

# Soft Power and National Identity in Chinese International Promotion\*

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Rather than cultural hegemony, soft power, as a part and parcel of comprehensive national power, has been paid more and more attention by China so as to get more discourse right and power in international diplomatic relationships to foster a peaceful external environment. This paper focuses on why China highlights soft power, how China strengthens its soft power through Chinese international promotion, and what role Chinese international promotion has played.

*Keywords:* soft power, Chinese international promotion, national identity, the Confucius Institute Project

## Introduction

In the 21st century, China comes to pay more attention on soft power to get more discourse right and power in international diplomatic relationships so as to foster a favorable external environment for China resolving its domestic challenges and continuing its process of modernization. In fact, soft power is a key concept which is conducted by China to gain other people's acceptance of its peaceful rise.

## A Brief Historical Background of Chinese Culture and Language

Throughout much time of its long history, China was one of the most powerful countries in the world. Consequently, Chinese culture and Chinese, the language, were of great influence. From approximately the third century CE to the second half of the 1900s, scholars and officials in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam adopted Chinese characters as the medium of scholarly and official communication, despite their spoken languages being very different from Chinese; Chinese characters also played a very important role on the development of these languages' written scripts as all of them adopted a significant amount of Chinese characters (Snow, 2010). At that time, China was regarded by the three countries as the most advanced country to learn from and emulate.

For a long time, Chinese the language was spread to Southeast Asia through migrations and trading business; many long-standing and even permanent Chinese communities were established throughout Southeast

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Asia. During cultural communication and business trading, Chinese, the language, these communities used played a significant role and there is some argument that Chinese characters were used as the lingua franca of trade during the first half of the 15th century (van de Ven, 2002). Then, China got a strong connection with quite a wide world through trade routes, such as the Maritime and Land Silk Road, which reached as far as Europe, which helped Chinese culture and Chinese, the language, become fascinating sources for European people through those stories of travelers, traders, and missionaries (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009). By the 18th century, European research on the Chinese language especially Chinese characters was quite profound and extensive (Kane, 2006).

However, at least from the Opium War through which Britain used military force to compel China to sign the humiliating Treaty of Nanjing, China entered a semi-colonial and semi-feudal situation which persisted over 100 years. During this long time, China was blown severely by domestic strife and foreign aggression. Hence, Chinese culture and Chinese, the language, were looked down upon by other peoples and even by ourselves, so Chinese international promotion was out of the question. Fortunately, out of the reform and opening-up policy implemented from the late 1970s under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China got on the speedy train driving to a modern, developed, and capable country and consequently Chinese culture and Chinese, the language, were gradually revived in several decades its importance and appeal to other peoples and ourselves.

### **Chinese Culture as a Resource of Soft Power**

Generally speaking, cultural power of one country refers to the imposition of its cultural values on other states or ethnic groups. Therefore, this kind of cultural power being connected closely with national power has alternatively been interpreted as “cultural hegemony”, “cultural colonialism”, or “cultural imperialism”, which was one main cause of several clashes of civilizations.

In the 21st century, it comes to be agreed extensively that whether one country can get more discourse right and power in international diplomatic relationships mainly depends on whether the country has a strong comprehensive national power, which is a concept developed in the late 1990s and gets to guide China’s strategies about power (Lampton, 2008). Basically, comprehensive national power is the combination of a country’s power, which consists of a number of components, such as economy, military, science and technology, natural resources, culture, diplomacy, and so on. According to China’s view, a true great power needs to be strong in every field and so China needs to pay more attention to soft power which is often considered as the “weak link” in China’s pursuit of comprehensive national power (Li, 2012, p. 41).

In contrast to cultural hegemony, soft power is a more effective and acceptable power and resource in international relationship. Joseph S. Nye Jr. first coined the term “soft power” in 1990 and made a definition of “*soft power* behavior” that when a country wants to “achieve its preferred outcomes in world politics” it is significant to “set the agenda and attract others in world politics” and get others to “want what you want” (Nye, 2005, p. 61, italics in original). In fact, rather than cultural hegemony, China has paid much attention to soft power in world politics so as to create and sustain a peaceful external environment which will allow it to focus on resolving its domestic challenges and continuing its process of modernization. In a word, soft power is a key concept which is conducted by China to gain other people’s acceptance of its peaceful rise.

Gradually, soft power gets to be a central starting point in China’s approach to world politics (Wang, 2011). As to China, the essence of soft power means to achieve its goals in world politics through using its

power resources to attract, persuade, and appeal to other actors, rather than relying on coercion and inducement alone like those measures of cultural hegemony (Nye, 2011).

Specifically, among its various soft power resources, China has put great importance to culture and Chinese culture as soft power mainly refers to “an amalgam of Confucian social and political values, folk and high customs and art, and the Chinese language” (Wuthnow, 2008, p. 9). In fact, Chinese culture as soft power is a kind of powerful cultural diplomacy which is defined by Cull (2008, p. 33) as “an actor’s attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad”.

### **Reasons for China Highlighting Soft Power**

As China’s successful economic development and modernization has made the second largest economic power, the way how China can maintain and improve its great power status in the contemporary world political system is now a hot point to be discussed and researched by scholars all over the world. Anyway, China comes to pay more attention to the concept of comprehensive national power and soft power and Chinese culture and Chinese the language have played a more and more important role for the reasons bellowing.

#### **Continuing Similar Thoughts and Practices in Chinese History**

In much time of its long history, China believed itself as culturally superior to all other peoples and nations. This latent self-confidence has made China to positively take advantage of its soft power, such as its culture and language to develop a favorable external environment, either through coordination into the Chinese world order or through the attraction of China’s example (Swaine & Tellis, 2000).

Through highlighting and strengthening its soft power, especially its traditional culture and language, China has sought to ensure the people’s loyalty through cultivating nationalism based on building economic prosperity and social stability domestically and pursuing for China more interests and greater status internationally (Chen, 2005). This in turn places additional importance on China’s efforts to accomplish its goals and protect its interests in world politics. Thus, “China’s rapid integration into the world made it important for Chinese leaders to succeed on the international front in order to succeed on the home front” (Zhang, 2012, p. 620).

In a word, a good international reputation of China both fosters a peaceful and favorable foreign environment and increases Chinese people’s confidence in the country. That is to say, China cannot achieve a good international reputation and positive international image just through coercion and inducement; soft power is often a more effective measure.

#### **Countering the “China Threat” Theory**

The “China Threat” Theory claims that the persistent and strong growing of Chinese power and influence is a huge danger to current political and diplomatic system of the world and that China’s rise will probably occur severe confront and even war with the Western world (Huntington, 1996; Mearsheimer, 2010). With the gradual but persistent declining of its comprehensive national power on the one hand and its leading status of so-called democracy on the other hand, the US does not want to accept the least possibility that China becomes a stronger power; the US authorities has made its every advantage to propagandize all over the world. Anyway, in the Western media and among some Western governments, the “China threat” theory is getting more and more bombastic and misleading publicity. This is potentially very damaging to China’s peaceful rise because if

China is widely perceived as an aggressive image other nations will be less likely to cooperate with it and even more likely to confront with it (Deng, 2008).

In view of this situation, China comes to believe that, through fostering its soft power, the majority of the world will get to understand and reassure about its peaceful rise and as a result the “China threat” theory will be countered and then lose its demonizing space. In fact, a mainstream and common view among Chinese leaders, government officials and scholars is that soft power is a useful and effective concept for China to present a benign and acceptable image of China to other countries and hence increase their understanding of China and diminish stereotypes of China (Nathan & Scobell, 2012).

Moreover, in Chinese view, the connotation of soft power contains the two levels of facilitating domestic development and strengthening international understanding and communication. Soft power is applicable both to domestic environment as well as world politics. In this way, soft power is “considered important for strengthening national identity and ethnic unity through the attraction and acceptance of Han Chinese culture” (Jeffrey, 2017, p. 30).

### **Planning and Implementation of Chinese International Promotion**

As to taking Chinese culture as a resource of soft power to strengthen China’s cultural diplomacy, the “most prominent element” is the “[international] promotion of the Chinese language” (Jeffrey, 2017, p. 6). China’s embrace of Chinese culture as a resource of soft power displays an attempt to reshape and improve a peaceful external environment for China realizing its full modernization. Hence, Chinese international promotion becomes greatly intertwined with the peaceful rise of China.

Indeed, international promotion of some language can be taken as policies and activities aimed at the learning and teaching of the language of a country in other polities outside the borders of the country and beyond its authority. International language promotion is often conducted in other countries by quasi-governmental organizations, which consists of mechanisms such as provision of opportunities for language learning, support for language teaching and learning in education systems and cultural appreciation activities. These mechanisms all base on the belief that language learning can be used as a means to “foster a favorable image in order to ensure greater power for the state in international relations” (Ager, 2001, p. 179). This kind of international language promotion started in European countries in the late 19th century with the establishment of organizations, such as the Alliance Française and the Dante Alighieri Society (Ostler, 2010).

China’s international language promotion is conducted through the Office of Chinese Language Council International, commonly called by its abbreviated Chinese name (Hanban). Hanban operates directly under the Ministry of Education and its membership consists of representatives from 12 ministries and commissions, many of which play important roles in China’s politics and policy development. Since the early 21st century, China has taken a more active attitude to strengthen globalization, emphasizing proactive attempts to improve its external environment. The approach of “going out” comes to be highlighted, in the process of which culture is an important dimension and Chinese international promotion gets to be an effective tool so that a number of international festivals and sporting events have been conducted one after another. Indeed, the core meaning of these activities is that “China will take the initiative in presenting itself to the world” (Zhang, 2012, p. 623).

Thanks to the great importance paid on Chinese international promotion, some scholars made an estimate in 2010 that there may be nearly 100 million people learning Chinese as a foreign language throughout the world, and numerous primary and high schools, universities and private education institutes offer Chinese

language courses (Wu, 2010). As a matter of fact, this consequence has given the Chinese government an opportunity to strengthen its soft power by persistently taking Chinese international promotion as an important resource to help achieve its goals in world politics.

The most effective measure and project conducted by Hanban to make Chinese international promotion is the Confucius Institute Project. As a semi-official institute, the Confucius Institute is a Chinese language promotion cultural institution which is mainly established as a partnership institution between Hanban, a Chinese university, and a university in the relevant country. Since the first Confucius Institute officially opened on 21 November 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, the Confucius Institute Project has gradually made a huge development. At the end of December 2015, the Confucius Institute project consisted of 500 Confucius institutes and 1,000 Confucius classrooms (Hanban, 2015). Confucius institutes conduct various activities, including Chinese language teaching, teacher training, proficiency testing and arranging study in China, and Confucius classrooms support Chinese language courses in primary and secondary schools in various ways, which are usually linked to a Confucius institute.

### **The Role of Chinese International Promotion**

Seen from a sociological perspective, any language has its special form, function, and quality, which is related with a whole set of the users' beliefs, perceptions, status, value, and feelings (Pan, 2015). In the case of Chinese international promotion, there is much evidence to suggest that "the Chinese language is widely seen as a conduit through which knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture and China itself can be transmitted to the world" (Jeffrey, 2017, p. 32). Firstly, there are some Chinese government officials' words can be taken as examples. Hu Youqing, a National People's Congress deputy, once said that Chinese international promotion "can help build up our national strength and should be taken as a way to develop our country's soft power" (as cited in Jeffrey, 2017, p. 32). The former vice mayor of Shanghai, Yan Juanqi, also suggested that

to promote Chinese learning overseas is beneficial to the revival and the spreading of traditional Chinese culture, to the projection of a benign image of China on the international stage, as well as to the expansion of China's influence in the world. (as cited in Jeffrey, 2017, p. 32)

Then, many scholars have similar opinions. Chen (2006) once argued that language represents some kind of thinking mode which on one hand makes its own people understand the nation's values and policies and on the other hand influences others' perceptions of and beliefs about the nation through the language's external promotion. More specifically, Mo (2009, p. 23) suggested that Chinese international promotion can play an significant role in China's peaceful rise because through Chinese international promotion, "we also promote Chinese culture and show the world's people that China is a nation which respects culture and desires peaceful development; it is this peaceful and harmonious culture which leads China to develop and rise".

Generally speaking, as one of the most effective tools, language is significant for cultural diffusion and globalization. In this way, even though China faces multiple internal and external barriers to fully achieve its potential as a global cultural power, China has taken more and more influential actions, such as establishing Confucius institutes and Confucius classrooms all over the world to promote the Chinese language. Consequently, Mandarin's increasing utility as a *lingua franca* (especially for trading business) has significantly increased the resonance of Chinese culture abroad. During this procession, with China's attractive culture being understood positively by common people in other countries, national image of China gets

improved greatly abroad. As a result, national identity of Chinese people comes to reach a new high point and they get to be more loyal to the country in contrast to the situation that Chinese cultural tradition only gets understood and enhanced at home without other peoples' understanding.

### **Training Qualified Chinese Teachers for Chinese International Promotion**

The approach of "going out" is one of the main approaches through which Hanban supports Confucius Institutes to make a fast and quality development all over the world. Besides appointing Chinese Deans and government-sponsored teachers to work in Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government selects, trains, and delivers numerous volunteer Chinese teachers to foreign countries in every year, which means great job opportunities for those graduates who major in Teaching Chinese as a foreign language. However, since Confucius institutes and Confucius classrooms have developed so fast that government-sponsored teachers and volunteer Chinese teachers are of critical shortage, students majoring in English teaching also have their advantages to become a volunteer Chinese teacher and even a government-sponsored teacher. On the one hand, as a *lingua franca*, English is helpful for volunteer Chinese teachers to carry out their Chinese teaching more effectively; on the other hand, college students majoring in English have to improve their understanding and mastering of Chinese language and culture by taking some relevant optional Chinese courses or actively taking part in classroom discussion in English class, such as English and American Literature class, with a perspective of Chinese thinking mode.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, soft power is helpful for China to get more discourse right and power in international diplomatic relationships for a favorable external environment. To gain other people's acceptance of its peaceful rise, China has paid more and more attention to strengthen its soft power through profoundly implementing its planning and policies of Chinese international promotion. As a result, Chinese language and culture gets more understanding and respect from other peoples, which can in turn enhance national identity of Chinese people to reach a new high point and makes them more loyal to the country.

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