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Pushing the Boundaries of Soft Power: The Controversial Chinese Case

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Does China have soft power, intended as the appeal of a country's culture and values to foreign audiences? Also, is China attempting to redefine this form of power, or are the country's efforts only a disguised manifestation of harder forms of power, such as its economic might? These are all ongoing debates which, until recently, seemed to favor a negative or at least a skeptical response –to the first question – and a still inconclusive one– to the latter (Huang and Ding, 2006; Li, 2008; ChinaPower, 2016; The Economist, 2017; Albert, 2018). But are things about to change for the country, or is it only an illusion? This growing power's elaborate strategies of attraction may not be seen positively by many. Yet some contend that its successes are already visible and that the Chinese way may prove effective in the long run (Kurlantzick, 2007; Ding, 2008; Zhang, 2010).

This article will first provide one of the most recent interpretations of the term 'soft power', which is no less contentious on its own. The second part will outline a few select opinions to determine whether China's 'charm offensive' has been deemed successful so far, and why the case is considered 'controversial'. The final part will attempt to make sense and relate these opinions with current developments in order to provide some directions in what the author expects in the near and not so near future for the Chinese way of wielding soft power.

The term 'soft power' was coined by academic Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, in his book *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power*. Several volumes followed to better explain this idea. Since then, the term has been widely adopted not only in academia, but also by journalists, politicians, and policymakers. In its most recent iteration, Nye describes soft power as 'the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes' (2011, pp.20-21). Soft power is heavily dependent on its resources, which include culture, political values, foreign and domestic policy, also supported by institutions. Yet the most topical aspect is the ability to convert power into tangible outcomes.

This is where most points of criticism arise. First of all, soft power is 'soft', hence supposedly incapable of concrete results (Ramo, 2009, pp.76-77). The term is also described as vague, confusing and even ethnocentric, as it was shaped with the US in mind and, more generally, by 'Western' thinkers (Fan, 2008). Similarly, Hall (2010) maintains that this form of power is not easily measurable, and it is better suited to the jargon of politicians, rather than having any real analytical value. Kearn labels it as a 'political buzzword' prone to be 'misused and misunderstood' (2011, p.65). Even more, Janice Bially Mattern believes that this form of power is 'not so soft' after all (2007). This aspect relates to the use of apparently soft tools, as public diplomacy or development aid, but in a subtle and intimidating way. All of these opinions may be debatable, while still being instrumental in promoting further research.

However, the 'not so soft' aspect of soft power is often related to how China operates (Financial Times, 2017). The country's conduct and strategies have often been equated to that of Russia. Recently, they have been branded as a form of 'sharp power'. This is described as a 'set of tools that manipulates or undermines democratic institutions and processes in order to increase a state's influence in another country' (Kellogg, 2018). The two countries are seemingly not trying to 'win hearts and minds', as in soft power, but they 'target audiences by distorting the information that reaches them' (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). The most prominent examples of these persuasive methods are the Russian RT, and the Chinese CCTV, as they are both government-funded networks attempting to

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reach broader international audiences through their English-language news coverage. Going back to the Chinese case, several books have tried to uncover its strategies of attraction, but a few examples stand out, perhaps also because of their provocative (or evocative) titles.

The first one is *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World* (Kurlantzick, 2008). This extensive work – with a journalistic flair – offers a well-researched view of how the country has managed to reverse a mostly negative and threatening image into a fairly positive one, through major diplomatic efforts, and the affirmation of its presence and relevance in international forums. Yet, almost ten years later, Kurlantzick (2017) still recognizes its achievements but is uncertain as to whether China is obtaining them from soft power resources, or if other factors are at play, such as the many 'generous' loans linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (Bullock, 2018). However, such views may be regionally confined, as they are showing positive outcomes only in select countries, such as in Africa and Latin America. Many argue that this can be the explanation for why China's soft power strategies are mostly supported by economic incentives (Linley, Reilly and Goldsmith, 2012; Wong, 2016; Hammond, 2017).

The second example is *The Dragon's Hidden Wings: How China Rises with Its Soft Power* (Ding, 2008). The title suggests that Ding has a positive opinion of China's conduct and results. However, a healthy dose of skepticism is present in the essay. China's culture is believed to be the soundest resource, followed by the Communist Party's governance, which is described as 'questionable' and, finally, Beijing's diplomatic 'finesse', seen as the major weakness of the country. A few empirical examples of soft power strategies are then provided, such as the major investments and collaborations with African and South American countries aimed at strengthening political and economic ties. However, since Xi Jinping took office a lot has changed and is still changing. That being said, even in this instance, Ding concedes that 'China's soft power influence in the global south is about China's economic activities and adroit foreign policy' (Li, 2010).

The last example is *Who's Afraid of China? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power* (Barr, 2011). Barr builds upon one of the major assumptions of wielding soft power: being a liberal democratic country (Nye, 2004, p.5). The author juxtaposes China's model as an alternative to the West through a multidisciplinary approach which draws upon international relations, development studies, and ethnography. The main argument, as stated by Barr, is that 'the rise of China touches a nerve in the Western psyche and presents a fundamental challenge to ideas about modernity, history, and international relations' (Barr, 2011). This last attempt offers some additional perspectives to understand Chinese's strategies of attraction, beyond the sole economic one. However, as mentioned before, all three books precede the Xi's era and his Thought, which aims at creating an alternative to Western liberal democracies, while promoting socialism with Chinese characteristics (Ng, 2017). The Chinese leader's name and ideas have recently been included in the party constitution, and are likely to permeate and define the country's policy and overall direction for the foreseeable future (Buckley and Bradsher, 2018).

When dealing with such a prominent and complex power as China, discussing and generalizing about its conduct may raise more questions than it answers. Nonetheless, due to the topical period for the country and its fast, multifaceted development, such questions open new directions for further research. To name a few: what is the role of a growing economy in the strengthening of its soft power? Is there a correlation between the two? Is China challenging another major assumption of soft power theory, which is that governments have only a limited role when wielding it (Nye, 2004, p.14)? Is there truly only one way to exert soft power in order to not be labeled as 'controversial'? May China prove itself to be an innovator? The answer to most of these questions cannot be given at the moment, as it will require a close observation of the strategies and outcomes of the country's 'charm offensive'.

To conclude, I would like to propose two main reasons for how (and why) China may be close to unleashing its true soft power potential. The first one is rather straightforward, the second one is a composite one, and it may require several pieces of the puzzle to fall into place. When looking at East Asia, both Japan followed by South Korea could be arguably recognized as soft power 'champions'. However, their successes did not come suddenly but followed a similar pattern which, unsurprisingly, is related to a steady economic development. Once fewer people have to deal with daily struggles, they are likely to start making use of their skills, and innovation comes in multiple forms. The sheer size of the Chinese population could mean that even if a small amount of them manage to stand out, tens of thousands of entrepreneurs, visionaries, scientists, and artists, can eventually show their value. Jack Ma, the

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Chinese self-made billionaire who created the e-commerce giant Alibaba, may only be the 'first' of many.

This relates to the second point, which is a compelling and inclusive story that has the ability to cross borders. 'Lee Kuan Yew once told Joseph Nye that on the grand chessboard of world order, America would always be ahead of China. This was because, while China might boast a population of 1.3 billion people, America could draw on the talents and goodwill of the more than seven billion of all humanity. In that account, Lee reckoned America had a good story but China did not' (Quah, 2017). Is it time for China to prove Lee Kuan Yew wrong? China's evolving story is unfolding before our eyes. It would be wise of us to keep a close watch on its developments to come.

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