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Evaluate China's current soft power strategy

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Abstract. Soft power strategy is an important aspect of China's foreign diplomacy. It must adapt to China's global peaceful rise. It must create understanding, respect and ultimately support China's political models and policies. Then, it will help China win friends' hearts and minds around the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that building and predicting a soft power strategy is firmly on China's international agenda. This paper starts with the background of soft power and then describes the rises and the limitations of China's current soft power strategy by using documents from previous researches and social media. Finally, the paper illustrates suggestions and solutions to improve this charming strategy.

Keywords. China; Peaceful Rise; Public Diplomacy; Soft Power; Strategy

Introduction

After Joseph Nye (1990) coined the concept of "soft power" and put forward the respective theories, it seems to be very popular not only among scholars but also among journalists and policymakers. The popularity of this concept has given rise to the popularity of research on national policies aimed at improving the image of a country in an overseas territory (Patalakh, 2016). Then, Chinese scholar Wang Huning published China's first article on soft power in the Journal of Fudan University. Wang assessed Nye's theory of soft power resources: culture, political values and ideas, and foreign policy. It is worth noting in view of the important role of culture in the exercise of China's soft power in 1993 (Wang, 1993).

More details on China's soft power policy were provided by Liu Yunshan, head of the Publicity Department of the CCP Central Committee, in an article published shortly after the 17th National Congress of the CCP. He stressed that China's soft power policy should be based on two aspects: core socialist values and the values of traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism (Sayama, 2016).

Callahan (2015) wrote in his online journal that President Hu Jintao launched the goal of "building a harmonious society" in 2004 and "building a harmonious world" in 2005. After President Hu Jintao (2007) announced his goals, the discussion in China really took off in the 2007 report of the 17th national congress of the communist party of China to build up China's soft power. President Xi Jinping, who is Hu Jintao's successor, attaches great importance to China's soft power, especially its "discursive power" and "communication capacity". He made this clear in February 2016 when he visited the headquarters of the *People's Daily*, *Xinhua*

News Agency and China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing. President Xi called on CCTV to objectively, truthfully and comprehensively introduce China's social and economic development to the world audience.

Joseph S. Nye, a famous American scholar, clearly pointed out the concept of "soft power". In his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, published in 1990, argues that soft power is relative to hard power, the axis of confrontation, during the Cold War. In a world of dynamic change, all nations should learn to achieve its goals through a new source of strength: to promote stronger interdependence among nations, to manage the international system structure and to share human cultural value (Nye, 1990). A country's soft power mainly comes from three resources: its culture (where it is attractive), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are considered as legitimate and having moral authority (Nye, 2015).

As a concept, "soft power" has undergone some changes since its inception. Indeed, one can distinguish between at least two explanations of soft power. In its simplest interpretation, this is consistent with the initial definition of Nye (1990, p.167), that soft power is simply the power of attraction, a capability to "get others to want what you want" with your good reputation and positive image. However, his latest definition of soft power defines the concept in broader terms, as "the ability to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes by the cooperative means of framing the agenda, persuasion, and positive attraction" (2011, p.19).

Despite its strong interest in the highest levels, China has yet to develop a comprehensive and coherent national soft power strategy, although different policies exist to that end. China's soft power policy is basically temporary and mainly passive, aiming to counter China's threat theory and improve China's image abroad (Glaser and Murphy, 2008). By the early 2000s, China's charm offensive or soft-power strategy had begun. At the top, the leadership in Beijing has set goals. As China's leaders have repeatedly stressed, China hopes to maintain stability and peace with all countries, especially border countries. Chinese scholars and officials eventually developed the term *heping jueqi* or Peaceful Rise. Zheng Bijian, a powerful senior adviser to Chinese leaders, first used the word and soon became part of the speeches of Chinese leaders, as well as the core of future academic research in China (Kurlantzick, 2007). This soft power strategy shows that even if China becomes a global power, it will not threaten anyone. Obviously, China's rise "will not come at the cost of any other country, will not stand in the way of any other country, nor pose a threat to any other country," said Prime Minister Wen Jiabao in a 2004 speech that encapsulated the Peaceful Rise idea (Pan, 2006).

The effectiveness of a country's soft power is difficult to measure. However, some studies have attempted to assess China's standing among populations around the world and the effectiveness of its soft power. A 2014 BBC world service survey looked at how different regions view each other and identified Africa as the most beneficial for China, followed by Latin America. Similarly, North American and European countries generally have lower interests in China. The BBC found that Chinese respondents rated their country highly, with 85% saying China played an active role in world affairs. Globally, with the exception of China, the average rating rate is 42% (BBC, 2014).

An article devoted to China's global soft power strategy concludes optimistically that China's "Peaceful Rise" strategy has been so successful that it provides Beijing with an international platform to share its views and gain more respect on major international issues (Ding, 2010). However, another article notes that China's regional acceptance around the world is markedly different. It especially matters in the case of the Western countries (the United

States, the European Union) and some of China's neighbours (Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines), who view China mostly in negative terms which, actually, complicates its "Peaceful Rise" in strategically important regions (*Pew Research Centre* 2014, p. 26–27).

As mentioned above, there are different opinions on assessment of China's current soft power strategy. Therefore, this paper will describe more in details based on the previous researches and social media that evaluate this strategy.

The Rise of China's Current Soft Power Strategy

Chinese officials themselves have mentioned soft power as one of the strategic elements behind China's rise, and many of the country's foreign policies are designed to enhance soft power capabilities. Some argue that China's soft power strategy appears to be largely reactive and rather narrowly aimed at bolstering economic resources, supporting strategic regional positioning, and/or opposing misunderstandings about China. In addition, some China watchers believe that China's soft power measures are mainly aimed at strengthening national interests, rather than being specifically used to counter the reputation and influence of the United States (Glaser and Murphy, 2008).

For instance, according to the Xinhua News Agency reported on April 14, 2016, the statistics of Ministry of Education shown that the number of international students studying in China had kept rising since 2015, and its structure was in continuous optimization. There are more than 397,635 foreign students from 202 countries and regions studying in 811 Colleges and Universities, research institutes and other educational organization in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities (Zhang Binqing, 2016). This information tells us that China's soft power strategy is improving. Based on my experience of first coming to China in 2009 for my master's degree at Jiangnan University, at that time I had only one countrymate that was studying at my university. Now I have more than 30 countrymates at Shanghai Jiaotong University in all campuses. It means that Cambodian students are now more interested in China than before.

Moreover, China is setting up Confucius institutes around the world to spread its language and culture and to strengthen cooperation with foreign academic institutions. These institutes can enhance China's soft power and help it establish its image as a benign country. It is a non-profit public organization affiliated with the ministry of education that administers the program. At one level, the Confucius Institute program can be seen as an effort to increase Chinese language learning and appreciation of Chinese culture, but at another level, it is part of a broader soft power projection that China is trying to win hearts and minds for political purposes (Pandarin, 2015). According to the official website of Chinese Hanban (Hanzhe Yangxi, 2015), by October 2014, 471 Confucius Institutes and 730 Confucius Classrooms have been established and spread over 125 countries and regions in the five continents and enrolled an accumulative total of 3.45 million students. Courses mainly include Chinese language, calligraphy, cooking, tea art, Chinese painting, traditional Chinese medicine, martial arts, and traditional Chinese operas and so on.

For example, Mandarin is spreading throughout Cambodia, where efforts to expand the education language have grown rapidly, largely funded by the Chinese government through the local branch of the Confucius Institute (CI). China is expanding its influence in Cambodia and finding this government very receptive to its services. The local CI works with the royal college of Cambodia. In the evening and early morning, students come to the college for language classes, but CI does much of its work elsewhere, including in government departments. In addition to offering free courses to government officials, CI also aims to

improve the mandarin proficiency of the general public. It aims to train local Chinese teachers, help set up classrooms in provinces across the country and select 50 Cambodian students to study in China each year (*The Phnom Penh Post*, 18 Dec 2017).

Ding (2006) in his PhD thesis, found that China has made remarkable progress in the overall level of soft power. Its successful development model has won global admiration and contributed to the development of new affinity between China and other Asian countries. The new diplomacy has enabled China to participate more actively and responsibly in international affairs, enhanced its ability to set an agenda and enhanced its national image. The consensus in the People's Republic of China is that the goal of soft power is to defeat those who see China as a threat and to nurture those who see it as an opportunity.

In his landmark study of China's new Asian engagement, the scholar David Shambaugh (2004) said that after internal policy discussions in Beijing, Chinese leaders decided "to have a peaceful environment conducive to domestic development" and that "China needed to be more proactive in shaping its regional environment." Furthermore, by focusing on soft power, the former intelligence officer Robert G. Sutter (2005) notes in his recent book *China's Rise in Asia: Promises and Perils*, Beijing could avoid directly confronting the United States, the unrivalled global hard power, while possibly weakening America's soft power in the longer term.

In addition, Kurlantzick (2007) claimed that China would be everyone's friend; Beijing would listen to the needs and desires of other nations, supposedly without asking for anything in return; China would not interfere or meddle. Foreign nations could benefit because China would not make demands upon other nations' sovereignty, economic models, governance, or political culture. China also would not threaten or sanction anyone—it would reassure other countries that it had no aggressive desires.

In short, if China today has the same strategy and power objectives as the United States did during the cold war, we can say that China has failed. However, China's soft power strategy once again adapts to China's specific goals and version of China's a just international system, rather than the goals and norms of the United States in its hegemony period. Therefore, China's global power strategy should not be measured by an American yardstick. If we look at China's real objectives and try to persuade other world powers to act in a way that suits such objectives, it seems clear that China has been successful in global power strategy and soft power appears to be greater than many scholars conclude (Kivimaki, 2014).

The Limitations of China's Current Soft Power Strategy

Sayama (2016) claimed that China's soft power activities have not been particularly successful until now due to the inconsistency between China's information, its actions and the nature of Beijing's participation in soft power activities. Soft power is mainly related to the way the government pays attention to the positive aspects of society. But in China's case, the government's strategy and tactics are closely related to shaping Chinese society rather than promoting its achievements.

In addition, according to Nye (2015), China emphasizes its cultural and economic advantages, but it pays less attention to political aspects that may undermine its efforts. Recent international opinion polls show that two major factors limit China's soft power. The first is nationalism. The party's legitimacy rests not only on high economic growth but also on its appeal to nationalism. This reduces the general appeal of President Xi's "Chinese Dream" while encouraging policies in the south China sea and elsewhere to antagonised neighbours. Another limitation is China's reluctance to make full use of uncensored civil society. As *The Economist*

points out, the Chinese communist party does not accept the idea that soft power comes mainly from individuals, the private sector and civil society. Instead, it insists that the government is the main source of soft power, promoting ancient cultural icons that it believes may have global appeal, often using propaganda tools.

Nye (2015) added that China has seen its government policies undermine the success of its soft power. Indeed, domestic repression of human rights activists weakened the soft power of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The benefits of the 2009 world expo in Shanghai were quickly undermined by the imprisonment of Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel peace prize winner, and television screens around the world showing empty chairs at the Oslo ceremonies. Marketing experts call this “stepping on your own message.”

Callahan (2015) said that the further expansion of China’s soft power is restricted by its domestic political institutions and its international system. China’s selective development of soft power is also responsible for rampant corruption and rapidly growing socioeconomic inequality. More importantly, China’s rise comes at a time when the international system is undergoing the structural transformation, inevitably complicating China’s efforts to project soft power.

Historically, China’s military actions in the 1990s and its powerhouse economy had created a “China Threat” school of thought among many scholars—the idea that, indeed, a rising China, like rising Japan and Germany in the early twentieth century, would threaten the world. As David Lampton (2005) points out, policymakers in many countries have responded to this view of the Beijing threat and adopted what he calls the powerful China paradigm. In Lampton’s powerful China paradigm, policy makers take it for granted that China will increasingly use its strength to wield power abroad, and they consider how other countries should prepare to compete with Beijing’s potential power (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Sayama (2016) claims that people in the West believe that resources supporting soft power mainly come from outside the government, while in China, the government plays a leading role in shaping social development and these resources. Second, in terms of its soft power, China pays little attention to the nature of its foreign policy. Indeed, its external behaviour towards some of its neighbours undermines its overall world standing. In the West, by contrast, the broad thrust of its external behaviour is seen as an important aspect of its soft power. On the other hand, while China wants its diaspora to support its overall position, Western countries tend to pay little attention to their views. Finally, the elements of Chinese policy seen as pertinent to external soft power (culture and values) also have an important place in domestic policy – they are used as a means to legitimise one-party rule and to unite the Chinese people around the CCP. By contrast, in the West, external soft-power activities have little or nothing to do with domestic affairs.

Moreover, the article of Ondřej Klimeš (2017) finds that CPC leadership has no clear distinction between the work of the domestic and foreign culture, and instead considers domestic cultural security and international soft-power-building a single ideational and discursive enterprise designed to maintain the CPC’s rule and gain international acknowledgement for it.

More importantly, the limitations and contradictions in China’s cultural diplomacy stem more from the nature of the work of the CPC. Even among China’s politically disinfected intellectuals, these issues are widely debated beyond the party’s central propaganda channels. For example, Chinese academic debates at the end of the Hu era as summarized by d’Hooghe pointed out organizational shortcomings, such as the lack of coordination among involved actors, the shortage of public diplomacy professionals, and the absence of an institution

exclusively in charge of China's public diplomacy. Some experts have criticized the process as still too top-down, China's civil society is not mature enough to play an important role, and the development of non-governmental public diplomacy organizations should be encouraged by the government. Others argue that China needs to better understand its identity and needs before it can begin to build a national image. Others have found Western hegemony in the global media and discourse, or the lack of credibility in Chinese reporting and the unattractiveness of Chinese values as a major issue in China's public diplomacy. One scholar especially commented that China's cultural diplomacy did not solve the problems of "liking traditional China but not contemporary China, liking Chinese culture but not Chinese politics and liking Chinese people but not the Chinese government" (d'Hooghe 2015: 125–128).

Kalathil (2011) expresses that the Chinese government and other authoritarian countries fundamentally misread the nature of the relationship between soft power and the globally networked, information-rich environment, and thus misunderstand the way of soft power accumulation. That is why their long-term efforts to deploy soft power are unlikely to be as effective as conventional wisdom.

More seriously, many international observers tend to see China's soft power capabilities as a zero-sum game with Western powers, especially the United States. One analyst argues that China's "Win-Win" doctrines and respect for national sovereignty deliberately stand in sharp contrast to American arrogance and interventionism. At the same time, China's soft power strategy includes focusing on countries with unstable bilateral relations with the United States, Kurlantzick (2007). For this reason, China's soft power capability has attracted much attention in the mass media and academia in recent years. In the eyes of many people, China's growing soft power is a difficult task, Kalathil (2011).

Last but not least, in its external propaganda work, China faces credibility problems because it usually blocks reports from any sources that are critical of the country. David Shambaugh (2005) says that 'in Beijing, the SCIO and the Foreign Ministry often call foreign journalists in for "tea chats" to scold them for articles deemed unfriendly to China', and American and European scholars and journalists can be refused visas if they fail to be compliant.

Suggestions and Solutions

Next, I will show some suggestions and solutions from leaders and scholars talking about how to improve China's current soft power strategy.

In terms of the promotion of cultural soft power, President Xi specifically called for the increase of "international discursive power" (*guoji huayuquan*) and building an "external discursive system" (*duiwai huayu tixi*). China's story, voice, and special characteristics should be explained through new media, and the discourse aimed at international audiences should be more creative, attractive and credible. This kind of foreign discourse is once again conceptualized as an extension of domestic ideological work because President Xi requires more active publicity of Chinese history and culture through school education, political research, historical research, film and television production, literature and other channels. Patriotism, collectivism and socialism education should be revised to make people have correct views on history, nation, country, and culture so as to enhance their confidence in being Chinese. Therefore, every one of the 1.3 billion should become the communicator of Chinese culture, as well as the traditional, Marxist and socialist values (Xinhua, 2013).^{[1][9]}

The success of China's soft-power strategy will depend on the sources from which soft power derives—a country's culture, the attractiveness of its political values and foreign policies (Nye, 2015). In terms of culture, China is probably the easiest time: people have a wide range

of interest in Chinese food, music, art and so on. Many people in the world want to learn Chinese, and if it is not because of an intrinsic interest in the language, it is very difficult to learn, then it is useful for business. Politically, China is likely to struggle harder as criticism of its authoritarian system keeps it on the defensive. Constructive action within international institutions bodes well for China in the field of foreign policy, but its image will be damaged by such troubled initiatives as Taiwan (Paradise, 2009).

China's aid programs are often seen as successful and constructive. The country's economy is strong, and its traditional culture has been widely admired. But if the country is to realise its enormous soft power potential, it must rethink its policies at home and abroad, limiting its claims to its neighbours and learn to accept criticism to unleash the full genius of its civil society. As long as China stirs up the flames of nationalism and controls the party, its soft power is always limited (Nye, 2015).

As a great power, China may even shift its influence away from the United States and create its own sphere of influence for places like southeast Asia, where it is the strongest. In this area, if there is any conflict in the region, countries will put their own interests under China and think twice. China will have the final say on important political, economic and strategic issues Kurlantzick (2007).

In general, countries attempting to build soft power may also emphasize their activities and multinational mechanisms, including the United Nations, respect for international law and treaties, and measures to promote international peace and stability, humanitarian actions – like showing a readiness to take in refugees – can also enhance a country's international reputation and thus influence. On the other hand, dictatorship and unilateralism in the international sphere tend to erode a country's capacity to build soft power (Sayama, 2016).

In short, China has a long way to go before it has the level of soft power it needs to become a true global leader. One reason may be that China's soft power is still in its early stage. Another reason may be that China lacks some key factors of soft power, such as the attractiveness of its political values Shambaugh (2005).

Conclusions

After a long description on different ideas on China's current soft power strategy, I can conclude that there are pros and cons of this strategy because when the scholars use American yardstick to evaluate China's soft power strategy, they claim the strategy is not yet successful, however, when other scholars assess the strategy by using Chinese standard, they support the improvement of the strategy. From my perspective, I strongly believe that China's soft power strategy will rise peacefully if the Chinese government try more to properly use this charming strategy. Moreover, Chinese citizens should learn more about China's soft power and help spread it to the world, especially when they are on tour or do business in foreign countries. Finally, based on my observations, some Chinese citizens show bad behaviours to foreign people both in China and during their international visits. Therefore, this drawback can affect the rise of China's soft power as well because soft power springs largely from individuals.

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