

Public Diplomacy Reconsidered

By CHINO Keiko

Media in and outside Japan reports that the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) called on U.S. universities that had invited to establish "Confucius Institutes" in their campuses to reexamine the validity of such establishments. The reason is that the recruitment of academic staff and the choice of curriculum are influenced by the intentions of the Chinese government, and the integrity of academic freedom is sacrificed thereby. Canada also is faced with a similar situation. There is no point in asserting that we knew from the beginning that this would happen. Ever since the first Confucius Institute was established in Seoul in 2004, the institute has grown in number at a furious pace across the globe, now counting more than 4000. Therefore, the above U.S. action is quite welcome to us and it is earnestly hoped that a brake would be put on such a trend. Any courses on China should be run, with academic integrity and independence fully maintained.

In principle, when establishing a Confucius Institute, academic staff and textbooks are provided by Chinese authorities and the receiving university provides the venue. This is an astute approach as if to emulate the way fast-food restaurants or coffee shops expand their chains. And this is a blessing offer to universities who cannot afford to run courses on China on their own, while China could gain access to academia of other countries with ease. There were some who highly praised China, which had expanded chains of Confucius Institute across the globe from western countries to Asia, Africa and South Pacific, saying that this is an epitome China's "image strategy," "soft power" or "triumph of public diplomacy." Besides, it has once become a fashion to criticize Japan for its backwardness in promoting public diplomacy in comparison with China.

But is it really so? Even if you win over somebody by image, he or she will eventually leave unless you have substantial quality. The phrase "public diplomacy" was coined in the U.S. back in the 1960s. But it was not until after the 9.11 terrorist attacks in 2001 that the idea gained wide attention even in the U.S. The U.S. had to address the pressing task of vying with anti-U.S. band as well as enlarging the number of Tomodachies (friends) of the U.S. Also in U.K., "Panel 2000 Task Force" was established under the Blair administration with an aim to elevate the brand value of U.K.

As for China, having been isolated from the international community because of the Tiananmen Square incident in which pro-democracy demonstrators were cracked down, it faced an urgent need to recover the confidence of the rest of the world.

In short, behind the background of the rise of public diplomacy was in varying degrees a negative aspect of the promoting country. I do not mean to deny the need of Japan to promote public diplomacy because of this. However, sugarcoating or false advertising would sooner or later betray itself. Confucius Institute is a wrong example to the axiom that public diplomacy will only do when it has proper substance.

(This is the English translation of an article written by CHINO Keiko, Journalist, which originally appeared on the e - Forum “Giron-Hyakushutsu” of GFJ on June 23, 2014.)