

The Role of Soft Power in China's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century

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Abstract: The concept of soft power has recently become more integrated in China's diplomatic strategy and foreign policy. China's utilization of hard power only is insufficient if it wishes to be an active player on the international stage. It also needs to employ soft power to stimulate its influences and leadership in world politics. This study focuses on the argument that soft power can play a significant role in shaping China's charm image among other countries. It also discusses that China's aspiration to be a more powerful state in the region depends on its ability to put more efforts into its soft power tactics. To this end, China has employed various tools of soft power's sources including Chinese culture, language, arts, aids, trades and investments to promote its influences abroad. China's interest in using soft power comes from its demanding national interests. These national interests include trying to secure a peaceful environment for its economic growth, to accommodate for its increasing energy needs, and also to minimise the influence of other powers, particularly the United States.

Keywords: China, Soft Power, Hard Power, Foreign Policy, National Interests

1. Introduction

Applying soft power in foreign policy has become a prevalent means in the relationship and cooperation among countries to exercise their powers without depending overwhelmingly on hard power. The concept of "soft power" was originally introduced by Joseph Nye in his book titled *Bound to Lead* in 1990. According to Nye (2004, p.5) "soft power- getting others to want the outcomes that you want, co-opts people rather than coerces them". In other words, soft power is a valuable tool to make others do what you want without resorting to coercive measures. Nye argues that the source of 'soft power' comes from intangible tools such as ideology, culture, and institutions (Nye 2004, p.6). Soft power has played a crucial role in the decision making of the United States' foreign policy and it has also been adopted by some other countries, including China. In Southeast Asia, China has appeared to be more powerful regarding its hard power tactics toward economy, military and technology. This rise in power encouraged Chinese leaders to think about other, more nuanced aspects of power. In the Chinese view, soft power is a helpful concept to build regional and geopolitical alliances across Southeast Asia and beyond (Huang & Ding 2006, p. 22). To this end, China has to use various types of soft powers' means

such as culture, language institutions, political values, aids and trades if it wishes to lesson is dependency on coercive measures of influence.

This research argues that China's aspiration to be considered as a more powerful state regionally as well as globally depends on further attention to the role of soft power in its decision making of foreign relations. The development of Beijing in all aspects of hard power is not only sufficient to fulfil its goals; soft power is a must for China in order to foster its influences and dominance across the world. This research is divided into four sections. In the first section, it reviews the general meaning of soft power and how it differs to hard power. The second section discusses incentives and motivations for using soft power and China's interest in soft power. The third section analyses the resources of China's soft power. The final section investigates a mainstream assessment of China's soft power and the outcomes of its application in China's foreign policy. The purpose of this research is to explain the role of soft power in China's diplomacy and foreign policy in recent years. It also contends that soft power is an important tool, necessary to shape China's charm image among Asian countries.

1.1 Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer some vital questions. Firstly, what is soft power and how it is different from hard power? Second, what does soft power mean in China's diplomatic approach and foreign policy? Third, what tools does China use as sources of its soft power? And lastly, what are the results of applying soft power in China's foreign policy?

1.2 Literature Review

There is a common understanding within Chinese foreign policy for soft power as a significant concept because the government believes that soft power is a key measure of the state's regional and international reputation and leverage. Being a powerful and competitive global actor requires China to employ hard power as well as soft power. (Mingjiang, 2008, p. 290). Li and Hong (2012) argue that the rise of a country's power can be mainly assessed by the "comprehensive rise in the national power" (p.47). According to the Nye's idea, the comprehensive national power of a state can be measured by its hard power tactics toward its economy, its military and its technology sector and its soft power approach which influences the representation of a nation's ideology, culture, and their overall appeal to other states. It is commonly accepted by scholars and observers that soft power plays a key role in China's foreign strategy (Gill, & Huang, 2006; Cho & Jeong, 2008; Wuthnow, 2008). According to Mingjiang (2008), studying the concept of soft power has become a popular topic among Chinese scholars; the majority of them accepted Nye's idea and his definition of the term, while many Chinese scholars deviate from Nye's main positions by adding the active role of mass media. They discuss the role of media and communication devices as a significant part of the state's soft power. (Cho & Jeong, 2008, p. 456).

The subject of soft power in Asian countries has not been researched widely by Western academicians and scholars, although a few publications in this area have been presented in print and online in the past few years. According to Mingjiang Li's survey who conducted for published Chinese articles in Chinese periodicals and journals that were collected in a huge database called the China National Knowledge

Infrastructure (CNKI) database. It was reported that the number of the articles published annually with reference to “soft power” in the article text averaged about eight from 1994 to 2000. This figure then rose to 53 from 2000 to 2004, and continued to grow to 314 between 2005 and 2007 (Lai, & Lu 2012). A recent paper by Blanchard and Lu described the tools that Beijing has devoted to develop the effectiveness of soft power and determine some of its goals in applying soft power as well as measuring the value of Chinese soft power in its foreign relations (Blanchard & Lu 2012). Kurlantzick’s book titled *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World* is the main English-language study so far. This book is a major academic attempt at mapping China’s soft power. In order to achieve its aims, China has utilized different kinds of tools, which Kurlantzick divided them into two groups, they are tools of culture contains (Chinese arts, culture, ethnicity and language) and the tools of business includes (investment, trade, aid, the appeal of China’s economic model) (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Previous studies have shown that the expansion of China’s domestic realm and responsibilities has encouraged it to look beyond traditional forms of power and seriously consider fostering soft power strategies in foreign policy. This development is not only a process of the improvement over China’s economic and military spheres, but also the growth of attraction towards China’s culture and ideology (Huang & Ding 2006, p. 22; Li & Hong 2012, pp. 46- 47; Cheng Sun 2011, p. 53; Cho, & Jeong 2008, p. 453). There is common agreement among Chinese scholars that culture is a substantial source of China’s soft power especially the post-Mao period of reform. This opening has led to rising global interest in Chinese culture (Gill, & Huang, 2006, p. 18; Mingjiang, 2008, p.292).

1.3 Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, the research methodology is a qualitative approach. This research utilized secondary resources such as books and journal articles in prominent Chinese and international journals as well as official websites. An acknowledged limitation of this research is that it is always difficult to evaluate the effect of soft power in foreign policy without conducting survey questionnaires in the targeted country to investigate the outcomes of soft power adaption. Therefore, the researcher basically relies on the former and previous surveys and data collection, which have been conducted in this area by other researchers.

2. What is Soft Power?

The concept of soft power was initially proposed by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s, and it then has become a widespread concept in the world politics. In *Bound to Lead* (1990), he distinguished between two forms of powers: They are command ‘hard power’ and co-optive ‘soft power’. Basically, hard power is ‘you get other states to do what you want’. He explained that the ‘coercion and inducement’ are the main sources of the ‘hard power’ (Huang & Ding, 2006, p.23). While the soft power “is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Cheng, 2011).

Soft power means that state A can use its intangible sources to charm state B without threatening or coercing. In contrast, hard power means that state A should force state B to do the favour of state A by threatening or coercing. This makes it clear that soft power is different from hard power in their sources and exercises. However, hard power not only includes military power, some other methods can be used

by a country to force other countries in order to change their behaviour, this includes 'economic and political pressure' (Vyas, 2010, p. 40). Fan (2008, p.150) argues that soft power can be distinguished from hard power by 'its relative, intangible and context-based' influence. He also explains that it is not easy to measure and control soft power due to 'its diversified sources'. It is also important to notice that the purpose of both hard and soft power is connected because both are seeking to achieve the same goals through affecting the behaviour and performance of others.

The common understanding of soft power by Chinese leaders and scholars is largely based on the theoretical background suggested by Nye on the soft power; large numbers of the Chinese scholars have adopted Nye's idea of soft power in their researches and studies. They also mainly accept the tools of soft power which are proposed by Nye such as culture, foreign policy and political values, while some other Chinese scholars add the role of mass media as a resource of state's soft power (Mingjiang, 2008). Nye argues that China's old art, culture and cooking have left intense effects across the entire world. The expansion of soft power in China has emerged most prominently by the turn of the 21st century (Li & Hong 2012, pp. 46-47). Therefore, this study applies the Nye's theory of soft power as a theoretical framework to explain the role of soft power in China's foreign policy.

3. China's Interest in Soft Power

In recent decade, China has initiated massive efforts to enhance its soft power across the world in order to fulfil its national interests. These attempts started when former President of China Hu Jintao in 2004 and 2005 publically announced his intentions and aims to build 'a harmonious society' and 'a harmonious world'. According to Hu, a harmonious world would be characterized by multi-relationships, mutually advantageous cooperation, the spirit of inclusiveness to build a world in which coexistence among civilizations exists and by a reformed United Nations (Hu, 2005). Discussion on soft power in the China's decision making has even more integrated after Hu Jintao in 2007 stated his purpose to build China's 'soft power' in his report to the 17th Party Congress in 2007. As a consequence of this interest in soft power, large numbers of the articles have been published in academic journals and Chinese periodicals, as well as confidential research projects on soft power at the official think tanks, for instance the Strategic Studies Institute of the Central Party School and the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) (Callahan, 2015). Beijing's attention to soft power has intensified under President Xi Jinping. And in 2014, Xi announced that developing China's soft powers can be achieved through the state's ability in global communication and its capacity of building a good communication system. He also believes that new media can play this role by increasing creativity and presenting reliability of China's publicity and the China's stories, voices and characteristics should be well explained (Xi, 2014) Under Xi, China has introduced many new initiatives to the world, such as "the Asia-Pacific dream," "the Chinese dream," "the Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road," "the Silk Road Economic Belt," "a new type of major-country relations," and many others. It is easy to describe such terms as "slogan diplomacy," but Beijing nevertheless attaches great meaning to it (Shambaugh, 2015, p.99).

Chinese leaders have soon realized that being a great power or even a powerful state in the region requires having hard power and soft power as well. It is obvious that combining both powers allow states to enjoy flexibility in its relations with other countries and maintain advantageous positions in

international competition (Chen et al., 2009). Applying different kinds of power including Soft power would help China to pursue its national interests: expanding its economic ties with other countries and integrating its market to the global markets. It also allows China to be more involved in the policy of developing countries and to make new alliances and regional associations in the Asia Pacific, Africa and Latin America (McGiffie 2009). In today's globalized world, through the use of soft power a country can play an important role in the world economy and international relations. At the end of the scale, using hard power has become more costly and is also unfavourable among societies and international communities. Many people around the world opposed the 2003 American invasion of Iraq due to the gory and bloody consequences of the war (Nye 2004, p. 14). Moreover, if China threatens its neighbours as a result they will be inclined to make other alliances against China's threat. In contrast, if China uses soft power to attract its neighbours, then neighbouring states will feel less need to balance China's power with equally coercive measures (Nye, 2012). By attracting neighbouring countries, China would reduce the United States' influence in the region.

As the largest country in Asia, China's rapid economic growth is a good indicator of increasing its hard power and soft power in the region. Therefore, it cannot be overlooked that economic power beyond soft power plays a significant role in China's diplomatic approach and its foreign relations. In order to promote its soft power China heavily needs economic power to support media broadcasting, cultural and art institutions both inside and outside the country. China has an opportunity to play a key role in the programs of development assistance and government investment in many other countries. In the last decade, its economy has been more integrated with more than 93 countries around the world, 'for both the benefit of the recipients and its own interests' (Wolf & Warner, 2013). Therefore, it is obvious that the ability of the country to make alliances and closer ties with other countries is a sign of increasing China's influence in the world. These relationships are significant for both countries in terms of economic and technological cooperation; it also helps the recipients to build their countries' infrastructures and to develop their economy.

However, China's interest in soft power has become more popular only in the late 1990s, this interest has been promoted due to some factors. Firstly, rapid development of China's economy provides confidence to its economic position in the global market. Secondly, China understood that it is important to develop its relation with neighbouring countries especially Asian countries. Finally, China has realized that using hard power will not achieve its goals in some issues for example, the South China Sea issue (Gil, 2008, p. 171). Chinese influence has increased in Asia over the last few decades through developing economic trades, providing aids to Asian countries and creating regional organizations. Cho & Jeong (2008) state that "besides increases in economic and military power, the strengthening of China's soft power has been pivotal in expanding the country's regional influence...., has risen as a potential competitor to the United States in the Asian region" (p. 454). The United States has influenced almost all countries around the world especially Asian countries through mutual trades and alliances other means of soft power. This compels Chinese leaders to rethink China's image at least on a regional scale.

4. China's Soft Power Resources

Soft power is a sort of power which depends more on attractive instruments than coercion. According to Nye a country's soft power relies mainly on three resources: its culture (culture's overall appearance through language and arts), its political values (democracy, human rights, and elections), and its foreign policies (legitimacy and moral authority) (Nye 2004, p.11). Therefore, the ability of the country and its administration are very important in directing the sources of soft power. In other words, only having the source of soft power is not enough to achieve the goals beyond your interests but also the country's desire to employ soft power in a sophisticated way is equally significant. In order to direct its soft power and obtain its objectives, China utilizes various sources to promote its soft power. In terms of culture, China has long history of traditional culture and civilization in the Asia and it main resource of fostering its soft power (Huang & Ding 2006, p. 26). From this it can be noticed that China's culture and economy can be substantial sources of its soft power. In contrast, China is not well recognised for its political values which are often plagued with low freedom of speech, a low freedom of religion and difficulty in granting and maintaining its citizens other political and civil rights.

Culture and language can play a key role in increasing the impact of China's soft power in the region. There are different ways to promote China's culture among other nations around the world. This could be through media such as T.V, Radios, Internet and film or through the establishment of cultural and language institutions in other countries. In 2004, China initiated a program to open Confucius Institutes in other countries, now it has more than 400 Confucius Institutes and 500 Confucius Classrooms in 120 countries. China plans to increase this number in the future in order to promote Chinese language and culture abroad (Hartig, 2012, p. 256). Some other efforts can be noticed is that it has established '24-hours Chinese TV and Radio broadcasting stations' to enhance its culture and language in other countries and also to attract international students. Education is another essential method to China's soft power. In 2015, around 300,000 International students were studying in Chinese universities (the vast majority learning the Chinese language), with additional numbers in vocational colleges. Every year, the China Scholarship Council provides nearly 20,000 scholarships to international students (Shambaugh, 2015, p.104). China has also become an active participation in 'regional multilateral organization such as the Association of South- East Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Cho & Jeong, 2008, p. 454). From this it can be seen that China has real intentions to promote its soft power and influence over other countries across the world through the diffusion and develop of its charm image.

Moreover, China has taken some steps to increase its assistance and aid to other countries around the world particularly in Southeast Asia, Latin America and Africa. Since 2010, China's aid and assistance have increased dramatically. in 2009, China's foreign aid was \$124.8 billion, it then increased to \$168.6 billion in 2010, it continued to grow to \$189.3 billion in 2011, while it was only \$1.7 billion in 2001 (Wolf & Warner, 2013). 2010 and 2011 figures were equivalent to about 3 per cent of China's GDP and were more than twice the size of the officially reported budget of defence ministry of the China. Moreover, China has pledged to spend large amounts of money on projects which are backing up its soft power. This includes \$150 billion for projects like (the New Development Bank, the Silk Road Economic Belt, the Maritime Silk Road and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). China has also projected to invest \$1.25 trillion worldwide by 2025 (Shambaugh, 2015, p.100). Allocating this amount

of money indicates China's serious efforts to appeal to the international community through admiration rather than traditional coercion. China's influence over economy is the strongest instrument supporting its soft power ambitions as it can attract other countries through signing huge trades and investment deals as well as offering loans.

5. What China Hopes to Achieve

Chinese leaders have understood the limits of hard power to change other's behaviour, and the costly consequences of using it. Beijing is acutely aware of the necessity for a soft power approach to promote national interests in the 21st century. Soft power would benefit China's interests in several ways. China is looking to secure its natural and energy sources as a main element to boost its economic growth; therefore, its close ties with more countries provide more alternatives to reach these resource needs. As Gil (2008) states, "China wants to create a peaceful international environment in which its economic development can continue and in which it can portray itself as a responsible and constructive player in world politics" (p. 117). China's major spheres of influence include Latin America, Africa and Central as well as South-West Asia. It is in these areas that China's foreign policy, political value and economic carrots have served as the main inspiration for its soft power to attract these countries. These regions have welcomed the rules on which Beijing has shaped its foreign policy because of their shared development concerns.

There are different views among analysts over China's long term interests in these areas and their implication for the United States. Some believe that China's soft power aims have been employed to weaken the United States' influence in the region. In contrast, others argue that China's strategy is to continue its economic development at least for the next 10- 15 years (Lum et al., 2008). There is no doubt that the United States' soft power has played a key role in the world because it effectively upholds values like transparency, justice, election and human rights domestically. In contrast, China's "domestic policies and values set limits ... where the Communist Party fears allowing too much intellectual freedom and resists outside influences" (Nye, 2004, p. 89). Therefore, in order to foster its soft power and to attract other nations, China must review its political values including its stance on minority rights, human rights, justice, media censorship and fair election processes.

6. Conclusion

The concept of soft power has integrated largely into Chinese diplomatic strategy and foreign policy toward other countries around the world. In recent years, China's hard power has experienced a large development in terms of economy, technology and military. China has then realized that applying soft power is very important to draw its charm image among other countries. China's interest in soft power is rooted in its commitment to achieve its national interests; to this end, it has employed different apparatus including (Chinese culture, language, arts, aids, trades and investments). It is important to say that China's political system requires some reforms in order to be more attractive by having a more inclusive approach to human rights, political participation and transparency of administration.

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