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China's Soft Power: Stuck in Transition

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Whilst China is excited about its rising soft power, the West is anxious over the impact of China's soft power on the international order. In reality, however, a coherent Chinese soft power strategy has yet to emerge. The growth and influence of China's soft power are constrained by its own transition in the face of Western assertiveness.

FOR ALL the excitement in China over its rising soft power, what has happened over Tibet in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics attests to the limits of China's soft power. Indeed, Tibet represents one of the countless socio-political problems inside a transitional China.

Soft power, a term coined by Joseph S. Nye, has become one of the most popular concepts in China's strategic circle. While Chinese strategists exhibit much excitement over a possible soft power approach to the attainment of China's rise in the new century, the outside world, in particular the West, has demonstrated misgivings over the growth of China's invisible power and its influence in many parts of the world.

A cursory look at the Chinese discourse on soft power shows that neither the Chinese optimism nor Western anxiety is based on solid ground. Numerous as they are, the Chinese writings on soft power clearly lack coherence and the intense debate in China points to the reality that China itself is undergoing a profound and a long-term transformation in the economic, cultural, and political arenas. Also, soft power is still perceived as a policy tool largely for defensive purposes against Western political pressures. China's own transition and its defensive posture are likely to be the two major factors that will constrain the further growth of China's soft power.

The Chinese Emphasis on Cultural Soft Power

Following Nye's concept, most Chinese analysts regard culture, values and foreign policy as the main sources of soft power; they single out culture as the most important source for China's soft power, although the Chinese discussion in general is fairly diverse, covering almost everything non-military. The traditional culture, in particular, has been favoured as the key to increasing China's soft power. It is believed that traditional Chinese culture has a long history, enjoyed millennia of glory in East Asia,

and provided the intellectual foundation for the economic take-off in many East Asian countries in the contemporary era.

Moreover, many Chinese scholars argue that traditional Chinese culture offers the world values, for instance harmony (*he xie*), that can provide alternative solutions to some of the seemingly intractable problems in the world: worsening environmental degradation, unending conflicts, and declining social ethics.

The Painstaking Search for Universal Values

There has been, however, an intense debate in China as to how China can offer cultural and political values that have universal applicability. Following the intellectual tradition since the May Fourth Movement of the early 20th century, many Chinese scholars have opined that traditional Chinese culture actually carries many things that are anachronistic and contradictory to the cultural and political trends in today's world.

This is particularly the case when it comes to political culture. Many intellectuals in China maintain that the Chinese cultural emphasis on social hierarchy and the traditional lack of rule of law do not bode well for China's soft power influence in the world. This is because many of these Chinese values go against the current political tide in the world, which is dominated by Western values of individual freedom and democracy. Furthermore, they argue that many Chinese cultural traditions and norms have been either destroyed or transformed by rounds of cultural iconoclasm and revolutions during much of the 20th century, and by Western cultural penetration in the reform era.

These divergent views exist not only in the scholarly community, but also, more significantly, between many scholars and the ruling political elite. Many liberal-minded intellectuals tend to look at the root impediments to China's soft power: the weakness in domestic institutions, in particular political institutions. They argue that in addition to significant changes that the Chinese development model will have to make - for instance making it more sustainable, open, free and harmonious - China has to ultimately build a constitutional polity to make its experience more appealing to the outside world.

The Chinese political elite and state-run media, however, continue to advocate traditional Marxist and socialist ideological doctrines to remould China's culture and hold the society together. Political editorials in the Chinese media regard a socialist core value system as the key to curbing the sharp decline of ideological appeal and ethical standards in Chinese society, and to the upgrading of China's soft power.

The debate clearly reflects the profound transition that China is experiencing. Its own culture is in flux and its socio-political future is uncertain. The official inclination is to cling to the last ideological straws. This would have quite significant negative impact on China's soft power through three major ways: allocating resources to research projects favoured by the ruling elite; giving the political and ideological watchdogs the power to discourage intellectual innovations; and most importantly, perhaps, retarding the process of political reform.

A Tool Largely for Defensive Purposes

Soft power, as expounded by many Chinese strategists, is supposed to serve as a soft shield against Western pressures and cultural and ideological inroads into China. An immediate goal is to dispel what they see as misperception or misunderstanding of the real China by outside commentators. And on that basis, stronger cultural and media soft power is expected to help develop a better image of the Chinese regime in the world.

Soft power is also expected to be used to fend off the influence or penetration of foreign cultures in

China, particularly those ideologies or beliefs that might be harmful to the legitimacy of the ruling party. Many Chinese elite worry that American cultural hegemony is dominating the world, including Chinese society.

They worry that the younger generation of Chinese is excessively exposed to American cultural and political influence that would ultimately engender a peaceful evolution to subvert the ruling power of the political elite. For the intellectuals, the concern is that Western cultural penetration will result in the waning of Chinese traditional culture and ultimately the weakening of Chinese identity.

Given these concerns, it is no accident that the Chinese discourse on soft power lacks the kind of assertiveness that one can detect in discussions among American strategists. This means that the Chinese decision-makers will focus on how to use soft power to defend their positions and other interests instead of actively transforming the identities or mindsets of their foreign counterparts, let alone re-shaping the international order.

No doubt, China will continue to put much premium on soft power and make every effort possible to further build its soft power in the future. But, because of the reality that China itself is in transition and the practical usage of soft power is for defensive purposes, soft power is likely to remain the dragon's underbelly, as some international observers have predicted.

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