

China and Soft Power: Building Relations and Cooperation

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Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical approach on how the shifting global order is shaping international relations, and how China wields soft power to alter its image from a “threat” or “the manufacturer of the world” towards a “peaceful rise”. Its recent economic growth enabled China to become a regional leader and a prominent actor in international affairs, contributing to a balance of powers. This paper seeks to bring a European perspective beyond the conventional Sino-US approach. It is relevant to assess why soft power, coined by Joseph S. Nye in the 1990s, is promoted in contemporary China. States are indeed competing for a better image, have an influence on others, and are influenced by others, as a result of the circulation of goods, culture, and ideas.

Keywords: *China, soft power, strategic communication, international relations, politics*

1. Introduction: China's Place in a Context of Globalisation

People's Republic of China (PRC) and soft power represent a conundrum in international relations. China's contemporary economic growth, spanning over three decades in a globalised economy, illustrates its dramatic rise and how it can be seen as an alternative model for other developing countries. It has become the second largest economy of the world behind the United States of America (USA), despite still being classified as a developing country according to the standards set by the World Bank. As a rising power, China has become a regional leader and a prominent actor in global affairs.

Most scholars are analysing China's conflicts and territorial disputes with neighbouring countries in East Asia, or looking into China's interaction with the US in terms of economic power and policy. In terms of discussion revolving around power, which can be called "hard power", "soft power", "smart power", or "partial power", depending on authors' points of view with respect to power in general and China in particular, these analyses stand for military and economic powers. Conventional approaches tend to discuss hard power. Looking into foreign policy strategy through public diplomacy by adding culture provides an opportunity to understand what is less obvious when it comes to strength and influence: how is it possible to use some leverage by not using pure strength, through communication and image perception?

Political scientist Lucian Pye states that "China is a civilisation pretending to be a nation" (cited in Marshall, 2015), which touches upon the topics of identity or image. Soft power is a concept created by Joseph S. Nye to depict the power of influence and attraction whereby states strive to pursue their goals while enhancing their relationships and international image. Focusing on soft power appears as yet another

discussion about power, to understand the underlying power being wielded. The American foreign policy concept of soft power has travelled to East Asia, and is now meshed within a different context.

How and why does China wield a public diplomacy tool to monitor and alter its image, and manage strategic communication to disseminate its influence and facilitate international cooperation? China is seeking to monitor its image from a “threat” or “the manufacturer of the world”, deriving from military might and economic rise combined with the image of manufacturing cheap goods, towards a “peaceful rise”. China has invested in Africa and Latin America and developed institutional ties with Asian countries from East Asia to Near Asia, and is seeking to sustain diplomatic and economic bonds with Europe. This is strengthening its position in the global order.

The existing theoretical and empirical literature in international relations and foreign policy is imprinted by Joseph S. Nye’s definition of soft power. Coined in the 1990s, this concept implies the ability to shape the preferences of others through cultural attractiveness, policy and values, rather than through coercion. It has been criticised and used in a mainstream way, at the risk of making it becoming meaningless. Nye refined it in his recent work in which he discusses smart power. In a globalised economy, there is also a circulation of ideas, and soft power is now applied to non-US and non-Western countries. It relates to a liberal-constructivist approach of international relations, and to public diplomacy, as soft power is a tool of public diplomacy. There is also the work of Justin Hart, who narrates the evolution of this concept throughout the twentieth century.

Furthermore, Joshua Kurlantzick has made empirical observations regarding China’s image in other countries, and noticed how the way a nation is perceived is related to foreign policy and behaviour in providing disaster relief. This is important as, for instance, China’s

involvement with the United Nations' peacekeeping operations has contributed to giving a positive image of the country in other nations. The literature suggests that hard and soft powers are intertwined, and that the same power can be both source of deterrence and aid, when the military or the economy, traditional hard power inspiring fear or authority, become tools of welcome help for security and development. While the concepts have been used to analyse the US image and power, it becomes relevant to apply these to other nations, such as China.

Indeed, China's influence in the shifting global order is debated: there were discussions about the East Asian development template prior to the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, where the Western *laissez-faire* policy template was perceived as the only way to develop, until the East Asian Tigers' successful development showed that there was the possibility of a different successful model, and the global financial meltdown of 2008 illustrated weaknesses in the Western economic system. This has been referred to as the Beijing Consensus by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004 (Ramo, 2004; Lanteigne, 2016). Similarly to this debate, it is possible to approach power and the process of soft power from a non-Western perspective.

A lot of the literature focuses on China-Japan, or Sino-US relations for military or economic rivalry. There is a research gap in China-EU relations, especially in terms of cultural and diplomatic exchanges. I strive to bring a more European and balanced view of soft power beyond the Sino-US-centric narrative of a superpower being challenged by a rising – hard – power, by looking at other bilateral relations. I am also interested in analysing how soft power meshes into a different political context, as a concept defined in a foreign policy analysis of American democracy is wielded by an authoritarian state.

Despite its regime, China is genuinely pushing for soft power to reach similar benefits as the United Kingdom's Cool Britannia, Japan's

“Cool Japan”, and South Korea’s “Korean wave”. Notwithstanding the fact that China is aiming at becoming a superpower of culture, I argue that China will not perform this using popular culture. Indeed, this would follow Jing Sun’s statement (Sun, 2013) that popular culture would be the wrong way to approach the issue of soft power, as this factor alone cannot be a tool supporting a shift towards a positive opinion, unlike a peacekeeping operation, which has been measured by polls.

The push for a better image and international competition and rivalry have led China to seek to wield soft power to a certain extent. Furthermore, a lot of the literature tends to assimilate the fight for a better image to propaganda, especially from non-Western countries. Nevertheless, it can be shown that even an authoritarian state can wield soft power thanks to its history and culture in relation to a political agenda, but not only so.

I would argue that it is essential to go beyond the Sino-US-centric narrative which the current literature offers. Going beyond that approach and seeking to fill a research gap there, I would argue that it is also important to stay away from popular culture, which is the conventional way research is approaching the concept of soft power, especially when it comes to East Asian countries. Breslin refers to Wang noticing that few Western phrases have attracted so much interest in China, while William Callahan is in favour of building bridges between disciplines (Breslin, 2011; Callahan, 2010). Therefore, bringing China into the research field of international relations can offer a less conventional perception of the discipline and its concept, and challenge traditional Western hegemonic views of the world order.

The conceptual framework around soft power and China belongs to a combination of realist, liberal and constructivist perspectives in a context of globalisation. Political economy scholars argue that

globalisation is essentially used in the economic realm to define internationalisation and liberalisation. This combination allows the economic flow to cross borders, as countries are opened to foreign investments, thanks to fewer restrictions. Globalisation also refers to the circulation of ideas and cultural values. Shared values, ideas and culture relate to soft power.

As the world order crudely lies embedded in a set of norms, institutions, and coercive power, discussing power – as balance of powers, relational power, hard power, soft power, and smart power – can be perceived as a realist perspective. However, China's rise and power is illustrated by its regional and global integration in international organisation, its position as the world's second largest economy: it touches upon liberalism and constructivism. States are now competing for a better image and shared values to attract and influence others.

This paper firstly offers an overview of the concept of power in the international relations field, evolving around hard power and soft power. Discussing concepts from American foreign policy analysis makes this part American-centred. Secondly, the paper focuses on soft power as a tool of public diplomacy within the foreign policy field and strategy. Thirdly, the paper examines why China and soft power matter in world politics today, by explaining how the process of image dissemination is affecting international relations. Finally, this paper is touching upon a renewed competition between countries to manage their communication and image, and makes a bridge between the ancient Silk Road and the contemporary one.¹

2. Power and Influence in International Relations: Achieving Cooperation and Trust through Attraction and Incentives

Discussing soft power leads to cover hard power, and thus power more generally, to analyse how power is shaping people's behaviour, preferences, and states' policies. It can be argued that explaining soft power has common grounds with the analysis of the global economy: states are intertwined, and also are interdependent. States seek mutual stability and attractiveness to reach economic goals.

2.1. Power as the Capability to Influence Others

In traditional international relations theories, power is threefold: it is a capability, a goal, and a responsibility (Hagström, 2005: 1-24; Fukuyama, 2004: 151-159). The political scientist Joseph S. Nye crafted the concept of soft power. An early definition reads as follows: "Command power can rest on inducements ("carrots") or threats ("sticks"). But there is also an indirect way to exercise power. This aspect of power, that is, getting others to want what you want – might be called indirect or co-optive power behaviour. It is in contrast to the active command behaviour of getting others to do what you want. Co-optive power can rest on the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express. This dimension can be thought of as soft power." (Nye, 1990: 181). Soft power is meant to shape behaviour using influence and co-option rather than force, thus achieving the same result as apparent hard power.

A decade later, Nye discusses the impact of soft power in books (Nye, 2004, 2002) wherein military and economic powers are described as hard powers used as strong incentives to get things done in a certain way. Conversely, soft power is a means allowing a person or a state to

get an outcome by shaping others' desire by spreading ideas, policies and values, such as liberal democracy, human rights, the rule of law or cultural assets. If a given policy is seen as legitimate, then it increases the strength of soft power; if a country loses its legitimacy, then it undermines its power or leadership (Nye, 2002: 8-12; Ferguson, 2003: 22-24, Shambaugh, 2015: online). Attractiveness is perceived as the key element to reach that goal: if others admire a policy or acknowledge its legitimacy, then it enhances one's power. However, soft power needs to be backed by military strength and alliances (Nye, 2004: x-xiii, and Nye, 2002: 8-12). The US is able to master both, albeit this view has been challenged over the last decade: the US image worldwide is not as positive as it used to be.

2.2. Power, and the Importance of Shared Values in World Politics

Whilst remaining a key asset to ensure peace and leadership through deterrence, military power alone cannot guarantee good relationships on the international stage. It is dependent on economic power and political frameworks. The combination of military might, moral values and economic wealth can ensure a nation a form of leadership (Ferguson, 2003: 18-24). Meanwhile, in a multi-polar world, diplomacy and alliances can empower a group of nations which cannot display military power.

How can soft power be a tool to achieve political goals? Its flaw lies in being too soft. Nye specifies that soft power should be seen as an analytical concept for academic analysis purposes, and not a theory (Nye, 2010b: 219): it does not solve problems, but evaluates a process and helps to achieve certain goals. Hence, Nye analysed the evolution of America's soft power. In the post-9/11 world, as a result of the US foreign policy strategy used to tackle terrorism, there has been a drop of US soft power in about eight years in the European Union, in Latin

America and most of the world. Nye notices that what a country does, matters more than what it represents (Nye, 2010a: 4-11). Why would that be? US soft power has been affected by the Bush administration's unilateralist War on Terror. Nye adds that providing aid in Africa to fight AIDS could not change the impact of the above (Nye, 2010a: 4-11). In other words, a government's policy can weigh more than culture and values in others' eyes, for elements of power do not carry the same weight. Regardless of a country's efforts to promote a good image and values, the ability to attract can hardly be under complete control because it depends on the receiving end.

2.3. The Power of Attraction: A Behavioural Perspective

A parallel can be made with behavioural economics, as soft power is now defined using behavioural terms: it is "the ability to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes by co-option and attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2010b: 216). This resonates in what economists have called a "pacific nudge" (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009): how to shape people's ideas and behaviour using appealing incentives rather than strength? The most recent definition appears less America-centred: one should not analyse "power over other but power with others" (Nye, 2010b: 216-227). This matches the evolution of the global economy, where states are intertwined: a policy affects others' perception or behaviour. Furthermore, Nye explains that "power becomes a positive-sum game. It is not enough to think in term of power *over* others. We must also think in terms of power to accomplish goals that involves power *with* others." (Nye, 2011: xvi-xvii, emphasis added). The new major change derives from technology and communication, allowing non-state actors, such as terrorists or hackers, to undermine states' stability or strategy. It emphasises the idea of cooperation.

As regards shifting powers and the recent balance of powers, the main argument is that the current world is an era of international and regional cooperation, to fight sudden setbacks and retaliate against common threats. Cooperation is a key element to help states ensuring a sustainable development, or to maintain leadership, for the common good. In that respect, one must present a strategy requiring new narratives in foreign policy to influence others.

3. Managing Communication: From Public Diplomacy to Nation Branding

Soft power is a tool of public diplomacy in the foreign policy field, conveying a nation's image to foster international relationships. It circulates thanks to state agents and non-state agents. It expresses a state's efforts to disseminate its soft power while showing the part that cannot be controlled.

3.1. Theoretical Framework: Managing One's Communication

Experts of the foreign policy field agree that Edmund Gullion coined the expression "public diplomacy" in the 1960s (Cull, 2009: 19). Public diplomacy is defined as follows: "the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of IR beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinions in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose jobs is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications." (Cull, 2009: 19). Moreover, "central to public diplomacy is the transnational flow of information and ideas." (PDAA, 2015: online). Nicolas Cull reckons that Gullion

provided a definition and an alternative to propaganda. Public diplomacy has been more commonly used since the 1990s.

Similarly to soft power, conveying ideas and information, or managing communication between nations and people, relies on perception, credibility and reputation. Credibility can be critical to succeed in using soft power (Barr, Feklyunina and Theys, 2015: 213-215), which semi-authoritarian states like Russia or China struggle with in the eyes of others. As underlined in section one, there is no control over the receiving end of the message, which supports proponents of soft power not being propaganda; it is used to facilitate trust building and cooperation in global affairs.

3.2. Developing an Image through Guanxi

Justin Hart offers an in-depth analysis of public diplomacy (Hart, 2013). Similarly to soft power, it originates in the United States' foreign policy strategy, as a component of foreign policy (Hart, 2013: 12-14). Hart describes public diplomacy as “an incredibly broad set of initiatives designed to shape the image of the US in the world” and refers to *The New York Times* striving to answer the questions “Why do they hate us?” after the 9/11 terror attack (Hart, 2013: 1-14). Honing public diplomacy as a tool to build a country's image illustrates the will to try to shape this image into a positive and attractive one. It also highlights that a form of ideology will always be tied to a state's foreign policy strategy.

Harts notes that in the 21st century, public diplomacy is depicted as the “most ambitious wartime communications effort since World War 2” (Hart, 2013: 4-5). There are two other aspects beyond shaping an image: building good relations with others in the long term, which can relate to the Chinese concept of *guānxi* (關係) or network of relations, whilst managing short-term crises by providing explanations and mending a given situation created by a foreign policy decision. Public diplomacy

comprises “daily communications”, “strategic communications” such as Shanghai Expo 2010, and the development of relationships with people in the long term, through student exchanges, conferences, or scholarships for instance (Nye, 2011: 105). In the 21st century, the main sources of information are information channels and people, or non-governmental actors. It has become increasingly harder to control information, to measure it, and to extract reliable and valuable data. Nye argues that “narratives become the new currency of soft power” (Nye, 2011: 104). In an era of massive flow of information and social media, information must combine reliability of the content and source with the art of storytelling to reach its targeted audience.

3.3. Strategic Communication: Managing States as “Brands”?

Scholars equally consider that international affairs now rely heavily on image and reputation, as strategic resources (Ferguson, 2015, Wang, 2011, and Ferguson, 2003). The central element regarding soft power and public diplomacy in world politics is that there is no control over the receiving end. When commenting on China, David Shambaugh illustrates the above perfectly: “Soft power cannot be bought, it must be earned” (Shambaugh, 2015). Indeed, all authors insist on the fact that public diplomacy and communication shall not be confused with propaganda, as the latter is a failure of communication harming credibility, and thus power.

The history of international relations offers stories of effective cultural diplomacy. As such, Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner provide an example of cultural exchange during the Cold War through sport as an effective tool of international diplomacy (Levitt and Dubner, 2014: 126-127). They refer to an international ping pong competition hosted by Japan in 1971, during which diplomatic exchanges between China and the US have been renewed. The Chinese team invited the American

team to Beijing, prompting the American government to send diplomats, and to invite the Chinese to America. Despite both nations having mutual political and economic interests, diplomacy was not working; the trigger of state relations was a sports tournament, where sportsmen were agents of communication influencing governments, and thus selling a good image of their country.

This example illustrates that states need to rely on political actors, and equally acknowledge the dissemination of soft power through non-state actors. The topic of China and soft power still matters today; why a Western-centred view on soft power and public diplomacy is wielded in a different context?

4. An Eastern Application: China's Soft Power, Why Does It Matter?

Image matters in world politics, as people are influenced by popular culture. Why do people accept one country's expression of economic or military power, and resent another country's similar expression of power? Nations, in this case China, are striving to monitor what others perceive of them, so as not to be seen as a threat despite being empowered by their development. How does a concept coming from the USA apply to China's historical background and political environment?

4.1. International Integration and Leadership

China has deployed a diplomatic, economic and security presence, illustrating an aspect of power lying in the process of integration through membership to institutions (Lanteigne, 2016). China's integration to the United Nations as the PRC in 1971, as one of the five members of the United Nations Security Council possessing the right to veto a resolution, embodies its global influence. China is combining a

diplomatic and security prominence with a strong economic presence: the PRC joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001. As regards its regional integration, China has become a member of several regional organisations: Asian Development Bank (1986), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation / APEC (1991), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation / SCO (1996), Association of East-Asian Nations / ASEAN plus Three (1997). China's dramatic economic growth and global presence have generated mixed perceptions in other countries, deriving from China's apparent and concrete hard power and the underlying fear of the Other.

Although there is no consensus to define development, scholars usually agree that it is both "a process and a condition" (O'Brien and Williams, 2010: 310-315). The word "transition" can be depicted as a movement from a known start to "a known end point", whereas the word "transformation" refers to a process of change from a known start to "an unknown end point" (Henderson, 2008: 376). This remark seems appropriate to describe the evolution of China since the late 1970s, especially since neither scholars nor policymakers can predict how the global economy will evolve after two recent global financial crises and the rise of new economic powers. There has been a shift in China's economic power and the nation's global image, from the "manufacturer of the world" to a great challenging power.

Despite arguments supporting the United States' position as a unique superpower in the current shifting world, some scholars are convinced that during the 21st century, China will remain a solid economic leader of the newly shaped global order (Jacques, 2009; Stiglitz, 2015). Similarly to the many debates which occurred among Western scholars with respect to East Asia's economic rise until the two global financial crises, many trust that only the Western liberal way of economic development is sustainable, based on a *laissez-faire* policy.

Martin Jacques strongly believes that China will not become more “Western” and will give a new perception of the contemporary world (Jacques, 2009), thus offering an uncommon view on China. Since the idea of soft power, born in the US, is now used in East Asia in a different culture and context, this position appears credible.

4.2. The Negative Impact of Hard Power on Image

In spite of being the world’s second largest economy, China is still classified as a developing country, according to the World Bank classification (World Bank, 2015: online). Global polls measuring countries’ perception worldwide, such as BBC World Poll or PWE, show that China has a relatively bad image in many countries. As such, it emerged that the 2008 Beijing Olympics, meant to be a capstone for China’s image, had the opposite effect: a BBC World Service Poll announced a drop from 45 to 39 percent of positive ratings (Sun, 2013: 153). Besides, scholars are demonstrating how soft power has successfully spread the “Cool Japan” or the “Korean Wave” image abroad, through the dissemination of popular culture. What about China today?

A report published by the British Council and the think tank Demos (2013: online) listed the elements driving the cultural agenda, and the actors of cultural relations. The former depends on “foreign policy interests, the desire to create a positive image around the world, the unique history and legacy of each nation, ideology, resources, language, cultural assets [expressed through] arts, education and individual expression, and commerce.” The latter involves “nations, states and cities, cultural, broadcasting and educational institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses, foundations, trusts and philanthropists, individuals, particularly artists, sports people and performers”. This report emphasises the economic aspect: spreading

culture as a tool of soft power involves many actors. It also implies that there is a cost related to promoting events or, on the receiving end, accessing culture by seeing an exhibition, a film, a sports competition, or a show.

Meanwhile, Jean-Luc Domenach insists on the fact that power relies on social balance, the creation of norms and technological innovation, and not only on strength (Domenach, 2008: 255-258). China's cultural influence, and thereby soft power, is of substantial importance to the global order. Hundreds of Confucius Institutes have thus been opened worldwide, and more people are willing to learn Mandarin Chinese. Shogo Suzuki nonetheless finds that there is not much data regarding China's soft power, due to the fact that similarly to American elites in the 1990s, Chinese elites in the 2000 have not taken this concept into account. Moreover, China's rise is usually perceived as a threat with respect to its hard power (Suzuki, 2010: 199-200); its labour policy in Africa and its quest for natural resources have attracted negative feedback locally, as well as in the public opinion (Suzuki, 2010: 207). However, it is worth noting that China's use of soft power within UNPCKO (United Nations Peacekeeping Operations) has been perceived as positive.

And yet, Callahan argues that China's soft power is negative instead of positive, and that it relates more to domestic purposes than foreign affairs (Callahan, 2015: 216-229). In his view, since soft power cannot be measured, it is a social construction like security and identity. With respect to statistics from BBC Poll (BBC World Service, 2010: online), most countries' population had a "neutral to poor" perception of China, following several years of foreign policy mishaps: political censorship, frictions regarding Tibet, Chinese dissidents, or territorial and maritime disputes with neighbouring countries. Conversely, about 75% of Chinese people are aware of their country's prominent role in global affairs

despite 56% also recognising the need to tackle domestic challenges (Wike and Stokes, 2016). Although it is argued that it is hard to measure soft power and its impact, assessing how a country is perceived or how it perceives itself can be an indication on whether a given foreign policy strategy is harming or enhancing a country's image.

4.3. China's Soft Power: Competing for a Better Image

China was perceived as the “manufacturer of the world” providing low labour cost, before switching from quantity to quality, and thus becoming a market of consumers. More generally, China's dramatic development has downsides with respect to environmental issues, such as pollution of air and water, and the access to water: these can be both an international and a domestic problem for the government. Combined with a context of global economic instability, this is challenging China's position within a potential “Global-Asian Era” (Henderson, 2008) in the short term, while China remains a world-region leader at present.

The PRC is widely perceived as being ruled by an authoritarian state. The regime does not subscribe to democratic values shared by Western developed states, which is sometimes creating tensions in the international scene with respect to law and human rights for instance. Furthermore, there are differences with respect to political regimes between the United States and China, while the idea of soft power originates from the United States. This suggests that even if China is playing an essential role in the global economy, it does not have the ability to replace the United States yet. As a result, the world tends to become multi-polar only in the economic realm, and there is possibly a competition in terms of soft power dissemination.

In terms of perception and image, Joshua Kurlantzick made an empirical observation regarding perception of the US in foreigner's mind while staying in the Asia-Pacific region: he was surprised to find

out that people in Australia and Thailand had a better image of China than the US. It was merely the outcome of the Bush administration's foreign policy in the post-9/11 world. This quick shift in America's popularity could however be reversed rapidly due to the precious US aid after the tsunami in Thailand in 2004 (Kurlantzick, 2007: 1-11). It felt natural to help in the aftermath of a disaster, and this was an opportunity to notice that foreign assistance has a positive effect with respect to a country's image.

Interestingly, Kurlantzick's observations are reinforced in Nye's latest work, whereby Nye seeks to explain that military power and economic power are sources of both hard and soft power, supplementing culture, political values and foreign policies (Nye, 2011: 84). As expressed above, military force is an actor providing aid for disaster relief (e.g. Haiti in 2010) and peacekeeping operations, while being a crucial item of security and deterrence. In that respect, this is the soft power part of the military power, but this is a sensitive one, relying heavily on perception.

4.4. Soft Power: Towards a "Peaceful Development"

Martin Jacques predicts that Chinese culture will challenge Western cultural norms, and gain a form of global influence on others, because each civilisation-state perceives the world order and international relations with its own history and culture (Jacques, 2009: 1-21 and 288-293). This implies that globalisation, by allowing the circulation of goods, ideas and cultures, enables them to merge, and consequently to reshape the global world order in the long term. This part of the literature is grounded in the fact that countries' economies are intertwined, and that cultures tend to influence each other. During the twentieth century until now, there has been a consensus that American culture has been, and remains, prominent worldwide. Jacques seems to

trust that this superpower will however be challenged shortly.

Both the US and China are global powers and are civilisations which can influence others as a consequence. A rising country can spread its influence more easily. It implies that there is now an increase of China's presence in the media: its art and film industry are better acknowledged abroad, more people want to discover and visit the country as tourists out of curiosity (Jacques, 2009: 548-560). This shows the country's dissemination of soft power. Jacques quotes Nye stating that "Much of American soft power has been produced by Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft and Michael Jordan" (Jacques, 2009: 610, and Nye, 2004: 17), but he reckons that it will be difficult for anyone but the US to master those four areas: culture, education and research, technology and innovation, and sport. Moreover, Jacques stresses that China's influence is great among developing countries, whilst its soft power is still weak in the Western world. This probably derives from its economic classification, political regime (Jacques, 2009: 609-616), and variations in China's foreign policy strategy (Lanteigne, 2016). Based on Jacques' statement and other scholars (Shambaugh, 2016; Lanteigne, 2016), it can be argued that this is currently the challenge faced by China's leaders: to work on changing China's image by using soft power and public diplomacy, economic wealth being a pre-requisite to enable a nation to use its soft power assets more efficiently. And yet, there might be a different approach to soft power due to different political regimes.

Regarding state policy, scholars refer to a prominent counsellor close to China's leader Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), Zheng Bijian (郑必坚), who coined the term *héping juéqǐ* (和平崛起, "Peaceful Rise") (Kurlantzick, 2007) to emphasise the fact that China should not be perceived as a threat. This term has actually been widely used in China by both leaders and scholars. Gregory Chow touches upon China's public diplomacy (Chow, 2012), insisting on how China could enhance

its diplomatic relationships by managing its public image, so as to appear as a friendly and peaceful country. He argues that “good diplomacy is a necessary part of China’s peaceful rise” (Chow, 2012). China enjoys the idea of peaceful development (Kurlantzick, 2007: 37, Guo, 2006). Incidentally, “Harmonious Society” (和諧社會 / *héxié shèhuì*), a concept used since 2005, is commonly said to come from Confucius’s ideas.

4.5. Political and Economic Strategies

Economic might often lead to an image imbalance. Despite its successful regional and international integration, China is searching for a missing element. One can refer to the “Yellow Peril”, an idea shaping the imagination of popular culture and influencing one’s image: one perceives the others as a threat, while the others wonder why people perceive them negatively. Could image still influence people’s perception of East Asia in the 21st century?

Today, when thinking about China, people might not see a “Yellow Peril” anymore; this fantasy circulated via popular culture, as it was spread in literature and films in the late 19th – early 20th centuries. What strikes people’s mind is China as the factory of the world, spreading cheap goods, based on the current state of things which has shaped the world over the last decades. China seems to have improvements to make in terms of image to catch up with the successful “cool Japan” or “Korean wave” image. Culture is a tool impacting people’s perception of the other, albeit this is not sufficient. Indeed, it is argued in the field of international relations that the world enjoys Coca Cola and Hollywood films, but that is not to say people embrace American governance and foreign policy. Thus, what can China do to display its soft power?

China’s soft power conveyed in international cooperation through public diplomacy, or growing aid, is called “charm offensive” or “smile

diplomacy” – *wēixiào wàijiāo* (微笑外交) (Kurlantzick, 2007; Shambaugh, 2013: 56-58). This strategy implies a peaceful approach offering many positive outcomes: the state is now participating in international issues by supporting peacekeeping, helping developing countries to reach economic empowerment, while fighting trafficking. Conversely, Joshua Kurlantzick and Marc Lanteigne note obstacles hindering China’s will to interact with others: labour poverty, environmental issues, corruption in Africa and Latin America, a certain lack of openness (Lanteigne, 2016; d’Hooghe, 2008; Kurlantzick, 2007: vii-xii). These are elements affecting China’s image abroad. In foreign policy and following Nye’s definitions, this is part of public diplomacy and soft power. China’s view of power covers smart power and a balance between foreign and domestic policies. Unlike what soft power originally was, foreign policy might not be as essential as domestic stability to assert Chinese soft power.

4.6. The Silk Road of Ideas: Then and Now, a Network of Trade

Routes

Historically, the Silk Road symbolises an exchange of goods, cultural artefacts and religions between nations, empires and civilisations. Indeed, art, silk, Buddhism, or Christianity have travelled and merged into new contexts, creating syncretism. The new Silk Road refers to a land route and a maritime route connecting East Asia to the Mediterranean Sea through many countries to foster international trade. This ancient network is tied to the current global economy and the circulation of ideas between the West and the Far East, such as the concept of soft power and its new narratives, from the USA to East Asia through Europe.

Originally, the Silk Road depicts trade routes, which started under the Han Dynasty (漢朝, 206 BC – 220 AD) and lasted until the Yuan

Dynasty (元朝, 1279-1368 CE) (Frankopan, 2015). Over the centuries, international business led to the creation of a network of trade paths on the Asian continent between the East and the West, from China to the African continent and Europe.

This historical and cultural legacy is being recognised by UNESCO since 2014, when the Silk Road was listed as a World Heritage Site (UNESCO, 1992-2016: online), as “Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor”. The land-based paths are spreading across China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. From a geopolitical perspective, China is a continental or land power seeking to turn into a maritime power, so as to become a “two oceans power” (Lanteigne, 2016; Marshall, 2015), which is symbolised by the “One Belt, One Road” strategy. Nowadays, there is a renewed interest in following this ancient network, both on the continent and the oceans, for security, maritime and economic purposes.

4.7. The New Silk Road: Securing Maritime and Economic Interests

In 2013, China’s president Xi Jinping (習近平) promoted a New Silk Road called One Belt, One Road (一帶一路). He introduced a plan for creating a New Silk Road from China to Europe, with an emphasis on the importance of the maritime silk road.² As such, there is a “One Belt, One Road” land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB, 絲綢之路經濟帶), and a Maritime Silk Road (MSR, 21世紀海上絲綢之路). From a geographical perspective, the former goes from East Asia to Europe through Central Asia and the Middle East, while the latter includes countries from Southeast Asia, Oceania and North Africa (Tiezzi, 2014: online). The scale of intertwined economies and international trades alongside these paths is ambitious and impressive as the MSR creates a big maritime empire connecting three continents.

What do these Chinese political and economic strategies imply? Following paths across the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean affect security and international relations as some areas are very sensitive topics in geopolitics (Marshall, 2015: 45-47). How to defuse tensions by trade alone? Conversely, international political economy theories suggest that an increase in economic ties foster better relationships between nations, which will be less likely to fight thanks to their economic ties. In terms of economic partnerships and competition, does this illustrate hard power or soft power?

4.8. The Silk Road of Ideas: The Globalisation of Concepts

Whilst the One Belt, One Road highlights political and economic strategies and foster hard power, domination and fighting for a stronger economy, the New Silk Road also relies on softer power qualities, as it can equally symbolise enhanced international relationships and *guanxi*. For instance, in terms of image and promotion of a nation's cultural heritage, Callahan refers to the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening show, where the Chinese film director Zhang Yimou (張藝謀) displayed several thousand years of civilisation (Callahan, 2010: 1-8). The Silk Road, international trade and open-door policy were symbolised by Zheng He (鄭和), who sailed around the world under the Ming Dynasty (明朝). This led to mutual interests and shared values, and thus harmony.

More recently, artists combine history of empires with the 21st-century economic power. For example, at the 2016 Monumenta exhibition in Paris, Huang Yong Ping (黃永砵)'s installation represents global power and global economy (Wullschlager, 2016: online). Indeed, this piece of work merges shipping containers with Napoleon's hat and the skeleton of a sea dragon: he thus refers to ancient empires, Asian mythology and contemporary economic trade and power through cargos

carrying goods on maritime routes. From a theoretical perspective, power, hard or soft, depends on image and attraction: it can repel others, frighten them, or attract them.

5. Conclusion

The idea of soft power has travelled from the West to the East. Soft power and public diplomacy have emerged in a North American foreign policy analysis context, which suggests that semi-authoritarian states like Russia or China might consider these concepts with a different approach. This paper has focused on China, whose cultural philosophy and political regime differ from American culture. China's audience is domestic, regional, and international. This affects the soft power discourse, as China's people and neighbouring countries tend to weigh more than the international/Western audience.

This paper has offered a theoretical framework from the American foreign policy analysis regarding soft power and public diplomacy, concepts designed by American scholars in terms of states competing for power and leadership, and issuing strategies to achieve this. This paper also examined the global context in which soft power is used: the political and historical backgrounds of the 20th and 21st century have changed the balance of powers, increasing international cooperation and interdependence. The post-Cold War world and post-9/11 context have changed the political environment, moving from a bilateral relationship during the Cold War to a uni-polar world in the military realm, and a multi-polar world in the economic realm.

This paper has also shown the move towards "smart power", as military force relies on economic power. These two components of hard power also possesses a soft power aspect: economic resources support military power to build military strength, while also being a tool for

empowerment to allow a country to be ranked following economic measurements such as the gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Striving to monitor a nation's image from the domestic and foreign aspects requires leaders to manage communication between nations and people. This relies on perception, credibility and reputation, which are critical to succeed in wielding the tool of soft power.

This paper made a bridge between the ancient Silk Road and the contemporary one and has sought to explain how the current Chinese political and economic strategies, by relying on Chinese cultural and historical heritage, is wielding soft power to strengthen its position in the international stage. As regards China's government narrative, then president Hu Jintao stated in a keynote speech in 2007 that the PRC has to "enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country ... a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength" (cited in Nye, 2011: 88), and later Chinese leaders stated their objective of making China a "superpower of culture" (Shambaugh, 2015). More recently in 2013, President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang (李克強) have been promoting the "One Belt, One Road" economic cooperation, which touches upon diplomacy, trade, and image.

This shows that the American concept of soft power is being embraced by others, in a different political, cultural and historical context, while the land-based and maritime road as economic paths are symbolising a New Silk Road, linking China's history and culture to economic power. The New Silk Road along the "One Belt, One Road" initiative is building a bridge towards the Mediterranean Sea, hence a circle linking China and Europe through other continents; it is also a strong reference to history and Zheng He's voyages, let alone the fact that in 2014, the ancient Silk Road has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Wielding soft power and striving to monitor one's image is about trust, credibility and reputation (CSIS, 2016; Hart, 2013 Nye, 2011). A nation needs trust to build political cooperation and economic partnerships, participate in or lead negotiations and facilitate cultural exchanges. If there is mistrust, nation branding is ineffective; these interactions are challenged or can fail. Furthermore, as part of the literature stresses, if something appears as propaganda, then it is a failure of communication. Besides, an essential aspect of soft power is no matter how hard one tries to influence and attract others, there is no control over the receiving end: this is relational power equally suggesting that soft power does not necessarily relate to a pro-active policy to engage with a targeted audience (perceived as hard power or propaganda), but also relates to something that a nation possesses that attracts others without acting on it (a process to be observed and understood). This highlights the relation with perception, attraction, how to promote one's image and why one – China – wants to promote it.

Notes

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1. This paper aims to present my research before fieldwork; therefore, I only referred to secondary empirical data at this stage.
2. “Xi in call for building of new ‘maritime silk road’” (by Wu Jiao in Jakarta and Zhang Yunbi in Beijing), *China Daily*, 4th October 2013, available at <http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-10/04/content_17008940.htm> (accessed 20th May 2016).

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