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## China Radio International in the Digital Age: Propagating China on the Global Scenario

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### Abstract

The dramatic economic growth of China has meant a renewed international influence: it is widely recognized that China is, today, a central actor in the world economy and politics. Historically, economic power has always been accompanied by increasing international cultural influence and it is certain that China's economic stature will also be reflected in the diffusion of Chinese culture. This paper explores and discusses about the strategies of the Chinese government in strengthening its international influence and image – the so called soft power - in the digital culture by examining the case of China Radio International (CRI), the only Chinese state-owned radio allowed to broadcast to overseas audience. China has moved away from pure propaganda toward a nuanced public relation strategy. One tool of this strategy is the international expansion of its media in different modes in the framework of the “going out” policy, aiming to make the Chinese language, Chinese culture and the Chinese media more visible internationally. This paper finds that the Chinese broadcaster, more than its Western counterparts such as BBC and the Voice of America, largely employs social site networks and new media, making interactivity its pivotal point of development. International partnerships and cooperation with foreign media are another successful approach of CRI in winning China's influence abroad.

**Keywords:** soft power, China Radio International, digital culture,

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globalization, Beijing Olympics, international image.

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## Introduction

The East Asia's position is shifting from periphery to prominence, and China is the last "economic miracle" and the new dynamic centre of economic and commercial expansion (Arrighi, 2008: 2). China has always had an attractive traditional culture, but it has entered the realm of global popular culture as well: just think about the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the creation of Confucius Institutes around the world and the 24 hour-daily broadcasting in English by China Radio International (CRI), China's official radio broadcaster (Nye, 2005).

In his keynote speech to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on Oct. 15, 2007, President Hu Jintao stated that the CPC must "enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests [and that] culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength" (Nye, 2008). Hu's statement clearly indicates China's willing and vision for international expansion by means of its culture and all what is related to it, using what political scientist J. Nye in the late 1980s called as 'soft power', defined as "a nation winning influence abroad by persuasion, attraction and appeal (culture, diplomacy, foreign aid, trade, and investment) rather than by threats or military force" (Nye, 2005).

With its increasingly relevant role it has played on the international scenario after joining the World Trade Organization, China has indeed moved away from pure propaganda toward a nuanced public relation strategy. One tool is the expansion of the international reach of its media: from new overseas edition of the national daily *People's Daily* and the launch of the English-language *Global Times* in the print industry, to the international channels of the national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), and the global profile of the news agency Xinhua, which reports from more than 100 territories by creating foreign bureaus. In particular, CCTV plays a major role in the external publicity: the establishment in 2000 of the English news channel CCTV-9, is followed by the creation in 2007 of CCTV-E and CCTV-F, the news and entertainment channels in Spanish and in French, respectively. In 2009 the portfolio of CCTV's international channels is enriched by the creation of two news channels, one in Arabic and one in Russian. All the above initiatives mark the internationalization of China's mainstream Chinese media in the framework of the "going out" strategy, aiming to make the Chinese language, culture, and media more visible internationally. The use of foreign languages is considered as a priority in this strategy as serving as a bridge to strengthen communication and understanding between China and other countries.

Gaining as much as possible approval by international public opinion has

been at the top of agenda of the Chinese government in its international expansion, especially in relation with Tibet and other sensitive issues that, as this paper addresses later, came out before the beginning of the Beijing Olympic Games. In the new digitalized world, indeed, media target is a worldwide audience, that is the reason why it is crucial for Chinese media to deliver their services in different languages.

In its expansion on the international scale, the Chinese government has employed the ICT to promote its soft power and to construct its international image in an increasingly globalized world (Zhang, 2009; Zhao, 2008; Sun, 2010): new technologies have broken through the original temporal and spatial limitations of information exchange and cultural dialogue in the direction of globalization. China, which has experienced a rapid development of ICT, has the largest group of Internet users and mobile phone users since 2008, even if the penetration rates are still low in comparison to Western countries. The Internet has revolutionized the instrument of soft power for different reasons: above all, despite the efforts of the Chinese government, the Internet is practically impossible to control. Whereas the traditional media provide only a one-way communication to the receiver of information, the Internet allows the user to select information to meet specific needs and provide immediate feedback.

This paper maps out and discusses about the evolution and the strategies of China's soft power by examining the case of CRI, the only state-owned radio network allowed to broadcast to overseas audience, whose role has evolved massively in the digital age. The comparison with other well-known international radio networks appears to be inevitable. In international radio news, indeed, two Western stations have established their credibility as reliable sources of news to listeners worldwide: BBC World Service and the Voice of America (VOA). BBC World Service, which went on the air in 1932, broadcasts in 44 languages since 1999 and is also available on the Internet. The Voice of America, established in 1942, broadcasts in English and 52 other languages. The VOA is now broadcasting over the Internet programs from all 53 of its language services. As this paper shows later, CRI's expansion strategies constantly refer to these two international radio networks.

### **1. CRI Online: a window of China on the world**

Founded in December 1941, CRI was thought to serve as an international broadcaster with programming that merely repeated Chinese leaders' statement (Kurlantzick, 2007). The liberalization process started in the late 1970s led this state-owned network to be more profit-driven like many Chinese media organizations. CRI currently broadcasts in 43 foreign languages o the whole world, using a range of transmission methods, including FM, AM, Internet radio, satellite, and podcast. CRI has also 117 international FM radio partners, as well as 32 AM radio partners in Asia, Africa, North America, Europe and Oceania. In North America, for instance, CRI programs can be heard on the medium wave AM band in many areas. As well, CRI makes extensive use of international content brokers, such as



specific needs. First of all, the building up of a modern international radio system is viewed as a necessary and natural development of the international cooperation and relations of China with other countries in view of a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of China abroad. At the center of this strategy is CRI, which is also the pivot of the modern international radio system. In addition, a modern international radio system aims at broadening the influence of China on the international public opinion: from the Chinese perspective, indeed, the idea of “strong West and weak China” has long dominated with the international public opinion. As being far to be eradicated in the short term, China feels a strong need to strengthen the broadcasting activity of its radio system outside the country as well as to raise the influence and the competitiveness of its radio, television and cinema in a global environment, with the view to build up a “harmonious international public opinion environment” (Wang, 2009: 137). Thirdly, the modern international radio system is considered as a natural development pathway of CRI: there is a clear reference to CRI’s international counterparts, namely BBC and VOA, which appear to gain larger credibility and recognition with the international audience. According to CRI’s leaders, the Chinese radio broadcaster is still short in some aspects with respect to its Western counterparts such as the international reach, the foreign partnerships and the services offered. It is imperative to CRI to shorten this distance by integrating the new technologies into its development path. Last but not least, market and users reasons require the need to establish such a system. The results of a survey conducted by CRI Online on its own website show that a growing demand of music services and contents that are related to online reading (Blue Book, 2008a: 216-217).

## **2. CRI’s strategies in the digital culture world**

Similar to its main international counterparts BBC and VOA, CRI has established a number of tools to propagate externally by using Internet and the new technologies. As mentioned previously, the first step of this strategy was establishing CRI Online in 1998. As multi-language website, CRI Online is currently available in 53 languages and mainly delivers political, economic, sport and cultural information about China. By end of 2007, CRI Online accounts for a total of 700 thousand visitors per day, with a daily peak of 860 thousand and offers a total of 23,240 hours of music programming (Blue Book, 2008c). Each website in the specific language offers services which are partially different from the other ones. For instance, the English version offers a page dedicated to online videos divided into seven categories: Traveller, Cultural Heritage, Beyond Stardom, Dynamic China, Life 360°, Panoramic Sports and Archives. Each category is continuously updated with new contents and can be shared with other online visitors.

More services offered by CRI Online include e-Journals, Board Bulletin System (BBS), blogging and a multi-language podcasting. By allowing for richer contents and interactivity, all these services aim at stimulating debates and opinion exchanges about China among users, CRI Online bloggers and visitors through an official media like CRI. This purpose is also achieved through a channel available on the website of each language called “Talk to

CRI”: through the website itself and by sending SMSs, online users can express their opinion and preference to the radio broadcaster. A successful example of these web talks is provided by the Japanese version, launched in September 2005. According to Wang (2009), the Japanese forum attracted large web participation and drew the attention of both governments in a period when the relationships between China and Japan were suffering from a crisis in a context of long standing unstable political relationships between the two Asian countries. A further step in this direction are the introduction in October 2006 of web talks between Chinese and Japanese university students and the launch in 2007 and 2008 of the “Sino-Japanese four season web talks” in partnership with the Japanese broadcasting association Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai (NHK),<sup>[1]</sup> achieving successful external propaganda effects.

Another powerful communication and propaganda tool of CRI is INet Radio, which is a specific web radio launched in July 2005 by the Chinese, English, German and Japanese versions of the Chinese radio broadcaster. Since 1998 and for seven years, the contents of CRI Online have been provided by the traditional radio and most part of them consisted in music programs and radio editorials. In contrast, INet Radio provides contents that are specifically produced for the web users. INet Radio webcasts currently in 11 languages and offers several thematic channels which allow for interactivity with speakers. This web radio station has been developing rapidly by integrating with local resources: local productions, local diffusion and local management and achieved national recognition as a Chinese top brand program for three years consecutively, from 2005 to 2007.

Over recent years, CRI web radio expanded its audience on the web by providing its own contents to some of leading Chinese portals, SNSs and instant messaging providers, such as People’s Daily Online, Xinhua Net, Chinese music online, idealife, kaixin.com, Sohu blog, QQ<sup>[2]</sup> etc. For instance, a web user of kaixin.com, a well-known Chinese social network site, can listen CRI programs live while he (she) is chatting with friends. This kind of partnerships makes CRI’s expansion strategies unique with respect to Western radio broadcasters.

While expanding itself and improving the image of China abroad by using Internet, CRI also integrated the new technologies to pursue this objective. One of the most successful results achieved by the radio broadcaster in this direction is the authorization in October 2006 from SARFT to serve as the fourth operator of IPTV<sup>[3]</sup>. This latter platform, which has been operating since March 2007, offers a 24-hour programming schedule providing programs such as sport, news, movies, education, weather, shopping and entertainment and interactivity.

The use of new technologies by CRI includes also transmitting on television via mobile phone: since 2007, thanks to a partnership with telecom operators China Unicom and China Mobile, the handset users can anytime and anywhere have access to a broad range of contents, some of which are from the traditional radio and the other are specifically designed for this service. For instance, at the launch of the service, the channels available include

weather information; programs specifically targeted to women; music programs, short dramas, information on Beijing Olympic Games, movies and variety programs.

Some months before the Beijing Olympic Games take place, the programs delivered by the English-language CRI Online are also available on mobile final user terminals such as iPod and iPhone. According to a survey conducted by CRI itself, Internet surfers of 168 countries and more 1500 cities all over the world visit to access this service up to date (Wang, 2009). Data show that 34% of requests are from US, the largest group, followed by China mainland, with 28%. The first 10 countries by the highest number of visitors are US, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, France, Italy, Russia, Mexico, Netherland and Switzerland. Altogether, the visitors coming from abroad account for 72% of the total.

### **3. Partnerships and collaboration with foreign media organizations: propaganda of local features**

While integrating massively the use of new technologies into its expansion strategy, CRI has also established many partnerships with foreign media organizations in the field of production, contents sharing and cooperation agreements. In the first stage of its expansion pathway, CRI used to employ the resources of editorial offices located abroad, which became later the editorial offices composed by Chinese journalists. In the second stage, Chinese personnel resources abroad and local ones are integrated to produce and diffuse contents which are strongly adherent and targeted to the localities. Depending on the specific local situation, the purpose of CRI in this direction is to create joint ventures with foreign partners or even to establish its own companies to run the relative business sectors (Wang, 2009: 176).

Among the partnerships CRI has established with international media, the most successful one is undoubtedly the cooperation with the NHK. This propaganda strategy targeted to the international community can be better understood by using the Chinese paraphrase to this regard: "Have influence on influential people, have influence on influential media", "borrow ships to go overseas" (*yingxiang you yingxiangli de ren, yingxiang you yingxiang li de meiti, jiechuan kua hai*), in order to raise the propaganda effects towards outside (Wang, 2009: 177).

An activity jointly launched by CRI and NHK in 2007 is the "Sino-Japanese four seasons web talks": NHK broadcast live these talks in its morning news program via radio and via web, as well as programs from the first channel of CRI for 30 minutes a day. From their side, NHK, together with other Japanese media organizations such as the newspaper Tokyo News, the Japanese news agency Jiji Press, the blog CJWEB and TOKOTOKO send their foreign journalist correspondents in Beijing and Tokyo to carry out on the field interview to common people as well as broadcast and report during the most important programming slots in the respective media organization, making a great advancement for the program and the mutual understanding of both the countries.

Furthermore, this partnership also involves the other Chinese media organizations such as CCTV, People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China National Radio and Chinanews, which sent their correspondents to make interviews on the field and broadcast them live. Leading Chinese portals such as Sohu, Tencent and 126.com are also involved in this partnership: they webcast live these talks on their sites.

#### **4. National Image Building: Beijing Olympics and Sichuan earthquake communication**

Olympics Games is one of the biggest communication event and one of the widespread expressions of popular culture of our times, a real mega media event (Panagiotopoulou, 2009). Beijing Olympics is an important event and a sports and cultural spectacle able to garner favorable media coverage worldwide (Jianping, 2008; Rivenburgh, 2004).

For the Beijing Olympics the Chinese government launches a massive media campaign both internally and externally in an attempt to build up the national identity and image. All the media outlets are involved in this communication strategy that produce different printed and audiovisual products of high quality. For the occasion, CRI launches in July 2006 a new radio station called CRI Olympic Radio in Beijing. This special broadcast is done in Mandarin, Korean, English, Russian, French, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese and German 24 hours a day.

CRI also plays an important role in the national tragedy caused by the massive Sichuan earthquake, gauging Beijing's commitment to transparency with regard to the scale and scope of the quake's impact. The Chinese government's rapid, full-throttle rescue and the unprecedented flow of news it has allowed have enabled ordinary Chinese and foreigners as well to share in the immense tragedy (Jianping, 2008)

#### **Conclusions**

CRI directors' speech, early, and President Hu's speech, lately, well address the issue of the importance to the Chinese media to strengthen their "communication capacity" (*chuanbo nengli*). Both the speeches, indirectly and directly, clearly indicate that Chinese media should start producing internationally programs and products, and should increase the competitiveness and impact of China's media. This push is driven by an acute realization that the international perception of China is largely shaped by western media coverage, and that such coverage is, more often than China likes, unfavorable (Sun, 2010). Protests in favor of Tibet before the Beijing Olympic Games started are just a recent example, as these protests obfuscated what was to be thought as to be simply a sport event.

As one of the mainstream media China uses in expanding its soft power worldwide, CRI firstly and largely emphasizes on technological innovation: indeed, to Chinese leaders, the new technologies appear to better accomplish their objectives of propaganda abroad, that is, to raise the



influence of China and improve the image of the country both domestically and, externally, with the international public opinion.

Beyond technological innovation, another strategy adopted by CRI is the establishment of key cooperation agreements and partnerships with foreign media organizations within a broader context of international cooperation in the communication field. Unlike its Western counterparts, broadcasting in the national languages allows CRI to largely integrate the local features with the Chinese ones.

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[1] See par. 3.

[2] QQ is a messaging service provided by Tencent, a Chinese leading company whose subsidiaries provide Internet and mobile phone value-added services and operate online advertising services in China.

[3] The rules about IPTV services in China are contained in the regulation entitled “Measures on the Administration of radio and TV programs transmitted via Internet” (*Hulianwang deng xinxi wangluo chuanbo shiting jiemu guanli banfa*) issued by the SARFT and in force on October 11, 2004. The “Measures” are known as SARFT’s Order n. 39. The other IPTV operators are Shanghai Media Group, CCTV and Southern Media Group.

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