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OPINION

Telling the China Story Well: China's Soft Power Strategy and its Limits

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China's global rise is increasingly driven by more than economic and military power. This opinion piece explores how Beijing is leveraging culture, education, diplomacy and development initiatives to shape international perceptions and strengthen its global influence. It also examines the inherent limitations of China's soft power strategy, arguing that domestic governance and international credibility will ultimately determine the success of its long-term global ambitions.



In an anarchic world, a nation's power has always been perceived in terms of its military and economic might. From the age of empires to that of nation states, hard power has been a central force to define the status and image of a nation. The way a nation controls various sources of power and their functions, and how it achieves its objectives and sustains its legitimacy, determines whether a nation is strong or weak. From Pax Britannica to Pax

Americana, military and economic dominance have remained central to global hegemonic pursuits. The rise of the liberal order, however, brought a shift in how power was imagined, with the era of constant conflicts leading to the birth of liberal multilateral institutions like the United Nations and a non-coercive notion of power to maintain world order. The United States positioned itself as the vanguard of maintaining the liberal order even at times through hard power, when its use was warranted. As such, hard power

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never lost its currency even when new forms and structures emerged emphasising on softer dimensions of power. It is within this evolving understanding of power that China has begun investing heavily in soft power as a critical pillar of its long-term global strategy.

The idea of soft power emerged slowly as liberal internationalism took roots in the post-War years. The rise of the American Dream attracted the best brains from all over the world and created a meritocratic and a knowledge-based society. The age of globalisation shaped its true meaning, a political project through economic engagement and cultural integration. The liberal idea gave the US economic might and engendered a new form of cultural production from Hollywood to McDonald's; inviting everyone to be a soft American.

Soft power is a nation's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or economic pressure. Instead of relying on military might, it leverages culture, education, political values, and public diplomacy to shape global perceptions and build international legitimacy. By channelling these values through cinema, art, and institutions, a nation can captivate the public imagination and rewrite its global narrative.

While the Americans have traditionally projected soft power through liberal democratic values, higher education, technological innovation and popular culture, the Chinese have learnt and practised it differently. China has sought to construct a new model of soft power rooted in civilisational identity, economic integration, and state-led development for mutual benefit, rather than relying on liberal institutions and the political freedoms they promise. With this idea of harmony through cultural and economic integration as its foundation, Chinese soft power marks a shift in Beijing's global projection of power.

The Rise of Chinese Soft Power

The emergence of China as a major global power has traditionally been understood through the lens of hard power, including its remarkable economic transformation and rapidly expanding military capabilities. Over the past few decades, the country has played a significant role in global politics by shaping international trade, infrastructure politics through its Belt and Road Initiative and regional dynamics. However, beyond these visible indicators of power, an equally significant dimension of China's global engagement lies in its use of

soft power. Under Presidents Hu Jintao (2003-12) and Xi Jinping (since 2012), there has been a recognition in Beijing that material capabilities alone were insufficient to sustain international leadership with the soft power consequently becoming an important component of China's national strategy. In his keynote speech to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2007, President Hu argued that China's national rejuvenation depended on its thriving culture, emphasising on cultural programmes, the cultural industry, and cultural workers to establish a cohesive state.¹ Similarly, President Xi, in his grand vision for China (2020-35), has consistently stressed the need to "tell China's story well" and to enhance the country's international soft power.²

This reflects a gradual shift in how Beijing seeks to present itself to the world and how it attempts to influence international perceptions. This kind of reinterpretation combines elements of China's civilisational heritage with contemporary policy priorities, in which concepts like Confucian ethics, moral leadership, and cultural identity are often intertwined with narratives of development, stability, and cooperation. As a result, rather than exporting liberal political values, China promotes a model centred on

cultural continuity, economic partnership and respect for sovereignty, reflecting how Beijing aligns its global image with political objectives and long-term ambitions.

Furthermore, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a much larger and complex dimension of China's engagement, often understood as an economic and infrastructure project. The initiative carries a broader narrative about Beijing's role in global developmental politics. Within this initiative, soft power has become central to its grand strategy to integrate language, culture, and development diplomacy through what has been described as retracing the historic Silk Route and reposition China at the centre of global affairs. It started showcasing China as a partner that builds connectivity, supports economic growth, and promotes cooperation, without political interference shaping its global image through Confucius Institutes, scholarships, and the expansion of cultural platforms.

Chinese Soft power: Using Confucianism to fulfil global ambition

Soft power in Chinese is often translated as *ruan shili*, a term that broadly refers to the ability to shape external perceptions through culture, values, and international

engagement, emphasising less on political values.³ Chinese interpretations situate soft power within the broader framework of comprehensive national power reflecting a strategic view in which economic capacity, technological development, cultural influence, and diplomatic engagement collectively contribute to the rise of the nation. It is seen as an important asset for its global ambitions and for building its narrative through culture and business, sans political reflections. It is different from the American conception of soft power, which is closely associated with Western liberal ideals.

China is not a liberal country; rather, it is a closed society with its own projections and value system unlike those in the West. Although the world was, until recently, unaware of how Chinese think, live, and behave, it has started organising cultural events and exchange programmes, often showcasing China's traditional art, ways of thinking, food, medical practices, and even martial arts. These cultural projects allow China to show off its civilisational image. Instead of pushing a particular political belief, it is promoting the Chinese language, a signature effort aimed at practising public-cultural diplomacy.

China is building its image by blending both public and cultural

diplomacy while maintaining the largest diplomatic presence globally unlike any other country.⁴ The Confucius Institutes remain among the most visible instruments of this strategy. Established across universities worldwide, these promote Chinese language education and cultural engagement and reinforce Beijing's preferred narrative about China's peaceful rise.⁵ Complementing these initiatives are scholarships, cultural festivals, tourism promotion and expanding diplomatic outreach, together creating a comprehensive ecosystem of public diplomacy.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and similar projects represent perhaps the most ambitious expression of China's soft power strategy and influence how people view China.⁶ While this dream project of President Xi Jinping was primarily conceived as an infrastructure and connectivity initiative, it also serves an important political purpose to portray Beijing as a developmental partner. Through investments in transport, energy and digital infrastructure, Beijing seeks to position itself as a reliable development partner, particularly across Asia, Africa and Latin America, even as there have been allegations that Beijing was pursuing 'debt-trap diplomacy' under its garb. For instance, several countries from

Europe to South Asia have expressed reservations about the BRI,⁷ thereby complicating China's efforts to project a benign international image and demonstrating that economic engagement alone cannot automatically generate lasting political goodwill.

Limits of China's Soft Power and Challenges for its Global Ambition

Despite significant investment, China's soft power faces structural constraints, even within its domestic political structures. The country's political system continues to shape international perceptions in ways that often undermine its cultural diplomacy. As such, the centralisation of political authority, lack of civil liberties, media and digital censorship, and continued concerns over the state of human rights, have created a credibility gap between China's external messaging and its domestic governance.

It is these tensions that highlight a broader paradox. While China has successfully demonstrated that rapid economic development does not necessarily require Western-style liberal democracy, translating economic success into international appeal and de-hyphenating its political image from its cultural

forays remain critical challenges. However, China strongly believes that its economic transformation has enhanced its image as a reliable partner to many countries. Therefore, without making any noise about its political image, it is opening a new pathway to the world built on a tech-driven culture, inviting millions of students through exchange programmes, expanding into heritage sites and investing in tourism, shifting from state-to-state relations to state-to-society relations.⁸ However, soft power ultimately depends not only on cultural promotion but also on the perceived legitimacy and credibility of a state's political system.

China's pursuit of soft power reflects a broader transformation in its foreign policy. The road ahead for China's global ambition has to qualify through its soft power progression. While the credibility gap in the Western normative sense may undermine its reputation, the rise of populism, nativism, and racism in the West could, with its efforts to reshape international narratives through culture, education, development partnerships, and diplomatic engagement, prevail. In particular, with the rise of Trump and MAGA movement in the United States,⁹ the great American Dream that laid the foundation of liberal internationalism has been dealt a

heavy blow even as the world today is witnessing de-globalisation challenges, unending wars and retreat of liberal institutionalism. President Xi, during the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017, outlined China's soft power vision aimed at world peace, global development, and a sustainable international order.¹⁰ The effectiveness of this strategy will depend on its ability to reduce the credibility gap between its domestic governance and global conduct.

Ultimately, China's distinct civilisational and development-driven soft power stands at a historic

crossroads. As Western liberal internationalism fractures under the weight of populism, nativism, and de-globalisation, Beijing's alternative model offers a potent counter-narrative to the traditional world order. Yet, cultural festivals, language institutes, and massive infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative can only go so far. The definitive success of China's long-term global ambitions will not be secured by material transactions alone, but by its capacity to reconcile its restrictive domestic governance with its professed global conduct, thereby closing the credibility gap and fostering genuine international trust.

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