

Reinventing Soft Power: The Strong Impact of China's Soft Power "Shortcomings" on the Global South

by Tanina Zappone

ABSTRACT

After being introduced into the Chinese academic debate in the 1990s, the notion of soft power has undergone such a process of "Sinicisation" that some scholars now wonder if the original concept has been gradually "reinvented" in China. Given worsening opinions about the PRC in the US and Europe over the last years, many analysts have stressed the weakness of China's soft power, pointing to its state-centred approach and lack of an attractive set of values to be emulated as the main shortcomings. However, China's growing influence in the Global South shows that these analyses have misevaluated the real goals and motivations of China's soft power. The Russia-Ukraine war provides telling examples of the successful dynamics of China's "defensive" or "negative" version of soft power and suggests it has significant impact in the least industrialised countries.

*China | Chinese foreign policy | Soft power | Global South | Ukraine |
Russia*

keywords

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1. The conceptualisation of soft power in the Chinese context

The concept of soft power (henceforth SP) entered the Chinese academic debate a few years after the publication in 1990 of the book *Bound to Lead* by Joseph Nye, where the formula appears for the first time.¹ However, the debate on SP did not receive a major boost until after 2007, when it moved beyond the boundaries of academia to enter the political discourse. For the first time, a top leader, President Hu Jintao, employed the formula "*ruan shili*" in an official speech.² Since then, the notion of SP has gradually evolved from a scholarly topic to a national strategy. This evolution transcends the ordinary process of domesticating a foreign notion, and should instead be understood in the framework of a reconceptualisation of the idea of national power and gradual shifts in the self-positioning of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

1.1 SP as a new index of national power

In the years prior to the introduction of SP, the concept of national power in China was basically understood in terms of "comprehensive national power" (CNP, *zonghe guoli* 综合国力), which could be defined as "the combination of all the

¹ Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead. The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York, Basic Books, 1990. Nye describes soft power as the co-optive power behaviour of getting others to do what you want, in contrast to the active command power behaviour of getting others to do what you want. In 1993 Wang Huning, a prominent figure of ideological propaganda for the last 30 years, writes the first relevant Chinese paper on SP. Wang Huning, "Zuowei guojia ruan shili de wenhua: ruan quanli 作为国家实力的文化:软权力" [Culture as national power: soft power], in *Fudan Xuebao* 复旦学报 [Fudan Journal (Social Sciences Edition)], No. 3/1993, p. 91-96.

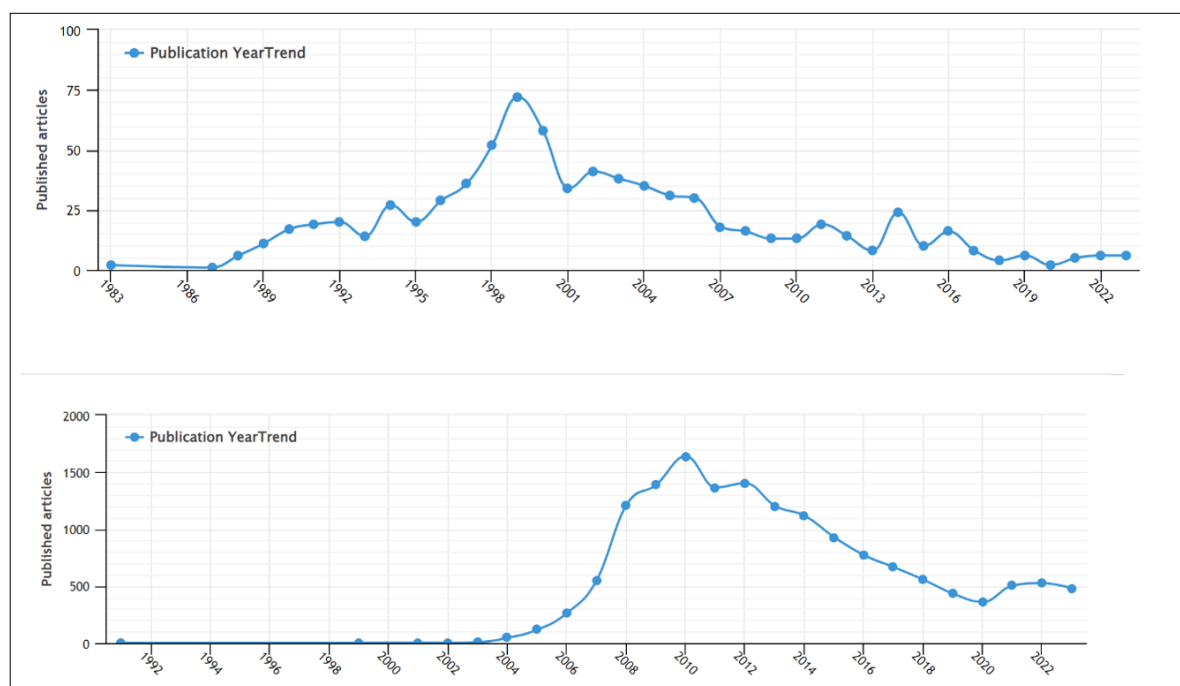
² Hu Jintao, *Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress*, 15 October 2007, http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/Features/200711/t20071104_1579245.htm. Original version: http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/zggcddsbcqgdbdh/2012-11/06/content_1742192.htm.

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powers possessed by a country for the survival and development of a sovereign state, including material and ideational ethos, and international influence as well”.³ Scholars developed the concept of CNP from the 1980s onward as a new power paradigm, with the aim of gauging national strength and predicting power relations, in the context of the growing multipolarity following the end of the Cold War. In this historical context, the range of factors determining a nation's power became much broader than in the past, and military strength was no longer the main index of power. In the years of major academic interest towards CNP (late 1980s–early 2000s, as shown in figure 1), internal development was a priority for China (figure 2) and authors tended to describe China as a developing country, in accordance with the strategy of maintaining a low profile (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦 literally, “hiding one’s capacity while biding one’s time”) espoused by Deng Xiaoping, the PRC’s top political leader after the death of Mao Zedong.

Figure 1 | Publication year trends for Chinese academic papers having *zonghe guoli* (CNP) and *ruan shili* (SP) in the title



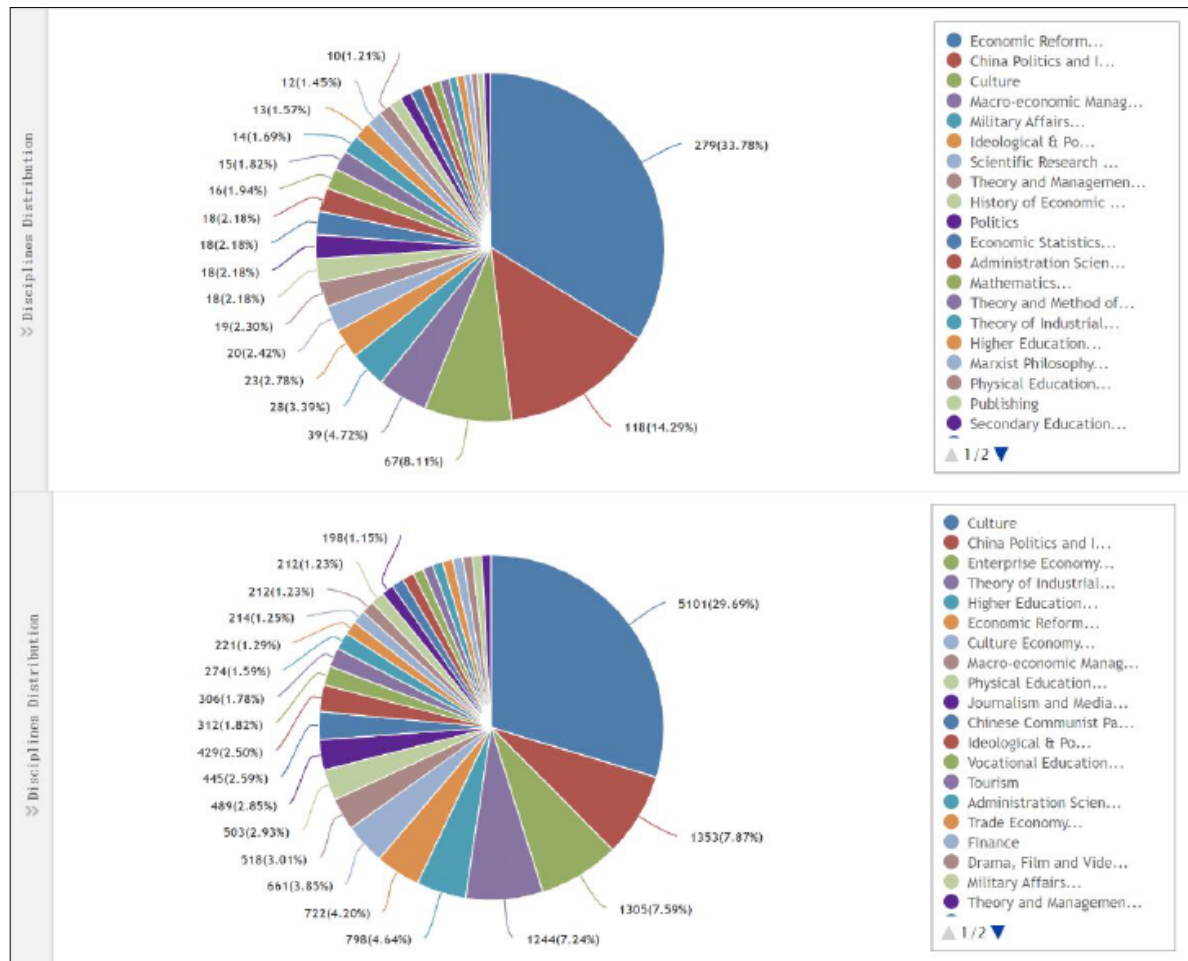
Source: CNKI.

Interest in the idea of SP did not emerge until the beginning of the 21st century, when the influx of foreign cultural products and information, deriving from the PRC’s entry into the World Trade Organisation (2001), brought leadership to fear

³ Huang Shuofeng quoted in Hu Angang and Men Honghua, *The Rising of Modern China: Comprehensive National Power and Grand Strategy*, paper presented at the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy conference on “Rising China and the East Asian Economy”, Seoul, 19-20 March 2004.

Western "pacific evolution" (the expression referred to the West's alleged attempt to use its cultural influence to undermine the survival of socialism in China). The PRC was recognised as lacking cultural power, a state of affairs that not only made it vulnerable to the risk of external contamination, but also jeopardised its capacity to exert greater cultural influence. Reaping the benefits of economic growth, China under Jiang Zemin (1989–2002) was ready to move from the receptive behaviour of the past to more active participation in international affairs so as to "[get in] gear with the world" (*yu shijie jiegui* 与世界接轨).

Figure 2 | Distribution of Chinese academic papers having *zonghe guoli* and *ruan shili* in the titles, by discipline



Source: CNKI.

Under Hu Jintao (2002–2012), a similar perspective on national culture emerged in the conceptual framework of China's "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起) or "peaceful development" (*heping fazhan* 大国崛起), a formula officially adopted to illustrate the idea that the country's political, economic and military development

was an opportunity for, and not a threat to, other states.⁴ The concept of SP was officially sanctioned in Chinese political discourse in this specific moment. The duality between hard and soft power fit into the debate on the country's limited ability to cultivate all the components of national power in a balanced way.

From 2006 onwards, the number of studies on SP began to increase while scholarly attention towards CNP decreased in an inversely proportional way (figure 1). SP was presented as an innovative paradigm for China's rise, coherent with initial attempts to rebrand the nation as a cultural power on the world stage; however, it neither overcame nor replaced the original concept of CNP. In 2007, Hu defined SP as a tool specifically aimed at elevating cultural power as a strategic factor in the competition in CNP.⁵ Looking at the occurrences of the two formulas in an online database of PRC President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Secretary General Xi Jinping's speeches, covering a time range of more than ten years, it is clear that the current leader still refers much more frequently to CNP than to SP, especially when talking about the goal of making China a great power (*qianguo* 强国).⁶

Rather than being conceived as a new taxonomy of China's national power – which would replace the pre-existing one – SP is framed as an objective strength to be measured, a specific resource within the framework of CNP. At the same time the wide debate on the notion allows to rethink diverse models of national power. In this regard, the introduction of SP marks both a "strategic shift in the [Communist] party's thinking and policies about the Chinese developmental path" and "a philosophical and ideological continuity with both traditional Chinese culture and Marxism and Mao Zedong's thoughts".⁷ The following section summarises the elements of greater originality in the Chinese definition of SP.

1.2 Soft power with Chinese characteristics

Undergoing a process of gradual "Sinicisation", SP has certainly taken on original features. The most prominent characteristic of Chinese SP is its "cultural

⁴ See Pan Chengxin, "'Peaceful Rise' and China's New International Contract: The State in Change in Transnational Society", in Linda Chenlan Li (ed.), *The Chinese State in Transition. Processes and Contests in Local China*, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 127-144.

⁵ Hu stated: "In the present era, culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength, and the Chinese people have an increasingly ardent desire for a richer cultural life. We must keep to the orientation of advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the cultural creativity of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress." See Hu Jintao, *Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress*, cit., where *zonghe guoli* is translated as "overall national strength".

⁶ *Xi Jinping xilie zhongyao jianghua shujuku* 习近平系列重要讲话数据库 [Database of Xi Jinping's important speeches], in *People's Daily Online*, <http://jhsjk.people.cn>. In the database the words "ruan shili" occur 123 times, "zonghe guoli" 232 times.

⁷ Weihong Zhang, "China's Cultural Future: From Soft Power to Comprehensive National Power", in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2010), p. 383-402 at p. 384.

dimension". The syntagma "cultural soft power" (*wenhua ruan shili* 文化软实力) has been by far the most pervasive formula in China's discourse on SP since 2007.⁸

Contrary to what might be expected, however, the emphasis on culture, as one of the intangible resources identified by Nye, does not narrow the sphere of understanding of SP in China; on the contrary, SP has assumed an even more fluid meaning in the Chinese context, extending beyond international relations.⁹ The prevalence of the "culture school" in official discourse still leaves ample room for discussing the nature of culture and the ways it may be realised: "the understanding of what constitutes culture is broader, including, among other elements, traditions, customs, core values, ethics, morals, lifestyle, national character, and the creative products of the cultural industry, but also political values, ideology orientation, and institutions".¹⁰

Everything possessed of a potential power to attract can be used in the competition over amassing SP, but official statements tend to place greater emphasis on the alleged uniqueness of China's civilisation. It thus comes as no surprise that the country's development model and related capacity to alleviate poverty and achieve the status of technological superpower – the so-called "China model" (*Zhongguo moshi* 中国模式) – as well as its millennial cultural tradition are the main arguments of the country's national-image-building strategy.¹¹ The adoption of such mixed SP resources marks another key difference with regard to Nye's vision, as his conceptualisation clearly distinguishes cultural, soft and intangible sources from economic, military, hard and tangible sources.¹²

Another aspect of Chinese SP worth mentioning is that this conceptualisation lacks a clear distinction between domestic and foreign dimensions: national cultural security and international soft-power-building are "single ideational and discursive enterprise".¹³ While for Nye the target audience for soft power policies is the international public, China's SP strategies involve and address both domestic and international audiences. On the one hand, they aim to improve the PRC's international competitiveness in terms of the global influence of Chinese culture. On the other, they seek to rebuild national identity and enhance national

⁸ In Xi Jinping speeches, the formula "wenhua ruan shili" appears in more than two-thirds of the total occurrences of "ruan shili" (87 out of 123). *Database of Xi Jinping's important speeches*, cit.

⁹ Tanina Zappone, *La comunicazione politica cinese rivolta all'estero. Dibattito interno, istituzioni e pratica discorsiva*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2017.

¹⁰ Natalia Francesca Riva, *Genealogy of wenhua ruan shili 文化软实力. Development, Formalization, and Popularization of the Soft Power Discourse in the Chinese Context (From the Origins to the First Years of Xi's Era)*, Padova, Libreria Universitaria edizioni, 2023, p. 133.

¹¹ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global. The Partial Power*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹² Nye associates "hard power" with tangible resources such as economic and military strength while soft power with intangible assets, such as culture, ideology and institutions. Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead*, cit., p. 32.

¹³ Ondřej Klimeš, "China's Cultural Soft Power: The Central Concept in the Early Xi Jinping Era (2012–2017)", in *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica*, No. 4/2017, p. 127-150 at p. 127, <https://doi.org/10.14712/24646830.2017.45>.

cohesiveness by unifying people around the objective of realising the Chinese dream (*Zhongguomeng* 中国梦) about "mak[ing] China prosperous and strong, rejuvenat[ing] the nation, and bring[ing] happiness to the Chinese people".¹⁴ This point is pivotal for understanding the motivations of Chinese SP.

2. The limits of China's SP

Since 2007, the government has invested billions of dollars in promoting China's cultural attractiveness.¹⁵ It is extremely difficult to prove a precise link between sources of attraction and foreign policy outcomes. However, opinion polls clearly demonstrate that China's investments have not resulted in an overall attractive capacity comparable to that exerted by the United States in most countries of the world. China's SP is particularly ineffective in Western countries.¹⁶

The main causes are arguably the government-oriented nature of China's SP strategies and the fact that authoritarian countries are unwilling to free civil society participation and therefore lack credibility and attractiveness.¹⁷ China may have learned this lesson and today's external propaganda focuses on "telling China's story" (*jiang Zhongguo gushi* 讲中国故事) by adhering to "the people-centred orientation" (*yi renmin wei zhongxin* 以人民为中心), which encourages increasing people-to-people communication engagement.¹⁸ Reconciling these sophisticated

¹⁴ Xi Jinping, *Address to the First Session of the 12th National People's Congress*, 17 March 2013, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202006/7954b8df92384c729c02be626840daed.shtml>.

¹⁵ Olga Krasnyak, "National Styles in Science Diplomacy: China", in *CDP Blog*, 13 December 2018, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/node/87586>. For a complete review of China's SP instruments (e.g. education programmes, sport events, public diplomacy initiatives, etc.) see, among others, Maria Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2022; and Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen and Ying Zhu (eds), *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics. China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds*, London/New York, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁶ A Pew survey shows that favourable views of China have dropped from early 2000s (51 per cent) to 2018 (38 per cent) in advanced economies. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries", in *Pew Research Center Reports*, 6 October 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/?p=48226>. Today 83 per cent of Americans have negative views on China; they are "complimentary of China's technological advancements but poorly rate or do not know its popular culture". See Laura Silver et al., "Americans Are Critical of China's Global Role – as Well as Its Relationship with Russia", in *Pew Research Center Reports*, 12 April 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/?p=52339>. With few exceptions and some differences between south and north, in Europe China is seen negatively as well. Richard Q. Turcsányi et al., *European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19. Differences and Common Ground across the Continent*, Bratislava, Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020, <https://www.ifri.org/en/node/18112>; Mariolina Sesto, "Sondaggio Swg: l'opinione pubblica Ue auspica buoni rapporti con la Cina a costo di smarcarsi parzialmente dagli Usa", in *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 19 May 2023, <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/sondaggio-swg-l-opinione-pubblicae-auspica-buoni-rapporti-la-cina-costo-smarcarsi-parzialmente-usa-AEHXTVD>.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept", in *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2021), p. 196-208, DOI 10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572; and Gary D. Rawnsley, "Communicating Confidence. China's Public Diplomacy", in Nancy Snow and Nicholas J. Cull (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, 2nd ed., London/New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 284-300.

¹⁸ Zhao Alexandre Huang, "The Confucius Institute and Relationship Management: Uncertainty Management of Chinese Public Diplomacy in Africa", in Paweł Surowiec and Ilan Manor (eds), *Public*

communication approaches with the dynamics of a highly controlled political system is a daunting challenge, however, made even harder by the increased authoritarian and centralised political culture of the Xi administration.

As a matter of fact, government policies often produce negative response by foreign publics,¹⁹ although it may be that current foreign public opinion might be even less positive without the interactions proposed by SP initiatives. At any rate, it is evident that China's SP potential is somehow constrained by the authoritarian dimension of its domestic politics. A recent sentiment analysis seems to demonstrate that even the worsened sentiments toward China, commonly attributed to the alleged cover-up of the Covid-19 pandemic, are mostly influenced by political issues such as human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.²⁰

China's selective development of SP, giving greater emphasis to some resources (culture and economics) and tools (media and big events) than others like projecting political principles and values which could align with those of target countries, relegates these indispensable SP factors to the background. In the absence of these resources, China's messages are understood through pre-existing frames.

This constitutes a serious shortcoming where these frames are substantially negative, but what about those countries where opinions on China are not negative?²¹ As a matter of fact, China's SP initiatives in the so-called Global South, the world's poorest and least developed countries, seems to be more effective. Let's take a couple of examples: despite the decrease in international mobility due to the impact of the Covid pandemic, China is still the eighth most chosen destination in the world for international students from the Global South, and the first among Asian countries;²² the majority of the 149 countries which joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the PRC's massive programme to develop maritime and land trade routes between East Asia and the Mediterranean (and all regions in-between) are from the Global South.²³

Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 197-223.

¹⁹ Examples of the failure of China's SP come from the closure of many Confucius Institutes in the US and Europe following accusations of espionage and censorship (Shao-Cheng Sun, "The Confucius Institutes: China's Cultural Soft Power Strategy", in *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, Vol. 6, No 1, 2023, p. 52-68, <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2023.4>) or the diplomatic boycott of the Olympics games in 2022 over human rights concerns in Xinjiang.

²⁰ Yerin Kim et al. "A Soft Power Challenge, or an Opportunity? A Big Data Analysis on Chinese Soft Power during COVID-19 Pandemic", in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 2023), DOI 10.1093/fpa/orad011.

²¹ For instance, a survey carried out by the Britain-based YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project between August and September 2022 has shown that, while China's reputation is declining in advanced Western economies, majorities in nine out of twelve non-Western countries in the sample of the survey have positive views of China's role in the world. Jon Henley, "Sharp Fall in China's Global Standing as Poll Shows Backing for Taiwan Defence", in *The Guardian*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/mfepq>.

²² Erudeda website: *China International Student Statistics*, <https://erudera.com/statistics/china/china-international-student-statistics>.

²³ Christoph Nedopil, *Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Shanghai, Green Finance & Development Center, 2023, <https://greenfdc.org/?p=575>.

3. The "Chinese solution" for the Global South: The case of the Russian-Ukraine war

To measure China's global power strategy without misevaluating it, it is necessary to consider the distinctive features of Chinese SP that place it in a conceptual and motivational framework which is substantially different from that of other countries.

For instance, by focusing solely on China's nationalistic policies – such as its antagonising approach in the South China Sea or the aggressive tones of so-called "wolf warrior diplomacy"²⁴ – as shortcomings of SP that arguably undermine its success, we risk overlooking the tight, intrinsic and programmatic interconnection between the internal and external factors of China's SP.²⁵ In a single party political system, where the absence of elections deprives the leadership of a tool for measuring consensus, nationalistic sentiments play an important role in legitimating authoritarian rule; in this context, international prestige, pursued via external propaganda (itself part of the CCP's conception of soft power), has the primary objective of making it easier for the government to maintain the support of local people.

Critics probably tend to overestimate the importance of China's aspirations of becoming a global major cultural power, thereby overlooking the fact that, behind political proclamations, the government's priority remains that of bolstering citizens' self-confidence in acting as representatives of Chinese culture (*wenhua zixin* 文化自信). Similarly, criticisms to the effect that China lacks a value system sharable with other cultures tend to undervalue the effectiveness of "defensive" or "negative" SP that constructs China's identity as distinct from others instead of publicising specific features of the country's identity to target audiences.²⁶

To understand this point it is probably useful to introduce the idea of the "China solution" (*Zhongguo fang'an* 中国方案),²⁷ first presented by Xi in 2014 as a response to the failure of Western solutions to global issues (as demonstrated in the 2008–2009 global financial crisis).²⁸ As Han and Huang explained in 2017, the China

²⁴ Bruce Elleman, *China's Naval Operations in the South China Sea. Evaluating Legal, Strategic and Military Factors*, Amsterdam, Renaissance Books, 2018; Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army. The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021.

²⁵ Joseph S. Nye, "The Limits of Chinese Soft Power", in *Project Syndicate*, 10 July 2015, <https://prosyn.org/31WBZ6t>.

²⁶ William A. Callahan, "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream", in *Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3-4 (November 2015), p. 216-229, DOI 10.1111/1467-9256.12088.

²⁷ Literally *fang'an* means "plan" or "programme".

²⁸ Xi mentions the formula also at the 2016 G20 in Hangzhou, which has been a key moment for China starting to promote new solutions at multilateral fora. The formula, which now has gone out of fashion, can be referred to specific proposal made in recent years, such as the idea of cyber sovereignty, China's environmental solution known as "ecological civilisation" (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明), the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, etc. Shaun Breslin, *China Risen? Studying*

solution is first and foremost a rejection of the universality of the "Western model" by asserting that it is possible to *not* impose any national values on other countries.²⁹ In this perspective, the relative absence of attractive political values in Chinese SP is not a negative trait per se. In March 2023, Xi reaffirmed the point while illustrating the so-called three global initiatives (Development, Security and Civilisation Initiatives). He stated that the PRC will never have colonial aims and that China sustains all peoples in the pursuit of their own original development trajectory. The uniqueness of the Chinese model is an inspiration for developing countries.³⁰

The Russia-Ukraine conflict gives us a clear example of China practicing "negative" SP at the discursive level.³¹ The PRC's representatives depict Ukraine as a humanitarian crisis caused by the geopolitical interests of great powers, while NATO and the United States are defined as "the instigator of the crisis" (*weiji de shizuo yongzhe* 危机的始作俑者).³² Meaningfully, in the same discursive context, China's identity and stance are mainly defined by contrast/subtraction: "China is not the creator of the Ukrainian crisis, nor is it a party to it" (*Zhongguo bu shi Wukelan weiji de zaozhe, ye bu shi dangshifang* 中国不是乌克兰危机的制造者, 也不是当事方),³³ asserts the government, and the country is described as a victim of "preconceptions, prejudice, arrogance and mislabelling" (*xianruweizhu, pianjian aoman, luan kou maozi* 先入为主、偏见傲慢、乱扣帽子).³⁴

This narrative frames China as the antithesis of the United States and an alternative global power, and it capitalises on the failure of western countries to conquer hearts and minds in the Global South because of an application of universalistic values that is widely perceived as hypocritical and instrumental. In the case of the conflict in Ukraine, it is evident how Chinese discourse aims to kindle scepticism

Chinese Global Power, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2021, p. 215-216.

²⁹ Quoted in Daniel C. Lynch, "The End of China's Rise: Consequences for PRC Debate on Soft Power", in Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen and Ying Zhu (eds), *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics. China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds*, London/New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 49.

³⁰ Xi Jinping, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Keynote Address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting", in *Xinhua*, 16 March 2023, http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2023-03/16/content_85171478.htm.

³¹ Maria Repnikova, "Russia's War in Ukraine and the Fractures in Western Soft Power", in *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (June 2023), p. 190-194, DOI 10.1057/s41254-022-00282-2.

³² Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on March 18, 2022*, 18 March 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202203/t20220318_10653105.html. Original version: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202203/t20220318_10653084.shtml.

³³ See for instance Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *President Xi Jinping Speaks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the Phone*, 26 April 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202304/t20230426_11066785.html. Original version: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202304/t20230426_11066754.shtml.

³⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022*, 24 February 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202202/t20220224_10645282.html. Original version: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202202/t20220224_10645295.shtml.

about the real intentions behind Western countries' appeal to international law and democracy.

And China seems to be successful in this regard, as many countries in the Global South have assumed a fence-setting position on the conflict, rejecting the premise of the West's more or less implicit calls to the side against Russia. The vote on the February 2023 UN General Assembly nonbinding resolution calling for Russia to end hostilities, approved by 141 members, involved 32 neutral positions and 7 rejections; all abstentions and rejections were from countries in the Global South. The vote was influenced by multiple factors, including economic and military ties with Russia. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that anti-western PRC rhetoric around the conflict, its abstention and comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia, also impacted the votes cast by at least some of these countries, most of which are also BRI partners.³⁵

Conclusions

China's influence in the Global South is conveyed (and augmented) by a political discourse which is as operationally vague as it is critical of the United States. The position paper released on 24 February by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis is a perfect example of this. While calling for a dialogue-based solution, it indirectly blames the United States and Europe by condemning the "Cold War mentality".³⁶

China's influence in the Global South could be seen as conveyed by the specifically Chinese vision of soft power and especially by the same factors often held up as the reasons China's SP has failed in Western countries, namely the absence of a set of values to be emulated. This fundamental aspect of Chinese SP has contributed to a long-standing tendency to underestimate the serious challenge China poses towards the liberal world.

Only time will tell whether the PRC will be able to make full use of its influence over the Global South to counter the "strong China paradigm" (e.g., a China that will invariably evolve along an overly assertive path),³⁷ or whether it simply intends

³⁵ Alessia Amighini and Alicia García-Herrero, "What Really Influences United Nations Voting on Ukraine?", in *Bruegel Analysis*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.bruegel.org/node/9023>.

³⁶ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, 24 February 2023, point 2, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html; Andrew Hartnett et al., "China's Paper on Ukraine and Next Steps for Xi's Global Security Initiative", in *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Issue Briefs*, 7 March 2023, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-paper-ukraine-and-next-steps-xis-global-security-initiative>.

³⁷ Using this formula, David Lampton refers to the idea that China will increasingly take advantage of its national strength to exercise power on other countries. David M. Lampton, "Paradigm Lost", in *The National Interest*, 1 September 2005, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/paradigm-lost-301>.



to utilise this influence as a tool for convincing its own public of the country's growing international prestige. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Global South will increasingly perceive China as an alternative international rule-maker, capable not only of rewriting the rules of the current international system, but also of providing and spreading new conceptions of the values it conveys.

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