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Cultural diplomacy: beyond the national interest?

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The field of cultural diplomacy, which looms large in present-day cultural policy and discourse, has been insufficiently analysed by the cultural disciplines. This special issue engages with the task of filling the gap. The present essay sets out the terms in which the authors have taken up this engagement, focusing principally on Australia and Asia. Distinguishing between cultural diplomacy that is essentially interest-driven governmental practice and cultural relations, which is ideals-driven and practiced largely by non-state actors, the authors pursue a twofold aim. First, to demystify the field, especially when it is yoked to the notion of 'soft power'; second, to better understand how actually-existing discourses of cultural diplomacy and/or cultural relations operate in different national contexts. The essay seeks in particular to scrutinize the current confusion surrounding cultural diplomacy and, in the context of the changing role of the nation-state, to explore its possibilities as an instrument for going beyond the national interest.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy; cultural relations; soft power; public diplomacy; national representation; instrumentalisation of culture

Introduction

The term 'cultural diplomacy' looms large today in the foreign policy practice of nation-states as well as in cultural discourse. Yet there is often a distinct lack of clarity in the way the notion is used, on exactly what its practice involves, on why it is important, or on how it works. Much of this indeterminateness stems from the conflation of cultural diplomacy *stricto sensu*, which is essentially interest-driven governmental practice, with cultural relations, which tends to be driven by ideals rather than interests and is practiced largely by non-state actors. Given the present-day intrications between trans-national cultural connections and cultural practice within nations, this phenomenon should be an important concern of the cultural disciplines. Yet so far they have paid scant attention to cultural diplomacy as a key component of the contemporary cultural policy landscape.

While the last decade and a half has seen a wealth of interest in the topic – and the broader rubric of public diplomacy – among specialists in international relations, with an emphasis on the evolution of the so-called 'new public diplomacy' (notably Melissen 2005, Cull 2009, Davis Cross and Melissen 2013; Hayden 2011), critical analysis from the perspectives of Cultural Studies, Cultural Policy

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Studies or Cultural Sociology, is almost non-existent (but see Clarke 2014 and also Paschalidis 2009 in this journal). By 'critical' here we do not mean simply a dismissive stance, but a rigorous, theoretically informed analysis which locates actually existing cultural diplomacy practices within their social, political and ideological contexts and examines the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which they operate. This special issue seeks to engage with the task of beginning to fill this gap, with a specific focus on Australia and Asia. The aim is twofold. First, to demystify cultural diplomacy, notably by deconstructing the 'hype' that nowadays accompanies it – especially when it is yoked to the notion of 'soft power'; second, to better understand how it actually operates across the world today. Such an analysis would also facilitate a consideration of preferred policy parameters in the field and of the question whether, when seen through a cultural lens, there can be such a thing as a cultural diplomacy that operates 'beyond the national interest.'

Untangling key discursive terms

Apart from the term cultural diplomacy itself, the discourse of the field this special issue explores is dominated by two other notions, 'soft power' and 'public diplomacy.' The purpose of this section is to set out briefly the frame of reference the three terms together provide. Given that the authors of the other contributions will take these understandings as points of departure, this introductory iteration will help avoid repetition further on.

The three notions have entered the lexicon of international relations and have become standard terms in foreign policy thinking. They are also factored into the policy mix by national, regional and local governments (e.g. cities), as well as by supranational organizations such as the European Union. As mentioned earlier, however, the processes these terms entail have rarely been critically examined. Their emergence as tools of national self-promotion or what Raymond Williams (1984) once called the 'cultural policy of display' has been insufficiently unpacked (Paschalidis 2009). Nor has there been much analysis of their place in discourses of cultural nationalism, which is arguably a key dimension of cultural diplomacy as a governmental practice (Isar's paper in this volume uses Bhabha's (1990) distinction between 'pedagogical' and 'performative' dimensions of nationalist cultural display to address this issue).

The semantic field of the term cultural diplomacy has broadened considerably over the years. It now applies to pretty much any practice that is related to purposeful cultural cooperation between nations or groups of nations. In the process, the term has floated some distance away from its original semantic moorings. The American diplomat turned writer Richard Arndt made the necessary distinction between cultural *relations* that 'grow naturally and organically, without government intervention' and 'cultural *diplomacy* [that] can only be said to take place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try to shape and channel this natural flow to advance national interests' (Arndt 2006, p. xviii). This distinction has become increasingly blurred.

Although countries such as France have used the term since the late nineteenth century, cultural diplomacy entered common parlance in most other countries only in the 1990s. It was originally used to refer to the processes occurring when diplomats *serving national governments* took recourse to cultural exchanges and flows or sought to channel them for the advancement of their perceived national interests.

But soon it was expanded into ‘the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding’ (Cummings 2003, p. 1). In point of fact, mutual understanding is only sometimes the object. The true protagonists of cultural diplomacy are never abstract ‘nations’ or generalized ‘peoples.’ *Governmental* agents and envoys are. In other words, cultural diplomacy is a governmental practice that operates in the name of a clearly defined ethos of national or local representation, in a space where nationalism and internationalism merge. Yet as the reigning culturalism of our time has made the term increasingly appealing, the ambit of cultural diplomacy has broadened considerably. Thus the term has come to be used as a partial or total replacement for many previously used notions such as foreign cultural relations, international cultural relations (ICR), international cultural exchange or international cultural cooperation. The different terms in this semantic constellation tend to be used interchangeably (Mitchell 1986), making it a true floating signifier.

The second leading term, *soft power*, was coined by the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990. Since then, it has taken international relations and public diplomacy by storm, often in ways that are far removed from what its inventor had envisaged. Nye (1990) distinguished between the command power – economic carrots and military sticks – that the United States of America possessed in ample measure and the co-optive or ‘soft’ power of ‘getting others to want what you want.’ This rests on the attraction of one’s ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the *preferences* that others are led to express. As Nye observed,

> political leaders and philosophers have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions. (Nye 1990, p. 32)

The soft power Nye was advocating that the USA deploy alongside – *not instead of* – its hard power was the universal appeal of its popular culture, as embodied in cultural goods and services, as well as the international influence of what he called the ‘ethnic openness’ of its way of life, or the political appeal of the American *values* of democracy and human rights. In other words, the soft power a country may project is not simply a question of culture, but rests also on ‘its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)’ (Nye 1990, p. 196). While the cultural policy literature presents a number of functionalist descriptions of the governmental apparatuses and discourses deployed in the name of culture as soft power, there has been next to no analysis of the polysemy of the term or of its implications. In this issue Robert Albro underlines how soft power is a peculiarly American articulation: driven by the sheer volume of cultural goods and services the US exports globally, the concept promises influence as a kind of neoliberal deployment based upon the global reach of American-inflected cultural consumption. A later idea of Nye’s that is equally premised on core elements of the American ethos was that of ‘meta–soft power,’ which is a nation’s capacity and introspective ability to criticise itself that contributes to its international attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility (Nye 2002).

A point that has been missed in most writing on soft power is that cultural attractiveness per se is *not* soft power on its own. It can be a soft power resource, provided it is deployed to achieve clearly defined policy objectives under a thought-out strategy. It is not intended to replace 'hard' power, but rather to complement it. Nor can there ever be such a thing as a State or supranational entity that defines itself as 'a soft power,' but this strange notion is nevertheless sometimes deployed.

In the course of its discursive expansion, cultural diplomacy has also been yoked to the cause of *public diplomacy*, advocated as a more citizen-oriented form of diplomacy than the standard model, whose 'targets' are no longer other governments so much as diverse national and global audiences and publics. It is increasingly understood as a trans-national process that can be engaged upon not just by governments and their agencies but by civil society and/or private sector stakeholders as well (Cull 2009), a form of intercultural dialogue based on mutuality and reciprocal listening. This term is also of American coinage. It was launched in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (and founder of the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy that would be set up there) in order apparently to overcome the negative connotations associated with the word propaganda (Cull 2006). By the present century, it had become firmly anchored in US public discourse and had spread to Europe and beyond. Like cultural diplomacy, the practice of public diplomacy has gradually been taken over by branches of government other than foreign ministries and has been deployed in the service of goals such as nation branding and portfolio promotion. At the same time, cultural diplomacy is now often understood as a particular form or dimension of public diplomacy, as a result of which the distinction between the two has become rather blurred.

Take, for example, this first paragraph of the Executive Summary of a landmark US Department of State report, *Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy*, published in 2005:

> Cultural diplomacy is the linchpin of public diplomacy; for it is in cultural activities that a nation's idea of itself is best represented. And cultural diplomacy can enhance our national security in subtle, wide-ranging, and sustainable ways. Indeed history may record that America's cultural riches played no less a role than military action in shaping our international leadership, including the war on terror. For the values embedded in our artistic and intellectual traditions form a bulwark against the forces of darkness. (US Department of State 2005, p. 1)

Encapsulated in this paragraph is a clear articulation of cultural diplomacy as a national endeavour, conducted in the national interest: it involves the instrumental use of national culture with a view to enhancing national security and the nation's international standing. The *Linchpin* report was published in response to the fallout from the US's disastrous invasion of Iraq, which had led to a plummeting of international public opinion against the United States, especially in the Arab world. The report argues that culture – through its deployment in cultural diplomacy – can reverse the erosion of trust and credibility that the US has suffered across the world, and help shape global public opinion in favour of America and the values it claims to stand for. However, while the report clearly considers that advancing the US national interest is foundational, some of the things the work of cultural diplomacy arguably does, as listed by the report, point clearly to outcomes that go far *beyond* narrow national interest. These include creating a ‘foundation of trust’ between peoples, providing ‘a positive agenda of cooperation in spite of policy differences,’ creating ‘a neutral platform for people-to-people contact’ and serving as ‘a flexible, universally acceptable vehicle for rapprochement with countries where diplomatic relations have been strained or absent.’

Cultural diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific: in or beyond the national interest?

The brief genealogy offered above shows the deep entanglement of the terms cultural diplomacy, cultural relations, soft power and public diplomacy. As a semantic constellation, they occupy a discursive field centrally focused on a concern with the management of the problematic relationship between the nation-state and its others in the international arena. Needless to say, this concern has become particularly salient in this era of globalisation and the geopolitical shifts in the distribution of economic and political power in the world. The papers brought together in this special issue all engage frontally with these new dynamics, with a particular emphasis on the complex roles cultural diplomacy policies and practices in the Asia Pacific region play in the context of evolving cultural self-representations in the societies concerned.

The point of departure for the special issue was a symposium held at the Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney in October 2013. The papers presented at this symposium provided a critical scan of the cultural diplomacy landscape of the Asia Pacific region. Although there was a particular focus on Australia, many of the issues that arise in the definition and assessment of that country’s cultural diplomacy practice are germane elsewhere, for several reasons. To begin with, Australian practice in this field has crystallised only fairly recently. In the process it has both drawn upon the established notions discussed above and has also struck out in some new ways. In particular, Australian cultural diplomacy today has a strong regional focus, one that is also becoming increasingly relevant in other regions, as the regional scale is perceived to offer a counterpoise to global forces. There is strong political and policy consensus in Australia that it is in the country’s national interest to establish closer links with the countries in the geopolitical region it finds itself in: Asia or, more broadly, the Asia-Pacific (see Australian Government 2012).[1] Cultural diplomacy is thought to play a major role in this effort of rapprochement: several essays (Lowe, Carter, Roesler) foreground this. At the same time, governments in the region – including those featured in this special issue, China, Japan and South Korea – have strongly stepped up their cultural diplomacy efforts, each with their own distinctive rationales and methods, as discussed in the papers by Wanning Sun (China), Koichi Iwabuchi (Japan) and Hyungseok Kang (South Korea).

The special issue is bookended by Robert Albro, who compares US and Chinese cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies, and Yudhishthir Raj Isar, who traces the policy evolution of ‘culture in EU external relations,’ the phrase used as an euphemism for cultural diplomacy by the institutions of the European Union, in other words at the supra-national scale. While both these papers underscore the fundamentally nationalist underpinnings of cultural diplomacy visions worldwide, they also point towards different strategies now being advocated with a view to going beyond the national interest. These include an emphasis on dialogue and collaboration based on shared interests that are not articulated in the name of the nation-state. They also point to the question of whether cultural workers such as artists and arts organizers are actually motivated by such lofty interests, rather than by more concrete purposes such as mutual learning; pooling of resources; co-financing; technical assistance; joint reflection, debate, research and experimentation; and ‘in its most complex forms, cooperation in the creative processes, the creation of new artistic works’ (Klaic 2007, p. 46). Cull recognizes (2009, p. 19) that ‘discomfort with advocacy roles and overt diplomatic objectives have led some Cultural Diplomacy organizations to distance themselves from the term.’ On the other hand, they are unlikely to distance themselves equally from the grants the term now brings within their grasp. Recourse to grand cultural narratives such as intercultural dialogue makes it easier for them to adopt this kind of opportunistic stance, just as it makes it easier for governments to advance the national interest cloaked in their mantle (Isar 2010).

The cultural diplomacy landscape that emerges from all the contributions encompasses a complex and sometimes contradictory range of practices, in which objectives, techniques of delivery, and assumed impacts and effects are often misaligned. In this landscape, the scope of what is seen as cultural diplomacy may be very broad, entailing many forms of cultural recognition between nations and cultures, many but not all of which are mediated in some way by states – or narrower – as an ‘overplayed hand,’ prone to ‘ambiguous and overstated’ claims, such as its ability to ‘manage the international environment’ (Isar 2010, citing Cull 2009).

Overall, then, we are faced with a rather confusing terrain, littered by a mismatch between overblown rhetoric and on-the-ground reality. The central contradiction behind this mismatch may be summed up as follows: on the one hand, cultural diplomacy is supposed to advance the national interest by presenting the nation in the best possible light to the rest of the world; on the other hand, it is expected (mainly by non-state actors) to promote a more harmonious international order to the benefit of all. This contradictory understanding rests on the widely held tendency, in current discourses, to elide the fundamental institutional location of cultural diplomacy within the machinery of government and, therefore, the inevitable restrictions imposed on it in terms of the interests it is meant to serve. As noted above, this elision stems from the ambiguity in the ways in which cultural diplomacy is conflated with the broader notion of ICR.

While the distinction between the two must remain analytically important, the pervasive tendency to conflate cultural relations and cultural diplomacy is a significant indicator of the uncertainty, not only about what cultural diplomacy is or should be, but about what it can achieve. Cummings’ definition cited above does not refer to ‘the national interest’ at all, and appears to suggest that the work of cultural diplomacy, while initiated by governments, is capable of going beyond any partisan, national interest by fostering mutual understanding, which presumably is of common interest. However, it is reasonable to assume that there is a tension between national interest and common interest. Since this tension cannot simply be swept under the carpet, how might it be reconciled? To put it more precisely, how can cultural diplomacy be *both* in the national interest *and* go beyond the national interest? Hence the question mark at the end of this special issue’s title.

The nation-state in a world of flux

The current modishness of cultural diplomacy – and public diplomacy more generally – should be seen in the context of the changing architecture of international relations in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world. Nation-states are still the primary actors in the international political arena, but their sovereign status has been steadily eroded by globalising forces which have heightened the transnational – and often disjunctive – flows of people, products, media, technology and money (Appadurai 1996). The fact that cultural diplomacy is often folded into cultural relations is in itself a reflection of the diminishing authority and capacity of national governments to act as the pre-eminent representatives of 'the national interest' (or even to define what the latter consists of). As Rosenau (2003) has observed, in the past few decades the world stage has become ever more dense, with a vast range of non-governmental actors, operating both locally and globally and interacting with each other horizontally through transnational communication networks, often intersecting with or even contradicting government-defined purposes and objectives. 'In earlier epochs,' says Rosenau (2003, pp. 61–62), the global stage was occupied mainly by states and their intergovernmental organizations, but in the emergent epoch the cast of characters has multiplied time and time again. States still occupy important roles in the routines of world affairs, but their ranks have become thin relative to all the organizations that now reach across boundaries to conduct their affairs. As a consequence, national governments have seen a decline in 'their ability to claim the final word at home or speak exclusively for the country abroad' (Rosenau 2003, p. 69).

This has serious implications for the governmental practice of cultural diplomacy. If cultural diplomacy, to reiterate Arndt's (2006) definition once again, pertains to orchestrated government intervention to channel the flow of culture to advance national interests, then in the new world (dis)order it will have to compete with an flood of other transnational flows of culture, which are beyond the control of governments and may or may not be in line with their definitions of the national interest at all. For example, Cynthia Schneider, a prominent American advocate for cultural diplomacy, in critiquing the apparent reliance of the US government on the free market distribution of US popular culture to do the work of cultural diplomacy, comments: 'While popular culture contributes – sometimes positively, sometimes not – to communicating American ideas and values, the most effective interface between government-sponsored cultural diplomacy and the free flow of popular culture has yet to be determined, or even analysed' (Schneider 2005, p. 161). Schneider goes on to suggest that US cultural diplomacy could deploy popular culture proactively to help restore the global reputation of the US after it nose-dived in the wake of the widely-condemned War on Terror in the early 2000s: 'Strategically investing in popular culture by targeting the distribution of desirable products would reap rewards in the court of world opinion' (Schneider 2005, p. 164). However, this begs a number of questions: who should decide what 'desirable products' are, and what criteria should be used? How exactly does popular culture communicate 'American ideas and values?' How does one know whether and which products will have a positive impact on 'world opinion?' How can one ensure that 'desirable' products are received in 'desirable' ways, for whom and according to whom? For example, when Michael Moore, the controversial US documentary filmmaker, won the *Palme d'Or* at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival for *Fahrenheit 9/11*, his highly critical film about George W. Bush's war on terror, was this a triumph for American cultural diplomacy, as Schneider's advocacy might seem to suggest? Or did the film's success only add further fuel to anti-Americanism around the world? Albro also points in this issue to the naivety of 'allowing the entertainment sector to assume the job of communicating the US's image to the world,' when commodified popular culture products express 'a US-specific lexicon of personal freedoms exercised as consumer choices in ways that often fail to engage with the perspectives or grievances of foreign publics.' In this view, the prevailing cultural policy of display elides dialogical processes in adhering to a 'correspondence theory of truth,' which is ill equipped to account for the nature of audiences and diverse ways of interpretation.

In short, government-driven cultural diplomacy is only one strand of cultural flow in the web of intersecting cultural relations being spun incessantly by myriad small and large players between nation-states and across the globe. Moreover, in a world where opportunities for global exchange and networking are ubiquitous, the rise of counter-hegemonic forms of cultural diplomacy, driven by forces that are working *against* established nation-states, is a distinct possibility. The concerted publicity stunts of the terrorist organisation ISIS, such as the dissemination of sensationalist videos of beheadings of hostages on the Internet as a recruitment tool for new jihadists among disaffected youth in the West, is an extreme case in point, highlighting that the domain of ICR is an intensely contested one in the current global condition, in which the role of government-initiated cultural diplomacy is highly circumscribed.

We would argue that it is precisely because the global cultural arena is now inhabited by ever denser flows of ideas, images, perceptions and messages, in which a wide range of people are taking part in ever greater numbers, that the stakes in the struggle to shape ICR through cultural diplomacy have become so much higher for nation-states, even as success in this field becomes ever more difficult to achieve. This is a point Holden (2013) gestured at in his British Council report *Influence and Attraction: Culture and the Race for Soft Power in the 21st century*. Holden observed that the appetite to invest in cultural diplomacy is especially high in newly 'emerging' nations such as the BRICS countries, whose governments are deploying heightened cultural diplomacy activities to raise their international profile and standing befitting their rising global economic power. Wanning Sun's paper in this issue, focusing on China, provides ample empirical support for this observation. Chinese analysts are well aware of the incongruence between China's growing economic clout and the country's political credibility. The major weak link is seen to be the interface with foreign media and reporting on China. The contradiction here is that while the Chinese government is clearly at pains to lift its credibility and legitimacy through its 'Going Global' media policy, its often heavy-handed approach runs the risk of achieving the opposite effect. Sun notes that the term 'external propaganda' (*wai xuan*) is still in use in Chinese policy writings: few academics or policy-makers are willing to abandon the paradigm of propaganda and control in which the media are expected to be the 'throat and tongue' of the Party.

The appearance of independence from state control requires a balancing act for all players in the international communications field. For instance, the UK's recognition of the value of arms-length bodies like the BBC World Service and the British Council to provide 'global public goods,' based on a stance of independence and impartiality, has been a longstanding strength of UK cultural diplomacy. On the other hand, as a recent House of Lords (2014) report demonstrated, there are calls for greater policy coordination between foreign affairs and cultural/media services to maximise public diplomacy and soft power outcomes for the UK. Presumably, winning in this game means having it both ways.

The discontents of ‘soft power’

Holden’s reference (2013) to a ‘race for soft power’ is important to highlight here. Soft power as they understand it is now pursued by many governments as a central objective of their foreign policies, mainly through projections of the attractiveness of their ‘national culture.’ Although this is a misreading of Nye’s conception of how culture can become a soft power resource, it has resulted in a distinctly enhanced focus on international cultural activity. The Chinese government’s huge investment in this regard, its so-called ‘charm offensive,’ is exemplified by the rapid expansion of Confucius Institutes around the world, as described by Albro. Both Japan and South Korea have also relied on the idea of soft power in devising their cultural diplomacy policies, as argued respectively by Koichi Iwabuchi and Hyungseok Kang. Cultural relations, here, are imagined in a strictly one-sided, nation-centric way: as the positive feelings or attitudes of foreign publics towards the nation that has performatively deployed and displayed its ‘national culture’ in a proprietary manner, as a means to achieve competitive advantage over other nations. In other words, the discourse of soft power has been instrumental in a heightening of cultural competition between and among nation-states.

As with many other notions in today’s cultural lexicon, soft power appears to be a highly mutable policy concept, one that lends itself to being mobilised in quite diverse contexts. Attention should therefore be given to the way in which ‘policies are not only remoulded when they are adopted in a new place, they are also reshaped in, and through, the process of mobilisation itself.’ (McKann and Ward 2013, p. 10) In the view of Melissen (2011, p. 249), soft power ‘fits East Asia like a glove.’ While Asian countries discussed in this issue do not articulate a specifically different account of soft power, Melissen argues that a ‘normative soft power’ is in operation in East Asia, based on ‘shared values,’ multilateral approaches and regional roles, where ‘soft power is conceived as a fundamentally relational concept’ (pp. 251–252). This places East Asian soft power agendas in contrast to the more ‘affective’ style of Nye’s ‘attractive’ soft-power dimensions. Apart from the doubtful implication about Asian cultures and their ‘normative’ inclinations, the perspectives in the East Asian cases collected here do not seem to support this view of shared, as opposed to nation-centric strategies. For example, while he does not deny the potential for contemporary media cultures to enhance intercultural understanding, Iwabuchi argues that the branding strategies that have accompanied the promotion of ‘Cool Japan’ tend to propel one-way cultural promotion, eschewing exchange and dialogue that might generate some amelioration of historical antagonisms affecting relations with other nations including Korea and China.

Sun’s analysis of Chinese academic and journalistic writing concerned with the PRC’s ‘Going Global’ initiative is also revealing in this regard. These writers generally acknowledge a soft power deficit in the media and communications sphere in relation to the West, leading to a loss of ‘our discursive autonomy to speak on our own terms’ (to quote a report by the government’s official National

Image Research Team). At odds with Western analysts of a ‘China threat,’ Sun sees the dominant affect at play in these writings as a sense of grievance about perceived Western domination in the communication and information sphere: China’s ‘Going Global’ and allied cultural diplomacy strategies can be seen as defensive and compensatory and they thus serve to trigger a ‘dialectic of control’ that undermines the credibility of China’s attempts to develop media services on a global scale.

In Kang’s account of South Korean cultural diplomacy, soft power emerged as a central concept in the mid-2000s. Culture was then recognised explicitly as a ‘pillar’ of diplomacy and associated directly with the Foreign Affairs ministry. However, Kang argues, referring to Ahearne’s distinction between explicit and ‘implicit’ cultural policy that Korea’s cultural diplomacy efforts have long corresponded to the latter, aimed firstly at the internationalization of Korean culture, at pursuing cultural recognition equivalent to its rising economic status, and later at advancing the recognition – and marketing – of its cultural goods and services, notably those associated with the ‘Korean wave’ (*hallyu*). The point is here that the adoption of soft power discourses was hardly the beginning of Korean strategies to enhance its cultural status, and in the process attempt to influence other strategic and economic dimensions. Nevertheless, it did bring about a shift in the institutional positioning of the country’s cultural diplomacy.

Hall and Smith (2013) argue that the intensifying race for soft power in Asia may in fact lead to a hardening rather than a softening of international hostilities in the region. One implication is that the race for soft power, when conceived as a struggle for national cultural ascendancy, is not particularly helpful in improving ICR. Indeed, Hall and Smith cite mass public opinion data to argue that the recent surge in soft power initiatives in the region has generally failed to have a positive effect on world public opinion, despite the massive resources poured into them. Iwabuchi is forthright in asserting that Japan’s ‘pop culture diplomacy’ activities have simply fuelled a ‘soft power rat race in their conflation of soft power and nation branding methods.’ All this points to inherent tensions in contemporary cultural diplomacy between the opposing dynamics of competition and mutuality. Indeed, we can argue that the widespread adoption of the discourse of soft power has been instrumental in impeding, rather than enhancing the development of ICR beyond the national interest.

Why has the concept of soft power been so attractive to governments? Hall and Smith (2013) argue that a major reason is that policy makers actually *believe* in the effectiveness in soft power strategies. From the perspective of cultural theory, this belief can be critiqued as being underpinned by two implicit yet mistaken assumptions about culture and communication. First, ‘culture’ tends to be reified, in other words seen as a thing, a discrete entity, consisting of content – images, ideas and values – that is readily presentable. Second, it is assumed that the communication of these images, ideas and values, packaged in distinct cultural products, is a linear, one-way process, in which the receiving end (i.e. the target foreign audience) simply absorbs the messages contained in these products. It is not surprising, given the pervasiveness of these assumptions, which Albro sees as the ‘folk theory of cultural diplomacy,’ that cultural diplomacy practitioners often talk about ‘messaging’ and ‘image projection’ in descriptions of what they aim to achieve. Albro’s survey of US public diplomacy officers demonstrated the widely-held assumption that American cultural products have meanings which were ‘self-evident, portable and contextless' and are unproblematically seen as 'vehicles for national values.' As Clarke (2014, p. 8) has pointed out, 'any claim of a straightforward relationship between the role of cultural products in cultural diplomacy policy and soft power outcomes' needs to be treated with scepticism. Indeed, a more appropriate approach, standard within Cultural Studies, would be to take the role of audiences into account as active meaning makers when they consume cultural diplomacy products: there is no guarantee that the way they read, interpret or understand such products will be in line with the original intentions of cultural diplomacy, on the contrary. As Clarke (2014) suggests, the effects and impacts of cultural diplomacy 'messaging' or 'image projection' can never be determined in advance. In this regard, many soft power strategies can be regarded as based on an illusion – the illusion of transparency.

Proliferating cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy, then, is a messy landscape, rather than a coherent body of policies and strategies that can readily be evaluated in terms of its success or otherwise for a given nation-state. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy as policy seems particularly prone to a disorganised coexistence of divergent rationales within government practices. Indeed authors in this issue have used a range of adjectives such as 'fragmented,' 'ambiguous,' 'superficial' or 'vague,' in describing the plethora of cultural diplomacy policy discourses and programs. Perhaps consistency and coherence cannot be expected of a field that encompasses very different conceptions of 'culture,' varying aims and types of instrumentalisation, and a range of institutional locations, including foreign affairs departments, cultural ministries, trade promotion agencies, and a multiplicity of relationships with non-state cultural bodies.

The situation in South Korea is particularly illuminating. According to Kang, there is a 'perpetual ambiguity,' an 'unclear separation' between the modalities of foreign affairs and cultural policy since the formation of the modern Republic of Korea after the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945. The Korean state explored many approaches over time: nation building from the 1950s, 'national modernization' in the 1960s and 1970s, cultural industries policy aiming to industrialize culture and support international competitiveness in the context of globalisation and finally the 'neo-liberal turn.' The twenty-first century, particularly from 2005, saw the influence of concepts of soft power, public diplomacy, and nation branding coalescing into the promotion of the Korean Wave and its various branding extensions – K-Pop, K-Drama, K-Food, K-fashion, etc. At the same time, a multiplicity of activities and functions associated with international cultural exchange in a globalising environment are distributed across a range of government and quasi non-government bodies. The proliferation of Korean cultural diplomacy activities has generated a blurred terrain of overlapping activities. Should this be described as 'a lack of cohesive strategic goals' in Korea's cultural diplomacy program, as a European Union report puts it (Fisher 2014), or as a series of divergent framings that nevertheless constitute a 'key national agenda' for Korea, as Kang describes it?

There is value in comparing Korea's policy distributions of cultural diplomacy with those of Australia, a country that adheres to a pragmatic and smaller scale approach to cultural diplomacy in the national interest. The Australian government was relatively isolationist in relation to the Asian region until the 1960s. But increasing economic integration with East Asia required Australia to develop stronger ties with the countries of its North beyond the economic sphere (Edwards and Goldsworthy 1999). An ICR Branch was set up within the Foreign Affairs Ministry in the late 1960s to promote positive images of Australia, a major early focus of which was on the touring of visual arts exhibitions in Asia (Manton 2003). From the 1970s distinct bodies were set up by the government to facilitate the building of cultural relations with specific countries, including the Australia Japan Foundation (founded in 1976), the Australia China Council (1978), the Australia-Indonesia Institute (1989) and the Australia-Korea Foundation (1992). While centrally hosted by Australia's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), these bilateral bodies operate in a relatively arms-length manner and aim to enable long-term engagement strategies through arts and educational programs. At the same time, DFAT has organised annual 'country focus' programs to showcase Australian culture in designated countries through the Australia International Cultural Council. However, this body was abolished in 2014 in a cost-cutting exercise by the government. DFAT also works with other agencies whose task is more specifically concerned with the export promotion of Australian cultural industries, notably tourism (Tourism Australia and state tourism agencies), educational services (Australian Trade Commission and the university sector), audio-visual production (Screen Australia), the hosting of major sporting events (Australian Sports Commission and state offices of sport) and diplomatic events (such as the G20 meeting held in Brisbane in November 2014). This is the side of cultural and public diplomacy most engaged in leveraging national economic interests and promoting Australia's soft power. However, Australia's nation-branding exercise, *Brand Australia* and its digital platform Australia Unlimited, are now largely inactive.[2]

Program descriptions easily convey a sense of coherent and 'joined-up' activity, but closer examination shows a messier picture (see Ang *et al.* 2015, Chapter 4). Australian cultural diplomacy is quite dispersed, in spite of government efforts to develop a more integrated approach (most recently around the rubric of 'economic diplomacy') and is in truth a small, indeed contracting activity, subject to almost continual budget erosion over the past fifteen years, leading some commentators to speak about Australia's diplomatic deficit (Lowy Institute for International Policy 2009). The role of non-state cultural organizations is highly important in establishing cultural relations, including with Asian countries. But these bodies are often small and their participation in international engagements is often self-funded and/or reliant on volunteer activity (Alway *et al.* 2013).

Between cultural diplomacy activities in South Korea and Australia there are some parallels, but more divergences. There are commonalities as regards the division of labour, namely the twin categories of foreign affairs departments and cultural agencies with international ambits. In both countries there is a hierarchy of official policy and diverse networking bodies promoting sectoral interests through government agencies. The most glaring difference – apart from the obvious difference in scale of government investment – is that in the Korean context the promotion of national culture is upfront, while in the Australian context there is much less orchestrated emphasis on this goal. In other words, while the Korean endeavour, as dispersed as it is, tends to be bound together by a determined shared effort to raise Korea's distinctive international profile as a nation, such coherence is much less in evidence in the Australian case.

Indeed, maintaining a coherent policy narrative in relation to diverse cultural diplomacy programs is perceived as a more general problem in other settings too. The House of Lords (2014) report on UK soft power recommends the development of a ‘strong strategic narrative’ which can support a ‘shared, long-term, national strategy,’ linked to greater coordination of cultural diplomacy activities. The report quotes Simon Anholt, the nation branding guru, who pointed out that the lack of a compelling national narrative

> is the reason why our instruments of soft power do so very well on their own account yet achieve only a small part of what they *could* achieve for the country and its standing, if only they were really working together. (quoted in House of Lords 2014, point 292)

From a cultural-theoretical point of view, however, we should problematize this concern to elaborate a unifying national narrative as the pre-condition for effective cultural diplomacy. In today’s globalised world, characterised by intensifying, multidirectional transnational flows, the attempt to impose a unifying national narrative on the intrinsically diverse range of cultural diplomacy/relations activity may prove an elusive pursuit. While it may still appear more achievable in relatively homogenous societies such as that of South Korea, a super-diverse nation-state such as Australia (or the UK) will always struggle to forge an image of cultural unity for itself. Rather than critiquing the lack of ‘strategic alignment,’ therefore, it may be better to take actually existing practices and their diversity on their own terms and examine precisely what they achieve.

Toward different understandings

In order to move on from a focus on soft power projection, cultural diplomacy policy and practice we would do well to adopt an understanding of culture and communication derived from contemporary cultural theory, which stresses culture as an ongoing process and as inherently relational, and communication as a social process of co-production of meaning. Such an understanding would help legitimise and buttress the more dialogic, collaborative approaches to cultural diplomacy that have begun to be proposed (see e.g. Zaharna *et al.* 2013; also European Union 2014).

We thus advocate a more ethnographic perspective, which would focus on the on-the-ground processes generated by cultural diplomacy projects and actors. Such a perspective would shed light on the actual processes of relationship building nurtured through such projects and highlight how they are shaped ‘by accident and accommodation, organizational culture and personalities, local cultural politics and circumstances’ (Paschalidis 2009, p. 286). In such analyses what would be considered ‘in the national interest’ (or beyond) cannot be predetermined; indeed, in many cases the very notion of the national interest may not be a relevant issue for the actors concerned. The Australian essays in this special issue (Lowe, Carter, Roesler) attempt to develop methodologies adequate to the difficult but necessary task of examining cultural diplomacy programs from the perspective of participants and audiences. Bettina Roesler’s analysis of the Asialink artist residency program, which has sent more than 700 Australian artists to different locations across Asia, examines the highly diverse and open-ended intercultural processes enabled by the program. In doing so, Roesler argues for the value of open-ended and often indeterminate exchanges that are well beyond the current policy grasp. Nevertheless, such openness may well contribute to the development of more fine-grained, cosmopolitan capacities, which Roesler considers an important priority for cultural diplomacy. David Lowe analyses Australia's strong involvement in the British Commonwealth-sponsored Colombo Plan from the 1950s, which entailed sponsorship for tens of thousands of Asian students to study in Australia at a time before restrictive White Australia immigration policies had been dismantled. The strong people-to-people links established with Asian countries have remained as an enduring collective memory of the Colombo Plan, perhaps a forerunner to Australia's later multicultural orientation. For Lowe, voices rather than images animate the understanding of an 'everyday' or 'vernacular' internationalism, as the Asian students came into close contact with ordinary Australians. Such attention to the specifics of intercultural dialogue can enrich our thinking about possible outcomes of cultural diplomacy programs, beyond the customary level of measurable 'impacts.' David Carter's investigation of Australian Studies centres in China is focused on the potential for greater engagement from academics with a stake in cultural analysis. He observes the reticence of humanities academics to become involved in cultural diplomacy projects, perceived to be tainted by nationalist agendas. Carter challenges them to move beyond negative critique and to contribute to the nation as a 'policy horizon and terrain for action, as a set of institutions for mobilising resources and forms of expertise.' In all these three cases, 'the national interest' emerges not as a top-down target imposed by government decree, but as a generative mechanism for *overcoming* narrow or exclusionary notions of the nation, in favour of more relational and open understandings. These examples show how by focusing on the cultural *relations* being built, the work of cultural diplomacy can go beyond the national interest in an iterative way: indeed, what these Australian examples show is the possibility that going beyond the national interest *is* in the national interest.

The conditions for and the actual practical dynamics of idealised processes such as dialogue and collaboration must, however, be carefully analysed in order to bring out the difficulties, contradictions and actual achievements of such processes. Albro, for example, exposes some of the fallacies of diplomatic 'folk theories' of US cultural diplomacy. He points to a very specific national 'cultural imaginary' on the part of cultural diplomacy officials that feeds on a certain cultural triumphalism, or the lack of it, as the contrast with Chinese policy thinkers, as outlined by Sun, shows. Isar, focusing on the evolution of the European Union's 'Culture in External Relations' agenda, has found a certain polyvocality in an agenda setting process that has been significantly driven by non-state actors, for whom 'culture' has been a key stake for a convergence of interests in reshaping a narrative of Europe 'in a pattern rather distinct from the manner in which cultural diplomacy is elaborated by national governments.' In this perspective, the polyvocality of the policy *process* is of equal value as the programs supported. Indeed the EU's policy settings may provide the current benchmark for the adoption of more cosmopolitan ideals in cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion

In this Introduction we have sought to clarify the tangled contemporary understandings of cultural diplomacy. In doing so we have located the central dilemma of cultural diplomacy in its primary aim of serving strategic interests of national governments while at the same time holding out the promise of moving beyond the national interest to support a greater good through mutual cultural exchanges. Associated with this key contradiction are the following tensions affecting national cultural diplomacy practice in today's world of flux:

- Since cultural diplomacy must valorise the general interest *as well as* strategic national interests, nations have to play a double game, for example the balancing of impartiality and strategic advantage in international broadcasting activity in order to achieve credibility and legitimacy.
- The national interests embodied in cultural diplomacy are never simply guided by purely instrumental or calculative thinking. Rather they are embedded in distinct ideas and affects about the nation and its place within an imagining of other nations, including 'folk theories' and blind spots that are relatively immune to rational argument and reflection. Studies of cultural diplomacy should explicitly draw on wider understandings of nationalism and specific national imaginaries: cultural diplomacy is a testing ground for possibilities for the politics of recognition between and perhaps beyond nations.
- There are persistent tensions between 'traditional' cultural diplomacy activities grounded in social and cultural exchange such as people-to-people engagements, collaborative projects, etc. on the one hand and activities premised on sectoral and market competition within globalising cultural fields on the other. Given the proliferation of types of activity in recent times – we haven't even mentioned the burgeoning field of digital diplomacy – within the cultural diplomacy domain, it may be useful to disaggregate the very notion of 'cultural diplomacy' and examine separately its various modalities, each with its differing dynamics, various incorporations within specific cultural and professional fields, and participating communities.

Such tensions have been sharpened by policy discourses and strategies affecting cultural diplomacy in the past two decades, most notably soft power and nation branding (Aronczyk 2013), that are centred on competition between nations. Has the rise of soft power discourse – as interpreted and implemented in so many diverse ways – contributed to a specific instrumentalisation of cultural exchange? Has it in the process perhaps limited the potential for cultural diplomacy to generate new intercultural understandings, and to reduce mistrust? Or will other tendencies in ICR, such as the directions exemplified by the EU's Culture in External Relations agenda, develop sufficient momentum to move cultural diplomacy towards greater mutuality? The Australian cases featured in this special issue suggest that cultural diplomacy can move beyond the national interest only if this move itself can be understood as being *in* the national interest. Further research, including in other countries and regions, is required to finesse the implications of this understanding.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Recently the Australian government has begun to use the term 'Indo-Pacific' so as to be able to include South Asia, particularly India, in this regional construct.
2. Australia's international broadcasting service, the Australia Network, which broadcast to some 45 countries in the Asia Pacific and India, was severely scaled down in 2014 following a highly public disagreement between the government and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which, the government alleged, was not fulfilling its public diplomacy requirements (Tapsell 2014).

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