

Research Report

## **China's Cultural Diplomacy**

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## 1. Introduction

A soft power is a power that establishes its foundations on three main pillars, i.e. culture, political values, and foreign policy. It is the culture of a state that attracts others and piques outsiders' interest in the unique attributes offered by the society. It aims to direct and imitate by using attraction of intangible sources such as culture, national cohesion, ideology, and influence on international institutions (Nye 2002). One of the ways through which a state can highlight itself on the international stage is its association with its cultural traditions by following which it can establish and enhance its dialectical and historical legitimacy. This association not only allows the creation of a distinct identity in the international arena but also anchors the national identity. Cultural tradition is usually built through language and literature, religion and belief systems, myths and history, lifestyle, and so forth.

Domestic and international performances are imperative if a country desires to make its culture attractive to others; the concept of cultural power as a tool in international relations is not limited to coercion, it rather acts as a tool of persuasion by creating an environment where the attractiveness of ideas creates a desire to follow it (Nye 1990). The term can be viewed as an expansion and advancement of Carr's (1954) thought of "power over opinion" and Lukes' (1974) "third dimension of power," the two of which illuminate on how the appeal of a country's way of life, beliefs, approaches, instruction and tact enable it to convince different countries to eagerly embrace its objectives (Su-Yan 2013). While acquainting this idea with China, Wang Huning contends that culture isn't as it were the establishment for setting strategies, yet in addition a capacity to impact people of different nations, which set the tone for this school of considerations.

## 2. Chinese Culture

China's growing economy in today's world makes it a key player in the international arena. It contributes greatly to the influence it has gathered. In order to further strengthen its global position, employment of cultural instruments is a major tool in China's arsenal. Perhaps the first official authorization of the central function of culture in soft power was secured in 2007 when the expression of "cultural soft power" was incorporated in the report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Socialist Congress of China (McGiffert 2016). In 2017, the report to the Nineteenth CPC Congress, a directing record on the work of China for the future five years, asserts that "culture is a nation and country's spirit" and expresses the aspiration of "building more grounded social certainty and assisting communist culture to prosper" with an uncommon accentuation on expanding China's cultural soft power (You 2018).

**2.1 Historical Perspective on Chinese Culture:** Historically, the concept of collectivism has played a centerstage role in the Chinese culture. Elements of collective agency have been prominent in ancient Chinese philosophy (Triandis 1995). The Chinese way of thought includes a large inclination to a more holistic

mindset (Nisbett et al. 2001). Unlike the Western approach to culture, which shows a much more prominent leaning towards individualism and focuses largely on the self - more so than evaluating from a more social and collective standing (Wang & Liao 2017).

**2.1.1 Confucianism:** These ideas of social evaluation, with the strong emphasis on society and collectivism, can be found in the teachings of Confucius. Confucius, born as K'ung Ch'iu in 552 BCE, was a tutor, who would provide formal education to children of the nobility in China. Confucianism has a vital role in shaping Chinese moral thought and social relationship. It had been adopted by several Chinese dynasties throughout the history, making it the reigning philosophy for over 1000 years. According to Yum (1988), it has endured as a political and social value system due to its integration into the educational system and was institutionalized through government officials, who were recruited.

The ideals of Confucianism are integrated deeply within the art of Chinese governance and political system. The society, as Confucius says, is an extension of family unit. The family unit is noted to provide the best environment for growth and self-actualization. This is because of the nurturing and supportive nature of the family setting allowing for the best environment for personal growth and prosperity (Weiming 1985).

**2.1.2 Taoism:** While the teachings of Confucius provide the guide to social life, Buddhism and Taoism give the religious and mystical backing to the Chinese culture. Buddhism and Taoism are the key components of traditional Chinese religious culture, being in the society for over 3000 years.

Taoism, much like Confucianism, rests its foundation on the idea of harmony within the society\*. This philosophy finds its origin in China and remains indigenous to the country. Taoism preaches a simpler life, one that is in harmony with nature, free and devoid of societal desires. Tao is defined as “the eternal order of the cosmos and at the same time, its course, an identification frequently found in metaphysics, but which lacks a thorough dialectical structure” (Weber 1951).

According to Taoist philosophy, Tao is defined as the essence of nature. Much like the concept of Sufism (mysticism), Taoist belief is the presence of a divine spirit everywhere and within everything. Man, and the divine, are all reflections of the Tao and hence are noted to be one. Taoism believes in the counteracting properties of the elements of nature; ‘yin and yang’ are opposite forces of light and darkness, yet they constitute one reality. Thus, asserting that it is the nature’s way to contradict, yet it compliments and fixes itself. Though, from a standard perspective, Taoism appreciates passivity and non-violent behaviour, the most important feature of Taoism is this assumption that reality consists of two opposing elements that are mutually embedded.

The Taoist concept of Yin and Yang explains China’s approach towards the world where there is good and bad, but they both work together in harmony. This approach is reflected in China’s assertive but cooperative role in the world defined by Xi Jinping.

**2.1.3 Yellow Emperor - Application of Concepts:** Gōngsūn Xuānyuán, nicknamed Yellow Emperor, was the primary head and pioneer of China. He was additionally seen as a divine being in Chinese folklore and named Five Forms of the Highest Deity. The Yellow Emperor represents Chinese nationalism. He remains an influential figure, as he is depicted as the originator of the centralized state, as a cosmic ruler as well as the initiator of Chinese culture (Chang 1983).

The Yellow Emperor is seen to have birthed many of China's cultural legacies, ranging from the Chinese Calendar, arts, and ancestor of football. Perhaps his presence is most noted in his association with Taoism. It is claimed by Chinese Taoist that many of the precepts were formulated by the Yellow Emperor (Windridge & Fong 1999).

With the rise of the Laozi, the position of Yellow Emperor as a deity diminished but he continued to be considered as an undying being: he was viewed as an ace of lifespan procedures and as a divine being who could uncover new lessons – as writings, for example, the 6th century Huangdi Yinfujing – to his followers (Komjathy 2013).

### 3. China Today: Cultural Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

In a stark contrast to the west, China's idea of culture revolves greatly around the cultivation of self and harmony. Western thought on culture is more focused on the process of assimilation and heteronomy. In recent times, Chinese government has largely focused on creating awareness about the Chinese culture around the globe. The focal point of the sixth plenary session of the 17th central committee of the Communist Party, was Chinese Cultural Diplomacy. "Cultural awareness" emphasizes "culture for diplomacy," while the focus of "cultural confidence" for culture."

Exchange of cultural dynamics as a mean to achieve diplomatic goals has been a key factor in the Chinese Culture for diplomacy dynamic. The soft power theory has become more prominent in the Chinese national strategy during the eras of President Hu Jintao and President Xi Jinping (Riva 2016). In 2007, President Hu Jintao, while addressing the 17th Communist Party National Congress, highlighted the importance of culture in enhancing the national power dynamics on the international stage (Hu 2007). He said: "(We must) enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests."

Within the academic discourse regarding soft power, China was first introduced as a case study by Wang Huning (Xiao 2017). He describes the concept of soft power within the framework of a Chinese concept to be slightly different from the one described by Joseph Nye. He says: "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics" revolves around the peaceful progress of society Graser and Murphy 2009 say culture is an important notion within the Chinese Soft Power strategy; it is seen as a way to promote China as a responsible, and reliable nation. Strategies such as

Confucius Institutions that promote cultural exchange are seen as a way to promote that image. (Lai 2012)

The Economic success of China has also made it more attractive to foreign eyes. Moreover, its timely actions to provide aid to the poorer nations has also enforced a positive image of the country. The Chinese government presents itself with Chinese concepts and ideologies in the forefront. Many of these characteristics have roots in Confucius ideology. The history of the country with Confucius teachings penetrated into the socio-culture discourse, makes the country's "Peaceful Rise" strategy more believable. The concept of peaceful rise in a Chinese context focuses greatly on the idea of "Peace".

## 4. Modern Day China

### 4.1 Emergence of concept of culture and cultural diplomacy

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power emphasizes upon the role of culture as a medium of influence in a country's soft image.

China's 'open door policy' that was devised in the 1980s had China's cultural traditions find themselves trending in the pop culture sphere. Both traditional (acupuncture, feng shui, martial arts, herbal medicines, regional cuisines, literature, religious practices) and more modern pop cultures (arts, cinema, pop music, acrobatics, and dance) have been in trend, allowing Chinese culture to be sought out by foreigners not only within Asia but from the West as well. (Ding and Saunders, 2006)

Former Chinese President Hu Jintao's era witnessed the inclusion of the concepts of soft power and cultural soft power in the national strategy of China. For China, culture is a key resource for power and is thus not only an important tool for its soft power but also, as asserted by Hu Jintao before the 17<sup>th</sup> Chinese Communist Party National Congress, 'a growing source of social cohesion and creativity as well as a factor of increasing importance in the strengthening of comprehensive national power.' (Becard & Filho, 2019). For China, thus, culture has a peculiarly irreplaceable role in its soft power for it is the framework that accommodates all other aspects of Chinese soft power.

During the ongoing era of President Xi Jinping, the concept of cultural soft power has been made the part of China's political jargon. Xi has asserted that "China needs to deepen reforms in its cultural system, promote socialist core values and push forward the cultural industry so as to build a solid foundation for the nation's cultural soft power," (Xinhua 2014). He has also stressed more publicity for modern Chinese values, or socialist values with Chinese characteristics alongside resource strengthening the cause to assert itself as a civilized, responsible and a reliable country, primarily through cultural and educational exchanges, internationalizing its mass media, and the widespread network of Confucius Institutes.

## 4.2 Instruments for application

China's instruments of soft power are a blend of those used by other countries with its own distinctive features sprouting from the Chinese culture and its conception of soft power.

China has penetrated well into the societal sphere through its cuisine long before it flexed its muscles for an increased role in the international arena. Language has been a priority for the country where a widespread network of Confucius Institutes is working to make China accessible and comprehensible for the world. The country extensively internationalized its mass media outlets to ensure the dissemination of Chinese version. It has attracted the global film industry with its largest number of film theatres compelling them to change their depiction of the country in their productions. Meanwhile, China is actively introducing cultural exchange programmes and granting scholarships to its educational institutions attracting the world youth to its varsities for professional and technical education. Similarly, with BRI China is introducing the world to the finesse of its architecture.

**4.2.1 Cuisine:** Richard Wilk, Prof. Emeritus at Indiana University, terms food as 'a particularly potent symbol of personal and group identity, forming one of the foundations of both individuality and a sense of common membership in a larger bounded group'. The representation of the Chinese food culture and culinary art in the overseas is a great example of 'Gastro-diplomacy'. Chinese food has influenced the local food habits across the globe. It has adapted to many a cultures and localized version of Chinese exclusive to ever country is a common sight in many a country that otherwise resist the Chinese impact. The Chinese cuisine's global impact happened much earlier, while Chinese food ingredients and cooking methods reached the modern-day south-eastern Asia as early as the Ming dynasty with the Chinese trade workers and migrants (Wu & Cheung, 2002). For centuries, Chinese cuisine has absorbed local ingredients and methods from far off corners of the world and it continues to incorporate into more and more cultures with each passing day to the extent that the United States has its own version of chop suey named 'American Chop Suey' and India has a popular 'Chindian' food culture. With the increasing pace of life and the eating out culture gaining momentum in the last half a century, the network of Chinese restaurants run by the immigrants abroad is fast spreading out of the Chinatowns gaining the associated populations and their way of life an acceptance abroad and putting a human face to the Chinese identity.

**4.2.2. Art, Film and Literature:** A major goal of the cultural diplomacy is putting a human face to the concept of a country/ a state. As China has overcome its poverty issue and achieved a stable and sustainable economy, the attention was directed towards changing the country's global perception. This was in line with the teachings of the ancient strategists of China like Confucius, Kong Zi and Mencius who were disinclined to territorial expansion by force and stressed on education and humanity to enhance the stature of the state (Palit, 2014).

At the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art in 2014, Xi stressed that literature and art being deeply integrated in people's lives can edify the humane side of any nation. Literature has a great impact on the youth shaping their opinions, likes and dislikes. Xi stressed the need for revival of Chinese art and culture for the

development of the nation. He pledged to transform the country's artists and literary circles into the forerunners of the struggle to help attaining the Chinese dream while keeping the spirit of innovation in line with the patriotic values (China Copy Right And Media, 2014).

China possesses one of the world's major literary traditions. The history of art and literature in China dates back to over 3000years. The earliest form of literature is found in the archives of courts of the ruling dynasties. Fictional work goes back to the Ming dynasty where novels in a developed vocabulary took birth to entertain the masses. The principal genre of Chinese literature is though poetry, early folk songs were written during the Han dynasty. For a brief period during Yuan dynasty, drama saw a peak, but Opera remains the most predominant form of popular entertainment (Asia for Educators, 2020).

The Peking opera, referred to as 'Pingju' or 'Jingxi' in Chinese, is currently the most influential opera in China that is making its mark with the foreign audiences and tourists as a representation of Chinese culture. Peking Opera has a 200-year history. The form of opera originated in 1790, at the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Emperor. China National Peking Opera Company has been cooperating with foreign countries in the creation of new Peking Operas for three years that depicts the impact and interests of investors and publics in the traditional Chinese art (Naiqian, 2019)

Being home to the largest number of movie theatres enabled China to attract the global film industry towards its market. The Chinese box office generates the second most revenue to USA at \$8.6 billion, thus there is naturally a desire to access the Chinese audience (IBIS World 2019). A market of 1.4 billion people of the country has compelled Hollywood to transform its representation of the country in its productions, alongside the massive direct investment from the country in international co-productions that comes with a set of rules that the country adheres to (Bunch, 2020). These developments are in line with the Chinese President Xi Jinping's understanding that art is the best way for different countries and nations to understand and communicate with each other. Xi realizes that the international community is increasingly attracted to understanding the country and its people and they shall not be limited to rely on the formal news sources and shall be allowed a peak into the society through the informal mediums of art, film and literature while adhering to the socialist principles and promoting the Chinese values (Xinhua 2015). China's massive investment in the Hollywood is helping it both in reaching the global Hollywood audience and through a foreign medium reshape its image internationally but alongside the co-production rule is allowing the Chinese industry to equip itself with the techniques and learnings from the highly developed cinematic skills of the industry and helping it bring its domestic industry to the international standards.

**4.2.3 Language:** Being the language of 20% of the world's population knowing Chinese can open many doors for the international students seeking better employment opportunities in the hospitality sector, media, finance, and diplomacy. A wide network of Confucius Institutes is a welcoming gesture from the country seeking a value addition to their skills.

A rather more formal approach towards cultural diplomacy, the Confucius Institutes (CI) primary focus is teaching the Chinese language. They serve as a platform for strengthening ties with the host countries through their cultural and educational exchange programmes as well as promoting multiculturalism and building a more harmonious world (Becard & Filho 2019). The first of these Institutions opened its doors in 2004 at Seoul, South Korea. As of 2018, there were 548 Confucius Institutes around the world. Apart from that there are 1,193 Confucius classrooms based in primary and secondary schools (Jakhar 2019).

CIs are considered among some of the most prominent instruments of public diplomacy. Though they are the most visible manifestation of China's soft power diplomacy, the structure for these institutions is very flexible and vary from country to country, majority of them are run in partnership with a foreign institution. CIs, combined with extensive international branding initiatives, strengthen the China's cultural diplomacy offering.

**4.2.4 Media:** In 2009, China decided to internationalize its media, realizing the need for its own narrative to reach the world citizenry and to counter the monopoly of western media on image building as phrased 'from the West to the Rest' by Daya Thussu (Thussu 2018).

As a result, in 2010 four of Beijing's prominent media agencies announced new branches in the international sectors. Today, Xinhua News agency has around 180 international offices leaving behind Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France Press (AFP) with publication in eight languages. China's Global television Network or CGTN broadcasts in four global languages other than English in 171 countries. China Radio International closely follow BBC radio with its broadcasts in 65 languages. In 2013, China Daily launched a bilingual edition in the US, being 16 pages in Chinese and 24 in English; the newspaper is distributed across Europe, USA and Latin America (Rehman 2020).

**4.2.5 Education:** China has a long history of providing education to international students studying in high schools and universities in China. With the most dynamic economic growth, China is investing about 1 trillion yuan (\$164 billion) in its educational system annually. At least 54 Chinese universities are ranked in the world top 500 universities (China Education Centre, University of Nottingham, n.d.). Over the past few years, the number of international students who study in China has significantly increased. Setting aside the quality of education, a major contributory factor is the facilitation provided by the Chinese government to foreign students in terms of scholarships, foundations and corporations designed to support international students, economic fee structure, and flexible rules for part-time jobs.

International students have enrolled in over 1004 higher education institutions in China. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China stats released in April 2019, over 1000 Chinese Higher Education Institutions have international enrollments where a total of 492,185 international students were studying in China in 2018. Out of them 63,041 international students received Chinese government scholarships whereas 429,144, which is 87.19% of the total, were self-funded (Ministry of Education, The People's Republic of China, 2019).

Chinese higher education institutions are enthusiastically offering exchange programmes, admitting foreign students, developing joint research programmes with foreign universities, and offering courses in English language. These measures have multi-dimensional benefits for the country, apart from bringing the world closer to the country and introducing them to it; it also serves as a learning medium for its populations and refining its own research capabilities (Soe 2019).

## 5. Institutional Support

China has long been dehumanized by the western powers, who portrayed it as a force intending to destabilize the world order pushing the country into an international isolation. China's own isolationist approach in the previous decades due to the lack of means to combat the western propaganda and its regression from western mode of governance has left many misconceptions about the country in even the states whose governments are close to the country and are in cooperation with it. People widely rely on western mediums for their impression of the country.

In 2016, President Xi Jinping with a realization of China's weakness on the front, declared that it was time for the country to lower its guard and assimilate with the world using its 'cultural soft powers' in order to develop an understanding of the country (Bader, 2016) and approached the world in an organized manner using the rich culture of the country, opening its doors to international students and extending a hand of cooperation to countries across the globe.

China has been actively expanding its influence in the diplomatic and economic circles. Xi has envisioned China's diplomacy as a 'diplomacy of socialism with Chinese characteristic'. Xi, evidently the most powerful Chinese leader since Chairman Mao Zedong, is fast moving towards the goal of 'China leading the reform of global governance system' to reflect Beijing's values and priorities (Xinhua 2018). For the first time in known history, China is actively involved in multilateral diplomatic ventures, actively participating in initiatives as JCPOA on Iran or a more global issue of climate change. Initiatives like Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Route Initiative by the country are fast positioning it as a dominant player in the region far and wide. Contrary to its past approach, China is also participating in military exercises with countries like Russia in the Sea of Japan, Mediterranean and the Baltic. It has developed important naval bases in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Djibouti.

## 6. New Era

Soon after assuming power in 2012, President Xi has adopted a rather benevolent approach towards the state's increasing influence in the global spheres, with his vision of a 'common destiny for mankind'. Xi's approach makes a lot more sense when viewed in the context of China's share and enormous dependency on the global system. As a largest global economy, it is in China's own interest to work collaboratively for addressing challenges that threaten the smooth functioning of the order. Issues such as climate change, pandemics and financial crisis that pose a threat to global safety and prosperity are those of common interest to the country as well. Xi, who desires a change in the current global governance system, rises

himself from the fact that the current system favours certain powers and their interest over the wider, global interests. Xi calls for a more inclusive system that would incorporate different modes of governance unlike the US and Western led global order that enforces western value system and governance model on everyone alike irrespective of their own values and culture. The approach has led to many blunders like Afghanistan and Iraq that are now left for the rest of the world to deal with as US and West distance themselves from the ensuing turbulence. Xi envisions a rather balanced and politically inclusive system giving everyone, irrespective of their size, an equal opportunity and that would “respect the legitimate interests and values of nations, regardless of their social systems or their levels of development.” (Ying 2017).

## 7. Conclusion

With the changing world, the power dynamics are changing as well. The old theories and practices of muscle power practices have a limited role to play in the modern day. The new rules of power are being shaped by economic might and soft image. China is aware of these facts and has been working on these dimensions for a long time. As Xi’s China successfully integrates into the global system, utilizing the international political sphere on issues of global significance and extending economic support where needed, many hopes and fears accompany the country’s rise.

The country’s rise on the global sphere is a breather for many, who are benefitting from the economic initiatives of China. With the hope for collectivism, China is struggling for a multipolar world where the small countries have a better say and a transformation of the existing global system is ruling with its multiple oppressive features because of its capitalist nature. Many misconceptions about the country still exist in the dominant western narrative. To combat those, China has been efficiently putting its strengths to play. China is making a very concerted effort for utilizing the privilege given to the country by its thousands of years old culture, the country’s rich history and the core concepts forming the basis of its society like cooperation and collectivism. Equally supported by the country’s blooming economy, China is now a major stakeholder in Hollywood; the Chinese media has an outreach that is outdoing many international/ western media outlets. Chinese cuisine has been internalized by many foreign cultures. The country offers an extensive cultural experience through its educational scholarship and cultural exchange programmes. Chinese language is taught across the world through a widespread network of Confucius Institutes and the world is fast opening to this mystery nation. As the rise of the country becomes inevitable by the day, it is equally important how does China play its cards well, be it economic development, global issues, or public diplomacy.

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