

China's Soft Power: Effective International Media Presence from Chi-Fast to Chi-Film

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ABSTRACT

Although many scholars have highlighted China's soft power diplomacy and its dimensions, this paper argues that China has strong soft power resources but does not have an effective international media presence to sell its story. Moreover, China lacks a global presence which brands like McDonalds, KFC, and Hollywood represent in the form of a strong American economy, culture, and history. Therefore, this paper suggests that China can enhance its soft power by setting up fast food chains with Chinese characteristics and Chinese film productions in other regions in general and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries in particular.

Keywords: Soft Power, China, BRI, Culture, Diplomacy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

China is rising steadily. Being a regional power with prospects of becoming a global power requires a strong foothold on the world stage. Over the years, the world has been witnessing strong American soft power through Hollywood films and fast food outfits like KFC and McDonalds; and accepting/assimilating it as normal. However, rising China and its soft power is seen as a rigorous aggressive approach, particularly by the West.

In reality, the notion of ‘soft power’ dates back to Chinese Confucian philosopher Mencius born in 372 BC, who believed that ‘righteous causes garner support, while unrighteous causes do not.’ In modern era, Nye defined the term ‘soft power’ as ‘a nation’s ability to co-opt rather than coerce, persuade rather than compel, to set agendas and to attract support.’ Soft power, for Nye includes the appeal of a state’s values, legitimacy of its foreign policy, and attractiveness of its culture (Nye 1990). Conversely, Chinese scholars’ understanding of soft power differs from Nye’s focus which is on the triumph of institutions while the former see it as sharing traditional culture and modes of economic development – of 德治天下 (Wilson Center n.d.).

At the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Hu Jintao declared that ‘The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture. We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country. We will further publicise the fine traditions of Chinese culture and strengthen international cultural exchanges to enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide’ (Jintao 2007). It is at this time that China officially launched its pursuit of cultural soft power (文化软实力). During the 18th National Congress in 2014, Xi Jinping remarked, ‘We should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world’ (China Daily 2014).

China is already using Chinese language, media expansion, pop culture icons, *Confucius Institutes*, *educational exchanges*, societal and cultural channels, including literature, art, film, music, sports figures, and even zoo exchanges (panda diplomacy) to expand its soft power. Figures like film director Zhang Yimou, actor Jackie Chan, pianist Lang Lang, professional athletes Yao Ming and Li Na, ballet dancer Tan Yuanyuan, and pop singer Jane Zhang are unofficial/informal cultural ambassadors.

While Chinese scholarship talks about enhancing soft power diplomacy, there are Western scholars who see China’s rise as aggressive and anticipate her efforts as antagonistic. This paper highlights Chinese (Section Two) and Western scholars’ narrative on China’s soft power (Section three). Moreover, recommendations are made (Section Four) for fortifying China’s soft power diplomacy through ‘Chi-Fast’ and ‘Chi-Film’.

2. CHINESE SCHOLARS' NARRATIVE

Chinese scholar Tuo (2010) posited the need to create a positive image worldwide and that can happen when China positions itself globally. His points to the importance of Chinese culture in this regard. Mingwei (2012) suggested that China could enhance its soft power by building communication systems through Chinese culture, which ought to have a foreign appeal and a systematic strategy. On the contrary, Hua (2007) argued that China should prepare grounds for soft power development through hard power because the latter's significance cannot be overlooked. Moreover, Zhangrun (2016) posited that 'The term "culture" used by government branches is mostly focused on ideological work, which serves state power through historical and political ideologies. Consequently, when the state talks about "cultural soft power, cultural engineering, and cultural industry," these terms are illustrated with reference to the construction of political legitimacy and nationalism, rather than with reference to civilization and human enlightenment. However, there is overlap between two concepts and there are no prohibitions between having conversations about them.' He argued that by setting all the nuts and bolts together it would be an 'integrative model of soft power' (Li and Worm 2010, p. 69). Additionally, another famous Chinese scholar Xueting advocated that China could enhance soft power by increasing 'Political Power.' He wrote that 'political power is the centre of a country's soft power' but emphasised that cultural strength could not be seen as soft power. Rather, both political and cultural power accumulate soft power. He further explained that 'China's comprehensive national power will increase at a higher rate if we use political power, instead of economic power as the foundation for our comprehensive national power' (Xueting 2007).

Zhongying (2014) recommended enhancing soft power by 'Huairou' (mollification) - an ancient Chinese ruling strategy. He argued that soft power notion has been imported from the United States (US) to China. Hence, the term has been misinterpreted and misrepresented. 'Huairou' or in another words, 'mollification' could solve problems in China's foreign relations because mollification means, 'pacifying and winning the hearts of foreigners through tributary trade.'

Pei Minxin proposed three areas to strengthen Chinese soft power. First, through political ideology with Chinese characteristics to balance 'Western society's value system centered on liberty and democracy in order to be fully respected internationally.' Second, through implementing social bureaucratic reforms, and third, through innovation from technology to pop culture (Minxin 2004). Likewise, Xueliang highlighted innovation and he argued that 'China's think-tanks need novel knowledge sources.' By opening symposiums to the larger public and reforming think-tanks could be a good approach, however, some topics are politically sensitive so while advising and talking about 'political, economic, military and security issues as well as domestic and foreign policy' one needs to be careful.

Nonetheless, he rhetorically asked ‘What is the point of spending money and building think tanks if everyone simply unswervingly supports, agrees, and follows the existing policy?’ (Xueling 2016).

One’s own ‘knowledge system’ (which is a key to having substantial soft power in the international community) needs to be unique and not colonised by Western ideas as suggested by Yongnian (2016). By promoting the renminbi (RMB) and improving international negotiation expertise, is vital. He posited that although ‘the use of RMB in settling bilateral trade has also been on rise, and some neighboring countries and regions have even started to carry out offshore transactions in RMB’, there is a room for improvement. He argued that China’s ‘stable currency, improved living standards, and stronger economy and greater ability to deal with crises’, has demonstrated a mounting soft power and has acquired international admiration. Nevertheless, a firm and unswerving base is mandatory in areas such as ‘exports, overseas investment, national image building, and international negotiations.’ According to him, ‘There is a particular need for intangible and tangible results achieved in these areas to be broadcast outside of its borders. China has been slow in creating a more positive image, despite the fact that it has been involved in developmental work beyond its borders for decades.’

Jiangyun (2012) pointed out how discrepancy between Chinese officials and business tycoons’ negotiation skills had undercut China’s position in ‘international trade, investment and cooperation.’ Therefore, these resulted in poor negotiations. For instance, ‘What starts as an advantageous situation may consequently become the opposite and incur high costs.’ In his view, the fiascos in various dialogues to institute bilateral trade agreements and undertakings was an indication of feeble soft power.

3. WESTERN SCHOLARS’ NARRATIVE

China has been facing a lot of criticism from Western media and scholars. For instance, authors while quoting Xi’s statement about China’s 2020–2035 goals for enhancing China’s soft power criticised it as a ‘lofty ambition’ due to intensifying Sino-US strains. Moreover, they consider soft power diplomacy as so-called ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ and view the COVID-19 pandemic as a sign of China’s waning image worldwide (Dams, Rühlig and Tonchev 2021). On the contrary, China has not only coped with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis remarkably but also supplied free doses of vaccines to many countries. How are Chinese efforts seen in various regions and countries is discussed briefly in the subsequent sections.

3.1. Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, China’s image has deteriorated significantly due to a lack of Chinese investment inflows. Moreover, ‘In Czech mainstream public debates, China’s

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is perceived as a geopolitical expansion that poses a challenge to the Western democratic system and its security.' Furthermore, the value and human rights issues and Czech empathy for Taiwan has contributed ominously in worsening China's soft power (Fürst 2021).

3.2. Denmark

China receives overwhelmingly bad representation in Danish media. 61 editorials addressing a wide range of themes, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hong Kong crisis, Huawei, panda diplomacy, Greenland, the trade war, and human rights, were published during an 18-month period (January 2019-July 2020). The vast majority of these editorials (59) discussed China in a negative light (Forsby 2021). Beijing's inability to wield any soft power in Denmark due to the impact of Confucius and cultural institutes activities has been negligible, as demonstrated by the increasingly negative popular, media and political perceptions (Ibid., p.29).

3.3. Italy

Although, there is a tug of war between the West and China on different matters and enhancing China's soft power is a concern. However, Beijing won many hearts in Italy when its COVID response was compared with the Italian government's difficulties, and Western democracies more broadly, in handling the pandemic. '...in spite of years of cultural and economic diplomacy, the element of appeal that may have actually strengthened China's image in Italy most recently has been the success of China's fight against COVID-19... China's ability to propose itself as an exporter of successful solutions for regional and global issues' should be more carefully looked at (Mariani and Ghiretti 2021, p. 56)

3.4. Latvia

The general public in Latvia views China more favorably than Latvian lawmakers. The country's political authorities now approach previously hailed economic initiatives and Confucius Institutes with mistrust and caution. Despite the lack of a definitive solution, they are being explored as potential tools to boost China's worldwide standing (Purva 2021).

3.5. Netherlands

The Chinese embassy's public diplomacy operations in the Netherlands should be viewed in the context of US-Sino rivalry. Due to Dutch skepticism of China prior to the pandemic, Chinese megaphone diplomacy failed to reach the Dutch audience, despite the fact that economic expansion and readiness to finance projects in the Netherlands offered huge potential. Furthermore, the Chinese regime's success in raising nearly one billion

people out of poverty has not improved its image in the Netherlands. China's basic soft power programme, which concentrates on culture and education, has become increasingly political (Dams and Martin 2021).

3.6. Poland

'China's soft power and public diplomacy activities in Poland are not specifically tailored for the country. The People's Republic of China uses similar tools to those that it uses worldwide, including new instruments such as social media platforms (like Twitter) that are not publicly accessible in China itself' (Szcudlik 2021, p. 70). However, because of China's growing global assertiveness, the generally indifferent attitude of Polish society toward China, as well as the customarily impartial media coverage in recent years, is deteriorating. Waning attitudes of China in Poland are due to factors such as its misinformation campaign over COVID-19 and restrictions on Hong Kong's autonomy. Poland wishes to keep the lines of communication open with the PRC (Ibid.).

3.7. Portugal

The successful handover of Macao in the late 1990s, or the spectacular influx of Chinese cash into Portugal in the last decade, have positioned the small and struggling periphery EU country among the top recipients of China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). China's help to Portugal has included medical and personal protection equipment contributions, as well as high-level institutional support to speed up bureaucratic processes relating to the import of Chinese COVID-19 equipment. The EU's initial hesitancy and lack of action left a vacuum which China filled. However, if there is a Chinese soft power policy for Portugal, historical linkages appear to be at the heart of it. COVID-19 diplomacy merely broadened the concept of soft power beyond government agencies and placed Portugal in a unique position within EU-China relations. The bottom line is that the importance of Chinese soft power in Portugal-China relations is based on (historical and cultural) sentiments as well as (current and future economic) interests, rather than any specific Chinese official plan (Rodrigues 2021).

3.8. Romania

The majority of Romanians construct their views based on mainstream media, which is frequently hostile to China. Only a few direct references to China can currently be found in Romanian political pronouncements. The large percentage are indirect and indicate a tendency for collaborating with Euro-Atlantic allies at the expense of China. 'Romania's place is in the Euro-Atlantic values zone; even if economic ties with China are not rejected, Romania should not go too far into the area of cooperation with states situated outside the zone of Euro-Atlantic values; national security has to be ensured together with the United States and NATO; and overreliance on Chinese imports should be avoided'

(Şincai 2021, p. 84). The cultural and educational components of China's soft power are the most fruitful under the current circumstances, among the multiplicity of traditional soft power instruments. There is remarkable interest in the Chinese language in Romania (Ibid.). The COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated Romania's negative impression of China and has erected a new obstacle to direct engagement with the country. All of China's efforts to supply medical goods to Romanians through donations or commercial deliveries have been seen as propaganda concealed under 'mask diplomacy'. Furthermore, claims of low-quality sanitary protection goods have grown common in the media, and the bulk of such deliveries from China have been labeled as 'low-quality' or even 'hazardous' (Şincai 2021, pp. 84-85).

3.9. Slovakia

Segments of Slovak society recognise China as contributing much-needed support during the COVID-19 outbreak. However, others accuse it of spreading the virus and its propaganda. The current Slovak President, Zuzana, and the new Slovak government Čaputová have already demonstrated their willingness to condemn and stand up to China. If Chinese diplomats resort to 'wolf warrior' tactics, it is probable that in the future, China will come closer to the centre of Slovak public attention, and public and political sentiments will become more polarised (Turcsanyi 2021).

3.10. Spain

Beijing has given great support to Spain's foreign policy priorities in its relations with China, including cooperation on global concerns such as climate change, the pandemic, and counterterrorism. In this light, Chinese public diplomacy in Spain can be seen as part of a fairly successful damage-control plan protecting and preserving Chinese soft power in the country (Esteban and Armanini 2021).

3.11. Sweden

In Sweden, China's soft power is eroding as Beijing has scaled back its soft power efforts and halted official cultural collaboration. Decreasing soft power is not solely due to events in the Nordic country; rather, it may also be part of the broader international discourse in Europe and the US that is becoming increasingly critical of China. However, it is conceivable that the special dynamics of China's coercive diplomacy with Sweden influence public image and explain the PRC's soft power's comparatively rapid decline in the country (Rühlig and Shao 2021).

3.12. United Kingdom (UK)

In the UK, the media frequently portrays China in a negative light. Partly as a result of events in Hong Kong, legislative interest has intensified, and negative opinions now dominate parliamentary debates. These variables show that China's soft power, or ability to influence actors in the UK through attraction or persuasion, is limited. The growth of stronger contact between the UK and China is hampered as a result. In recent years, there has been little evidence of China's soft power successfully working in the UK. In fact, this debunks the claim that the ruling Communist Party wields disproportionate influence in British politics or that China poses a serious (even existential) danger to the UK or its political system. Given the paucity of evidence to back up such claims, they appear to be an attempt to rally support for policies that target China, either out of sympathy for Washington's strategic antagonism or out of fear of a future in which the UK's own global dominance is waning (Summers 2021).

3.13. European Union (EU)

Europe is wary of China's BRI, accusing it of stifling free trade and favoring Chinese businesses. The EU disclosed a 'connectivity of Europe and Asia policy' in its response to BRI. At the outset, BRI aided China's image in Europe; but 'events such as the EU's unwillingness to lift the arms embargo, China's anti-secession law, and controversies surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympics' eventually caused it to lose face. Other concerns, such as the expanding 'trade deficit, currency manipulation, market access, intellectual property, and the overall increased strain of economic competition from China', have added to Europe's discontent. By 2013, the honeymoon phase had come to an end, with economic advantages failing to materialise as expected. Almost every European news outlet takes a critical stance on expanding Chinese dominance, and security dangers related with the BRI and its economic expansion. The Chinese government uses communication to convey ideas of itself as a trustworthy economic partner, strengthen its image as a political entity, and de-securitise narratives about its geopolitical goals. However, her image is disputed at the EU level primarily in economic terms, but also in geopolitical and normative terms. The EU's stance in these three sectors has shifted from skepticism to skepticism in recent years, a trend that was consolidated with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. China's soft power strategy in the EU is obviously built on a strategy of repeating key messages that depict pictures of Beijing as it intends to be perceived by its EU counterparts (Ekman and Picardo 2021) but this needs a lot more work.

3.14. Austria

China's soft power message revolves around economic themes and is carved out of its economic weight. Crucially, while the PRC's soft-power resources in Austria might be

limited, its ability to capitalise on these resources is likely to be enhanced by the absence of a public and political debate, coupled with the lack of China strategy, as well as the largely missing link between policymakers and China experts. Austria's 'nonchalance' towards China might well represent the PRC's most effective source of soft power (Erlbacher 2021). This indicates that there are good prospects for China to cultivate links between Austrian policymakers and Chinese professionals.

4. DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. International Media Presence and Chi-Film

It is undoubtedly challenging to gauge the impact of soft power. Whereas there are a small number of metrics, China's hard work seems to have had diminutive upshot in heightening its favorability. Therefore, it is suggested to enhance its effective media presence globally. In fact, this seems to be a bottleneck preventing overseas audiences from seeing, understanding and interacting with modern China. Although, current efforts have had varying results, for example, CGTN is quite established within Africa, but it had its license temporarily revoked in the UK. As a result, personalising a media package and network for each country is a major issue, whether by collaboration with local organisations, as was the case with Fairfax and ABC (though the Fairfax contract was ultimately cancelled), or by bolstering the country's broadcasters. However, one needs to remember what works in one country may not in another, and what works in one country may not always work.

Moreover, in many countries WeChat app does not function like other international apps such as WhatsApp, and people cannot install WeChat with that freedom. China's media and internet policies, and the West's active limitation and censorship of Chinese content are indications that Beijing is fighting an uphill battle. Although China has strong soft power assets, including cultural heritage, overseas linkages, an enviable lifestyle, it does not have an online overseas presence to boost it, and in the West, this is actively resisted as well. It is a big barrier, possibly a war of attrition. China cannot establish an effective foothold into Western platforms, and its own platforms are banned or denigrated such as Tiktok and WeChat.

China has set up Confucius institutions in many countries but those have also been scaled back, with universities canceling their relationship. China needs to develop exchange programmes with top universities of developing countries and not just American or European universities. Chinese presence as students in other societies will also help to disseminate Chinese culture and strengthen soft power.

In some ways, China is looking at salvaging what overseas influence it can have rather than growing it. This heightened during the pandemic under the pretext of 'combating

misinformation’ but it existed before the pandemic as well. Chinese media outlets were flagged as ‘state controlled’ organisations on Western platforms before COVID-19, including Twitter and YouTube. In addition, even before the pandemic, there were regular measures by these companies to remove users flagged as Chinese ‘bots’ or influence operations. Only impartial media coverages can show Beijing’s notable crisis handling during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially her free supply of millions of vaccines to many countries.

Moreover, BRI has faced a lot of criticism from many countries. On the one hand, it is seen as a tool for strengthening the economic role and enhancing China’s power globally, while on the other side, it is seen as a good initiative of uplifting downtrodden economies. Nonetheless, it needs to be clarified that China has not forced its vision, culture, political system or even BRI on any country unlike what the US has been doing. Countries, according to their national interests and globalisation trends undertook agreements with China. If any country feels threatened, it first needs to put its own house in order, find loopholes in its own system and policies and plug them. Any country with strong economic power would disseminate its culture and language through soft power diplomacy to win more hearts in its favour.

Soft power is not as powerful as people think it is. Soft power follows hard power. If a country has hard power, it can dictate the environment that soft power works in. Soft power in many ways can be seen as ‘who controls the narrative’ as argued by Edward Said and which the world has seen in the case of the US. The US has always enjoyed a special status in the world. Everyone wants to be American, be in America, wear American and eat American and live like an American. A major actor in creating this attractiveness is Hollywood and image-making pop culture industries. What people see and hear all day and night affects them and society on a whole. Narratives matter in this time of competition and race. China seems to be struggling to tilt those narratives in its favour.

The way Hollywood movies have expanded all over the world, the Chinese film industry is nowhere near it. Therefore, there is a huge potential for ‘Chinawood’ to expand its industry to other countries and work with their film industry.

4.2. Chi-Fast

Following American patterns, many Chinese in China began eating fast food, and people can now find McDonalds, KFC, Burger King, Starbucks, Pizza Hut, and Luck in Coffee almost everywhere in the country. However, we rarely see Chinese fast food outside of China, with the exception of instant noodles and noodle soup. There is a lot of Chinese food that can be brought and expanded to other nations, where it can be merged with their national eating styles to create a local flavor with a Chinese touch, e.g., Peking Duck and

Glorious China Chicken. Although there are a few Chinese fast food chains in the US, such as Panda Express, P.F., and Pei Wei Asian Diner, other regions, particularly the BRI countries, are less familiar with Chinese food, particularly fast food. Not only is a fast food restaurant an instrument of soft power diplomacy, it has a lot of potential for generating revenue. Sichuan, Shanghai, Chengdu, Beijing, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Guilin, and Xi'an cuisines are only a few examples of Chinese cuisine. Dishes like hot pot, shrimp with vermicelli and garlic, a variety of seafood, dumplings, Chowmein, Chang fen, fried shrimp with cashew nuts, tang cu, Ma po tofu, wontons, Chun juan spring rolls, Yangzhou fried rice, Matcha, and a variety of Boba tea can all be easily introduced with a fusion of local culture and fast food style.

China does not have a global presence yet like McDonalds and Hollywood despite having strong cuisine, culture, and history. Therefore, China can enhance its soft power by introducing a fusion of fast and Chinese food, which may be called 'Chi-Fast'. In addition, collaboration of Chinese film industry and stars with other countries movie industries under 'Chi-Film' can introduce multicultural movies in various languages, including Mandarin.

5. CONCLUSION

Being a regional power with the potential to become a global one necessitates a solid presence on the international scene. However, 'Rising China' has been viewed as a stridently confrontational strategy, notably by the West. This paper highlights the Western narratives in favour and against China's soft power diplomacy. Chinese intellectuals and opinion leaders are trying to figure out how China can improve its soft power diplomacy and numerous Chinese academics put forward a set of policy recommendations. For instance, enhancing soft power through Chinese language, culture, history, political ideology, mollification, technology, pop-culture, knowledge system, RMB, and trade. Nevertheless, this paper identifies gaps and highlights the areas where China needs to improve, specifically in Europe. Furthermore, the study proposes an effective international media presence through 'Chi-Fast' and 'Chi-Film' to fortify China's soft power diplomacy to gain significant position against American soft power through its big brands.

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