘soft power’ (ruan shili), Michael Keane observes, ‘was symbolized by the Beijing Olympics in 2008’. (Keane 2011: 16) Yet there is a degree of reticence in the Western reception of Chinese media products that has less to do with cultural Chineseness than with the fact that the soft power package also contains a hefty dose of the ideological persuasion of the current Chinese government. Certainly, Chinese soft power has not been quite as effective as it was intended to be. (Huang 2013)

Another complicating factor is that Chinese soft power is as much ‘inward-looking’ as it is ‘outward-looking’. (Barr 2011: 28; 35; 2012: 82) There is a marked difference between its domestic purpose in creating a positive ‘collective imagination’ and its international aim of ‘branding the nation’ globally. How to reconcile these goals is a serious challenge for Chinese media producers. At home Chinese producers face two hurdles, official support and censorship. This affects ‘what Chinese citizens can possibly consume or produce in terms of information online’. (Oates 2008: 185) Challenged by the dual goal of global and domestic targeting, the progressive wing of the CCP has realized that any domestic employment of ‘raw power inevitably harms Beijing’s own efforts to promote a peaceful image’. (Barr 2012: 85; 83) What is on offer domestically ‘needs to avoid “chaos” at all cost, including heavy-handed censorship, in order to ensure … social stability and national unity’, (Sun 2010: 66) while what is disseminated abroad must take greater cognizance of Western audience expectations.

Reception, then, is a good deal more complex here than it is in national media consumption where ‘those with control of the means of production run cultural life’. (Staiger 2005: 77) For nowhere does
the observation that processing media messages is ‘a learned cultural practice’ make more sense than in
the soft power exchange between China and the West. (Brasell 1992: 55) If the West is to become a
more competent reader of Chinese media products, it needs to significantly expand its interpretive
frame of reference. According to ‘cultivation theory’, the West must embrace an ‘accumulation of media
experience’ if it is to appreciate ‘media influence’. (Staiger 2005: 59) Such an ‘accumulation’ has already
taken place to a certain degree in the domain of the reception of Chinese cinema, foremost through the
films of Zhang Yimou. (Zhang 2004)

While Zhang Yimou’s early films tended to be banned in China for depicting the nation’s poverty,
simple folks and the immorality of sex scenes, they were received enthusiastically by Western audiences.
(Dai 1993) Although the enthusiasm was initially restricted to an elite of film buff’s, the awards his films
received at major festivals quickly spread Zhang Yimou’s reputation across the globe. However, while
Western audiences showered the Fifth Generation filmmaker from China with such accolades as ‘near
perfect’, ‘breathtaking’, ‘visual purity’, achieving the ‘original ambition’ of cinema as ‘a visual art form’,
his recent film The Flowers of War has been received with far less flattery. The intriguing point is that
while Zhang Yimou was honoured with the artistic directorship of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing based on
the global acceptance of his movies, (Kobak 2010) his latest film, equipped with all the features of
Hollywood, big stars, and a huge budget, has failed the test of Western audience expectations, being
reviewed as ‘a crude mix of commercial vulgarity and political propaganda’. (The Guardian) This stands
in strong contrast with China’s expectations for the film to at least being short-listed as ‘best foreign film’
in the 2012 Academy Awards. It is a puzzle for many Chinese that their film failed to gain international acclaim.
Another Chinese soft power product that has had a mixed reception in the West are the Confucius Institutes. Created and monitored by the Hanban, a non-profit branch of the Ministry of Education in Beijing, Confucius Institutes began to be offered to Western universities in 2002. Today there are about 369 such Institutes in over 100 countries around the world. (Churchman 2011) The official aim of the Confucius Institutes, backed up by Confucius Classrooms, is to spread Chinese good will, Chinese language teaching, and Chinese cultural values across the globe. To achieve this goal, Hanban has provided *logos* and *emblems*, books, audio-visual materials, on-line courses, Chinese instructors, as well as financial incentives. Chinese authorities defend the establishment of Confucius Institutes as an equivalent of the *Goethe Institut*, *Alliance Francaise*, and the *British Council*. Within a relatively short time since China’s educational initiative was greeted by a sizable body of critical commentary in the West. (Rudolph 2012; Churchman 2011; May 2011; Meyerson 2010; Ren 2010; Scarlatelli 2010; Starr 2009; Chey 2008; Maslen 2007) Western critics point out that there is no government interference in the curriculum of the European cultural institutions, while the opposite appears to be the case in Confucius Institutes. Some critics object to improper influence by the CCP over academic freedom (Schmidt 2010); to the absence of any discussion of human rights, of dissidents such as Liu Xiaobo and Ai Weiwei, of Tibet, Xinjiang, the Tiananmen Square episode; the topic of democracy (Ren 2010; Norrie 2011; Nakagawa 2011); and of other sensitive issues. Critics deplore a lack of academic freedom and a certain bias in the culture classes (Patty 2011); the possibility of increasing influence of a foreign state (Ricking 2012); that getting grants from China is a form of ‘dancing with the devil’ (Rudolph 2012); and the unacceptability of intellectual ‘no-go zones’. (Redden 2012) Objections are also raised against restrictions on the relation of Confucius Institutes with tertiary institutions in China by the policy of ‘prescribed partnerships’ and attempts at blocking guest speakers. As the President of the University of Manitoba Faculty Association put it, ‘it is inappropriate to allow any government, either foreign or domestic, control over a university classroom regardless of how much money they offer’. (Redden 2012)
In short, China’s Confucius Institutes have raised the suspicion of a communist ‘Trojan Horse’. (Paradise 2009; Meyerson 2010)

Not all countries have welcomed the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms without reservations. Japan and India government decided against permitting any to be established at their universities. Melbourne University has banished its Confucius Institute from its main campus. On 12 October 2011, a petition with 10,000 signatures was tabled in the New South Wales Parliament in Australia demanding the scrapping of the ‘Confucius Classroom Scheme’ to prevent foreign propaganda from being disseminated in the Australian school system. Though European intellectuals have not reacted as strongly to the introduction of Confucius Institutes at their universities, one topic has been widely discussed, the teaching of Chinese ‘exceptionality’, according to which Chinese culture is naturally different from any other. What the Europeans object to is the assumption that Europe and its intellectual off-springs are naturally critical. Instead, they insist that critique in all its forms has been a hard-won achievement since the Enlightenment, prior to which obedience to authority was not unlike obedience in the Confucian and Chinese communist sense.

In the diplomatic arena, soft power as an intriguing variant of the Chinese cultural campaign can be illustrated by the visit in 2009 of the exiled Uyghur Rabiya Kadeer to Australia. On 20 July 2009 the Melbourne Film Festival received a request from the Chinese Embassy in Canberra, asking the Festival to scrap an Australian documentary film, The Ten Conditions of Love. They also asked the Festival not to let the protagonist of the film, Rabiya Kadeer, address the audience. The Film Festival replied that they had no grounds to do so. Likewise, the Australian government resisted strong pressure by the Chinese government not to issue her a visa. To make matters even more precarious, Kadeer was also invited to offer a lecture at the prestigious National Press Club on 11 August. From China’s perspective, Rabiya
Kadeer is a criminal who, as the President of the World Uyghur Congress, instigated a violent riot on 5 July in Urumqi, causing 1,680 to be injured, and 184 deaths, including 137 ethnic Han Chinese and 46 Uyghurs. (Covered by *The Australian*, 5 August to 12 October, 2009)

Since Australia, like China, condemns terrorism, the Chinese government expected strong cooperation from the Australian government. Nor is it just the CCP and the Chinese government that view the matter in this light. Many Chinese, both inside and outside China, support their government’s hard line in trying to stop Kadeer’s efforts at ‘splitting’ the country. Reading the web, one quickly gets a sense of Han Chinese nationalist sentiments. In Australia, the Melbourne Film Festival website was targeted by Australian Chinese trying to prevent on-line ticket sales for *The Ten Conditions of Love*. Some condemned the unfair coverage of the issue by the Australian media. (*The Australian*, 17 August 2009) As one blogger writes, ‘Whenever there is a conflict, Western reporters will prefer to choose some selected views - you've guessed it right - the views that are opposed to China. ... They would rather prefer the Asians remain poor and under-developed, so that the superiority of Western civilization can be maintained in the region’. (Davi 14 August, 2009) One sarcastic comment reads, ‘I'm still waiting for the Aussies to invite the Indonesian terrorists who recently bombed Jakarta and killed Aussies, to present a film at the Melbourne International Film Festival’. (Ray 17 August 2009) It would seem that the clash of representations and interpretations remains irreconcilable. The two horizons are incommensurate, at least for the time being.

We would be amiss, though, if we were to read the three cases merely in such a binary fashion. For the situation of cross-cultural reception is not free of the logic of trans-national politics. Viewing the contrast without paying attention to the pressure exerted by global politics on the Chinese government and Chinese cultural sensitivities would assume a dubious interpretive innocence on the part of the Western critic. Moreover, in analysing the three cases we must acknowledge the fundamental
asymmetry that exists between subjects in China and the West. Ironically, it is the relative critical freedom of this reader which may be viewed with suspicion by Chinese media experts as part of the global hegemonic politics which post-Enlightenment reasoning finds hard to eschew. In this light, negative Western responses to Zhang Yimou’s latest film express an unfulfilled demand for a revolutionary potential rarely explored by and demanded from Hollywood. Western reactions to Confucius Institutes can be read as expressing a fear of a well-guarded turf suddenly threatened by a serious competitor; and the Kadeer case could be said to expose a contrast between a well-developed degree of sensitivity in matters of freedom of expression and a not so well-nourished auto-critique of the shortcomings of Western political, economic, and social structures. In short, in the analysis of cross-cultural media reception, the Enlightenment heritage of critique should retain a certain distance from the dominant political and economic structures of the West.

**The Chinese soft power paradox**

In several speeches since the 6th Plenary Session of the CCP’s Central Committee in October 2011, Hu Jintao refers to Western media imports as ‘spiritual pollution’ and ‘hostile forces’ intent on weakening China by ‘Westernizing’ and dividing it. In the face of such threats, the Chinese need to be ‘vigilant’ and strengthen China’s cultural image ‘socialist core value system’ at home and abroad. (Hu 2012) Hu’s exhortation is a well-rehearsed repetition of ideas expressed in a speech in 2009 by Li Changchun, in charge of CCP propaganda, urging Chinese media to ‘go global’ by strengthening ‘our foreign language channels, expanding our partnership with foreign television organizations’ so that ‘our images and voice can reach thousands of homes in all parts of the world’. (Sun 2010: 54f.)
Such pronouncements appear to be aimed primarily at strengthening the legitimacy of the CCP, both domestically and internationally. In this double-directedness, China’s patriotism crusade blurs cultural and political nationalism. Not surprisingly, then, the call to soft power by the Chinese government has become a serious topic in the West. (Huang 2013; Liu 2012; Chua 2012; Barr 2012; 2011; Keane 2013; 2011; 2007; Montgomery 2010; Sun 2010; Ding 2009; Li 2009; Suzuki 2009; Hunter 2009; Young and Jeong 2008; Guo 2004) The Chinese leadership has realized that ‘the total strength of Chinese culture and its global influence is not compatible with China’s international status’. (Hu 2012) So it makes sense to boost China’s global, cultural influence to achieve a ‘competitive advantage’. Only in this way, the Party leadership believes, will they be able to overcome China’s ‘third affliction’, its still largely negative image in the world.

What has not escaped the China watchers’ attention is the somewhat paradoxical nature of this ‘charm offensive’. (Kurlantzick 2007 passim; Barr 2012: 81) It is paradoxical that Confucius, rejected until recently as feudal anathema, is now being reconstituted in a very different image, with the accent on harmony, moral values, and peace. On the one hand, there is the traditional Confucius in the Analects, still a popular classic in China, advocating a steep social hierarchy with an individual prince at the top, ruling over an elite of gentlemen and a mass of labouring peasants. On the other hand, today’s China is representing herself to the world as an egalitarian society in which everyone is able to participate in the evolving market economy under the governance of a political collective, even if in reality such a picture does not stand up to scrutiny. Certainly, the new Confucian fiction is carefully groomed to optimize current Chinese soft power aims. The return to Confucius symbolizes the new China as imagined by the government: ‘educated, orderly, harmonious, respectful, unified’. To this extent at least, the sage is a perfect model for the type of ‘harmonious’ society the Party wishes to project. (Barr 2012: 91; cf.
Yet, as Liu Kang has argued, the soft power campaign has also revealed a fundamental crisis of ‘cultural identity’ in today’s China. (Liu 2012)

Paradoxical too is the hostility of the Chinese leadership to Western and especially Hollywood culture. For one, this opposition is not shared by the population at large; more to the point, officially sponsored films with their patriotic themes emulate precisely a kind of Hollywood style rejected by China’s leaders in Western media products. In spite of years of political guidance designed to immunize Chinese viewers against the lure of Hollywood, when the Western blockbusters Titanic and Avatar where screened in China, they were greeted with embarrassing enthusiasm by millions. As a result, some home made competitors, such as the bio-drama Confucius (2010), had to be shelved. However, the extraordinary quota of no more than 20 movies from the West being allowed to be screened to Chinese audiences per year is hardly motivated by the fear that ‘envisaging an alternative world might produce political action’. (Staiger 2005: 112) After all, the quota is widely circumvented via the internet and other legal as well as illegal avenues. The fear of revolutionary potential of too much Hollywood may very well be overshadowed by a resistance to ‘cultural imperialism’ (Tomlinson 1997) and imperial ‘penetration’. (Wang 2005: 28) Moreover, one of the mechanisms of dealing with a variety of cultural features from within and outside of China is their hybridization into a ‘cultural patchwork’. (Tao 2005: 69) Nevertheless, the idea of revolution remains a topic, ‘no matter how hidden and elusive it is in the profit- and consumption driven contemporary era’. (Yang 2009: xv) Paradoxical too is that Chinese producers are urged to make their products attractive to the West while they find themselves constricted by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, whose guidelines disapprove of time travel, myths, and frivolous plots.
Different ‘horizons of expectations’ can be said to be a result also of the asymmetrical relations between Chinese viewers and subjects in liberal democracies that are at work in the following case. On 23 July 2012 both CCTV 4 and Australia’s Channel 10 reported the heaviest rainfall in Beijing since 1961. Whereas Channel 10 showed images of disrupted city life, CCTV 4 chose to turn the natural disaster into a story of ‘good people and good deeds’. Volunteers were shown driving to Beijing airport to collect stranded passengers. Perhaps the two ‘horizons of expectations’ remain artificially incommensurable as a consequence of political interference. Yet, political steering is not the only factor to be considered here. The interpreting subjects are also culturally constituted in markedly different ways. On the one hand, we have an audience that appears traditionally sceptical, even if thoughtlessly so; on the other hand, the Chinese audience meets official messages halfway, yearning as they do for the rise of a once more glorious China. Cultural nationalism is a powerful force in China. As such, the ‘horizon of expectations’ is by no means a self-evident concept. It requires historical, cultural, social, and political specification.

**Incommensurable approaches**

Important for cross-cultural media consumption is that producers are themselves always already an audience; they ‘actively imagine the ways’ in which ‘audiences will respond to their works’. (Nightingale 2003: 368f.) In our case, the West to be persuaded has not been imagined in an entirely effective manner. Otherwise it would be difficult to understand why Chinese cultural production has not been more readily embraced in the West. Nightingale’s ‘imagined audience’ must also be distinguished from the measurable, empirical audiences and their function in the constitution of cultural objects. This essential distinction is sometimes neglected in audience research, as in Barrie Gunter observation that
‘reception analysis is effectively the audience research arm of modern cultural studies, rather than an independent tradition’. (Gunter 2000: 19) This forgets the important point of reception theory that complex objects such as stories are not empirical data but imagined constructs, *intentional objects*, requiring *constitution*, in the sense of ‘fleshing out’ in the mental, discursive and nonverbal acts of individuals within cultural frames. A second perspective influential in reception theory is the notion of ‘horizon’ made famous by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’, an approximating process by which the culturally distant texts can be appropriated by the interpreter. (Gadamer 1985: 273f.; 337f.) The concept of ‘horizon’ has become popular also in the wake of the work of Jauss, who foregrounds the necessary interaction of a ‘producing subject’ and the ‘consuming subject’. (Jauss 1982: 15) With reference to Gadamer and the *Analects*, John Makeham emphasizes the *hypothetical* character of our readings as a result of our inevitable involvement in the constitution of meaning. I take this as a given. What I want to rescue from the complex relativity of interpretation is that there have survived certain Confucian principles in spite of the many transformations of the *Analects*, such as the summary value of obedience to authority in contemporary China and a concomitant scepticism towards *critique*. (Makeham 2003: 12f. 205) For successful cross-cultural media interpretation to occur, at least three different kinds of comprehension appear to be required: of generic norms; the history of forms; and the opposition between fiction and social reality. (Jauss 1982: 24; 1989: 151ff.) In cross-cultural media consumption, this translates into the minimal triad of generic innovation, the historical intertextuality of styles of production, and the dialectic between culturally distinct media messages and the interpretation of ambient social-political situations.

Under the influence of the Birmingham School the notion of reception has shifted from individual reading performance to reception by mass audiences and modes of consumption, with various
emphases: on the processes of ‘encoding/decoding’; (Hall 1980) on the TV viewer as an active subject and the limits of discursive control; (Ang 1991) on the ethnography of consumer practices, (Moores 1995) as the continuum from ‘impersonation’ to ‘improvisation’, (Nightingale 2003) as a practice of contestation within the logic of capitalist postmodernity, (Ang 1996) as well as the notion of the ‘diffused audience’ with a sociology of performance, (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) media and democracy, (Liebes and Curran 1998) media in everyday life, (Alasuutari 1999) the message cognition process, (Wicks 2000; Gunter 2000) the politics of popular culture, (Ruddock 2001) and on the relation of audience and identity. (Gauntlett 2007) Useful as many of these studies are for telling us about national audiences and their subdivisions into class, gender, age group, and other categories, they are in need of being complemented by cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives. Much the same can be said of ‘reinforcement models’, ‘power models’ in terms of media effects, ‘quantification models’ and their ‘behavioural’ relations. (Staiger 2005: 66) Nor indeed do the key concepts of audience research of ‘attendance (cinema), watching (television), listening (radio), and reading (newspaper and magazines)’ satisfactorily address the problematic of cross-cultural reception. (Gunter 2000: 94)

From the cross-cultural perspective of ‘Made in China’ in the West, I also want to take issue with such influential analyses as those by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel De Certeau. The tendency to reduce cultural dispositions to socioeconomic realities, as in the work of Bourdieu, does not explain very well why such deeply rooted cultural dispositions as Confucian obedience and the Chinese conception of language as normative nominalism persist stubbornly in the era of socialist market capitalism. (Bourdieu 1984: 288ff.; 334ff.; 391ff.) A similar lack of explanatory force can be observed if we choose De Certeau’s central theses in The Practice of Everyday Life to interpret the persistence of cultural attitudes in contemporary China. To be sure, it is precisely local and individual ‘tactics’ of survival in the face of government
'strategies' that constitute a popular form of resistance to dominant power. (De Certeau 1984) Yet neither Bourdieu’s nor De Certeau’s analyses shed much light on the Western reception of Chinese media products.

In describing cross-cultural audiences, we must account for ‘the social world of actual audiences’ (Ang 1991: 13) while acknowledging that no audience can be successfully described as ‘external to its discursive construction’. (Hartley 1987: 125) Useful pointers to such a task can be found in Shaun Moores’ *Ethnography of Media Consumption*. If the central aim of reception ethnography is to understand the lived experience of media consumers, then it has to engage with ‘the situational contexts in which the media are used and interpreted’. Even though Moores focuses on the ‘micro-setting’ of an ‘anthropology of everyday consumption’, we can translate this approach to the level of cross-cultural analysis of media reception by extending it to the ‘macro-setting’ of global comparisons. (Moores 1995: 32) A similar case can be made for the approach employed by Paul Willis in *Common Culture*, though we cannot simply transfer his assumption of a common youth culture from a national plane to that of the cross-cultural reception of media products being exchanged between China and the West. What is transferable, it seems to me, are the parameters of the consumption of popular art, lifestyles, and the notion of ‘symbolic creativity’. That Willis’ idea of the symbolic play in the everyday culture of the young will become increasingly relevant for cross-cultural interpretation is borne out by the recent, raving reception of *Avatar* in China. (Willis 1990)

A broad approach to international cultural interaction has been proposed by Wanning Sun who speaks of ‘three related perceptions of the role of communication’ which we can bring to bear on the question of China’s soft power initiatives: (1) Communication as ‘a form of symbolic power’ transforming global perceptions of China to become compatible with China’s political and economic goals. (2) ‘Credibility-
gaining process’. Here, the emphasis is on merging, as far as possible, the differing horizons of expectation of ‘media producers and media consumers’. (3) A form of narrative by which the values of one society can be effectively transmitted to another society. Together, the three kinds of perception of communication, Sun argues, allow us to better understand ‘communication across different symbolic universes’. (Sun 2010: 56f.) This is useful, as is Chua’s tripartition into local, diasporic, and international, culturally distant audiences, each with its concomitant ‘field of analysis’ and investment of self-identification. (Chua 2012: 81f.)

From whichever side we approach cross-cultural exchange, we must accept that, on the one hand, ‘every culture strives to takes steps to preserve and promote its own aesthetic heritage and outlook’ and, on the other, ‘cultural/artistic preservation becomes a larger issue as economic globalization accelerates’. (Orlik 2009: 287f.) At the same time, from the perspective of reception, in ‘cross-cultural communication … the message is translated through a cultural lens or a cultural filter’. (Moriarty and Rohe 2005: 123) This relation is further complicated in cross-cultural interaction by the inevitable intrusion of political considerations, and this is nowhere more obvious than in the transmissions of cultural products between China and the West. It would seem that in this global exchange culture and politics are problematically intertwined, a relation complicated by the Chinese government’s use of culture to deflect international criticism. If this is indeed the case, a broadening of our focus on media products to include the nexus between culture and politics that plays a role in the deep differences between China and the West may provide the kind of perspective needed to come to grips with the ‘politics of reception’.
Confucian Obedience and Western Critique

From the Enlightenment slogan of ‘everything must submit to Kritik’ to present-day Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the hallmark of European thinking has been the many-faceted notion of critique. (Kant 1965: 9, n) Since its inception as an analysis of ‘the way social power, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk’ (van Dijk 2001:352) to the 1980s, CDA underwent a self-reflective evolution beyond its focus on lexical questions. (Fairclough 1995) Critical Discourse Analysis now views itself as social action (Wodak 2007); opposes social inequality (Van Dijk 2001); combines text immanent and social diagnostic criticism; promotes an equitable social order by embracing a normative, universalist politics of ‘deliberative democracy’, a fully functioning ‘public sphere’ in Habermas’s sense (Reisigl and Wodak 2001:34), and re-contextualises oppressive language use (Wodak and Fairclough 2010). In these senses, CDA is an explicit linguistic expression of an attitude that is all-pervasive in Western interpretive thinking, the disposition of political critique.

In contrast, in China, from Confucius’s invitation of the class to beat up the student who disagrees with him (Analects Book 11, 16), even if this incident is to be read no more than as a metaphor, to the ‘rectification of names’ in the work of Xunzi and beyond, Chinese classical thinking has been dominated by two principles diametrically opposed to post-Enlightenment thinking: the Confucian meta-rule of obedience and a conception of the role of language that one could sum up by the term normative nominalism, emphasizing moral prescription and social particulars. Accordingly, the use of language is neither determined by logical and syntactic relations nor by the relations between sentences and the objects of the world, nor by its abstractive potential, but rather by the normative rules emphasizing the specificity of titles, names and rank (ming), appropriate conduct (li) informed by moral principle (de). As a result, both the meta-rule of obedience and normative nominalism powerfully
reinforce social order and political authority. Since Confucius this has been a rarely disputed belief system which is effective to this day and still throws a retarding shadow on the introduction of Western notions of critique, especially as exercised by individuals. Having said this, neither Confucian obedience nor normative nominalism must be understood in any ‘timeless’ sense. The umbrella notion of Confucian obedience does not deny the fine-grain differentiation of the many forms that Confucianism has undergone throughout Chinese history, as forcefully argued for example by Joseph Levenson (1968). Rather, the summary phrase is meant to capture a fundamental principle that has survived, in ever changing historical guise, since its early formulations in the Analects. As such, Confucian obedience is to be seen as a distillation into a meta-rule of all the prescriptions and prohibitions that characterize historical Confucianism. Much the same can be said about normative nominalism. As Levenson himself in the end feels compelled to observe, in spite of all the historical modifications of Confucian thought ‘the broad conditions … have been laid down’, such that ‘China’s past will be kept in mind’ and ‘fragments from its world of values valued’. (Levenson 1968: 122f.) To that extent, the contemporary Chinese political unconscious still reflects political obedience as a value and views Western critique with suspicion.

At the same time, when we compare traditional and more recent Chinese notions of criticism (pipan, piping, lunheng, ziwo piping, da pipan, da ming, da fang, da bianlun) with their European, post-Enlightenment counterparts, we note a reversal of directionality. In the former, we are dealing with a top-down procedure, criticism by authority of subordinates; in the latter the reverse is the case. Since “everything must submit to critique,” we have a bottom-up directionality, from individuals and groups questioning authority. Nor has that aspect of Confucian teaching been drastically altered under consecutive communist Chinese regimes in spite of the temporary demotion of Confucius under Mao.
Quite the contrary. In its revamping of Confucian values, the present Chinese government, like all of its dynastic forerunners, is more than happy to perpetuate the Confucian meta-rule of political obedience.

Why, then, is China’s attempt to make its soft power campaign more effective a ‘mission impossible’? In Sun’s analysis, the failure of the ‘Chinese party-state and its media to present a convincing picture of openness, transparency, and objective media outlook in a sustained and systemic way’ is the result of China’s ‘inability to adopt a set of institutionally-sanctioned news values and news-gathering practices which are truly independent of political and ideological control and constraints’. (Sun 2010: 67f.) According to Chin-Hao Huang (2013), the failure of Chinese soft power in Asia is the result of Beijing resorting to military coercion in the resolution of territorial disputes and China’s refusal to political reform. What I want to add here is that the failure is not entirely China’s. Both Chinese and Western media producers and audiences are captives of their respective political and cultural frames of reference, a relation that is not exhausted by two deeply different histories of ideas, but must include also the logic of transnational politics which powerfully intervenes in cross-cultural media consumption.

Conclusion

Given these complications in the process of the cross-cultural reception of media products, it should not come as a surprise that the interpretive ‘horizons of expectations’ characteristic of Western and Chinese audiences should be different and, for the time being, incommensurate. This situation, however, cannot be viewed from the West as a failure to be laid solely at the doorstep of China. It has partly also to do with a Western fear of a rising China beneath which one can discover ‘a deeper set of questions concerning identity’. For if part of that fear has to do with the perception of China’s expansive nationalism, we must also realize that it is ‘easier to recognize nationalism in others than in oneself’
It would seem, as Michael Barr has remarked, that this fear is an expression of the West facing ‘a loss of centrality’ which amounts to nothing less than a serious ‘identity crisis’. (Barr 2011: 3; 6) To recognize this situation should not be beyond the West’s capacity not only for critique but also for auto-critique, systemic self-criticism. After all, ‘the conditions and boundaries of audiencehood are inherently unstable’. (Moores 1995: 2) Or, if the West, as Adorno and Horkheimer have argued, has lost its capacity for self-criticism as a result of mass media deception, then a serious examination of its fear of China may very well revive that capacity. (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 120-167) For only when Western fears of a rising China are transformed into a self-critical reassessment of its own cultural and political presuppositions, can a more constructive cross-cultural pattern of media consumption evolve. Only then can the current politics of reception as cross-cultural incompatibility be superseded by genuine global dialogue.

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