

RESEARCH NOTE

“Soft Power” in Chinese International Relations Theory: Some Aspects of the Chinese Debate on “Soft Power”

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Summary

The term “soft power,” coined by American scholar J.S. Nye, not only became well known in China but also stirred a debate among Chinese experts about how to adapt this notion to the Chinese context. This debate embraces a wide spectrum of issues — from a linguistic problem (how to properly translate the expression “soft power” in order to reflect its intended meaning), to the very definition of the term, to sources, tools, and other aspects of it. Due to the fact that the practice of China’s “soft power” has already been painstakingly described and analyzed, this paper focuses on theoretical assumption of Chinese “soft power,” seen from the perspective of Chinese scholars. This discourse contributes to the debate about the PRC’s foreign policy and international relations theory with Chinese characteristics.

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Foreword

Defined for the first time by Joseph S. Nye, the term “soft power” has generated interest and aroused a very heated discussion among not only Western but also Chinese scholars and experts on international relations. This debate could be perceived as an attempt to adapt this term to the Chinese context. The discussion could be recognized as a process of Sinicization,¹ which is not a new trend in Chinese discourse about international relations theory. The process of Sinicizing foreign concepts has been common in Chinese political practice, not only in the PRC, but also during the times of the ancient empire and the early twentieth-century republic. The best example of Sinicization is the process of incorporating Buddhism

¹ Sinicization (*zhongguohua*) can be defined as giving a foreign term or idea a Chinese “spirit” in order to adapt this notion to Chinese conditions and needs. Discussion among Chinese scholars about Nye’s concept, and those scholars who provide their own definitions of “soft power” taking into account Chinese foreign policy, could be perceived as a Sinicization of this notion.

as a foreign religion in the first century. Furthermore, the debate could also be seen as an example of discourse pluralization, as Chinese scholars strive to not only develop a model of “soft power” suitable for China, providing decision-makers with recommendations about conducting Chinese policy, but also to evaluate the effectiveness of Chinese “soft power” implementation. The “soft power” discourse is part of the debate among Chinese scholars and experts about PRC foreign policy and about international relations theory with Chinese characteristics — topics concisely presented by Zhu Liqun.²

The aim of this paper is to describe only a small part of the debate inside China about the “soft power” theory — its definition, sources of it, its main mechanisms, and the tools that are indispensable in its appropriate usage in China. It should be highlighted that the intent of this paper is not to present the practice of Chinese “soft power” in the particular sphere of China’s foreign policy engagement, which has taken place mainly in the neighborhood but also in Africa and Latin America. This topic has been widely depicted and analyzed, mainly by Western scholars.³ Instead, I focus here on the theoretical assumption of Chinese “soft power,” seen from the perspective of Chinese scholars. This debate concerns various issues, including linguistic problems — such as how to appropriately translate the expression “soft power” in order to reflect its intended meaning and even how to define the term — and other aspects, such as the sources and tools of “soft power.”

The paper is divided into three parts: The first briefly describes Nye’s concept of “soft power.” His articles are the basis and starting points for Chinese scholars who focus on “soft power” research. In the second part, I concentrate on the general description of Chinese academic interest in this notion. There are a great number of

² Zhu, Liqun: *China’s Foreign Policy Debates*, Chaillot Papers, Institute for Security Studies, Paris, September 2010. See also Mierzejewski, Dominik (2010): “The International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics. An Introduction”, in: Jacoby, Marcin (Chief Editor): *China Past and Present*, New Polish Papers in Chinese Studies, Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, p. 37; Chen, Yugang (2008): “Zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun 30 nian” (30 Years of China’s International Relations Theory), in: *Guoji Wenti Luntan (International Forum)*, 50, pp. 37-49.

³ For example see: “China’s Foreign Policy and ‘Soft Power’ in South America, Asia, and Africa”. A Study Prepared for Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Washington 2008; Kurlantzick, Joshua (2006): “China’s Latin Leap Forward”, in: *World Policy Journal*, 23, 3, pp. 33-41; Eisenman, Joshua; Kurlantzick, Joshua (2006): “China’s Africa Strategy”, in: *Current History*, 105, 691, pp. 219-224; Kurlantzick, Joshua (2006): “Beijing’s Safari: China’s Move into Africa and Its Implications for Aid, Development, and Governance”, in: *Policy Outlook*, 29, pp. 1-7; Parenti, Jennifer. L. (2009): “China-Africa Relations in the 21st Century”, in: *Joint Force Quarterly*, 52, pp. 118-124; Kurlantzick, Joshua (2006): “China’s Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power”, in: *Policy Brief*, 47, pp. 1-7; Lum, Thomas; Morrison, Wayne M.; Vaughn, Bruce: “China’s ‘Soft Power’ in Southeast Asia”, in: *CRS Report for Congress*, January 4, 2008; Hsiao, H. H. Michael; Yang, Alan (2008): “Transformations in China’s Soft Power toward ASEAN”, in: *China Brief*, 8, 22, pp. 11-15; Kurlantzick, Joshua (2006): “China’s Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia”, in: *Current History*, 105, 692, pp. 270-276; Kurlantzick, Joshua (2007): *Charm Offensive. How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World*, New Haven: Yale University Press; Szcudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2010): “Soft Power in China’s Foreign Policy”, in: *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 19, 3, pp. 45-68.

articles about this concept in China's largest database, CNKI. The subsequent section of the paper is devoted to the analysis of the debate inside the PRC about "soft power with Chinese characteristics."

Nye's Definition of "Soft Power" as a Reference Point

Almost all Chinese analyses concerning "soft power" start from Nye's quotation about this term — its definition and sources. In order to start analyzing the Chinese perception of "soft power," Nye's take on this concept should be described briefly as a reference point. Nye is widely perceived as the first scholar to explicitly define "soft power." But it should be highlighted that according to some Chinese experts, before Nye the "soft power" idea was described by other scholars. However, they did not use this term directly.⁴ Nevertheless, Nye remains, in Chinese scholars' eyes, the most important expert to focus on "soft power."

In 1990, J.S. Nye proposed a new perspective on power. He argued that the traditional definition of power, which is strongly connected with using force, should be modified. In his opinion, geographical factors like population and country size are being replaced by economic, scientific and technological factors. Power resources like population, the size of the military, etc., become less important. It is acknowledged that using these tangible forms of power generates more costs. Under these circumstances, it seems apparent that the determinant of power is the ability to convince others to change their behavior without using coercive tools. This ability is perceived as an intangible form of power, what could be called "co-optive" soft power. It should be stressed that nowadays, in the changing world, power has become less coercive. The source of this power is an attractive culture and ideology that others strive to emulate, norms that have a positive influence on a society, and institutions that others want to participate in.⁵

In 2004, Nye published a book in which he described in detail what "soft power" really is: "an intangible attraction that persuades us to go along with others' purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place."⁶ Nye also elaborated sources of "soft power." According to him, "soft power" has three types of sources: culture, in places where it is attractive to others; political values, when the giving country lives up to them at home and abroad; and foreign policy, when it is seen by others as legitimate and having moral authority. But, more important, sources by themselves do not decide the effectiveness of "soft power." As Nye discloses, "the

⁴ Zheng, Yongnian; Zhang, Chi (2009): "Guoji zhengzhi zhong de ruan liliang yiji dui zhongguo ruan liliang de guancha" (Soft Power in International Politics and Chinese Soft Power Observations), in: Tang, Jing (ed.): *Daguo ce: Tongxiang daguo zhi lu de Zhongguo ruan shili. Ruan shili da zhanlue* (Great Power Policy: The Road to Power. Great Strategy of Soft Power), Beijing: Renmin Ribao Chubanshe, pp. 2-13.

⁵ Nye, Joseph S. (1990): "Soft Power", in: *Foreign Policy*, 80, pp. 153-171.

⁶ Nye, Joseph S. (2004): *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs, p. 7.

effectiveness of any power resource depends on the context.” He goes on to write: “All power depends on context — who relates to whom under what circumstances — but soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers.”⁷

Nye’s concept stirred scholars and decision-makers to debate “soft power,” its sources and tools. In 2006, Nye published another article in which he slightly modified his view on the economic and military aspects as sources of hard power. He revealed that “sometimes in real-world situations, it is difficult to distinguish what part of an economic relationship is comprised of hard and soft power.” Furthermore, “military prowess and competence can sometimes create soft power.”⁸

Chinese Interest in the “Soft Power” Concept

It is widely acknowledged that the debate over “soft power” in the PRC started precisely in 1993 after the first publication dealing with this term by a Chinese scholar, Wang Huning.⁹ Since then, the concept of “soft power” has been a hot issue in the PRC. Scanning the largest Chinese scholar database, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI, *zhongguo zhiwang*), one can easily find numerous publications about “soft power.” Looking only at CNKI’s China Academic Journal Network Publishing Database, there are 5,870 articles about “soft power” using the keyword *ruan shili*, 342 using *ruan quanli*, and 172 using *ruan lilian*.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., p. 12, 16.

⁸ Nye, Joseph S. (2006): “Think Again: Soft Power”, in: *Foreign Policy*, 152.

⁹ Wang, Huning (1993): “Zuwei guojia shili de wenhua: ruan shili” (National Cultural Power: Soft Power), in: *Fudan Xuebao (Sheke ban) (Fudan Journal (Philosophy and Social Science))*, 3, pp. 75–96.

¹⁰ One of the aspects of the discussion of Chinese “soft power” is how to translate the term into Chinese. The problem centers around the meaning of the word “power” in the Chinese language. Mandarin has three similar words that could be used to reflect the term power: *shili*, *lilian* and *quanli*. But this does not mean that the range or connotation of these three words is the same. Using these three terms depends on how “soft power” is generally perceived by a particular scholar. Furthermore, it depends on what is being taken into consideration — “soft power” as a concept or “soft power” seen through the prism of resources. According to Li Zhi, who tried to resolve this translation problem, *quanli* refers to authority and right. It is not material-related power. *Quanli* is strongly connected with behavior, activities, and operational possibilities. *Shili*, however, is related to actual strength, material power, and resources. According to her, Nye’s concept of “soft power”, which is connected with particular behavior, should be translated *ruan quanli*. But, as she underscores, Nye also distinguishes sources of “soft power” that are not operational elements but rather could be called elements of material power, so under these circumstances, the term *ruan shili* should be applied. In other words, when “soft power” as a general concept is discussed, *ruan quanli* ought to be used, but when “soft power” is defined through its resources, *ruan shili* must be used. But it seems apparent that, despite the fact that there are some doubts as to how to translate the term “soft power” into Chinese, the most popular translation is *ruan shili*. For more information, see Li, Zhi (2008): “Ruan shili de xianshi yu Zhongguo dui wai chuanbo zhanlüe. Jian yu Yan Xuetong xiansheng shangque” (Achievements of Chinese Soft Power and External Communication Strategy. Polemics with Yan Xuetong), in: *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)*, 7, pp. 54–58.

When one looks at these articles, taking into account only their titles, it becomes clear that the debate tackles many aspects of “soft power,” such as its sources or the elements that comprise it. It should be noted that Chinese experts use various denominations — for example, core factors, main aspects, etc., which are not consistent with Nye’s “source” of “soft power.” Chinese scholars focus also on the content of “soft power”; its definition; the relationship between “soft power” and culture, national interest and public diplomacy; and even translation problems¹¹ that occur because there is no one officially accepted Chinese term for “soft power.”

Nye’s articles are the basis for the Chinese debate over “soft power.” In almost all papers about “soft power,” Chinese authors refer to Nye’s concept, quoting the definition and sources. Analyzing this debate, I believe that Chinese scholars generally approve of Nye’s definition of the concept as a non-coercive way of influencing others by using the charm offensive; however, there are considerable differences of opinion when it comes to sources and tools. It would be nearly impossible to analyze the thousands of articles about “soft power” that have been published in China so far. Therefore, I focus here on the thoughts of the most influential scholars engaged in this debate, mainly Yu Xintian, from the well-known Chinese think tank Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), and Yan Xuetong, from the prestigious Tsinghua University. I perceive these two scholars as representing two different Chinese approaches to “soft power.”

But before I analyze the perception of “soft power” by selected Chinese scholars, let us turn our attention to Chinese interest in “soft power,” using Zhu Liqun’s framework. Analyzing the internal debate about China’s foreign policy, Zhu suggests using three concepts that she finds crucial to understanding the discussion and elements that are being taken into account by Chinese scholars in formulating their opinions about Chinese diplomacy. They are: “*shi*,” which consists of two elements, 1) general trends in the international arena and in the global order (*guoji geju*), and 2) the configuration of powers; “identity,” which means China’s own perception as an international player and the PRC’s role on the international stage; and “strategy,” which is seen as a set of tools indispensable for achieving Chinese interests.¹² Keeping these concepts in mind, it could be assumed that the starting point for China’s interest in “soft power” could be the so-called “China threat” theory (*zhongguo weixielun*). This notion, formulated chiefly in the U.S. in the 1990s, was a result of China’s mesmerizing rise and the emergence of perceptions that the PRC’s growing international relevance poses a threat to stability not only in Asia but also globally. In other words, “*shi*” was interpreted through the prism of China’s rise, which, on one hand, is proof that the modernization policy launched by Deng Xiaoping has been a success, but on the other hand, is seen as a threat to

¹¹ Zhao, Gang; Xiao, Huanzhu (2010): *Guojia ruan shili* (National Soft Power), Beijing: New World Press, pp. 4-8, qian yan (Foreword).

¹² Zhu, Liqun: *op. cit.*

global stability. This perception influenced Chinese identity in that it caused China to see itself as a more important global power. What is more, the significance of “soft power” in international relations was proven by the U.S. case. The preoccupation of the U.S. with the so-called “war on terror” (primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan) during G.W. Bush’s presidency resulted in a decline of America’s global popularity. China, aware of its growing status (which could be seen as a threat in other states), and witnessing the “soft power” decline of the U.S., started to rethink its global role. This trend is visible in discussions about the modification of the “one superpower, many great powers” (*yichao duoqiang*) concept, underscoring multipolarity or even a bipolar (*liangchao duoqiang*) global order.¹³ A new perception of *shi* (China as a threat) and identity (China as a growing superpower) influenced China’s strategy. The “soft power” concept could be perceived as a part of a Chinese strategy to show the world that the Middle Kingdom is a responsible stakeholder, promoter of peace and stability, and provider of norms and cultural heritage.

The Chinese Debate over “Soft Power”: An Introduction

An interesting debate about the “cultural” and “political power” approach, which was taken by Chinese scholars in scientific journals and newspapers, could give us a picture of the Chinese perception of “soft power” as an element of China’s foreign policy. The prevalent perception among Chinese scholars that “soft power” is culture, a concept advocated by Yu Xintian, was rejected by Yan Xuetong’s definition of *ruan shili* as political power. Yan’s opinion spurred a debate on “soft power.” This part of the paper concentrates on that debate.

According to Yu Xintian, soft power consists of three elements: 1) ideas, concepts and ways of thinking; 2) the system and institutions; 3) strategy and policy. Despite the fact that “soft power” is based on these three factors, culture is core (*ruan shili de hexin shi wenhua*). Furthermore, she emphasizes that at culture’s core are values

¹³ See, for example Chen, Dongxiao (2011): “Dangqian guoji jushi tedian ji zhongguo waibu huanjing de xin tiaozhan” (Current International Situation and the New Challenges to China’s External Environment), in: *Guoji Zhanwang (World Outlook)*, 1, pp. 1-11; Cui, Liru (ed.) (2010): *Shijie Dabianju (The World in Transition)*, Beijing: Shishi chubanshe; Yan, Xuetong (2010): “Dangqian guoji xingshi yu zhongguo waijiao de tiaozheng” (The Current International Situation and the Adjustment of China’s Diplomacy), in: *Zhanlue Juece Yanjiu (Journal of Strategy and Decision-Making)*, 2, pp. 3-17; Yang, Jiechi (2011): “Dangdai guoji geju de yanbian he wo guo waijiao gongzuo” (The Evolution of the Contemporary International Situation and China’s Diplomatic Work), in: *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu (International Studies)*, 1, pp. 1-4; Liu, Mingfu (2010): *Zhongguo Meng (Chinese Dream)*, Beijing: Zhongguo youyi; Li, Zhengming (2010): “Dui dangqian guoji geju yu zhongguo duiwai zhanlue de sikao” (About the Current International Order and China’s Foreign Strategy), in: *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi Luntan (Forum on World Economic and Politics)*, 3, pp. 85-96.

(*wenhua de hexin shi ji jiazhiguan*).¹⁴ She opposes the perception of “soft power” presented by Yan Xuetong, who sees culture as only a supplemental element of “soft power.” In Yu’s eyes, soft and hard powers are completely different entities. She is convinced that “soft power,” grounded in culture, occupies a dominant position over hard power. In her opinion, “soft power” decides hard power’s development directions. Moreover, these two types of power are connected, and it is very difficult to distinguish them from one another.

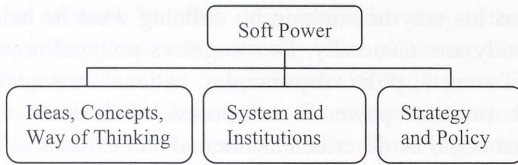
Culture is seen not only as a passive factor acting as a source or basis for particular activity, but also as an operational element that could be used to influence others. Chinese culture is perceived not only through the prism of cultural events, cultural objects, festivals, Confucian traditions and, generally, past events and history, but also as a way of thinking and a collection of ideas, concepts, principles, etc. It seems plausible that tradition is an important element of culture but not the sole constituent thereof. Other important elements are also contemporary Chinese culture embracing ways of thinking and ideas — for example, peace, development, harmony, reforms, openness, the “people first” principle (*yiren weiben*), etc. In other words, Yu perceives culture widely. Furthermore, she argues that political power, described by Yan Xuetong as the core of “soft power,” is closely related to culture because it is based on culture, which influences policymakers’ decisions. Culture shapes a country’s policy. In other words, in reality, culture influences policymakers, who then formulate and implement new strategies and policies. This is the reason why “soft power” is defined as “non-material” power but has a decisive and operational role in creating policy. For example, new ideas and concepts like “peace and development,” coined by Deng Xiaoping, or “harmonious world,” announced by Hu Jintao, actively influence decision-makers and society and improve the effectiveness of “soft power.”¹⁵

According to Yu Xintian, “soft power” has three characteristics: a dominant/leading role (*zhudaoxing*), which means that it effectively influences hard power development directions; permeability/osmotic features (*shentouxing*), which means that “soft power” has the ability to influence and penetrate deeply into everything; and invisibility (*yinbixing*), which refers to the fact that its intangibility makes it very difficult to recognize its particular influence and role.¹⁶

¹⁴ Yu, Xintian (2010): *Wenhua, ruan shili yu Zhongguo duiwai zhanlüe* (Decoding International Relations. Culture, Soft Power and China’s Foreign Policy), Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, p. 7.

¹⁵ Yu, Xintian (2007): “Ruan lilian’ duanxiang” (Random Thoughts about “Soft Power”), in: *Waijiao Pinglun (Foreign Affairs Review)*, 97, pp. 35-36; Yu, Xintian (2008): “Ruan shili jianshe yu Zhongguo duiwai zhanlüe” (Construction of Soft Power and China’s Foreign Policy), *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, 2, pp. 15-20.

¹⁶ Yu, Xintian (2008): “Ruan shili jianshe yu Zhongguo duiwai zhanlüe” (Construction of Soft Power and China’s Foreign Policy), in: *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, 2, p. 17.

Figure 1: Yu Xintian's Soft Power Concept (2008)

Based on: Yu, Xintian (2008): "Ruan shili jianshe yu Zhongguo duiwai zhanlue" (Construction of Soft Power and China's Foreign Policy), in: *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, 2, pp. 15-20.

Such a perception of "soft power" is firmly opposed by Yan Xuetong. In 2007, Yan published two articles about his take on "soft power," which kicked off a debate in China about how to understand this concept.

According to Yan Xuetong, "soft power" consists of two elements: political power and cultural power. These two features have different levels of importance and strength. More significant, one of them is only a supplemental factor. It means that even if its worth is zero, "soft power" still exists. In Yan's opinion, the most profound factor of "soft power" is political, not cultural, power. He clearly argues that the core of "soft power" is the political power and that cultural power \neq "soft power." Yan criticizes Nye's definition of "soft power," which does not clearly describe the factors that comprise this concept. Yan is convinced that in order to know what the most important elements of "soft power" are, its particular parts must be distinguished and analyzed separately. The lack of this distinction in Nye's definition leads to a misunderstanding of "soft power," one seen through only the prism of culture. In fact, culture is only one of the elements of "soft power," but not a decisive one. In elucidating the differences between soft and hard power, he stresses that "soft power" is related to the fact that a person to whom this power is directed behaves as we wish, but this behavior is perceived by the doer as a voluntary act. In the case of hard power, this particular behavior is a result of coercive actions: control, order or pressure.

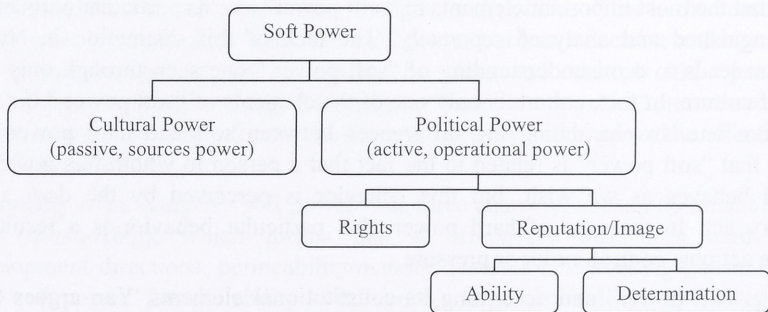
Defining "soft power" and describing its constitutional elements, Yan argues that political power is operational power (*caozuo xing*), which is responsible for activity, decisions and their implementations. In other words, political power is a factor with influence and the ability to effect change. Culture, however, is only a source (*ziyuan xing*), a passive factor that could not, by itself, serve to influence and modify. Culture seems to be a "warehouse" of things that could be used to improve the effectiveness of political power. But if political power does not take anything from the cultural "warehouse" or if this "warehouse" is empty, it does not mean that "soft power" does not exist. To be clearer, Yan provides a mathematical formula that defines "soft power":

$$\text{Soft Power} = \text{Political Power} \times (1 \times \text{Cultural Power})$$

It seems to be a paradox that according to Yan Xuetong, “soft power” means political power. But he explains his way of thinking by defining what he believes political and cultural power really are. Generally, he recognizes political power as the will of leaders, a system of society, political principles, national strategies and policymaking. In more detail, political power is comprised of an internal and external mobilization ability that could be described as internal and external support for one country’s policy. If we look at political power through its content, it has two elements: rights to do something (for example, rights to vote in the U.N., IMF forums, etc.) and prestige or reputation (the opinion held about a particular country by both its own citizens and foreigners). This reputation is a core factor of political power. It consists of two elements: determination to realize its particular policy and ability to implement its policy and strategy.¹⁷

Yan treats culture narrowly, superficially and colloquially. He does not perceive culture through ideas and concepts that could change the consciousness of decision-makers and thus influence decisions they make (as Yu Xintian does). He perceives culture as education, science and technology, literature, art, mass-media news, television, cinema, clothes, food, etc. Ideas, ideologies, concepts, doctrines and principles, however, are seen as elements of political power.

Figure 2: Yan Xuetong’s Soft Power Concept (2007)



Based on: Yan Xuetong, “Ruan shili de hexin shi zhengzhi shili” (Soft Power’s Core is Political Power), in: *Huanqiu Shibao*, May 23, 2007

While describing the role of political power in “soft power,” he gives impressive and illustrative examples. To better understand his logic, he suggests using metaphors. For example, if the ability of farmers to farm their land is perceived as political power, the technical and scientific knowledge of how to do this job is cultural power. It means that drawing from this knowledge, a farmer could improve the results of his/her work, but it does not mean that without this knowledge, he/she

¹⁷ Yan, Xuetong: “Ruan shili de hexin shi zhengzhi shili” (Soft Power’s Core is Political Power), in: *Huanqiu Shibao (Global Times)*, May 23, 2007.

does not know what to do. In other words, cultural sources could be used to improve results of work but this does not mean that without these sources, the farmers' ability disappears automatically. Yan Xuetong also says that the evidence that political power is the main element of "soft power" is China's international status during the Cultural Revolution. He argues that restoration of China's membership in the U.N. in 1971 was a testament to China's growing position on the international front. He is also convinced that the Soviet Union's "soft power" in 1991 was better and stronger than it was in 1951, but despite this fact the Soviet Union collapsed.¹⁸

In 2008, Yan Xuetong and Xu Jin published an article in which they tried to establish "soft power" quantitative measures which would enable a comparison of the *ruan shili* of different countries. Apart from this aim, these two scholars described how they perceive the "soft power" concept. It seems plausible that Yan Xuetong slightly modified his opinion concerning elements that make up "soft power." Yan and Xu argue that "soft power" consists of three essential factors: international attraction, international mobilizing power, and internal mobilizing power. Each of these elements has its own subfactors.

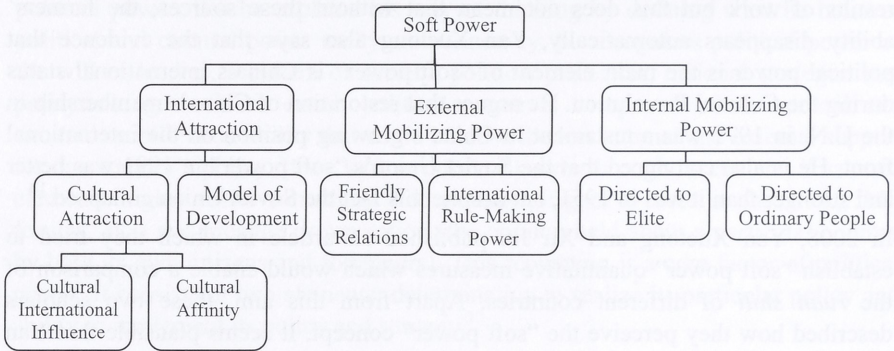
The first one — international attraction — means that one country attracts another, the latter voluntarily following the behavior of the former. This international attraction factor has two sources: The first is a national model, which could be defined as a way of development. The second is cultural attraction, which could be divided into two sources: countries with similar cultures (a context that could produce cultural affinity between the homogeneous states, making it easier for them to influence international affairs) and cultural international influence. It means that this particular culture has spread throughout the international arena, and many people can understand and accept its cultural values.

The second factor — international mobilizing power/strength — means that in order to attract another country to accept our suggestions and demands we should use non-coercive methods to produce influence. These methods are based mainly on friendly strategic relations and international rule-making power. Keeping good relations with other countries and the having the opportunity and skills to propose and make new international rules improves a country's "soft power."

The third essential factor — internal mobilizing power/strength — indicates that government should use a non-coercive method to receive domestic support for its external and internal policy. This factor has two "faces." The first one is directed to the elite, whereas the second one is focused on ordinary people.¹⁹

¹⁸ Yan, Xuetong: "Wenhua ziyuan xuyao zhengzhi yunyong" (Cultural Resources Need Political Power Usage), in: *Huanqiu Shibao*, August 2, 2007.

¹⁹ Yan, Xuetong; Xu, Jin (2008): "Zhong-Mei ruan shili bijiao" (Comparison of China's and the U.S.'s Soft Power), in: *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, 1, pp. 24-29.

Figure 3: Yan Xuetong's and Xu Jin's Concept of Soft Power (2008)

Based on: Yan Xuetong, Xu Jin (2008): “Zhong-Mei ruan shili bijiao” (Comparison of China’s and the U.S.’s Soft Power), in: *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, 1, pp. 24-29

The cultural perception of “soft power” seems to be more popular among Chinese scholars than the political power perception of the term. This premise is vindicated by the fact that Yan Xuetong’s political definition of “soft power” has raised a debate. One of the experts who published criticism of Yan’s perception of “soft power” is Li Zhi from the Communication University of China in Beijing; she is a supporter of Yu Xintian’s “soft power” perception. She clearly claims that “soft power” is culture (*ruan shili jiu shi wenhua*). She says that this scientific dispute between the cultural and political school is useless because the concepts of “soft power” being taken into consideration are on different levels. These two perceptions, or definitions, are incomparable with one another (*kejian, wenhuapai yu zhengzhipai zhijian de zhenlun, bing bu shi zai tong yi fanchou xia zhankai de*).²⁰ In her opinion, political power could not be “soft power” itself. Political power could only use “soft power,” but it does not, however, constitute “soft power” itself. She argues that sources of “soft power” defined by Nye could be directly called culture. She recommends viewing culture and “soft power” as being on two levels. The first consists of ideas, values, way of thinking, and principles. It is a base (*yuan/ti*), defined as possessing a primary (*yuansheng xing*) and internal character (*nei ying*). The second is defined as a cultural and social system that manifests itself in strategy and politics. This level has an external (*wai xian*) and derivative character (*yansheng xing*). It is defined by the words “spread” (*liu*) and “use” (*yong*).²¹

An opponent of Yan Xuetong, and a supporter of the cultural definition of “soft power,” is Lu Gang from Beijing University. He rejects almost all of the arguments provided by Yan about political power as a basis for “soft power.” He says that the

²⁰ Li, Zhi (2008): “Ruan shili de shixian yu Zhongguo duiwai chuanbo zhanlue. Jian yu Yan Xuetong xiansheng shangque” (Soft Power Achievement and China’s External Communication Strategy. Discussion with Yan Xuetong), in: *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, 7, p. 56.

²¹ Ibid.

metaphor of “soft power” as a land’s cultivation is irrelevant because doing this job without any preparation and knowledge is impossible (this “know-how” is passed down from father to son). Furthermore, he is convinced that the Soviet Union’s cultural power was stronger in 1951 than in 1991. He emphasizes that we should define in detail what cultural power really is. Lu is against treating culture only as an accumulation of cultural goods and products. He gives the following illustrative example: he perceives the Soviet Union’s cultural power in 1951 through the prism of 1) ideological attraction (at that time Leninism and Stalinism were popular ideologies), 2) literature and art attraction and influence (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gorky, etc.), and 3) the Russian language, which was very popular in China in the 1950s. Lu disagrees with Yan’s opinion that the Cultural Revolution did not weaken China’s cultural power. He argues that the Cultural Revolution not only destroyed the PRC’s cultural heritage and led to an economic disaster, but was also dramatically harmful to China’s image abroad.²² Lu is one of few Chinese scholars to pay attention (though not explicitly) to the role of context and addressee in the perception and use of “soft power.” In the 1950s, Russian language, literature and ideological thoughts could be perceived as soft elements of Russian diplomacy. The same tools are not today seen as attractive because the context and addressee are not the same.

Lu Gang defines “soft power” as a state’s external attraction power and ability to persuade. *Ruan shili* sources are culture, values, and legitimate policy. “Soft power” is a way to deal with international affairs, which excludes a unilateral, mandatory and direct way to force others to accept their will. In this sense, strategic reputation as a core element of “soft power” is questionable. Strategic credibility sometimes needs to use military and economic strength, perceived as hard power. Lu argues that despite the fact that China focuses on strategic credibility and reputation, underestimating the importance of cultural powers weakens China’s image and can lead to the so-called “China threat” concepts.²³

Another Chinese expert, Wu Xu, accepts neither Yan Xuetong’s nor Lu Gang’s perception of “soft power.” He says that soft and hard power cannot be distinguished and analyzed as separate entities. Moreover, “soft power” can be defined only in specific situations and processes. It seems clear that Wu Xu has paid attention to Nye’s important remark concerning “soft power” — the context of activities. Furthermore, he thinks that “soft power” could be perceived through two power types, which he calls static (*jingtai*) and dynamic (*dongtai*). Static “soft power” concerns the ability to predict and avoid crisis using access to information to anticipate these potential crises. Having dynamic soft power, however, means that when a country finds itself under circumstances of crisis and public criticism, it is

²² Lu, Gang: “Wenhua shili ruo rang Zhongguo shifen” (Weak Cultural Power Leads to China’s Decline), in: *Huanqiu Shibao*, June 20, 2007.

²³ *Ibid.*

able to overcome this negative image. In other words, dynamic “soft power” is responsible for creating a positive image of the country, a state with good intentions. Nowadays, the biggest shortcoming of China’s “soft power” is that foreign media sees China through the prism of bad intentions in international activities.²⁴

An interesting concept of “soft power” is presented by Zheng Yongnian and Zhang Chi. They criticize Nye’s definition, arguing that Nye’s “soft power” is too large, full of internal contradictions, and sometimes illogical. They clearly assess Nye’s concept as limitless (*wuxian kuodahua*). They say that a good example of these contradictions is military and economic power, because sometimes they are included in soft power, but sometimes also in hard power. Furthermore, according to Nye’s definition, the effectiveness of “soft power” can be reduced to simple relations — for instance, if one likes American music, Nye assumes that automatically and naturally he/she admires the U.S., its policy and international behavior. They also say that Nye “threw everything into one bag” — meaning, he used American music, McDonalds, movies, Hollywood, etc., all as examples of U.S. “soft power.”

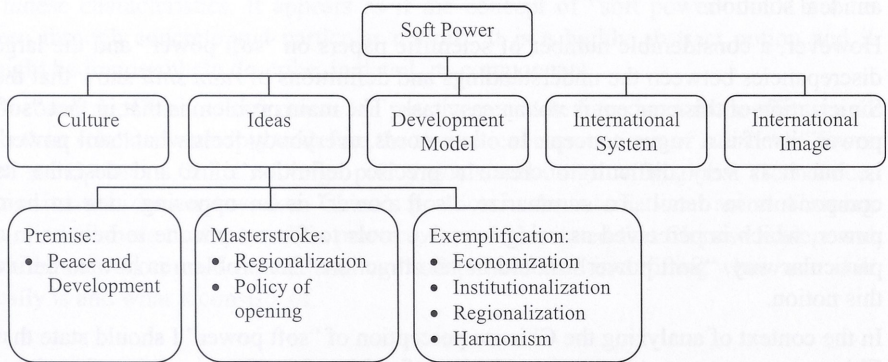
In Zheng and Zhang’s eyes, it is the recipient of power (*shoulizhe*) who decides what is and is not soft or hard power. They argue that power in international politics should be divided into three types: 1) hard power, meaning the recipient is passive, accepting “carrots” and/or “sticks,” 2) soft power, meaning the recipient is active — good examples being a small country that actively seeks others to protect itself militarily, economically, etc., or the Marshall Plan, and 3) bargaining power (*xieshang lilian*), which is not connected to imposing one’s will or actively striving for something. Bargaining power is explained as an agreement resulting from cooperation, discussion and compromise. It is an idea that floats somewhere between soft and hard power. For example, the free trade agreement (FTA) between China and ASEAN countries is an example of bargaining power. According to Zheng and Zhang, these three types of power are relative to each other because sometimes, in particular situations, it is very difficult to distinguish hard, soft, and bargaining power from one another. These two scholars propose their own perception of China’s soft power. They say that Chinese *ruan shili* embraces four elements: multilateralism, economic development, good neighborhood policy, and the “China model.” These elements seem to represent this active strive to establish a new model of international behavior.²⁵

²⁴ Wu, Xu: “Zhongguo ruan shili bu neng chi laoben. Jian yu Yan Xuetong Lu Gang liang wei jiaoshou shangque” (Chinese Soft Power Cannot Rest on Laurels. Polemics with Yan Xuetong and Lu Gang), in: *Huanqiu Shibao*, June 27, 2007.

²⁵ Zheng, Yongnian; Zhang, Chi (2009): “Guoji zhengzhi zhong de ruan lilian yiji dui zhongguo ruan lilian de guan cha” (Soft Power in International Politics and Chinese Soft Power Observations), in: Tang, Jing (ed.): *Daguo ce: Tongxiang daguo zhi lu de Zhongguo ruan shili. Ruan shili da zhanlue* (Great Power Policy: The Road to Power. Great Strategy of Soft Power), Beijing: Renmin Ribao Chubanshe, pp. 2-13.

One of the most famous Chinese strategists, Men Honghua from Central Party School in Beijing, argues that when one analyzes “soft power,” this concept should be Sinicized (*shixian gainian de bentuhua*). Men argues that China’s “soft power” consists of five core elements: The first element is culture, by which he means spiritual values (education, literature, art, religion, science, etc.). Culture itself could not change the world but it influences the mind and indirectly modifies the world. Second are ideas and ways of thinking. He discloses that the starting point of China’s thinking change was the “peace and development” concept, while its bases are internal reformism and an external policy of opening. The third element is the model of development that affects others through a “spillover effect.” Fourth is the international system — an ability to influence the international order — and fifth is international image — when others can predict what a particular state will do in a particular situation.

Figure 4: Men Honghua’s Perception of Soft Power



Based on: Men, Honghua (2007): “Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu yu zengjin fanglue” (Assessment and Enhancement of China’s Soft Power Strategy), in: Men, Honghua (ed.): *Zhongguo: Ruan shili fang lu* (China’s Soft Power Strategy), Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, p. 3-54.

What should be stressed, Men Honghua argues, is that culture, ideas and a development model create something he calls internal work (*nei gong*), while he refers to international image as external work (*wai gong*). The fifth factor — international system — is an element that links these two works and is the main channel of “soft power.”²⁶

²⁶ Men, Honghua (2007): “Zhongguo ruan shili pinggu yu zengjin fanglue” (Assessment and Enhancement of China’s Soft Power Strategy), in: Men, Honghua (ed.): *Zhongguo: Ruan shili fang lu* (China’s Soft Power Strategy), Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Chubanshe, pp. 3-54.

Conclusions

The ideas presented above are only a small part of the debate on “soft power” in China. It seems impossible to analyze each article about *ruan shili* published in the PRC. However, even this tiny presentation is proof that the process of “soft power” Sinicization is an attempt to include this concept into the Chinese theoretical framework of international relations, which is still under construction. Moreover, apart from this theoretical assumption, Chinese scholars recognize “soft power” as a very useful and, in fact, indispensable element of modern foreign policy. Further intensification of China’s international engagement may enhance the sense of China’s threat and, therefore, the PRC needs to strengthen the soft component of its foreign policy. This is the reason why the PRC is increasingly focusing its attention on “soft power.” China’s aim to achieve a significant breakthrough not only economically but also politically is prompting leaders to use miscellaneous non-coercive tools to win friends and well-wishers. “Soft power” appears to have been an ideal solution.

However, a considerable number of scientific papers on “soft power” and the large discrepancies between the understandings and definitions of *ruan shili* show that the Sinicization of this concept is not an easy task. The main problem is that in fact “soft power” itself is a vague concept. In other words, everybody feels what “soft power” is, but it is very difficult to create a precise definition of it and describe its components in detail. To summarize, “soft power” is an opposing idea to hard power, which is perceived as using coercive tools to force someone to behave in a particular way. “Soft power” should be an attraction. The problem is how to define this notion.

In the context of analyzing the Chinese perception of “soft power” I should state that Chinese experts generally accept Nye’s definition of “soft power” but they have problems defining its content. The majority of Chinese scholars treat culture as one of the most crucial elements of this concept, but assign it varying degrees of importance. The most visible problem is that it is very difficult to pinpoint what they mean by “culture.” However, all of them argue that culture should refer at the very least to Chinese tradition. But what is more important and seems to provide a good basis for formulating “soft power” with Chinese characteristics is the fact that culture also embraces ideas, principles and concepts. It is not only accumulation of cultural goods and historical places but also philosophical, religious and political heritage that influences decision-makers. On one hand, the broad understanding of culture should be seen as positive and as China’s most significant contribution to the theory of international relations. On the other hand, references to the achievements of Chinese philosophical and political thought, especially Confucianism with its admiration for hierarchy, obedience to the authority, etc., may raise concerns about China’s recognition of international relations based on the Westphalian order. Furthermore, culture by itself, even including ideas and principles, is not “soft

power.” Nye remarked that context is extremely important in deciding whether something can be regarded “soft power.” This condition appears to have been neglected by Chinese scholars. In other words, to some extent everything could be soft or hard power but it depends on the context and the recipient of a particular action. China’s concept of “soft power” seems to underestimate these profound circumstances.

It is assumed that Chinese scholars would like to classify “soft power” and to highlight its components, which seems to be consistent with China’s way of thinking described by Nakamura. Nakamura states that, in China, great importance is attached to concrete, rather than abstract, issues. Specific events, facts and precedents are more important than abstract concepts and ideas. He exemplifies this assumption by citing the fact that the Chinese language is rife with nouns and adjectives describing the same object but in a different form or state.²⁷ This way of thinking could be perceived as a serious limitation to creating “soft power” with Chinese characteristics. It appears as if the concept of “soft power” could not be seen through concrete and particular notions. It is a highly abstract notion and it might be impossible to describe, in detail, its components.

To conclude, China’s “soft power” in practice seems to have been more effective so far than scholars’ attempts to define the theoretical assumptions of *ruan shili*. From the standpoint of China’s foreign policy goals and its growing global ascendance, this situation does not weaken China’s position in the international arena. Keeping in mind Chinese “soft power” in practice, it could be stated that Chinese leaders and scholars are more well versed in using “soft power” than in defining what *ruan shili* really is and what it consists of.

²⁷ Nakamura, Hajime (2005): *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People. India, China, Tibet, Japan*, Cracow: Jagiellonian University Press.