

# The Rise of China with Cultural Soft Power in the Age of Globalization\*

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Culture has been exerting an even greater influence on China's image construction and nation branding in today's globalizing world. As "culture" is the core of Chinese soft power strategy, the concept of "soft power" has been redefined as "cultural soft power" in the Chinese context. Cultural instruments, including the Chinese language as well as traditional and popular cultures, are widely implemented as the "charm" tools to wield and project China's soft power. Cultural diplomacy is also viewed as an effective way to promote an understanding of China's ideals, support Chinese economic goals and enhance Chinese national security in subtle, wide-ranging, and sustainable ways. Although Chinese soft power is still in its "embryonic phase", partly due to its close link to the country's economic performance and huge market attraction as well as the disadvantages generated by the political and ideological issues, it has contributed greatly to expand China's international influence and create a circle of like-minded allies on its periphery, in which process its increasing importance shall not be neglected.

*Keywords:* Chinese culture, soft power, cultural influence, cultural diplomacy, globalization

Cultural influence, besides the continued momentum of economic growth and military strengthening, becomes more and more important in an ever-increasingly interdependent and interconnected world, which turns out to be a crucial factor in expanding China's international influence today. With its spectacular performance in economy, China realizes the need to play a greater international role and strengthen ties with neighbouring countries by employing the cultural instruments. These cultural activities include, for instance, establishing the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (1987, NOCFL), providing Chinese-learning-related courses and programs by setting up Confucius Institutes all around the world, improving its International Broadcasting service as well as holding great international events like Beijing Olympics 2008 and the World Expo 2010, which all aims at building up a desired international image and reputation.

Culture is not an omnipotent factor, however, it plays an increasingly important role in shaping a nation's internal and external behaviours in today's world. While China continues modernizing its economy at a rapid pace, a tendency of attaching more importance to soft-power-oriented policies driven by cultural force is also

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noticeable.<sup>1</sup> Since the past decade, the idea of “soft power” has been widely discussed, embraced, and appropriated in China. Application of cultural soft power is gradually recognized as an effective way to achieve great power status, and culture is above all the core of Chinese soft power strategy.<sup>2</sup>

### **Redefining “Soft Power” with Chinese Cultural Connotations**

First advocated by Joseph Nye in 1990, the concept of “soft power” derives from a simple dichotomy of defining coercive power as hard power while attractive power as soft power, establishes a theoretical framework for assessing the role and contribution of culture in post-cold war international relations.<sup>3</sup> When assessing soft power, Chinese scholars also adhere to the three parameters that Nye identifies, namely culture, political values and foreign policy, whereas they propose a wider scope and different approach in the Chinese discourse in the meantime.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Culture as the Core: Retrospect and Prospect on “Soft Power” in China**

The most notable of the Chinese features concerning this discourse is that Chinese scholars and policy makers pay exceptional attention to the role of culture in the country’s soft power strategy in the same time as they conform to Nye’s conceptual framework. Since its first introduction to China in the 1990s, the concept “soft power” was closely linked to “culture”, which could possibly explain the distinctive importance that “cultural factors” enjoy in the Chinese discourse. Wang Huning, then renowned professor at Fudan University and now head of China Central Policy Research Office, published the first Chinese paper on soft power entitled “Culture as National Power: Soft Power”<sup>5</sup> in 1993, in which he set the tone of culture being the main source of a state’s soft power for Chinese academics.

“Soft power” has been increasingly mentioned and rephrased as “cultural soft power” in the Chinese academic writings as well as both official documents and popular newspapers and magazines since the past decade. It is believed that the official sanction of the core role of culture in soft power was clinched in 2007, when the term “cultural soft power” was included in the report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, the report to the Nineteenth CPC Congress, a guiding document on the work of China for the future five years, claims that “culture is a country and nation’s soul” and states the ambition of “building stronger cultural confidence and helping socialist culture to flourish”, with a special emphasis on increasing China’s cultural soft power.<sup>7</sup> Statically, according to a search result on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, currently the largest and most comprehensive of its kind

<sup>1</sup> In the past several years, discussion and debates about what constitutes Chinese soft power and how China wields and projects its soft power raised much concern among academics, and culture is one source that has been devoted much attention to. See, for instance, Ding Sheng. *The Dragon’s Hidden Wings: How China Rises with Its Soft Power*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2008; Kurlantzick, Joshua. *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007; Li Mingjiang, ed. *Soft Power: China’s Emerging Strategy in International Politics*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009; Wang Jian, ed. *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy Through Communication*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Guo Jiemin, “From State Soft Strength to International Soft Power: Directions and Approaches of Promoting Chinese Soft Strength Construction,” p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> See Nye, Joseph S. “Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy*, No. 80, (Autumn, 1990): pp.153-171.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> See Wang Huning. “Zuowei Guojia Shili de Wenhua: Ruan Quanli” [Culture as National Power: Soft Power]. *Fudan Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of Fudan University] No. 3(1993): pp. 23-28.

<sup>6</sup> Carola McGiffert. “Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World,” p.16.

<sup>7</sup> Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (The Report Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, English Version), October 18, 2017.

in China, 9,754 publications (articles in journals, periodicals and newspapers as well as a part of MA. and Ph. D. dissertations included) in the social sciences and humanities sections of CNKI feature the term “soft power”<sup>8</sup> in their titles from January 2004 to January 2018. Furthermore, 3,533 of the above mentioned titles explicitly define this term as “cultural soft power”, which accounts for approximately one-third of the total numbers. Compared with the search result of “null” before 2004 by conducting the same research, the surging popularity of this term is undoubtedly epitomized.

### “Cultural Soft Power” in the Chinese Discourses

Although the term “cultural soft power” stems from Nye’s concept, it is largely sinicized by underlining its strong link with culture.<sup>9</sup> Assessing the existing scholarly literatures and debates, the understandings of Chinese scholars on “cultural soft power” fall into three major schools of thoughts.

First, some analysts accept the idea of “soft power” as the equivalent of culture, especially in the earlier stage of research on this subject, attempting to explain this concept from the cultural perspective from the very beginning. For instance, when introducing this concept to China, Wang Huning argues that culture is not only the foundation for setting policies, but also a power to influence the public of other countries, which sets the tone for this school of thoughts.<sup>10</sup> The political report to the Sixteenth National Congress of CPC in 2002 adopted the same interpretation on this concept, pointing out that “culture intertwines with economics and politics, demonstrating a more prominent position and role in the competition for comprehensive national power” in today’s world.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the chief objection to this school of thoughts is its possibility to mislead the public that the nation who possesses more cultural resources has necessarily stronger soft power. Admittedly, all the cultural resources could not be applied as soft power, and some cultural practices might even harm a nation’s soft power if the foreign audience finds them unappealing. Consequently, only when the positive part of a nation’s cultural heritage plays an important role in building the national image or shaping another country’s public opinion, could it be considered as a successful projection of national power.<sup>12</sup> In short, abundant cultural resources are the indispensable foundation instead of the guarantee of a nation’s soft power.

Second, a number of scholars are much concerned about the lack of competitiveness of Chinese cultural products in international trade, therefore in their points of view, the cultural soft power equals to the competitiveness of culture.<sup>13</sup> Compared with the trade surplus in the industrial sector, Chinese cultural sector and service sector suffer from huge trade deficit, lagging far behind both its Western counterparts and neighbouring Japan and South Korea.<sup>14</sup> As a result, this second school of thoughts often turns to the criticism

<sup>8</sup> Three different Chinese versions of translation on the term “soft power”, namely *ruan shili*, *ruan lilian*, *ruan quanli*, are equally included in the search.

<sup>9</sup> See Zheng Yongnian and Zhangchi, “Soft Power in International Politics and the Implications for China,” pp. 6-12.

<sup>10</sup> Wang Huning, “Culture as National Power: Soft Power,” pp. 23-28.

<sup>11</sup> Jiang Zemin’s Report at 16th Party Congress on Nov 8, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Hu Jian, “Cultural soft power: China’s perspective,” p 5.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Hua Jian et al. *Wenhua: xianjin wenhua de neihan yu 21shiji zhongguo heping fazhan de wenhua dongli* [Cultural Power: Progressive Cultural Connotation and Cultural Force for Peaceful Development in the 21st Century]. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe [Shanghai Literature and Art Press], 2006; Tian Feng, Xiao Haipeng and Xiahui. *Wenhua jingzhengli yanjiu yanjiu* [A Study on the Cultural Competitiveness]. Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe [China Social Sciences Press], 2007.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, taking the import and export of television programmes as an example, according to *China Statistical Yearbook 2015* released by National Bureau of Statistics, the annual import in 2014 amounts to 2,090,240,000RMB, while the total export only amounts to 272, 260,000RMB. See also the warn of China’s deficit in “cultural trade” with West in Hu Jian, “‘Zhongguo zeren’ yu heping fazhan daolu” [China’s Responsibilities and the Road of Peaceful Development], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 7 (July 2007): pp. 43-7; Zhu Chunyang, “Zhongguo ‘wenhua niche’ jige fansi” [Several Reflections on “Cultural Deficit” in China], *Renmin luntan* [People’s Tribune] (July 2012): pp. 70-71.

of “cultural imperialism” and advocacy of increasing the country’s cultural competitiveness by developing cultural industry. Their concerns are mainly based upon the standpoint that China is on the front lines of marginalization by Western cultural business juggernauts, especially by the predominant position of the United States.<sup>15</sup> Although strengthening the cultural competitiveness is of great urgency in China, excessive highlighting on the significance of cultural competitiveness in the framework of soft power sometimes conveys misleading information to the international community that China aims at seizing the strategic high ground in international cultural market, which, to a great extent, has been used as the evidence to depict China as a threat.

Third, still some analysts occasionally internalize political value as a component of a nation’s culture, thus hold that political value could directly serve as cultural soft power.<sup>16</sup> Also argued is that foreign policy is a source of China’s soft power.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, this school of thought has not been endorsed by the majority of scholars and policy-makers in China, for political value is an ideologically-loaded term that can cause an argument just by being uttered. The core of political value is political ideology, which has strong class nature and could by no means be shared by another country or party. Culture is an attractive source that can contribute to the global civilization and be appreciated by the public of other countries, while political value is a coercive power that is highly exclusive. As a result, it is largely inappropriate to include political value in the framework of cultural soft power.

### **Reinterpreting “Cultural Soft Power” with Chinese Cultural Connotations**

In view of the existing scholarly literatures on the question of how soft power should be defined in the Chinese context, it is not difficult to understand that culture is the core of Chinese soft power, among which traditional Chinese culture is singled out as the most valuable source. With this in mind, the argument is that the concept of soft power has been redefined with Chinese cultural connotations from three regards.

First, traditional Chinese culture appreciates moralism and humanism, which stresses “gaining respects through virtue” and “giving priority to human beings”. For instance, Confucianism points out in *The Analects* (*Lunyu*) that a king’s way to rule should rely on moral force instead of physical force, believing that the benevolent governance (*Wangdao*) will triumph over the hegemonic governance (*Badao*). These values, inherent in traditional Chinese culture found in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other classics, are fully embodied in the concept of “Harmony”, which serve as the basis of special Chinese cultural appeal in an era of cultural diversification and globalization.<sup>18</sup>

Second, Golden Mean (*Zhongyong*), a profound philosophical tradition in Chinese thinking and statecraft that treasures the value of equilibrium, demonstrates the inclusiveness of Chinese cultural soft power. The practice of Mean is Chinese tradition in managing interstate relations since ancient times. As Chen Jianfeng contends that the wisdom of Mean can provide Chinese leadership with the intellectual capacity to approach major international issues in a balanced way, which turns out to be China’s contribution to world stability and prosperity, the same way as the notion of democracy contributed by Europe and the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Third, propriety, a concept advocating that people should follow the conventional rules in society, is also at a very important position in the traditional Chinese culture. China has always been known as a land of

<sup>15</sup> Ni Xun, “CPPCC National Committee Members Discuss How to Strengthen Cultural Soft Power.”

<sup>16</sup> Jia Leilei, “Major Components of National Cultural Soft Power”; Yan Xuetong, “The Core of Soft Power is Political Power”.

<sup>17</sup> Zhao Lei, “Increase of China’s Soft Power Raises Attention,” pp. 45-46.

<sup>18</sup> Li Mingjiang, “China Debates Soft Power,” p. 292.

<sup>19</sup> Chen Jianfeng, “The Practice of the Mean: China’s Soft Power Cultivation,” pp. 84, 98.

propriety and righteousness, and this tenet of propriety is also the core value of Confucianism, which partly explains China's tradition of resorting more to soft power instead of hard power from a historical approach.

### **Cultural Diplomacy to Develop an Understanding of China's Ideals**

Cultural diplomacy, according to one accepted definition, is the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other nations by utilizing cultural attraction, through which states can more effectively pursue their national interests. One major ambition of a country's cultural diplomacy strategy is to project soft power. Today, cultural activities are frequently utilized to develop the world's understanding of China's ideals, and the major ways of application fall into three categories:

#### **Chinese Language as a "Charm" Tool**

As China cements ties with the rest of the world, especially the developing countries, with its growing economic performance, interest in Chinese language and culture has correspondently grown. Since the past decade, the Chinese government has played an impressive role in promoting both, with the most remarkable success being the establishment and swift proliferation of the Confucius Institutes across the world.

From the establishment of National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL) in 1987, to the setting up of the first Confucius Institute in Seoul, South Korea in 2004, the Chinese government initiated the cultural activities for providing Chinese-related courses and programmes all around the world. According to the statistics of Confucius Institute Headquarters, until the end of 2015, more than 500 Confucius Institutes and 1,000 Confucius Classrooms have been established in 134 countries under the guidance of the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban*) so far. They have become great actors in teaching Chinese language, promoting cultural exchanges, facilitating business activities and boosting Chinese studies abroad.

The establishment of the Confucius Institutes worldwide has been observed as one of China's attempts to build up its soft power through cultural diplomacy.<sup>20</sup> In most cases, Confucius Institutes are established through a partnership between two academic institutions, one foreign and one Chinese; for example, the Confucius Institute at Phuket is a collaboration between Prince of Songkla University in Thailand and Shanghai University in China. Sometimes, more than two universities or institutions may be involved as partners in setting up of an institute. The influence of Confucius Institutes as a diplomatic approach is highly appreciated by Chinese Leadership. For instance, during the trip to the UK on October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015, President of China Xi Jinping attended the Annual meeting of the British Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, and he delivered a speech on its opening ceremony, wishing that Confucius could help China connect with ordinary British people. Generally speaking, Confucius Institute Project is a success, which helps create the impression among foreign public of a kinder and gentler China. The best way of evaluation is to consider this project as "a type of impression management, an endeavour by China to craft a positive image of itself in a world fraught with danger".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Zhang Yongjin, "The Discourse of China's Soft Power and Its Discontents," p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> James F. Paradise, "China and International Harmony: The Role of Confucius Institutes in Bolstering Beijing's Soft Power," p. 662.



Besides the systematic language promotion activities undertaken by Confucius Institutes, celebrity effect is also an alternative to demonstrate the charm of Chinese language and culture. Chinese President Xi Jinping, a widely respected leader with special charisma in today's China, is a keen promoter of Chinese language and culture himself. He frequently cites Chinese classics in his speeches and writings, and skilfully uses traditional Chinese culture as a charming diplomatic instrument, especially when communicating with Asian leaders who share the similar cultural heritage. In a recent family dinner hosted by Xi as Party chief to welcome visiting Kuomintang Honorary Chairman Lien Chan at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse on February 18, 2014, he prepared a Shaanxi cuisine dinner, for both leaders have roots in this region. *BiangBiang* Noodles, a local delicacy was presented in the dinner. Given the word *Biang* (See picture above) is one of the most complicated Chinese characters, Xi wrote down this character in a little note and presented to Lien, which was an intelligent gesture to “charm” his cross-straits counterpart by resorting to the power of traditional Chinese culture, trying to raise the consciousness of the target audience on the same root that mainland China and Taiwan share.

### Mass Media to Project Soft Power

Perceiving the dominant role of Western media, Chinese analysts also believe that capability and effectiveness in mass communications are important aspects of a state's soft power.<sup>22</sup> As a result, China becomes increasingly keen to have its voice heard and continues improving its international broadcasting service over the past years, with the goals of “airing its views, enhancing the country's global influence, and showcasing its rise as a great power in a nonthreatening and nonconfrontational manner”.<sup>23</sup> The role of mass-communication will be analysed from two respects.

Internationally, the establishment and development of CCTV International channels are good examples to demonstrate China's ambition for competing with Western counterparts and reaching out to the foreign public. First established in October 1992, CCTV-4 is the first international channel in Mandarin aiming at overseas Chinese audience, especially those in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. In 2000, CCTV expanded its service and launched a 24-hours English Channel. It further established the E&F Channel (Spanish and French) in 2004, replaced in 2007 with separate services for both languages, and followed by CCTV-Arabic and CCTV-Russian in 2009, with a plan to launch CCTV-Portuguese in the near future. Since its inception, CCTV international channels aim at telling China's story to foreign audience and expanding the country's global influence. Among all the programs provided, culture-related programs are most welcome. According to a survey conducted around the time that China held Beijing Olympics, foreign viewers were more likely to switch to CCTV International to learn Mandarin or to watch programs about Chinese history and culture rather than for news.<sup>24</sup> In a stage of lack of competitiveness in reporting affairs non-related to China, Chinese culture has been projected through these channels as the major attraction to influence foreign public.

Domestically, one impressive move taken by the Chinese government is its recent efforts in discouraging English formation and reviving public interest in traditional Chinese culture by promulgating strict regulations

<sup>22</sup> Li Mingjiang, “China Debates Soft Power”, p. 294.

<sup>23</sup> Zhang Xiaoling, “China's International Broadcasting: A Case Study of CCTV International,” p. 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

on national media. China has been wary of the infiltration of English language in the recent years, although the trend of Westernization of languages is probably part of globalization, a number of policy-makers and scholars hold that economic openness shouldn't sacrifice cultural traditions. From April 2010, in line with a government directive after several national legislators and political advisors called for the preservation of the Chinese language's purity, the government announced a ban on the use of borrowed English acronyms such as NBA, GDP, WTO, CPI, BBC, WTO, NATO and F1 in all TV programs. This move resonates with the view of George Orwell, well-known English writer and social critic, that "never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent"<sup>25</sup>. While some doubts have also been raised to challenge this move by mentioning that "English seems never to refuse imported words", the mainstream public opinion embraced the government's stance by emphasizing the importance of protecting the language purity as a tool for preserving the nation's overall strength.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, TV talent show programs switch their interest from pure entertainment to Chinese-culture-related competition, with the most remarkable example being the success of a program entitled "Chinese Characters Dictation Congress" (*Zhongguo Hanzi tingxie dahui*). Launched in 2013 by CCTV, this program organizes a competition among young students from all over the country (some students from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan are also included), intending to raise audience's interest in learning Chinese language and culture, so as to ensure cultural heritage preservation.

### **Cultural Activities as Promoters of National Image**

Many cultural and sport activities, such as holding great international events like Beijing Olympics 2008 and the World Expo 2010 as well as encouraging cultural exchanges initiated by both the state and non-state actors, are also believed to be good ways to build up a desired international image and reputation.

As perhaps the most influential event held by China, the government seized on the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as an opportunity to present a new China to both its citizenry and the world. Superbly choreographed by the film director Zhang Yimou, the opening ceremony presented an impressive and somehow lavish spectacle infused with colour, symbolic meaning, and reminders of China's historical fascination, which was an effort to project China's national soft power.<sup>27</sup> The Beijing Olympic slogan is "One World, One Dream," which promotes the very idea of harmonious coexistence despite differences, as expressed in the "harmonious society" concept first put forward by Hu Jintao in 2005. Proclaimed as a "century old dream" (*bainian mengxiang*) of the Chinese people, this event expresses Chinese people's eagerness for the global recognition of their achievements and progress.<sup>28</sup>

Various activities are also organized for promoting the national image abroad. For instance, Chinese and French governments organized *Les Années Chine-France*, a series of cultural exchange activities between two countries from 2003 to 2005, followed by another event called *Festival Croisements* launched in 2006. The latter is a platform to encourage cultural exchanges between Chinese and French artists, which has already entered its 9<sup>th</sup> year. In 2007, China sent its Qin Dynasty terra cotta army warriors to the exhibition at the British Museum, as the result of "years of diplomacy" and efforts to improve cultural relations between China and

<sup>25</sup> George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language".

<sup>26</sup> Li Shigong, "Will Banning Foreign Abbreviations Help?"

<sup>27</sup> Michael Keane, "Keeping Up with the Neighbors: China's Soft Power Ambitions," p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> Pang Zhongying, "The Beijing Olympics and China's Soft Power"; See more discussion on China's image building through Olympics, see Jeroen de Kloet, Gladys Pak Lei Chong, and Stefan Landsberger, "National Image Management Begins at Home: Imagining the New Olympic Citizen," in *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy Through Communication*, pp. 117-33.

Britain. Pandas have also been an important symbol of Chinese diplomatic efforts to both cross-straits and foreign public, the latest event is sending up a pair of pandas, *Xinghui* and *Haohao*, to Belgium, expecting to charm Belgians with the furry gifts.

### **Cultural Soft Power to Bolster China's Quest for Regional Leadership**

With the growing integration of its economy with the region, China has stressed on multilateralism, economics, and its "cultural soft power" advantages in relations with Asian neighbours. Regionally, China is seen as a threatening competitor by Japan and India and a rising power with an uncertain future by Southeast Asian neighbours. The goal of China in the region is to play an indispensable role and exercise increasing influence in the regional affairs, while in the meantime compete with Japan, balance the force of US and marginalize the influence of Taiwan.

### **Culture as a Strategic Opportunity to "lock in" Its Interest and Influence in the Region**

China's ancient history and traditional culture have been utilized as a valuable source of soft power for attracting its East Asian neighbours with whom China shares a Confucian heritage.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps Chinese ideology, culture, and other aspects of soft power have been facing more challenges in their seeking of appealing to foreign community, whereas its cultural heritage is an effective tool to win friends and influence opinion in nearby Asia.<sup>30</sup>

Named after Confucius, the most influential intellectual ever in China, the name of Confucius Institute itself is great attraction to China's Asian neighbours, especially the countries where many Chinese descendants live, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Promoting Confucianism is not part of their remit, as commented by *Economist*, China uses Confucius "as a Father-Christmas-like symbol of avuncular Chineseness rather than as the proponent of a philosophical outlook".<sup>31</sup> Sinosphere (*Hanzi wenhua quan*), also called the "Chinese-character cultural circle", refers to the nations and districts that use Chinese characters or once used Chinese characters and has inherited Chinese-character tradition. This circle coincides with today's Eastern and Southeastern Asian countries, including China's major regional competitor Japan. For instance, the Singapore government has been promoting Mandarin Chinese as a way to reduce inter-ethnic barriers among dialect-speaking Chinese and cement greater ties across Southeast Asia.<sup>32</sup> By resorting to culture, China's endeavour in exercising soft power in this region attempts intentionally to remind foreign public of the same cultural root that they share, and culture contributes great power to increase the country's regional influence in Asia.

Meanwhile, the cultural instruments are also believed to be an ideal approach to limit the influence of Taiwan in the region. In view of the linguistic relations between Taiwan and Mainland China, they both have the same spoken language, but have different writing systems. The Confucius Institutes worldwide only teach the simplified form of Chinese instead of the classical characters used in Taiwan. As a person's choice of language is of paramount importance to his/her identity construction, the relationship between language learning, political identity and boundary drawing is undoubtedly complicated, with significant political

<sup>29</sup> Chen Yugang, "Build China's Soft Power within the Context of Globalization," p. 38.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Sutter, "Why Does China Matter?" p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> "China's Confucius Institutes: Rectification of Statues".

<sup>32</sup> Michael Barr, *Who's afraid of china? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power*, p. 72.



implications to other Asian countries.<sup>33</sup> Confucius Institutes are believed to contribute to support China's quest for regional leadership by projecting national power in a gentler and subtler way and "to serve to advance China's foreign policy goal of marginalizing Taiwan's international influence."<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, due to deep historical grievances and continuing contemporary conflicts, it can be imagined that China's "charm offensive" would hardly work on Japan. China has adopted a two-pronged stance in tackling Sino-Japan relation, which is essential to the regional stability. From the perspective of interdependence, China acts on the assumption that "interdependence would restrain a Japanese response"<sup>35</sup>; while from the perspective of rivalry, taking Japan as the major regional rival and pushing Japan to accept a dominant China is its primary goal.

### **Cultural Activities to Liaison with "Good Neighbours"**

At the turn of the century, there has been a subtle re-orientation of Chinese diplomacy from bilateral relations with great powers, to multilateralism, with an ambition of attaching more importance to neighbouring states.<sup>36</sup> For this end, a diplomatic strategy entitled "Good Neighbour Policy" (*Mulin youhao zhengce*) is advocated by the Chinese Government to establish good relations with neighbouring countries in Asia. Amid a comprehensive approach to carry out this strategy, cultural activities have always been considered as a major component to liaison with "good neighbours".

In Southeast Asia, the ASEAN plus China mechanism is a well-functioned platform for China to project its soft power. In retrospect, China left with the ASEAN states somehow negative impression because of its support to the communist parties in several countries as well as the negative impact on ASEAN economy brought by its cheap exports. However, efforts have been made by China to alleviate the historical negative impression by joining the dialogue mechanism in 1994 and proposing the concept of an ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (FTA) in 2001. More cultural interactions have been encouraged ever since the establishment of the effective dialogue mechanism between China and ASEAN, among which Chinese outbound tourism plays an important role in supporting ASEAN economy, projecting a favourable national image as well as demonstrating its capabilities, wealth, confidence and determination to the region. The ASEAN member countries, such as Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, are favoured destinations for Chinese self-paid outbound tours, which contribute to the increasing Chinese tourist arrivals to this region. Tourism is therefore believed to have played an important role in China's quest for regional leadership. Compared with the direct financial aid, tourism not only provides "aid" in a subtler way, but also contributes to publicize an image of a prosperous China and the stability of the Chinese currency, boosting national confidence and effectively refute the "China Threat Theory".<sup>37</sup> This tourism effect also applies to Taiwan and Singapore.

For Central Asia and Russia, since the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in mid-2001, the "Shanghai Spirit" embodies mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, peaceful bargaining and respect for differences as guiding principles of intercourse of the SCO.<sup>38</sup> The cultural interaction between China and central Asia has a long history, which can trace back to the cultural exchanges via ancient Silk Road

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-4.

<sup>34</sup> Bates Gill and Yanzhong Huang, "Sources and Limits of Chinese 'Soft Power'," p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> Leszek Buszynski, "Sino-Japanese Relations: Interdependence, Rivalry and Regional Security," p. 162.

<sup>36</sup> Chien-peng Chung, "The "Good Neighbour Policy" in the Context of China's Foreign Relations," p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> Fan Shih-Ping, "The Effects of China's Tourism Diplomacy and a 'United Front'," pp. 271-2.

<sup>38</sup> "Declaration on Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization".

more than 2000 years ago. In the comprehensive cooperative framework of SCO, with whose name itself being a successful image projection of China, a mechanism of annual meeting of culture ministers is established to promote cultural exchanges and cooperation. As a member state, China skilfully makes the most of this platform to connect with its central-Asia neighbours. The signing on 16 August 2007 of the “Intergovernmental agreement on cooperation” in the field of culture has further pushed the cultural interaction to reach a new level. Supported and sponsored by SCO, a number of cultural activities have been organized, such as the project of “Children Paint Tales” and “2013 Europe-Asia Children Culture and Art Exchange Week” held in Hangzhou by the China Association for Children’s Art. Furthermore, SCO University, operating as a network of existing universities in member states, envisages even broader cultural exchanges, and a list of more than twenty universities in China has joined this network.

### **Regional Contest: From Pax Americana to Pax Sinica?**

Over the past decade, both Chinese soft power and economic performance is on the rise, hence a number of analysts argue that China’s rise is coming at the same time of the declining influence of the United States. Partly due to over-emphasis on the war against terror and the accompanying changes in its foreign policy, the declining influence of US is believed to have left a power vacuum in Asia, from which China’s soft power strategy has benefited greatly.<sup>39</sup>

The success of China’s performance in economy, modernization in society as well as the expansion of cultural soft power has led to the talk by foreign observers of a “Beijing consensus”, a term coined by Joshua Ramo. “Beijing consensus” is a distinctive Chinese-style development philosophy based upon socialist values, which challenges the “Washington consensus,” a set of liberal values based on Western experience and interests.<sup>40</sup> It refers to China’s model of development, which are overwhelmingly conceptualized as a process of China’s peaceful rise by Chinese academics. China’s foreign policy aims at reassuring others of its nonthreatening intent, enhancing its acceptance by the international community, and realigning the international environment to its liking, and it is with these goals in mind that the instruments of soft power are conceived and pursued.<sup>41</sup> For instance, with the states in China’s neighbourhood of northeast Asia, China intends to maintain close economic relations with South Korea and Japan. The essential attraction from China is a huge market for the exports of South Korea and Japan. As Lee, an Korean professor, points out, in the process of regional contest, “China would try to pull Korea away from the US while the US tries to keep Korea within its own remote-front-yard”, and he further argues that “Korea will be increasingly attracted to China in the future unless the US fully recovers its economic vitality”.<sup>42</sup>

Cultural diplomacy, together with the slogan of “China’s peaceful rise”, helps alleviate fears and reduce the likelihood of other countries allying to balance a rising power.<sup>43</sup> As Paradise observes, “the purpose of the soft power offensive is to spread Chinese values throughout the world and to project a more benign view of the country, one that is unquestionably committed to a peaceful rise.”<sup>44</sup> In this sense, there is a fear that China will

<sup>39</sup> Zhou Ying, “Assessing China’s Soft Power Diplomacy and its Implications on Asia Cooperation”, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Joshua Cooper Ramo, “The Beijing Consensus”.

<sup>41</sup> Yong Deng, “The New Hard Realities: ‘Soft Power’ and China in Transition,” p. 69.

<sup>42</sup> Geun Lee, “China’s Soft Power and Changing Balance of Power in East Asia,” p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> See Joseph S. Nye, “The Rise of China’s Soft Power,” *Wall Street Journal Asia*, December 29, 2005; Jean A. Garrison, “China’s Prudent Cultivation of ‘Soft Power’ and Implications for U.S. Policy in East Asia,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 32, no. 1 (2005): 25-30.

<sup>44</sup> James F. Paradise, “Can China’s Soft Power Offensive Succeed?”

change the *status quo* and challenge American world domination by resorting to its soft power strategy, which leads to the talk of possibility *from Pax Americana to Pax Sinica*. However, compared with its enormous economic achievements, China's soft power is still in its "embryonic phase" and the competitiveness of its structural strength is limited. In the meantime, soft power of the United States remains influential, and it is even believed that U.S. "can easily out-charm China" in this stage.<sup>45</sup>

### Challenges Ahead

As noted above, Chinese leadership has recognized the important role of soft power in achieving comprehensive national power and embraced the mainstream academic viewpoint that culture is the core of its soft power. Today, Chinese traditional culture still has a strong vitality and appeal, while the soft power theory resonates exactly with the traditional Chinese culture, which could possibly explain the great popularity it enjoys in China. Nonetheless, soft power, as expounded by Chinese analysts as well as foreign researchers, is still in its "embryonic phase" in China's pursuit of comprehensive national power, which is principally perceived as a defensive source instead of a constructive force.<sup>46</sup> China's soft-power policy emphasizes culture, and is largely ad hoc and primarily reactive, attempting mainly to defend from the China-threat perception.<sup>47</sup> With this in mind, the major challenges concerning the role of cultural soft power in expanding China's regional influence fall into four categories:

#### "Reconstructing" Chinese Cultural Values

The major challenge faced by China is first and foremost in the phase of value reconstruction, because the core traditional Chinese value, once influential in the world, had been suffering from a "deconstruction" by the continuous foreign invasions and internal conflicts in modern Chinese history.

China's current aspiration and drive to achieve great power status is dramatically shaped by its "superiority-inferiority complex".<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that China has rich cultural resources and a long history, which are appealing in the eyes of many foreign nations, its modern history since 1840 was humiliating, full of defeats, failures and trauma of being invaded and colonized. Particularly, in the period of the May Fourth Movement (1919), "New Cultural Movement" launched by Chinese progressive intellectuals criticized many negative aspects of traditional culture, believing that traditional Chinese culture could offer little to the outside world due to its many backward aspects. Western thinking concerning democracy and science, which was considered to be "superior", dominated Chinese intelligentsia, while "inferior" traditional Chinese culture turned to be "otherness".

All those failures and humiliations have been deeply ingrained in the Chinese mentality and transformed China from a role model for its neighbours to a humble imitator, which made modern China suffer from a cultural "deconstruction". In my point of view, China is now coming out of the century-long humiliations and entering into a phase of regaining great power status and resetting models for its Asian neighbours. In this regard, the emerging soft-power-oriented policies that China implements today is an endeavour of "cultural reconstruction", aiming at eliminating the image of "otherness" and building the new "self" for Chinese culture,

<sup>45</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The U.S. Can Out-Charm China".

<sup>46</sup> Li Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power", 288; Jiang Ling, "Construction of China's Soft Power: Advantage, Deficiency and Lifting Countermeasure," p. 386.

<sup>47</sup> See Bonnie S. Glaser and Melissa E. Murphy, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate," pp. 10-26.

<sup>48</sup> Deng Xiaogang and Zhang Lening, "China's Cultural Exports and its Growing Cultural Power in the World," p. 144.

so as to increase its global influence.

### Reforming Cultural Industries

Cultural export is one of the key elements of a country's cultural soft power; however, as argued previously, China is facing a huge deficit in the cultural sectors. The cultural industries are "powerful carriers and distributors of values and beliefs", which play an important part in expanding a country's influence.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, compared with the attractiveness of China's traditional culture and fascinating history, Chinese popular culture is still in its launching phase. As neighbouring Japan has expressed its influence through popular culture, and South Korea has exploited the "Korean wave", a number of Chinese scholars argue for a renovation of China's media, cultural and creative industries through a transformation of China's industrial structure.<sup>50</sup> Cultural soft power has thus become a key issue in the reform of cultural industries in China.

The popular culture of US, known as the entertainment industry, has played a dominant role in foreign policy over the past five or so decades, whose success has convinced the world the meaning of *pax Americana*.<sup>51</sup> The expanding popular culture of Japan also conveys to the global public that "Japan appears the 'softer' power" compared with China.<sup>52</sup> As argued above, Great emphases have been made on "cultural soft power" in the past decade in China, and both Chinese academics and policy-makers have noted the necessity of shifting from infrastructure toward human capital, from "made in China" to "created in China", which could open up a more international sphere for China.<sup>53</sup>

### Tackling "Cultural Deficit"

As a leading country in international trade, China has maintained a trade surplus for many years, but in the meantime has a great deficit in cultural trade. The phenomenon of standing deficit of cultural trade has been hindering the flow of Chinese culture, which has critically endangered China's global influence today. "Cultural deficit", as expounded by Chinese analysts, gives rise to a huge crisis of contemporary Chinese culture.

Just as Nye points out, "when a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the attraction it creates".<sup>54</sup> However, in spite of the overwhelming exportation of "made-in-Chinas", the country still has few ethnic or political values to offer to a world dominated by Western philosophies, which turns out to be the lack of assertiveness and profound influence in China's soft power discourse.

Accordingly, this paper argues that the current situation in China is critical, because behind the appearance of cultural trade deficit, the real problem that matters is the adverse balance of cultural and ideological values.<sup>55</sup> In other words, foreign cultures (from both the Western world and the neighbouring Japan and South Korea) have a huge impact on Chinese public, making Chinese be increasingly attached to their values; however, the

<sup>49</sup> Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, "Contesting soft power: Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia," p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> See, for instance, Li Wuwei, *Chuangyi gaibian Zhongguo* [Creativity Is Changing China]. Beijing: Xinhua Publishing, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Keane, "Created in China: The New Catch up Strategy," p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Yee-Kuang Heng, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who is the Softest of Them All? Evaluating Japanese and Chinese Strategies in the 'Soft' Power Competition Era", p. 276.

<sup>53</sup> For more detailed discussions on China's creative economy and how television, animation, advertising, design, publishing and digital games are reshaping traditional understanding of culture, see Michael Keane, *Created in China: The Great New Leap Forward*. London: Routledge, 2007; Michael Keane, "Created in China: The New Catch up Strategy," Proceedings International Communication Association, Development and Intercultural Communication Panel, Dresden, June 20, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Wu You. "Cultural Industry Policy and National Cultural Revival," p. 83.

influence of Chinese culture remains limited and superficial. As the carrier of a nation's cultural values and beliefs, the weak performance of Chinese cultural industry is a clear manifestation of vulnerable Chinese cultural values. Hence the plight of "cultural deficit" is a great challenge for China's soft power strategy today.

### **Making Progress, but Still Being Controversial**

As analysed previously, China's soft power efforts have achieved considerable progress since the past decade. Nonetheless, unlike the overwhelming compliments of Chinese academics and policy-makers for its success, the issue of Chinese soft power is still controversial judged from international opinions.

Controversy has first been generated from political and ideological issues, such as corruption, ever increasing gap between the haves and have-nots as well as lack of democracy and political openness, which have all impeded the Chinese "charm offensive" from being sufficiently charming. The general understanding of Chinese cultural diplomacy principally coincides with China's state centred approach, which makes it less attractive to democratic countries. As Chinese specialist Ingrid d'Hooghe believes that "the state still initiates most of China's public diplomacy, and the lack of legitimacy and credibility in public diplomacy messages remains a big obstacle."<sup>56</sup> Although the importance of non-governmental actors in this picture has gradually been acknowledged, the essence of Chinese cultural diplomacy is still largely state-centric. This one-actor model has somehow negative effects on Chinese cultural soft power. For instance, despite the fact that Chinese media scholars and practitioners know that "news reporting rather than the communication of culture plays the leading role on the world arena," it is difficult for Chinese media to win over foreign audiences in a timely fashion due to the state-centric running model and strict control over news coverage.<sup>57</sup>

As China's strategies are sometimes described to have an "authoritarian nature"<sup>58</sup>, its soft power strategy is not that successful in the eyes of international community, as local Chinese academics might have imagined. It is largely believed that the achievement of China's cultural soft power is "not matched by economic success"<sup>59</sup>, or "China's massive push to project soft power has not directly translated into more supportive views of its quest for status and legitimacy".<sup>60</sup> The close link of China's cultural soft power and its economic power is often mentioned, which leads to the arguments that China's current attraction rests principally in the economic field<sup>61</sup>, namely the market attraction for its developed neighbours like Japan and South Korea, then aid and investment attraction for developing ones, such as some ASEAN countries. It is not a critique of China's development model regarding cultural soft power, but it does reveal "how underneath these hard power issues lies soft power fears and how the two often get tangled."<sup>62</sup> Concerns have also been raised regarding the expansion of China's soft-power influence around the world, some Western analysts even pointed out that "as China expands its national power and assumes a bigger role on the international stage, it is possible that Beijing will promote Chinese socialist values as an alternative to Western values and seek to assertively promote the China development model."<sup>63</sup> For sure, all that mentioned above has been included in the Chinese version of

<sup>56</sup> D'Hooghe, Ingrid. "The expansion of China's public diplomacy system," p.19.

<sup>57</sup> Li Xiguang and Zhou Qingan, *Soft Power and global communication*, p. 34.

<sup>58</sup> Zhang Yongjin, "The Discourse of China's Soft Power and Its Discontents" , 51; Zhao Suisheng, "The Prospect of China's Soft Power: How sustainable?", p. 260.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Keane, "Keeping Up with the Neighbors: China's Soft Power Ambitions," p. 130.

<sup>60</sup> Chin-Hao Huang, "China's Soft Power in East Asia: A Quest for Status and Influence? The national bureau of Asian research NBR special report," p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Geun Lee, "China's Soft Power and Changing Balance of Power in East Asia," p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Barr, *Who's afraid of china? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power*, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser and Melissa E. Murphy, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate," p.10.

cultural soft power, which is called “soft power with Chinese characteristics”. In this regard, whether those Chinese characteristics are a motivation or an opposition is one question to be answered in future practice.

For conclusion, the boost of China’s cultural soft power along with its economic performance has been crucial in expanding the country’s international influence. Although Asia has been experiencing rapid economic development, which leads to the talk of “the power shift from the West to the East”, this region remains complicated and fragile due to the complex of geopolitics, the diversities of civilization as well as the disputes of history problems.<sup>64</sup> Despite the fact that China and its neighbours are closely linked and interdependent in economy, the political and territorial conflicts in the region have never ceased, which is an “Asia paradox” according to South Korean President Park Geun-hye.

In short, the trend of economic integration is inevitable in the age of globalization, and China is by far a regional leader in the field of economy in Asia. China’s “charm offensive” through culture diplomacy contributes to ease some tensions over political disputes and expand its international influence in a subtle way, it is still far from enough to prevent some countries who depend on China in economy from seeking security aid from U.S. Admittedly, the accomplishment of “the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation”<sup>65</sup> is on its way, but the goal has not yet been achieved. China, as a responsible great power, its “use of soft power may still be limited today, but it is growing in importance.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Chen Jimin, “The Motivations for China’s New Periphery Strategy”.

<sup>65</sup> Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”, October 18, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> James F. Paradise, “China and International Harmony,” p. 657.

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