

Culture and Politics (International Relations) MA Thesis
University of Leiden



**To what extent does China represent a threat to the
soft power primacy of the U.S.?**

An assessment of Chinese and U.S. soft power 2004-2018

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1.0 Introduction

At the turn of twenty-first century, there were 28,707 McDonald's restaurants worldwide¹. At the time of writing, this has increased by around 30% to more than 37,000². Around 2,500 branches are open in China, with that number forecast to double by 2022³. China, by contrast, has no "fast-food mega-chain"⁴ beyond or even within its borders. This may appear a somewhat spurious riposte to narratives of China's rise and America's decline, but these numbers are not without their significance. Cultural icons such as McDonald's create a shared language and act as universal frames of references for people around the world. Where the golden arches logo is recognised, where American food is being consumed, and where, of course, an American multinational is making money, America has power. Popular though Chinese food is throughout the world, China is lacking a soft power weapon as potent as McDonald's.

This cannot be attributed to soft power ignorance on China's part, though. Since 2004 especially, China has invested heavily in improving its relations, international image and soft power capabilities. For all China's efforts, its achievements (or lack thereof) are contested⁵. Conversely, US spending on soft power policies has been gradually shrinking, as prominent politicians apparently remain oblivious to its importance⁶. Nonetheless, US soft power has resisted any notable decline. This presents an intriguing and significant research puzzle: If we are, in hard power terms at least, in a period of Chinese rise and American decline, to what extent does China represent a threat to the soft power primacy of the US?

This thesis will examine Chinese and American soft power in an era where developing and maintaining such power may be crucial to the superpower status of these two nations, as they battle for the hearts and minds of the global community.

¹ McDonald's Corporation Annual Report, 2000. Available at: www.zonebourse.com/MCDONALDS-CORPORATION-4833/pdf/71649/McDonald's%20Corporation_Rapport-annuel.pdf

² The Statistics Portal "Number of McDonald's Restaurants Worldwide from 2005 to 2017." Available at: www.statista.com/statistics/219454/mcdonalds-restaurants-worldwide/

³ Emily Feng. "McDonald's to Double Number of China Restaurants." *Financial Times*. 8 August 2017.

⁴ Paul French. "In Search of Mickey Li's: Why Doesn't China Have its Own Fast-Food Mega-Chain?" *Foreign Policy*. Vol 201 (July-August 2013), 31.

⁵ David Shambaugh. "China's Soft-Power Push: The Search for Respect." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol 94 (2015), 107.

⁶ Joseph Nye. "The Decline of America's Soft Power: Why Washington Should Worry." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol 83 (2004), 16.

1.1 Americanisation vs Sinicisation

The topic of American soft power primacy generates much debate: ardently liberal (and particularly neoliberal) American scholars may credit this primacy to the inherent superiority of American values; the draw of freedom, the promise of worldwide democracy, the chance for anyone to become wealthy in a liberalised global economy. They might also look beyond the US and deride the culture of their perceived rivals, be they Chinese, Russian or Middle Eastern. If universal values were the reason for America's continued soft power supremacy, one would expect to see little resistance to Americanisation. The growing literature on the global phenomenon of Anti-Americanism proves that this is patently not the case⁷.

In his notorious *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington identifies a “Sinic” civilization, which underpins the culture of China and its surrounding nations⁸. One may therefore think of Sinicisation (or for Rachman, “easternisation”⁹) as the force competing with Americanisation for soft power supremacy, albeit a force that has so far struggled to expand far beyond its own heartlands¹⁰. The intention of this thesis is not to engage in a cultural relativist critique or comparison of the two cultures, but to compare each nation's soft power efforts, of which cultural efforts are a constituent part. The study will focus on the years since 2004, when Joseph Nye's milestone work *Soft Power* was published, and met with greater appetite in China than in Nye's homeland, as Chinese academics and politicians alike began to embrace the concept¹¹. In undergoing this comparison, it may be possible to make cautious forecasts about each nation's soft power prospects as we move further into what is already widely being called the Chinese century¹².

⁷ See: Sabri Cifti and Güneş Murat Tezcür. “Soft Power, Religion, and Anti-Americanism in the Middle East.” *Foreign Policy Analysis*. Vol 12, No 3 (July 2016), 374–394; Alan McPherson. *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Yan Jianying. “Impact of Global Anti-Americanism on America's Soft Power.” *China International Studies* (Jan/Feb 2010), 133-144.

⁸ Samuel Huntington. *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 45.

⁹ Gideon Rachman. *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline From Obama to Trump and Beyond* (London: Other Press, 2017)

¹⁰ Young Nam Cho and Jong Ho Jeong. “China's Soft Power: Discussions, Resources, and Prospects.” *Asian Survey*. Vol 48, No. 3 (May/June 2008), 453.

¹¹ Cho and Jeong, “China's Soft Power”, 455-461.

¹² Joseph Nye. “The American Century Will Survive the Rise of China.” *The Financial Times*. (March 26, 2015), 7; Gary Rawnsley. “China Talks Back: Public Diplomacy and Soft Power for the Chinese Century.” in Nancy Snow and Philip Taylor (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*. (London: Routledge, 2008), 282–291; David Scott. *The Chinese Century? The Challenge to Global Order*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

1.2 Defining soft power and other key terms

The liberal scholar Joseph Nye, who coined the term “soft power”, best articulates the concept in his 2004 work of the same name¹³. Though his exposition is thorough, a succinct definition might be: the ability to influence the behaviour of others to achieve desired outcomes, without the use of force or coercion, but through attraction and legitimacy. With a few minor but worthy caveats (see Chapters 2.4 and 3.1), this is the definition this study will adhere to. For Nye, culture is not synonymous with soft power, but an important source of it. In turn, the arts, food, fashion and intellectual practices etc. (this is by no means an exhaustive list) make up culture. To return to the example of McDonald’s, the restaurant is an international symbol of US cuisine, an aspect of US culture; wherever US culture is being consumed, US soft power is being generated.

Culture is a notoriously contested term; in order to be compatible with the above definition of soft power, the most appropriate definition of culture for this study will be that which is synonymous with cultural produce: films, music, cuisine, fashion - the various tangible expressions of cultural values. This is not to shy away from the ever-disputed question of “What is culture?”, but rather to make effective use of the term in the research design.

It would also be prudent to explain “primacy”, as opposed to “hegemony” or “dominance”. Americanisation has lent the US soft power primacy around the world, but importantly not hegemony, which would imply total power. Likewise, dominance would suggest that the US has achieved soft power successes in every region of the globe, which it evidently has not. Nonetheless, the US remains the most successful broker of soft power in the modern age.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

After a consideration of existing debates around soft power, particularly with reference to China and the US, follows the research design, based around the most notable model of soft power conversion. This design will inform the structure of the analysis, moving through each stage of the soft power conversion model and interrogating relevant policy, statistics and phenomena, to reach a conclusion on China’s potential to emulate the soft power successes of the US.

¹³ Joseph Nye. *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004)

2.0 Literature review

2.1 American decline and Chinese rise

In recent years, some scholars of American decline have turned their attention to China's rise¹⁴, begrudgingly, even fearfully conceding that American primacy will give way to Chinese primacy at some stage. How China will achieve this is disputed. In the most recent literature on the topic, Allison argues that the US and China are in fact "Destined for War" if things continue on their current trajectory, while Rachman believes a more peaceful Chinese rise is possible¹⁵. Looking back some years in the literature, Buzan has also indicated that China's peaceful rise is certainly possible, but also difficult: to achieve primacy, Western cultural and political differences will have to give way¹⁶. Though Buzan stops short of using the term itself, it is through soft power means that China will have to achieve a peaceful rise.

2.2 The significance of soft power

For many realists, the prospect of a peaceful rise is both unlikely and of little importance; with money and might, China can take over the world. But this, on the part of Mearsheimer, who describes the prospect of a rising China as "downright depressing"¹⁷, is effectively short-sighted doomsaying. Even E.H. Carr, chief among realists, accepted that power over opinion was "not less essential for political purposes than military and economic power"¹⁸. Nye himself refers to the esteemed realist Arnold Wolfers, who distinguished between short-term, hard-power-centric "possession goals" and the more long-term and abstract "milieu goals", for which soft power is essential¹⁹. Huntington, too, has recognised that culture is of paramount importance to people around the world²⁰, and throughout *Clash of Civilisations* reasserts that the West should preserve

¹⁴ See: Graham Allison. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017); John J. Mearsheimer. "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*. Vol 3 (2010); Rachman, *Easternization*.

¹⁵ Rachman, *Easternization*.

¹⁶ Barry Buzan. "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?" *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*. Vol 3 (2010), 32.

¹⁷ Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm", 396.

¹⁸ E.H. Carr. *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 132.

¹⁹ Nye, *Soft Power*, 16.

²⁰ Huntington, *Clash of Civilisations*, 20.

its culture in order to preserve its power²¹. As this study will go on to explore, the winning of hearts and minds was central to the US establishing itself in the latter half of the twentieth century as the world's leading nation, and it is where it has failed to win such affections that it has suffered its greatest setbacks. It follows, then, that China must do the same in its seemingly inevitable ascent to primacy, if it wishes to exert influence over the world in the way the US has done.

As few scholars have attributed much credit to soft power in the creation of US primacy, few too have attributed much importance to soft power in maintaining that primacy. Were the likes of Mearsheimer to appreciate the significance of soft power, they might not be so alarmed by America's apparent decline in hard power.

2.3 Chinese soft power

The American realists also underestimate the appreciation afforded to soft power by scholars focusing on China. There is no absence of literature on China's burgeoning soft power, but what exists is limited in quantity and scope. Kurlantzick has undergone perhaps the most thorough explanation of China's soft power efforts to date, providing an invaluable account of how Nye's theories have manifested themselves in China²². His conclusions, however, are a little premature: writing in 2007, Kurlantzick believed that China's soft power was already transforming the world - over a decade later, it is difficult to argue that such transformations have made themselves at all apparent. More reasonable conclusions are drawn by Cho and Jeong²³, accepting that developing though it is, China's soft power ambitions still face major obstacles, most notably its authoritarian political system. Indeed, questions can be raised as to how far Chinese soft power efforts can be disentangled from CCP propaganda²⁴. This is a conclusion shared by Shambaugh in his more recent study: "so long as its political system denies, rather than enables, free human development, its propaganda efforts will face an uphill battle."²⁵

²¹ Huntington, *Clash of Civilisations*, 311-12.

²² Joshua Kurlantzick. *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

²³ Cho and Jeong, "China's Soft Power", 472.

²⁴ Kingsley Edney. "Soft Power and the Chinese Propaganda System." *Journal of Contemporary China*. Vol 21, No 78 (2012), 900.

²⁵ Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push", 107.

2.4 Problematising soft power

If soft power is widely underestimated in its significance, it is possibly overestimated in its universality. Nye's work has encountered criticism, certainly when it comes to applying the concept to China. The values that Nye suggests are fundamental to the American appeal, freedom and opportunity²⁶, are typically conceived of as individualistic Western norms, which are not necessarily relevant to the full international community.

This is just one of the problems one encounters when applying Nye's concept to China. Liu has thoroughly critiqued soft power and Chinese cultural diplomacy, arguing that Nye's work omits crucial considerations of Chinese history, both domestically and in the eyes of the wider world²⁷. Liu further highlights inconsistencies with Nye's various elaborations on soft power, recognising the tension between intrinsic attraction and extrinsically-aided persuasion, which Nye often treats as synonymous²⁸.

Nye has also been negligent of the distinction between state-led and other forms of soft power generation. As Liu indicates, when discussing China and soft power, Nye accused China of having "made the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power." Yet Nye's previously discussed conceptualisation relies heavily on the state's role in instrumentalising US soft power. Of course, a great deal of US soft power has been generated through corporations and NGOs, from McDonald's to Hollywood to the Gates Foundation. Likewise, while the CCP retains a great deal of control over China's cultural output, Chinese authors, musicians and filmmakers have enjoyed global recognition independently of their government. Bearing in mind Bleiker's convincing proposition that cultural items which are not explicitly political are often more politically powerful²⁹, an exclusively state-centric approach to the concept of soft power is patently insufficient.

Several Chinese scholars have also expressed dissatisfaction with the "fuzzy" boundaries between hard and soft power³⁰ - this will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Reflecting the above criticisms, my understanding of soft power will not be statically rooted in the period

²⁶ Nye, *Soft Power*, 6.

²⁷ Xin Liu. "Look Beyond and Beneath the Soft Power: An Alternative Analytical Framework for China's Cultural Diplomacy." *Cambridge Journal of China Studies*. Vol 12, No 4 (2017): 79.

²⁸ Liu, "Look Beyond...", 80.

²⁹ Roland Bleiker. *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 8.

³⁰ Hongyi Lai. "The Soft Power Concept and a Rising China." in *China's Soft Power and International Relations*. eds. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

examined, but will take into account China's historical development. Nor will this study follow Nye in an attempt to draw finite conclusions, but will look to assess developments over time and the potential for these developments to continue, making nuanced projections about the ability of China to surpass the US in its cultural diplomacy.

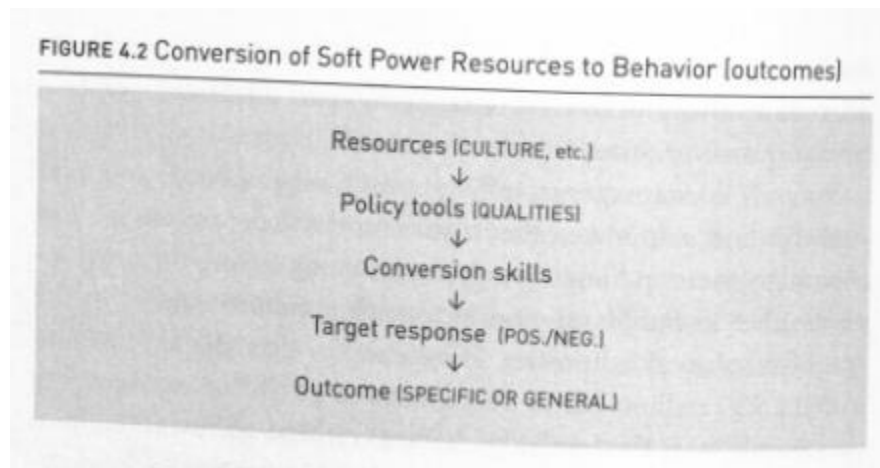
3.0 Research design

This thesis will adopt a largely qualitative approach, following the stages of Joseph Nye's flawed but nonetheless useful Soft Power Conversion Model, whilst keeping in mind the criticisms described above.

3.1 The Soft Power Model

Just as Joseph Nye coined the term soft power, so too did he provide in 2011 the model outlining how soft power can be converted into desired outcomes³¹:

Figure 1



Resources refers to the sources of soft power that a nation has available to call upon. Policy tools refers to the nation's political ability to capitalize on these resources. Conversion skills is perhaps the most subjective term Nye employs in this model, referring to "such qualities as benignity,

³¹ Joseph Nye. *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 100.

competency and charisma”³², effectively meaning the individual skill of leaders in making use of the policy tools. The outcome then depends on the target response to these conversion skills.

As alluded to in the literature review, Nye’s conception of soft power has not been without its critics, particularly in China. Several Chinese scholars have questioned the “fuzzy” boundaries between hard and soft power and numerous terms within³³. The above model is subject to that same “fuzziness”, aiming as it does to stratify some ambiguous and overlapping terms. Nye’s favoured three soft power resources, culture, values and policy, are not always (even rarely) distinct from one another. Policy, classified by Nye as a stage one resource, is particularly indistinct from stage two of the model, policy tools, where it will here be addressed.

Moreover, the acquisition of policy tools for other goals is often in itself a desired outcome of soft power efforts - for example, an improved international image is a goal of Chinese soft power policies, but that improved image can then be utilised to achieve other goals. This example also illustrates the blurred lines between the later two stages of Nye’s model, target response and outcome; China’s desired outcome is for the world to respond more positively to the prospect of a rising China.

Taken with Nye’s own confession that conversion skills can only be measured subjectively, this model is imperfect at every stage. Nonetheless, it remains the most useful framework available for studying the effectiveness of soft power efforts, not least as it corresponds with the founding definition of soft power to which both Chinese and American scholars have generally adhered. This study will employ this model, while remaining conscious of the historical context, the distinction between state and non-state soft power generation, and the potential bias toward Western norms.

3.2 Measuring soft power potential

Soft power is traditionally measured by polling on the favorability of a nation, but these polls would be of limited use in confronting the research puzzle posed; they could only assist in target response, or where relevant, outcome. Instead, more comprehensive data covering the earlier stages is necessary. For this, the Soft Power 30 index offers the most useful existing methodology. Measuring six weighted sub-indices of soft power (culture, digital capabilities, education,

³² Nye, *Future of Power*, 100.

³³ Lai, “The Soft Power Concept and a Rising China”, 3.

international engagement, enterprise and political values), the Soft Power 30 index determines an annual ranking - interestingly, the 2018 index places the US at a four-year-low in fourth place, and China only just inside the top 30 nations, at 27³⁴ - the fourth highest-ranked Asian nation.

That these rankings are not necessarily reflective of expectations - certainly Kurlantzick would be surprised to see China's "transformative" soft power ranked so low - points to several drawbacks in the index, notably a lack of historical context. The index is ranked in isolation year on year, and more significance might be drawn from a nation's trajectory over an extended period of time. Unfortunately, the index began in 2015. Accordingly, these rankings will not be treated with undue significance. Furthermore, its weightings of the six indices are questionable; from Nye to Zicheng³⁵ to the present author, all who engage with the issue of soft power also engage with the issue of culture. As such, the Soft Power 30 index's weightings, which position culture sixth out of six, are unsatisfactory.

3.3 Resources

3.3a Culture

To begin with culture, this will here concern cultural output. Given that the music and film industries are mentioned across the literature, and are two fields in which the US has enjoyed particular soft power success, international takings in these industries from 2004 onwards will form the data against which cultural power is measured.

3.3b Values

The values Nye talks of that have contributed so heavily to American soft power can broadly be described as freedom and opportunity. Again looking back to 2004, data on these values has been monitored by Freedom House and the UN respectively, determining how authentic each nation can be in invoking these values.

³⁴ *The Soft Power 30*. London: Portland Communications. Available at: softpower30.com/

³⁵ Cho and Jeong, "China's Soft Power", 458.

3.4 Policy tools

3.4a Policies that affect soft power

The contested role of policymakers in generating soft power must be examined, as those rare policies that address soft power are not the only policies that affect it - important foreign and domestic policies have just as much, if not more, impact on a nation's soft power. Here, both primary and secondary reading concerning such policies will be examined.

3.4b Aid contributions

A principal way powerful nations have tried to develop soft power is through their aid and development contributions to their less powerful global neighbours. This is monitored by various international bodies.

3.5 Conversion skills

As previously noted, Nye concedes that this stage of his model is the most subjective, as judging the "benignity, competency and charisma"³⁶ of those looking to utilise their soft power resources and policy tools is a matter of opinion. The Gallup International Survey on Global Leaders (est. 2007) does provide the most comprehensive and widely-used data on leaders' worldwide approval ratings. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey can provide helpful context for the years not covered by Gallup.

3.6 Target response and outcome

3.6a A positive international image

In this particular case, widely identified as a priority for China, the target response and outcome are one and the same. China is targeting the global community in its efforts to promote itself as a benign and attractive power on the rise. On the other hand, scholars such as Nye have argued that the US is suffering from a serious image problem in the twenty-first century, largely due to its foreign policy conduct³⁷. The aforementioned Pew Global Attitudes Survey is surely the best way of measuring the response over the years.

³⁶ Nye, *Future of Power*, 100.

³⁷ Nye, *Soft Power*, 66.

3.6b Increased exposure to language and culture

Language could prove a fundamental stumbling block for Chinese soft power ambitions. The US has long benefitted from English being the lingua franca, with an estimated 20% of the global population able to understand English and therefore able (all else being equal) to seamlessly access and potentially relate to US culture. Though estimates suggest a similar percentage can speak some form of Chinese, these people are largely confined to China itself and its immediate neighbours. Chinese soft power resources are a lot less accessible globally, and is a vital reason behind China’s push for the establishment of Confucius Institutes across the world. Its success in this endeavour since its conception in 2004 will be measured, against the US, whose own educational institutions have been central to its soft power. UNESCO statistics may prove helpful in illuminating this.

3.7 Complete research design

Integrating these measurements and data sources into Nye’s model creates Figure 2. Through this design, it should be possible not only to assess how effective each nation is in making use of soft power, but also to highlight at which stage each nation has succeeded and faltered. Though this thesis will not feature a comprehensive prescriptive or predictive element, from this research, it will be possible to make tentative forecasts for each nation’s soft power future.

Figure 2

| Stage of Nye's Soft Power Conversion model | Measurement | Source of data (2004-2018 where possible) |
|--|--|--|
| Resources ↓ | Culture - Film | International box office takings (boxofficemojo.com) |
| | Culture - Music | IFPI Global Music Report |
| | Values - Freedom | Freedom House Freedom in the World Report |
| | Values - Opportunity | UN Human Development Index |
| Policy tools ↓ | Existing government policies | Various sources |
| | Foreign Aid policies | Aiddata.org and similar |
| Conversion skills ↓ | International perceptions of leadership | Gallup World Leaders polls |
| Target response ↓ | International perceptions of countries | Pew Global Attitudes Survey |
| Outcome | Positive international image | Same as target response |
| | Increased exposure to language and culture | Number of Confucius Institutes and UNESCO Student Flow Index |

4.0 Analysis

4.1a Resources - Culture

As outlined above, this chapter will focus on the cultural resources available to the two countries, with which they can export ideals and myths which can in turn generate soft power. The film and music industries, which account for a great deal of such resources, will be examined here, not least as these are two industries in which the US has achieved historic success and China has seen recent development. A strong performance in these industries lays much of the groundwork for the later stages of Nye's soft power model.

Film

Of all American cultural resources, Hollywood is perhaps the most universally recognised as synonymous with the sphere of activity it represents. The biggest film industry in the world in terms of revenue, Hollywood has for almost a century promoted what Farhi and Rosenfeld have termed the "appealing themes and myths of the United States itself: individuality, wealth, progress, tolerance, optimism"³⁸, the values that are the bedrock of American soft power. For decades, the only comparable national film industry was that of India, Bollywood, which continues to outstrip the US in terms of films produced per year, but collects only a fraction of the total revenue at the box office³⁹. This lends some weight to the notion that American values are uniquely universal.

Despite surpassing Bollywood as the world's second most profitable film industry in 2012, "Chinawood", as recognised by Wendy Su⁴⁰, has gone largely unnoticed, both as an industry and a term in itself. However, this is an industry still in its infancy compared to those of the US and India; it is possible that China's share of the international market could grow significantly over the

³⁸ Paul Farhi and Megan Rosenfeld. "American Pop Penetrates Worldwide." *The Washington Post*. 25 October 1998. Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/10/25/american-pop-penetrates-worldwide/3416df02-7643-4894-9771-6dabd05f2bd1/?utm_term=.6b8cc7123ccb

³⁹ Niall McCarthy. "Bollywood: India's Film Industry By The Numbers." *Forbes*. 13 September 2014. Available at: www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2014/09/03/bollywood-indias-film-industry-by-the-numbers-infographic

⁴⁰ Wendy Su. "New Strategies of China's Film Industry as Soft Power." *Global Media and Communication*. Vol 6:3 (2010): 317.

coming decades, but not necessarily to a point where it can challenge the long-established dominance of Hollywood.

Internationally, the highest-grossing films for each year of the past two decades have all been American productions⁴¹. The first and last films in the Harry Potter series (the highest earners in 2001 and 2011) may be British in origin, but were chiefly produced by California-based Warner Bros. Each American production which has entered the box office top 20 since 2004 has consistently earned the majority of its revenue overseas, typically accounting for between 55-80% of overall receipts. The international cinema-going community have continued to voraciously consume Hollywood productions, and in doing so have continued to ingest those American myths.

To consider even the past five years, the highest-grossing films worldwide have all been instalments in ongoing franchises of what Boggs and Pollard have termed “disguised combat”⁴² films: *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018); *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017); *Captain America: Civil War* (2016); *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015); *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014). Each film depicts fantastical conflicts (four of the five reference “war” even in the title), in which heroic Americans (or at least heroes with American voices) defend those essential and seemingly globally-held values of freedom and individuality against some usually extraterrestrial threat. For audiences across the world, Americans are not only their entertainers, but their saviours.

By contrast, Chinese films have, at the time of writing, made very little international impression, not least about China’s potential to save the world, though upcoming blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* (2019), recognised by some observers as a “a foreign-policy primer”⁴³, may be read as an overdue step toward rectifying this. Only in the years immediately preceding the period here studied did the Chinese film industry begin its process of liberalisation, a journey which is not yet complete, despite hugely improved box office performance⁴⁴. Having spent decades as a tool of CCP propaganda, the Chinese film industry began in the mid-2000s to embrace some of the ideas

⁴¹ All data concerning box office revenue in this chapter can be located at www.boxofficemojo.com.

⁴² Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard. *The Hollywood War Machine: U.S. Militarism and Popular Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2015): 185.

⁴³ “Xi Jinping Thought Saves the World.” *The Economist (China)*. 16 February 2019. Available at: www.economist.com/china/2019/02/16/xi-jinping-thought-saves-the-world

⁴⁴ Wendy Su. *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994-2013*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016): 164-166.

that had made Hollywood such an international force, without altogether abandoning Chinese values. New productions followed humanistic narratives of starcrossed lovers across national borders, war heroes reflecting on their past, and more familiar kung-fu movies which had traditionally gathered strong returns⁴⁵. Whilst focusing on more individualistic narratives, these films also foregrounded powerful Chinese cultural values such as brotherhood, loyalty, family and perseverance⁴⁶.

While an impact on the international box office was not immediately apparent, a clear trajectory is discernible, as Chinese films crept up the rankings over the coming decade, finally entering the Top 20 in 2016 with *The Mermaid (Mei Ren Yu)*, which placed 14th, ahead of America's disguised combat blockbuster *X-Men: Apocalypse*, and Oscar favourite *La La Land*. The following year, a Chinese film entered the Top 10 for the first time, as *Wolf Warrior 2* became the country's highest-grossing film ever, placing seventh internationally. Though no single Chinese film was to repeat this feat in 2018, two entered the Top 20 as *Operation Red Sea* and *Detective Chinatown 2* finished 13th and 14th respectively.

To what extent the values championed in these films are being absorbed internationally is unclear, but it is evident that as a Chinese soft power resource, the film industry is one of notable potential and increasing impact. The challenge for China is to keep this momentum building, offering international audiences as much alternative to American productions as possible. For the US, the challenge is in maintaining its number one status, which allows it to propagate its values largely unchallenged in cinemas across the world. In years to come, the cinema may become a key strategic battleground for the two nations.

Music

Espousing many of those same values, American pop stars have repetitively and successfully promoted those "appealing myths and themes" to a largely receptive international audience, again adding some credence to the notion that American cultural values are universally enchanting. China can boast no comparable success in the music industry, which has lagged even behind its film industry; while prior to the period studied, China did have at least one internationally-

⁴⁵ Su, *New Strategies*, 319.

⁴⁶ Su, *New Strategies*, 320.

recognised film (though even that was a co-production with Hollywood) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), it would be a stretch to claim that even at the time of writing they have a single internationally-recognised pop star. This is a major problem for a country looking to assert its soft power, as it struggles to contribute to a cultural industry which generated decade-high worldwide revenues of \$17.3bn in 2017⁴⁷.

Whilst the US does not dominate the global music industry to quite the same extent it dominates in film, there is no question that American music retains the biggest international reach, having been the world's biggest national music market for the entire period studied⁴⁸. In 2017, seven of the Top 10 best-selling artists for that year were American, with the remaining three being Canadian or British artists who significantly benefit from American influence and support⁴⁹. In any case, it is certainly the case that English-language music enjoys the biggest global influence, and in the twenty-first century, the US has been the most important market for and originator of English language music.

China, on the other hand, is not even the biggest music market in East Asia, currently falling behind its neighbours in Japan and South Korea, the second and sixth biggest international markets respectively. That said, China now places tenth, an all-time high, gradually climbing from 21st in 2013⁵⁰ and 14th in 2015⁵¹. This represents something of a boom, even if China remains some way behind its American counterparts. Historically, the challenge facing the Chinese music industry has been piracy; the IFPI reported in 2012 that an estimated 99% of China's music consumption came through digital piracy, meaning that despite China having almost twice as many internet users as the US, music revenues equated to about 1% of that of the US⁵². This represented a disastrous failure in potential to develop a competitive Chinese music market, and by extension, competitive Chinese music itself.

However, in 2013, the Chinese government underwent a major shift in its approach to copyright laws, clamping down on piracy services; within a year, legal streaming had overtaken

⁴⁷ IFPI (The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry) Global Music Report 2018: 11.

⁴⁸ IFPI reports 2004-2018.

⁴⁹ IFPI Global Music Report 2018: 8.

⁵⁰ IFPI Global Music Report 2013: 14.

⁵¹ IFPI Global Music Report 2018: 28.

⁵² IFPI Global Music Report 2012: 23.

piracy as the most popular means of consuming music within China⁵³. That this coincides with the rapid growth of the Chinese music market is cause for much optimism about the industry; according to Jiang Tao, President of ChiaTai Music: “Now, Chinese artists have an opportunity, their work and their copyrights will be protected, their music will be part of a properly monetised ecosystem and through this we will generate homegrown success and, eventually, a Chinese superstar artist.”⁵⁴ The IFPI themselves have recognised that “China’s population is over 1.3 billion. If a small fraction of this population pays for streaming services, it will be the biggest music market in the world.”⁵⁵

That China has experienced such rapid growth over such a short period may be cause for alarm for the US, whose market could well be eclipsed by further evolution should the CCP develop laws surrounding performance and broadcast rights, strengthening its ability to foster a global superstar. However, there is plenty of debate about how “authentically Chinese” any potential superstar might be; will China look to develop its own distinctive cultural output, imbued with Chinese values, or music that sounds Western, but is from China?⁵⁶ Indeed, artists leading the charge for China have adopted Westernised names and built their music videos around Western cultural references⁵⁷. China may even take cues from its neighbours in Japan and South Korea; the former has traditionally been influential in the more developed music industries of Hong Kong and Taiwan, whilst “K-Pop” is a growing international force⁵⁸.

Here, the role of English, widely thought of as “the world’s second language”⁵⁹, cannot be underestimated. Whilst films are above all a visual medium, one that can be augmented with dubbing or subtitles, pop songs usually rely on the listener being able to understand their lyrical

⁵³ IFPI Global Music Report 2014: 37.

⁵⁴ IFPI Global Music Report 2018: 28.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Jeroen de Kloet. “Rock in a Hard Place: Commercial Fantasies in China’s Music Industry.” in *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis*. eds. Stephanie Donald, Yin Hong and Michael Keane. New York: Routledge, 2013: 103.

⁵⁷ “Could Jane Zhang Become China’s First Global Pop Star?” BBC News. 21 Dec 2016. Available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-38179767

⁵⁸ IFPI Global Music Report 2018: 23.

⁵⁹ Richard S. Pinner. *Reconceptualising Authenticity for English as a Global Language*. Bristol: Blue Ridge Summit, 2016: 34.

language. How far this will limit the potential of an “authentic” Chinese impact on the global music scene, and how far this will safeguard US dominance, remains to be seen.

Of course, the two soft power resources of film and music cannot be considered in isolation. Both contribute to a broader cultural understanding. An audience exposed only to American music may get a glimpse of American values and narratives, but are unlikely to be overwhelmed by American soft power. However, audiences who regularly consume American films, music, television, literature and even food are gradually given a full picture of the ideals that underpin American soft power. As such, the equivalent Chinese ideals must be at the heart of any global soft power push in the film and music industries. Though the two Chinese industries are closing the gap on their American rivals, without appealing, authentic and well-communicated (language may prove decisive) alternatives to American values, they will struggle to exert the same soft power influence.

4.1b Resources - Values

If cultural produce such as music and film expresses a country’s authentic values, a consideration of what exactly those values are is also necessary. For Nye, the values of freedom and opportunity would be central to the successful global recognition of the American Dream. Though, as has been discussed in the literature review, these values are very much rooted in Western normative thought, it is reasonable for Nye to suggest that they have been met with approval by the majority of the international community. If the world did not generally look upon these values favourably, one could hardly speak of the US as the leading soft power nation. It follows, then, that China must look to promote some approximation of these values, or an equally palatable alternative, in order to turn the heads of the international community.

Freedom

According to the US-based NGO Freedom House, the US is experiencing a minor crisis of freedom. As the nation which has perhaps done more than any other in modern times to advance the value of freedom, through both its culture and politics, the US is held to an especially high

standard. For most of the past decade, and particularly since the inauguration of President Trump, the US, Freedom House argue, is falling short of this standard⁶⁰.

Antagonistic political polarization, funded by shadowy special interest groups, and complimented by an increasingly partisan and fact-light media has presented a significant problem for American domestic freedoms over the past decade, as simultaneously, the consecutive surveillance programmes of the Bush and Obama administrations have compromised certain civil liberties⁶¹. Since 2009, American freedom has been on the decline, falling from a score of 94 (out of 100) at Obama's inauguration to 89 at Trump's⁶². The Trump presidency has, then, exacerbated this decline, with a further three-point fall to 86 within the first year⁶³. Freedom House attributes this to the President repeatedly casting doubts on the veracity of the free press, the credibility of the independent judiciary and the legitimacy of elections⁶⁴.

All this, as will be corroborated in Chapters 4.3 and 4.4, demonstrates that on its current trajectory, the US is gradually losing its ability to draw upon the value of freedom as a soft power resource. Though it remains beyond doubt a free country, the US now lags some way behind its traditional peers in France, Germany and the United Kingdom; the closest freedom scores to that of the US belong to Belize, Croatia, Greece, Latvia, and Mongolia⁶⁵.

The significance of this for the Chinese question cannot be underestimated: Freedom House's most recent report states that:

*“As the United States ceases its global advocacy of freedom and justice, and the president casts doubt on the importance of basic democratic values for our own society, more nations may turn to China, a rising alternative to US leadership. The Chinese Communist Party has welcomed this trend, offering its authoritarian system as a model for developing nations.”*⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Freedom House Freedom in the World Report 2019: 17.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Freedom House 2019: 21.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Freedom House 2019: 17.

⁶⁵ Freedom House 2019: 22.

⁶⁶ Freedom House 2019: 23.

A crucial paradox here is that China is of course an authoritarian nation, not an electoral democracy. This does not however, mean that notions of freedom are without value. Just as the US has espoused the idea of freedom while simultaneously denying it to both foreign and domestic citizens, the CCP can too employ the mythical allure of freedom to capture the imagination of the global community.

In the twenty-first century, the CCP has sought to promote “democracy with Chinese characteristics”, with superficial gestures such as appointing non-party government ministers, public consultation on some legislation and ostensibly open debate on economic reform⁶⁷. Of course, the CCP’s system of governance is in no way compatible with the kind of freedoms one would associate with a democracy of any kind. Genuine challenges to state power are met with punitive responses, as many pro-democracy activists are imprisoned⁶⁸. Extensive propaganda campaigns have criticised the western model of democracy as a route to freedom, as the CCP steps up its efforts to reshape the world’s image of a desirable political model⁶⁹.

If China is keen to suggest that it can replace the US as a global guarantor of rights and freedoms, it has a long way to go. Though the American score is in decline, so is the Chinese, from a much lower starting point; though Trump has presided over a three-point drop in freedom, in the same period, China has experienced the same three-point drop, from 14 to 11 out of 100⁷⁰. In guaranteeing the freedoms of its citizens, China is comparable to the Congo, Laos, Uzbekistan and Yemen - hardly world-leading nations.

Opportunity

A central tenet of American values is opportunity, the idea that through education, hard work and determination, even the most humble citizen could rise to the very top. The UN, in their Human Development Index (HDI), seek to quantify such possibilities, and have generally found the US to be among the best-performing nations; there is apparently a kernel of truth in the mythical American dream.

That the US is not the singular outstanding nation in this index is hardly grounds for accusations of underperformance, as it consistently ranks amongst the uppermost High-HDI

⁶⁷ Freedom House 2008. Available at: freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2008/china

⁶⁸ Freedom House 2012. Available at: freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/china-0

⁶⁹ Freedom House 2017: 3-4; Freedom House 2018: 5.

⁷⁰ Freedom House 2019: 6.

countries⁷¹. However, there is a concerning trajectory; though the US HDI has improved in the twenty-first century, from 0.885 to 0.924, this improvement is behind the curve of its contemporaries⁷². As such, the US has slipped five places in the rankings over the period studied, from eighth to thirteenth⁷³. For context, there are 189 countries taken into account, with an average score of 0.728 - Norway tops the Index with 0.953 and Niger is at the bottom with 0.354⁷⁴. Though the UN's reports do not provide commentary on the data, the statistics do offer some insight into the reasons behind the slowing pace of American human development. Growing income inequality between the richest and poorest citizens has severely undermined the American claim to be the land of opportunity, as has the continuing gender income gap⁷⁵. Indeed, the US ranks well below its peers on the issue of gender equality, as the 41st best-performing nation in the world, with scores almost identical to those of Serbia and Kazakhstan⁷⁶.

Though it would be rather incautious to propose that the CCP is a champion of gender equality, China has, in the period studied, surpassed the US in that regard at least, ranking at 36, just behind New Zealand⁷⁷. Whilst this may be counted as a minor victory for China, it still has a long way to go in ensuring that the opportunities afforded to its male and female citizens are opportunities worth taking. China lags far behind the US in the overall rankings, in 86th place, with a score of 0.752⁷⁸. Though it is near the bottom end of the High-HDI countries, it is still among them, and above the average of 0.733 for countries in East Asia⁷⁹. China's shortcomings in comparison with the US are significant: the number of years Chinese citizens spend in education is almost half that of the US average, and the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita is around one quarter of that of the US⁸⁰. Though Chinese women may be more likely than American women to experience the same opportunities as their male counterparts, those opportunities still lag far behind those available to American citizens on the whole.

⁷¹ United Nations Human Development Index, 2004-2018.

⁷² UN HDI 2018: 22.

⁷³ UN HDI 2018: 26.

⁷⁴ UN HDI 2018: 25.

⁷⁵ UN HDI 2018: 38.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ UN HDI 2018: 39.

⁷⁸ UN HDI 2018: 23.

⁷⁹ United Nations Human Development Index 2018 China briefing note. Available at: hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/CHN

⁸⁰ UN HDI 2018: 22-23.

As the US follows an increasingly familiar trajectory of decline, China follows an increasingly familiar one of improvement. Over the period studied, no other High-HDI country experienced such rapid HDI growth between 2000-2010, and only four others matched China's rate of growth between 2010-2017⁸¹. This was largely driven by an almost five-fold increase in GNI per capita, which, despite being a fraction of the American figure, is moving in the right direction. This has translated to a modest increase in the rankings of seven places over the period studied, representing gradual, albeit limited, Chinese improvement in providing its citizens with valuable opportunities.

It is well worth noting that the seventh-ranked nation in terms of HDI (having overtaken the US in 2014) is the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, largely owing to its world-leading life expectancy and impressive per capita income⁸². Given Hong Kong's historical and cultural proximity to the People's Republic, there is no inherent reason that China itself cannot seek to emulate its neighbours, with effective government.

The incentive for China to do so is rooted in soft power. If the CCP's intentions are to draw the international community away from American-style democracy, it surely must be able to present itself as a viable alternative guarantor of those values that American-style democracy champions. Though the international community are not likely to be cognizant of the myriad data supporting or diminishing a state's claim to the stewardship of freedom or opportunity, the everyday manifestation of the phenomena such data represents determine just how viable any claims might be. In other words, the US or China can promote freedom, opportunity or any number of values through film, music or any number of means, but without authenticity, such promotion will ring hollow.

Though the US might not be the standard-bearer of freedom and opportunity it so often claims to be, it has largely performed well enough for such claims to be more or less authentic, and therefore has been successful in generating significant soft power from them. That said, these claims will lose authenticity the further the US slides down the rankings. China might be some way off legitimately casting itself in the role of standard-bearer for these same values, but the more

⁸¹ UN HDI 2018: 27.

⁸² UN HDI 2018: 22.

US influence falters, the more opportunity China will have to develop its own soft power in the space vacated.

4.2 Policy tools

The so-called “fuzziness” of Nye’s concept is again exposed when the policy tools stage of his soft power model is examined. Policies that explicitly address the generation of soft power are rare, particularly with regard to the US government, which Nye has posited as being historically disinterested, yet also successful⁸³. Nye has gone on to suggest that it is the mistake of the Chinese government to think that they can generate soft power⁸⁴. This calls into the question the inclusion of policy tools in Nye’s model, and demands a nuanced approach.

Here, significant examples of policy which have contributed to a nation’s soft power, even if that were not the policy’s primary intention will be considered; this means the inclusion of hard-power-related foreign policy alongside the more obviously soft-power-related foreign aid policy.

Foreign policy

If, as Nye asserts, US administrations (as of 2004) have been largely ignorant of soft power, how has the US come to be the world’s leading soft power nation? With the cultural output and values outlined above, the US has continued to generate soft power in a manner that largely bypasses policy. In fact, as Nye would surely agree, the US has even practiced policy which directly contradicts those values, and seen little negative effect on its soft power⁸⁵.

To suggest that policy choices are unimportant would be ahistorical. To briefly go some way beyond the period here studied, scholars of both US and Chinese soft power attribute huge importance to the 1948 Marshall Plan⁸⁶. Through this plan, the US granted roughly \$100 billion (in modern figures) in economic assistance to post-war Western Europe, bringing the region firmly into the US sphere of influence, rather than the Soviet. Though it would be difficult to describe this as anything other than a hard power policy move, the soft power effects were notable;

⁸³ Nye, *Soft Power*, 13-15.

⁸⁴ Joseph Nye. “What China and Russia Don’t Get About Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy*. 29 April 2013. Available at: foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/

⁸⁵ Nye, *Soft Power*, 55.

⁸⁶ Nye, *Soft Power*, ix; Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, 7.

increasing economic ties and affinity with the US allowed for those agents of American culture and values, Hollywood, Coca Cola and McDonald's, to flood the Western European market. In doing so, one of the most (economically, militarily and culturally) powerful regions in the world was incorporated into the US model of globalisation.

This incorporation was only strengthened, and to some degree widened, over the coming decades in the polarised climate of the Cold War. Indeed, US soft power was far more effective in crossing the Berlin Wall than Soviet soft power⁸⁷, and once the Wall had fallen, American domination appeared complete. Policy has since been relatively unimportant, as non-state actors, like Hollywood, have done the work of reinforcing this primacy. This, then, is not to say that policy tools have no place in generating soft power, but that constant policymaking is not necessarily required. The US experience suggests that once established, soft power sticks. In the period of American primacy, the challenge has been maintaining, rather than generating soft power; where non-state actors have done this, policymakers have been able to afford ignorance.

If US policymakers in this period have achieved soft power success through ignorance, China has achieved failure through volition. Successive CCP leaders since 2004 have made soft power development and cultural diplomacy a central tenet of their administrative goals; President Hu Jintao had taken up the cause at the very start of this period⁸⁸, and it continues to be pursued, perhaps more enthusiastically than in previous administrations, by current President Xi Jinping, who stated in 2013 that “enhancing national cultural soft power is crucial” to the realisation of China’s broader strategic goals⁸⁹. One of the more significant endeavours associated with this is the international establishment of Confucius Institutes, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.4.

Curiously, the Beijing Consensus, as understood by its leading observer, Joshua Cooper Ramo, makes no mention of soft power, and only fleeting allusions to China’s international “image” or international representation⁹⁰. Nonetheless, as the broad strategic goals outlined in Cooper Ramo’s study do amount to a peaceful rise, it is unsurprising that Chinese policymakers would connect soft power to the aims of the Beijing Consensus. It must be recognised that these

⁸⁷ Nye, *Soft Power*, 49.

⁸⁸ Timo Kivimäki. "Soft Power and Global Governance with Chinese Characteristics." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*. 7:4 (2014): 429.

⁸⁹ Liu, “Look Beyond...”, 81.

⁹⁰ Joshua Cooper Ramo. *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), 19, 68.

aims are not necessarily to forcibly emulate the Washington Consensus, but to promote a new way of understanding international politics, based around harmony and co-existence. This does not, as some scholars have suggested⁹¹, render comparisons between the two approaches moot, but it does, as ever, necessitate a considered analysis.

If the intentions of the Washington Consensus were to expand the American sphere of influence in developing nations post-1989, the US was doing so from a position of already-established primacy, not least in the realm of soft power. The Beijing Consensus clearly faces a different set of circumstances; it must exist, at least in the short term, alongside the established consensus of its competitor, should it want to avoid direct confrontation. To this end, Chinese foreign policy has been characterised less by force than a desire to develop soft power.

For Cooper Ramo, the Beijing Consensus can be distilled into three “theorems.”⁹² First, that developing countries should embrace cutting-edge technology, infrastructure and innovations, as China has done, “to create change that moves faster than the problems change creates.” The second is perhaps the most direct in challenging the Washington Consensus, in that it argues for sustainability and equality measures to replace traditional indices such as GDP in determining national development. The final theorem is the one that, should China adhere to it, abates any fears of direct conflict with Washington: the necessity of self-determination.

In terms of more specific policy tools under the wider Consensus, the much-lauded Belt and Road initiative appears to be a direct descendent of Cooper Ramo’s first theorem. Through this campaign, Chinese firms have been investing in infrastructure in 71 countries, stretching across Asia and into Africa and Europe, developing trade and diplomatic opportunities with states that account for as much as half the world’s population, and a quarter of global GDP. This is a primarily economic (and therefore hard power) policy, but one that is already drawing comparisons with the Marshall Plan⁹³ in its potential to expand Chinese influence across the globe.

The supposed \$1tr spent on the Belt and Road Initiative has been augmented by colossal expenditure on ensuring its intentions are viewed as benign. Though the exact figures are uncertain, it is estimated that that the CCP’s annual budget for “external propaganda” exceeds

⁹¹ Liu, “Look Beyond...”, 88.

⁹² Cooper Ramo, *Beijing Consensus*, 12.

⁹³ Peter Sabine. “Belt and Road is ‘Marshall Plan Without a War’, Analysts Say.” *South China Morning Post*. 28 March 2017. Available at: www.scmp.com/special-reports/business/topics/one-belt-one-road/article/2082733/belt-and-road-marshall-plan

\$10bil, vastly outstripping comparable spending in the US⁹⁴. The problem for China seems to be that state-funded propaganda is simply not as effective as independently-created messaging. Nye may well have been correct, even at the risk of undermining his previous works, when he argued that the CCP were mistaken in their approach to soft power⁹⁵. Even in 2008, when China was presented with the ideal soft power opportunity in the form of the Beijing Olympics, the spectacle of the opening ceremony and glory of the games was marred by reports of state-sanctioned human rights abuses⁹⁶, population displacement⁹⁷, and even tighter press regulation⁹⁸.

Nowhere is the gulf between Chinese words and deeds more apparent than in the ongoing dispute over Taiwan. Despite official commitments to harmony and self-determination, the gradually escalating rhetoric employed by President Xi suggests that such courtesy may not be extended to Taiwan, refusing to rule out forceful measures to keep Taiwan in check⁹⁹. This exemplifies the gap between China's civil language and military actions identified by Scobell¹⁰⁰. Li concludes that this gap will seriously hinder any attempts to build Chinese soft power, as it simply reinforces the "China threat" image¹⁰¹.

Foreign aid

Both American¹⁰² and Chinese¹⁰³ scholars have recognised the potential of foreign aid to enhance a nation's image, influence and soft power; a generous superpower appears to be a benign one. As early as 2004, Nye argued that the US spending a mere 0.1% of its GDP on foreign aid was creating a soft power deficit, as this stood at around one third of the contributions of comparable nations¹⁰⁴.

⁹⁴ Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push", 100.

⁹⁵ Nye, "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power."

⁹⁶ "China Gold Medal' for Executions." BBC News. 15 April 2008. Available at: news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7346938

⁹⁷ Hyun Bang Shin and Bingqin Li. "Whose Games? The Costs of Being 'Olympic Citizens' in Beijing." *Environment and Urbanization*. 25:2 (2013): 560.

⁹⁸ Andrew Jacobs. "China to Limit Web Access During Olympic Games." *New York Times*. 31 July 2008. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2008/07/31/sports/olympics/31china.html?partner=rssnyt

⁹⁹ Nicola Smith and Wendy Tang. "China's Xi Jinping says Taiwan 'must and will be united' with Beijing." *The Telegraph*. 2 January 2019. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/01/02/chinas-xi-jinping-threatens-resort-force-unify-taiwan/

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Scobell. 'Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?' *Parameters*. Vol 39 (2009): 4–22.

¹⁰¹ Mingjiang Li. "The People's Liberation Army and China's Smart Power Quandary in Southeast Asia." *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 38:3 (2015): 361.

¹⁰² Nye, *Soft Power*, 62.

¹⁰³ Lai, "The Soft Power Concept...", 13.

¹⁰⁴ Nye, *Soft Power*, 62.

By comparison, though China was contributing fewer dollars to aid efforts, its contributions stood at around 0.22% of its GNP in 2005¹⁰⁵.

For the most part, the US has maintained its spending levels throughout the period studied, in the region of \$50bil contributed each year, with the majority of aid going to Africa¹⁰⁶. This has lent the US the accolade of being the most generous Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nation in this period, ahead of the UK and Germany. However, in 2018, US foreign aid spending plummeted by over one third, as revised policies under the Trump administration came into effect¹⁰⁷. Though the \$28bn spent in 2018 remains more than any other OECD nation, it suggests a significant change in direction for US foreign aid policy, which, should it continue, can only serve to widen that soft power deficit.

Foreign aid is a slightly more complex topic in China. Perhaps owing to its supposed unpopularity domestically¹⁰⁸, foreign aid is one area of policy about which Chinese governments have been particularly secretive, only recently establishing an official government body, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), to manage it¹⁰⁹. Whereas in the West, the purpose of foreign aid is generally to help underdeveloped nations, CIDCA's brief is to create "mutually-beneficial outcomes"¹¹⁰ for both the donor and recipient. Though China ranks among the most munificent nations in terms of dollars donated, questions can be raised as to how far this can be considered foreign aid. Even Kurlantzick, a leading enthusiast of Chinese soft power, accepts that Chinese aid and investment are more closely associated with coercion¹¹¹. Just as the CCP promotes democracy with Chinese characteristics, it perhaps too promotes what Mardell calls "foreign aid with Chinese characteristics."¹¹²

As with US aid, Africa has been the primary target for Chinese aid policy. Lai estimates that in the latter half of the twentieth century, 30% of all Chinese aid spending went to Africa, where target countries such as Kenya and Nigeria now welcome Chinese influence¹¹³. Such

¹⁰⁵ Lai, "The Soft Power Concept...", 13.

¹⁰⁶ USAID Foreign Aid Explorer. Available at: explorer.usaid.gov/aid-trends.html

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ "Despite its Reputation, Chinese Aid is Quite Effective." *The Economist*. 12 October 2017. Available at: www.economist.com/china/2017/10/12/despite-its-reputation-chinese-aid-is-quite-effective

¹⁰⁹ Jacob Mardell. "Foreign Aid With Chinese Characteristics." *The Diplomat*. 7 August 2018. Available at: thediplomat.com/2018/08/foreign-aid-with-chinese-characteristics/

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, 6.

¹¹² Mardell, "Foreign Aid..."

¹¹³ Lai, "The Soft Power Concept...", 13.

spending has continued well into the period studied, as Hsu et al. argue that China is looking to tighten its grip on Africa's natural resources; as of 2009, nearly half of all Chinese aid was heading to Africa¹¹⁴. According to an extensive 2017 study by AidData, China's spending on aid in the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century amounted to around \$350bil, of which only one fifth was in grants¹¹⁵. The remainder consisted of concessional loans at below-market rates, which effectively leaves recipient countries in debt to China¹¹⁶. Here, the distinction between generosity and coercion is a fine one; even the most apparently altruistic policy decisions obscure more opportunistic desires.

If Nye is correct about the role of policymakers in generating soft power, Shambaugh is more precise about the particular malaise facing the CCP, their spending, and their policies:

*“What China fails to understand is that despite its world-class culture, cuisine, and human capital, and despite its extraordinary economic rise over the last several decades, so long as its political system denies, rather than enables, free human development, its propaganda efforts will face an uphill battle. Soft power cannot be bought. It must be earned.”*¹¹⁷

This echoes and extends the conclusions drawn in the previous chapter; that benign rhetoric and spectacular displays focusing on peace, harmony and cultural prowess are helpful in generating soft power. But without beforehand establishing a degree of authenticity, they are not nearly as helpful as they could be.

Nye is right that US policy has often betrayed the values it purports to reflect, and that such hypocrisy is among the most likely causes of soft power losses¹¹⁸. But the US benefited from nearly a half-century in which the international context allowed it to pursue policies and establish structures that would develop goodwill with its strategic neighbours, as the vanguard of the aforementioned values against a Soviet threat. By the start of the period studied, the US could afford policy mis-steps which would slightly affect its soft power.

¹¹⁴ Jennifer Y. Hsu et al. "Going Out' or Staying In? The Expansion of Chinese NGOs in Africa". *Development Policy Review*. 34:3 (2016), 423.

¹¹⁵ AidData study on Chinese Aid. Available at: www.aiddata.org/china

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push", 107.

¹¹⁸ Nye, *Soft Power*, 127.

China, in modern history, has enjoyed no such luxury. For a long time viewed by the Western world in particular through the lens of a “yellow peril” or “red threat”¹¹⁹, it is pursuing soft power from a much less advantageous position than the US. Where US soft power suffered over Iraq and Afghanistan, China may over Taiwan and other controversial foreign policies. Equally, its seemingly benign foreign policy decisions are more likely to be met with suspicion than open arms, particularly when its domestic policies continue to undermine any ostensible benevolence.

This is the trap US policymakers must be wary of. If policy hypocrisy does indeed undermine soft power, then the US cannot be ignorant of it forever. So long as its policies tend toward egotism rather than compassion, its soft power will fade. Enduring though soft power may be, there is nothing to suggest that it is unconditional to any and all policy decisions. To this end, Nye’s comments about the role of policymakers in soft power are perhaps premature. It is difficult however, particularly with an eye on China, to contend Shambaugh’s conclusions.

4.3 Conversion skills

It is the role of a nation’s leaders on the world stage to make use of these policy tools, create soft power gains, and reach a desired outcome. This means that in the soft power conversion process, the skills of a particular leader are critical. Nye has identified the three essential characteristics of “benignity, competency and charisma”¹²⁰, though he concedes such vague and subjective criteria are difficult to measure. This is another in a series of ambiguities which plague the soft power concept.

The Gallup International Survey on Global Leaders (which has gone by various titles through its existence) provides some useful insight into the how the international community might view the leaders of China and the US, but only goes as far back as 2007. The slightly less applicable Pew Global Attitudes Survey, measuring responses to a country itself rather than leaders in particular, goes back further to 2002, though this provides some valuable background as to how far leaders and countries are viewed separately.

¹¹⁹ Liu, “Look Beyond...”, 78.

¹²⁰ Nye, *Future of Power*, 100.

Particular attention will also be paid to responses in areas of strategic importance, such as Africa, where both countries have funnelled a great share of aid and investment. The results will shed some light on the importance of having a benign, competent and charismatic leader, and the potential cost of having a contentious or ineffectual one.

The US entered the period studied on a trajectory of steady, but gradually declining international approval¹²¹. Despite little explicit interest in soft power in the higher reaches of American government, Nye wrote in 2004 that there was at least recognition that arrogance would likely promote resentment, but unfortunately, President George W. Bush was determined to test that theory¹²². With the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan widely viewed as a calamitous soft power misfire, Bush was perhaps the first President in the age of post-1989 American dominance to truly test the patience of the international community. In 2007, Pew was reporting a “nearly worldwide lack of confidence”¹²³ in the President, which left him less popular than even Russia’s Vladimir Putin in traditional allies such as the UK¹²⁴.

In the final year of Bush’s presidency, international approval of the US had slipped to a then record low of 34% - at that same point, China’s stood at 37%¹²⁵. It is clear that even with the cultural esteem the US had developed, destructive policies and leadership had damaged US soft power to the point where even China, still widely viewed with scepticism at this point¹²⁶, attracted greater international approval. The significance of leadership is only underscored by developments in the years after this.

When Nye spoke of a benign, competent and charismatic leader, he may well have been picturing someone in the mould of Barack Obama. Without debating the merits or shortcomings of his policy choices, it is evident that President Obama provided the US with a soft power boon at a time it had hit an all-time low. In 2009, approval of the US soared 15 points to 49%¹²⁷, despite the persistent US presence in Iraq and Afghanistan. This was not only due to Obama’s personal characteristics, but also his race; while Nye notes that a history of racism had typically hampered

¹²¹ The Pew Global Attitudes Project. *What the World Thinks in 2002* (Washington: Pew, 2002), 53.

¹²² Nye, *Soft Power*, 66.

¹²³ The Pew Global Attitudes Project. *The Pew Global Attitudes Survey 2007* (Washington: Pew, 2007), 4.

¹²⁴ Pew, *Global Attitudes 2007*, 62.

¹²⁵ Gallup. *Rating World Leaders Survey 2019* (Washington: Gallup, 2019), 2.

¹²⁶ Pew, *Global Attitudes 2007*, 4.

¹²⁷ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 2.

US soft power in Africa¹²⁸, Obama's election saw African approval of US leadership rise to an unsurpassed 85% in 2009¹²⁹. Such figures remained steady throughout Obama's presidency, never dropping below a 40% worldwide approval rating, and standing at 48% when he left office¹³⁰. By comparison, worldwide approval of Chinese leadership in 2016 stood at 31%¹³¹; during the Obama presidency, US leadership had enjoyed a soft power swing of plus 20%.

Within the first year of the Trump presidency, that swing had reversed entirely¹³². Once again, examining the leader, rather than the leader's policies, President Trump is perhaps the antithesis of Nye's ideal soft power politician, as someone who employs nationalistic, uncooperative rhetoric¹³³. One particularly egregious example would be Trump's alleged description of some African nations as "shithole countries"¹³⁴ - an obvious soft power blunder, which has surely contributed to declining African approval of US leadership - at 85% in 2009, it is now at 52%¹³⁵. This decline in faith has been reflected across the international community, with the worldwide approval score in 2018 at 31%, behind China's 34%¹³⁶. In effect, Bush left the US with a three-point approval deficit to China, Obama eliminated it, and Trump has reinstated it.

While it appears that the international preferability of US and Chinese leadership has been changing hands, this is almost entirely down to wild fluctuations in the US figures. Approval for Chinese leadership has bottomed out at 29% and peaked at 37% in the period studied¹³⁷ - a mere 8 point window of variation. Steady though they may be, perceptions of Chinese leadership have been steadily low. Even as US appeal declined under the Bush administration, there was little appetite for China to fill the leadership void; Pew found that most people around the world believed that the emergence of another superpower would make the world a more dangerous place¹³⁸.

¹²⁸ Nye, *Soft Power*, 13.

¹²⁹ Gallup. *The U.S. Global Leadership Project 2010* (Washington: Gallup, 2011), 3.

¹³⁰ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 2.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 4.

¹³⁴ Josh Dawsey. "Trump Derides Protections for Immigrants from 'Shithole' Countries." *The Washington Post*. 12 January 2018. Available at: www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.4d416d363af3

¹³⁵ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 20.

¹³⁶ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 2.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ Pew, *What the World Thinks in 2002*, 62.

Despite his best efforts in this period to exercise soft power¹³⁹, President Hu Jintao struggled to break through existing concerns about China's expanding economic and military power¹⁴⁰. Generally, perceptions of the Chinese leader were difficult to disentangle from the overarching perception of China; Pew reported that he was "largely unknown in many parts of the world"¹⁴¹, and even in Asia, as many as one third of survey respondents did not know enough about the President as an individual to form an opinion¹⁴². Hu Jintao's highest approval ratings were to be found in Africa and Latin America, where China's growing influence was welcomed with less scepticism¹⁴³, and in some countries was viewed as preferable to that of the US¹⁴⁴. On the back of this, China saw approval of its leadership hit its pinnacle of 37% in 2008, the same year the US hit its nadir¹⁴⁵.

President Hu's successor has also repeatedly stressed the need to increase Chinese soft power¹⁴⁶, but has not always followed his own recommendations. President Xi Jinping has done little to allay those recurring fears around China's growing economic and military influence, not least with his rhetoric on Taiwan¹⁴⁷, and in making himself a more notable international presence than his predecessor, has developed something of a cult of personality¹⁴⁸. Though the benignity, competence and charisma of said personality is debatable, the figures show that international approval of Chinese leadership has never decreased under Xi's watch, and has gradually risen from 29% in 2012 to 34% in 2018, the highest since 2009¹⁴⁹.

Whilst such numbers cannot be lauded as a success, this positions Chinese leadership three points ahead of US leadership in 2018, and moving in the right direction. Significant too is the African approval of each nation's leadership, which stands in 2018 at US 52% and China 53%¹⁵⁰. Though too much importance should not be drawn from a one point difference, US policymakers

¹³⁹ Lai, "The Soft Power Concept and a Rising China", 2.

¹⁴⁰ Pew, *Global Attitudes 2007*, 4.

¹⁴¹ Pew, *Global Attitudes 2007*, 66.

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Pew, *Global Attitudes 2007*, 39.

¹⁴⁵ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push", 99.

¹⁴⁷ Smith and Tang, "China's Xi Jinping says Taiwan 'must and will be united' with Beijing", *Telegraph*.

¹⁴⁸ Tom Phillips. "Xi Jinping: Does China Truly Love 'Big Daddy Xi' – or Fear Him?" *The Guardian*. 19 September 2015. Available at: www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/19/xi-jinping-does-china-truly-love-big-daddy-xi-or-fear-him

¹⁴⁹ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 2.

¹⁵⁰ Gallup, *Rating World Leaders 2019*, 22.

may look back to that 85% figure in 2009 and wonder what might have been, under a more amicable President.

Subjective though it may be, there is no questioning the effect of leadership on soft power, particularly for the US. The data covering the period here studied could hardly demonstrate this more clearly, as the US has enjoyed dramatic peaks and troughs. For the US, the maintenance of its soft power depends to a notable degree on how consistently it can elect leaders who meet Nye's criteria. The longer the US continues with a leader who is openly hostile to the international community, the more its soft power is likely to suffer drastic losses.

China finds itself in a slightly different position, in that perceptions of its leadership are less volatile and perhaps less significant, as Chinese leaders often act simply as figureheads for a more long-term and permanent political movement. However, the gradual improvement in Chinese leadership approval under Xi Jinping suggests that a leader who can establish a personality, separate from the movement he represents, can have an effect - in this case, a positive one.

Though neither current leader of the two nations can reasonably claim to have the love of the international community, it is clear that one has strengthened his nation's standing, while the other has undermined it. The soft power prospects for both nations may depend largely on for how long these two trajectories continue.

4.4 Target response and outcome

It has already been established that, despite being separate stages in Nye's model, target response and outcome are effectively the same thing; the target of China's soft power push is the wider international community, with particular focus on key strategic areas. Their response, be it favourable or otherwise, is an outcome in itself: do they trust and embrace Chinese influence? What this influence in turn enables China or the US to do is more often than not a matter of hard power, and as such will not be discussed to a great extent here. The US has perhaps less assertively pursued this influence in the period studied, but still requires at least the acquiescence of its global partners if it is to pursue its broader goals.

It has also been established that even earlier stages of Nye's model are not so easily distinguished from the latter; this is why Confucius Institutes are examined here. Though they are

a tool of Chinese policy, their success is very much dependent on the local response to them. A nation accepting Confucius Institutes would no doubt be considered a soft power win for China, as it not only signifies a degree of trust, but also feeds back into the conversion process, as the Institutes pursue their own specific outcomes, dependent on how effectively they are utilised by the personnel overseeing them.

A comparable measure for the US is its attractiveness to foreign students, which Nye highlights as one of the great American soft power successes¹⁵¹. Where China hopes to enamour the world's youth with its culture through Confucius Institutes, the US already does through its world-leading universities. Maintaining its sizeable share of the global student population is a key soft power outcome for the US, and one that may be affected by the previous stages of culture, policy and leadership.

Ultimately, it is the judgment of the international community that counts for most in the matter of soft power, and the aforementioned Pew Global Attitudes Survey remains, as Nye suggested back in 2004¹⁵², the best measure for determining a soft power outcome.

In keeping with China's broader soft power push, the Confucius Institutes programme was founded in 2004 under the management of the Office of Chinese Language Council International, more commonly known as Hanban, an arm of the Chinese Ministry of Education. Confucius Institutes are educational centres, established in local affiliate colleges and universities around the world, with financing shared between the hosts and Hanban. The stated mission of the programme is to promote Chinese language and culture on every continent, developing educational and diplomatic relations with other countries, with a view to creating a more harmonious world¹⁵³.

In many ways, this is Beijing's most explicit soft power policy, and one it has funnelled millions of dollars into, in an attempt to establish 1,000 of these institutes worldwide by 2020¹⁵⁴. Though it appears highly unlikely that target will be hit, it would be premature to write the programme off as a failure. Hanban's website reports that as of 2009, just five years after the programme's conception, over three million people worldwide were involved in some way with a

¹⁵¹ Nye, *Soft Power*, 33.

¹⁵² Nye, *Soft Power*, 6.

¹⁵³ Peter Mattis. "Reexamining the Confucian Institutes." *The Diplomat*. 2 August 2012. Available at: thediplomat.com/2012/08/reexamining-the-confucian-institutes

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

Confucius Institute, with over 250,000 directly enrolled¹⁵⁵. The numbers have continued to swell since then; 300 Confucius Institutes were open in 2011¹⁵⁶, 440 in 2013¹⁵⁷, and at the last count in 2018, there were 548 established worldwide, around one tenth of which were in Africa¹⁵⁸.

The continued growth of the programme has defied controversy, though it has no doubt been stunted by it. Many critics argue that the institutes are little more than platforms for Chinese state propaganda, or worse still, espionage¹⁵⁹. Such accusations are unproven, but somewhat understandable given the central role of the CCP in the programme's administration; it is governed by a council of party officials and chaired by Vice Premier Liu Yandong¹⁶⁰. Even the teaching of CCP-approved "standard Chinese characters" has been met with criticism, as this form of the Chinese language is seen to be exclusionary for much of the Chinese population, and simply another means of CCP manipulation¹⁶¹.

Such concerns have led to resistance and the widespread closing down of already-opened institutes in Canada, Germany, Japan, Sweden and the US, to name but a few. During the writing of this thesis at the University of Leiden, the University announced it was severing its ties with the programme due to divergent interests¹⁶². Despite apparent scrutiny, Confucius Institutes have continued to thrive in the US, with more than 100 operating there as of 2018¹⁶³. Sahlins suggests that this is a conscious decision on the part of Beijing, who are willing to be more flexible in "increasing China's own soft power in the camp of its greatest competitor for world supremacy."¹⁶⁴

All this makes Confucius Institutes relatively difficult to assess. Though the target response has been far from positive in some parts of the world, the outcome has not been so adversely affected as to render the programme a failure. China may fail to meet its own lofty ambitions in establishing 1,000 Institutes by 2020, but a figure approaching 600 would be at least a modestly

¹⁵⁵ "About Confucius Institute/Classroom." *Hanban website*. Available at: english.hanban.org/node_10971.htm

¹⁵⁶ Mattis, "Reexamining the Confucian Institutes."

¹⁵⁷ "Total number of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms worldwide from 2013 to 2018." *Statista*. Available at: www.statista.com/statistics/879340/china-confucius-institutes-and-confucius-classrooms-worldwide/

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Mattis, "Reexamining the Confucian Institutes."

¹⁶⁰ Marshall Sahlins. "China U." *The Nation*. 30 October 2013. Available at: www.thenation.com/article/china-u/

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² "Leiden University to end agreement with Confucius Institute." *Leiden University website*. 19 February 2019. Available at: www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2019/02/confucius-instituut-en

¹⁶³ "Total number of Confucius Institutes...", *Statista*.

¹⁶⁴ Sahlins, "China U."

successful outcome in the circumstances. If this number can continue to grow at any rate, it is inevitable that more and more people will become inclined to a favourable view of China.

It is a favourable view of the US and its academic freedoms which make the US the single most popular destination for foreign students from around the world¹⁶⁵. Attracting these students is a critical soft power outcome for the US, as it not only exposes non-Americans to American culture (in much the same way Confucius Institutes work), it also brings some of the world's brightest young minds to American shores, creating hard power outcomes in turn. Those students who return to their country of origin or elsewhere, take with them valuable links to America, which may also engender any number of hard or soft power benefits.

This outcome, like much else the US has achieved in terms of soft power, has had little to do with policymakers. Many of the world's most renowned academic institutions are based in the US and are free from any meaningful state interference, offering an educational experience based around those core values discussed in Chapter 4.1b, freedom and opportunity. This experience is enough to draw millions of overseas students to the US each year, including over 300,000 Chinese students as of 2018, according to UNESCO¹⁶⁶. At the same time, only around 75,000 young Americans are studying outside the US, creating a huge net import of talent¹⁶⁷. This has been constant throughout the period studied, and appears to be unencumbered by reactions to US policy decisions or leadership; the number of overseas students in the US has nearly doubled since 2009¹⁶⁸.

China, on the other hand, loses much more talent than it attracts, particularly to universities in the English-speaking world; the top five destinations for Chinese students are (in order) the US, Australia, the UK, Japan and Canada¹⁶⁹. UNESCO does not hold detailed data on where foreign students in China come from, but estimate the total figure to be around 150,000 - half of the number of Chinese students in the US alone¹⁷⁰. This has been another outcome unaffected by changes in China over the period studied: in 2007, one seventh of all overseas students around the world came

¹⁶⁵ UNESCO. *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students*. Data available at: uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ UNESCO. *Global Education Digest 2009*. (Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009), 36.

¹⁶⁹ UNESCO, *Global Flow...*

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*

from China¹⁷¹, and in 2009, China was sending nearly three times as many students abroad as the next major country of origin, India¹⁷².

The unwavering international popularity of American educational institutions, compared with the seemingly unattractive Chinese options, explains to a large extent why China has had to go on the offensive with its Confucius Institutes. The US generates significant soft power by having some of the world's best universities, while China is attempting to generate soft power on a much smaller scale through Confucius Institutes. Though this programme has met with some success, China would surely find still greater success if it were able to emulate the US in the separation of university and state, thereby improving the educational experience. According to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2018, 43 of the top 100 universities in the world are in the US - China boasts only two¹⁷³. The fact is that at present, China's universities are unable to compete with those of the US in attracting foreign talent and generating both soft and hard power outcomes as a result. No number of Confucius Institutes will change that, especially if these Institutes, along with domestic universities, remain so closely tied to the state.

It is not only in education where China seemingly undermines the values of freedom and opportunity, and this is reflected in the international opinion polling; two thirds of those surveyed by Pew in 2018 felt that China did not respect its citizens' freedoms¹⁷⁴. This is only one element of a survey which, on the whole, does not indicate positive outcomes for China's soft power push, but also casts doubt on the continued soft power primacy of the US.

50% of those surveyed view the US favourably, and 43% unfavourably¹⁷⁵. There is an uncomfortably narrow gap for the US between those two views, especially as it is a gap that appears to be narrowing fast. In 2016, the US' favourability stood at 64%, and the opposite view

¹⁷¹ UNESCO, *Global Education Digest 2009*, 47.

¹⁷² UNESCO, *Global Education Digest 2009*, 36.

¹⁷³ The Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2018. Data available at: www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2018/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

¹⁷⁴ Pew Research Centre. *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*. (Washington: Pew, 2018), 56.

¹⁷⁵ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 3.

26%¹⁷⁶. In 2017, that had narrowed to 49% and 39%, respectively¹⁷⁷. So, whilst favourable views of the US have picked up one point in 2018, unfavourable ones have gained four. Since President Trump entered office, the margin of difference has shrunk from 38% to 7%.

This has been compounded by only 14% of people thinking that the US is effectively tackling common global problems, and only 28% believing that the US respects other countries' interests. What's more, though a slim majority (51%) believe that the US respects freedom, this is another figure that has fallen sharply in recent years¹⁷⁸. Pew reports that such frustrations with the US are particularly prevalent amongst its key strategic allies, such as the UK, France and Germany¹⁷⁹. Opinions of the US remain reasonably strong in the strategic battleground of Africa, however, with Kenya's approval rating of 70% among the highest of all the countries surveyed¹⁸⁰.

Just as 43% of people internationally view the US unfavourably, 43% also view China unfavourably. Remarkably, this is bad news for the US, who have traditionally far outperformed China in such polls; China's international favourability now stands at 45%, just 5 points behind the US¹⁸¹. Positive views about China are most keenly felt in countries including Russia, Indonesia and the Philippines, all major beneficiaries of China's Belt and Road Initiative¹⁸² - a clear soft power success from a hard power policy. Equally, China's local foreign policy appears to be having a negative effect, as 78% of Japanese, 60% of South Korean, and 47% of Australian respondents viewed China negatively on the whole¹⁸³. In Australia especially, positive views have dropped by 16% in the past year alone, largely due to concerns of undue Chinese influence in businesses and universities¹⁸⁴. Chinese influence is evidently apparent in South Korea too; though most people hold unfavourable views toward China, a whole 92% believe that China is a more important actor in the world today than it was a decade ago¹⁸⁵.

¹⁷⁶ Richard Wike et al. "U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership." *Pew Research Center*. 26 June 2017. Available at: www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 4.

¹⁸⁰ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 6.

¹⁸¹ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 54.

¹⁸² *ibid.*

¹⁸³ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 39.

Though felt most strongly by China's neighbours, this is a view shared by the global community altogether, with 70% of reporting that China is playing a more important role now than it was a decade ago¹⁸⁶ - only 31% said the same about the US¹⁸⁷. Nonetheless, globally, most still prefer the US as a leading power, by an overwhelming 63% to China's 19%¹⁸⁸. It is this statistic above all others that shows, no matter how badly the US is stumbling, China remains a long way behind.

A closer look at regions of particular interests reveals some more positive outcomes for China, however. Seven of China's eight best scores in terms of preferability against the US come from Africa and Latin America: Tunisia 64%, Mexico 41%, South Africa 38%, Nigeria 36%, Argentina 35%, Kenya 30% and Brazil 28% - the other is Russia with 35%¹⁸⁹. The US may generally be the leader of choice, but the gap is at least narrower in the regions China would most like it to be.

What this polling, and indeed the Confucius Institutes' development, amounts to is an unmistakable increase in China's profile, but not a significant increase in China's favourability. It is the latter which soft power is primarily responsible for, and the outcomes seem to indicate that China's soft power has not been developing at the same rate as its hard power. Even the most positive outcomes have certainly not been enough to wrestle much, if any favourability, away from a rival experiencing a relative soft power crisis. If the polls are anything to go by, it appears that a decline in approval of the US has not lead to an increase in approval of China, but an increasing popularity of the opinion that the world would perhaps be better off if neither were its leading power¹⁹⁰.

5.0 Conclusion

In short, China is becoming a more prominent power, but not necessarily a more welcome power, whereas the US, despite losing some status, continues to benefit, if not from approval, then at least

¹⁸⁶ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 11.

¹⁸⁷ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 4.

¹⁸⁸ Pew, *Global Attitudes Survey 2018*, 12.

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*

from familiarity. Despite some positive receptions in key strategic areas (particularly Africa and Belt and Road nations), China is still more widely feared than loved - this is a failure of soft power, and one that, to echo Shambaugh once more¹⁹¹, can be generally attributed to its restrictive political system, which denies it the same soft power resources as the US.

This does not rule out the prospect of a peaceful Chinese rise, but it does mean it is a distant prospect. To achieve such a rise, the Chinese government will have to be more politically flexible than it has ever looked likely to be. Though it has loosened its suffocating grasp on some key cultural industries, such as film and music, it must also dial back its stifling of personal and academic freedoms, which have limited the effectiveness of Confucius Institutes, for example. This flexibility, unanticipated as it is, will have to be matched with patience. With the US' historical advantages, and China's historical drawbacks, it will take decades to either: A. undo Americanisation (and indeed the IGO apparatus that underpins it), or B. convince the international community that China (and a world system based on Sinicisation) can be a better guarantor of those values that have made the US so widely admired. The more authentic it can be in these claims, the more convincing it will be.

Both paths A and B are long and ambitious ones, to the extent that the US largely need not worry about China threatening its soft power primacy any time soon. The challenge for the US, at every stage of Nye's model, is maintaining its primacy. Its governments have generally been ignorant of soft power in the period studied, with its foreign policy and diplomacy often undermining the efforts of its non-state soft power agents, such as music, film and academia, and contributing to a growing view that the US is turning its back on the values for which it has historically been commended. Thanks to that history, US soft power has been mostly resistant to these mis-steps, but it cannot count on that relatively recent history forever. Under present leadership, its soft power is eroding faster than ever before. This trend must be arrested over the coming years, before the majority of the world's population no longer remember what made the US the world's soft power leader in the first place.

The effects of leadership, as measured by the Conversion Skills stage of Nye's model, have proved particularly stark in the Target Response and Outcome stage, even as Nye himself sought to play down the importance of Conversion Skills. But in that self-criticism, Nye has hit upon a

¹⁹¹ Shambaugh, "China's Soft-Power Push", 107.

crucial aspect of soft power, which is that it is indeed subjective, not only in its reliance on opinion, but also in that the very concept of soft power can be thought of in different ways.

This study has, in passing, incidentally exposed many flaws in the concept of soft power, including the “fuzzy” boundaries between some of its essential terms and stages in the conversion model, and its questionable applicability to a state like China. Much of what is considered soft power in China is indistinguishable from what Western observers would recognise as the hard power tactic of coercion. Future studies into soft power should be wary of such nuances.

Future studies should also be cognizant of the comparative element this thesis has attempted to bring to the fore. Not only will this help shape a more universal understanding of what soft power entails, it will also emphasise that soft power, like hard power, is a competitive space. In this competitive space, the US has held the upper hand for decades, owing to the other element this study has foregrounded: the two nations’ unique histories.

All in all, despite its relative decline, the US remains the primary actor and China a still distant threat, in our existing understandings of soft power. But China has been pushing the boundaries of that understanding, and making gains beyond it, in key strategic areas. These limited gains are some way from representing a serious threat to US global primacy, but that does not mean they are not a threat at all. The period studied has shown that, if anything, US governments have represented the greatest threat to American soft power, just as Chinese governments have hindered their own ability to be a more significant threat.

Through a historically-grounded and comparative study, which takes into account conceptual flaws, this thesis has gone some way toward answering the question of which nation will be the leading soft power nation of the coming decades. Without looking to make definitive predictions, it is clear that American primacy is not guaranteed, nor is Chinese primacy inevitable.

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