

CHINA'S SOFT POWER

Air Commodore Khalid Iqbal (retd)*

Abstract

Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. It is a relatively new entrant in the national power potential calculus. Most of the tools used for harnessing soft facet of power are capital intensive. Soft power has long been operative in the inter-state relations but its recognition as an independent discipline came in the 1990s. China has specially focused its attention towards enhancing its soft power since 2003. China has made significant inroads into South East Asia, Latin America and Africa. However, there is still great untapped potential for the development of China's soft power, particularly the cultural industry. America occupies over 40 percent of the world's cultural market share, while China is yet to hit the 4 percent mark.

Key words: Soft Power, China, Culture, Confucius Institutions.

Introduction

The term soft power was coined in the early 1990s by Joseph S. Nye Jr.,¹ in his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He refined the concept in his follow-up book in 2004: *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. In Nye's words soft power is, "the attractiveness of a country's political ideas and policy."² The term is now widely used in international affairs by analysts and statesmen. The former US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, spoke of the need to enhance American soft power by "a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security i.e., diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, economic reconstruction and development."³

* Consultant, Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), Islamabad, Pakistan.

¹ "Soft Power," *Wikipedia* (online), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power (accessed July 23, 2012).

² Daniel Large, "As the Beginning Ends: China's Return to Africa," in *African Perspective on China in Africa*, ed. F. Manji and Stephen Marks (Oxford: Fahamu, 2007), 158.

³ Ibid.

The Concept of Soft Power

Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. For example, contemporary practices of community policing rely on making the police sufficiently friendly and attractive to help them achieve shared objectives.⁴ Joseph Nye distinguishes between hard power - the power to coerce—and soft power—the power to attract.⁵

Soft power is not the same as influence, because influence could still rest on hard power or the threat to use such power or through monetary incentives. It is also more than just persuasion or the ability to bring around people by argument, though that is an essential constituent of it. Moreover, soft power is inclusive of the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to assent. Soft power resources are the assets that produce such attraction.⁶ “If one’s behaviour is determined by an observable but intangible attraction - soft power is at work.”⁷

Soft power uses a different type of toolbox; it uses attraction to shared values.⁸ During his first trip to Beijing after being elected as the Bolivian President, Mr Morales proclaimed himself to be a “great admirer of Mao,” while President Chavez of Venezuela had once exclaimed that Mao and South American revolutionary icon Simón Bolívar would have been “great friends.”⁹

Soft power has gained wide currency throughout the world, and is now regarded as an important indicator of comprehensive national strength.¹⁰ Soft power includes factors such as culture, sports, political system, media, and foreign policy. Among these, culture is the core; it fully reflects a country’s influence, cohesion and popularity. It affects the country’s development potential and popularity. Economic wealth of a country is a fundamental precondition for soft power. People aspire to look like those in wealthier societies rather than poorer ones¹¹. Much of America’s soft power radiates from

⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr., “The Benefits of Soft Power,” August, 2, 2004. Remarks, drawn from an address given on March 11 at the *Centre for Public Leadership’s Conference* on “Misuses of Power: Causes and Corrections,” <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/4290.html> (accessed July 23, 2012).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ R. Evan Ellis, “Chinese Soft Power in the Latin America,” *NDU Press*, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/chinese-soft-power-latin-america.html> (accessed July, 30, 2012).

¹⁰ Nye Jr., “The Benefits of Soft Power.”

¹¹ Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (London: Penguin Books Limited, 2012), 609.

Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft and Michael Jordan. Each of these is based on huge national wealth.¹²

Chinese policymakers have emphasized the peaceful nature of China's rise. The advance of China and the multidimensional strategic strides it is making are the most effective manifestations of its soft power.¹³ In the words of Nye, "in a global information age...success depends not only on whose army wins, but on whose story wins." The implications of soft power in the contemporary environment are difficult to evaluate quantitatively, because they involve complex and interconnected effects and feedback in such a manner that the ultimate results of an action go far beyond the capacity of applied stimulus and the end influence may not be in line with initial estimates.¹⁴

China has since long realized that during the era of asymmetric conflicts, it is difficult to hold on to a territory captured through bloody battles and that war is an instrument of the past. Underscoring the importance of soft power, the Chinese President Hu Jintao wrote in a recent article: "the overall strength of Chinese culture and its international influence are not commensurate with China's international status; the international culture of the West is strong while we are weak."¹⁵ The Bush era concept of hard power has made the US quite unpopular in the world. China has moved in to fill this void, with its focus on multiculturalism and peaceful rise.¹⁶ China's focus is essentially on the developing world with its offers of string free aid and infrastructural development. Being a strong state itself China's respect for sovereignty of others, opposition to super power hegemony and advocacy of level playing field in inter-state relations carry strong appeal amongst the developing states. American soft power projection pegs around democracy within state, whereas China relies on the principle of democracy between the states. Likewise, China's dislike for the western dominated international institutions and its urging to reform institutions like the IMF wins the hearts and minds in the developing countries.

The core of Chinese soft power is the widespread perception that the Peoples Republic China (PRC), because of its sustained high rates of economic growth and technology development, is a power to be reckoned with globally. In general, this perception can be divided into seven areas:¹⁷ hope for future

¹² Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The means to success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 17.

¹³ Evan Ellis, "Chinese Soft Power in the Latin America."

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Esther Pan, "China's Soft Power Initiative, Back Grounder," *Council on Foreign Relations* (CFR), May 18, 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-soft-power-initiative/p10715> (accessed July 23, 2012).

¹⁶ Frank Ching, "Dialogue Peace in Our Time?," *South China Morning Post*, November 3, 2010.

¹⁷ Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World*, 609.

access to Chinese markets; hope for future Chinese investment; influence of Chinese entities and infrastructure; hope for the PRC to serve as a counterweight to the United States and Western institutions; China as a development model; affinity for Chinese culture and work ethics; China as “the wave of the future.” In each of these domains, the soft power of the PRC can be identified as operating through distinct sets of actors: the political leadership of countries, the business community, students and youth, and the general population.¹⁸

Tools of Chinese Soft power

Economic Strategy

China’s economic progress has been accompanied by a steady expansion in its cultural and diplomatic influence globally, especially in the developing world. This growth in soft power has been apparent in Southeast Asia for a number of years. But now it is also evident in Latin America, and in its surge of business deals and development projects in Africa. Some experts see China’s influence expanding at the expense of the United States, which used soft power effectively throughout the Cold War. There has been much speculation in recent months that developing countries could be increasingly approving of China’s blend of market economy and authoritarianism as an attractive alternative to democracy. China’s rising wealth will incrementally enable it to project itself in a variety of ways of soft power to the world.¹⁹

Diplomacy

When it comes to diplomacy, Beijing knows how to win. Whether it is at the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations (UN) or any other international organization, China is out-manoeuvring the West, everywhere. In recent years, China’s leaders have frequently joined forces with India; the two countries jointly managed to salvage the UN climate negotiations and the Doha trade talks.²⁰ Alongside, China also cultivates relations with third-tier countries that have voting rights in international bodies. Beijing generally ties its assistance to two conditions, i.e., no official relations with Taiwan and support for the PRC in international organizations. China has friendly relations with some of the world’s most problematic countries, such as Zimbabwe, the Sudans, Myanmar and Yemen. States rejected as failed entities by the West are accepted by China as opportunity. The pro-China voting bloc led by African

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 611

²⁰ Ibid.

nations has managed to influence the processes in the WTO.²¹ Chinese influence in the United Nations has been growing. Within the last decade, support for Chinese positions on human rights issues has risen from 50 per cent to well over 70 per cent.²² China has adjusted its diplomatic practices to contemporary compulsions. It has joined the WTO, has become more helpful on non-proliferation issues, has settled territorial disputes with its neighbours, and joined a variety of regional organizations. This new diplomacy, coupled with the slogan of “China’s peaceful rise,” helps to alleviate fears and reduce the likelihood of other countries scrambling to balance a rising power.²³

Culture & Education

China has already set up more than 500 “Confucius Institutes” around the world and plans to add more than 100 additional institutes,²⁴ for promoting China’s culture. One result of a tenfold increase in award of scholarships by Chinese Universities is that twice as many Indonesian students are now going to China than to the United States. China is steadily increasing its support for cultural exchanges, sending doctors and teachers to work abroad, welcoming students from other nations to study in China, and paying for the Chinese language programmes abroad. More than 110,000 overseas students from 178 countries studied in China in 2004.²⁵ This figure was a ten-year high, and an improvement of over 40 per cent from 2003.²⁶ In 2005, China’s Education Ministry announced a new initiative to boost Chinese-language teaching in American Universities and language institutes around the world. Beijing University has announced a visiting scholars fund to encourage foreign doctoral students to study in China. Many people in developing countries can easily distinguish between American pompous arrogance and Chinese healthy self-confidence.²⁷

Chinese Models of Application of Soft Power

Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, Chinese culture, cuisine, calligraphy, cinema, curios, art, acupuncture, massage centres, herbal medicine, and fashion fads have permeated the local cultures. Young people in the region are fascinated by

²¹ Maharajakrishna Rasgotra, ed., *The New Asian Power Dynamics* (New Delhi: Sage publications Inc.), 109.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Esther Pan, “China’s Soft Power Initiative.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Chinese culture. Students from Southeast Asia make up a sizeable number of overseas students. There is a perception in Southeast Asia that to get ahead, it would suit you to go to China.²⁸

Latin America

Although China's current trade and investment position in Latin America is still limited as compared to the United States, its influence in the region is based on hopes of what it could be in the future.²⁹ China is increasingly supporting cultural and educational programmes that have a very benevolent finish. Chinese influence is seen as benign, especially in comparison to the bad spell that Latin America has had with the United States.³⁰

When Hu Jintao toured Latin America in 2004, his "message of greater economic, financial, trade, and technology ties was precisely the sort of engagement that Latin America had long wanted from Washington," said Cynthia Watson, a professor of strategic studies at the National War College (NWC). The Chinese government has negotiated more than 400 trade and investment deals with Latin American countries in the last few years, investing more than \$50 billion in the region.³¹ China's investments are on the increase in Latin America, where many governments are receptive to the Chinese message that bringing millions out of poverty is the best example of respecting human rights.³²

Estimates of the size of the Chinese middle class range from 100 million to 150 million people; this sheer number inspires Latin American business people. Ecuadorian banana magnate Segundo Wong reportedly stated that if each Chinese would eat just one Ecuadorian banana per week, Ecuador would be a wealthy country.³³ PRC has begun to loan, or invest, tens of billions of dollars in the region, including in high-profile deals such as: \$28 billion in loans to Venezuela; \$10 billion to Argentina; more than \$4.4 billion to Peru; \$5 billion steel plant in the Brazilian port of Açu, and another \$3.1 billion to purchase a stake in Brazilian offshore oil blocks from the Norwegian company Statoil; a \$10 billion loan to Brazil's Petrobras for the development of its offshore oil reserves; and \$1.7 billion to purchase seven Brazilian power companies etc.³⁴

PRC is also taking on roles in regional institutions, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), Inter-American Development Bank

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Evan Ellis, "Chinese Soft Power in the Latin America."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

(IADB), and UN peacekeeping operations in Haiti.³⁵ China's emergence as a key global player has assumed an important place within Latin America.³⁶

Africa

China has actively pursued a development agenda in Africa, including numerous agreements on energy and commodities. Princeton Lyman, CFR senior fellow for Africa policy studies, says: "China's soft power engagement in Africa includes: professing solidarity with Africa in international forums on trade and human rights issues; writing off more than \$1 billion in debt from African countries; training more than 100,000 Africans in Chinese Universities and military institutes; and sending more than 900 doctors to work across Africa. China has also intensified its trade and energy ties with Africa."³⁷ China's practice of building roads, hospitals, and bridges in countries where it has made substantial energy investments—like the Sudans, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea—has drawn approval from local governments. People appreciate the fact that the Chinese have a reputation for finishing infrastructure projects quickly and on budget. Drew Thompson writes in the Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief* that Beijing's increasing involvement in Africa is an expansion of its soft power.³⁸

Chinese Soft Power in the Middle East

While America is looking more towards the Pacific, China is fascinated by the Middle East. To sustain its economic growth, China is heavily dependent on Middle Eastern energy resources. The resource rich and volatile Middle East is indeed a critical centre of gravity for the Asia-Pacific as well as a key for China's continued economic prosperity³⁹. Chinese strategy is pegged around deepening economic ties, which evolve into soft power relationships. China is already the Middle East's next best oil customer after the US and has taken a generally "status quo" attitude towards regime changes in the wake of the "Arab Spring." Trade between China and Gulf Cooperation Council nations

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "China's Soft Power in Africa," *Wikipedia* (Online), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power (accessed July 23, 2012).

³⁸ Drew Thompson, "China's Soft Power in Africa: From the Beijing Consensus to Health Diplomacy," *China Brief* 5, no. 21 (October 13, 2005), http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/051013_china_soft_pwr.pdf (accessed July 30, 2012).

³⁹ Lt. Col. Eduardo A. Abisellan, "Chinese Soft Power Strategy in the Middle East," *Brookings*, July 17, 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/up-front/posts/2012/07/17-china-soft-power-abisellan> (accessed July, 30, 2012).

already exceeds \$80 billion per year, and this trade could easily lead to greater bilateral exchanges.⁴⁰

Performance Appraisal: Chinese Soft Power

China has been striving to build the Chinese cultural value system and increase its influence in the world, and has achieved remarkable results. China's cultural influence index ranks 7th among 131 countries worldwide; it trails behind the US, Germany, the UK, France, Italy, and Spain. In 1990, China's cultural influence ranked eleventh. In addition, China's cultural influence has risen from second to first in Asia, according to the "China Modernization Report 2009: Study of Cultural Modernization" released by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS). "The ascent of China's cultural influence reflects clearly the rise of China's soft power," said He Chuanqi, director of *China Centre for Modernization Research* under the CAS. The country began to take soft power development as part of the national development strategy in 2007, and has formulated the policy on China's soft power development which fit both Chinese and international conditions, said Dr Li Zhi, associate researcher at the *International Communications Research Centre*, Communication University of China.

Furthermore, China has assumed more international responsibilities, dispatching international search and rescue teams to earthquake-hit Haiti and Chile, assisting the post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan and engaging in peace-keeping missions. Such activities have enhanced worldwide recognition of China. Meanwhile, China has actively participated in formulating international rules. Sponsoring the Boao Forum for Asia and hosting the six party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. When the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit faced the crisis of failure, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao put forth an amendment on energy-saving and emissions reduction that has been popular with many member countries.

China is taking this cultural activity rather seriously, on both domestic and international fronts. She is spending billions of dollars to extend its reach to all corners of the world, primarily through the state-controlled *Xinhua* News Agency and its CNC World television news network.⁴¹

Yet it is important to recognise that the exercise of soft power by China has its limits. In, Latin America for example the cultural gap and the associated difficulty in learning each other's language stand in the way and mar development of mutual understanding and trust.⁴² Chinese companies in Latin America are often seen as poor corporate citizens, reserving the best jobs and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

subcontracts for their own nationals, treating workers harshly, and maintaining poor relations with the local community.⁴³ For analysts focused on the “rise” of China in Latin America and elsewhere, the issue is not whether China is a threat, or whether it has the right to pursue its national interests in Latin America and other parts of the world. Rather, it is important to recognize the dynamics that this re-emergence creates in a region with close human, geographical, and economic ties to the United States.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Over the past decade, China's economic and military might has grown impressively. This has made some of its neighbours to look for allies to balance China's increase in hard power. But if a country could simultaneously enhance its soft power, its neighbours would feel less inclined to seek balance. For example, Canada and Mexico do not seek alliances with China to balance the US power the way Asian countries like India and Japan seek American presence to balance off China.⁴⁵

China is spending billions of dollars to increase its soft power. The Chinese style emphasizes high-profile projects such as building stadiums. The 2008 Olympics was a success abroad, but shortly afterward China's domestic crackdown on human rights activists undercut its soft power gains. Shanghai Expo attracted more than 70 million visitors,⁴⁶ but it was followed by the jailing of Nobel Peace Laureate, Liu Xiaobo.⁴⁷ Now, in the aftermath of the Middle East revolutions, China is clamping down on the Internet and jailing human rights lawyers, once again torpedoing its soft power campaign.

A recent BBC poll shows that opinions about China's influence are quite positive in much of Africa and Latin America, but rather negative in the United States, Europe, India, Japan and South Korea.⁴⁸

There is still great untapped potential for the development of China's soft power, particularly in the cultural industry. Data shows that the cultural industry of the US occupies 43 percent of the world's cultural market share, while the Asia-Pacific region has only 19 percent of the market share, including 15 percent taken by Japan and Australia and 4 percent by China and other countries and regions. In the beginning of this year, President Hu Jintao, wrote: “we must clearly see that international hostile forces are intensifying the strategic plot of Westernizing and dividing China, and ideological and cultural

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Joseph S. Nye Jr., “China's Soft Power Deficit,” *Wall Street Journal* (US Edition), May 9, 2012, A11.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

fields are the focal areas of their long-term infiltration,” and added that “the international culture of the West is strong while we are weak.”⁴⁹

Notwithstanding the criticism, the Chinese are in the process of conquering the world; but softly, through winning the hearts. They are doing this very successfully by pursuing an aggressive trade policy towards the West, granting low-interest loans to African and Latin American countries, applying diplomatic influence, pursuing a campaign of cultural activities and by providing larger contingents of soldiers for UN peacekeeping missions than any other Security Council member.■

⁴⁹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Why China is Weak on Soft Power,” *New York Times* (New York), January 17, 2012.