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Cultural diplomacy and soft power of China: Theory, strategy and application in South East Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines the expansion of China's influence beyond economics into culture and ideology, focusing on its state-led cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia, a region of critical strategic importance. Adopting a qualitative approach that utilizes case studies and empirical data, the research analyzes the mechanisms and motivations behind China's soft power strategy. The findings reveal that these initiatives are distinctly state-centric and frequently aligned with immediate economic or political goals. While this strategy has successfully established a notable cultural presence for China in the region, it is simultaneously hampered by significant challenges in building genuine trust and persuasive appeal. The paper concludes that the effectiveness of China's soft power is ultimately constrained by these issues, casting doubt on the long-term sustainability of its approach. These findings offer crucial insights for policymakers, suggesting that a more organic, trust-based approach is necessary for long-term success and informing how regional nations can formulate effective engagement strategies.

Keywords: China, Cultural diplomacy, Soft power, Strategy, Application, South-East Asia.

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Contents

Contribution of this paper to the literature

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of China's cultural diplomacy and soft power specifically within Southeast Asia. It uniquely combines theoretical frameworks with strategic implementation and practical application, illuminating how Beijing leverages cultural assets to enhance its influence, manage its image, and foster diplomatic relations in this critical region.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Concept of Soft Power

Soft power, which is a term introduced by Nye (1990) has been featured prominently in international relations literature. Nye (1990) first used the term "soft power" in his book Bound to Lead, where he described how some states can influence others not solely through coercive force or economic power, but also through attraction. Soft power is defined as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment." About globalization, and not all states wishing to act through coercive means that may lead or generate backlash, soft power has become increasingly useful for states seeking to generate their images, change values, and create sustainable influence. Nye (2004) refined this argument further in Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics, where he indicated three sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy, particularly when it is seen as legitimate and having moral authority. When a country is able to produce attraction in these three areas, it is also able to influence decisions that would not normally be possible through coercive means. Soft power also differs from hard power, which is largely coercive or economic.

Subsequent work has appraised and expanded on Nye, for example, Wilson III (2008) stressed the practical need for narrative framing and communicative effort in implementing soft power where attraction cannot happen by accident, attraction must be generated from a strategic approach; Melissen (2005) expanded the meaning of soft power with the concept of public diplomacy in which non-state elements (e.g., media, NGOs, education, etc.) contribute to a nation's brand abroad. Critics of Nye's framework have identified weaknesses in its conceptual clarity and imposition of a Western construct. For example, Lukes (2005) and user of soft power to bring about change of preference had the innocuous tone of being multi-democratic, while still indirectly wielding power to coerce attraction and although not aggressive, attracted or preferred outcomes can be considered manipulative. Furthermore, Hayden (2012) raised issues regarding the understanding and measuring of soft power, noting that it can be difficult to locate attraction as an authentic preference and not as an influence produced by strategic means.

The concept has also been analyzed in non-Western settings. Kurlantzick (2007) was among the first authors to conduct a systematic study on China's soft power strategy, and he noted that China utilizes a myriad of state-based more traditional instruments of soft power such as foreign aid, scholarships (this includes international students who study at Chinese universities, and cultural exchange students who go to the University of Utah or other US universities), and Confucius Institutes. Kurlantzick characterized Chinese soft power as "conditional" because it is rarely applicable simply as a result of admiration. In some cases, Chinese soft power also carries with an economic or financial motivation from Beijing's side. Similarly, Gill and Huang (2006) studied the structural and strategic underpinning of China's soft power with an emphasis on the actions of the Chinese government, and a consideration of the cultural narratives and style of diplomacy emanating from the state. These authors showed that there is an obvious danger in confusing a predictively and practices-based model of soft power based on information and narratives suggested by an authoritarian regime with a normative model of soft power based on persuading the public as its foundations, as Nye described.

Also, smart power, a hybrid method of achieving definitions or objectives with the combined elements of hard and soft power has increasingly assumed an integral role in foreign policy analyses. Nye (2009) asserts that the best strategies to move global politics forward are not limited to either attraction or coercion, but rather a combination of the two, sensitive to context; this perspective is also represented by other later researchers considering global power arrangements in an increasingly multipolar reality. With respect to practice, this combination of soft and hard power has been reflected more in the actions of great powers including the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea. While we observe differing new formats and at times, some ambiguity in terminology, the body of literature consistently affirms the roles of legitimacy, perception, role models, and communication in exerting international influence. Without question, soft power has represented a unique way of understanding how states are seeking to shape global norms and behavior when they form consensus without engaging violence or financial incentive.

1.2. Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy has emerged as a critical instrument of soft power in international relations, serving as a means for states to project influence and shape perceptions through cultural exchange, heritage promotion, and people-to-people engagement. Although often associated with public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on the use of cultural assets language, arts, education, and shared values to promote mutual understanding and foster international goodwill. The tools of cultural diplomacy include academic and artistic exchanges, scholarship programs, international cultural institutes (such as Germany's Goethe-Institutes, France's Alliance Française, and China's Confucius Institutes), cultural events, exhibitions, cinema, music, cuisine, and language promotion. These forms help build a nation's image (nation branding) and increase goodwill among foreign publics. Cultural diplomacy has played a significant role in the post-Cold War era, as countries compete to win the "hearts and minds" of global audiences. The success in cultural diplomacy does not come from "promoting politics through culture" but from creating genuine spaces for cultural interaction (Leonard, 2002).

Cultural diplomacy is an important subset of soft power, which is achieved through cultural exchange activities that promote understanding, develop trust, and ultimately produce global influence. Cultural diplomacy is regarded as one of the most powerful instruments in the deployment of soft power. When a state is able to diffuse its culture outwards and generate attraction, it has the opportunity to positively affect the behaviors and attitudes of populations in other countries without resorting to the practice of coercion. Bound, Briggs, Holden, and Jones (2007) "Cultural relations are the daily manifestation of soft power." While soft power is an abstract strategy,

cultural diplomacy is the concrete means for implementing this strategy. The two concepts should be thought of as complementary: cultural diplomacy is used as a tool of soft power, but cultural diplomacy is also a visible means by which soft power is expressed. While cultural diplomacy can be used in both informal and formal settings, its capacity to be effective, in terms of expressing soft power, is contingent on the way in which cultural diplomacy is practiced. It is quite possible to practice cultural diplomacy in a propagandist or tightly-controlled institutional manner where the legitimacy of the efforts can be called into question. If projects and events demonstrate a sense of manipulation or lack of authenticity, the foundations of soft power can be weakened. On the other hand, if a state offers opportunities for reciprocal exchange that encourage genuine two-way cultural conversations, it can begin to construct a positive image and expand its soft power in a sustainable manner.

The contemporary idea of cultural diplomacy began to appear after World War II when countries were working to refashion the broken diplomatic relations that allowed for global warfare. Cummings (2003) explains that cultural diplomacy "is the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding," which can stem from either formal or informal diplomacy. Cummings' definition closely resembles Nye (2004) description of soft power, where public diplomatic reliance on culture, political values and foreign policy creates a "trust" factor with foreign and domestic audiences relative to coercive hard powers. Often, scholars have examined the historical paths of cultural diplomacy, as Mark (2008) notes "It has become particularly dominant since the end of the Cold War, but cultural diplomacy was utilized before the Cold War, especially as it applies to international relations and the United States versus the Soviet Union." Cultural diplomacy during the Cold War included an arsenal of educational exchange programs (Fulbright Program), international transmission programs (e.g., Voice of America), and cultural engagements (artistic performances) stripped of the public ideological contestation identified over historical resources transferred through diplomats.

In the post-Cold War period, an increasing number of emergent powers have engaged in cultural diplomacy to improve their image abroad. Nye (2008) contends that cultural diplomacy is a component of "smart power," the judicious use of hard and soft power to achieve goals of foreign policy. Within this paradigm, countries including China, Turkey, and South Korea have increased their cultural diplomacy through either state-sponsored or quasi-state media content, cultural centers or agencies. Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015) particularly acknowledge a shift away from state-centric cultural diplomacy toward more inclusive, multi-actor endeavors. They suggest that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy increasingly relies upon collaboration between governments and civil society, including previous non-state actors as part of the cultural industries. Melissen (2005) also argues that the credibility of cultural diplomacy and its authenticity is enhanced when the participation of non-state actors in the cultural sphere, including artists, educators, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can influence cultural messaging.

Nevertheless, there are concerns from scholars who are skeptical of the effectiveness and authenticity of cultural diplomacy when it is understood as a political tool. For example, Arndt (2005) expresses that purposeful cultural diplomacy tends to undermine legitimacy if audiences suspect it is propaganda rather than genuine exchange. Cull (2009) reinforces this view, and indicates that the relationship-building aspects of sustainable cultural diplomacy should take precedence over directing one-way messaging. In the Asian way, cultural diplomacy is often operationalized through state-led programs, such as China's Confucius Institutes or Japan's Cool Japan campaign, that have gained some degree of visibility. Kaneva (2011) asserts that although these institutional programs have important bases for visibility, they must scale the structural issues of censorship, lack of civil society actors, and geopolitical mistrust, to have long-term effect. Cultural diplomacy is still a powerful tactic for international influence, especially when pursued transparently, mutually, and inclusively. Cultural diplomacy is most effective when competing national interests can be balanced with meaningful intercultural dialogue, it is nonpartisan, and stakeholders from both sending and receiving countries are affected.

1.3. China's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

In recent decades, China has increased its endeavor to build and utilize soft power as an aspect of its foreign policy, with the aim of enhancing its status and improving its public diplomacy image. Recognizing the limits of hard power, particularly in the competitive globalized setting, China has determined to promote soft power tools, with cultural diplomacy being one of the principal functions. While China has great potential for soft power with its ancient civilization, its rapid economic growth and increasingly expansive global connections to establish a soft power base, for it to be effective, the base cannot be one-sided state-driven propaganda (Nye, 2005). The term "soft power" was granted its official recognition in Chinese political discourse in 2007 at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party when President Hu Jintao called for "enhancing the soft power" of Chinese culture. Under President Xi, soft power is structured into the "China Dream" strategy, a grand strategy for national rejuvenation in terms of economics, culture and the world (Callahan, 2015). The 2011 White Paper on China's Peaceful Development states that "developing soft power" is a major aspect of demonstrating a "responsible, cooperative and peaceful" nation.

A central tenet of China's soft power strategy has been expanding cultural diplomacy through programs like Confucius Institutes (CIs). CIs are funded and managed by Hanban (which is now called the Center for Language Education and Cooperation) and are specifically aimed at promoting the international teaching of Chinese language and culture. Hartig (2015) argues that the sheer number of CIs especially throughout Africa and Southeast Asia indicate China's intention to shape how the world perceives China in a manner that will support its geopolitical and economic interests. However, several authors indicate that the CIs have raised alarm over academic autonomy as well as the politicization of cultural interchange (Brady, 2015; Paradise, 2009). Since 2004 China has opened hundreds of Confucius Institutes and classrooms around the world to teach Chinese language and promote traditional culture. While the primary function of the CIs will always be to promote a positive image, there have been moments of controversy as a result of academic interference and politicized education.

China also mobilizes educational scholarships and exchange programs as soft power tools. For example, according to Yang (2010) the Chinese government has substantially increased scholarships for foreign students,

particularly those from the Global South, alongside other soft power engagements in active diplomacy. These programs increase China's attractiveness in some respects, particularly related to the educated elites of developing countries; however, their long-term effect is debated. Kurlantzick (2007) highlighted that China's soft power is conditional—domestically driven, often linked to economic assistance or infrastructure investments, rather than based on spontaneous cultural appeal (opposed to a hard power base). China also operates in the area of international media and digital portals as part of cultural diplomacy. Organizations like CGTN and Xinhua have been charged with "telling China's story well," to audiences abroad (Shambaugh, 2015). China has improved its media level as a result of these efforts; however, it makes little impact short of credibility in liberal democracies, and state-run stories are considered fulfilled with suspicion. Rather, Rawnsley (2009) outlined that the truth is also essential for effective media diplomacy and China is continuing to wrestle with this credibility.

Although China is working intensively to strengthen its cultural diplomacy, the effects of its soft power will continue to be limited by its domestic political environment. Nye (2013) believes China's ability to export soft power is adversely impacted by censorship, authoritarianism, and the lack of a civil society that may help enhance its credibility outside of China. d'Hooghe (2015) also says China's centralized and objective driven production of soft power content not only lacks authenticity, but also plurality needed for more genuine engagement. In the context of regions such as Southeast Asia, the reception of China's soft power has been uneven. Chitty and Ji (2021) comment that even with an increase in Chinese dramas watched and uptake in learning Chinese language, the masked opportunity for Chinese values due to the deep political distrust related to the South China Sea is an obstacle for broader acceptance. These conclusions support Zhao (2013) ripe opinion that for China to successfully modify this soft power strategy, it needs to similarly take into account the immediate political and socio-cultural circumstances of the places it aims to penetrate. As previously asserted, China's cultural diplomacy is not a wholly bottom-up people-based effort, but an extension of its foreign policy that is calculated and linked to its broader foreign policy objectives. In effect, while China's cultural diplomacy can be examined in terms of visibility and fully participating in cultural outreach, its levels of success are often limited by issues of credibility, political context and a lack of participation by non-state actors.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Its primarily economic nature notwithstanding, the BRI represents cultural cooperation as well, including the construction of schools, academic exchanges, support for local culture, and a world view that marries economic and cultural diplomacy to complement China's soft power (Nye, 2008). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, is frequently characterized as an economic and infrastructure development strategy, but it is also an important aspect of China's efforts to project its soft power through means of cultural diplomacy. While the primary focus of the initiative is connectivity and trade in Asia, Africa, and Europe, it also allows for China to project its cultural and educational reach. Within the BRI framework, soft power resources (such as Confucius Institutes, scholarships for international students, and cultural exchange programs) are integrated into the overall Chinese geopolitical plan (d'Hooghe, 2015). This relationship is evident in partner BRI country partners where China is building roads, ports, and railways while directly investing in language centers, media collaborations, and educational partnerships (particularly in Southeast Asia and Africa).

The BRI connects development aid and cultural diplomacy as part of the same initiative which provides China with a foothold to influence perceptions and implement an understanding of what it means to be a modern actor, specifically a modern good actor. While it is widely acknowledged that China's process of diplomatic engagement through BRI can a be a beneficial resource, scholars have noted that it increasingly blurs the line between soft power, approaches to diplomacy, and deliberate influence, leading to discussions about how voluntary or engaged cultural diplomatic commitments can be (Kurlantzick, 2007; Nye, 2013). As many authors predominantly recognize, soft power is also highly conditional on recipient country investment strategies that are dependent on some of China's interests and potential sources of their influence. Additionally, critiques of China's BRI-linked cultural diplomacy outline the state-centric model of plan-based engagement which lacks coherence, credible transparency, and a pluralist approach to diplomacy, creating barriers for converging soft power strategies in places like liberal democratic societies, or regions where geopolitical pressures are high (Zhao, 2013). Overall, while BRI holds out promise in terms of establishing legitimacy for China's global engagement and developing cultural export, we aren't yet ready to call it soft power and define its potential for credible engagement, particularly in places where local political contexts raise suspicions about the intentions of China.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach, combined with empirical data from reports by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (2023) and Pew Research Center (2023) as well as policy documents and statistics from Hanban (2023) and the Chinese Ministry of Education. Several representative cases such as Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines are analyzed to compare the reception and effectiveness of China's soft power in Southeast Asian countries with different political and social contexts.

Document and data Analysis: Review of Chinese government white papers, official speeches, and policy documents (e.g., the "Go Global" strategy, cultural components of the Belt and Road Initiative) to evaluate diplomatic strategy and soft power of China.

Case Studies: Confucius Institutes in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America; Expansion of Chinese media: CGTN, Xinhua News Agency; Some major cultural events such as: Beijing Olympics, Silk Road cultural festivals.

3. Results

3.1. Confucius Institutes (CIs)

Research shows that China has implemented soft power through a range of cultural and educational diplomacy tools over the past two decades, particularly in Southeast Asia.

The Confucius Institutes (CIs) were first launched by the State Council of the Chinese government in 2004, in collaboration with the Hanban (which has now changed their name to the Center for Language Education and Cooperation). The goal was to create a global library of designated language and cultural centers similar to Germany's Goethe-Institut and France's Alliance Française. Southeast Asia quickly emerged as a prime area for

expansion possibilities due to geographic proximity, cultural ties, and growing economic connectivity with China. In 2023, there are now 530 Confucius Institutes and 1,171 Confucius Classrooms in 162 countries and territories. In Northeast Asia, there are more than 60 institutes at large universities in Thailand (16), Indonesia (8), Malaysia (6), Vietnam (6), the Philippines (4), etc. (Hanban, 2023). These institutes represent language learning, cultural events, scholarships for local students, and strengthen China's cultural influence within the region.

The development of Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia is a conscious hybrid of culture and geopolitics. While they operate under the auspices of promoting mutual cultural understanding and the learning of Mandarin language, the implicit function is part of China's goal to promote influence as a soft power mechanism in regions where cultural resonance and economic dependence exist. The Confucius Institutes have an educational role, but they also fulfill a diplomatic and horizontal international engagement role; an important part of global positioning. Confucius Institutes have undoubtedly extended China's cultural presence in Southeast Asia and advanced a limited language-learning objective and people-to-people ties, particularly in places that have an historically favorable relationship like Malaysia. However, their role as a soft power instrument is ambiguous, limited by local distrust, international resentment created through foreign and geopolitical tension, and an absence of cooperation and engagement with local citizens and institutions. If China's cultural diplomacy is to move from an emphasis on visibility to credibility, it will require political dis-engagement, action on the part of non-state actors, and recognition of the host country's socio-political sensitivities.

Education has long been a critical element of China's soft power strategy, and especially so since President Xi Jinping's on-going vision of a global China took shape with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Education and scholarship serve both a diplomatic and ideological function: they can portray China in a positive, attractive light, create long-term relationships with future elites, and expand China's cultural and political influence. Unlike forms of hard power, education operates on a normative and value-based level and presents the possibility for developing change from the experiences of individuals. Nye (2004) notes that soft power is most effective when it comes from a place and desire for legitimate attraction, and education represents an opportunity for attraction if it is not over politicized or implemented through coercion. Thailand holds the highest counts in the region with 16 Confucius Institutes in total. In 2022 approximately 30,000 students in Thailand were studying Chinese along with being the highest study-abroad destination at over 8000 students studying in China. Overall, the response has been positive, especially in the northern and northeastern provinces in Thailand. While interest in Korean and Japanese has grown, the number of students learning Chinese in Vietnam has somewhat decreased (about 12% less than in 2019–2022) despite widespread cultural interaction. Confucius Institute operations are still ongoing, but they are being closely examined because of the geopolitical environment and worries about ideological influence.

3.2. Educational Scholarships and Exchange Programs

In addition to being a focus of China's educational diplomacy, Southeast Asia also benefits from a number of other characteristics, such as its close proximity, high young population, and need for affordable foreign education. The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China indicates that between 2013 to 2023, more than 300,000 ASD from members of ASEAN studied in China on a full or partial scholarship, which is an increase of more than 80% compared to the last nine years of 2003-2012 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2023). According to Vietnam will rank in the top five students to study in China along with the four other Southeast Asia members under their scholarships program. In 2022, China issued over 60,000 scholarships to students from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) member states, an increase of almost 20% from 2018 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2023). The highest number of recipients were students from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

Education is also a kind of elite socialization. Students who study abroad in China come back with networks, language skills, and the social knowledge of Chinese society which may help create more beneficial foreign policy orientations in the future. China's education diplomacy presents an alternative to the Western-dominated academic discourse, frequently framing academic cooperation in South-South academic cooperation, mutual development, and non-interference in internal affairs. Through scholarships and research grants, China is able to frame its image as a benevolent partner especially to states which find Western funding criteria or worldview a barrier to cooperation. Education also provides the human capital development that is needed for BRI infrastructure projects. The many students who receive scholarships to study in China may also be trained in fields directly related to BRI development - such as engineering, shipping and logistics, medicine and public administration - thus creating not only soft power messages, but also functional dependence, as regions become reliant on Chinese-trained professionals to operate Chinese built and operated infrastructure development.

While China's educational diplomacy has significant scale and financial backing, it has limitations. Unlike Japan or Korea's cultural diplomacy, the education-based diplomacies being developed in Southeast Asia are perceived as being state-directed by China and have the potential to carry the suspicion of ideological indoctrination with a strategic motive. Mandarin remains a difficult language to learn, and some ASEAN students may also be hindered by cultural adjustments to China. In many countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, scholarship initiatives might lead people to suspect the potential for strategic designs in light of BRI investments or territorial disputes. China's education and scholarship is a strategic, multidimensional use of soft power. These initiatives succeed at enhancing China's cultural and political power. However, these initiatives' long-term impact is questionable in its credibility and local reception, or whether China can present itself as an earnest partner, not merely as a strategic power. For Southeast Asia, the challenge was finding a pragmatic balance between benefitting from access to Chinese education, and respecting the appeal of national autonomy and pluralistic exchange. Today, many graduates of Chinese universities elevate sectors in public and private leadership capacities in ASEAN, who collectively constitute a potential soft diplomatic constituency.

3.3. International Media and Digital Platforms

China's efforts to expand its global media and export cultural products are intended to change narratives, mitigate negative stereotypes, and assuage concerns regarding China by developing and presenting it as a more

positive and confident character. As part of China's broader soft power approach, the government of China determined that having control over discourse was the only way for it to counter its reputational deficit and expand its legitimacy and influence internationally. The government and Chinese enterprises are heavily invested in global media and the export of cultural products. Culture products and media platforms like TikTok (owned by ByteDance) and Chinese television dramas continue to gain popularity in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore.

At the same time, the Chinese government is amping up the number of films made encouraging nationalism and the "Chinese Dream" narrative to enhance the country's image as a rising global power (Chitty & Ji, 2021). In 2023, China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism held 500 or more international cultural events, including the "China Arts Festival Abroad," "Happy Chinese New Year," and the "Tea and Silk Exhibition." In Vietnam, "Chinese Film Week" has been held annually in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City since 2016, mostly averaging over 10,000 annual guests (Chinese Embassy in Hanoi, 2023). CGTN is 24/7 in 6 languages (English, Spanish, French, Arabic, Russian, and Chinese) and CGTN operates over 70 overseas bureaus. In Southeast Asia, CGTN and China Daily distribute in Thai, Bahasa, Khmer, and Vietnamese. CGTN's English-language YouTube channel has 3.2 million subscribers (BBC Monitoring, 2023).

The use of overseas media and the export of cultural products is an important component of China's soft power agenda. The strategy to influence global perceptions of China, counter unfavorable narratives about China and present China as a rising, responsible global power, is intended to resonate worldwide. Unfortunately, the complexity of its investments in internationalizing all three-state media (CGTN, Xinhua News Agency, and China Daily), the country's aim is to secularize (i.e. push a narrative beyond linguistic and regional boundaries) the narrative of China - particularly across the region of Southeast Asia. The Chinese outlets produced multilingual content (English, French, etc.) for targeted audiences, mainly emphasizing China's development achievements, peaceful nature, and its contributions to the world. In Southeast Asia, local broadcasters can obtain Chinese public media through content partnerships or media cooperation agreements, allowing distributions of what is, ostensibly, paid content (often at lower prices or subsidization). Those partnerships act to amplify pro-China views while embedding Beijing's strategic narratives into local media systems.

Also, cultural products such as television dramas, variety shows, and digital entertainment have been increasingly exported, as streaming platforms like iQIYI and Tencent Video have emerged in regional markets and for millennial audiences in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. These platforms offer a way to increasingly export Chinese popular culture. Thus, Chinese dramas, historical epics and other aesthetic forms, will also expand China's cultural familiarity. Although there is a reception of Chinese cultural products by larger audiences, this reception frequently operates at the entertainment level, and the audience can have a positive engagement with Chinese popular culture while at the same time engaging with, or remaining indifferent to, China's political system or model of governance. In this context this limitation of China's cultural diplomacy important: the attraction of Chinese cultural products does not translate into an ideological alignment or endorsement of Chinese political values.

Furthermore, while China's digital diplomacy, including the active social media engagement of its embassies and diplomats, broadens its communication capabilities, it has received criticism for its confrontational tone and opacity. Beyond China's domestic borders and especially in relatively more democratic Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, many of its international media operations are considered propagandistic because of the degree to which they are state-controlled without any editorial independence. This perception considerably diminishes the credibility and effectiveness of China's messaging. Additionally, when cultural content is closely linked to directed geopolitical objectives, people often suspect that there are other agendas at play when it comes to soft power campaigns where China's political or territorial interests stretch independent of contested overlapping geographical claims. In the end, while it improves its visibility and cultural stature through media expansion and cultural exports, China's ability to leverage this as soft power is limited by issues of authenticity, trust and political environment. While South Korean or Japanese cultural exports organically achieved marketplace success and depth of emotional or ideological legitimacy, China's state-sponsored model stumbles. Future success of this strategy is likely contingent on Beijing granting greater creative autonomy for recipients, fostering more reciprocal cultural dialogues and creatively engaging the complex socio-political landscapes of recipient countries.

3.4. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The BRI's effectiveness as an instrument of China's soft power and cultural diplomacy is complex and disputed. On one hand, the BRI has succeeded in extending China's economic and cultural footprint in more than 140 countries, creating new opportunities for engagement through infrastructure, academic exchanges, and cultural partnerships (Hurley, Morris, & Portelance, 2018). Southeast Asia is one area where, commonly, new BRI-related investments were accompanied by Confucius Institutes, bilateral education treaties among educational institutions, and scholarships promoting the language, culture and values of China (d'Hooghe, 2015). China has increased its visibility, and in turn has created opportunities for inter-cultural dialogue, especially among youth. In addition, other cultural programming tied to the BRI, such as joint exhibitions, art festivals, and language programs solidified China's narrative of being a peaceful partner in development (Zhao, 2013).

The state-centric and strategic nature of BRI, therefore, has also generated skepticism and opposition from countries in their engagement to BRI, likely shaped by concerns of sovereignty, indebtedness, and/or geopolitical manipulation (Nye, 2013; Rolland, 2017). BRI opponents argue that the softer, more benign elements of BRI can benefit countries but are ultimately conditional, with civil society practice and mutual respect being of subordinate consideration. Also, BRI's supposed Chinese cultural diplomacy's legitimacy has been undermined by limited transparency, some lack of local stakeholders' input to cultural projects and the perception that Chinese official institutions have surreptitious influence. While it is possible that BRI may advance Chinese soft power influence, long-term success depends on an ability to keep genuine people-to-people connections strong, being more institutionally transparent, and avoiding coercive perceptions.

Although some significant successes have been accomplished, China's soft power has faced a series of obstacles with regard to authenticity, credibility and sustainability. China is many times seen to be practicing the

"instrumentalization of soft power" without transparency- especially associated with geo-political consequences, limitations of information and ongoing abuses against human rights (Kurlantzick, 2007). A considerable number of western countries have closed Confucius Institutes citing fears arising around political influence and academic liberty. Cultural diplomacy can only work when both countries are expressing full mutual dialogue rather than a unilaterally imposed partial message (Cull, 2009). Despite spending millions in soft power projects, China's credibility lingers low in Southeast Asia. ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (2023) survey demonstrated that only approximately 27.4% of respondents regarded China as a "trustworthy partner" and only 23.5% of respondents expect China to act responsibly on the world stage. By comparison, both Japan, and the US, score very high levels of trust. In Vietnam, Pew Research Center (2023) reported that 75% of respondents had an "unfavorable view" of China after extensive cultural exchanges, demonstrating that cultural presence doesn't equate to social consensus or a sense of increased public goodwill. According to surveys conducted by Pew Research Center (2023) and ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore), international public responses to China's soft power are mixed with 23% of respondents viewing China to be "the most positively influential cultural power" in the region (529%Japan is at 29%). However, 38% of respondents in Vietnam and the Philippines believe that China's cultural activities are "propaganda-driven," and 62% expressed concerns regarding "cultural-educational expansionism." In the United States, the reports note that 76% of respondents had a negative view of China's global influence and 62% opposed the presence of Confucius Institutes in American institutions of higher learning.

Table 1. Evaluation of soft power practice.

Soft power	Actual effectiveness	Real-world evidence
Culture (Films, language, traditions)	Medium – High	Viewership on Chinese film platforms (Youku, iQIYI) in Southeast Asia rose by 40% (2022–2023); however, the appeal is mostly entertainment-based.
Political values (Development model)	Low	Most students studying in China do not agree with the country's information control model (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023).
Foreign policy (Belt and road initiative – BRI)	Medium	Despite the increase in scholarships, there are ongoing suspicions about China's strategic motives.

Table 1 presents the actual effectiveness of different components of soft power, using real-world evidence. Culture (Films, language, traditions) is rated medium-high in effectiveness. The evidence shows a significant increase, a 40% rise between 2022 and 2023, in viewership of Chinese film platforms like Youku and iQIYI in Southeast Asia. This indicates a growing reach and appeal of Chinese cultural products. However, the effectiveness is noted to be primarily entertainment-based, suggesting that while it successfully engages audiences, it might not translate directly into deeper political influence or alignment. Political values (Development model) are rated as low. The provided evidence indicates that even students who choose to study in China, and are therefore exposed to its political system, largely do not agree with the country's information control model. This suggests that efforts to promote its political values or development model have limited success in gaining genuine ideological acceptance. Foreign policy (Belt and Road Initiative – BRI) is rated as medium. While there has been an increase in associated scholarships, which might be intended to build goodwill and influence, the evidence points to ongoing suspicions about China's strategic motives. This implies that despite the economic engagement and opportunities offered by the BRI, there is still a significant level of distrust or apprehension regarding China's underlying intentions, thus limiting its full soft power potential.

4. Discussion

4.1. Rethinking Soft Power through the Chinese Lens

The research shows that China is developing soft power based not only on traditional sources of soft power such as culture and language, but because it is creating a connected web of foreign policies and investment connecting culture, education, and the economy that is oriented around the BRI. However, while Nye (2004) original definition of soft power focused on the ability to "get others to want what you want, through attraction rather than coercion," much of China's utilization of soft power is framed with a somewhat state-centered approach and without natural or civil-society inspired appeal. In essence, China's soft power is "conditional" and often relies on aid, scholarships, or bilateral agreements, instead of established voluntary consensus as described in the original theory (Kurlantzick, 2007).

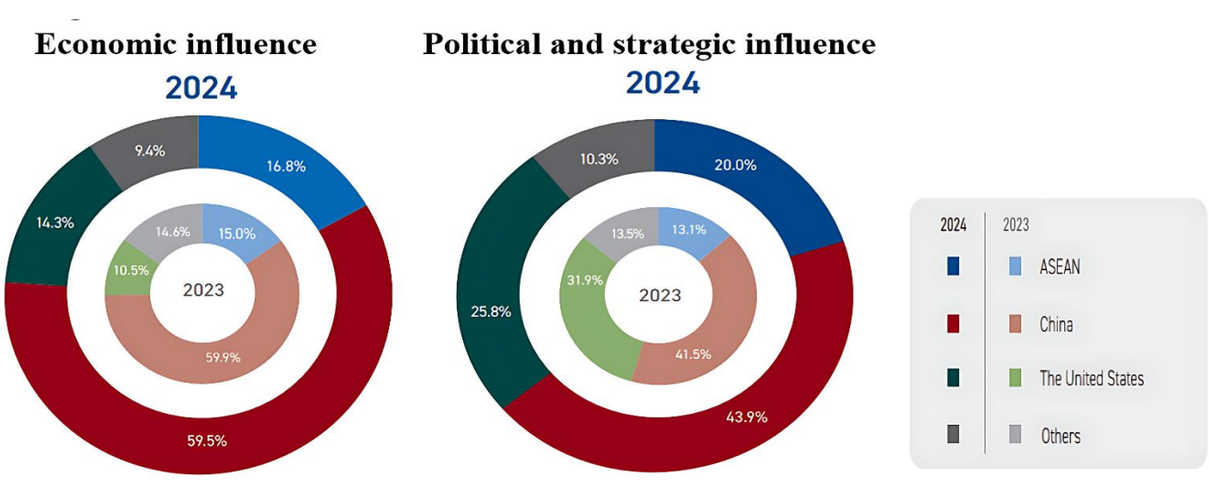

Figure 1. Most economic and political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia.

Source: The State of Southeast Asia 2023 – 2024 Surveys.

Figure 1 illustrates that China remains the most significant political-strategic power in Southeast Asia in 2024. In 2024, China still leads the way with 43.9%, increasing from 41.5% in 2023. China represents the largest area of political-strategic influence, but not much increased. Nevertheless, China's political-statecraft influence is very limited, its position represents advantages in economic leverage, strategic requirements, and geopolitics, and in 2024 those positions exist, but with minor improvement; and, greater influence for the United States and ASEAN. China's major growth and still significant influence of the United States and ASEAN would also lead to an impression, even identity, that does not resemble any 'soft power' appeal. China has made significant investments in cultural diplomacy tools such as external media, Confucius Institutes, and cultural exchange and artistic exploration, among others. This has helped develop cultural brand awareness, while simultaneously allowing for an increased level of global public engagement with China, particularly that of youth in developing societies. China's soft power capacity tends to be effective on a functional level (entertainment, studies, scholarships, etc.), while it has not translated into a sense of broader acceptance of its values (politics, ideology, development model) (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2023). In many cases, soft power tends to become conflated with economic power, leading to skepticism about its validity. Also, China's credibility is diminished by hidden ties, content controlled by the state, and geopolitical strategies, particularly in democratic countries and disputed areas (South China Sea).

Southeast Asia is a region that is culturally & inherently open to China, especially when there is a long history of cultural and trade connections (e.g. Thailand, Laos, Cambodia). There were indications that such open receptivity is not uniform. China had created a positive image in Thailand through education, scholarships, and media. Thai youth consumed Chinese culture primarily through entertainment (TV shows, language apps), and this resulted in the development of a more institutionalized soft image for China (Chitty & Ji, 2021). In Vietnam and the Philippines, although China is engaged in a lot of cultural exchange with these countries, the geopolitical tensions and regionally politicized suspicions of China's soft power resulted in limited perceptions of China's soft power. These two examples demonstrate that soft power is to a large degree dependent upon the political and social nature of the receiving country and isn't only a numbers game based on size of investment and the number of events, per se.

4.2. Soft Power Cannot Be Separated from Hard Power in the Asian Context

Though the assumptions of "soft" referring to non-coercive power can be flawed, initiatives that assert "soft power" by China often incorporate aspects of economic aid, investment, or diplomatic contingencies, and as such should be expended as a concept pragmatically—especially because non-Western powers (e.g. China, Russia, Turkey) are subverting norms in both policy and practice to establish the avenues and pathways for influence. In the Asian geopolitical milieu, soft power cannot be disentangled from hard power without significant negotiation. In a way that soft power is often described in liberal democratic states in the West as some self-contained form of influence based upon civil society, cultural industries, or attractive political values, the soft power approaches employed in Asia - especially emerging powers such as China - are much more instrumental and hard wired in to state actors, spheres of economic influence or leveraged diplomatic mechanisms. The analysis of soft power is deferentially a more pragmatic approach, such that many engagements, exchanges, extensions and expansions across cultural, educational, media, etc. have the help of an economic incentive, infrastructural investment or some political conditionality. For instance, while the Confucius Institute and Chinese scholarship programs may seem to be something of cultural or educational endeavor, they are more often within an umbrella as either bilateral cooperation or collaboration through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. These arrangements frequently include an implied or explicit expectation of political alignment, or at minimum, political good- will, demonstrating the ways in which soft and hard power come together as adjunct forms of influence.

Furthermore, the projection of soft power in the Asian context is often framed by recipient states under a lens of realism. In this case we see cultural diplomacy framed not only on its aesthetic or educational value but also its strategic value. This becomes particularly clear in Southeast Asia where cultural intentions are bound up with historical memories, territorial disputes, and concerns of sovereignty. Even innocuous acts such as Mandarin and cultural festivals can be perceived as influences aligned to geostrategic interests. As a result, soft power is influenced by the regional security environment and stakeholder perceptions about the influencing state's intentions. In Asia, the implication of soft and hard power aligns with the "charm offensive" agenda, where soft-power tools are employed as part of the economic and political toolkits, and not as a separate form of attraction (Kurlantzick, 2007). The indistinction between forms of attraction and persuasion on the one hand and coercion and inducement on the other hand demonstrates a hybridized power model such as such a structure envisioned some of the purity presented by Nye (2004). For China, soft power is not merely to create admiration for Chinese tradition or values; it can also act to reinforce a political narrative internally, legitimize a development model, and front a reasonable international basis for framing its international strategic interests. So, in the Asian case, any assessment of soft power must be contextualized within the broader web of economic, political, and security relations. It is important to recognize this complexity, not only to appreciate the constraints and opportunities of China's soft power, but also to reconsider theoretical frames which may insufficiently understand the state-centric and strategic nature of influence in non-Western international relations.

The role of non-state actors is critical in order for cultural diplomacy to work. The study indicates that it is this lack of independent civil society organizations, artists or scholars within China's cultural diplomacy network that accounted for the perceived weakness of its soft power. Compared to Japan or South Korea where popular culture evolves independently of the state, China appears to still depend on state institutions to engage in media and cultural promotion. Cultural diplomacy cannot be effective if it does not involve non-state actors who provide much more authentic, varied, and people-to-people engagement that is not state directed. Governments can provide direction and financing, but cultural diplomacy is much more nuanced and believable by the involvement of artists and scholars, educational institutions, NGOs, and private cultural industry entities that allow actors to operate independently. Such a distinction is valuable in pluralistic societies whereby culture cannot be monolithic and where cultural translation includes the presence of multiple voices and narratives.

Non-state actors bring spontaneity, creativity, and legitimacy to international cultural exchange that state-driven approaches often lack. In contrast to formal diplomatic channels, these actors can engage in nuanced, grassroots-level dialogues that resonate more effectively with foreign audiences. For instance, independent filmmakers, musicians, academic researchers, and cultural entrepreneurs often serve as organic ambassadors of a nation's culture, generating interest and goodwill through their work without being seen as instruments of government propaganda. This distinction is vital because the perceived authenticity of cultural output directly influences its soft power value. When cultural products are viewed as state-sponsored or ideologically driven, especially in politically sensitive environments, they may elicit skepticism or resistance rather than attraction.

Similarly, the presence of non-state actors presents more opportunities for flexible responsiveness to constantly evolving preferences of global audiences. As the world continues to change swiftly and with the rapidity of digital networks and transnational communication cultural influence increasingly encompasses adaptability, creativity, and openness; qualities that tend to be endemic in civil society instead of the rigidity of bureaucratic institutions. For instance, Japan and South Korea's global popularity is being propelled by its popular culture anime, K-pop, cinema through market defined, non-governmental processes increasing enthusiastic global fandoms, and constructing their national identity with very little state intervention in foreign affairs.

In contrast, state defined cultural diplomacy as filtered through media as in the case of China and Confucius Institutes often struggles to resonate or trust. As a result, the absence of an independent cultural agency in the public diplomacy architecture of China increases perception of top-down messaging, that is strategy-based calculation, which diminishes perceptions of soft power. Without a self-directed civil society as a layer of diversity and spontaneity, cultural exchange loses many of its dimensions and cultural diplomacy renders itself as a mechanism to political communication rather than sympathy and mutual understanding. Therefore, in order for cultural diplomacy to be credible, engaging and ultimately effective, it must be framed by a dynamic ecology of prevalent non-state actors and entities that are able to act with some level of autonomy from government objectives. Non-state actors help create authentic, or at least less superficial, effects of cultural exchange whilst making cultural diplomacy multi-faceted, infinitely adaptable and reliable in creating enduring intercultural relationships. However, the absence of non-state actors and entities risks cultural diplomacy as a surface projection of nation states as part of a single narrative, rather than as a layered and diverse presence or framing for the purposes of soft power or international reputation.

5. Conclusion

China's cultural diplomacy is a core aspect of China's larger strategy of soft power, and it hopes to create a legitimacy of influence without coercion on the world stage. The Confucius Institute, cultural exchanges and media outreach programs have reached some level of prominence, most notably in spaces of the Global South, however they are controlled by the state to such an extent that many recipients doubt their authenticity and motivations. The state-directed model of China's cultural diplomacy is one that has diminished perceived credibility, and affected degrees of influence in many nations, especially those with diverse & polarized political or pluralistic contexts. In the future the success of the soft power of China will depend on its ability to develop reciprocal and depoliticized forms of cultural exchange. Addressing and better resolving between government-led and genuine people-to-people engagement could create the mutual trust that forms the basis of sustainable soft power. Future studies could also begin to focus on examination from the perspectives of the recipient countries, and develop longitudinal studies that explore not only immediate reception but long-term effectiveness of Chinese cultural diplomacy in politically or culturally diverse contexts.

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