SOFT POWER, HARD TIMES

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IN AUGUST 2018, China's outward-looking press, including the *Global Times* and the *China Daily*, wanted the world to know all about one Chinese artist, Shu Yong 舒勇, whose Belt and Road Initiative-themed travelling exhibition Global Tour of *Golden Bridge on Silk Road* opened that month in Florence. It may be true, as the website of the Galerie Urs Meile (Beijing-Lucerne) proclaims, that Shu, who has long cultivated the

image of the maverick, 'stirs up trouble' by 'playing games with the government, enterprises and the media'. These days, however, Shu appears to be painting a straight Party line. The *China Daily* quoted him saying of his installation *Golden Bridge on Silk Road* that it 'symbolizes our hope for joint cooperation within the framework of the Initiative, the creation of a global community with a common destiny and shared interests'.¹

Golden Bridge on Silk Road
Source: CGTN, Twitter

Ai Weiwei's *Snake Ceiling*, an installation of children's backpacks to commemorate the Sichuan earthquake victims

Source: Alvin Tse, Flickr

Another Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei 艾未未, was making the news in August as well, when Beijing authorities demolished his studio, without warning, while he was in Germany. The lease had expired, and re-development of the entire district was on the cards. Yet the failure to give notice, resulting in damage to work that was stored there, fits a pattern of official harassment directed at the artist since he began his unwelcome investigations into the corruption-related deaths of some 5,000 children in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

In 2007, Ai Weiwei and Shu Yong had, in fact, been collaborators, with Ai curating a series of exhibitions by

Shu Yong at the Imperial City of Beijing gallery. Ai was then enough of a *persona grata* to have been invited to help design the stadium for the 2008 Beijing Olympics (the 'Birds Nest'). By the following year, the two artists' paths had diverged. Ai created a monumental installation of children's backpacks in Munich to commemorate the earthquake victims, while Shu celebrated the People's Republic of China's sixtieth anniversary with the performance piece *Ten Thousand People in Red Dress Sing the National Anthem* 一万多人身着红衣高唱国歌. Ai's *persona* switched to *non grata*, while the long-haired Shu became the artist-rebel even a Communist Party could love.

The Party-state would dearly like everyone else to love Shu more, and Ai Weiwei less. Yet if you Google Shu Yong's Florence opening in English, only a tiny handful of links appear: one to the *Global Times* and another, somewhat mysteriously, to the Chinese-language site of Macau's Wynne casino. Searching the news for Ai Weiwei's studio demolition, by contrast, produces more than a dozen pages of links to reports and videos in international media, art and architectural journals, and the webpages of human rights organisations such as PEN. Considered together with ongoing simmering controversies around the world about Confucius Institutes on university campuses and United Front activities in general, it sometimes seemed that in 2018, Chinese cultural soft power could not catch a break.

But beyond the headlines, China was using its culture in myriad ways to woo the world — from staging impressive exhibitions of imperial artefacts in Saudi Arabia and Salem, Massachusetts, and crowd-pleasing folk art from Hebei in Brussels, to festivals and celebrations such as Mexico City's Beijing Cultural and Creative Week in June.

David Shambaugh of the Brookings Institution has estimated China's

official 'public diplomacy' budget (which includes educational, media, and other investments as well as cultural programs) to be about US\$10 billion a year — about five times that of the US. And yet despite this massive spending, and even despite Trump — the first American president to appal the country's allies as much as its enemies, the Soft Power 30 index in 2018 ranked the US at number 4 and China at 27 — down 2 places from the year before.²

In his contribution to the 2018 *Soft Power 30 Report*, Zhang Yiwu 张颐武, of Peking University, suggests that China would be better off focusing its soft power efforts on developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where the market for cultural products is less 'saturated' than in the US and Europe, for example. He also questions the prioritisation of 'classical and elite' cultural forms in official promotions. Noting the role that pop culture plays in American and South Korean soft power, China ought also, he says, do more to promote its pop and even celebrity culture overseas.³

Chinese television shows and dramas, including the *Story of Yanxi Palace* 延禧攻略 (see Chapter 5 Forum 'The

Story of Yanxi Palace, pp.149–151), are indeed growing audiences in places as diverse as Pakistan and Tanzania. The Chinese–American coproduction *The Meg*, starring Chinese actress Li Bingbing 李冰冰, meanwhile, topped the US box office on its opening weekend in August. Hollywood, historically on the job for American soft power, is itself now moonlighting for China.

Crazy Rich Asians is another story: condemned by a *China Daily* op-ed writer Phillip J. Cunningham as ‘a white-bread film that follows tired old Western tropes’, and ‘exploration of crazy money [that] makes money look good’, Cunningham extols the made-in-China production and summer hit *Hello Mr Billionaire*. Despite having ‘a ridiculously convoluted plot riddled

with holes big enough to drive a high-speed train through’, he asserts it is ‘edgier’, and that it ‘feels real and sings free’.⁴

The new super-ministry for Culture and Tourism, created in early 2018, did not appear to approve of many artists ‘singing free’. It continued to ramp up censorship and controls over all aspects of Chinese art, pop culture, and intellectual life, on and offline, with a fresh push against ‘vulgar’ 粗俗 content, politically sensitive themes and celebrity culture. Responding to a letter from eight elderly artist-educators, including 99-year-old Mao portraitist Zhou Lingzhao 周令钊, meanwhile, supreme leader Xi Jinping 习近平 reminded China’s art academies of their mission to produce artists

Crazy Rich Asians

Source: Gamer Geek, Flickr

devoted to the 'building of socialism'. How that plays out for the Chinese art world remains to be seen. But a heavily censored, and politically directed culture that is strongly nationalistic and inadequately self-reflexive is unlikely to advance China's powers of cultural attraction.

China also scored a soft power own goal when the officially sponsored, nationally broadcast 2018 Spring Festival Gala featured a skit starring a Chinese actress in black-face and padded posterior and an African man in a monkey costume. As Andrew McCormick of Columbia University pointed out in *The Diplomat*,⁵ it's hardly the first time 'that China had offended along racial lines'. After critical reports appeared in Kenyan media, a Chinese embassy spokesperson in Nairobi complained that the

Kenyans were simply following the lead of the scandalised Western press: 'Kenyan people should have their own judgement'. This tone-deaf response only ensured that the controversy simmered on.

Chinese officialdom may be confounded and even angered by how China's internal cultural affairs, from the knocking down of an artist's studio to a tactless skit on television, can affect their nation's ability to project cultural soft power. Yet, as the US Council on Foreign Relations observed more generally in its February report 'China's Big Bet on Soft Power', 'Ultimately, China's tightening authoritarian political system is the biggest obstacle to the positive image the country and government yearn for'.⁶ Money can't buy you love.

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