



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reading the Chinese Soft Power: A Civilizational Perspective

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Abstract

The rise of China on the global stage in recent decades has been influential. Beyond its economic and military prowess, China's soft power its ability to influence and shape the global economic and cultural landscape has increased. This power has also been instrumental in implementing Chinese foreign policy. In this context, this research attempted to analyze the projection of the Chinese soft power and the projects to implement it. In the critical lens of soft power theory, the research aimed to provide valuable insights into how China's unique experiences, interactions, and perceptions can provide a more comprehensive understanding of soft power. Methodologically, the study followed a process-tracing research method that offers a rich and detailed way to investigate and explain causal agents, contributing to a deeper understanding of complex phenomena. This study is fundamentally descriptive and analytical. It employs secondary sources such as books, journal articles, internet sources, and newspaper articles as a reference. This study discussed about the history, uses the lens of Confucian ideology, and success stories in economic growth and poverty alleviation. Furthermore, the study examined the major foreign policy departure of China to analyze soft power as a whole.

Keywords: soft power, the Confucius values, Chinese culture, public diplomacy, the Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

The term "soft power" is not a new phenomenon in international relations and political studies. Academic researchers and political leaders frequently use it by localizing the word as country-specific. Professor Joseph S. Nye, Jr. first introduced

it in the 1990s in his famous book *Bound to Lead*. According to him, soft power is all about describing the ability to influence the behavior of others by the use of non-coercive means. In another sense, it is "attractive power" (Nye, 2004, p. 6). The soft power of a country is based on three main resources: culture, political values,

and foreign policy (Nye, 2004, p. 11). China, like other nations, has also applied this idea of soft power to view its rich culture, language, foreign policy, economic development, and Chinese leadership.

The English word soft power can be loosely translated into Chinese as *ruǎn shìlì* (软实力) which has been used frequently among scholars. In Chinese political discourse, the term soft power surfaced in the mid-2000s as one of the dominant foreign policy lexicons (Mingjiang, 2019, p. 44). It became more apparent when President Hu Jintao linked China's "rejuvenation" to its ability to project soft power, officially elevating its importance in Chinese diplomacy in his 2007 speech (Martin, 2021, p. 178). Similarly, Chinese President Xi Jinping prioritizes soft power by emphasizing the need to be present in the world. He puts forward the cultural image of China to enhance its soft power across the world (Xi, 2020, p. 365). It clearly indicates the sense of urgency towards creating a beautiful image of China through the means of culture. The emphasis on soft power has increasingly become significant in shaping the country's foreign policy behavior. Still, the prevailing perception about soft power is comparatively weak in relation to other major powers, especially the United States (Mingjiang, 2019, p. 45). However, China, as a non-Western and civilizational state, has its own way of projecting soft power. The concept of soft power is not new to traditional Chinese thought. Morality, law, and cooperation are the basis of relations among states (Barr, 2011, p. 26). Investigating the roots of cultural values, foreign policy behavior, and leadership enhances the understanding of Chinese soft power.

Yuval Noah Harari, a well-known historian and philosopher, simply states that a homo sapiens is a story-telling animal. Humans think in terms of stories and, every nation has its own story (Harari, 2019, p. 11). Likewise, China also has its own story to tell the world. The story of the Yellow

River Civilization includes unique cultures, the Great Wall, martial arts, cuisine, and people, among other things. China has the most impressive story of economic growth, poverty alleviation, and progress in science and technology in the world. Furthermore, the story of the Silk Road vividly shows how people, goods, cultures, and ideas travelled across the world. Now, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been contributing to enhancing China's positive image globally through connectivity and infrastructure development projects. Consequently, one may affirm that China has already executed the notion of soft power. China now advances with assurance, supported by persuasive narratives. As Chinese President Xi Jinping rightly pointed out, "the quest of the era is to tell the story of China, and the mission of the era is to tell a good story of China" (Liu, 2019, p. 80). Hence, China has been branding its story and history together to promote its beautiful image in the world. More than that, "China's rapid economic development has increased its global political influence as well as rapidly expanding soft power" (Lai, 2012).

The Chinese discourse of *tianxia*, a model of world politics, reflects a distinctive way and approaches to international relations. The source of Chinese soft power lies in *tianxia*, which projects the soft power heritage of China in the world (Barr, 2011, p. 102). The concept *tianxia* literally means "all under heaven," which indicates unity and inclusivity and describes the worldview of China as its presence in the world expands (Lanteigne, 2012). The Chinese soft power has been making a greater attempt to develop cohesive Chinese ideas (Cho & Jeong, 2008) suitable for 21st-century international relations. Therefore, The Chinese way of soft power differs from its Western counterparts.

Methodology

Methodologically, the paper follows a process-tracing research method that offers

a rich and detailed way to investigate and explain causal agents, contributing to a more profound understanding of soft power. The paper attempts to describe and analyze the related secondary sources, both Western and non-Western (Chinese). The sources range from books to journal articles to internet sources to newspaper articles.

According to Zhao (2021), the Chinese concept of *tianxia* serves as both a methodology (p. vii) and a theory (p.1). It highlights the world over the state as the highest unit. It imagines a political system of the world as a family-harmonious and cooperative, yet one in which no single power holds hegemony (Acharya, 2025, p. 95). At the same time, soft power—a concept originating in the West—derives from the Westphalian nation-state and emphasizes cooperation and non-coercion. Hence, it's plausible that both ideas are juxtaposed to explore Chinese soft power within the broader and more inclusive methodology of *tianxia*.

Literature Review

Since the idea of soft power originated in the 1990s, a plethora of literature has surfaced in both academic and non-academic spheres. The political scientist Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who put forward the idea of soft power in contrast to hard power, coercive measures. He points out soft power as a co-optive power where one can have the ability to persuade others through one's culture and values (Nye, 2004, p. 7). It primarily evokes cultural charm and global prestige that can ultimately influence and shape the global agenda and preferences of others (Mansbach & Taylor, 2012). The Chinese people have greater confidence in their own culture. China's soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture have increased significantly (Xi, 2020, p. 362). To enhance its cultural confidence, Beijing promotes Confucius Institutes abroad. Besides that, China has adopted a pragmatic approach over ideology, which is evident in the speech

of President Xi Jinping in the international forum. China's pragmatic approach to soft power, combined with its success story of economy and remarkable economic engagement, has been more successful in the global South, particularly in Africa and Latin America (Repnikova, 2022, p. 46-49). In fact, "wealth and economic strength are preconditions for the exercise of soft power and cultural influence" (Jacques, 2009, p. 416). Nevertheless, the core idea of China's soft power strategy was to gain international prestige and admiration (Lai, 2012).

According to Bodde (1981), the term "civilization" originates from a Latin root related to "citizen" and "city." In Chinese, the equivalent term is a binome, *wén huà*, which literally translates to "the transforming" or "civilizing" (p. 39). During the Warring States period, intellectual diversity flourished, and both Confucianism and Taoism surfaced (p. 42). *Wén huà* is not just an abstract concept; instead, it holds a set of ideas that are fundamental to the Chinese way to human civilization and governance (Ping, 2002, p. 75). Likewise, the Chinese civilization values public opinion. The will of the people is the basis of the Chinese government for a long time (Koo, 1919). This indicates that peace, harmony, and order in social and political life are fundamental aspects of Chinese civilization, which can serve as a source of soft power. The ideological culture of the country has a long and glorious history and has constantly nurtured its vitality and dynamism. One hundred schools of thoughts have been remarkable and widespread, influencing various aspects of society, philosophy, and governance both within China and in neighboring regions (Thavonsouk, 2019, p. 206).

When foreigners think of representative Chinese cultural brands, they often think of traditional forms, including martial arts, cuisine, the Great Wall, and pandas (Rosen, 2022, p. 377). Family values, respect for elders, and a strong feeling of community are valued highly in Chinese culture. The

traditional arts, such as calligraphy, painting, and martial arts, are also well-known and duly practiced as an everyday reality of Chinese culture. Thus, the concept of soft power can be understood within the cultural history of China. More than that, today China is known for its impressive economic growth, governance, poverty alleviation, innovation, leadership, and so on.

The notion of soft power provides the basis for public diplomacy (Hooghe, 2015, p. 23). Culture is an integral part of public diplomacy, as it shapes thinking, behavior, and communicative approaches, significantly influencing the diplomacy of any country (Hooghe, 2015, p. 42). The essence of public diplomacy lies in accomplishing specific objectives through the engagement and persuasion of people's hearts and minds. China, as a civilizational state, has a distinct culture that is definitely shaped by its history, geography, and social relations among different ethnicities. There is a sense of urgency among Chinese leaders to spread culture throughout the world. The Chinese president Xi Jinping emphasizes that "we need to expand our outreach to get the public more involved and encourage more lively exchanges among diverse cultures" (Xi, 2017, p. 538). It suggests that China is attempting to delve into the roots of culture and brand it in order to boost soft power outside of the country.

Chinese culture faced significant setbacks due to Western incursions; the two thousand years of Confucian values that had unified the Chinese people disintegrated, resulting in a loss of their institutional and social basis (Xu, 2013, p. 114). Furthermore, for a decade the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) attempted to minimize Confucian culture. "The Cultural Revolution was the supreme manifestation of Maoist China's hostility towards traditional or Confucian culture, which was identified with the Four Olds—old thought, old culture, old tradition and old customs" (Singh, 2023, p. 17). However, today, China has been taking inspiration

from history. "The country will continue to use Marxism as its guiding ideology; however, it will place greater emphasis on China's historical and cultural traditions (Zeng, 2016, p.1). That's why China looks back to its roots and takes traditional values as a source of inspiration to move ahead. In doing so, China should respect the values of other Chinese ethnicities. In fact, traditional Confucian teaching entails understanding the origins of civilization. It is somehow necessary for the social and political stability of China. Definitely, the internal social and political dynamics of China have external influence, no matter what. "Many Chinese intellectuals argue that to strengthen the nation's discourse power, China will have to influence the values and norms that underpin the international community" (Green-Riley, 2022, p. 112). Nevertheless, the return of Confucian values matters in consolidating the Chinese soft power narrative. For that, "Xi has also accelerated the drive of his predecessors to become a global power through soft power. He has used Confucius Institutes to spread Chinese language and culture throughout the world..." (Economy, 2018, p. 232). The Confucius Institutes (CIs) were founded in 2004 to enhance China's soft power abroad, develop ties to foreign institutions of higher education, and promote Chinese-language study. More than 500 have been established globally (Gallagher, 2022, p. 358). Since the establishment of the first Confucius Institute in Korea in 2004, the number of China's language-teaching institutions have grown rapidly (Liu, 2019, p. 82).

The world is changing, as power shifts from the West to the rest, as Fareed Zakaria vividly mentions in his book, *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest*. China's awakening is reshaping the economic and political landscape, but it is also being shaped by the world into which it is rising (Zakaria, 2008, p. 88). Furthermore, the economist Jeffrey Sachs puts it simply: China is the most successful development story in world history (Sachs, 2008, p. 89).

Similarly, "In the forty-year period of 1979–2019, the Chinese experienced a far greater improvement in their living conditions than any dynasty had ever delivered to them at any point in their twenty-two-hundred-year history" (Mahabubani, 2020, p. 152). While not explicitly termed so, the establishment of the concept of the "peaceful rise" of China became a sort of official soft power state mantra, designed to act as a direct antidote to the idea of the China threat (Breslin, 2020). Furthermore, "the Chinese model, defined as the "Beijing Consensus," is a key element in China's economic soft power configuration and represents a major challenge to Western institutions like the World Bank and the IMF" (Fiori & Rosen, p. 195). The Beijing Consensus refers to the overall political and economic policies. State-led economic growth and market-orientated reforms are the key interests of China. The Beijing Consensus, which is viewed as a Chinese model, has been seen as an expression of soft power. "The Chinese development model is based on continuous and selective state interventions in markets and firms to shape the course of economic development" (Walia, 2020). To advance the Beijing Consensus or China's development model, China must engage in frequent communication and dialogue to resolve differences in this multipolar world. For this, soft power is the only way to get things done. The Beijing Consensus seems to be the alternative to the Washington Consensus. Although China's rise differs from that of other great powers in history, a perceived China threat exists in many parts of the world. "China is the first rising power to emerge within an international system characterized by 'regime saturation' (Lanteigne, 2009, p. 32)." As a result, China's growth is exceptional and peaceful; it differs from the rise of previous major nations. The conflict played a crucial role in their growth. Evidently, China's soft power stems from its peaceful rise in a multipolar world.

Data Presentation

This article analyses the emerging soft power elements of China that have shaped debate and enhanced interactions with other nations, ultimately fostering positive global perceptions. The study employed qualitative content analysis, based on secondary literature on the notion of soft power in general and Chinese soft power in specific.

Chinese Culture and BRI

Chinese culture has significant prestige across East Asia, and its regional influence is reviving notably (Jacques, 2009, p. 305). China's cultural focus on "harmony despite differences" has a positive contribution to enhance its global cultural soft power. This cultural focus may facilitate constructive talks across diverse global civilizations, thereby alleviating the rhetoric of "yellow peril" and "China threat" (Mingijang, 2019, p. 45). Nonetheless, despite China's increasing economic might, its soft power remains limited (Miller, 2019, p. 90). China, along with other Asian nations, is lagging in soft power relative to the United States and Europe. Asian countries are expected to enhance their soft power in the future; yet, currently, they are deficient in soft-power resources compared to the United States and Europe (Nye, 2004, p. 89).

China has not yet emerged as a predominant distributor of soft power in the conventional context. Despite the fact that several countries commend China for its brand of soft power, characterized by its capacity to recognize and fulfil the developmental requirements of other countries (Economy, 2018, p. 222), particularly in areas such as infrastructure development, economic investment, and cultural exchange initiatives. Consequently, China's journey towards soft power is extensive and distinct from that of other nations.

The internet serves as a vital conduit for disseminating the finest aspects of human

civilizations and advancing soft power. China is prepared to construct, via the internet, a conduit for worldwide cultural exchange and reciprocal learning, enabling individuals from all nations to share global cultures, thoughts, and emotions, and fostering mutual understanding (Xi, 2017, p. 585). China's political and economic development has significantly contributed to expanding cultural exchange activities, thereby enhancing soft power. However, soft power can be the victim of the political interests of another country, depending upon the geopolitical conditions. For instance, India avoided joining the BRI and also banned Chinese apps such as TikTok and WeChat citing security concerns. "In the summer of 2020, India banned 59 Chinese apps, including TikTok, WeChat, Weibo, and QQ, an instant-messaging service owned by the internet giant Tencent. At the time, TikTok had nearly 200 million users in India and considered the country its biggest market outside the US" (South China Morning Post, 2023). Chinese culture has largely been exported through the TikTok app, which has a massive global fan following. However, it has become susceptible to the broader political sphere (Rosen, 2022, p. 384). However, China has become increasingly transparent and is actively leveraging its cultural influence as a component of its soft power strategy. "We should enhance China's soft power and better present China to the world" (Xi, 2017, 483). Since soft power is thought to be a more potent tool for influencing public opinion globally, China is becoming more and more concerned about it.

Chinese soft power has been shifting over time. Decades of economic reform and unparalleled economic success in the region have significantly bolstered confidence in soft power. The BRI is China's flagship foreign policy project, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI is a revival of the Silk Road, encompassing both political and economic elements of soft power. For millennia, the

Silk Road was crucial in facilitating trade and cultural exchange between the East and West. Currently, it links countries, regions, and continents via five routes and six economic corridors to foster mutually beneficial cooperation by endorsing the concept of a community with shared futures. The BRI employs a five-pronged strategy for establishing connections, placing connectivity at the core of its approach to policy, trade, finance, and people-to-people coordination (Kondapalli & Xiaowen, 2017, p. 73). The policy of connectivity has been implemented through various projects, institutions, media initiatives, and dialogues with think tanks. Interactions and people-to-people exchanges have brought people increasingly closer (Xi, 2017, p. 558). In addition, the BRI has established cultural hubs in the countries that are connected by the BRI. The China Cultural Centre in Pakistan is one of them. Such kinds of activities are supposed to enhance cultural interaction among different civilizations. "In some observers' view, the BRI is an important tactic for the Chinese government to reconstruct the international communication order, exercise China's discourse power, and develop the nation's soft power in the age of globalization" (Myint, 2019, p. 58). Therefore, the BRI serves as China's primary source of soft power.

Chinese leadership strives for achievements. Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy mantra, 'hide one's capabilities and bide one's time', has been the subject of the past. Today, the leadership is more vocal in the international system. Yan Xuetong, a Chinese academician and professor of international affairs at Tsinghua University, is a stronger advocate of Chinese soft power. In his book, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, he underscores political leadership over political value as a fundamental aspect of soft power. He amalgamates political values and culture into a singular variable, designating foreign policies as "political capability." Political leadership determines

foreign policy, while political values inform but do not dictate its policy-making. The decline of American dominance during the Trump administration resulted not from American culture or political beliefs but from leadership (Yan, 2019, p. 13–14).

The Practice of Panda Diplomacy

Giving pandas to other nations as a token of friendship and goodwill is known as panda diplomacy. In recent years, the Chinese government has given pandas to nations including the US, France, Japan, and South Korea. Additionally, to improve relations with nations in Africa and Latin America, President Xi Jinping has employed panda diplomacy. Precisely, Chinese soft power is associated with panda diplomacy. The practice of panda diplomacy is a very old strategy of China. However, the theory of soft power is very recent and Western. China had already used panda diplomacy as a type of soft power for thousands of years before the term "soft power" was created. According to the Diplo Foundation (n.d.), this practice of sending pandas abroad has its origins in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), but it gained significant prominence during the 20th and 21st centuries.

Recently, panda diplomacy has been used to promote international cooperation and understanding and to foster peace and friendship between nations. "And after the communists came to power in 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong resurrected the practice of gifting pandas to favored allies – in this case, North Korea and the Soviet Union" (Anderlini, 2017). Similarly, "When China started to open up economically in the 1970s, pandas were sent as gifts to Western countries, including the UK, Germany, and Japan. Following President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972, the US was given a pair of giant pandas as a sign of diplomatic rapprochement" (Pitt, 2021). After that, President Richard Nixon visited China in 1972. His trip to China signaled the start of a new era in US-China relations. It was considered the initial step in Sino-American

rapprochement. Besides that, "since 1966 the globally recognizable logo of the World Wildlife Fund (now the World Wildlife Fund for Nature) has been a stylized panda, and this has also done the Chinese panda-based soft power projection no harm whatsoever" (Simons, 2017, pp. 180-81). To be precise, China has long incorporated pandas as a foreign policy endeavor. Although China is "considered relatively weak in soft power, China has found incredible success in using panda diplomacy to improve its image" (Ameringer, 2022). As a result, panda diplomacy, as a tool of Chinese foreign policy, has significant value in projecting soft power as a means of fostering political and economic ties.

Practice of Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is fundamentally understood as a means to promote values and interests by directly engaging with the public of another country (Sharp, 2005, p. 106). The practice of public diplomacy in China is ancient. As a form of soft power, Chinese public diplomacy involves people-to-people relations. It demands activities related to cultural exchanges, student exchange programs, and visits. The Chinese public diplomacy heavily uses state media in order to project the image of the country. "China, however, still lags hugely behind the West when it comes to the international media" (Jacques, 2009, p. 418). However, China is conscious about it. As the saying goes, "Even one enemy is too many, and one hundred friends are too few. We should have a wider circle of friends. The more friends we have, the better it is" (Xi, 2017, p. 333). It means Chinese soft power is used to create more friends through persuasion. And public diplomacy is best served by using soft power. The former Chinese President, Hu Jintao, established the idea of public diplomacy in China in 2009. The idea of establishing public diplomacy is to improve China's image abroad and to strengthen its ties with other countries. Hu Jintao further wanted to advance China's

economic and political interests through public diplomacy. He has also used public diplomacy to promote China's economic development and attract foreign investment. Hu has used public diplomacy to promote China's soft power, such as its culture, language, and values. Public diplomacy is crucial for promoting a nation's rich cultural heritage. Hu Jintao's statement highlighted the incorporation of public diplomacy into the framework of national policy (Liu, 2019, p. 78).

Public diplomacy, a form of soft power, shares similarities with Track II diplomacy. It is inherently informal and involves various actors, particularly non-governmental figures such as academics, businesspeople, and sportspersons. As a facet of soft power, it promotes the building of trust and understanding between parties. Communication serves as the sole persuasive tool for Track II diplomacy. Ping-pong diplomacy, a significant historical instance in international relations, exemplifies this approach. In 1971, tennis players from the United States visited China. This visit served as an icebreaker for the new relationship with communist China and involved much more than merely sports competition. The event, known as 'ping-pong diplomacy', signaled a significant improvement in diplomatic ties between the two countries (Millwood, 2021).

This event stands as a strong example of Chinese soft power. Likewise, China made history by hosting the Olympics in Beijing in 2008 for the first time. "The 2008 Olympics was a soft power victory for Beijing" (Griffiths, 2021). This significant event represented an opportunity for China to showcase its burgeoning global political and economic achievements. Over the past couple of decades, China has been establishing institutional mechanisms and think tanks and organizing international conferences to enhance its global image. Additionally, films are among the most prominent elements of soft power, as they enrich existing culture and increase its

popularity. "China does not appear likely to succeed in promoting its films to foreign audiences, acknowledging the worldwide preeminence of Hollywood" (Rosen, 2022, p. 384). Nevertheless, China is making its mark in this sector as well. "In the longer run, the Chinese film industry is likely to challenge the global hegemony of Hollywood and embody a distinctive set of values" (Jacques, 2009, p. 417). Ultimately, the overarching aim of Chinese public diplomacy is to enable Chinese culture to flourish and achieve the ultimate objective of the Great Rejuvenation.

Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is to interpret the soft power aspect within the broader context of Chinese culture, which functions as a site for knowledge production, rather than to establish any alternative theory or challenge the existing one. The discourse of soft power can be decoded in China's classical works, ranging from Confucian teachings to Daoist teachings and so on (Repnikova, 2022, p. 5). While interacting with the rest of the world, China not only influences global affairs but also is influenced by them.

As mentioned, the objective of this paper is to examine China's development of soft power through a civilizational lens, focusing on the culture, Confucian values, BRI, public diplomacy, panda diplomacy, and Chinese leadership that distinguish its strategic outreach from Western paradigms. Unlike the liberal-institutional foundations of Western soft power, rooted in universalist values and individual rights, Chinese soft power draws from Confucian harmony, historical continuity, and a non-interventionist worldview. China's civilizational narrative is not merely ornamental but instrumental in shaping international perceptions, especially in Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America. Initiatives like the Confucius Institutes, BRI cultural exchanges, and diplomatic

references to a "shared future for mankind" are reflective of a unique attempt to globalize a distinctly Chinese worldview.

Power, in its broadest sense, refers to the ability to influence others to achieve desired goals. Joseph Nye Jr. categorizes power into two types: hard and soft. He employs the metaphor of "sticks and carrots," which represents coercion and persuasion, respectively, to accomplish objectives (Nye, 2023). Soft power-essentially getting things done by persuasion, cultural activities, ideologies, and cooperation through international institutions-is considered a source of power, which is not a new phenomenon (Nye, 2023). It allows nations to exert influence through cultural, political, and diplomatic channels instead of using force and has emerged as a major component of current international relations. As it navigates its complex geopolitical setting, China, a rising power, has deliberately relied on soft power. As part of its soft power strategy, China works to strengthen relationships with other states and non-state actors, trade with them, attract investment and technology, boost tourism, and obtain support and favorable perceptions internationally.

According to traditional Chinese thought, power comes from morality, and morality comes from nature (Wang, 2008). Hegemony does not lie in power but morality (Yan, 2022, p. 115). These arguments suggest that persuasion, which is the core of soft power, is more significant in today's volatile world. Power is also based on how the story is told, not just how strong one's army or economy is. The best narrative can serve as a source of power. The economic success story of China has been changed into both hard and soft power within limits (Nye, 2019). China has heavily invested in soft power. Cultural exchanges and the BRI projects can enhance China's attractiveness...? (Nye, 2020). The government has announced a plan to enhance soft power by 2035. The plan reads that China's modernization offers

a new alternative for the rest of the world, who want to accelerate their development by maintaining their freedom. Chinese wisdom offers solutions to the problems faced by mankind (Yan, 2022, p. 105-6). According to the survey conducted by the Global Soft Power Index, Brand France, China ranks as the second-most influential nation globally in terms of soft power, following the United States (Haigh, 2025). Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat, TikTok (also known as Douyin), Tencent QQ, Baidu, and Sina Weibo are becoming increasingly prominent and responsible for the enhancement of Chinese discourse about soft power.

As Princeton political scientist Baldwin has recently written, "Nye's discussion of soft power stimulated and clarified the thoughts of policymakers and scholars alike-even those who misunderstood or disagreed with his views" (Nye, 2023). However, the Chinese concept of power differs significantly from the Western concept. Confucius posits that one should cultivate inner wisdom akin to a sage while embodying the external attributes of an emperor. In other words, morality inside brings power outside (Wang, 2008). The statement clearly suggests that persuasive power rather than coercive power is necessary for the state. This indicates that the concept of soft power has long been present in traditional Chinese thought. It just needs the way of decoding and interpreting in the modern world.

As China continues to rise, a nuanced understanding of these historical and philosophical frameworks becomes essential for scholars and policymakers alike. "Chinese soft power significantly derives from Beijing's efforts to enlighten and educate the global community about the country's unique characteristics" (Lanteigne, 2012). China is the first great power to emerge within the international system. One reason for this is the global reach of Chinese soft power, which effectively spreads ideas and culture (Lanteigne, 2012). China's soft

power is essential for understanding the country's transition from a regional power to its aspirations of becoming a global power (Cho & Jeong, 2008).

Mainland China experiences a "soft-power deficit" both internationally and domestically. Even within mainland China, the official representation of "Chinese culture" lacks popularity. In contrast, American and Western cultures are extremely popular, especially among the youth (Eades, n.d.). Although anti-American sentiments have increased in recent decades, particularly in the developing world, the United States' projection of power extends well beyond military capabilities (Al Makahleh, n.d.). There is a throat cut competition between China and the United States on multiple fronts, including the projection of soft power. As the soft power of the U.S. declines, it creates a more positive opportunity for China to enhance its own soft power influence. The cultural dominance of the U.S. has been challenged repeatedly and now faces the increasing prominence of China's cultural products and digital space (Bi, 2025).

China's soft power is dependent on the Beijing Consensus, the Chinese development model, and the peaceful rise and civilization of China (Cho & Jeong, 2008). Besides that, the Pew Research Centre indicates that middle-income nations hold Chinese technology advancements in regard (Silver, Huang, & Clancy, 2023). This suggests that China's soft power in terms of technology has also been growing. Likewise, Wang (2008) asserts that public diplomacy is an alien notion in China. Chinese individuals predominantly utilize the term *dui wai xuan chuan* or *wai xuan* (external propaganda), focusing on promoting Chinese achievements and enhancing the nation's image abroad. The word propaganda has been utilized positively by the State since the State has the sole responsibility to do so. He also asserts that the Chinese comprehend public diplomacy by highlighting the significance of people-

to-people relations. As a civilizational state, China has rich cultures, languages, arts, and so on. People-to-people relations foster interactions, creating opportunities for mutual understanding. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC, 2020) puts forward State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's views on public diplomacy. According to him, public diplomacy is a crucial aspect of major-country diplomacy. To advance major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics and to promote China's soft power construction, it is imperative to further improve and strengthen public diplomacy. In this way, it has been obvious that public diplomacy comes under the umbrella of soft power construction. The MFA, 2004, held an academic seminar on China's public diplomacy. Since that time, the MFA has placed importance on public diplomacy to serve the Chinese people. The soft power of China has been impeded in China's foreign policy, particularly under the framework of promoting and protecting its global image, economic partnerships, and cultural appeal. However, it must be contextualized within a broader geopolitical framework that accounts for both the strengths and limitations of China's soft power arsenal.

Conclusion

The Chinese way of soft power has already been woven into the fabric of traditional Chinese culture and civilization. Socialism, which embodies Chinese characteristics, also reflects Chinese soft power. Chinese culture and socialist values are being combined to make Chinese soft power more competitive. One can view it as an integral part of the state's comprehensive power. Apart from culture, the discourse of Chinese economic growth, the BRI, foreign policy, governance, and leadership—all these aspects support Chinese soft power on a greater scale. It has been made popular by Chinese social media. The overall

purpose of Chinese soft power is not only to contribute toward achieving national interests but also to enhance the best image of China. Soft power aims to improve perceptions of a nation by showcasing its ideals and culture and thereby creating an inclusive and harmonious world-Tianxia, all under heaven. As the Chinese saying goes, "When we eat the fruit, we think of the tree that bore it; when we drink water, we think of its source" (Xi, 2017, p. 381). It can be understood that the modern Chinese way has been shaped by traditional Chinese thinking but is its own distinct way. Revisiting the civilizational perspectives, China is expanding its soft power and attempting to share its fruits of development on the global stage.

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Consent for Publication

"Not applicable"

Plagiarism and AI Use

The manuscript is free from plagiarism and improper use of AI-generated content. Any permitted use of AI tools (if applicable) was limited to language support and has not replaced original scholarly contribution.

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