

China Plays “Her Power” Card in “Liyuan Style”

by Yu Jing Shen Tu

Yu Jing Shen Tu (Yujing@pacforum.org) is a Vasey Fellow at the Pacific Forum CSIS, and PhD candidate in the political science department at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

First Lady Michelle Obama’s absence at the Obama-Xi’s Sunnyland summit disappointed many in China. The media asserted that her absence deprived China’s own glamorous first lady, Peng Liyuan, of a chance to shine and to help shape her country’s international image. Ms. Peng’s “Her Power” helps burnish China’s soft power.

While Mao once said that women hold up half of the sky, in truth women wield relatively little power in China, particularly in politics. There are no women among the recently elected members of the Politburo Standing Committee. Traditionally, first ladies rarely entered the spotlight and fell under a cloak of secrecy. Since 2007, when Xi became the likely appointee to head China’s new government, Peng started to fade from public view. During China’s once-in-a decade leadership transition, Peng’s name and image were not mentioned in the front pages of the country’s main media, and were even blocked on search engines. These phenomena might reflect Confucianism’s discrimination against women’s legitimate power in politics. There is also fear about the mix of beautiful women and powerful men that embodied the experience of Queen Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty, the Empress of the late Qing Dynasty, Mao’s wife Jiangqin, and Bo Xilai’s wife Gu Kailai. Their reputations are characterized by derogatory terms.

Peng has the political wisdom and privileged connections to break this pattern. As a famous Chinese ethnic vocalist, she was well known long before Xi Jinping became famous. Her patriotic songs helped her win popularity among the Chinese people since the 1980s. Peng seems like Hillary Clinton, having evolved from being China’s most recognizable national folk singer into a political and diplomatic asset. She played a leading role in deploying “Her Power” through “First Lady Diplomacy,” especially when members of the Politburo Standing Committee have little experience in foreign policy. Peng is telling a story to galvanize women’s participation in politics in her “Liyuan Style,” softening the image of the Chinese Communist Party’s bureaucratic face and recasting its image in domestic politics and beyond China’s borders.

Domestically, she is having a powerful impact. Her self-confidence and active communication reflect China’s growing pride and confidence. The simplicity and frugality of the “Liyuan” style is a powerful counter to the image of corruption that often dominates the media. Her fashion sense has been highlighted by the media as well. As soon as pictures

of her are published, sales of her clothing and accessories skyrocket, selling out and inspiring knockoffs. Her preference for Chinese brands feeds national pride and patriotism, as well as shows off the creativity of Chinese designers.

Peng is sending other positive messages as well. Her “Liyuan style” disconnects the negative image of the corrupt official and echoes the anti-corruption campaign led by President Xi. She is a long-term advocate for poverty relief and Chinese media say she is an “ambassador for the prevention of juvenile delinquency and for tobacco control.” She participated in philanthropic projects including Gates Foundation initiatives for children’s issues. Official visits to schools, meeting with children, and active participation in social work show an understanding of the concerns of ordinary Chinese and of the need to improve education, environment protection, poverty reduction, and other social issues. (Her emphasis on education and the needs of children suggests Peng wouldn’t fault Michelle Obama’s decision to be at home with her daughters rather than attend the summit.)

Peng’s new visibility is important for foreign audiences too. Her fashion choices demonstrate one form of China’s growing soft power – the power of its creative community and its culture. In 2011, she was appointed by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a Goodwill Ambassador in the fight against tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. For Westerners accustomed to visible spouses of leaders, it is difficult to appreciate the significance of a Chinese First Lady whose advocacy and charisma bolster China’s image. The promotion of “Her Power” in “Liyuan Style” is a novelty in China. Peng’s much-vaunted charisma seems to boost expectations of China’s transformation.

Peng’s high profile and public approval make her the brightest rising star in China’s diplomatic firmament. Her dynamic personality improves Beijing’s international image and is seen as a form of soft power diplomacy to offset the negative influence of Beijing’s increasingly assertiveness. “Her Power” and “Liyuan Style” may also help Xi Jinping and his administration prepare for the political reform that is supposed to inspire people, capture international attention, and push the world to embrace his “China Dream.”

As China’s media promotes Peng, public reaction is proud but not unanimous. Peng embodies the image of a charming first lady, but “Her Power” has its limits: when she is in military uniform, her soft power quickly evaporates. Social media continue to focus on the dark side of Chinese politics. Every breathless comment about Peng is matched by one about the murder trial of Gu Kailai and Bo Xilai’s treatment. Chinese Netizens have no illusions about corruption in China; they know that is as much a part of contemporary China as is Peng, and all her good work won’t eliminate it. As the first lady in China, Peng faces many challenges to use “Her

Power” wisely and successfully, such as the risk of being blamed for creating a cult of personality like Mao’s wife. More interaction with foreign counterparts may help. Hopefully at a future summit, she will be able to meet Michelle Obama, who may help her promote more effective “First Lady Diplomacy” in China, and between China and the United States.

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