

Mandarin Chinese as a means to China's Soft Power

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Abstract

Since China's rise to the economic, political and military power, she has made efforts to project soft power around the world. Soft power is the ability to get other people to want what you want without having to force their compliance and cooperation. China knows that building a linguistic bridge linking her to the rest of the world has benefits and therefore wants to gain influence on the world's political and economic stage through the promotion of Mandarin Chinese as a global language. There is an increasing demand for Mandarin Chinese learning around the world, thus the establishment of the Confucius Institute to meet up with the demand. It is the objective of this research to highlight the importance of Mandarin Chinese to China's soft power. This paper argues that Mandarin Chinese is a means to China's soft power using soft power as a theoretical framework. This is a qualitative research with secondary data from the library, published papers and internet. The paper finds out three major things. First, China shifted to soft power strategy after the opening-up era in order to achieve a peaceful rise. Second, China establishes Confucius Institutes around the world to market Mandarin Chinese and influence the world positively using soft power strategy. Third, China's soft power strategy is gaining momentum but not without some challenges.

Keywords: *China, Mandarin Chinese, Confucius Institute, Soft power*

Introduction

Chinese is a group of related but in many cases mutually unintelligible language varieties, forming a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Chinese is spoken by the Han majority and many minority ethnic groups in China. About 1.2 billion people (around 16% of the world's population) speak some form of Chinese as their first language. The varieties of Chinese are usually described by native speakers as dialects of a single Chinese language, but linguists note that they are as diverse as a language family (Crystal, 1987; Norman, 1988; Wikipedia). There are between seven and thirteen main regional groups of Chinese (depending on the classification scheme), of which the most spoken by far is Mandarin (about 960 million), followed by Wu (about 80 million). Most of these groups are mutually unintelligible. Standard Chinese (*Putonghua/Guoyu/Hanyu*) is a standardized form of spoken Chinese based on the Beijing dialect of Mandarin. It is the official language of China and Taiwan, as well as one of the four official languages of Singapore. It is one of the six official language languages of the United Nations. The written form of the standard language (*zhongwen*), based on the logograms known as Chinese characters (*Hanzi*), is shared by literate speakers of otherwise unintelligible dialects (Mair, 1991; Norman, 1988; Wikipedia). In this paper, Chinese language stands for and means Mandarin Chinese.

China has been a great nation. This is evidenced in her history, culture, and civilization. According to Chinahighlights.com, "China is one of the world's four ancient civilizations, and the written history of China dates back to Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BC), over 3,000 years ago. China has a long history starting from Xia Dynasty (c. 2070-1600 BC) to Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the Republic of China era (1912-1949) and the Modern China (1949-now)". This is to say that China had been a great nation in the past and continue to be a great nation at present. However, between then and now China has suffered some setbacks. Sun (2000) says that,

In the course of Chinese history, China has a lot of setbacks, including a period of instability and disrupted economic activity after the fall of Qing Dynasty; China-Japanese war; Chinese civil war which caused the collapse of the Republic of China and formation of the People's Republic of China. China rises back again starting from the death Chairman Mao to the present day. The rise was called a 'peaceful rise' by President Hu Jintao.

China's peaceful rise according to Guo (2007) was an official policy in China under the leadership of Hu Jintao. Before this policy, there was a negative view of China by the world especially the West. The term was implemented to rebut against the "China threat theory" (Shaohua, 2006: 256). As China emerged as a great political, economic and military power, China wants to assure other countries that its rise will not be a threat to peace and security. China wants to achieve being a responsible world leader through the soft power strategy using Mandarin Chinese as a means. Language is important in every aspect of human lives. It is central to human activities. Language has important social purpose because it is mainly used for communication. China wants to make Mandarin Chinese a global language. By so doing, she can influence the people from different parts of the world. That is soft power. This paper examines Chinese soft power strategy using Mandarin as a means.

Soft Power: A Theoretical Concept

We cannot talk of soft power without first understanding what power is all about and then contrast soft power with hard power. There are different types of power. In this paper, we talk of political power. According to Oxford Dictionary online, power is "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events." For Wikipedia online, "power is the ability to influence or outright control the behaviour of people." These two definitions are similar. In other words, power is the ability to influence the behaviour of people. Nye (2004) posits that "power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want". The USC Center on Public Diplomacy contrasts hard power and soft power. It explains that hard power is deployed in the form of coercion: using force, the threat of force, economic sanctions, or inducements of payment. In contrast, soft power describes the use of positive attraction and persuasion to achieve foreign policy objectives. According to Wikipedia online, "soft power is the ability to attract and co-opt, rather than by coercion (hard power) which is using force or giving money as a means of persuasion". In other words, hard power is coercion or use of force while soft power is non-coercion and use of attraction and appeal. A defining feature of soft power is that it is non-coercive.

Joseph Samuel Nye Jr., an American political scientist is the co-founder of the international relations theory of neoliberalism, developed in a 1977 book *Power and Interdependence*. Later, he explains the distinction between hard power and soft power, and pioneered the theory of soft power. He sees the combination of hard power and soft power as "smart power". Nye coins the term "soft power" in a 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The changing nature of American power*. In the book he says, "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants – might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants". He further develops the concept in his 2004 book, *Soft Power: The means to success in world politics*. In the

same book, he further explains that soft power has been referred to as a form of national power that is based on ideational and cultural attractiveness, which is intentionally or unintentionally utilized by actors in international relations to achieve strategic imperatives. Nye (2011) claims that soft power does not contradict the international relations theory of realism. He says that “soft power is not a form of idealism or liberation. It is simply a form of power, one way of getting desired outcomes”.

Soft power has its limitation and weakness. It has been criticized by many authors as being ineffective. Codevilla (2008) says that “some authors dismiss soft power out of hand as they assert that actors in international relations respond to only two types of incentives: economic incentives and force”. As a concept, it can be difficult to distinguish between soft power from hard power. Lee (2011) opines that “despite the fact that soft power as a concept is increasingly being incorporated into policymaking and diplomatic efforts, there are lingering debates about how to conceptualize soft power, measure soft power – resources, and employ soft power tactics in real-world politics”. She further explains that “scholars and policymakers have found soft power difficult to build a theoretical model that explains how soft power tools and resources are developed and used”. The difficulty arises from the different objectives and application of soft power from different nations. Many nations have recognized the importance and relevance of soft power tools and resources. Treverton and Jone (2005) assert that “soft power also constitutes more than mere cultural power and includes political values and ideas, educational and socioeconomic systems, and legitimate national policies as accepted by other nations and people”. In other words, soft power is not only employed in cultural system but also in political, educational and socioeconomic systems. Lee (2011) says that “many countries have recognized the significance of using soft power tools and resources to engage in competitive politics of attraction, legitimacy, and credibility”.

Chinese Soft Power

Gill, (2008) analyzes the historical shift in Chinese foreign policy from 1950s to date. He says that,

between 1950s and 1970s, China’s foreign policy was focused on encouraging and supporting revolution in other parts of the world; after Deng Xiaoping came to power, China focused instead on its own economic reform and modernization while purposely keeping low profile in world affairs, and beginning in the late 1990s, however, China again changed its focus and began to concentrate on soft power.

This is to say that the adoption of soft power strategy is relatively new to China. Yasushi and McConnell (2008) say that “Japan is the first country in East Asia to embrace the concept of soft power as an instrument of its foreign affairs and security policy...”.

Other countries like China and Korea have equally embraced the concept of soft power in their foreign policies. Lee (2011) asserts that “the Republic of Korea and China were relative latecomers to the idea of incorporating soft power into their foreign policies and projecting soft power for the purpose of diplomacy”. As nations around the world understand the importance of soft power, different governments adopt soft power in their foreign policies. Kurlantzick (2006) argues that 1997 was a critical year for China’s rise of

soft power. He states that “the year 1997 provides a convenient date to mark China’s soft power emergence”. Economy (2016) has a different view. She says that,

China began to get interested in soft power in the early 1990s...but I don’t think it really took hold until the mid 2000s, perhaps 2007 when then-president Hu Jintao gave a speech in which he linked the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation to the ability to deploy soft power.

We can say that China starts to use soft power officially in her foreign policy between 1990s and 2000s. That is not to say that before these years China had never used soft power strategy in her national and international affairs. However, the increase in use of soft power starts in the new millennium. A nation changes its foreign policy depending on what it wants to achieve at a particular time. Kurlantzick, (2007:226) opines thus,

In a short period of time, Beijing has proven that it can shift its foreign policy quickly and woo the world, often focusing on countries America has alienated. China has drastically changed its image in many parts of the world from dangerous to benign.

This is to say that China changes its foreign policy to achieve a desired purpose. China focuses more on African countries to achieve its dream of peaceful rise. Chinese soft power is a strategy the Chinese government is using in projecting its image abroad. Gill (2008) says that “Chinese soft power has a slightly different meaning than Nye’s original definition”.

Then what is Chinese soft power? According to Shaun (2011:7), Chinese soft power

is an attempt to promote a preferred Chinese idea of what China is and what it stands for, including an emphasis on the historical roots of current thinking, identity-formation and policy designed to correct misconception among overseas audience about Chinese motivations and intentions”.

That means China is promoting “Chinese Dream”- the new China to the world using soft power strategy. Kurlantzick, (2006: 271) says that China’s purpose of using soft power is to create a peaceful international environment in which its economic development can continue and in which it can portray itself as a responsible and constructive player in the world politics. In other words, China does not want to use force to achieve its “China Dream” of becoming a responsible super power. She wants to quietly and peacefully achieve her goal. Shaun (2011) states that “although debate over Chinese soft power has increased in recent years, there is no shared definition of what ‘soft power’ actually means. The definition seems to change depending on what the observer wants to argue”. The change may not only depend on what the observer wants to argue but also what the actor wants to achieve.

In 2014, President Xi Jinping says, “we should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s messages to the world” (Shambaugh, 2015). This increase in Chinese soft power has been phenomenal. Biswas and Trotajada (2018) assert that “China has accumulated considerable soft power through

its long history, culture and philosophy. These have been complimented by its phenomenal economic growth over the past three decades”. They went further to say that,

China’s soft power is likely to increase significantly during the coming decades. However, it will depend on many imponderables, including how China handles the South China Sea disputes, the border issues with its neighbors, and its extensive environmental problems among other things.

These other things include China’s political, military, and trade issues. However, China is working assiduously to improve and solve these problems. This is why Torres (2017) affirms that “China’s soft power push has plenty of room for improvement”. The improvement on Chinese soft power will certainly come with time if China is transparent and sincere.

Chinese Soft Power Strategy

China’s traditional culture has been a source of attraction, building on which it has created several hundred Confucius Institutes around the world to teach its language and culture.

The enrollment of foreign students in China has increased from 36,000 a decade before to at least 240,000 in 2010 (Nye, 2012). The number of students learning Mandarin Chinese around the world is increasing geometrically every day. President Hu Jintao once said that the Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world. The statement is true because Chinese culture is fast spreading all over the world. Kurlantzick (2007) states that “in a short period of time, China appears to have created a systematic, coherent soft power strategy, and a set of soft power tools to implement that strategy”. One of the soft power tools is Confucius institute for promotion of Mandarin Chinese around the world. Gill (2008) says that “in order to implement its soft power strategy and accomplish these goals, China employs a number of tools. There is little doubt that China sees the promotion of Chinese language learning as one of its soft power tools”. In support to the above statement, Kurlantzick (2007: 67) states that “promotion of Chinese-culture and Chinese-language studies is a major component of this public diplomacy”.

The promotion and spread of Chinese language and culture starts centuries ago. This study will limit itself to the modern promotion of Chinese language and culture. When a culture is promoted, language is promoted; and when a language is promoted, culture is promoted. There is no culture without a language and there is no language without a culture. China is currently promoting Chinese language learning throughout the world as part of its effort to accomplish its foreign policy goals through the use of soft power. Gill (2008) states that “Chinese language learning is promoted through the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Confucius Institutes, Volunteer and State Sponsored teachers and the Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students”.

The most institutionalized and strategic form of influence is the establishment of state policies and agencies entrusted with the task of promoting national languages and cultures abroad. In 1987, China established the National Office of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOTCFL) with a range of activity, including cultural exchanges and tours, support networks for foreign teachers of Chinese, and a wide array of language

teaching supports (Bianco, 2007). Chinese government has conceptualized many programmes and has materialized some of them to popularize the Chinese language around the world in a systematic way and on massive scale. The NOTCFL has begun establishing China's own global network of overseas Chinese learning centers; Confucius Institutes, which provide the resources of Chinese language teaching and research to host countries (Ding & Saunders, 2006). The National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL), also known as the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban* in Chinese), is the main organ for the promotion and spread of the Chinese language.

According to its website, Hanban is committed to making the Chinese language and culture teaching resources and services available to the world, to meeting the demands of overseas Chinese learners to the utmost, to contributing to the formation of a world of cultural diversity and harmony. The Ministry of Education of China's website states (as cited in Gill, (2008:117) says the purpose of teaching Chinese language to foreigners is the following:

Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) is an integral part of china's reform and opening up drive. To promote TCFL is of strategic significance to popularize the Chinese language and culture throughout the world, to enhance the friendship and mutual understanding as well as the economic and cultural cooperation and exchanges between China and other countries around the world, and to elevate China's influence in the international community.

This has summarized the Chinese dream, a peaceful rise using a soft power system. This includes the promotion of Mandarin Chinese around the world to enhance mutual understanding and friendship, as well as economic and cultural cooperation between China and rest of the world. Kurlantzick (2007) asserts that "around the world, the Chinese government has launched several measures to increase the teaching of Chinese". One of the measures is the establishment of Confucius Institutes around the world.

According to *The Economist*, "Confucius is a generally recognizable symbol of Chinese culture". The Confucius Institute is named after the noted Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551-479 BC). Confucius Institute is a trademarked brand name, which according to a spokesman for the organization, "those who enjoy more brand names will enjoy higher popularity, reputation, more social influence, and will therefore be able to generate more support from local communities" (Starr, 2009). A *China Post* article reports in 2014 that "Certainly, China would have made little headway if it had named these Mao Institutes, or even Deng Xiaoping Institutes. But by borrowing the name Confucius, it created a brand that was instantly recognized as a symbol of Chinese culture, radically different from the images of the Communist Party" (China Post, 2014).

All these comments are pointing to the fact that China opted for the right name for the vehicle (Confucius Institute). Confucius is accepted internationally as a man of peace. China chooses the name of Confucius to achieve her dream of peaceful rise.

Confucius Institute (*Kongzi Xueyuan*) is a non-profit public educational organization affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, whose aim is to promote Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges (Sahlins, 2013; Penn, 2014; Mattis, 2012). The Confucius Institute program began in 2004

and is overseen by Hanban (officially the Office of the Chinese Language Council International). The institutes operate in co-operation with local affiliate colleges and universities around the world, and financing is shared between Hanban and the host institutions. The related Confucius Classroom program partners with local secondary schools or school districts to provide teachers and instructional materials (Jianguo et al., 2010). A total of 516 Confucius Institutes and 1,076 Confucius Classrooms have been established in 142 countries and regions (Chinadaily, 2017). According to the *People's Daily Online*,

Confucius Institutes provide Chinese-learning-related courses and programs, such as Chinese language teaching at all levels, professional training for university, secondary and elementary school Chinese teachers, test for a certificate of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Chinese competitions for further Chinese studies in China and introductions to Chinese culture.

Kumaravadivelu (2012) says that “Confucius Institutes have become a symbol as well as a vehicle”. He further says that their stated goal is not merely to promote Chinese language and culture, but also to “contribute to cooperating in developing multiculturalism and working together to build a harmonious world”. Confucius Institute, despite promoting and teaching Chinese language and culture around the world, she has other goals like diplomacy (soft power). Li Changchun was quoted in *The Economist* saying that the Confucius Institutes were “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda setup”.

Mandarin as a means to China’s Soft Power

China is currently promoting Chinese language learning throughout the world as part of its effort to accomplish its foreign policy goals through the use of soft power (Gill, 2008). The Chinese government itself has also taken the task to promote Mandarin, taking it as a way to develop soft image and to garner national strength across the board (Ramzy, 2006). The promotion of Mandarin Chinese is both at national and international levels. At national level Mandarin is the official language in China. It is used in education, media, and government. At the international level, Mandarin is taught as a second or foreign language. Kurlantzick (2007:116) says that

China’s appeal is reflected in another explicit sign of success. Chinese language and cultural studies have skyrocketed in popularity in the developing world, as average people come to see learning Chinese as vital to business and as providing a kind of popular cachet, a way English long has.

In order to project China’s soft power, the teaching of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages has been identified as a major source. The Ministry of Culture has been treating it as a matter “of strategic significance...” to “enhance friendship and mutual understanding” between China and other nations, and to “elevate China’s influence in the international community” (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). National People’s Congress (NPC) deputy director, Hu Youqing says that “Chinese language can help build our national strength and should be taken as a way to develop our country’s soft power” (Kurlantzick, 2007:67). There is certainly evidence to suggest that the promotion of Chinese language

learning has been successful in creating a positive image of Chinese and attracting learners (Gill, 2008). China uses Mandarin Chinese as means of soft power to appeal the world and attract millions of learners all over the world.

Conclusion

With the re-emergence of China, the Chinese language may possibly become one of the most dominant languages for second language learning because of Chinese growing economy (Bianco, 2007). Chinese is spoken by an estimated one out of every six people on earth (Ramzy, 2006). Its practical value has surpassed that of French, German, and even Japanese in much of the world and its future opportunities seem limitless (Ding & Saunders, 2006). Owing to political and economic factors, Mandarin Chinese is becoming the second *lingua franca* in the world. It is estimated that more than a billion people will learn Chinese in the near future (Hao, Hong et al. 2010). From Jakarta to Vancouver and from New Delhi to Chicago, surging interest in studying the Chinese language is just one gauge of the greater magnetic pull that China exerts after two decades of galloping economic growth (Ding & Saunders, 2006).

In conclusion, although China's efforts to promote Mandarin Chinese learning have contributed to a positive image of the nation and attracted learners in significant numbers, which is likely to be helpful in achieving its goals, there are still many obstacles that stand in the way (Gil, 2008). China is using its language as a means of soft power around the world through the aid of Confucius Institutes, yet there are a lot of things to be done to sustain this achievement.

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