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**Soft Power in Chinese Discourse:
Popularity and Prospect**

Li Mingjiang

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyze the Chinese discourse on soft power and address these major issues: How do the Chinese elite understand and interpret soft power? Why is there such a strong interest in soft power in China? What role do the Chinese elite assign to soft power in China's international strategy in the 21st century? To answer these questions, I thoroughly examine various official documents, prominent scholarly writings, and the most influential national-level media reports and analyses. This study reveals that Chinese views on soft power are variegated, with the mainstream believing that soft power is still a weak link in China's strategic planning but nevertheless should be an important component in China's rising strategy. At the moment, soft power is largely perceived as a tool for defensive purposes in China's international politics and a means for various domestic goals. I conclude that a grand Chinese soft power strategy is still in its embryonic phase.

Li Mingjiang is an Assistant Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include the rise of China in the context of East Asian regional relations and Sino-US relations, China's diplomatic history, and domestic sources of China's international strategies.

Soft Power in Chinese Discourse: Popularity and Prospect

Observers of Chinese politics and international relations could hardly have failed to notice the upsurge of references to the term “soft power” in China in recent years. The popularity of this concept among Chinese political leaders, scholars, journalists and pundits has been striking. Its prevalence in the Chinese media is by no means an insignificant issue. Although it is arguably one of the most important aspects of China’s foreign strategy that has emerged in the new century, it is insufficiently understood by the outside world. International political leaders and pundits have paid a lot of attention to the growth and practice of China’s soft power and have unequivocally expressed their concerns over its implications. For these reasons, a thorough examination of the term is warranted.

A good starting point for understanding the importance of soft power in China’s international politics is how the concept is discussed among the Chinese elite. How do they understand and interpret the meaning of soft power? Why is there such a strong and growing interest in soft power in China? What role do the Chinese elite assign to soft power in China’s international strategy in the new century, especially in the context of China’s rise? This paper will neither delve into the theoretical debate of what constitutes soft power nor focus on China’s actual practice of soft power. The purpose here is simply to examine the overall understanding of soft power among Chinese intellectuals and the implications of this understanding for China’s international strategy.

Methodologically, a conscious effort has been made in this paper to focus on official documents endorsed by the top Chinese leadership, articles in prominent Chinese journals and the most influential national-level media reports and analyses. The first part briefly discusses the popularity of soft power in China. The second section analyses Chinese views on soft power and the mainstream assessment of the state of China’s soft power. The next section examines the motivations behind China’s strong interest in soft power. The fourth part addresses major approaches that have been proposed in China to increase Chinese soft power. The concluding section sums up the main features of Chinese discourse about soft power and analyses its potential implications for China’s international strategy.

Several conclusions emerge from this study. First, decision-makers and opinion leaders in China have given an enormous amount of attention to the fate of their nation’s soft

power. Second, Chinese discourse largely conforms to Joseph S. Nye's conceptual framework but is not strictly limited to the scope of that conceptualization. Third, unlike Nye's primary focus on the efficacy of soft power in achieving foreign policy goals, Chinese discourse frequently refers to a domestic context and evinces a mission for domestic purposes. Fourth, soft power, as expounded by Chinese analysts, is still a weak link in China's pursuit of comprehensive national power and largely perceived as a tool for defensive purposes, including cultivating a better image of China to the outside world, correcting foreign misperceptions of China, and fending off Western cultural and political inroads in China. On the basis of these analyses, I argue that a grand Chinese soft power strategy is still in its embryonic phase, despite the painstaking efforts by Chinese strategists to devise various proposals. The lack of assertiveness in China's soft power discourse reflects the fact that China has few political values to offer to a world still dominated by Western philosophies and reveals the reality that China itself is still undergoing a profound social, economic and political transition.

Soft Power: Surging Popularity in China

Flipping through official Chinese government pronouncements, academic journals and popular newspapers, one frequently comes across the term "soft power". This is a clear indication that soft power has become a noticeable part of official and popular discourse on foreign policy and international politics.

Soft power is no longer an alien concept for top Chinese political leaders. The political report to the 16th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in 2002, for instance, points out that, "in today's world, culture intertwines with economics and politics, demonstrating a more prominent position and role in the competition for comprehensive national power".¹ The 13th collective study session of the Politburo of the 16th CCP Central Committee, which was held on 28 May 2004, focused on how to develop China's philosophy and social sciences. This study session took place two months after the CCP Center publicized a document titled "Suggestions of the CCP Center on Further Developing and Boosting Philosophy and Social Sciences". Cheng Enfu, a professor at the Shanghai

¹ Jiang Zemin, "Political Report to the 16th CCP Congress", 8 November 2002.

University of Finance and Economics, and also one of the two scholars who gave lectures at the session, commented that the study session clearly shows the importance that Chinese leaders attach to soft power.² Media commentary echoes Cheng's assessment, saying that the study session signifies the leadership's will to accelerate the growth of China's soft power from a strategic height.³

Party chief and President Hu Jintao made it clear at the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group meeting on 4 January 2006: "The increase in our nation's international status and influence will have to be demonstrated in hard power such as the economy, science and technology, and defence, as well as in soft power such as culture."⁴ Other leaders have also frequently referred to soft power. At the fifth session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Tenth National Committee in March 2007, Jia Qinglin, CPPCC Chairman and a member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, delivered a speech in which he elaborated on China's soft power. In July 2007, the CPPCC National Committee held a special session on "cultural construction as the main approach for national soft power building". At the meeting, Jia urged Chinese officials to "deeply understand the importance of national soft power with cultural construction as the main task" in order to both meet domestic demands and enhance China's competitiveness in the international arena.⁵

President Hu, at the Eighth National Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, instructed that more attention be given to cultural development and upgrading of China's soft power, which, he said, are major practical issues.⁶ Hu again highlighted soft power in his political report to the 17th Party Congress in October 2007, stressing the urgency of strenuously building China's cultural soft power to meet domestic needs and increasing international competition. Hu's call aroused a new round of interest in soft power

² *Wen Hui Bao* [Wen Hui newspaper], "Yi ruan shili tisheng guojia zhonghe jinzhengli" [Use soft power to upgrade national comprehensive competitiveness], 21 June 2004.

³ Yang Taoyuan, "Tisheng zhongguo ruan shili: jiedu zhongyang zhengzhiju di shi san ci jiti xuexi" [Upgrading China's soft power: An explanation of the 13th collective study session of the CCP CC Politburo], *Liaowang xinwen zhokan* [Outlook News Weekly], 7 June 2004, Issue 23.

⁴ Ma Lisi, "Guanyu wo guo jiaqiang ruan shili jianshe de chubu sikao" [Preliminary thoughts on accelerating China's soft power building], *Dang de wenxian* [Literature of Chinese Communist Party], No. 7.

⁵ Pan Yue, "Quan guo zhengxie zhaokai zhuanxi xiexianghui" [CPPCC National Committee convenes a special consultation meeting], *People's Daily*, 25 July 2007; Excerpt of Jia's speech at the CPPCC National Committee special session on 24 July *Dang Jian* [Party Building], Issue 9, 2007, p. 6.

⁶ *Guangming Daily* commentary, "Nuli tigao guojia ruan shili" [Strive to raise national soft power], 17 November 2006.

throughout China. Local governments and various cultural communities held discussion sessions on China's cultural soft power. Soft power and culture became the headlines in many newspapers in the aftermath of the 17th Congress. A *People's Daily* commentary, for instance, proclaimed that China has to substantially increase its soft power in order to play an active role in international competition.⁷

Various Chinese organizations and research institutes have followed up with and contributed to the growing popularity of soft power by organizing conferences on the topic. The China Foreign Languages Bureau hosted a forum on "trans-cultural communications and soft power building" in Beijing in August 2006. In early 2007, the International Public Relations Research Center at Fudan University sponsored a forum among government officials and leading scholars on "national soft power construction and the development of China's public relations". The China Institute on Contemporary International Relations carried out a special study on soft power⁸. The Institute of Strategic Studies of the Central Party School also conducted a comprehensive study on soft power.⁹

According to one Chinese strategist, soft power and its relevance to China has become an important topic of discussion in Chinese strategic circles.¹⁰ This observation is indeed substantiated by the number of papers that have appeared in Chinese journals and newspapers. The China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, currently the largest and most comprehensive database of Chinese journals and periodicals, can be used to run a simple search. Searching the three sections of CNKI's journals and periodicals—liberal arts/history/philosophy, politics/military affairs/law, and education/comprehensive social sciences—resulted in 485 papers with the term "soft power" in their titles from 1994 to 2007.¹¹ Using the same search method for the period 1994 to 2000, the system showed a record of 11 articles, whereas from 2001 to 2004, the total number was 58. From 2005 to 2007, there were 416 such articles. In 2006, the number of papers was 104 and in 2007, this number rose to 237. Expanding the search to the full text and not just the title resulted in

⁷ *People's Daily*, "Tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili" [Upgrading national cultural soft power], 29 December 2007.

⁸ See Study Group on soft power at CICIR, "Ruan shili guoji jiejian" [International lessons about soft power], *Outlook Weekly*, Vol. 11, 12 March 2007.

⁹ Men Honghua, "Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu baogao" [Assessment and report of China's soft power], *Guoji guancha* [International Observations], Part one, Issue 2, 2007, pp. 15-26 and Part two, Issue 3, 2007, pp. 37-46.

¹⁰ Men Honghua, Part one, Issue 2, 2007, p. 15.

¹¹ The Chinese translation of soft power has four versions: *ruan shili*, *ruan lilian*, *ruan guoli* and *ruan quanli*. *Ruan shili* is becoming more popular than the other three. For the searches, I entered all four terms and used the "or" function.

1,211 articles in the same three sections of the database from 1994 to 2007. From 1994 to 2000, there were 57; from 2001 to 2004, there were 212; from 2005 to 2007, there were 942 pieces. In 2006, there were 273 papers, and in 2007, the number was 518. Using the Chinese newspaper section of the CNKI, the search results shows a total of 509 articles with the term “soft power” as part of the titles from 2000 to 2008. Not all of these papers or newspaper articles are specifically relevant to China’s foreign policy or international relations, but a vast majority analyse soft power in relation to China’s international politics. The fact that the term has become so popular in many fields in China is an indication of the extent of interest in soft power among the Chinese interlocutors.

Chinese Discourse: Scope and Assessment

In the decade since Nye coined the term soft power, Chinese writings almost exclusively focused on introducing and evaluating the concept itself. But in recent years, Chinese writings on this subject have become conspicuously comprehensive and sophisticated, covering a wide range of topics: critical reviews of Nye’s conceptualization, soft power in China’s peaceful rise and development, as well as Chinese choices and strategies in cultivating and using soft power in international politics.¹²

Chinese writers who write on soft power frequently make references to the Great Wall, the Peking Opera, pandas, martial arts, sports star Yao Ming and movie star Zhang Zhiyi. However, the mainstream Chinese understanding of soft power has largely followed the conceptual framework proposed by Nye. The vast majority of Chinese analysts are quite faithful to Nye’s definition of soft power, that is, “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”.¹³ They have also largely followed the parameters identified by Nye: culture, political values and foreign policy.¹⁴ Yet the discussion in China is wider in scope and sometimes emphasizes areas that Nye paid little attention to.

¹² For a comprehensive review of Chinese discourse on soft power, see Liu Qing and Wang Litao, “*Jin nian guonei ruan lilian lilun yanjiu zongshu*” [A review of Chinese studies on soft power theory in recent years], *Journal of Jiangnan Social University*, Issue 2, Vol. 9, 2007.

¹³ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (Public Affairs, 2004), p. x.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 11.

China's Soft Power Sources: Culture, Development and Foreign Policy

According to Chinese analysts, the first Chinese article on soft power was written by Wang Huning, who is now a member of the CCP Central Committee Secretariat.¹⁵ In that article, published in 1993, Wang argues that culture is the main source of a state's soft power. Chinese analysts have since followed this central thesis. This is discernable in various speeches by Chinese leaders and numerous scholarly writings.¹⁶ Traditional Chinese culture, in particular, is singled out as the most valuable source of Chinese soft power on the premise that it boasts an uninterrupted long history, a wide range of traditions, symbols and textual records. Many Chinese writings also point out the good values in traditional Chinese culture found in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and other classical schools of thought, for instance, winning respect through virtues (*yi de fu ren*), benevolent governance (*wang dao*), peace and harmony (*he*), and harmony without suppressing differences (*he er bu tong*).

They argue that the traditional Chinese cultural values with “harmony” at the core are the basis of Chinese cultural appeal in an era of cultural diversification and globalization. In modern history, Western civilization, epitomized by science, individualism and materialism, pushed for industrialization but at the same time caused a lot of problems, including environmental degradation, confusion in social ethics, and international and regional conflicts. Traditional Chinese culture, which stresses “giving priority to human beings” (*yi ren wei ben*) and “harmony between nature and humankind” (*tian ren he yi*), may provide alternative approaches in addressing these problems, thus putting Chinese culture in a more advantageous position in the post-industrialization, information era.¹⁷

It is also argued that history nicely demonstrates the advantages of China's cultural soft power. The Chinese nation has a long history compared to other nations, of which cultural glory was a prominent feature. More importantly, its culture has influenced East Asia for millennia. The socio-economic success of East Asian “dragons” and, now, the success story of China's own economy are evidence of Chinese cultural merits. While China and East

¹⁵ Wang Huning, “*Zuowei guojia shili de wenhua: Ruan quanli*” [Culture as national power: Soft power], *Journal of Fudan University*, Issue 3, 1993.

¹⁶ For instance, Luo Jianbo, “*Zhongguo jueqi de duiwai wenhua zhanlue*” [external cultural strategy in China's rise], *Journal of the Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP*, Vol. 10 No. 3, Jun., 2006, pp. 97–100.

¹⁷ Jiang Haiyan, “*Hongyang zhonghua minzu de youxiu wenhua yu zengqiang wo guo de ruan shili*” [Promoting the outstanding culture of the Chinese nation and strengthening China's soft power], *Journal of the Party School of the Central Committee of the CCP*, Vol. 11 No. 1, 2007 ; Li Haijuan, “*‘Ruan quanli’ jingzheng Beijing xia de wenhua zhanlue*” [Cultural strategy in the context of soft power competition], *Mao Zedong Deng Xiaoping liluan yanjiu* [Mao Zedong thought and Deng Xiaoping theory studies], 2004, Issue 12, pp. 49–54.

Asia are in ascendancy, the West has started a cultural reflection and readjustment, which provides China with a good opportunity to expand its cultural influence.¹⁸

The discussion of cultural soft power, however, often easily turns to notable Chinese discontent about losing competitiveness in the international trade of cultural products. According to this utilitarian view, the Chinese cultural sector has lagged far behind its Western counterparts in competing for business in the world. This school of thought cares about China's soft power but is mainly concerned about being marginalized by Western cultural business juggernauts, particularly the predominant position of the U.S. in the international trade of cultural products, including movies, popular music, television programmes, fast food and fashion.¹⁹ In addition to this minor diversion, there are also dissenting views on Chinese culture as the main source of China's soft power. Echoing the intellectual tradition of criticizing the many negative aspects in traditional culture ever since the May Fourth Movement, some Chinese scholars maintain that there is very little in traditional Chinese culture that China could offer to the outside world because there are too many "backward" aspects to it. One scholar notes that Chinese culture is actually more diverse now, and includes the Han Chinese culture, the cultures of other ethnic minorities, folk culture, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and other folk beliefs. In modern times, traditional Chinese culture has also been infiltrated by Western culture. Moreover, traditional Chinese culture has been reshaped by the revolutionary experience of the CCP to a significant extent. Putting too high a premium on Chinese culture in the pursuit of soft power may be misleading, according to some writers.²⁰

Chinese analysts occasionally mention the Chinese model of development as a source for the nation's soft power. A study conducted by a scholar at the Central Party School concludes that China's gradualist approach to reform and opening up has provided a new alternative to the classic modernization theory and "Washington Consensus" for underdeveloped countries.²¹ The Chinese experience of development is occasionally brought up at various forums, indicating that it is indeed part of the consideration for China's soft power

¹⁸ Men Honghua, "Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu baogao" [Assessment and report of China's soft power].

¹⁹ Ni Xun, "Quanguo zhengxie weiyuan tan zengqiang wenhua ruan shili de zhuoyandian" [CPPCC National Committee members discuss how to strengthen cultural soft power], *Guangming Daily*, 3 January 2008.

²⁰ Yu Xintian, "Ruan lilian duanxiang" [Some reflections on soft power], *Foreign Affairs Review*, No. 97, 2007.

²¹ Men Honghua, "Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu baogao" [Assessment and report of China's soft power].

among the Chinese elite.²² However, there is no consensus among analysts about the efficacy of the so-called “Beijing Consensus” in bringing soft power to their nation, as further discussion in this paper will reveal.

A number of Chinese analysts also follow Nye’s emphasis on foreign policy and institutions. Su Changhe argues that soft power is evident in a state’s ability in international institution building, agenda setting, mobilization of coalitions and ability to fulfil commitments.²³ Another study suggests that China’s soft power includes three aspects: cultural diplomacy, multilateral diplomacy and overseas assistance programmes.²⁴ These analysts tend to emphasize the flexibility in Chinese foreign policy as a source of Chinese soft power.

Moving Beyond Nye’s Conceptualization

Deviating from Nye’s core positions, many Chinese analysts attach much importance to the mass media, arguing that capability and effectiveness in mass communications are also an important part of a state’s soft power. Chinese analysts are impressed by the dominant role of the Western media. According to Chinese statistics: “Currently, the major four Western news agencies, Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters and Agence France-Press, produce four-fifths of the total news stories in the world every day. The 50 top Western trans-national media corporations hold 90 per cent of the world communication market. The United States alone controls 75 per cent of TV programmes in the world. In many developing nations, 60 to 80 per cent of the content in TV programmes comes from the U.S. Over half of the total show time in the world’s theatres is taken by American movies, which account for only 6.7 per cent of the total global movie production.” Western dominance in media and mass communications has resulted in their “cultural hegemony” or “media imperialism”.²⁵

²² Feng Jian and Qian Haihong, “Gonggong guanxi shiye xia de zhongguo ruan shili jiangou” [China’s soft power construction in the perspective of public relations], *Journalism Quarterly*, Issue 92, Vol. 2, 2007.

²³ Su Changhe, “Zhongguo de ruan quanli – yi guoji zhidu yu zhongguo de guanxi wei li” [China’s soft power – an example in the relationship between China and international institutions], *Guoji guancha [International Observations]*, Issue 2, 2007.

²⁴ Zhao Lei, “Zhongguo ruan shili tisheng yin ren guanzhu” [Increase of China’s soft power raises attention], *Zhongguo dang zheng ganbu luntan* [Forum of Chinese party and government officials], Issue 1, 2007.

²⁵ Yao Xu, “Gonggong guanxi de chuanbo shouduan yu zhongguo ruan shili jiangou” [Communication methods of public relations and China’s soft power building], *Xinwen qianshao [News Frontline]*, Issue 7, Vol. 93, 2007.

There are several studies that challenge or are critical of Nye's conceptualization.²⁶ One scholar, for instance, argues that the sources of soft power come from three dimensions: institutional power, identifying power and assimilating power. Institutional power refers to a state's ability to propose or build new international institutions or arrangements. Identifying power refers to a state's ability to influence other states through the latter's recognition of its leadership role. Finally, assimilating power refers to the attraction of a state's cultural values, ideology and social system.²⁷ Yan Xuetong believes that soft power lies in political power that is exclusively found in political institutions, norms and credibility, rather than in culture.²⁸ Zhu Feng argues that soft power has little to do with sources of power but is all about whether the international community accepts a nation's policies and strategic choices, as well as to what extent those choices accord with most nations' interests.²⁹

Concerning the relation between hard power and soft power, some Chinese analysts seem to be more willing than Nye to emphasize the inseparability of hard power and soft power. They argue, for example: "Soft power and hard power are mutually complementary to each other. Soft power can facilitate the growth of hard power; whereas hard power can demonstrate and support the increase of soft power."³⁰ Another study is critical of Nye's dichotomy of hard power and soft power, arguing that, depending on the context, any source of power can be both hard and soft, and that China's soft power is best illustrated in the "China model", multilateralism, economic diplomacy and good-neighbourly policy.³¹ Another scholar identifies five key elements for soft power: culture, values, development model, international institutions and international image.³² In addition to these different

²⁶ For instance, Ji Ling and Chen Shiping, "Guoji zhengzhi de bianqian yu ruan quanli lilun" [Changes in international politics and the soft power theory], *Foreign Affairs Review*, Issue 96, 2007; Fang Changping, "Zhong mei ruan shili bijiao ji qi dui zhongguo de qishi" [A comparison of soft power between China and the U.S. and its implications for China], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], Issue 7, 2007; Su Changhe, "Zhongguo de ruan quanli—yi guoji zhidu yu zhongguo de guanxi wei li".

²⁷ Gong Tiejing, "Lun ruan quanli de weidu" [On the dimensions of soft power], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], Issue 9, 2007.

²⁸ Yan Xuetong, "Ruanshili de hexin shi zhengzhi shili" [The core of soft power is political power], *Huanqiu shibao* [Global Times], 22 May 2007.

²⁹ Zhu Feng, "Zhongguo ying duo cezhong 'ruan shili' jueqi" [China should give priority to soft power rise], *Huanqiu shibao* [Global Times], 30 April 2007.

³⁰ Zhu Majie and Yu Xintian, "Ruan guoli jianshe: bu rong hu shi de wu xing yingxiang" [Soft power construction: Invisible influence not to be ignored], *Proceedings of Annual Meeting of Shanghai Social Sciences Circle*, 2004.

³¹ Zheng Yongnian and Zhang Chi, "Guoji zhengzhi zhong de ruan liliang yiji dui zhongguo ruan liliang de guancha" [Soft power in international politics and an observation of China's soft power], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], Issue 7, 2007.

³² Men Honghua, "Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu baogao" [Assessment and report of China's soft power].

views, there seems to be a tendency among some Chinese scholars to focus on anything that would be helpful in boosting China's international influence, ranging from traditional Chinese medicine³³ to the story of China's economic success³⁴ to sports culture³⁵ to educational exchange programmes.³⁶

Another major difference with Nye's analysis is the notable domestic context that numerous Chinese analysts frequently refer to, e.g. national cohesion, domestic political institution building, social justice, social morality and educational quality. Yu Keping, a well-known political analyst in China, argues that education, the psychological and physical condition of the people, technological advancement, superiority of national culture, human resources and strategy, social cohesion and unity, and the sustainability of socio-economic development, are all parts of soft power.³⁷ The domestic context is also evident in the remarks of top Chinese leaders. Hu Jintao, for instance, propounded that cultural soft power has two main purposes. One is to enhance national cohesion and creativity, and to meet the demands of people's spiritual life. The other is to strengthen China's competitiveness in the competition for comprehensive national power in the international arena.³⁸ Official documents and writings by prominent scholars frequently mention the urgency to rebuild Chinese culture and develop new values to hold the rapidly changing society together and strengthen national cohesiveness.³⁹

Soft Power: A Weak Link in China's Comprehensive Power

The dominant view among Chinese interlocutors on the current state of China's soft power is that China has made much headway and still has great potential, but its score on soft

³³ Zhao Haibin, "Yi zhongyiyao chuantong wenhua tisheng zhongguo ruan shili" [Use traditional Chinese medical culture to upgrade China's soft power], *Journal of Yunnan College of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Issue 1, Vol. 30, 2007.

³⁴ Zhao Shusen, "Jingji shijiao xia de ruan quanli yu zhongguo de heping fazhan" [Soft power in economic perspective and China's peaceful development], *Ya fei zong heng* [All-round Asia-Africa], Issue 5, 2007.

³⁵ Cheng Bin et al., "Tiyu wenhua chuanbo yu tisheng guojia ruan shili" [Communications of sports culture and the increase of China's soft power], *Collection of excerpts of papers presented at the 8th national sports science conference*, 2007.

³⁶ Qian Zhengshun, "Jiaoyu waijiao zai guojia ruan shili waijiao zhong da you ke wei" [Educational diplomacy to play a big role in China's soft power diplomacy], *Journal of National Academy of Education and Administration*, Issue 2, 2007.

³⁷ Yu Keping, "Zhongguo moshi: jingyan yu jianjie" [The China model: Experience and lessons], in Yu Keping (Ed.), *Zhongguo moshi yu Beijing gongshi – chaoyue huashengdun gongshi* [The Chinese model and Beijing consensus – beyond the Washington consensus] (Beijing: Social Sciences Press, 2006), p. 19.

³⁸ Hu Jintao, *Report at the CCP 17th Congress*, 15 October 2007.

³⁹ Wang Zuoshu, *Goujian shehuizhuyi hexie shehui de ruan shili* [Building soft power for a socialist harmonious society], (Beijing: People's Press, 2007).

power has lagged behind its own hard power growth and the soft power of other major powers, particularly that of the U.S.⁴⁰ In fact, Chinese strategists describe the current state of China's soft power and its future development as worrisome. This is so because not only is China's current soft power still weak, the issue of converting China's increasing national power into constructive international influence is also still a weak link in China's strategic planning.⁴¹ Some argue that the most important gap between China and the developed countries, particularly the U.S., is not about gross domestic product or military force, but about soft power. This is due to China's drawbacks in domestic institutions, weakness in research, its low level of education, the not-so-good national image, and the decline of national identity and social cohesion.⁴² Others base their pessimistic view on the fact that China has very few global name brands and a significant deficit in the trade of cultural products, even though it is becoming the factory of the world. The deficit in cultural trade, in particular, is a clarion call for many Chinese officials and scholars. For instance, in 2004, China imported 4,068 kinds of books from the U.S. and exported only 14, imported 2,030 books from Britain and exported only 16, imported 694 from Japan and exported only 22. In 2005, in the intellectual property rights trade with the U.S., the ratio of import and export was 4,000 : 24.⁴³

This pessimistic orientation was echoed by participants in a forum hosted by the Fudan University International Public Relations Research Center on "national soft power construction and the development of China's public relations" in January 2007. Many participants at the forum mentioned that China has indeed made many inroads in soft power. Wang Guoqing, deputy director of the State Council Information Office, noted in his keynote speech that China has gained much soft power in recent years, as evidenced by the international attention given to China's development, the international attraction of China's development model, the ability to shape the course of international affairs in China's diplomacy and the affinity emanated by Chinese culture. But overall, he noted, China's soft

⁴⁰ Zhan Yijia, "Zhongguo shi ruan shili daguo ma?" [Is China a nation with strong soft power?], *Shijie Zhishi* [World Knowledge], 2006, Issue 20, p. 5; Deng Xiaochao, "Qiao ran jueqi de zhongguo ruan shili" [Chinese soft power quietly growing], *Ascent*, 2005, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 89–93; *Liberation Daily*, "Touxi zhongguo 'ruan shili'" [Analysing China's soft power], 3 October 2005.

⁴¹ Men Honghua, "Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu baogao" [Assessment and report of China's soft power].

⁴² Huang Renwei, "Ruan lilian yu guojia anquan" [Soft power and national security], *Xuexi yue kan* [Study Monthly], 2003, Vol. 202, Issue 1.

⁴³ Li Lei, "Dazao zhongguo ruan shili" [Moulding China's soft power], *Shangye wenhua* [Business Culture], November 2006, pp. 86–88.

power has been lagging behind. Participants at the forum acknowledged that the weakness of China's soft power is most evident in China's export of cultural products and the relatively weak influence of China's mass media in the international arena.⁴⁴

With regards to the international impact of China's development model, there is notable disagreement on whether the Chinese experience is or should be a source of China's soft power. Some officials and scholars believe that the so-called "Beijing Consensus" has indeed demonstrated its attractiveness to many developing countries. Wang Guoqing, as noted above, lists the perception of China's development and China's development model as the two most important sources of China's soft power growth.⁴⁵ But many others are doubtful that the Chinese experience provides much soft power to China. Their scepticism is based on the fact that Chinese development is not complete yet; it is too early to conclude that there has been a unique Chinese model of socio-economic development.⁴⁶

A minority of Chinese scholars hold more optimistic views of China's soft power. Those who are more sanguine tend to emphasize the country's potential, arguing that China has all the elements of soft power, including cultural power, language power, civilizational power and intellectual power. The fact that China is sponsoring "Confucius Institutes" throughout the world attests to China's determination to expand its soft power.⁴⁷ One author says that in today's world, interdependence is intensifying, calling for ever-closer cooperation among nations. International cooperation will have to depend on certain equality, mutual trust and mutual benefit. This increasing urgency for international cooperation provides a valuable opportunity for the Chinese culture, which emphatically values "harmony". The Chinese cultural proclivity of stressing "harmony without suppressing differences" (*he er bu tong*) is likely to provide new thinking and a new approach to international relations, thus highlighting the comparative advantage of Chinese culture. In the eyes of these optimists,

⁴⁴ Feng Jian and Qian Haihong, "Gonggong guanxi shiye xia de zhongguo ruan shili jiangou" [China's soft power construction in the perspective of public relations].

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Zhang Jianjing, "'Beijing gongshi' yu zhongguo ruanshili de tisheng" [The "Beijing Consensus" and the increase of China's soft power], *Dangdai shijie yu shehuizhuyi (Contemporary World and Socialism)*, Vol. 4, 2004.

⁴⁷ Pang Zhongying, "Kongzi sixiang de 'chukou' he ruan liliang de shiyong" [The export of Confucianism and use of soft power], *Shijie Zhishi [World Knowledge]*, 2006, Issue 17, p. 67.

“harmony”-laden Chinese culture can then proffer some universal values to the outside world.⁴⁸

Soft Power: A Means to Multiple Ends

The preceding discussion has clearly demonstrated an intense desire and a strong sense of urgency in China to build and promote its soft power. Many analysts have argued that China should treat soft power at the level of state strategy.⁴⁹ This urgency largely springs from the Chinese assessment of soft power as being the weakest link in its rise in comparison to Western powers.⁵⁰ There are also other reasons why China is so enthusiastic about soft power. In a nutshell, soft power is envisioned as a means to multiple ends.

Soft Power: An Indicator of World Status

The most frequent argument is that soft power has to be part of “comprehensive power” that a major nation is expected to possess. It is commonly believed in Chinese strategic circles that soft power has become an important indicator of a state’s international status and influence.⁵¹ A great power has to have material or hard power as well as soft power in order to enjoy flexibility in international politics and maintain advantageous positions in international competition. In light of this, many Chinese analysts have argued that soft power is inseparable from China’s rise.⁵² A world power has to be one of the cultural centres of the world where ideas, values, social life and beliefs are attractive and appealing to people in other countries. “If a major power cannot provide some guiding moral or cultural ideals of universal value for the international society, its major power status is unlikely to be acknowledged by other states, and even its own development is hard to be

⁴⁸ Yu Yunquan, “Zhongguo wenhua ruan shili jianshe ren zhong dao yuan” [China’s cultural soft power construction has a long way to go], *Dui wai da chuanbo* [External Communications], Issue 1, 2007.

⁴⁹ Zhao Changmao, “Zhongguo xuyao ruan shili” [China needs soft power], *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan* [Outlook News Weekly], 7 June 2004.

⁵⁰ Huang Renwei, *Zhongguo jueqi de shijian he kongjian* [Time and space of China’s rise], (Shanghai Social Sciences Press, 2002).

⁵¹ Men Honghua, “Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu baogao” [Assessment and report of China’s soft power].

⁵² Li Jie, “Tisheng ruan shili dui shixian wo guo heping jueqi zhanlue de zuoyong” [The role of increasing soft power for the realization of China’s peaceful rise], *Taipingyang xue bao* [Journal of Pacific Studies], 2005, Issue 12, pp. 64–71; Huang Jing and Yue Zhanju, “Ruan shili jianshe yu zhongguo de heping fazhan daolu” [Building soft power and China’s peaceful development road], *Dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi* [Contemporary World and Socialism], 2006, Issue 5, pp. 103–107.

sustained.”⁵³ Soft power, in the view of many Chinese strategists, does not grow automatically from the influence of material hard power. Instead, it has to be intentionally cultivated and built up.

According to various Chinese scholars, building soft power that is commensurate with China’s major power status and influence has become an urgent task in China’s development strategy. The sense of urgency comes from these factors. First, China’s hard power—economic, technological and military—has already experienced a dramatic increase but its soft power has lagged behind, creating an imbalance in its national comprehensive power structure. This imbalance is not good for China’s aspiration of higher international status and greater international influence.⁵⁴ Others have made it more specific by saying that building soft power is conducive to the domestic programme of building a “harmonious society”, a concept that the Hu-Wen leadership has proposed to tackle mounting domestic social challenges. Domestic stability needs more attention to culture, national cohesion, morality and institutions. All these measures are aimed at maintaining social and political stability in China to create some sort of favourable internal conditions for China’s peaceful rise. In addition to these specific tasks at the strategic level, the building up of soft power is also useful for exploring alternative pathways to sustainable growth.⁵⁵

A Soft Shield for Self-Defence

The emerging Chinese soft-power strategy also relates to the “important period of strategic opportunity” that the Hu-Wen leadership has emphasized. At a meeting with Chinese diplomatic emissaries, President Hu Jintao noted that to better serve Chinese interests during this “important period of strategic opportunity”, China needs to strive to ensure four “environments”, namely, a peaceful and stable international environment, a neighbourly and friendly environment in the surrounding regions, a cooperative environment based on equality and mutual benefits, and an objective and friendly media environment. Chinese analysts believe that soft power is instrumental in helping China achieve these goals. The immediate goal is to dispel what they see as misperception or misunderstanding of the real China by outside commentators, to develop a better image of the Chinese regime in the

⁵³ Luo Jianbo, “*Zhongguo jueqi de duiwai wenhua zhanlue*” [External cultural strategy in China’s rise].

⁵⁴ Wang Jianjun, “*Ruan shili sheng wei*” [Soft power given more attention], *Liao wang* [Outlook Weekly], Vol. 11, 12 March 2007.

⁵⁵ Men Honghua, “*Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu baogao*” [Assessment and report of China’s soft power].

world, and also to fend off excessive influence or penetration of foreign cultures into China, particularly those ideologies or beliefs that might be harmful to the legitimacy of the ruling party.

First and foremost, soft power is intended to shape a better perception of China by the outside world. It is primarily utilized to refute the “China threat” thesis, facilitate a better understanding of China’s domestic socio-economic reality, and persuade the outside world to accept and support China’s rise.⁵⁶ Externally, building soft power is good for China in order to maintain a stable and peaceful neighbourhood. It also helps to solve various problems between China and other countries so that these problems do not exacerbate any tensions.⁵⁷ The international strategic environment also contributes to China’s sense of urgency in developing its soft power. Unlike the American experience of developing hard economic and military power first, then soft power influence, China does not enjoy such a propitious international context. China has to develop its soft power simultaneously because without the kind of soft power to maintain a favourable international status, many forces in the world will prohibit or hamper China’s development.⁵⁸

According to Chinese scholars, upgrading the capacity of Chinese mass media outlets can also help the outside world better understand China.⁵⁹ This is due to the worry that with the increase of China’s hard power and its impact on the international order, many outside observers are hyping China’s economic competitiveness and increasing energy demand in the world and external apprehensions towards China’s military power. Building soft power would be beneficial to mitigate such outside concerns. Chinese scholars are also aware that other major powers, in particular those that are critical of China’s rise, may amplify its negative impact. Thus, developing soft power would help create a more favourable international political atmosphere for China’s rise.⁶⁰ Many Chinese analysts also fear that Chinese voices have to be heard in the international discourse on soft power, as Western analyses of China’s soft power may be inaccurate due to ideological, social and cultural

⁵⁶ Fang Changping, “*Zhong mei ruan shili bijiao ji qi dui zhongguo de qishi*”.

⁵⁷ Song Xiaofeng, “*Shi xi zhongguo heping jueqi zhong de ruan quanli yinsu*” [A preliminary analysis of the soft power factor in China’s peaceful rise], *Journal of Guangdong Institute of Public Administration*, June 2005, Vol. 17 No. 13, pp. 46–50.

⁵⁸ Zhang Jianjing, “*Beijing gongshi yu zhongguo ruan shili de tisheng*” [The Beijing consensus and the increase of China’s soft power].

⁵⁹ Liu Sen, “*Xiang shijie shuoming zhongguo, guanjian kao tisheng ruanshili*” [Upgrading soft power is key in explaining China to the outside world], *Liberation Daily*, 3 November 2007.

⁶⁰ Wang Jianjun, “*Ruan shili sheng wei*” [Soft power given more attention], *Liao wang* [Outlook Weekly], Vol. 11, 12 March 2007.

differences and the inclination of Western scholars to focus on counter-measures to China's soft power.⁶¹

International Competition: Soft Power but Hard Reality

The long-term goal for China is to face up to the perceived competition for soft power among the major powers. Echoing many international strategists, Chinese analysts also acknowledge the trend that in today's world, the role of traditional means of power—e.g. military power—is relatively decreasing. The world is experiencing ever deepening globalization and, in this new era, stability, cooperation, multilateralism and democratization in international politics are on the rise. New rules and approaches in international competition have emerged. In addition to the traditional dimensions of military, economic and technological hard power, soft power, as represented by culture, political ideology, development model and capacity in international institution-building, should also be part of the national comprehensive power.⁶² In the words of one Chinese analyst: “Apparently, the competition among nation-states appears to be a rivalry of hard power, but behind such rivalry is the competition between institutions, civilizations, and strategies, which are essentially the rivalry of soft power.”⁶³ Zhu Feng argues that China has to transcend the conventional approach in international competition that focuses on hard power, and instead seek to win ideas and international influence to maintain a “soft counterbalance” instead of “hard counterbalance”.⁶⁴

Many Chinese analysts claim that the major powers are all stepping up efforts to build up their soft power, including European nations, the U.S., Japan, India and South Korea.⁶⁵ Western powers have always been actively propagating their political system, ideology (democracy) and culture.⁶⁶ The U.S. is believed to continue to pursue an aggressive soft power strategy to practise “cultural hegemonism”, using its strong economic and political power and advantages in global information networks to promote its spiritual and cultural

⁶¹ Fang Changping, “*Zhong mei ruan shili bijiao ji qi dui zhongguo de qishi*”.

⁶² Huang Jing and Yue Zhanju, “*Ruan shili jianshe yu zhongguo de heping fazhan daolu*” [Building soft power and China's peaceful development road].

⁶³ Zhang Jianjing, “*Beijing gongshi yu zhongguo ruan shili de tisheng*” [The Beijing consensus and the increase of China's soft power].

⁶⁴ Zhu Feng, “*Zhongguo ying duo cezhong ‘ruan shili’ jueqi*” [China should give priority to soft power rise].

⁶⁵ See Study Group on soft power at CICIR, “*Ruan shili guoji jiejian*” [International lessons about soft power], *Liao wang* [Outlook Weekly], Vol. 11, 12 March 2007.

⁶⁶ Yu Xibin, “*Ruan shili liluan de neihan, chansheng beijing ji yunyong*” [Content, background and application of the soft power theory], *Dangdai shijie* [Contemporary World], 2006, Issue 9, pp. 33–35.

products, socio-political ideals and values.⁶⁷ Japan publicized a national strategic plan in 2005 that called for greater efforts to promote Japanese culture in the world. South Korea proposed back in 1998 that its cultural sector should be one of the main industries for its economy in the new century.⁶⁸ Chinese analysts frequently refer to South Korea as an example of successful practice in soft power. Many argue that if South Korea, largely influenced by traditional Chinese culture, could be successful in projecting its soft power, China has no reason not to be successful, because many of the cultural fundamentals evident in South Korean cultural products had their origins in Chinese culture.

Many among the 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 influence. The fear of the political elite is peaceful evolution, i.e. Western liberal political ideology gradually infiltrating Chinese society to weaken their legitimacy. For many scholars, Western cultural penetration will result in the waning of Chinese traditional culture and ultimately the weakening of Chinese identity.⁶⁹ In this sense, “beefing up cultural competitiveness is as important as building a strong military”.⁷⁰

“The competition of cultural power is the core on soft power contention.”⁷¹ In September 2006, the Chinese government released an official document entitled “The National Planning Guidelines for Cultural Development in the Eleventh Five-Year Period”.⁷² The document asserts that today’s world culture is increasingly intertwined with economics, politics and technologies, all of which are important indicators of a nation’s comprehensive power. To win the international competition in this complex environment, a state will not only need strong economic, technological and defence power but also strong cultural power. In fact, the guidelines stipulate that one of the goals of Chinese cultural development is to

⁶⁷ Zhao Yi, “*Ruan shili: daguo zheng xiong de jue li chang*” [Soft power: The arena of major power rivalry], *China Society Periodical*, 2005, Issue 12, pp. 55–57.

⁶⁸ Li Jie, “*Ruan shili jianshe yu zhongguo de heping fazhan*” [Soft power construction and China’s peaceful development], *Guoji wenti yanjiu [International Studies]*, Issue 1, 2007.

⁶⁹ He Ying et al., “*Qian xi guojia ‘ruan quanli’ lilun*” [Notes on national soft power theory], *Journal of University of International Relations*, 2005, No. 12, pp. 5–8.

⁷⁰ Huang Renwei, “*Ruan lilian yu guojia anquan*” [Soft power and national security].

⁷¹ Li Haijuan, “*‘Ruan quanli’ jingzheng beijing xia de wenhua zhanlue*” [Cultural strategy in the context of soft power competition].

⁷² *Xinhua News Agency*, “Full Text of The National Planning Guidelines for Cultural Development in the Eleventh Five-Year Period”, 13 September 2006.

increase the influence of Chinese culture in the world so that it can match the nation's economic power and international status.

The Chinese Approach to Stronger Soft Power

This section discusses roadmaps to stronger soft power that have been proposed by Chinese intellectuals. It should be noted from the outset that most analysts share the view that China should still focus on hard power and develop soft power on the basis of economic, technological and military advancement. Many of them, however, have proposed new ideas about how China can further strengthen its soft power.

A Cultural Offensive: Reaching Out to the World

In line with the dominant perception that culture matters most, both official and scholarly prescriptions for the growth of China's soft power have focused on various strategies to work on the cultural front. The 2006 National Planning Guidelines for Cultural Development vows to push for a "go out" strategy to ratchet up the competitiveness and influence of Chinese cultural products and actively promote Chinese culture in the world. One of the major policies that the document proposes is to utilize various festival occasions to promote international understanding of Chinese culture, to actively participate in international decision making in order to increase China's discourse right, to cultivate international sales networks for Chinese cultural products, and to provide support to those major overseas-oriented cultural enterprises. Zhao Qizheng, the former director of the State Council Information Office, mentioned that China should regard reviving its culture and strengthening cultural communication with the outside world as an important task for the nation's destiny.⁷³

In recent years, the Chinese government has done a lot to promote cultural exchanges with the outside world. These efforts include participation in the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in 1998, the 1999 Paris China Culture Week, the 2000 U.S. Tour of Chinese Culture, the China Festival at the Asia-Pacific Week in 2001 in Berlin, the Chinese

⁷³ Shen Suru, "Kaizhan 'ruan shili' yu dui wai chuanbo de yanjiu" [Conduct research on soft power and external communications], *Dui wai da chuanbo* [Grand External Communications], 2006, Issue 7, pp. 24–28.

Year in France from October 2003 to July 2004, the Sixth Asian Arts Festival, the Chinese cultural tour in Africa, the “year of Russia” in China in 2006, and the “year of China” in Russia in 2007. It has been stressed that the Chinese diaspora throughout the world is also a good platform in promoting Chinese culture.⁷⁴

Official reports stated that part of the responsibility to increase the influence of Chinese civilization in the world lies with scholars in philosophy, humanities and the social sciences. It is their mission to further discover and promote traditional Chinese cultural values with “harmony” at the core. As noted above, Chinese analysts claim that in modern history, Western civilization spearheaded industrialization but may not provide effective solutions to various current challenges, including environmental degradation, confusion in social ethics, and international and regional conflicts. Traditional Chinese culture, according to their views, stresses “giving priority to human beings” (*yi ren wei ben*) and will be more valuable in overcoming the Western obsession with the omnipotence of materials, in resolving the increasingly growing spiritual crisis of humankind, reversing the worsening natural environment and reining in escalating international conflicts.⁷⁵

Political Values and Institutions: Officials vs. Critics

The Chinese political elite and state-owned media continue to advocate adhering to traditional Marxist and socialist ideology in constructing a spiritual civilization.⁷⁶ According to official pronouncements, China needs to make more effort to construct a socialist core value system to enhance the cohesion of the Chinese nation. Constructing a socialist core value system should be the primary task in upgrading China’s cultural soft power. Sinicized Marxism should continue to be upheld as the guiding ideology for the party and people. The common aspirations under socialism with Chinese characteristics should serve as the cohesive force. The spirit of patriotism and reform and innovation should be used to inspire the people.⁷⁷ Although Chinese decision-makers have realized the importance of culture in

⁷⁴ Lin Guoxia, “*Zhongguo ruan shili xianzhuang fenxi*” [An analysis of the state of China’s soft power], *Dang dai shijie* [Contemporary World], Issue 3, 2007.

⁷⁵ Jiang Haiyan, “*Hongyang zhonghua minzu de youxiu wenhua yu zengqiang wo guo de ruan shili*”.

⁷⁶ Shen Jiru, “*Bu neng hushi zengqiang wo guo de ‘ruan shili’*” [The enhancement of China’s soft power should not be neglected], *Liaowang xinwen zhoukan* [Outlook News Weekly], 11 October 1999, Issue 41, pp. 12–13.

⁷⁷ *People’s Daily*, “*Tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili*”.

promoting Chinese soft power, they still have to regard Marxism as the primary political framework for China's cultural development.⁷⁸

Many liberal-minded intellectuals, however, tend to look at the root impediment of China's soft power. Qian Chengdan, a history professor at Beijing University who lectured members of the CCP Politburo, argues that the rise of China and the increase of China's soft power will need more institution building in the various fields—economic, social, cultural, jurisdictional and political—to ensure the transition from the rule of men to the rule of law.⁷⁹ Another scholar argues that in addition to significant changes that need to be made to the Chinese model—for instance, making it more sustainable, open, free and harmonious—China has to ultimately become a constitutional state in order to make its experience have universal application to the developing states.⁸⁰

Other scholars have explicitly opined that the challenge for the growth of China's soft power is to elucidate a set of values that would unite the Chinese population domestically and be convincing, appealing and attractive externally. The author proposes that China should promote these values to increase its soft power: peace, development, cooperation, democracy, justice and human rights.⁸¹ Another scholar argues that Chinese values that may have universal appeal include economic development, stability and harmony. The task for China is to integrate, institutionalize and operationalize these values.⁸²

Public Relations: Expanding the Influence of Chinese Media

According to some scholars, another reason why China still lags behind in soft power is that previous and current Chinese efforts have concentrated on traditional Chinese cultural legacies but the government has not done a good job in conducting international public relations, particularly in dealing with the Western media. As a result, the Western media have

⁷⁸ *Xinhua News Agency*, “Full Text of the National Planning Guidelines for Cultural Development in the Eleventh Five-Year Period”, 13 September 2006.

⁷⁹ Wang Haijing and Qian Chengdan, “*Zhidu jianshe chengqi ruan shili*” [Institutions to Support Soft Power] *Liao Wang* [Outlook Weekly], Vol. 11, 12 March 2007.

⁸⁰ Zhang Jianjing, “‘*Beijing gongshi*’ *yu zhongguo ruanshili de tisheng*” [The “Beijing Consensus” and the increase of China's soft power].

⁸¹ Zhu Majie and Yu Xintian, “*Ruan guoli jianshe: bu rong hu shi de wu xing yingxiang*” [Soft power construction: invisible influence not to be ignored].

⁸² 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], Issue 2, 2007.

excessively focused on the negative reporting of China.⁸³ One reason for China's lack of soft power, according to some Chinese scholars, is insufficient financial input in the tools of communication.⁸⁴ The solution for this problem is two-fold. First, China must learn to develop more effective strategies to better deal with the Western media. Second, China needs to strengthen the capacity of its media in international communications.

Conclusions

In recent years, both Chinese officials and scholars have gone to great lengths to explore soft power and its implications for China's foreign affairs. The popularity of soft power in China perhaps reflects the widespread excitement of the Chinese people about the pending rise of their nation as well as their sensitivity to anything that may have an impact on China's ascendance. Following Nye's conceptual framework, Chinese officials and scholars have shed much light on the sources, potential, practice and objectives of soft power in the Chinese context.

A few things, however, are still unclear in the Chinese discourse on soft power. For instance, it is not clear how soft power can be translated into the attainment of specific foreign policy goals. This is particularly the case in their discussion of culture being the main source of soft power. There are very few concrete suggestions as to how the Chinese "harmonious" worldview could restructure the world order. Moreover, available Chinese studies are short of empirical reviews or specific case studies, such as how its foreign policy or participation in international institutions has had an impact on its soft power.

Another key point is that in much of Chinese discourse, one finds constant reference to the domestic context, whether it is culture, values or institutions. This domestic orientation clearly indicates that China itself is in a state of significant changes—cultural, economic, social and political. This state of flux indicates that many sources of Chinese soft power are also uncertain, pending the ultimate transformation of the Chinese state and society. The uncertainties are also reflected in the debate among Chinese scholars, although some common views are shared by the vast majority of analysts. Furthermore, even the domestic

⁸³ Wu Xu, "Zhongguo ruan shili bun eng chi laoben" [China's soft power cannot depend on traditions only], *Shiji xing* [Century], Issue 6, 2007.

⁸⁴ Shen Suru, "Kaizhan 'ruan shili' yu dui wai chuanbo de yanjiu" [Conduct research on soft power and external communications].

political environment has some impact on the Chinese understanding of soft power. For instance, in the analysis of media influence as a source of soft power, very few Chinese analysts, at least among those who are engaged in the soft power discourse, realize that Western media outlets, powerful as they are in shaping world opinions, are not submissive tools of their governments. As a matter of fact, the Western media, most importantly the U.S. media, has played a crucial role in bringing down the international reputation of the U.S. government soon after the invasion of Iraq.

The official inclination to cling to the last ideological straws may have quite a significant negative impact on China's soft power. First, given the preference of the decision-makers, a lot of resources will continue to be allocated to research projects that are closer to the official ideology, the new Marxist project being a good example. Second, it gives the political and ideological watchdogs the power to censure works that they may deem unfit, for political reasons, sometimes wantonly and arbitrarily. Third, it discourages intellectual innovations. Perhaps most importantly, the official discourse is likely to facilitate the slow political reform process. Given the predominance of Western ideological and political ideals, political stagnation in China will continue to put it in a defensive position. Instead of shaping worldviews and setting agendas in world affairs, soft power, however the Chinese elite may define it, will have to be used for defensive purposes.

In light of all these factors, it is perhaps understandable why Chinese discourse on soft power also seems to demonstrate a lack of confidence and forcefulness. This is particularly evident when compared to the American discussion of soft power. Chinese analysts seem to downplay or neglect the function of soft power to aggressively influence others. Chinese authors rarely discuss political ideology or beliefs and their potential for China's soft power promotion. They are more or less inclined to base their arguments on relativity, frequently stressing the relative nature of culture and ideology, whereas the American analysis of soft power tends to be more absolute in advocating the universal nature of their ideology, socio-political system, beliefs and cultural tenets.⁸⁵

More often than not, official Chinese voices have steadfastly emphasized the importance of respecting the cultural, social, political and ideological diversity in the world. This emphasis on diversity is clearly a counter-measure to Western insistence on promoting its universal ideational influence in the world, including in China, which would pose a grave

⁸⁵ Fang Changping, "Zhong mei ruan shili bijiao ji qi dui zhongguo de qishi".

challenge to the ruling position of the CCP. The lack of confidence is also a reflection of the fact that the Chinese socio-political system is not in conformity with the global political discourse and atmosphere in which political openness and pluralism are the dominant norms. Another factor in Chinese reluctance to aggressively advocate soft power has to do with their caution that such a loud voice might be interpreted by the West as some sort of Chinese grand strategy to challenge the West. Beijing is fearful that any fanfare on soft power could be used by some Western observers as part of their evidence to support a “China threat” thesis.⁸⁶

China has indeed done a lot to promote its soft power. These efforts include various large-scale cultural activities in other countries, putting in a large amount of financial resources to cultivate a better image of China, promoting the capacity of its mass media in international communications, and sponsoring Confucius Institutes throughout the world. Despite all these efforts, Chinese intellectuals seem to be uncertain about the ultimate fate of China’s soft power. Numerous writings by Chinese analysts do suggest the validity of the thesis: “Soft power remains Beijing’s underbelly and China still has a long way to go to become a true global leader.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Yu Yunquan, “*Zhongguo wenhua ruan shili jianshe ren zhong dao yuan*”.

⁸⁷ Yanzhong Huang and Sheng Ding, “Dragon’s Underbelly: An Analysis of China’s Soft Power”, *East Asia*, Vol. 23 No. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 22–44.

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