

China's Soft Power Policy: Lessons and Implications

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Submitted 19 March 2015; accepted in final form 17 April 2015

Abstract

China's increasing strength in all aspects is vital to international relations, but more importantly to Asia-Pacific's security architecture. It is critical for countries in the region, including ASEAN, to scrutinize China's role and conduct regarding its domestic and foreign policies, which will affect ASEAN more than other regions in the world. Soft power policy has played an important role in China's foreign affairs over the past two decades and has been watched by countries around the globe. It will be beneficial to learn China's experiences of its conduct in this regard, as well as to understand the distinction between Western and Chinese concepts of soft power. Information from this study will improve understanding of China's foreign policies, enable countries to be prepared in dealing with China, and be a lesson for nations to use in shaping their policies.

Keywords: China, soft power, public diplomacy, Chinese culture

1. Introduction

China's growing economy and military strength have made it a major global player and, inevitably in the foreseeable future, a regional power, if not a super power. Subsequently, as a potential superpower, China must pursue a big role in all aspects, particularly in foreign affairs, with a view toward maintaining its influence, promoting its interests and, from time to time, demonstrating its real power. To achieve this status, a tool box comprising hard and soft power must be employed according to varying situations. As a latecomer, it has followed the practices of using soft power to attract other powerful countries, such as the United States, European Union and Japan. The discourse on China's soft power has drawn much attention of political leaders, scholars, academicians and mass media as well as observers around the world. Many studies have been conducted on China and its soft power policy. Almost all of them hold convergent views that China, as an emerging power, China has, to certain extent, achieved the goals of her soft power strategy, garnering supports from the international community in various efforts of her foreign affairs.

China has learnt and developed the concept of soft power well enough to identify the definition conforming to the Chinese history, tradition and culture, and use it effectively. While U.S. soft power has been declining since its invasion into Iraq in 2003, China's soft power has been rising. International observers, particularly those in the Asia-Pacific region, have raised concerns about the expansion of China's soft power around the world.

This article compiles thoughts, arguments and reasons from literature written during 2004-2014, with a view toward learning the development of China's soft power concept; the core components of that concept; the effectiveness of its policy; Chinese thinking about soft power and its role in foreign policy; Chinese scholars' movement beyond a dominant theory of soft power; and Chinese objectives in promoting its soft-power policy.

Since this policy directly involves the U.S. and has a huge impact on the Asia-Pacific region, this paper also examines the prospects and implications of American and Chinese policies for the Asia-Pacific region.

2. Debate about Soft Power (Concept, Chinese Version or Characteristics)

2.1 Concept

Joseph Nye defines “power” as the “ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants.” He divides power into three categories: (a) hard power, as coercive force wielded through inducement or threat based on military intervention, coercive diplomacy and economic sanctions and a reliance on tangible power resources such as armed forces or economic measures (Wagner, 2014); (b) soft power, as an ability to attract or co-opt countries to one’s will that rests on three resources: “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)” (Nye, 2013); and (c) smart power, as a combination of hard and soft power. According to Ernest J. Wilson III, smart power is the “capacity of an actor to combine elements of hard and soft power in ways that are mutually reinforcing such that the actors’ purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently” (Wilson, 2008).

To understand clearer about the difference of ‘hard power’ and ‘soft power,’ one must understand that soft power is based on the belief that legitimacy is power; not power is legitimacy. Soft power means applying power with others not over others. Soft power relies on consent while hard power depends on coercion. Because we live in an interdependent world, no single nation can build its future alone; and multidimensional aspects of security issues e.g. transnational issues, by relying on merely soft power that can bring about necessary international cooperation to solve various transnational issues. Soft power has brought about cooperative efforts of concerned parties, while hard power is more unilateral action.

Soft power and public diplomacy are closely linked. According to Nye, public diplomacy has a long history of promoting a country’s soft power in winning the Cold War, and public diplomacy is an important tool in the arsenal of soft power (Nye, 2008). Yiwei Wang’s paper analyzes China’s perceptions and misperceptions of public diplomacy, including how Chinese history and culture have shaped its understanding of soft power and use of public diplomacy as a means of promoting it. She points out that “public diplomacy” is a foreign concept in China, a term similar to the concept of “external propaganda,” or the “promotion of the Chinese image abroad.” In Chinese, “propaganda” has a positive meaning that takes into account the activities conducted, such as the release of news (Wang, 2008).

Wang opines that China has misconceived soft power as shown in the following actions and beliefs: 1) its perception of national strength as an index of international image; 2) its focus on international standing while neglecting international image; 3) its focus on expanding its economy internationally over culture; 4) its excessive humility about promoting the nation in international society; 5) and the assumption that it should be respected for its long history and civilization (Wang, 2008).

Glaser and Murphy have elaborated in detail what Chinese scholars and leaders have studied, discussed and learned about soft power, dividing it into two waves of intellectual debate. The first wave was in 1993 when Wang Huning, then deputy director of the Policy Research Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) under Jiang Zemin and subsequently the director of the same office under Hu Jintao as well as the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee, gave priority to culture as the main source of soft power. The second wave occurred in the mid-2000s, when Chinese theorists expanded Nye’s original conceptual framework to formulate “soft power with Chinese characteristics,” which captured the attention of China’s leadership as well the general public (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

2.2 Chinese Characteristics

The convergent view among Chinese scholars comprises two main schools of thought about the core of soft power: culture and political power.

Culture: Chinese values such as giving priority to human beings, harmony between mankind and nature, and harmony lead to a harmonious society and world. The mainstream intellectual view is that culture is the core resource of a state’s power (Glaser & Murphy, 2009), which China’s leadership has embraced, resulting in greater funding of its cultural soft-power resources at home and expansion abroad. Today’s global problems might be better addressed by adopting China’s cultural concepts, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, whose essence embrace honesty, faithfulness, tolerance, cooperation, and compromise, according to this view.

Politics: Soft power consists of international attractiveness, international mobilization capability and domestic mobilization capability. China must rebalance its domestic development and establish a harmonious society – social equality and justice – as the political basis for soft-power construction. Other Chinese scholars point out that soft power is evident in a state’s ability in international institution-building, agenda-setting, mobilization of coalitions, participation in multilateral diplomacy, overseas assistance programs, and peacekeeping operations (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

Some Chinese analysts promote the idea of combining hard and soft power as they are complementary under the rubric “comprehensive national power,” which encompasses all sources of material and ideological power (Li, 2008; Hunter, 2009). As economic power can be leveraged as sanctions or payments, it is considered hard power (Nye), whereas economic development and some forms of financial assistance are soft power. Shaun Breslin argues that China’s emergence as an alternative economic partner appears as the major source of attraction for developing states. Breslin also opines that if the soft-power concept includes an attraction toward political and social systems, values and policies, then China seems to have minimal soft power (Breslin, 2011).

2.3 Comparison between Chinese and the Western Fundamentals

China and the West see basic virtue differently. Confucius gives priority to human beings, the relationship between humans and nature, and self-examination, as opposed to the West’s belief in individualism and liberalism (Glaser & Murphy, 2009), and its tendency to think in absolutes, such as good vs. evil, and view others as irreconcilable enemies (Wang, 2008).

The Chinese approach proceeds from an inner world; the West has adopted an external/exploring culture. A Westerner asks, “Who are you?”; a Chinese asks, “Who are we?” (Wang, 2008). The understanding of power in Chinese culture is also opposite to that in the West. While in Western politics, power refers to the ability of one actor to influence the attitude and behavior of another actor, the ancient Eastern tribute system takes into account the extent of acceptance in the power of another, too (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

During the Warring States Period, power in Chinese became associated with strategy. Alan Hunter states that the concept of “soft power” has been a fundamental part of military thinking in China for more than 2,000 years. Philosophically speaking, Chinese understanding of power is related to morality, in particular “moral leadership” (Hunter, 2009). Morality inside brings power outside. Confucius said, “Do not impose upon others what you do not desire yourself.” In short, power comes from morality and morality comes from nature; therefore, there is no Chinese international relations theory (Wang, 2008).

China’s long-standing opposition to the use of force, preservation of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in other countries’ affairs, its opposition to economic sanctions, and the concept of building a harmonious world resonates with many nations. There have been several apparent cases of China’s consistency in her policies that have made her more attractive than the U.S., who often times violated international rule of law and norm by taking unilateral actions in different regions at different occasions. The past experiences at the United Nations demonstrated that the Western Powers always use ‘coercion means’ to get the support from smaller countries for their positions or directions they wanted.

3. The Case in Point

3.1 Development of Soft-power in China

Although there was the fact that China just began to study the term ‘soft power’ in the 1990s, the Chinese have understood the philosophy, techniques and the nature of ‘soft power’ for a long time. The Chinese had employed some tools considered to be part of ‘soft power’ to attract foreigners before. Studies have found that China has used soft power in different forms throughout history, dating back to the Tang and Yuan dynasties. In modern history, China began to reform her foreign strategy with an aim at obtaining a peaceful international environment in the 1980s when she began her reform agenda, focusing on domestic economic development (Sheng, 2006). The so-called soft power strategy arrived at a turning point in the 1990s, when she was perceived as a threat, (Tai-Ting Liu & Tsai, 2014) because of her unstoppable

economic continued growth. This perception coincided with the decline of American soft power after the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003.

During that period, the concept of ‘peaceful rise’ was proposed by China as an attempt to associate herself with peace, but it backfired and generated negative impressions. In response, China promoted the concept of “harmonious world view” and the “good neighbour policy,” as major tools of soft power were promoted (Tai-Ting Liu & Tsai, 2014) in 2005 white paper on “China’s Path to Peaceful Development” (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

After a long and intense discourse about the concept of soft power at different levels, the Chinese have been able to come up with a clearer picture and a conclusion that Chinese history and culture are significant source of soft power, and that there was a strong sense of urgency toward building and promoting soft power, to such an extent that analysts urge soft power to be treated on the level of state strategy (Li, 2008).

3.2 China’s Objectives

Initially, China’s soft power was largely perceived as a defensive tool, such as cultivating a mild image to repel the “China threat” theory. Chinese strategic circles believe that soft power, as an aspect of the “comprehensive power,” is an important indicator of a state’s international status and influence, and a tool for maintaining advantageous positions in international competition. Therefore, many Chinese analysts argue that soft power is inseparable from China’s rise. It is instrumental in helping China achieve the goals of a peaceful and stable international environment, a neighborly and friendly environment in surrounding regions, a cooperative environment based on equality and mutual benefit, an objective and friendly media (Li, 2008), and a reduction of the impact of the China threat theory and its challenges on national security (Tai-Ting Liu & Tsai, 2014). China’s approach to soft power is holistic; the domestic and foreign policy aspects of soft power development are conceived as an organic whole (Glaser & Murphy, 2009), which has led to the concept of a harmonious society and world. In short, China’s development of soft power is an important task in its highest development strategy of building “comprehensive national strength” while “maintaining internal stability” (Sheng, 2006).

Wang points out that to enhance China’s soft power, the task falls to public diplomacy, and that since the end of the cold war, Chinese public diplomacy has pursued five main objectives: (1) publicizing the Chinese government’s statements, (2) forming a desirable image of the state, (3) rebutting distorted overseas reports, (4) improving the international environment surrounding China, and (5) exerting influence on the policy decisions of foreign countries (Wang, 2008).

3.3 Practices and Implementation

Hu’s announcement in 2007 and the following years can be considered an embryonic phase of China’s soft power discourse, which has been developing rapidly since then along with the policy’s implementation and literature on this subject. China has employed several programs and tools to promote public diplomacy and soft power. Her soft power projection comprises culture and religion, education and Mandarin, diplomacy, media, tourism and sports, a Chinese diaspora, and economic aspects. China also dispatches doctors and teachers abroad. Increasing numbers of foreign students have come to study in China, and more foreigners are learning Mandarin. The number of Confucius Institute offices established abroad has grown from more than 40 in the U.S. and 260 in 75 countries in 2009, to 896 in 108 countries in 2014 (Tai-Ting Liu & Tsai, 2014). There is also growing interest across foreign policy and institutions in soft power. Some scholars have categorized its current soft-power activities into five areas: investment, peacekeeping and humanitarian aid, exchange programs, diplomacy and multilateral institutions (Kalathil, 2011).

In addition to the above-mentioned projects and activities, two elements need to be elaborated as key sources of Chinese attraction. First, her success in economic development and poverty-reduction along with the concept of development according to one’s own characteristics (the idea of “doing it your own way”), referred to as the so-called Beijing Consensus, resonates positively in the developing world while the Washington Consensus has failed many developing countries (Hunter, 2009). The Beijing Consensus idea, put forward by Joshua Cooper in 2004, drew much attention on China as an alternative to the West or Washington Consensus, which come with ideology without proper concern for local conditions. Secondly,

Chinese growing participation in international institutions has played a significant role in increasing her presence in world politics. She has always used the means of enhancing her role in international institutions at every forum globally and regionally. Chinese leaders agreed on the importance of China's participation in multilateral diplomacy, overseas assistance program and peacekeeping operations. The supportive votes China has received on many issues in the United Nations system provide evidence of her efforts.

3.4 Challenges

Scholars, analysts, China's elite and its leadership agree that the biggest element that has hampered and continues to obstruct its soft power policy is its authoritarian political regime (Huang, 2013). Calls from inside and outside the CPC for the leadership to undertake wider political and socio-economic reform have been bolstered; the Scientific Development Concept adopted at the 17th CPC Congress in October 2007 was a rebalancing of development strategy that included political reform (Glaser & Murphy, 2009).

There is also agreement that China needs a civil society to complement the state's role in efforts to promote soft power. A third obstacle to soft power promotion that has been mentioned is China's lagging ability in using media to promote its policy when compared with that of the much less censored media in the West. Further, China must take other challenges into consideration, such as: corruption, the lack of international credibility and foreign policy (Hunter, 2009). Because its efforts concentrate on traditional Chinese legacies, its conduct in the world of international public relations remains weak.

Some scholars view China's foreign policy principle of non-interference as an obstacle to soft-power promotion because it leaves the country open to criticism for not being proactive in helping to resolve conflicts and other social problems in countries such as Sudan and Myanmar. The increasing aggression of China's military on its territorial claims against ASEAN member-states in the South China Sea provides further evidence of nearby countries' concern about China's regional objectives. Other obstructions include megaprojects like its Silk Road venture, as potential partners question whether China will benefit at their expense. In addition, the West regards China's foreign policy of unconditional assistance, which has attracted many countries in the developing world that resist reforms to limit corruption and environmental degradation, as irresponsible; its domestic politics as authoritarian; and its civil failure to instill the rule of law as untrustworthy. All of these conditions have been criticized as impediments to its development of soft power.

Systemic disadvantages that China must overcome include: 1) a diplomatic system complicated by many departments and groups, making it difficult to devise long-term strategic arrangements for practicing public diplomacy as well as overcautious diplomats of dubious quality and ideas; 2) a bureaucratic system in great need of reform that injects bad domestic habits into public diplomacy; and 3) a public diplomacy with a huge linguistic and cultural gap in communicating internationally.

4. Lessons and Implications

This research provides information on the development of China's foreign policy and the implications of its conduct while employing soft power.

4.1 Lessons and Recommendations

China's policies and conduct have the strongest effect on the Asia-Pacific region. The following points address leaders, scholars and analysts in the region concerned about protecting and enhancing their interests. China's rise and growing soft power requires more institution-building in various fields to ensure the transition from the rule of men to the rule of law. To develop soft power, China needs to fully integrate itself and be more active in international society. Its development of soft power is increasingly critical as a mechanism for realizing its dream of becoming a global power, especially since its hard power resources greatly lag those of the world's major powers. China holds little attraction in the West. Nye was skeptical about China's soft power as it was obtained solely through a centralized regime, whereas soft power's success needs civil actors as well. However, to judge the policy's success, one must take into account the responses of targeted countries (Moss, 2013).

China's public diplomacy strategy with Chinese characteristics can be outlined as follows:

- The target: Chinese public diplomacy's basic goals of self-confidence, trust, cooperation, peace-loving, all of which cooperate with national development strategy;
- The means: shaping an affirmative and democratic government;
- Focal points: using media on multilateral stages;
- Organization: appointment of a vice minister of foreign affairs in charge of public diplomacy.

4.2 Implications for China's Neighbours

Countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as across the globe, need to watch closely and take timely action in response to the changing situation regarding the following points.

Many Chinese elite are concerned about America's cultural hegemony and worry that the so-called peaceful evolution, i.e., Western liberal ideology, is gradually pervading Chinese society, thereby weakening its legitimacy (Li, 2008). The competition for cultural power, therefore, is the core of intensifying soft power contention, or, in Nye's remarks, in today's world, competition is about credibility, not military might as in the past. However, this scenario is uncertain, given that some countries continue to increase defense expenditures. The key reason for the decline of American soft power is due to "what America does," while "what America is" still holds a powerful attraction (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). If this scenario persists, the world will see more defiance from the developing world against the West.

Since 2012, China has signaled that it should be regarded as a major power by shifting its policy of "a new model of major-country relations" to "major country foreign policy with Chinese characteristics," departing from President Hu's dominant discourse of "Peace and Harmony" (peaceful development, harmonious world and diversity in harmony) (Xie, 2014). In this connection, China is still cautious as it knows its hard and soft power still lag that of the U.S.

In 2014, China's leaders visited several countries, organized high-level meetings and conferences, pledged to setup and finance huge funds in different regions, and projected great confidence. The U.S. views China as more assertive in a bid to weaken a U.S.-dominated regional and international order, and ultimately to replace the U.S. in that dominance. Meanwhile, China holds that the Pacific Ocean is large enough to accommodate two giants. Based on a long-term strategy, it will continue to focus on economic development to use as influence rather than employ hard power.

According to Huang Chin-Hao, although China has invested tremendously in deploying soft power in various countries and, generally speaking, has been successful, reactions have varied. The obvious success story is seen in Africa. As far as Asia is concerned, South Korea and Japan have more negative perceptions of China, and Taiwan has a mixed view. Many in Southeast Asia have a positive attitude toward China's growing economy, but this does not mean that they have an overall positive image of China's rise (Huang, 2013).

Several countries in the developing world will continue to enjoy China's soft power, in particular its economic and educational cooperation. Southeast Asian countries will continue to strengthen their cooperation in economic development projects with a few exceptional cases, such as Vietnam and the Philippines because of their territorial disputes.

4.3 Prospects for 2015

China's shifting policy of adopting a more assertive stance demonstrates its decreasing sensitivity toward the U.S., which should respond by strengthening its security and economic architecture to ensure that China favours multilateralism and playing a responsible role. In doing so, the U.S. must engage countries in the region with soft power (Huang, 2013) and help strengthen allies so it can lower its financial burden. The perception of the China threat has been the main obstacle to improving China's international image. When China is weak, its image is positive; when strong, its image is negative. China should change the logic of this perception by helping international society learn to trust China. This will require China take on all the responsibilities of a great power and participate actively in international affairs (Wang, 2008).

When people around the world need global cooperation to combat disasters, both man-made and natural ones, the U.S. can resume a leading role by persuading countries to support such endeavors. China, as the second-largest economy and with its growing strength, should also take measures to build an image of a cooperative, friendly and responsible country, in order to enhance its development objectives. If the U.S. forsakes a leading role, China will pay dearly (Logan, 2013).

There are two possible scenarios with regard to the international environment in Asia-Pacific: (1) the U.S. maintains its forward presence and commitment to its allies and clients, which is important for its credibility; and (2) the U.S. helps establish more powerful national militaries in like-minded states. Asian nations should be encouraged to cooperate on security issues without the U.S. leading the way in line with “conengagement”: military containment combined with economic engagement (Logan, 2013). According to the latest U.S. “National Security Strategy” document issued in February 2015, a small positive sign appears in its final paragraph, which reads “We confidently welcome the peaceful rise of other countries to share the burdens for maintaining a more peaceful and prosperous world.” People in the Asia-Pacific region are hopeful that the two powers, who possess different sources and tools with different values, will be able to accommodate each other.

5. Conclusion

So far China’s leadership has focused on using soft power and agreed that culture is the core of soft power, with “harmony” at the core of its cultural values. China has so far avoided promoting political values in its soft power policy, because it does not conform with the global political discourse and might be interpreted as a grand strategy to challenge the status quo. On the contrary, the U.S. is the one who has lately conducted a policy of anti-status quo, by taking unilateral actions, without adhering to international rules and laws.

The convergent view is that China has done much to develop and promote its soft power (Li, 2008) by transforming it from a “defensive” to a “proactive” policy. Despite its success in keeping a balance with the U.S. and transforming “made in China” into “created in China,” (Wang, 2008), it is still a long way from becoming a true global leader (Li, 2008).

Both China and the U.S. benefit from globalization. The rise of China’s soft power is not at the expense of the decline of the American soft power (Wang, 2008), but certainly the U.S.’s conduct of hard power policy has helped promote the rise of China. Under present circumstances, the competition between the two has been healthy. Nye reminds that the U.S. decline is not an absolute one (Nye, 2011). Therefore, from any point of view, they need to cooperate in order to build a harmonious world. It should be noted that, fortunately for China, ASEAN, which began as a political grouping and has grown to be among the world’s largest economic communities, has played a role in maintaining regional peace and stability that provides a favourable environment for China’s economic development.

In understanding Chinese foreign affairs, it is worth noting that the leadership still follows Deng’s guiding theories: (1) there are two issues in the world, i.e., peace and development; and (2) “taoguang yanghui” or “keep a low profile” in conducting foreign affairs. Given this point, one can anticipate that China, no matter how much confidence it has accumulated, will be cautious in affairs that might directly affect American interests, while it will be more aggressive in promoting development schemes with countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

One may conclude that China’s strategy and efforts have been along two main lines: (1) avoid military conflict, especially with the U.S.; (2) work on both bilateral and multilateral alliances with political and economic partners (Hunter, 2009).

Lastly, in his new book *The Future of Power*, Joseph Nye makes the following points:

- 1) Power can be employed three ways: through coercion or sticks; payments or carrots; and attraction or persuasion, or soft power. In the 21st century, the ability to combine these into smart power will be a challenge for all actors in international politics;
- 2) Two big shifts in how power is wielded in world affairs are power transition among states and power diffusion from states to non-state actors. These shifts result from the information revolution and globalization;

- 3) Power diffusion is potentially a greater threat to power than power transition. In other words, the threat from non-state actors may be greater and more serious than any threat from China; and
- 4) Nye reiterates, in the case of China as an authoritarian nation, that it has difficulty in creating soft power because much of it is actually generated by civil society (Nye, 2011).

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