



## China's Soft Power Policies and Strategies: The Cultural Activist State

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### ABSTRACT

'Soft power' has become a popular concept in Chinese political discourse, frequently appearing in government documents, academic discussions and the mainstream media. This article defines soft power as a form of *state activism* through culture – and examines the ongoing discourses at home and abroad on China's soft power in transition, exploring the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of China exerting soft power in the West. The paper starts with an exploration of China's embrace of the concept soft power as a strategic compass for its efforts to enhance comprehensive national capabilities. It then investigates the obstacles that China hitherto has encountered when building and implementing soft power. Through reviewing China's soft power assets and liabilities, the paper suggests that Chinese soft power strategies should be performed on the basis of humanitarian values, pacifistic policies, multilateral cooperation, and multiculturalism. In addition, the implementation of China's soft power strategies in the West will be more effective if non-governmental bodies can be allowed more institutional space.

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The term "Chinese Dream" [中国梦] was put forward by President Xi Jinping in November 2012. It has been heavily popularised in political circles and the mass media since that time, particularly on and since Xi's accession to Prime Minister in March 2013. The official interpretation of the Chinese Dream (as routinely articulated by government propaganda) is oriented towards a large-scale planning initiative for national capacity building and aiming for prosperity and "rejuvenation".<sup>1</sup> Xi subsequently delivered a significant speech in the headquarters of UNESCO in Paris on 27 March 2014, asserting that "the realisation of Chinese dream is the development of material civilisation and spiritual civilisation", and "with the peoples of the world together", China wants to "create a colourful civilisation for mankind and provide the correct spiritual guidance and strong motivation".<sup>2</sup> Chinese Vice-Premier Liu Yandong, (in charge of culture and education), elaborated on the Chinese Dream in her speech at the third annual conference of the Tai-Hu World Forum (a Chinese NGO, aiming to promote cross-cultural communication). She addressed three points: first, China is set to build the strategic means to strengthen its culture, and for culture to play a major role in pursuit of the Chinese Dream; second, China will give attention to cultural development to boost its soft power; third, China will expand people-to-people exchanges with other countries, so as to open up larger room for "win-win" cooperation in the world.<sup>3</sup>

Liu used the term 'soft power', the now globally-famous term first forged by Harvard professor Joseph Nye, who coined the term in relation to a country's power of attraction and persuasion (as distinct from the "hard" power of force or coercion).<sup>4</sup> Since its introduction, the term has proven to be a flexible

concept, generating an architecture of terms for strategic deployment within established international relations or foreign policy frameworks. Through both qualitative and quantitative analyses, this paper articulates the term's adaptation in a Chinese political context, ascertaining the effectiveness of China's soft power strategies in the West – on both the sender's and the receiver's side. This paper then assesses the factors contributing to China's soft power resources, and looks at potential ways of improving China's soft power against the background of its current, dominant, national policy framework – the Chinese Dream.

### China's embrace of 'soft power'

The concept 'soft power' has found a receptive audience in China, entering Chinese academic and political debate as much as the speeches and documents of China's highest leaders. The enthusiasm for the 'soft power' concept is now firmly embedded in Chinese political, social and cultural spheres. The term appeared for the first time on an official occasion in the government report at the 17th CPC Congress (The National Congress of the Communist Party) in October 2007. The then-president Hu Jintao announced clearly that "China must enhance its cultural soft power". Some five years later, in his report to the 18th CPC Congress, (one of the most authoritative documents of China's current government), Hu elaborated on soft power and reclaimed its significance:

To achieve the great renewal of the Chinese nation, we must create a new surge in promoting socialist culture and bring about its great development and enrichment, increase China's cultural soft power, and enable culture to guide social trends, educate the people, serve society, and boost development.<sup>5</sup>

Hu's successor, President Xi Jinping embraced the concept soft power as part of his ambitious Chinese Dream. On 30 Dec 2013, Xi presided over a conference on the topic of how to enhance China's national cultural soft power within current policy frameworks. Xi stressed that improving China's cultural soft power matters to the very realisation of

<sup>1</sup> Xi said, "We must make persistent efforts, press ahead with indomitable will, continue to push forward the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." China Daily (accessed 17 March, 2013) [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013npc/2013-03/17/content\\_16314303.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013npc/2013-03/17/content_16314303.htm)

<sup>2</sup> The full Paris speech is available from: [http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2014-04/01/content\\_31964496.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/chinese/2014-04/01/content_31964496.htm) (accessed 2 April, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Liu Yandong's speech available from the Xinhua News Agency: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-06/18/c\\_1111208467.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-06/18/c_1111208467.htm) (accessed 18 June, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> See Joseph Nye's original development of the concept in his work *Bound to Lead* (1990), which disputed the view that the United States was in decline, then further elaborated in *The Paradox of American Power* (2002), then properly defined in *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics* (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Full text of Hu Jintao's report at the 18th Party Congress available from: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c\\_131981259.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm) (accessed 18 November, 2012).

the Chinese Dream,<sup>6</sup> claiming that "we should strive to spread the values of contemporary China, namely the values of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to increase China's international discourse power."<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the confluence of the terms 'communism', 'socialism' and Chinese society', the term 'soft power' has proliferated in Chinese official discourse on both domestic and international issues in very specific ways. Especially after the humiliation of the torch relay for 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, where because of protests China was forced to cut short the relay (and so reflect on its international image and political reputation). In the light of such global media exposure, the Chinese leadership has recognised soft power as an important indicator of a state's international status, contending that China's soft power must be strengthened so to match the nation's economic power and political status on the world stage. The government decided to make its own voice heard, investing in the cultivation of China's own global media brand.

Chinese scholarly discussions about soft power have mushroomed since 2008. Chinese scholars have gone to great lengths to explore the uses of soft power and its implications, and numerous papers have been published in China on the topic. Table 1. records the number of published Chinese academic papers on soft power from 2004 to 2013 (Source: CNKI.net). It demonstrates that after 2008, the number of Chinese papers on soft power virtually doubled.

Year	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009
Papers	2020	2365	2433	2569	2079
Year	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004
Papers	2068	1041	500	165	75

Table 1: *Research papers published on the subject of Soft Power in China.*

Chinese scholars have been actively exploring the concept's possibilities as much as its political or practical uses. The main academic issues that have emerged in China include: the appropriation of soft

power in improve China's global standing; how to develop a peaceful national image and dispel perceptions of a 'China Threat' – otherwise tempering foreign suspicions of China's growing strength; how to enhance China's percentage in the global market of cultural and creative industries; how to maintain the balance between the exploitation and protection of cultural resources; how to harness the role and the power of the media in nation branding; how to influence the opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values; and how to design 'public diplomacy' to serve the interest of politics.

Having explored and expanded the concept, evaluated its importance and implications, Chinese theorists have not reached a visible consensus on how to formulate soft power theoretically in a Chinese context. Notwithstanding specific deployments of the term by China's leaders, for scholars there seems to be no definitive distinction between soft power strategies and 'public diplomacy' or 'cultural diplomacy', for instance. The opaqueness in Chinese theoretical interpretations of soft power is due, in part, to the complex and non-quantifiable nature of cultural, affective, aesthetic, visual and image-based forms of communication, as well as events, the coordination of international relations through events, the particular and relational qualities of relations between nation states, and the nebulous nature of one's global 'image', perceptions, cultural identity, reputation, 'standing', influence, credibility, confidence, and the reception of expressions of one's national virtues – the armory of soft power strategy, combined with the vagueness in Nye's original conceptualisation of soft power, make for a difficult subject of theorisation. Nye (2004) did not specify how to translate soft power into actual political influence or to produce specific desired specific political outcomes within international relations; nor did he clarify whether the concept tailored for US foreign policy and orientated within US experience, would be effectively applied to the cases of other countries (even in the West, let alone the East). Although Nye updated a refined version of his concept through prescribing the use of 'smart power' in his *The Future of Power* (2011); the operability, measurability and sphere of application of soft power remained unspecified. In fact, Western academia has not reached a definitive clarification of the term either. For example, Hayden (2012) suggests that

<sup>6</sup> While Xi has not offered a single definition of the Chinese Dream, it is generally accepted that it refers to a cultural renaissance of the Chinese nation as a means of rapid and maximum social, economic and military growth – all within the framework of Chinese socialism.

<sup>7</sup><http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-12/31/c118788013.htm> (accessed 31 December, 2013).

"soft power encompasses three broad categories: influence, the force of an actor's argument, the 'attractiveness' of an actor's culture and institutions" (p.5). Meanwhile, when Kurlantzick (2007) analysed how China uses soft power as its "charm offensive" to project a benign national image in the world, he controversially includes trade and overseas investment in the definition of soft power.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, conceptual ambiguity per se does not prevent China appropriating the idea as a convenient tool of political science to understand China's position in the world. Instead, the complexity inherent in the term semantically actually allows Chinese political discourse the opportunity for an easier assimilation – for it can serve as an umbrella term accommodating various interpretations and uses. The proliferation of writings on soft power suggest that the mainstream Chinese politicians and scholars simply accept soft power as a general and infinitely variably political instrument, which has the potential to serve China's national and international interests, considering China's political and economic successes on the international stage often spark applause as well as fears.

The most significant feature of discussions on soft power in Chinese academia is that its usage is not limited to international image-building or international cultural communication for political effect: It is also applied used within domestic cultural affairs to strengthen national and collective consciousness. In other words, soft power is an instrument for deepening debates about culture at home. The definition of soft power has been broadened in Chinese discourse and thus is often interchangeable with the term 'national cultural soft power', implying of certain domestic mobilisation capability.<sup>9</sup> China's interpretation of soft power sounds more like Morgenthau's 2005 identification of the nine elements of national power, among which national character, national morale, diplomacy, and the quality of government, form the intangible source of the 'power' itself. The Chinese have similarly conceptualised soft power generically, as both a

foreign and a domestic policy tool, forming a fundamental difference with Nye's classical iterations of the term and other subsequent scholars' definition of soft power as a singular strand foreign policy instrument.

Another feature worth mentioning is that some scholars – including Western sinologists – believe that the concept of soft power resonates with Chinese intellectual traditions. For example, Sheng Ding (2008) argues that "such ideas [soft power] have been embedded in ancient Chinese philosophies and culture throughout its history" (p.25). According to Ding, Chinese strategists, Taoist thought, and Confucian thinkers, all recognized that power can be derived through morality and benevolence, good governance, and the winning of hearts and minds (Ding, 2008; Ding, 2010). The idea of soft power is therefore not something in itself new to the Chinese, but internal to the historic synthesis of Confucianism and Taoism and the social means by which they formed a unique Chinese cultural character. For more than two millennia, the ideal image of Chinese traditional culture the world over can be attributed rather to soft-power than hard-power. Abundant evidence of comparable understandings to the idea of soft power within ancient Chinese thought can be found in Alastair Johnson's (1995) important discussion on how culture in China was always 'strategic'.

### The reception of China's soft power in the West

The idea of soft power has evidently (and curiously) stimulated the imagination of Chinese politicians as much as scholars, perhaps that during the current era of its history China has reason to be acutely sensitive to foreign perceptions of its national image and policies abroad. It can be observed that the Chinese government has made great efforts to promote its soft power in the West, embarking on numerous soft power initiatives. These efforts include holding large-scale events of cultural exchanges (art, literature, music, film, historical relic, performances, and so on), investing a large amount of financial resources in various schemes to cultivate a better national image, enhancing media outreach aimed at the Western public, and establishing Confucius Institutes throughout Europe and North America. The Chinese government has signed formal agreements with Western countries that help integrate Chinese language teaching into their public

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<sup>8</sup> Kurlantzick's book on soft power recognises only one player (state elites) in the Chinese soft power universe, consequently ignoring the soft power activities of non-state actors, thus failing to recognize and acknowledge the cultural complexities and diversity of China.

<sup>9</sup> 'National cultural soft power' has a similar but wider spectrum: it ascertains resources of culture, morality, political values, institutions, foreign policies, patriotism, and even then qualities of citizens.

schools' curricula. The China Scholarship Council oversees a wide range of educational activities worldwide, awarding generous scholarships to Western students for study in China, also sponsoring educational exchange programmes. Furthermore, "the diplomats from China are more amiable and skilled at engaging local communities [...] more skilled than earlier in navigating foreign media outlets" (Lampton, 2008: 128). China has placed special emphasis on the soft-power aspects of its engagement with the West, seeking to be accepted as a nonthreatening, constructive, and reliable power, and a responsible stakeholder in the international system. As Hayden (2012) argues, "China's efforts to cultivate soft power reflects a strategic awareness that soft power resources and mechanisms are crucial to the larger effort of managing China's rise, addressing challenges, and leveraging a highly mediated and increasingly transparent environment for international politics" (p.169).

Investing billions of Chinese RMB (Yuan) into soft power promotion in the West, China's central government, however, has hitherto obtained a limited return on its investment. The public opinion studies conducted by YouGov, the BBC World Service, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and the Pew Global Attitudes Project, all suggest that China's soft-power achievements have not been as effective as expected. Compared with its rapid economic development, China's soft power facility lags significantly behind the rate of performance of its newly-acquired hard power. Of course, opinion poll outcomes are influenced by sample selection, question formulation and interview timing, and the perceptions of China and of China's soft power differ significantly per Western country and per target group. Overall, however, these polls indicate that China's massive investment has not been translated into more supportive views of China's current political quest for status and legitimacy both within the global economy and in the realm of international relations. China, which is ever perceived as a 'significant other', has encountered specific difficulties in implementing soft power strategies in Western societies.

For example, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs released a public opinion survey 'US Attitudes towards China' in 2010. It shows half of American adults consulted consider that financial indebtedness

to China will become a critical threat to vital US interests in the next ten years; two-thirds believe China practices unfair trade; a majority is opposed to having a free trade agreement with China; and a majority prefers to hedge against a possible future threat from China by building up strong relations with Asian-Pacific allies, even if this might diminish relations with China.<sup>10</sup> The results demonstrated the Americans' widespread negative impressions of, and attitudes towards, the People's Republic (in the framework of geopolitics, though it is difficult not to consider this as reflective of attitudes more broadly). Similarly, according to a YouGov poll (28-29 April, 2013) with a sample size of 1632 British adults, the participants were asked to choose a number (from 1 to 7 on the scale, where '1' means "the political system in China is not at all free" and '7' means that "the political system in China is completely free"). 72% of those polled awarded China a low freedom score (1-3), while only 6% thought "China has a free political system" (those who give a high score 5-7). While this may seem factually obvious to some, questions on freedom are value-laden and in China are understood to reflect a general positive regard. In this case the response was not positive. YouGov also conducted research for the YouGov-Cambridge Programme (11-12 June, 2013) with a sample of 1000 US citizens. The samples are classified into Gender, Age, Party ID, Race and Education. Participants were asked to consider words and phrases tabled in boxes, and decide which one they most associate with China (selecting up to four or five). Five of the top six words associated with China were negative: 'can't be trusted', 'undemocratic', 'corrupt', 'lacks important morals', 'bullying'. Only 2% of American participants believe China is 'a force for good', 2% think China respects human rights, and only 1% links China with 'democratic'.

The BBC World Service annual global polls offer a broad picture, and in this case (June, 2014) reflects a predictable state of affairs:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Available from: <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/us-attitudes-toward-china-results-2010-chicago-council-public-opinion-survey> (accessed 28 March, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Available from: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/country-rating-poll.pdf> (accessed 30 August, 2014).

Country	Mainly Positive	Mainly Negative
Canada	28%	64%
USA	25%	66%
UK	49%	46%
France	26%	68%
Spain	24%	59%
Germany	10%	76%

Table 4: *China's Influence.*

That the majority of Western publics regarded China's influence as 'mainly negative'<sup>12</sup> is not surprising, and it is not surprising either to find that China's soft power strategies have resonated in liberal-democratic Western countries on a much lower level than the third world. Shambaugh (2013) depicts China's embarrassment at promoting soft power: "we witness a large and growing number of China's cultural activities abroad – but very little influence on global cultural trends, minimal soft power, and a mixed-to-poor international image in public opinion polls" (p. 207). It is recognised that a country's international reputation is shaped by its government, multinational corporations, products and brands, and people. The effects of soft power strategies depend heavily on the 'receivers' acceptance, which is often difficult for the 'senders' to control. When a country is perceived as representing moral integrity, social progress, and economic success, it will exert appeal to other nations, but if a country is associated with the impressions of 'untrustworthy, immoral, corrupt, bullying, undemocratic', the country will hardly be able to exert soft power over others. This is particularly true if any soft power strategy is framed by media and information sources over which a government may have little influence, even on the level of factual accuracy. Soft power strategy can also be compromised by foreign dissidents, or critics, or even celebrities whose publicised opinions (however ill-informed) can have a major impact on a given public.

Western societies have by and large firmly embraced the values of individualism, human rights, the rule of law, justice, freedom of speech, and other fundamental principles common to what is routinely referred to as 'liberal democracy'. However, the

government of China cannot easily borrow Western values so as to find political legitimacy or justify itself; it seems that China has unconsciously sought to challenge the West's monopoly on such 'legitimacy' by contesting how we interpret this. As long as the general perception in the West persists – that China is an autocracy respecting no human rights and lacking in democracy – no Western society would wish to imitate China's model of governance, or indeed accept China as a trustworthy partner. It seems that China has to contend with many negative perceptions on this front, which are all very difficult to change. These negative perceptions spring in part, of course, from conflicting political ideologies, different political systems, different interpretations of human rights, economic competition, cultural and racial alienation, historical mistrust, a misreading of Chinese policy and political orientation in the world, a disagreement with China's strategies, and fears of yet another unpredictable rising power on the world stage, and so on. As Michael Barr (2011) argues, the rise of China as an alternative model to Western liberalism could question the very basis of traditional political legitimacy (p.5). Shambaugh (2013) describes the macro-context of China's awkwardness so: "China is in the community of nations but is in many ways not really part of the community; it is formally involved, but it is not normatively integrated" (p.7). Because of China being different in all of the above respects, it would find it hard to avoid being seen as a potential challenge to the West's hegemony – in making the 'rules of the game' of global political legitimacy. Such resulting alienation and such indissoluble differences, form a fundamental barrier for China's soft power efforts in the West; China's strength and difference combined contain the seeds of a potentially fierce strategic competition between two great global forces.

### China's soft power assets and liabilities

In the context of China's current strategic concerns, soft power is associated with intangible assets: with foreign policies, political values, diplomatic artistry, international reputation, traditional culture, and the new creative industries. As mentioned above, it also includes domestic factors such as citizenship education, scientific development, social cohesion, and harmonious ethnic relationship. I wish now to focus on reviewing China's soft power in terms of its

<sup>12</sup> Available from: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/07/18/global-image-of-the-united-states-and-china> (accessed 28 September, 2014).

assets and liabilities and do so in the context of President Xi's Chinese Dream, and so I will attempt to articulate the more effective approaches to soft power that China does or could engage in by which to extend its influence in the West.

In terms of its political values, the Chinese Dream is, in its own phraseology, engaged in constructing a "socialism with Chinese characteristics" [中国特色社会主义], which demands a systematic application of "core socialist values" [社会主义核心价值观]. But, is the Chinese Dream an asset to China's soft power? There are, on the face of it, two aspects to a country's political value system: one domestic – by what principles a government rules its own people – and the other international – how this government deals with other nations and conducts international affairs. Domestic political values and its corresponding political system are important considerations for a state's soft power capabilities – to a certain degree soft power if a representation of such. The Chinese constitution does provide for guarantees of economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights. But all such rights must only be exerted in accordance with "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and concomitant 'core socialist values'. According to Report to the 18th CPC Congress, the core socialist values embrace "patriotism, collectivism, and socialism; prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law; dedication, integrity, and friendship" (Chapter VI). These values have indeed the potential to develop into a consistent and persuasive universalism. Meanwhile, the term "socialism with Chinese characteristics" emphasises China's uniqueness and implies a sense of exceptionalism.

It seems that there is here a paradox: for the core socialist values (to be promoted in the West) are universal (for socialism itself was always internationalist and exceeded the traditions or political systems of any one nation state), but the 'Chinese characteristics' form an emphatic focus on Chinese particularity. How therefore can China's socialism function as an attractive model for Western societies? Will China export its 'core socialist values' as a critical alternative to Western liberal and democratic values? To answer those questions, two facts must be recognised: first, since Deng Xiaoping's 'Reform and Open-Door' policies [改革开放] of the late 1970s, China largely abandoned its role as a

protagonist of ideological arguments with other countries; second, China is actively seeking an understanding of its political system and policies, rather than an 'export' of such as a 'model'. China's political leadership does not (at least in policy terms) expect the West to emulate the Chinese model – in fact, China itself knows that Western publics are reluctant to promote any part of the Chinese political system. Yet the slogan 'Chinese Dream' itself can be rightly perceived as a soft-power instrument, albeit both coined and used for defensive purpose. The slogan suggests an alternative, a bold proclamation of a coherent worldview, a testimony of faith in the trajectory of the current political system, and a conviction of belief in a viable future for this system. It is a banner to strengthen its standing in the world, defending the Chinese government against criticism from the West, and at the same time it emphasises China's uniqueness.

Actually, some of the 'core socialist values' of the Chinese Dream (such as 'democracy, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law'), of course resonate with the fundamental principles of Western liberal-democratic thought. To some extent, the predominance of Western thought (both ideological and political terms) in China's new political rhetoric of 'socialist core values' implies that China, at least presently, has no intention of challenging the ideological dominance of Western liberal democracy. The Chinese Dream is subtle and sophisticated in the way it presents difference within a fundamental unity. The difference is lodged in both history, culture and of course interpretation – the Chinese government's interpretation of these values does not lead, for example, to Western-style suffrage or individualism. Yet it proposes that both China and the West can together embrace the enlightenment and the humanitarian values required for an equal political dialogue.

The Chinese Dream appeals to the philosophical register of political values – where both sides can affirm a vision of a common humanity rather than a fixed set of interests divided by national boundaries. On the level of political pragmatics, both the Chinese Dream's socialist values and classical Western liberalism maintains an opposition to religious extremism, advocating tolerance and equality, respecting and protecting women's and children's rights for example. China and the West equally share pragmatic agreements on a range of global

challenges, such as their responses to natural disasters, epidemics and terrorism. Like Western social contract theories, China also has its own version of 'social contract' – the principle that central government obtains legitimacy only through fulfilling its responsibilities to its citizenry.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore conceivable that on both philosophical and pragmatic registers, the Chinese Dream might find a measure of acceptance with Western publics, providing that China does not maintain a stance of ideological opposition to the West's pre-eminence in connecting the philosophical and the pragmatic when determining the shape of the global order (such as the operation of global markets, global security, international cooperation, and so on). Through the permanent seats on the UN Security Council, China is in any case an established partner and plays a role in such 'shaping' in any case.

In foreign policy terms, the Chinese Dream inherits Chairman Mao's "five principles of peaceful coexistence" [和平共处五项原则]. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power, China is conscious of international security, and President Xi's foreign policies can therefore be understood in terms of the application of the 'five principles of peaceful coexistence' to the current world order. Originating in the 1950s, these principles are: respect of national sovereignty and territorial integrity; non-aggression; peaceful coexistence; non-intervention in another country's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit. As a political principle, China holds a long-standing opposition to the use of force, insists non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, and refuses to participate in economic sanctions against certain regimes simply on account of international consensus. China's foreign policies are applauded in some developing countries, but in the West are met with suspicion, particularly in relation to human rights, or humanitarian crises in other countries. China is widely regarded as a forthcoming superpower, yet within the context of a sustained Western hegemony, it increases the likelihood of contention and conflict. And so in its foreign policy effort, China's soft power liabilities will alert us to the limitations of the concept of soft

power itself. Foreign policies as soft power will stop to be a dominant consideration in situations where there are real differences of diplomatic interests and geopolitics: economic competition regularly leads to uneasiness between China and Western Europe, geopolitical competition in Asia-Pacific often contributes to the clash between China and the United States. Nevertheless, Chinese foreign policies can still offer China soft-power resources if the Chinese government can enhance its proficiency in global governance on the basis of pacifist multilateral cooperation. China needs to accept international standards, behave according to international rules, and participate in establishing international rules and norms. The Chinese diplomacy must convince the world that China is a trustworthy, cooperative, and responsible member of the international community, capable of and willing to contribute to world peace and prosperity. China has expanded its contribution to offering global public goods. For instance, Xi's 'Chinese dream' in foreign policies has been converted into the ambitious proposals of 'the Silk Road Economic Zone' and 'the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' [一带一路]. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is another successful example of using diplomatic skills and economic temptation to shape soft power.

China possesses one of the most ancient, vibrant and sophisticated cultural traditions. Mainstream Chinese intellectuals view culture, both traditional and modern, in a very serious sense as internal to the country's stability and development (and so, where a core resource in the country's soft power, authentically representing Chinese society as grounded on an historically deep and diverse cultural life). Chinese culture – which can be listed simply as its language, traditional Chinese painting, calligraphy, literature, philosophy, music, Peking opera, film, online game, medicine, acupuncture, martial arts, cuisine, historic relics, architecture, sightseeing – can indeed be appropriated so as to create a favourable image of China abroad. As Sheng Ding (2008) contends, "China's cultural attractiveness has become its reliable soft power resource" (p.73). One dimension of the Chinese Dream policy framework is to revive a sense of China's historicity. And China has a long history of being an object of fascination for Western scholars.

Western studies of Chinese classics began with the Jesuits as early as in the sixteenth century. The

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<sup>13</sup> Confucianism argues that the ruler ("the son of Heaven") must be a capable, responsible, moral and benevolent protector of the people as well as of Chinese civilisation. If the ruler fails to fulfil his duty in this, Heaven will abandon him and replace him with other rulers who can better fulfil these responsibilities.



celebrations of the Chinese New Year around the world, spreading outside the diaspora of people of Chinese origin, is a reminder of the growing popularity and expanding international recognition of the vibrancy of Chinese culture and traditions.<sup>14</sup> The richness and diversity of Chinese culture is also something of a surprise to Westerners educated on a stock imagery of the 'Orient'. Since the end of the First World War, there emerged arguments in China contending how traditional culture could apprehend the negative consequences of modernisation, providing alternative values in addressing global challenges. President Xi himself also holds great enthusiasm for Confucianism and other Chinese classics.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, traditional values are apolitical or ideologically neutral, thus much less threatening.<sup>16</sup>

However, it is arguable that traditional Chinese culture only provides soft power potential, not soft power itself given its complexity. It remains to be seen how traditional culture can be translated or represented in its full character as a contemporary reality, and so applied through the sustained institutional practice of soft power. Joseph Y. S. Cheng (2012) observes "the exploitation of traditional culture strategically to provide re-assurance to the international community has now been raised to the official level" (p.183). For example, such traditional virtues are, namely "winning respect by virtue" [以德服人], which actually objects to militarism and national chauvinism, advocating a resolving of international conflict through equal negotiation; "harmony without suppressing differences" [和而不同] can be interpreted as a multiculturalism, respecting cultural, political, religious, and ideological diversity while encouraging tolerance; "do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you" [己所不欲勿施于人] articulates a biblical-like call for understanding and a respect of each other's different interest and welfare; "harmony between nature and humankind" [天人合一] can be appropriated to confront environmental problems such as global

warming.

China can thus increasingly resort to the deep virtues of its own traditions for inspiration. The articles collected in Callahan and Barabantseva (2011) describe and explain how traditional Chinese concepts, particularly those stemming from Confucian thought, are rediscovered in modern Chinese political rhetoric and foreign policies. China's traditional values provide a much needed ontological and epistemological underpinning for the country's future development. As a nation retreating from Leninist communism, the Chinese government has moved closer to an official embrace of Confucianism and the forms of collectivism, corporate responsibility and respect for authority contained within Confucian tradition. While interpretations on the difference between Confucius' teaching and historical Confucian traditions, which are plural and pan-Asian, the CPC nonetheless uses Confucius as a symbol to signify its ideological approach to leading and unifying the nation (Bell, 2008).

Such political exploitation of traditional culture may of course generate negative impacts and misunderstanding if handled inappropriately. For example, some Chinese cultural nationalists tend to idealise Confucianism and China's imperial past, claiming that Chinese culture can restructure the world order and address its chronic failures. Such statements will diminish rather than enhance soft power. Traditional Chinese culture is much more complex than a few slogans or models of global order, and there are surely always differing interpretations of history. For example, M. J. Li (2009) observes that "the traditional Chinese cultural emphasis on social hierarchy generates suspicion among some international observers that China seeks a Sino-centric international order in East Asia" (p.8). Furthermore, Chinese culture is still a form of "local knowledge" and a huge effort is needed before it becomes a true 'global knowledge', and in this linguistic inhibitors are great (even within China).

As soft power measures nonetheless, China has established a considerable number of Confucius Institutes in Western countries, providing Chinese-language classes. Naming the institutes after Confucius is significant, not least a testimony to this internationally recognised ancient aspect of pre-communist China. The Confucius Institute programme is initiated by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Han ban), influenced

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<sup>14</sup> For example, London's Trafalgar Square hosts one of the biggest Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations in Europe, involving nearly half a million visitors each year.

<sup>15</sup> President Xi has attended academic conferences on Confucianism, visited the Confucian Shrine, and often makes quotations from Confucius in his speeches.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Confucian works and Taoist works were widely translated into Western languages after the First World War, and Confucian scholars (such as Gu Hong Ming) was welcomed in the West during the 1920s.

by the mission and programs of Germany's Goethe Institute, France's Alliance Française, Spain's Cervantes Institutes, and the British Council. With a mission to promote the Chinese language education and increase mutual understanding, the state-sponsored Confucius Institutes are regarded as an important vehicle to transport China's soft power. The Ministry of Education provides massive financial support to cover CI expenditures worldwide, including US\$150,000 in start-up funds for each CI and 50 percent of their operation and development costs. The number of European and American students of the Chinese language has been on the rise for many years and is now a widespread option. However, even in its most optimistic anticipation, it will take many decades to approach the demand for English. In addition, because the Confucius Institutes are state-sponsored, "political concerns have been raised over the presence of a Chinese government-backed institution on Western university campuses" (Starr 2009: 79). It is also noticed that individual admiration for Chinese culture and interest in learning the Chinese language will not causally generate support for, or acceptance of, the Chinese communist government's foreign or domestic policies.

It is important to be equally cautious about appropriating modern culture as a soft-power resource. The Chinese government has elaborated strategies to promote China's cultural sector as the Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Chapter VI):

"We should promote rapid development and all-around flourishing of the cultural industry and cultural services, and ensure both social impacts and economic benefits, with a priority on the former.

"We should invigorate state-owned non-profit cultural institutions, improve corporate governance of profit-oriented cultural entities, and create a thriving cultural market.

"We should foster a fine environment that enables a large number of talented cultural figures, particularly eminent cultural figures and representatives of Chinese culture, to distinguish themselves in artistic pursuits.

"We should develop a modern communication network to improve our capacity for communications.

"We should deepen reform of the cultural sector, release and develop cultural productive forces, foster a democratic atmosphere in both academic research

and artistic pursuit, create a vast cultural arena for the people and encourage the free flow of cultural inspiration from all sources."

The report indicates that the Chinese government has developed coordinated, consistent, coherent and comprehensive soft-power strategies of promoting modern Chinese culture. The government has recognised the importance of cultural markets, the talents of its people, and modern communication network. To enhance competitiveness in the international trade of cultural products, the cultural industries must be developed in accordance with the logic of cultural market; to foster mutual understanding and free cross-national information flows should be guaranteed and protected; to extend its mass communications and media outreach, person-to-person communications should be encouraged, non-governmental actors should be allowed to participate in the global circulation of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture.

However, in practice, the state-centred hierarchical model is still shaping China's cultural management. State actors possess huge advantages and resources, but often suffer disadvantages. For example, state actors sometimes lack flexibility, and are easily to be viewed with suspicion concerning their motives for hegemony in this area, or even their engaging in espionage. The consequence is that whatever China does will be associated with China's internal central government politics, which remains controversial in the West. When soft power is seen as issuing from the ideological campaign of the State apparatus, it will more often than not undermine rather than increase China's reputational capital. Centralised soft power operations and the direct state intervention into cultural activities, can expect resistance from audiences in the West, particularly in Europe, where 'culture' exceeds the sphere of the state; for despite the generous public funding of culture in the West, cultural actors themselves widely associate with 'civil society' and are resolutely independent of the apparatus of the state. Soft power is in danger of generating suspicion internationally, that what the Chinese government is export is an inauthentic official version of 'Chinese culture' – in reality, a government-sanctioned image of itself.

Many of the Chinese cultural events that successfully reach large audiences in the West, such as Chinese New Year celebration, are not in fact

promoted by the Government (or, of which, the government is not the most important supporter). Many eminent translators and promoters of Chinese art, philosophy and literature, are not Chinese Government officials but Western sinologists. In global cultural dialogue, non-state actors – such as artists, writers, tourists, visiting scholars and students, immigrants, business communities, universities, research institutions, creative enterprises – routinely contribute more to the promotion of Chinese culture in the West than official Government channels.

The digital media or information revolution over the last two decades has also diminished the traditional borders of nation-states, facilitating a global circulation of discourses, ideas, values and cultural practices, creating virtual communities and global networks that exceed any one 'tradition'. On one hand, a country's cultural impact does not always match the size of its economy (see the modern influence of English culture), and the growth in its soft power is not necessarily in direct proportion to the increase in its hard power (see Denmark or Switzerland's international reach). On the other hand, there is a new phenomenon of power diffusion from nation-states to non-state actors, like NGOs. The Chinese government issues white papers explaining China's positions and policies on such critical issues as human rights, national defence, and educational and cultural exchanges, to create a more favourable image, or more understanding of China in world opinion. Yet so far the Chinese government's soft-power strategies seem to have a vital flaw: there has been limited emphasis on how to fulfill its policy aims through mobilising Chinese non-state organisations and, for example, maximise the power of international cultural and social communications, of which the Internet is central. China needs to consider the intimate relation of public diplomacy to soft power capability.

Kurlantzick (2006) classifies soft power into 'high' (targeted at political elites) and 'low' (targeted at the broader public) (p.1). China's soft power should, given the range of its aims, target at both elites and the broader public. It is often believed that 'high soft power' is more direct than 'low soft power' because political elites can exert more impact on policy making than general public can. But even if the benefits of 'high soft power' are more immediate, it is the broader public and its organisations (call them

civil society organisations, though in China this category is not a stable one) that can shape cross-national relationship in a more pervasive, authentic and more decisive context over the long term (in a sustainable way). Specification of the audience is essential to evaluating effectiveness. It has been criticised that China has focused on 'high' and relatively ignores the 'low'. China should direct its initiatives at multiple audiences, distinguishing between target countries and target groups, and relocating the resources to make for a more balanced and diverse range of organisations involved.

It is therefore necessary for China to deliberate on its public diplomacy including long-term national policy, specific strategies, and multi-level programmes. China's public diplomacy should show the world its tolerance and multi-cultures, its responsibilities for and contributions to the international community, its determination to insist on peaceful development and common prosperity. Public diplomacy must never seem to be nationalistic propaganda, must not be narrowed down to government PR. And indeed, China does possess public-diplomacy instruments: The State Council Information Office, Foreign Publicity Office, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs are three major governmental players in the field of public diplomacy. Policies are explained in white papers, on governmental websites and during press conferences. Celebrations such as the Beijing Olympic Games and the Shanghai World Expo 2010 were held with public funds, and publications introducing China are exported with governmental subsidiaries. The Chinese government has promised to increase the government budget to finance more international students to visit China, and support foreign educational institutions in launching cooperative programs with Chinese universities. To target at Western audiences, CCTV (China Central Television: the state broadcaster) has launched international channels in English, and broadcasts programmes in almost all the major European languages. Xinhua, the state news agency, has also launched its twenty-four-hour English language channel to launch an international presence. Other state-owned media – China Radio International and the China Daily newspaper – participate in the promotion of China's international image also. Meanwhile, China's public diplomacy has acknowledged the role of Western media. Chinese leaders have begun to invite Western

correspondents to press conferences, and a new generation of Chinese diplomats have started to address the Western media. For example, the China's Ambassador to the UK, Mr Liu Xiaoming, received interview in BBC programme *Newsnight*, explaining China's position on maritime disputes. The State Council Information Office commissioned Lowe and Partners, international advertising agency, to help produce a series of "China image films". But the outside world obtains information about China not just via Chinese official media or China's friends in the West. There are newspapers and magazines not state-owned or controlled bringing their own messages; there are independent reports, writers and bloggers who enrich the image of China without being influenced by the Chinese government. In order to reach to a wider audience more than the diplomatic community, China needs to make more effective use of the possibilities of the internet and mobilise its netizens. Unfortunately, China is deficient in this area.

There are political and structural obstacles which make it more difficult for China (more than Western governments) to push its soft power agenda over the Internet. The Chinese government is convinced that it is in the national interest to control the flow of information between China and the outside world. And there are consequent criticisms that accuse the State's cultural management bureaucracies of inadvertently constraining China's soft power through their conservative attitudes towards artistic innovation and creation (Zheng, 2008). The governmental censorship and the controversial Great Firewall mechanism, if abused, are supposed to suppress the talents and creativeness of its citizens, potentially depriving China of a significant soft-power asset in the global networked cyberspace, which can directly engage with Western publics and civil societies in a much wider spectrum.

The 18th CCP Congress report (2012) claims that "the strength and international competitiveness of Chinese culture are an important indicator of China's power and prosperity and the renewal of the Chinese nation" (Chapter VI). It is understandable that China considers the cultivation of soft power as part of the international political competition. But the term "cultural competitiveness" is somehow ambiguous and unclear; cultural competition is not zero-sum game, culture is not something that can be controlled, regulated or quantified to directly serve

the political interests of parties and states. Culture must be allowed and enabled to flourish freely according to its own laws. The government should accept the position that cultural communication doesn't exist solely to serve the nation's international political interests or image-building. It exists historically, independently, and socially, and not equivalent to mechanisms that serve solely for making economic profits or even enhancing personal friendship. More fundamentally, culture exists for the sake of improving humankind's understanding and enriching the diversity of culture – and the cosmopolitan cooperation and cultivation of diversity. Cultural exchanges for the purpose of diversification require diverse participants. It is artists, intellectuals, performance companies, artistic organisations, creative enterprises, ordinary citizens, and civil society organisations, who decide what is Chinese culture and how to market it abroad. The government needs therefore to find its own approach to the British principle of 'arm's length' when supporting and promoting culture, letting the creative minds and innovative non-governmental bodies in and outside China use their expertise and manage their own production. China's soft-power strategies would be more effective in the West if the Chinese government could understand how so much of culture is not simply a form of power; encouraging the talents of its citizens and cultural industries through a non-competitive and gradual movement towards greater openness and more tolerance, would provide a vital condition for Chinese culture to extend into the world around it. In other words, the Chinese Dream could embrace cultural variety and cultural diversity and benefit from the power of culture's autonomous capacity for development.

### Conclusion

Henry Kissinger, in his now well-known account on the rise of China observes that "China does not see itself as a rising, but a returning power."<sup>17</sup> It does not view the prospect of a strong China exercising influence in economic, cultural, political, and military affairs as an unnatural challenge to world order – but rather as a return to a normal state of affairs." (p. 546) As China has emerged as a global power, its range of national interests is expanding, and soft

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<sup>17</sup> Kissinger, H (2011) *On China*, New York and London: Penguin.

power has become an important component of the Chinese Dream, promising a fully integrated national revival. Both political leaders and academic elites are nonetheless concerned about China's image worldwide, and devote much attention to shaping China's influence. Yet polling shows that China's soft-power efforts have so far encountered obstacles. In this paper I have suggested that China needs to deepen and broaden its knowledge of (and therefore research of) the conceptualization and operationalization of soft power both at home and in the West. While reviewing the assets and liabilities of China's soft power, I have observed that China possesses huge soft power resources – its political weight, its pacifist foreign policies, its economic success, and its richly diverse traditions. Yet, the most crucial components of Chinese soft power are its versatile people.<sup>18</sup> All soft power efforts are, however, diminished if China fails to extend the capabilities of its people, and, for example, grasp opportunities in the global information age, when soft-power strategies are more and more overlapping with public diplomacy, where cultural communication has moved from straight lines and clear hierarchies to networked forms of organisation, and where it is not central government but civil society, institutions and markets that decide what shape a country's output takes. Soft power, in its most clear and direct form, is derived from synergies between state and civil society. Collaboration with non-governmental bodies in public diplomacy is passivity in the face of globalisation, but an effective way of implementing soft power strategy. It is hoped that President Xi's Chinese Dream will deliberate on how to grant non-governmental bodies and a range of cultural actors more space so that soft power is not simply a form of promotion or political PR, but a form of development and expression of a growing, creative, expansive cultural life.

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<sup>18</sup> D'Hooghe (2010) observes that Westerners hold a more favourable view of Chinese *people* than the nation state of China (p.14).