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Academic Foresights

Soft Power Debates in China

How do you analyze the present situation of soft power debates in China?

We must first ask whether Chinese experts debate on soft power? If so, when have they started debating, and what are the different approaches of the concept elaborated in China? An increasing number of academic works have been focusing on China's soft power strategy in the past few years, both in China and in the rest of the world. However, Chinese experts have been debating Joseph Nye's concept for over two decades. In the early 1990s, in parallel with the collapse of Soviet Union, the concept of soft power started to gain certain interest in Chinese intellectual circles, although the political leaders most often ignored what they then presented as a "Western concept", in a context of deep tensions that followed the 1989 Tiananmen Square events. Yet, Nye's first book that mentions soft power (1) was translated in Mandarin Chinese by He Xiaodong as early as in 1992 and published by the very official China's Military Translation Press. An article written by Wu Chunqiu in 1990 also mentions various components of power and includes some elements identified by Nye in a list aimed at formulating a development strategy for China.(2) But it is an article written by Wang Huning in 1993 that clearly addresses the issue of soft power in China for the first time. With this text, Wang opened the debate on the relevancy of such an approach to Beijing, suggesting that "if a country has a culture and an admirable ideology, other countries will tend to follow. (...) It does not need to use a hard power, too costly and less effective".(3) This article is an outline of the concept developed by Nye, while the culture is clearly identified as the main source of soft power. From then on, the construction of soft power has been initiated in China, and although still hesitant at its beginning, it differed from its general acceptance in the U.S. in the emphasis put on the need to use it as a strategy to increase China's influence and power.(4)

The non-Chinese experts have different approaches however on the reception of the soft power in Beijing. Bonnie Glaser and Melissa Murphy argue in particular that the concept has been well received since its introduction in China (5), while Sheng Ding and Li Mingjiang believe on the other hand that this text has had little impact.(6) For Sheng Ding, it is due to the fact that Wang Huning's article was released too soon after the Tiananmen Square events and the isolation China was facing at that time. He believes it was not until the mid-1990 that "China has emerged from the trauma of Tiananmen Square" and the academic circles then began to really look at soft power as a relevant option.(7) This reluctance may also be explained by the various Chinese

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experiences in the second half of the twentieth century. Once focusing on its ideology in the 1950s in order to take the leadership of the Third World, and later attempting to spread the ideas of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, China had already tried in its own way to develop a form of soft power, with limited results to say the least, the chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution (1965-1975) being the most significant example. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the early 1990s, a generation of leaders inspired by the ideas and recommendations of Deng Xiaoping chose to reject any temptation to return to such strategies. The other explanation lies in the domestic debates within the Chinese Communist Party, where conservatives have often been reluctant to experience strategies clearly identified as emanating from the Western world. Experts agree, however, on the fact that discussions were at first confined to academic circles, and later, from the early 2000s, the interest in soft power has gradually increased among politicians and the media.(8)

Since Nye's ideas have generated more than a significant interest in China, soft power has been slowly debated and redefined by the experts and the Chinese leaders, to the point that it is possible to make mention of a "Chinese soft power", with characteristics different than the concept originally developed by Nye, and thus offering a genuine reconstruction.(9) It should also be noted that several schools of thought have emerged and debated China's soft power, its characteristics and its goals. Not all the Chinese scholars theorized the Chinese soft power in the same way, but instead proposed a very different definition of it.

Among the various schools of thought, the "cultural school", also known as the "Shanghai school", quickly became the main stream. This school is called "cultural school" because of its emphasis on culture, and respects the orientations of soft power proposed in Wang Huning's article.(10) Yu Xintian, director emeritus of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS), summed up the position of the cultural school by asserting that "soft power consists of ideas and principles, institutions and policy measures that operate within the culture of a nation and that cannot be separated".(11) Culture is the main source of soft power because it includes two other sources of soft power identified by Nye: foreign policy and domestic politics.(12) For the supporters of the cultural school, ancient history and traditional culture are the main elements of the Chinese cultural soft power. To improve the attractiveness of China in the world, this school therefore advocates an intensive promotion of Chinese culture abroad. The implementation of Confucius Institutes around the world is a direct consequence of this strategy, and indicates the strong influence of the "Shanghai school" in the past decade.

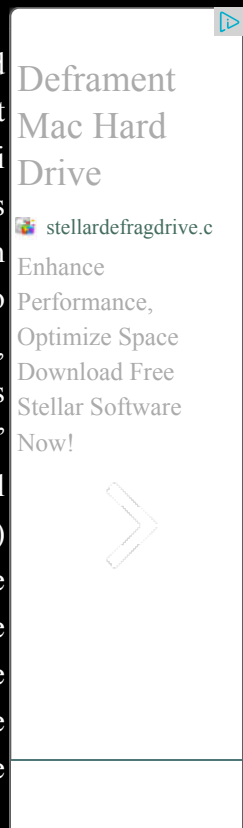
During the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in December 2002, several reforms in the cultural field were officially launched with the aim of promoting Chinese culture in order to serve the country's strategic interests. But it is only in 2007, at the 17th National Congress, that soft power was formally adopted as a political strategy.(13) It must be reminded that this decision was taken at the initiative of the Ministry of Culture, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (14). In addition, the speech

Ministry of Culture, not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.(14) In addition, the speech given by Hu Jintao during the Congress confirmed the formal adoption of the concept of soft power promoted by the Shanghai school. Officially, “Hu Jintao has called for a renewal of socialist cultural initiatives, stimulating cultural creativity in the whole nation and making culture an important part of Chinese soft power”.(15) This virtuous, if not idyllic, vision of Chinese power is unusual to say the least, and for the first time relies almost exclusively on the tools of soft power, first and foremost the cultural influence, without ever mentioning the economic or military fields, except to indicate that China seeks to play a more significant role in maintaining peace, to a level that has been interpreted in China as a “national renaissance”.(16) Its main drawback is not to propose a long-term vision, but to advocate support for cultural initiatives to promote China in the world. In this sense, it is closer to what is often referred as “nation branding” than a clearly defined political strategy.

The other theoretical schools, currently less influent within the Chinese leaders, are known as the “cultural secondary schools” that follow up on the vision of the Shanghai school, but emphasize even more on the importance of cultural factors; and the “schools culturally critical”, mainly composed of “the school of May 4, 1919” and “the school of cultural pluralism”. Others put the current domestic politics and foreign policy strategies in the center of soft power, and are usually identified as “political schools” of Su Changhe, Jin Xu and Yan Xuetong.(17) If they could prevail in the future, depending on the opportunity as well as the political choices, these schools are for the moment more discreet, but still influence the strategy of mobilization of considerable means, and China’s Grand strategy.

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

As we have noted, it took several years for a soft power strategy to be debated and officially recognized in Beijing, but its ultimate goals still remain unclear, and have not been defined to date. The fifth generation of leaders led by the tandem Xi Jinping – Li Keqiang that came to power in late 2012 also has not yet identified new trends, besides the eloquent and most certainly intentionally unclear “Chinese dream”. It does not mean however that China has abandoned its soft power strategy. To the contrary, it is likely to be debated at a different level, which would incorporate China’s growing power, assertiveness, and to some extent responsibility as a great power. Many Western experts have thus questioned the possibility for the implementation of a “Beijing consensus” that would compete with the “Washington consensus” and upset the international economic system by providing, and imposing in certain circumstances, new rules.(18) This hypothesis is for the time being firmly rejected by the Chinese leadership. The question is however raised whether soft power is not just a temporary strategy, while the establishment of a new hegemony would be Beijing’s ultimate goal. Even the Chinese experts are questioning the path followed by the Chinese power (19), and raise the question of a new governance model, while still hesitating whether they should make mention of a “Beijing consensus”.(20)




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It is however quite unlikely that such a mention will become Beijing's official posture under Xi Jinping, and we may therefore expect more debates within the next few years that will shape China's strategy for the future decades. One cannot therefore exclude a significant turn in the definition and assignment Beijing gives to its soft power, notably as regards a potential change of paradigm in regional or international relations. But it is most likely that the Communist party will not fundamentally change the discourse that has accompanied its soft power strategy since 2007 under Xi's leadership.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

This question concerns China as a great power in general, and the strategies that will be implemented to reach its objectives, if any, in particular. It also suggests potential structural transformations that would be the result of a soft power strategy. The answer all depends on the direction that Beijing assigns and will assign to its soft power strategy, and the fifth generation of leaders will most likely come with several adjustments, comparable to those the Hu-Wen tandem imposed after 2002. Among the many Chinese experts who have explored the issue of soft power, Li Mingjiang believes that China's leaders assign multiple objectives to soft power. These strategies are implemented to: 1) fight against misperceptions and misunderstanding of China (portrayed among others by foreign media); 2) improve the international image of the regime; 3) challenge the excessive influence of foreign cultures (especially the ideologies and beliefs that undermine the legitimacy of the party); 4) refute the theory of a China threat; and 5) maintain a stable and peaceful periphery.(21) These five elements are subject to various debates within the Communist party, dividing mostly conservatives and reformers. The different power and international affairs schools are however also divided among groups such as globalists, regionalists or nationalists, who diverge on what should be China's role once it has become the first world economic power.

Since soft power has become an essential component of China's strategy, its fate is closely associated to the evolution of the political and academic debates. Considering its success, and although it still remains incomplete or partial (22), we may consider with no doubt that it will remain however a priority in order to serve China's influence and public diplomacy. Alongside the "Chinese dream", and although the success of this slogan must still be demonstrated in the long term, we may also take into account the impact of such public policies on the Chinese population, and ask whether China's soft power strategy primarily aims at "seducing" the world and giving a better image of a regime usually highly criticized, or at improving the way the Chinese perceive their own country and its leaders.

Notes:

(1) Nye, Joseph S., Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power, New York, Basic Books, 1988

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- (2) Wu, Chunqiu, "Comprehensive National Strength and Its Implications for China's Development Strategy", *Journal of International Technical Economics Institute*, n°3, 1990.
- (3) Wang, Huning, "Zuwei Guojia Shili de Wenhua: Ruan Quanli" (Culture as a national power: soft power), *Fudan Daxue Xuebao (Fudan University Journal)*, March 1993, pp.23-28.
- (4) See Shen, Jiru, "Do Not Ignore the Importance of Soft Power", *Liaowang*, n°41, October 1999; and Sheng, Ding, *The Dragon's Hidden Wings: How China Rises with Its Soft Power*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2008.
- (5) Glaser, Bonnie, & Murphy, Melissa, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate", in McGiffert, Carola (dir.), *Chinese Soft Power and its Implications for the United States – Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World*, Washington, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2009, pp.10-27.
- (6) Ding, Sheng, & Saunders, Robert. A., "Talking Up China: An Analysis of China's Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language", *East Asia*, vol. 23, n°2, 2006, pp.3–33; and Li, Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 2, n°2, 2008, pp.287-308.
- (7) Ding, Sheng, & Saunders, Robert. A., "Talking Up China: An Analysis of China's Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language", *East Asia*, vol. 23, n°2, 2006, p. 26.
- (8) See Pang, Zhongying, "Kongzi sixiang de chukou he ruan lilian de shiyong" ("The export of Confucianism and use of soft power"), *Shijie Zhishi*, n° 17, 2006; Meng, Honghua, "An Evaluation of China's Soft Power and Promotion Strategy", in Meng, Honghua (ed.), *China's Soft Power Strategy*, Zhejiang, Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2007; Kurlantzick, Joshua, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007; Courmont, Barthélémy, *Chine, la Grande Séduction – Essai sur le soft power chinois*, Paris, Choiseul, 2009 ; and Cabestan, Jean-Pierre, *La politique internationale de la Chine*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2010.
- (9) Li, Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power", op. Cit.
- (10) Wang, Huning, "Zuwei Guojia Shili de Wenhua: Ruan Quanli", op. Cit.
- (11) Yu Xintian, quoted in Glaser, Bonnie, & Murphy, Melissa, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate", op. Cit., p. 13.
- (12) Yu, Xintian, "The Role of Soft Power in China's Foreign Strategy", *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, March 13, 2008.
- (13) On the debates among Chinese scholars that preceded the Congress and the mentions of a clear soft power strategy, see Pang, Zhongying, "On China's Soft Power", *International Review*, vol. 42, 2006, pp. 1–4; Huang, Yanzhong, & Ding, Sheng, "Dragon's Underbelly: An Analysis of China's Soft Power", *East Asia*, vol. 23, n°4, 2006, pp.22–44; Lai, Hongyi, "China's Cultural Diplomacy: Going for Soft Power", *EAI Background Brief*, n°308, 2006, pp.1-12; Luo, Jianbo, "Zhongguo jueqi de duiwai wenhua zhanlue" ("External cultural strategy in China's rise"), *Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Xuebao*, n° 3, 2006, pp. 97-100; Jiang, Haiyan, "Hongyang zhonghua minzu de youxiu wenhua yu zengqiang woguo de ruanshili" ("Promoting the outstanding culture of the Chinese nation and strengthening China's soft power"), *Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao*, vol. 11, n° 1, 2007, pp. 107-112; Yao, Xu, "Gonggong guanxi de chuanbo shouduan yu zhongguo ruanshili jiangou" ("Communication methods of public relations and China's soft power building"), *Xinwen qianshao*, n° 7, 2007, pp. 93-94; Zhu, Feng, "China Should Give Priority to the Rise of Soft Power", *Huanqiu Shibao*, April 30, 2007; and Cheng, Yugang, "Build China's Soft Power within the Context of Globalization", *Guoji Guangcha*, February 2007. These authors offer various approaches of what the Chinese soft power should be focusing on, mostly mentioning its cultural characteristics. See also Young, Nam Cho, & Jeong, Jong Ho, "China's Soft Power: Discussions, Resources and Prospects", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, n°3, 2008, pp. 453-472; and Han, Bo, & Jiang, Qingyang, *Ruanshili. Zhongguo shijiao (Soft power. A Chinese perspective)*, Beijing, Renmin Chubanshe, 2009.
- (14) "17th Party Congress Demands Boosting Cultural Creativity 'Soft Power'", *Xinhua*, December 28, 2007.



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(15) Cited in Suzuki, Shogo, "Chinese Soft Power, Insecurity Studies, Myopia and Fantasy", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 30, n°4, 2009, p. 781.

(16) See Zhu, Zhe, & Quan, Zongtian, *Zhongguo gongchandang yu zhonghua minzu fuxing ruanshili* (Chinese communist party and the soft power of the Chinese national renaissance), Wuhan, Hubei Renmin Chubanshe, 2009. See also Huang, Suofeng, *Zonghe guoli xinlun: qianlun xin Zhongguo zong he guoli* (New theory of global power: Chinese global power theory), Beijing, Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1999.

(17) Yan, Xuotong, & Xu, Jin, "A Soft Power Comparison between China and the United States", *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, January 20, 2008.

(18) Ramo, Joshua C., *The Beijing Consensus: Notes on the New Physics of Chinese Power*, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004; Halper, Stefan, *The Beijing Consensus. How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the 21th Century*, New York, Basic Books, 2010; and Birdsall, Nancy, & Fukuyama, Francis, "The Post-Washington Consensus", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, n°2, March-April 2011.

(19) See Wang, Jisi, "Zhongguo guoji zhanlue yanjiu de shijiao zhuanhuan" (Change in perspective and research on China's international strategy), in *Zhongguo Guoji Zhanlue Pinglun 2008* (China International Strategy Review 2008), Beijing, World Knowledge Press, 2008; Yu, Xintian, "The Role of Soft Power in China's Foreign Strategy", *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, March 13, 2008; and Zhang, Wenmu, "Shijie lishi zhong de qiangguo zhilu yu Zhongguo de Xuanze", ("Great powers trajectory in world history and the choice of China"), in Guo, Shuyong (ed.), *Zhanlue yu Tansuo* (Strategy and exploration), Beijing, Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2008, pp. 33-54.

(20) Yu, Keping (ed.), *The Chinese Model and Beijing Consensus*, Beijing, Social Sciences Press, 2006.

(21) Li, Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power", *op. Cit.*, p. 300. See also Li, Mingjiang, "Soft Power in Chinese Discourse: Popularity and Prospect", *Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Working Paper 165*, 2008; and Li, Minjiang, *Soft Power. China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2009.

(22) On China as a partial power and the limits of its soft power strategy in particular, see David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global/ The Partial Power*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, especially Chapter 6.

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