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THE RISE OF CHINESE SOFT POWER: CULTURE, DIPLOMACY, AND INTERNATIONAL PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Chinese soft power has drawn much attention worldwide and has become an important part of the nation's larger national strategy. This paper looks at the fundamental elements of Chinese soft power to increase China's global influence, such as its values, cultural legacy, and outreach initiatives. It also examines China's different development strategies to build and project its soft power, including bolstering cultural diplomacy, using educational exchanges, and advancing popular culture through media campaigns. The paper also assesses the difficulties encountered in these endeavors, such as geopolitical tensions and cultural misunderstandings. The analysis emphasizes how complex Chinese cultural soft power is and how crucial it is in determining China's reputation internationally.

Keywords: China, Culture, Soft power, Diplomacy, Education

Introduction

In 1990, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in an article "Soft Power" published in the American journal "Foreign Policy".¹ In his book *Destined to Lead*, Professor Joseph Nye explains the relationship between soft power and hard power, asserting that the distinction between the two lies primarily in their behaviors and the resources they employ. From a behavioral perspective, hard power is characterized as "coercive power," which relies on threats and inducements to alter another's actions. This form of power is driven by the ability to compel others through fear or material incentives. In contrast, soft power is framed as "persuasive power," which shapes others' preferences and desires. Rather than using force or coercion, soft power relies on the attractiveness of a country's culture, political values, and ideology to influence others. By setting the agenda and shaping narratives, soft power enables countries to

¹ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft power." *Foreign policy* 80 (1990): 153-171.

counsel and guide others in aligning their preferences with their own, subtly directing outcomes without overt pressure. This distinction emphasizes how soft power operates through appeal and co-optation. In contrast, hard power relies on compulsion, highlighting the nuanced ways in which power can be exercised in global politics.² Nye posited that soft power or "assimilation power" is the ability of a country to create a situation where other countries imitate its tendencies and align with its interests. This power primarily derives from cultural and ideological appeal, international norms, and institutional mechanisms, as opposed to the tangible resources associated with economic and military power.³

In 1996, Nye and William Owens expanded on soft power in their article "America's Information Edge" in 'Foreign Affairs Quarterly'. They later elaborated on this idea in "Power and Interdependence in the Information Age" and "National Interests in the Information Age." They argued that soft power is rooted in the attraction of a country's culture and ideology, enabling it to achieve desired outcomes through appeal rather than coercion.⁴

Nye emphasized that soft power relies heavily on persuading others to follow or adhere to certain norms and institutions, shaping their behaviour to align with the influencing country's objectives. If a country's position is perceived as attractive or strengthens an international system that promotes coexistence, there is less need to rely on traditional economic or military capabilities. Further developing his theory, Nye published "The Paradox of American Hegemony: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone" in 2003, discussing how soft power allows a nation to make others want what it wants through cooperation rather than force or coercion. He highlighted that while soft power is not exclusive to the United States, its cultural and ideological alignment with global norms gives it a significant advantage in influencing international decisions.⁵

In 2004, Nye's book "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" provided a comprehensive discussion on the definition and sources of soft power, contrasting it with hard power, which involves coercion through military and economic means. Nye

² Fu, Yanan, and Shufang Li. "Research on the Relationship Between Soft and Hard Power of Enterprises." *Fourth International Conference on Economic and Business Management (FEBM 2019)*. Atlantis Press, 2019.

³ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft power." *Foreign policy* 80 (1990): 153-171.

⁴ Nye Jr, Joseph S., and William A. Owens. "America's information edge." *Foreign Aff.* 75 (1996): 20.

⁵ Nye Jr, Joseph S. *The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

argued that effective power in the modern world necessitates a blend of hard and soft power, which he termed "smart power".⁶

By 2006, in his article "Rethinking Soft Power," Nye further refined his concept, defining soft power as the ability to change others' behaviour through attraction rather than coercion or inducement. He asserted that smart power involves the strategic combination of hard and soft power to achieve foreign policy goals.⁷ Nye's evolving theory was encapsulated in his 2008 publication "The Powers to Lead," where he introduced the concept of "contextual intelligence" to help leaders formulate strategies appropriate to their goals and circumstances.⁸

Nye's theory underscores the importance of cultural and ideological influence in global politics, advocating for a balanced approach that combines the strengths of both hard and soft power to maintain international leadership and cooperation. Nye acknowledged that soft power is not exclusive to the United States; however, he argued that the U.S. possesses a distinctive advantage in leveraging soft power due to its cultural and ideological alignment with widely accepted global and cosmopolitan norms and values. This alignment enhances the United States' influence in international decision-making and boosts its credibility and reputation through effective international cooperation. Nye highlighted that the United States' soft power, derived from cultural appeal and ideological influence, often surpasses its hard power capabilities.⁹

In his book, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Nye systematically delineated the definition and sources of soft power, examining the soft power resources of the United States and other countries. He articulated the distinction between "hard power" and "soft power", where hard power involves coercing others through threats (sticks) or inducements (carrots) and is frequently associated with military and economic tools. Conversely, soft power, or "assimilation power," involves influencing others to align with one's goals through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion.¹⁰

Nye's concept of soft power encompasses cultural allure, ideological appeal, and the ability to set international norms and agendas that other countries aspire to follow. This comprehensive and systematic explanation of soft power underscores its

⁶ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft power: The means to success in world politics." *Public Affairs* 10 (2004).

⁷ Nye Jr, Joseph, Think Again: Soft Power, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power/>

⁸ Nye Jr, Joseph. *The powers to lead*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁹ Nye, Joseph S. *Soft power and great-power competition: shifting sands in the balance of power between the United States and China*. Springer Nature, 2023.

¹⁰ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft power: The means to success in world politics." *Public Affairs* 10 (2004).

significance in contemporary international relations and provides a framework for understanding how nations can wield influence beyond traditional hard power means. In his article "Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power" Soft power and great-power competition: Shifting sands in the balance of power between the United States and China. Joseph Nye emphasized that while various resources contribute to soft power, the term itself cannot encapsulate all forms of influence. The primary elements of a nation's soft power include its culture (if it is appealing to others), values (if they are attractive and consistently upheld), and policies (if they are perceived as inclusive and legitimate). Nye's proposition of soft power theory emerged from significant shifts in international relations, illustrating how the nature of power evolves with changing circumstances. Solving global problems with traditional power means is challenging in the era of globalization and information. Instead, nations rely on international cooperation and mechanisms that utilize soft power elements like values and foreign policies to enhance competitiveness, resolve disputes, and elevate their global standing. Nye highlighted the importance of combining hard and soft power to create "smart power" which integrates various resources to shape international rules and effectively influence political outcomes.¹¹

China's Soft Power from President Hu to Xi

The term "soft power" is often seen when reading official Chinese government statements, academic journals, and popular newspapers. This clearly shows that soft power has become an aspect of foreign policy and international political discourse that deserves attention, both in official and popular discourse. China's engagement with the concept of soft power began as early as 1993 when Wang Huning, a key figure in Chinese political thought and a prominent member of the CCP Politburo, introduced Joseph Nye's theory to China. As the Head of the Central Policy Research Office, Wang played a pivotal role in incorporating Nye's ideas into China's strategic discourse, which eventually shaped the country's approach to integrating culture, values, and diplomacy into its broader foreign policy agenda. This marked the beginning of China's exploration into utilizing soft power to enhance its global influence.¹²

At the time, China faced growing international concerns about its rise, particularly due to the "China Threat" theory that gained prominence overseas. To mitigate the growing anxieties about its intentions, China turned to soft power strategies, seeking

¹¹ Nye, Joseph S. "Get smart: Combining hard and soft power." *Soft power and great-power competition: Shifting sands in the balance of power between the United States and China*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023. 63-66.

¹²Wang Huning, 'Culture as National Soft Power, available at: <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/wang-huning-ldquocultural-expansion-and-cultural-sovereignty.html>

to project a more peaceful and cooperative image on the global stage. This approach aimed to counterbalance the negative perceptions arising from its growing geopolitical and geoeconomic influence.¹³

It was not until the 16th Party Congress in November 2002 that the issue of culture, integral to soft power, was formally addressed in a political report. At that time, President Jiang Zemin called for cultural development and reform, signalling a shift in focus. From that point, the Chinese government began to emphasize soft power. The political report of the 16th CPC National Congress in 2002 stated that culture is deeply intertwined with the economy and politics in the contemporary global landscape, and its significance in shaping a nation's overall strength and influence is increasingly evident. As nations compete on the international stage, the role of culture has shifted from being a mere background element to a critical component of comprehensive national power. Cultural assets serve as identity markers and strategic tools in diplomacy, soft power projection, and the global economy, underscoring their growing prominence in geopolitical and economic competition.¹⁴

By the 17th National Congress of the CCP in 2007, soft power was officially incorporated into China's political framework. This marked a pivotal moment in China's evolving soft power strategy.¹⁵ The political report at the 17th National Congress of the CCP underscored the importance of advancing both the socialist value system and Chinese culture. It also marked the first time that "soft power" had been officially mentioned in a government document since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Following the Congress, Liu Yunshan, then head of the CCP Central Committee Publicity Department, elaborated on China's soft power strategy, emphasizing two key pillars: the core values of socialism and the values rooted in traditional Chinese culture, particularly Confucianism. While Confucian values, such as filial piety, love for others, and harmonious conduct, were relatively uncontested, the precise definition of socialism's core values remained debatable.

Additionally, the importance of cultural and social sciences in shaping China's soft power was highlighted during the 13th collective study session of the 16th Politburo of the CCP Central Committee in May 2004. This session, held just two months after the CCP Central Committee released its "Opinions on Further Developing and Promoting Philosophy and Social Sciences," demonstrated Chinese leadership's

¹³ Denny Roy, 'The "China Threat" Issue: Major Arguments', *Asian Survey* (Vol. 36, No. 8, August 1996), pp. 758–71.

¹⁴ Jiang Zemin, "Political Report to the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," November 8, 2002

¹⁵ Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 17th Party Congress, available at: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content_6204564.htm

strategic focus on enhancing China's soft power. Media responses echoed this sentiment, signaling a clear government intention to elevate soft power as a significant component of China's international influence.¹⁶

On January 4, 2006, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee and President of China, made it clear at a meeting of the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group that *"the improvement of my (China) country's international status and influence must be reflected not only in hard power such as economy, science and technology, and national defence but also in soft power such as culture"*.¹⁷

Other Chinese leaders have also regularly emphasized the importance of soft power. In March 2007, Jia Qinglin, Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee delivered a speech at the Fifth Session of the Tenth National Committee of the CPPCC. In the speech, he systematically elaborated on China's soft power approach. Later that year, in July 2007, the National Committee of the CPPCC organized a special meeting focused on using cultural development as a key driver for building China's soft power. During this meeting, Jia Qinglin urged Chinese officials to recognize the significance of soft power and prioritize cultural construction as the central means to strengthen domestic capacities and improve China's global competitiveness. Additionally, President Hu Jintao suggested at the Eighth National Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles that major practical issues related to cultural development and the enhancement of China's soft power should receive increased attention. This growing focus on cultural soft power highlights the Chinese leadership's strategic interest in leveraging culture to enhance the country's influence on the world stage.¹⁸

In October 2007, President Hu reiterated the importance of soft power in his report to the 17th CPC National Congress, stressing that we must strengthen the construction of [China] our country's cultural soft power to meet domestic needs and improve international competitiveness. President Hu's call set off a new cultural soft power craze nationwide. Local governments and cultural circles held special seminars. After the 17th CPC National Congress, "soft power and culture" became the headlines of major newspapers. The People's Daily commented that China must vigorously enhance its soft power to participate actively in international competition. Chinese

¹⁶ "Improving the country's overall competitiveness through soft power", Wenhui Daily, June 21, 2004.

¹⁷ Ma Lisi, "Preliminary Thoughts on Strengthening the Construction of Nguyen They" (Preliminary Thoughts on Accelerating the Construction of China's Soft Power, Communist Party of China), No. 7, pp. 35-38.

¹⁸ Guangming Daily Commentary. (2006). Strive To Raise National Soft Power. 努力提高国家软实力

organizations and research institutions have also tracked and studied soft power and further promoted the popularization of soft power by holding relevant conferences. In August 2006, the China Foreign Language Bureau held a forum on "Cross-Cultural Exchange and Soft Power Construction" in Beijing; in early 2007, the International Public Relations Research Center of Fudan University discussed "National Soft Power Construction and China's Public Relations Development" for government officials and well-known scholars. The China Institute of Contemporary International Relations also conducted special research on soft power, and the Strategic Research Institute of the Central Party School also conducted comprehensive research.¹⁹

The recognition of soft power as a key component of China's foreign policy was firmly established in the Political Report of the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012. During this Congress, then-retiring President Hu Jintao provided substance to the concept of soft power, signifying its importance within China's broader strategic objectives. Hu Jintao emphasized that cultural soft power should be strengthened to enhance China's international influence and promote its values and traditions on the global stage, thus highlighting soft power as integral to both domestic development and international diplomacy.²⁰ He added:

Socialist core values include prosperity [富强 fuqiang], democracy [民主 minzhu], civilization [文明 wenming], harmony [和谐 hexie] as important for nation-building; freedom [自由 ziyou], equality [平等 pingdeng], justice [公正 gongzheng], rule of law [法治 fazhi] as important for the construction of an ideal society; and patriotism [爱国 aiguo], respect for work [敬业 jingye], faith [诚信 chengxin], friendship [友善 youshan] as moral standards for nationals.

In recent years, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee and President of China, the Belt and Road Initiative has become an important part of China's cultural soft power, reflecting the concept of "building a community with a shared future for mankind". President Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the importance of enhancing China's cultural soft power, such as promoting traditional culture, cultural confidence, cultural exchanges and cooperation, using modern media, promoting Chinese culture, conducting cultural diplomacy, and promoting the Chinese language. 2014 President Xi Jinping said, "We must enhance our country's soft power, tell China's stories well, and better convey China's voice to

¹⁹ Men Honghua, "Pinggu Report on China's Soft Power", International Observation, No. 2 and 3, 2007.

²⁰Full text of hu Jintao's report at 18th Party Congress', available at: http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/Diplomacy/201211/t20121118_1586373.htm

the world'.²¹ In February 2015, President Xi Jinping emphasized that culture should serve as a "wellspring" to nourish the Party's values, underscoring the importance of cultural ideology in reinforcing China's political and social systems.²²

President Xi Jinping has emphasized enhancing China's soft power, particularly strengthening its "discursive power" and "communication capacity." This priority was evident during his visit to the headquarters of major state media outlets, including People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing, in February 2016. During this visit, Xi underscored the importance of media in projecting China's image globally, urging CCTV America to present an "objective, true, and comprehensive" account of China's social and economic development to international audiences. This visit highlighted Xi's commitment to elevating China's narrative on the global stage through effective media communication.²³

President Xi Jinping articulated his thoughts on culture and soft power in a recent meeting on public communication and culture, highlighting the critical role of culture in advancing China's broader national objectives. President Xi stressed that the cultural soft power vision includes 'Cultural Confidence and Unity' and builds stronger cultural confidence to unite and inspire the people. The promotion of core socialist values and the development of a socialist ideology are central to this, to foster a cohesive intellectual foundation for the Chinese people. 'Cultural Prosperity and Leadership' Xi advocates for China to advance cultural prosperity and become a global leader in culture, fostering a "modern Chinese civilization." This involves upholding openness and inclusiveness while remaining rooted in fundamental socialist principles. 'Cultural Soft Power and Global Appeal' A major goal is to enhance China's cultural soft power, increasing the appeal of Chinese culture both domestically and internationally. By promoting Chinese civilization and protecting traditional Chinese culture, China can project a stronger cultural image globally. Ideological Strength and Risk Mitigation, Xi stresses the importance of maintaining ideological strength and mitigating risks. Cultural development is key in managing ideological challenges and reinforcing China's global image as a harmonious, progressive society.²⁴

Socialist Core Values and China's Cultural Soft Power

²¹ Eleanor Albert, China's Big Bet on Soft Power, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

²²The Economist, 'Confucius Says, Xi Does', available at:

<https://www.economist.com/china/2015/07/25/confucius-says-xi-does>, 25 July 2015

²³ China Central Television (CCTV) America, 'Chinese President Xi Jinping Visits with CCTV America via Video Call', 19 February 2016, available at: <https://america.cgtn.com/2016/02/19/chinese-president-xi-jinping-visits-with-cctv-america-via-video-call>

²⁴ Xi Jinping Thought on Culture put forward at national meeting, available at: http://en.cppcc.gov.cn/2023-10/09/c_927352.htm

Marxism serves as a foundational political and cultural resource for China's cultural soft power. Introduced to China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Marxism was embraced by the Chinese populace and became a guiding ideology for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Over time, it has evolved into the core ideological framework that influences China's political landscape and cultural discourse, reinforcing the nation's identity and values. By integrating Marxist principles with Chinese characteristics, Marxism has become central to China's efforts to strengthen its cultural soft power domestically and internationally.

Throughout China's revolution, construction, reform, and opening-up, the Sinicized Marxist theoretical system has been developed and refined, becoming the guiding ideology for the Party and the country's social development. The fourth plenary session of the 19th CPC Central Committee underscored the significance of upholding Marxism's guiding role in ideology as fundamental for the prosperity and development of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics. This political essence of national cultural soft power highlights the political background, guidance, and consciousness of China's path and system.

China's political elite, scholars, and media consistently advocate for continuing Marxist and socialist ideologies in building a strong spiritual civilization. Official directives emphasize the importance of developing a socialist core value system to strengthen national unity and cohesion. Enhancing this core value system is critical in improving China's cultural soft power. Sinicized Marxism is upheld as the guiding ideology for the Party and the people, while the collective goals of socialism with Chinese characteristics provide the unifying force. The values of patriotism, reform, and innovation are also highlighted as essential in inspiring and motivating the Chinese populace.²⁵

Although Chinese policymakers recognize the significance of culture in advancing China's soft power, they prioritize Marxism as the fundamental political framework guiding the nation's cultural development. Some scholars argue that the key challenge to expanding China's soft power lies in articulating a cohesive set of values that resonate with the domestic population and are compelling and attractive to the international community.²⁶

²⁵ Outline of the National "11th Five Year Plan" Period Cultural Development Plan, available at: <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2006/09/13/outline-of-the-national-11th-five-year-plan-period-cultural-development-plan/>

²⁶ Outline of the National "11th Five Year Plan" Period Cultural Development Plan, available at: <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2006/09/13/outline-of-the-national-11th-five-year-plan-period-cultural-development-plan/>

One suggestion is that China should focus on promoting values such as peace, development, cooperation, democracy, justice, and human rights to enhance its soft power on the global stage. These values, when emphasized, could help bridge internal cohesion while appealing to external audiences.²⁷ Another scholar contends that China's values with universal appeal include economic development, stability, and harmony. The key challenge for China is to effectively integrate these values into a coherent framework, institutionalize them, and make them operational in domestic and international contexts. By doing so, China can reinforce these values as central to its cultural identity and soft power strategy, enhancing its global influence.²⁸

By 2011, China had become the world's second-largest economy, significantly enhancing its hard power and international status. However, entering the 21st century, particularly since the 2008 global financial crisis, China has faced a paradox. After years of rapid economic growth, China has entered the ranks of middle-income countries, leading to imbalances brought about by rapid industrialization, informatization, urbanization, marketization, and internationalization. Internationally, economic globalization has exposed deep-seated structural contradictions in the global economy, politics, and culture. Emerging developing countries are collectively rising, while the relative strength of Western developed nations is declining, altering the global power structure. The development of socialist China has particularly unnerved certain Western forces, leading to increased anti-China rhetoric and containment efforts.

During this period, China must unwaveringly adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics and prioritize scientific, harmonious, peaceful, and cooperative development. Simultaneously, greater emphasis must be placed on constructing national cultural soft power, guiding public opinion, and uniting people domestically to provide the spiritual motivation for socialist modernization. Externally, efforts should focus on resolving doubts and confusion, enhancing exchanges, building a public diplomacy platform for global engagement, and creating a favourable international public opinion environment. Thus, under current historical conditions, China's cultural soft power construction faces severe challenges and presents significant opportunities.

From Soft Power to National Cultural Soft Power

The phrase "If the 'gun' symbolized the hard power of the Communist Party of China, the 'pen' symbolized its soft power" was used in discussions to highlight the dual focus

²⁷ Mingjiang, Li. "China debates soft power." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2.2 (2008): 287-308.

²⁸ Chen Yugang, 'Shi Lun Quanqiuhua Beijing xia Zhongguo Ruan Shili de Goujian', ('Thoughts on the Construction of China's Soft Power in the Context of Globalization'), *Guoji Guancha* (International Observations), No. 2, 2007, pp. 36-59

of the CCP on military strength and ideological or cultural influence. This perspective is often attributed to Chairman Mao Zedong, who emphasized the importance of revolutionary culture as much as armed struggle during the early stages of the CCP's efforts to gain control. Mao believed that both "hard power" (represented by military strength) and "soft power" (through ideological influence, propaganda, and culture) were necessary for achieving the revolution and securing political control.

Culture serves as the spiritual core and defining symbol of China. At the pivotal moment of the "two centenary goals," the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee unveiled a forward-looking blueprint for China's economic and social development through the "14th Five-Year Plan" and beyond. This marks China's transition into a new development phase aimed at comprehensively building a modern socialist nation. President Xi Jinping underscored the significance of cultural development, stating that cultural construction must have been given a central role and carefully advanced during this period.

Strengthening the nation's cultural soft power is vital for achieving the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation and fostering a modern socialist state. This process hinges on reinforcing China's cultural confidence, invigorating its national cultural identity, and remaining committed to the distinctive path of socialist cultural development with Chinese characteristics. By promoting these cultural ideals, China aims to unify its people and project a strong, positive image internationally.²⁹

"Chinese culture and ideas have the potential to appeal worldwide, but only when there is 'honesty in the depiction,'" says CFR Senior Fellow Elizabeth C. Economy.³⁰ Since Joseph Nye proposed the concept of soft power, it has garnered significant attention from politicians and scholars worldwide. In November 2006, Hu Jintao emphasized the importance of improving the country's soft power at the National Congress of Literary and Art Representatives and the Congress of Authors. In January 2007, he reiterated this point at the 38th collective study session of the Politburo Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, highlighting the role of network culture in enhancing China's soft power. The 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly introduced the concept of "cultural soft power," recognizing it as a crucial aspect of socialist cultural construction. The 18th National Congress of the CPC

²⁹ Enhance China's Cultural Soft Power, available at: http://en.npc.gov.cn.cdurl.cn/2021-12/09/c_688377.htm

³⁰ Eleanor Albert , China's Big Bet on Soft Power,available at; <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

also aimed to significantly enhance cultural soft power to build a moderately prosperous society by 2020³¹.

In his book "Cultural Power," Gao Zhanxiang provides a detailed explanation of the evolution from "cultural power" and "soft power" to "cultural soft power, and he concluded that cultural power is the core of soft power³². This term can be understood from two perspectives. First, Joseph Nye, who coined the term "soft power," examined areas such as culture, domestic values, politics, and diplomatic substance and style. This has naturally led to discussions about cultural soft power, value soft power, political soft power, and diplomatic soft power, with "cultural soft power" being considered narrowly. In a broader sense, "cultural soft power" is an essential component of comprehensive national power. The Chinese concept of "cultural power" combined with Nye's "soft power" resulted in the term "cultural soft power." This concept integrates the theories and connotations of both cultural and soft power, making China's comprehensive national strength theory more complete and allowing for better development of cultural and soft power theories. Broadly defined, cultural soft power complements and interacts with hard power, such as economic strength, technological prowess, and national defence capabilities. It encompasses the influence, cohesion, and charisma of a country or region's culture.

Moreover, Joseph Nye's soft power theory mainly addresses American issues from an international relations perspective; China's approach to soft power integrates its national conditions with Marxism and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Enhancing China's national soft power involves addressing international relations and domestic development. This dual focus differs from Nye's concept of soft power, which emphasizes external capabilities. Consequently, discussions about soft power can extend to countries, regions, cities, companies, or even individuals.

In its foreign exchanges, China increasingly focuses on setting the "political agenda," conveying information rich in Chinese elements to the world and enhancing China's global voice and image. Generally, improving China's cultural soft power addresses the internal contradiction between the people's growing cultural needs and the lagging cultural production. It also seeks to counter Western cultural colonialism, imperialism, and hegemony, consolidating national cultural security.

Major Components of Chinese Cultural Soft Power

The 2024 Global Soft Power Index Ranking report, released by British brand consultancy Brand Finance, indicates that China's global soft power ranking has risen

³¹Hu urges enhancing 'soft power of Chinese culture, available at:
https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/15/content_6226620.htm

³² See, Meng, Meng. "Chinese soft power: The role of culture and Confucianism." (2012).

to third place, marked by the "largest score increase³³." As the US Medriva website noted, this rise signifies China's growing influence on the global stage. Brand Finance defines soft power as "a country's ability to influence the preferences and behaviours of all parties on the international stage through attraction or persuasion rather than coercion." Soft power, therefore, is a concentrated reflection of a country's attractiveness, influence, and appeal, contrasting with the more tangible forces of economic and military power. Soft power engenders feelings of closeness, love, and respect³⁴. American political scientist Joseph Nye, who introduced the concept of soft power, asserted that the creative transformation and innovative development of China's traditional cultural essence would enhance its cultural soft power, consolidating its unique advantages³⁵.

The source of China's soft power is multifaceted. Evaluations highlight China's prominent national image as a historically rich, charming, oriental country contributing to global development. China's active participation in global governance is highly recognized, and its development path offers significant reference value. These factors contribute to a credible, lovable, respectable Chinese image, strengthening the country's soft power. China's rapid improvement in soft power is driven by the attractiveness and innovation of its culture. Traditional Chinese culture, with its 5,000-year-old heritage, has gained international popularity. The Chinese New Year has become a globally celebrated festival; Chinese language and culture, traditional Chinese medicine, Tai Chi, and calligraphy are widely embraced overseas, and classic works like "The Art of War" and "Tao Te Ching" attract numerous enthusiasts. Modern Chinese cultural products, including films and television shows like "Mountain and Sea Love" (山海经) and "The Wandering Earth" (流浪地球)" as well as cultural exports like "Genshin Impact (原神)," and social media such as WeChat, (微信 Wēixìn) and TikTok (抖音 Dǒuyīn) have also gained international popularity³⁶. These cultural influences are bolstered by China's emphasis on civilizational inheritance and innovation.

³³ Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2024: USA and UK ranked top nation brands, China takes third place, overtaking Japan and Germany, available at: <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/brand-finances-global-soft-power-index-2024-usa-and-uk-ranked-top-nation-brands-china-takes-third-place-overtaking-japan-and-germany>

³⁴ Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index 2024: USA and UK ranked top nation brands, China takes third place, overtaking Japan and Germany, available at: <https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/brand-finances-global-soft-power-index-2024-usa-and-uk-ranked-top-nation-brands-china-takes-third-place-overtaking-japan-and-germany>

³⁵ See, Meng, Meng. "Chinese soft power: The role of culture and confucianism." (2012).

³⁶From silver screen to gaming, China levels up soft power, available at: <https://english.news.cn/20240703/6ae002d2bfd4c31bf5886df41e8d212/c.html>

Moreover, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a major vehicle for extending its soft power. The BRI promotes global connectivity through infrastructure, cultural exchange, and economic integration, with China's cultural soft power being a key component of this initiative. Through projects like the Confucius Institutes and cultural events, China fosters cultural diplomacy and projects a positive global image. China's rise in global soft power rankings demonstrates its ongoing efforts to integrate its developmental approach with cultural influence, focusing on mutual benefit and cooperation across the continents.

Below are the key components:

1. Cultural Heritage

China's 5,000-year history softens the power aspect and haze the possibilities by allowing influence through culture and value assets. The rich history comprising traditions in philosophy and arts and literature provides a basis for China's soft power pushes. Important and backbone philosophies which fueled are known as confucianism, taoism, and even buddhism. Gandharva terrains not only contributed into carving the morals and ethics of china society, but also foster appreciation of Chinese culture the world over.

Calligraphic Arts, Tai Chi practices and Medicine extend toward Chinese borders and draws multiple global audience due to one of China's heritage. Universal celebrate Chinese festivals like Spring Festival(Chinese New year) and Mid-Autumn further project the impact and presence of China worldwide. Such Events welcome scholars, practitioners, nations and community encourage the engagement, culture, and understanding.

Furthermore, China's traditional culture is the most significant the country's cultural asset to promote soft power. Throughout history, Chinese civilization has formed a set of ideational, humanistic, moral, and value systems which profoundly resonate with the people. These aspects cultivate a person's temperamental disposition and form the basis of the hero's china's firs identity and psyche. The consciousness described above as well as collective spirit motivates endless Chinese citizens to strive for the revival of the country, indicative of indomitable, dauntless, and valiant spirit. The immense depth of history and culture which china possess have a marked influence soft power and cohesion within the country and internationally build shared respect of China's rich traditions and heritage.

2. Culture and Media

Chinese culture has been popularized around the world through various media such as movies, television shows, and animations. Movies like 'The Wandering Earth' and 'The Three-Body Problem' are quintessential in shaping global views of China as a technologically-advanced modern superpower while still being rooted in its rich

cultural heritage. These works of science fiction builds China's international perception by showcasing its advanced technological innovation while multidimensionally contributing to soft power by highlighting them through universal narrative structures conveyed from a Chinese perspective.

China's reach all over the globe has extended further through their digital innovations like WeChat and TikTok (Douyin in China). The development of TikTok heightened engagement with the international audience by showcasing traditional Chinese dances as well as contemporary pop culture phenomena. These trends cultivate new ways of interacting with China and engage tourists at every corner. The growth of these platforms showcases China's prowess in developed the ostentatious merging of cultural content and advanced technology, creating a new era of global access and interaction.

Apart from filmmaking, China has soaked up strategic foreign media investment regions to improve its cultural influence. These include state-run media bodies like China Global Television Network (CGTN), Xinhua News Agency, and China Radio International, all of which have set up offices and branch stations abroad. These media institutions seek to communicate China's views on international relations, rebut negative portrayal of China, and give alternative news to the West. Through these instruments, China tries to control foreign public perception and advertise its model of governance, preferred methods of development, and cultural ideals.

In relation to broader political discourse, Beijing has enhanced its international broadcasting outlets to tailor coverage of China to different regions in the world, during important press conferences used by Chinese leaders to interact with their foreign counterparts, China is able to showcase its previously underexposed international presence. More specifically Xinhua has grown to possess 170 foreign bureaus, with plans to reach 200 by 2020.³⁷

The Global Times, alongside China Daily, sells international editions in English. China Global Television Network (formely CCTV) provides news in English, Spanish, Arabic, French, and Russian on their six channels with correspondents stationed in over 70 countries. Additionally, China Radio International airs 392 hours of radio programming daily in 38 languages, with coverage from 27 foreign bureaus.³⁸

Notably, a November 2015 investigation by Reuters revealed that the media organization covertly manages a network of over thirty radio stations across fourteen

³⁷ Eleanor Albert, China's Big Bet on Soft Power, available at; <https://www.cfr.org/background/Chinas-big-bet-soft-power>

³⁸We are now CGTN, China Global Television Network , available at; <https://america.cgtn.com/2016/12/31/we-are-now-cgtn-china-global-television-network>

countries through front companies, underscoring China's strategic efforts to enhance its influence abroad.³⁹

The media also substantiates China's cultural narratives, particularly in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese has tried to cultivate public relations perception of itself, including cultural achievements, economic development as well as values through partnership with local media. This represents a major part of China's soft power strategy to build a favorable reputation overseas using traditional and social media. From movies and television shows to social media advertising, content produced in China serves both as entertainment and propaganda aiding China's narrative wars. China blends contemporary and historical approaches to its soft power by using traditional media and modern technologies.

3. Educational and Academic Exchange

The Confucius Institutes (C.Is.) form a global network of state-run organizations aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture through educational and cultural exchange programs. These institutes typically partner with universities and educational institutions worldwide. Their primary goal is to offer Chinese language instruction, cultural programs, and academic collaboration to enhance mutual understanding and spread Chinese cultural influence globally.

The Chinese Ministry of Education manages these institutes through their governing body, Hanban (now known as the Center for Language Education and Cooperation). The Hanban's mission, as stated on its website, focuses on promoting the learning of the Mandarin language and fostering global harmony and cultural exchange. Their goal is to facilitate educational and cultural ties that benefit China's international image, thus reinforcing China's soft power.⁴⁰

The Chinese government opened the first Confucius Institute on November 21, 2004, in Seoul, South Korea, geographically closer to China. However, this program rapidly expanded worldwide, with Confucius Institutes spanning every continent except Antarctica. Currently, there are 498 Confucius Institutes and 773 Confucius Classrooms in 160 countries and regions.⁴¹

As of 2024, Confucius Institutes are scattered and operate worldwide, reflecting the Chinese government's resolve to enhance its soft power and promote mutual understanding among nations. Although the number of institutes has slightly decreased due to concerns over academic freedom and influence in certain Western

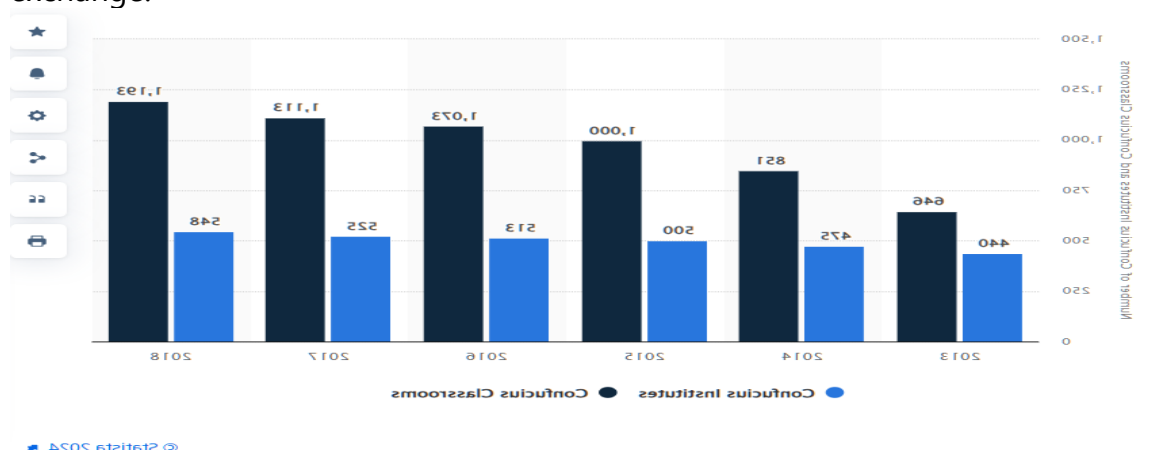
³⁹ Koh Gui Qing and John Shiffman , Beijing's covert radio network airs China-friendly news across Washington, and the world, available at; <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-radio/>

⁴⁰ Details of Confucius institutes available at: <https://ci.cn/en/gywm/pp>

⁴¹ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202312/09/WS6573a382a31040ac301a6f16.html>

countries, such as the United States, several European nations, and Australia, the network continues to expand in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These institutes remain a cornerstone of China's broader soft power strategy, offering a state-sanctioned mechanism to foster cultural exchange, language learning, and bilateral relations. Despite challenges and closures in some regions, the global footprint of Confucius Institutes still plays a significant role in spreading Chinese language and cultural values internationally.⁴²

Despite these challenges, the Chinese government continues to prioritize Confucius Institutes as a key component of its soft power strategy while diversifying its global cultural outreach through digital platforms and other forms of media. The institutes remain central to promoting Mandarin education and facilitating international cultural exchange.⁴³



The Confucius Institutes serve as a state-run network promoting Chinese language and culture worldwide, often compared to institutions like the British Council, Goethe Institute, and Alliance Française. Their mission aligns with China's broader soft power strategy, focusing on contemporary China's achievements and the enduring legacy of Confucian traditions. These institutes, overseen by the Hanban (now the Center for Language Education and Cooperation), are strategically placed within educational institutions globally to facilitate Mandarin language education, cultural exchange, and international collaboration.

One of the central aims of the Confucius Institutes is to assist in designing policies for international Mandarin promotion, providing educational support at various levels, and developing proficiency standards for Mandarin instruction. These regions

⁴² The Economist, 'Confucius Says, Xi Does', available at: <https://www.economist.com/china/2015/07/25/confucius-says-xi-does>

⁴³ Hanban institutes, available at: http://english.hanban.org/node_7719.htm

particularly benefit from the institutes as they offer pathways for individuals seeking employment with Chinese companies or those wishing to engage in business with China. Moreover, students aiming to study or conduct research in China find the institutes a valuable resource.

The U.K., in particular, hosts 29 Confucius Institutes and 126 Confucius Classrooms, more than any other European country. This highlights the strategic importance of the U.K. for China's cultural outreach, as reflected by President Xi Jinping's attendance at the 2015 UK Confucius Institutes annual conference.⁴⁴

4. Cultural Diplomacy and People-to-People Exchanges

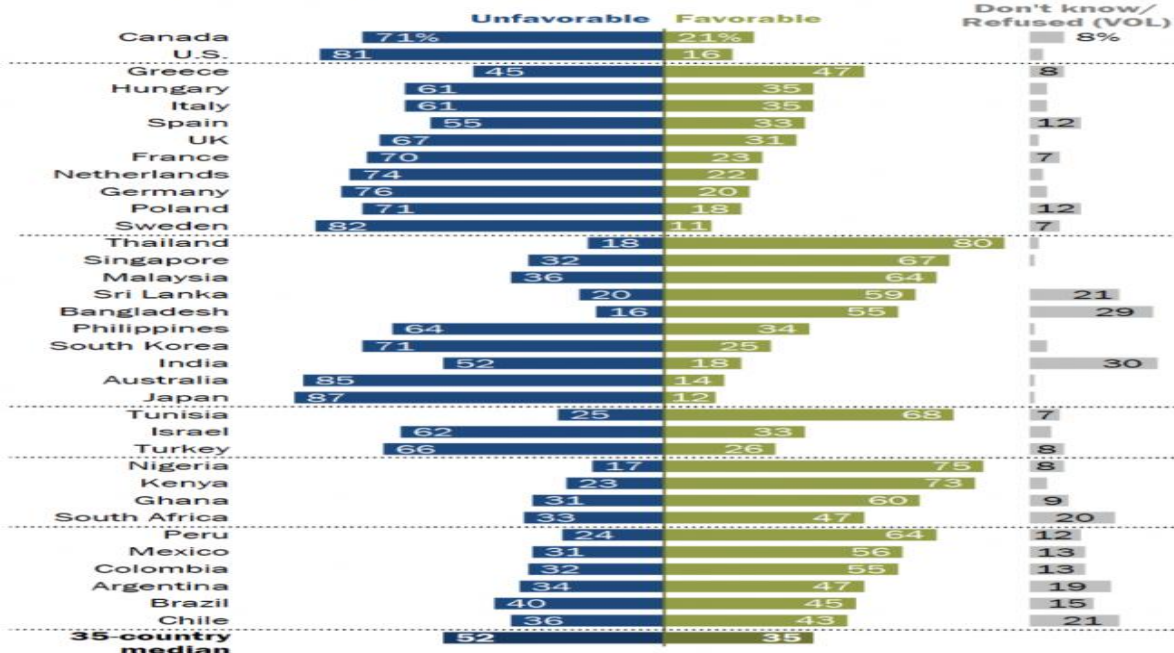
Cultural diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people connections have become key elements in shaping China's international image. Although China has recently emphasized this approach, its implementation remains limited, as these exchanges are largely conducted through state-owned, traditional methods of diplomacy (Sayama, 2016). China has established numerous platforms to promote its culture, language, and traditions globally, using cultural exchange programs in sports, arts, music, film, and literature. Additionally, China facilitates various governmental and non-governmental seminars, conferences, and dialogue forums that foster interaction and cooperation between Chinese citizens and the international community. Notable forums such as the Beijing Forum, the Boao Forum for Asia, and the China Development Forum serve as interactive dialogue venues aimed at advancing a positive global image for China (Shambaugh, 2015).

Beyond these cultural initiatives, China has heavily invested in educational exchanges, scholarships, and research partnerships, enhancing its reputation in global academic circles. The Chinese government offers over 20,000 annual scholarships to foreign students across disciplines, from science and technology to arts and social sciences (Shambaugh, 2015). A significant portion of these scholarships are dedicated to promoting the study of Chinese language, literature, and culture through Confucius Institutes worldwide. China also provides short courses, research fellowships, and professional development programs for foreign civil servants, diplomatic personnel, and military officials from friendly nations, strengthening ties and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Shambaugh, 2015).

⁴⁴The Economist, 'Confucius Says, Xi Does', available at:
<https://www.economist.com/china/2015/07/25/confucius-says-xi-does>

Attitudes toward China vary widely across regions

% who have a(n) ___ opinion of China



Source: Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey.
 Most People in 35 Countries Say China Has a Large Impact on Their National Economy
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

It seems that most these initiatives and investments were aimed at winning over both hostile and non-hostile nations. With the passage of time this formula seems working. Fewer nations view China as a negative influence, even the previously less responsive, which is seen as a positive sign. It has shown positive signs in Africa, Latin America, and Europe (Devlin, 2018). The Soft Power China's Improving International Image figure put out by Pew Research Center in 2018 demonstrates that China is successfully using soft power to positively change the perception of its influence on the world. China has a long tradition of leveraging cultural diplomacy and People-to-People Exchanges to further its geopolitical and economic interests. However, in recent years, China has more clearly integrated elements of Joseph Nye's concept of public diplomacy into its external engagement strategy. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which focuses on state-to-state communication, public diplomacy emphasizes direct communication with the population of target countries, aiming to establish a national image that is seen as reasonable, legitimate, and authoritative. It also seeks to highlight key agenda items and build relationships with private individuals and groups through initiatives like conferences, research collaborations, and educational programs. Zhang Guozuo, a prominent Chinese scholar, has described China's soft power strategy as one that involves "communicating Chinese positions and opinions, establishing a positive international image, creating a favourable international environment, and

promoting a peaceful, harmonious, and cooperative world." This approach reflects China's evolving public diplomacy framework, which focuses on shaping perceptions at the governmental level and building influence through direct engagement with foreign publics. By promoting cultural exchanges and international cooperation, China aims to foster mutual understanding while simultaneously advancing its strategic interests on the global stage.

This strategy aligns with Nye's notion of public diplomacy as it prioritizes the importance of shaping global perceptions and establishing China's influence through cultural and educational initiatives. In doing so, China positions itself as a global leader in fostering peaceful cooperation and harmony while addressing global challenges to benefit its geopolitical objectives.⁴⁵

China focuses on two key audiences in its public diplomacy efforts: the populations of Western nations, especially the United States—due to the significant and growing trade relationship—and the global Chinese diaspora. The Chinese diaspora includes ethnic Chinese individuals residing in various countries, notably the United States and nations within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China heavily utilizes digital platforms, particularly the Internet, to engage these groups effectively and efficiently.

The Chinese diaspora, which has become increasingly influential in their host countries' economic, social, and political spheres, is a significant target of China's public diplomacy. In 2011 the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office pointed out for the first time the concept of "Chinese diaspora public diplomacy" which focuses on improving relations with overseas Chinese communities. This diaspora outreach is carried out through multiple media platforms, including radio, television, publishing, and the Internet. In 2009 President Hu Jintao and in 2010 Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi highlighted the need to focus Chinese public diplomacy efforts on overseas Chinese communities and their engagement regarding China's viewpoints on controversial topics like Taiwan and Xinjiang.

The SCIO, as described by scholar David Shambaugh, serves as a primary agency concerned with these activities. The SCIO supervises the outflow of information and manages the international image of China, as well as shaping content for external consumption. It does not only seek to manage information for internal narratives, but also attempts to shape content that portrays China's position on contentious political matters within the diaspora and engages with the broader global audience. Through

⁴⁵ See, Sayama, Osamu. "China's approach to soft power." *Seeking a Balance between Nationalism, Legitimacy and International Influence*. Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. London (2016): 5.

these means, China enhances its global soft power while also advancing its strategic interests.⁴⁶

Key audiences for the State Council Information Office (SCIO) include Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities. According to David Shambaugh, the SCIO is pivotal in coordinating China's external communications. Its activities encompass media and public diplomacy efforts, such as employing spokespersons, holding press conferences, publishing books and magazines, and producing films. Additionally, the SCIO reaches foreign visitors to China, including expatriates, tourists, and business travellers, through prominent outlets like the Foreign Language Press. However, the objective seems to foster a deeper understanding and sympathy for Chinese concerns among these communities. This approach aligns with what Benedict Anderson calls "long-distance nationalism," a phenomenon where expatriates, despite being physically distant, often develop a heightened sense of patriotism or connection to their homeland.

China's engagement with the overseas Chinese community appears to aim to reinforce its cultural and emotional ties to China, especially on sensitive geopolitical matters like Taiwan and Hong Kong. By leveraging these connections, China hopes to expand its influence and bolster its soft power while cultivating a broader international support base and understanding of its national interests.⁴⁷

While there isn't always an automatic alignment between the views of the Chinese diaspora and the Chinese government, Homare Endo, a Japanese scholar who has researched the perspectives of the Chinese diaspora in the U.S., suggests that a prosperous and stronger China often instils pride and hope among overseas Chinese communities. Consequently, as long as Beijing continues engaging with the Chinese diaspora, it can reasonably expect strong backing from overseas Chinese to support the country's direction under Xi Jinping.

Kent Calder of Johns Hopkins University argues that China has actively sought the support of the growing Chinese-American population to influence U.S. government decision-making. By leveraging media, academia, think tanks, and Congress, and through the openness of Washington's political culture, China has encouraged Chinese Americans to advocate for Beijing's interests. The Chinese embassy in Washington plays a significant role in coordinating these efforts.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Shambaugh David, 'China's Soft Power Push', available at; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/chinas-soft-power-push>

⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (California, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Kent Calder, *Asia in Washington: Exploring the Penumbra of Transnational Power* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014), pp. 109, 141–53.

A key objective of China's public diplomacy is to improve its image among Western audiences, and one of its primary strategies involves leveraging media platforms. For instance, China Central Television (CCTV) has established production facilities and begun broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and Nairobi, Kenya. This indicates that the U.S. and Africa are significant focus areas for China's public diplomacy efforts. China aims to make its broadcasts more credible and relatable to Western audiences by employing American presenters, reporters, and staff at its Washington bureau.

These initiatives form part of China's broader strategy to position itself as a cooperative and credible global player. By embedding its narratives within internationally consumed media outlets, particularly in areas vital to its economic and political interests, such as the U.S. and Africa, China seeks to shape global perceptions. Including foreign personnel and multilingual programming further illustrates its intent to engage with diverse international audiences.⁴⁹

5. Aid as an Economic Instrument of Soft Power

China has leveraged aid and assistance as a strategic component of its soft power, using it to cultivate favorable international conditions for peaceful development. Targeting primarily underdeveloped and developing nations, China's aid approach aligns with the South-South development model, aiming to strengthen ties with southern hemisphere countries and neighboring states, both near and distant. Aid includes bilateral support through financial grants, low- or interest-free loans, and various government funding mechanisms (Albert, 2018). These programs often focus on poverty reduction, health improvement, living standards, and humanitarian relief in disaster scenarios (Fuch & Rudyak, 2019).

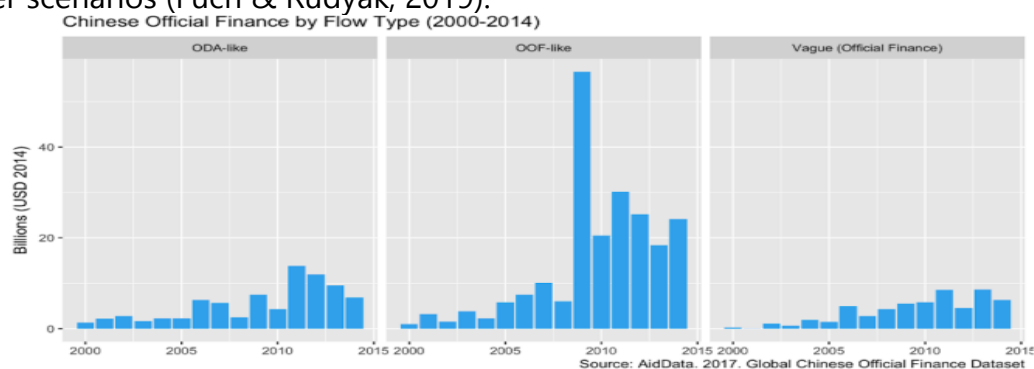


Figure: Bar chart showing China's Official Assistance Flow (source: AidData, 2017), Legend: ODA= Official Assistance Flow & OOF=Other Official Flows

⁴⁹ Shambaugh David, 'China's Soft Power Push', available at; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/chinas-soft-power-push>

From 2000 to 2014, China allocated \$354.3 billion across 140 countries, closing the gap with U.S. aid at \$394.6 billion (Dreher et al., 2017). The data from AidData also shows increased Chinese contributions in both Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Other Official Flows (OOF), with OOF representing financial flows outside traditional development aid, often for commercial objectives (Dreher et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the systematic development of Chinese cultural soft power has become prominent within the context of China's comprehensive national and international goals. China employs its influence through multifaceted means, ranging from Confucianism and traditional festivals to modern digital platforms like TikTok and WeChat, all rooted in a 5,000-year-old culture amalgamated with contemporary progress. Such efforts foster national integration and increase the appeal of China internationally, reinforcing its stance as a model development country that promotes peace while advocating for a "community with a shared future for mankind." China's reach has been further enhanced, bringing deepened cultural exchanges and understanding through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Confucius Institutes, and expansion of Chinese media overseas. Through these means, China aims to change the international image of the country to one that promotes cooperation and peace. Cultural diplomacy, sports, educational and media outreach work in unison to showcase a new chapter in China's story from an emerging power to a global powerhouse..

President Xi Jinping has placed soft power pertaining to culture under high priority as China aims to rise on a global scale. Under Xi, China has focused on nurturing the development narrative, else governance, international cooperation, and better relations uniquely Chinese. China attempts to undermine the negative views that stem from the country's geopolitical and economic intentions by utilizing its cultural values and marking its stance as peaceful. But this advancement of soft power does come with its set of challenges. Cautious regions like the US along with Europe have received pushback due to a lack of trust towards China's political aim. This has led to the closing of Confucius institutes, and concerns regarding the freedom of media and the academia. These international relations create problems for China's cultural diplomacy, showing a need for smoother solutions to some centers of resistance. Another problem for China is the need to unify its diverse internal population under the socialists core value perception while soft powering outwards.

Moving forward, the evolution and refinement of strategies will be key to the success of China's cultural soft power. This includes addressing international concerns about political meddling, fostering authentic partnerships and striking a balance between value promotion and cultural imposition. China's assertion of leadership in global

governance will continue to rely on its soft power for shaping global sentiments, influencing relations and consolidating its presence internationally. It is clear that Chinese soft power cannot be viewed merely as a means of influence, but rather as a testament to the nation's identity and aspirations. By uniting traditional heritage with modern diplomacy and innovation, China stands poised to assume a leading role in global affairs on the 21st century.

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