

Beijing's Battle for 'Soft Power' Playing Out in the West End

By [Simon Veazey](#) On March 20, 2012 @ 7:11 pm In [National](#) | [No Comments](#)



The London Coliseum is the largest theatre in London, with 2,359 seats. It was opened in 1904 and twelve years ago was completely refurbished and restored with money from institutions such as National Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage. It is the home of the English National Opera (ENO) and has hosted works by Wagner, Puccini and Tchaikovsky. The U.K. promoters of [Shen Yun](#), a world-renowned Chinese performing arts company, say the Chinese Embassy in London has been pressurizing the theatre to stop Shen Yun performing in April. (Roger Luo/ Da Ji Yuan/The Epoch Times)



It is a buzzword increasingly associated with China. It even sounds like a mystical Kung Fu technique. But “soft power” is one move that the Chinese regime has yet to master in the international arena.

It is this pursuit of “soft power” that lies behind recent attempts to stop a performance of classical Chinese dance at a West End theatre in London, according to China expert Ethan Gutmann.

Due to perform in London in April, Shen Yun is a world-renowned Chinese performing arts company with a stated mission to revive China's 5,000-year-old divinely inspired culture.

But the promoters say that the Chinese Embassy in London has been trying to derail the performances – with a potential total audience of around 10,000 – following a pattern seen globally over the last several years.

Ethan Gutmann, an expert and author on modern-day China now living in London, says the regime is envious of Shen Yun's ability to set the terms on which Chinese culture is seen in the West.

Gutmann says: "The Chinese government does not play well with others. They want soft power but they are not good at soft power. They produce movie after movie, show after show, they've tried that, but somehow it never breaks through."

Shen Yun on the other hand, says Gutmann, has been truly successful in laying out its own picture of China's cultural heritage – one which does not chime with the agenda of the regime. "It is about presenting this moral point of view in a very elegant way, with beautiful costumes and sculpted dances and bringing people through Chinese history in a fun way. The Chinese government envies that, they want that – they've been looking for soft power for a long time."

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— *Ethan Gutmann, journalist, investigator, and author of Losing the New China: A Story of American Commerce, Desire and Betrayal*

Increasingly over the last several years, the Communist Party's thirst for soft power has come to the fore, with growing numbers of institutions being set up overseas in the name of promoting Chinese culture and language, with various performing arts groups also being sent to the West.

Through these institutions, some believe that the regime is pushing its own propaganda messages and whitewashing over the image of a communist dictatorship with a shocking human rights record. In some countries commentators and politicians have raised concerns over the proliferation of Confucius Institutes and how they contribute to the malevolent intentions of the regime in China.

Gutmann is a journalist, investigator, and author of *Losing the New China: A Story of American Commerce, Desire and Betrayal*, and has been described as a “mammoth sociological, political whistle-blower” by the US magazine the *National Review*.

He says he has seen Shen Yun every year for the last five years. “It’s glamorous. It lends itself to the big venues very well. As a show it has something for everyone. I took someone last year who has no experience with China – a young lady of about 15 – and she was crazy about it just for the costumes.”

Shen Yun is billed as the world’s premier classical Chinese dance company, with three performance companies touring simultaneously around the globe for five months every year. But the New York-based performing arts company wants to go further still. “The group will only continue to expand, and in the not-too-distant future, Shen Yun will have many companies touring around the world simultaneously,” says the introduction on the Shen Yun official website.

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The promoters of Shen Yun in the UK, the Falun Dafa Association, say that the Chinese regime is frightened of Shen Yun reviving the traditional culture and beliefs that the Communist Party sought to destroy over the last 60 years. They too say that the communist regime cannot bear for anything to be done in the name of China that is not under its control.

The Association says that various UK Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament have expressed concern over the attempts to interfere with Shen Yun in London.

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MEP Gerard Batten told *The Epoch Times* that he was confident the London Coliseum would not give in to pressure from the Embassy and had written to encourage them.

“I know the Chinese Communist Party tried to stop Shen Yun from performing in Romania last year. It’s an absolute disgrace that they are trying to use strong arm tactics here in the UK.”

The Association say that about a month ago they learnt that the Embassy had been pressuring the theatre to cancel Shen Yun. In the last week, they have

also learned that the Embassy has been pressuring sponsors by threatening to withdraw business opportunities in China.

But the Association is confident that the end result will be good for Shen Yun. “In other places, whenever the CCP has tried to mess with Shen Yun performances, they’ve usually just ended up helping to promote it,” says Dr Wei Liu of the Association. “When they sent letters to politicians telling them not to support Shen Yun or to see it, it just raised the profile of the show, and those politicians went to see it.”

Shen Yun is scheduled to give five performances at the London Coliseum, from April 12th-15th.

According to the Association the theatre has said it will honour the contract with Shen Yun, but wants to keep a “neutral stance” on the issue.

The CCP has been attacking Shen Yun in various forms for years says Ethan Gutmann. “Most of it is done in a fairly mild way where they put pressure on the theatre. In some cases it gets very explicit,” he says, mentioning how in Canada a few years ago, the Shen Yun performers’ tour bus had its tyres slashed. “Not slashed to the point that they burst – but just enough so that they would blow when they hit motorway speeds.”

He is in no doubt that the regime was behind the slashing of the tyres.

There are over 40 documented cases of the communist regime interfering in Shen Yun over the last several years in various countries.

Gutmann says that it should come as no surprise to us in the West. “What is surprising is the lack of press, and the lack of outrage,” he says. “The tendency in the West – and this is very disturbing – is to look at this as an inter-family squabble they don’t need to get involved with, not as a matter of morality.”

He says that there is a tendency to think “these are all Chinese people, it’s not our business.”

“This is a very strange attitude given that this is exactly what this show is presenting, exactly what the West represents – which is freedom, and freedom of ideas and freedom of thoughts. This is a show which is expressing morality, it is dealing with a lot of deep issues within Chinese culture.”

Chinese novelist and commentator Zhang Pu said last week that the regime in China feels its soft-power strategy is threatened by Shen Yun.

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“After seeing Shen Yun, Westerners can make a comparison with the CCP’s propaganda,” Zhang said. “They can clearly tell what is really beautiful art, what is real traditional Chinese culture and arts, and what is the essence of the 5,000 years of the Chinese civilisation.”

He says that he has seen performances in London put on by the Communist Party. “When the CCP’s top troupe, the Dance Troupe of the General Political Department of the People’s Liberation Army, came, its performances were full of low, sexual jokes, flirting up and down the stage. Their dance performances are the same ones the CCP has used for decades. It is absolutely not art.”

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