



CERCLE DE STRATÉGIES ET D'INFLUENCES

INTERNATIONAL ARTICLE :

HARD POWER IS NOT ENOUGH: SOFT POWER IN CHINESE'S FOREIGN POLICY

How does soft power shape foreign relations? Why shouldn't hard power be enough?

WRITTEN BY
Marine OURAHLI

IN A FEW WORDS :

This article examines **the function of soft power within Chinese foreign policy**, underscoring its importance in response to Western concerns regarding **human rights** and similar matters. Despite China's rise as a formidable **economic and military force**, it endeavors to bolster its global reputation through **cultural diplomacy** and other soft power tactics. The piece outlines various initiatives undertaken by China, including the **establishment of Confucius Institutes** and advancements in its film industry. However, it also acknowledges the challenges China confronts, such as its **authoritarian governance** and **controversial policies**. Ultimately, the article concludes that while China strives to improve its international standing, inherent limitations persist due to its political system and domestic practices.

AUTHOR :



Marine OURAHLI recently graduated from the Erasmus Mundus International Master in Security, Intelligence & Strategic Studies, a program jointly conducted by the University of Glasgow, Dublin City University, and Charles University in Prague.

With a bachelor's degree in literature, she explores the intersections of cultural realms with defense, particularly focusing on the soft power dynamics and the influence of popular culture on strategic thinking.

Marine's expertise extends to the intersection of security and emerging technologies in armaments, as well as issues related to space security.



The *Cercle de Stratégies et d'Influences* is a think-tank whose aim is to **analyse** and **propose strategies** to guide political, economic and social decisions, focusing on three key themes: **Innovation**, **Environment** and **Influences**.

Introduction:

How does soft power shape foreign relations? Why shouldn't hard power be enough? China's economic power is no longer in question, and it has succeeded in establishing itself as a key player in regional and global geopolitics. However, China has a frightening and threatening stature for the West. It is often criticized by Western public opinion for its lack of democracy, treatment of ethnic minorities, human rights issues, child labour and freedom of expression... China is on its way to becoming a major military power, which does not improve the international community's fears against it, yet it has the ambition to be a competitive but not aggressive partner in order to have a real impact on the international scene. Chinese politics has understood the importance of showing itself in a new light by using soft power. This is why it is necessary to question China's need for soft power in its foreign relations. It is essential to dwell on the effectiveness of soft power in the world as well as Chinese soft power and the various means it deploys. Soft power is defined as the ability of a state to influence and shape international relations in its favor through a range of means other than coercive (threat or use of force), in particular cultural and diplomatic means. This concept was defined by the American professor Joseph Nye and has been adopted by many political leaders. This essay argues on the visible failure of Chinese diplomacy and on culture as the keystone of Chinese soft power. The rest of the essay is structured as a first look at soft power as a pillar of international relations and then examine the consequences of soft power in China's relations with the rest of the world.

The use of soft power and cultural diplomacy in foreign relations:

Joseph Nye defined power in a broad sense as the ability of an entity (a country, a non-governmental organization, a single individual, among other possibilities) to get what it wants from another entity. In Nye's theory, the arsenal of means that make it possible to coerce (here, the logic of threat is at play, often through military means) or to incite (through the delivery of counterparts or the granting of concessions, often financial) is distinguished from the capacity to seduce. The Coercion ('the stick') and the inducement ('the carrot') are defined as the tools of 'hard power', that which is concretised in a relatively tangible force. The ability to seduce, on the other hand, corresponds to a more subtle field of action, that of "soft power". Broad and strong soft power requires the active and free participation of civil society and is therefore more easily characterized in liberal societies. Soft power is therefore the ability of a country to influence without using conventional tools. The use of soft power makes it possible to avoid having to use harmful tools and to evolve towards new power relations. The use of soft power allows a country to consolidate its power in the world while building a good reputation, thus attracting the sympathy of the population. Hard power facilitates a country to become a military and economic power while soft power enables it to establish and maintain this power as a long-lasting one. In the toolbox of soft power, culture is often presented as the most obvious source of influence with foreign nations. A country can use culture to assert its power and make it desirable, as was the case for France and England.

What could be called "cultural diplomacy" is historically a French specificity, invented in the 19th century and which allowed France to impose itself as a model despite the political instability that prevailed there. The United States is often cited as a soft power, having successfully exported its culture around the world. Hollywood has been and still is the arm of American soft power, spreading the American way of life around the world through cinema. American cinema is the most profitable cinema in the world and yet it is only third in terms of volume of film production behind India and Nigeria. American films still reflect the claims of American power, as shown, for example, in the film *Captain Phillips*, based on a true story, which demonstrates the military means used by the United States to rescue a sailor taken prisoner by navigator taken prisoner by Somali pirates. Nye likes to compare the influence of American power to the influence of the Roman Empire, with the difference that Rome's influence ended where its troops had succeeded in imposing themselves, whereas the glory made in the United States embraces almost the entire globe.

Soft power is not the prerogative of the Western world, Asian powers such as India, Japan and South Korea have acquired real cultural power over the last 20 years. Japan, for example, began to sketch out forms of soft power in the early 1960s, initiating the emergence of a 'new' soft power in the 1990s, on the fringes of economic stagnation, fuelled by popular culture and what it said about Japanese society. Aware of a nascent rivalry with other Asian powers, Japanese leaders were keen to use Japan's attractiveness to serve a strategy of influence on a regional and even international scale. It is also necessary to mention Korean soft power, also known as *Hallyu*, which has experienced a real breakthrough in recent years. Since the beginning of the 2010s, there has been an explosion in the popularity of K-Pop with, for example, the first K-Pop concerts in the Western world or the phenomenal success of Psy's "Gangnam Style". More recently, the worldwide success of *Squid Game*, the most watched series on the American platform Netflix, and Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite*, which won four Oscars and the Palme d'Or, are just two examples. Soft power is part of real political, geopolitical and economic strategies, and thus extends the field of competition between Asian powers.

The integration of soft power in building China's foreign relations:

China, despite its undeniable economic and military power, enjoys a detestable reputation on the international scene, dragging along with it a number of issues such as its authoritarianism and its lack of respect for human rights. Recently, the situation of Uighur trafficking in China has received a lot of international attention and has added another layer to the unpopularity of the country. In order to increase their popularity, China has decided to adapt its foreign policy to soft power. It was necessary for Beijing to give itself a positive image and soft power was the best way to do this. The government therefore set up a strategic line based on international influence. This takes the form of a gradual increase in its involvement in peacekeeping operations and a quest for visibility within international organizations.

This strategy was intended to promote the perception of China as a country that uses its power for peace, helping to build and maintain peace in conflict-affected countries. As a result, China is now the largest troop contributor of the five permanent members of the Security Council and the sixth largest financial contributor to peacekeeping operations, with a particular geographical focus on the African continent. It is not surprising to see Beijing involved in peace in Africa, having invested massively in the continent economically, a project known as Chinafrica, so these missions serve several Chinese interests. In recent years, China has participated in twelve peacekeeping operations in Africa, including in Sudan (UNMIS), Western Sahara (MINURSO), Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), Ethiopia-Eritrea (UNMEE), Liberia (UNMIL), the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) and, since 2013, in Mali (MINUSMA).

Despite its efforts for world peace, China is struggling to promote these ideas within its own borders. China is particularly known for a particular diplomatic practice that has been called panda diplomacy. It consists in offering giant pandas as gifts to start diplomatic relations with a new country or to improve existing ones. This practice is not new since traces of it can already be found under the Tang dynasty between 618 and 907. It reached its peak under Maoist China in order to present a softer posture to the rest of the world and thus to establish relations with the Western bloc countries. In China, the panda is considered a "national treasure", so the gift has great significance. However, under pressure from several environmental activists, this policy was officially stopped in 1984 and was replaced by long-term loans to foreign zoos because of its protected status.

China remains a contested country and its peacekeeping missions are seen as hypocritical and opportunistic. When Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics in 2008 and the Winter Olympics in 2022, numerous criticisms, protests and calls for boycotts emerged, dealing a severe blow to China's attempt at soft power. In 2022, Tibetan demonstrators pleaded outside the International Olympic Committee's headquarters in Lausanne "that Beijing 2022 should not become Berlin 1936", and many demonstrations called for a boycott of the Olympics. Washington announced a "diplomatic boycott" of the Olympics on 9 December 2020. The United States justified this decision by human rights violations in the Xinjiang region, where China is accused of holding one million Uyghurs, a Turkish-speaking Muslim minority, in internment camps. Many countries have followed suit, including Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom and Australia. The 2008 Summer Olympics had been at the origin of a similar movement, but this time the rallying point was the issue of Tibet. The Olympic Torch Relay was the scene of numerous demonstrations, in particular during the lighting of the torch in Olympia on 24 March, then during its passage in London on 6 April and in Paris on 7 April. As expected by the theory, it is found that China has relied on cultural diplomacy as a major element of its international strategy. China has a rich and diverse culture, a culture that could be its greatest asset. Exporting one's culture allows Chinese values to coexist with other cultural powers such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

Confucius Institutes are among the major elements of Chinese soft power in its foreign policies. The aim of these institutes is to spread the Chinese language, culture, history and philosophy throughout the world. The logic is simple: the more the world's populations master the Chinese language and take an interest in the country's culture, the better the emergence of China and the policies and ideas conveyed by the Middle Kingdom on the international scene will be understood. The institutes have grown and multiplied since the mid-2000s. According to the latest census of the Hanban, the National Bureau for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Chinese Ministry of Education), in 2017 there were no less than 516 Confucius Institutes and 1,076 Confucius classes in primary and secondary schools in 142 countries. In a globalized world like ours, the major cultural element is cinema, an industry that China has long occupied.

Cinema has a strong symbolic capital and China has a massive industry. For the first time in history, cinema revenues in China exceeded those of the United States in 2020, making Chinese cinema an interesting element for the expansion of its soft power. Cinema has a strong symbolic capital and China has a massive industry. For the first time in history, China's film revenues exceeded those of the United States in 2020, making Chinese cinema an interesting element in the expansion of its soft power. China has become the world's largest film market, surpassing the US market by a few million dollars. The primary challenge facing Chinese cinema lies in its orientation towards a domestic audience, which frequently hinders its ability to gain traction internationally, particularly amidst stiff competition from Hong Kong, Japanese, and Korean film industries. Despite several attempts by American companies to penetrate the Chinese market, exemplified vividly by Disney's *Mulan*, which unfortunately met with failure in Chinese theaters, a handful of Chinese films have managed to garner global recognition. Ang Lee's masterpiece, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, stands as a prime example, having clinched the prestigious Oscar for Best Foreign Film. One noteworthy success story in Chinese cinema is the filmography of Zhāng Yì-Móu, which has enjoyed acclaim on the international stage. Demonstrating a keen understanding of cinema's potency, China presented *The Wandering Earth* in 2019. Adapted from Liu Cixin's acclaimed 2000 short story, this film marked China's inaugural foray into the realm of science fiction blockbusters with aspirations reaching beyond its borders. Notably, it marked the first instance where Chinese censors permitted the portrayal of the destruction of Beijing and Shanghai. *The Wandering Earth* swiftly ascended to become the second highest-grossing film in China's cinematic history, amassing substantial revenues. Globally, it claimed the third position among the highest-grossing films of 2019, trailing only behind Disney juggernauts *Avengers: Endgame* and *Captain Marvel*. Subsequently, Netflix acquired the rights to *The Wandering Earth*, facilitating its dissemination to a global audience when it premiered on April 30, 2019. This strategic move underscored the film's reach and ensured its accessibility worldwide. Fast forward to 2024, Liu Cixin's renowned Chinese science fiction novel received the television treatment, tailored for an international audience on Netflix by an American production team, which notably included producers from the acclaimed series *Game of Thrones*.

Having previously been adapted for Chinese audiences in 2023, this series now offers a distinct blend of Western and Chinese influences, providing a fresh perspective that challenges the prevailing Western-centric narrative in mainstream science fiction. China's significant investment in the realm of science fiction underscores its ambition to shape the collective imagination, presenting a vision of the future where China not only features prominently but emerges as a pivotal player. This strategic emphasis on science fiction serves as a potent tool for projecting China's influence onto the global stage, fostering a narrative that positions the nation at the forefront of technological innovation and societal advancement.

By actively engaging in the production and promotion of science fiction narratives, China seeks to assert its presence in the collective consciousness, shaping perceptions of tomorrow's world and its place within it.



Conclusion:

Soft power has infused international relations for decades now and is seen as an indispensable tool for powers to assert their status. Soft power is also necessary to consolidate hard power and is therefore indispensable. China is one of those nations that have understood the importance of soft power and have oriented their international policies towards this objective. Yet, despite its efforts, China has many obstacles that prevent it from having effective hard and soft power.

The nature of the Chinese regime is in itself a limit to the soft power that Beijing seeks to deploy. The limits of soft power are therefore to be found more in the sometimes overzealous initiatives of the Chinese authorities, which have enabled soft power to take off. The strategy of massive investment in developing countries, with no regard for local balances or respect for human rights, is undoubtedly profitable for Beijing, but could be considered as hard power rather than soft power.

References:

Akaha, Tsuneo. "Japon: trouver l'équilibre entre soft power et hard power." *Politique étrangère*, vol. , no. 1, 2011, pp. 115-127.

Anderlini, J. "Panda politics: the hard truth about China's cuddliest diplomat." *Financial Times*, 2017.

Armitage, Richard, and Joseph Nye. *Commission on Smart Power : a smarter, more secure America*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, 2007.

Courmont, B. "Le soft power chinois: entre stratégie d'influence et affirmation de puissance." *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, vol. 43, 2012, pp. 287-309.

Dagnaud, Monique. "Le cinéma, instrument du soft power des nations." *Géoéconomie*, 2011/3 (n° 58), 2011, pp. 21-30. DOI: 10.3917/geoc.058.0021.

Dennison, Stephanie, and Rachel Dwyer, editors. *Cinema and Soft Power: Configuring the National and Transnational in Geo-Politics*. Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

Durin, L. "JO de Pékin 2022: la géopolitique s'invite à la cérémonie d'ouverture." *La Croix*, 2022.

Gazeau-Secret, Anne. "'Soft power': l'influence par la langue et la culture." *Revue internationale et stratégique*, vol. 89, no. 1, 2013, pp. 103-110.

Heng, Yee-Kuang. "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who is the Softest of Them All? Evaluating Japanese and Chinese Strategies in the Soft Power Competition Era." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 10, no. 2, May 2010.

Kharpal, A. "Netflix has a China strategy — but it doesn't involve launching there soon." *CNBC*, 2019.

Lemaître, F., and Vulser, N. "Comment la Chine s'attaque à la suprématie du cinéma hollywoodien." *Le Monde.fr*, 2021.

Leheny, David. "A Narrow Place to Cross Swords: Soft Power and the Politics of Japanese Popular Culture in East Asia." In *Beyond Japan: The Dynamics of East Asian Regionalism*, edited by Peter Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi, Cornell University Press, 2006.

Nashidil Rouiaï. "Sur les routes de l'influence: forces et faiblesses du soft power chinois." *Géococonfluences*, September 2018.

Nye, Joseph S. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs, New York, 2004.

"PANDA DIPLOMACY: CITES secretary says panda transport need not be reported." *Taipei Times*, December 24, 2008.

Rawnsley, Gary D. "Cultural Outreach: Cinema and Soft Power." *Journal of Chinese Film Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2021, pp. 187-203.

Sohn, Yul. "'Middle Powers' Like South Korea Can't Do Without Soft Power and Network Power." *Global Asia*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2012.

AFP, "La flamme olympique allumée, des opposants à Pékin s'invitent à la cérémonie", 24 mars 2008.

Le Point. "JO 2022: des manifestants tibétains dénoncent les 'Jeux de la honte'." 2022.