

Ditan Park in Beijing has been decorated for the upcoming Chinese New Year. Chinese culture still has very limited influence around the world, especially in the West.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE



Growing China's soft power: Free debate and creative thinking are key

Even with its efforts, China's soft power is not growing. Despite its soft power arsenal, Beijing faces many challenges in using it to its advantage. **BY YU HONG**

LOOKING at indicators of hard power in economic growth and military strength, there is no question that China is now a world power. Economically, China has made the jump to become the world's second largest economy and one of the world's biggest trading countries; there are over 100 China companies among the world's 500 top companies, and it brings irresistible opportunities to global companies as one of the world's largest consumer markets. Militarily, China is picking up the pace on modernising its armed forces; its military expenditure is now the second highest in the world. With the *Shandong* becoming its second operationally ready aircraft carrier, China now counts itself as a naval power, among the few countries in possession of two or more aircraft carriers. Other examples of China's growth in hard power are not hard to find.

Along with hard power, soft power has also become an important component of a country's overall power, and is becoming an increasingly important platform where big countries compete for influence. Soft power is a demonstration of a country's attraction, influence, and appeal to others. The concept of soft power was first proposed in the late 1980s by political scientist Joseph Nye, referring to a third area of power for a country besides economic and military power, mainly comprising culture, arts, food, education, foreign policy, growth model, governance, and national image.

The Chinese government and leaders are highly conscious of soft power, and see it as an important element in the great revival of the Chinese nation. To this end, the Chinese government has put in a lot of money and

come up with various policies in support of soft power. But when it comes to the current state of China's soft power and international influence, Western countries and China hold very different views. The government, intellectuals and media in Western countries look at the lack of freedom and democracy in China, coupled with strict censorship rules on publications and news, and conclude that China has little or no soft power. On the other hand, China's cultural confidence is high, and it believes that its growing economic hard power will lead to greater soft power, and that its cultural soft power is already spreading overseas.

The rise of China's soft power

Objectively speaking, China's soft power and international influence has grown in recent years. In terms of cultural heritage, China is an ancient cultural civilisation, with a long and glorious history and rich cultural resources, and the biggest number of Unesco heritage sites in the world. The Confucian-centred Chinese civilisation is the only one that has lasted for 5,000 years, laying a firm foundation for China's soft power development. According to figures from the Confucius Institute (CI) headquarters or Hanban, as at the end of 2018, China has set up 548 CI branches in 154 countries, with some 47,000 staff. CI's aim is to promote the Chinese language and spread Chinese culture.

From the perspective of maintaining a rules-based international system, the growing trend of international unilateralism and protectionism has seriously hurt multilateralism and the authority of a UN-centred multiorganizational arrangement. As the biggest beneficiary of the open multilateral system, China is

actively advocating and safeguarding multilateralism. This is shown in its establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), its active pushing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and its participation in addressing climate change, which have won praise from the international community.

On active participation in global governance and system reforms, China's lead in establishing the AIIB shows that it is starting to guide the course of regional development, and has a growing influence in funding Asia's infrastructure. In just four years, the AIIB has attracted the membership of over 100 countries, showing China's popularity. China's strengths in infrastructure funding and construction make it difficult for other countries, including the US, to compete with it.

In terms of economic and commercial influence, along with China's power as the world's second largest economy and one of the world's biggest trading countries, its businesses are actively investing overseas and setting up overseas operations, from neighbouring Asia all the way to Europe, Africa and Latin America. All over the world, there are traces of China businesses and businessmen and their activities.

And when it comes to the appeal of its growth model, China's experience or the "China model" is becoming increasingly attractive to many developing countries. China's effective management of domestic political stability, economic growth, and social governance gives developing countries an alternative growth model to the Washington Consensus.

Of course, the China model also has its flaws, such as environmental pollution, corruption, lack of transparency in policymak-

ing, uneven regional development, and a growing rich-poor gap, which is the focus of the international community's doubts about the China model. The 2019 *Global Competitiveness Report* released by the World Economic Forum clearly states that of all the indicators, China is weakest in institutions, with a very low global ranking, particularly in checks and balances, media freedom, social capital (such as social cohesion and political participation), and corruption.

Limitations and difficulties in China's soft power development

China has to realise that apart from its hard power, soft power will help its growth, and that its soft power is far from strong. As a big country with about one-fifth of the world's population, China's soft power and influence is still weak.

The annual *Soft Power 30* report by the UK's Portland Communications is the most comprehensive quantitative analysis of countries' soft power, based on subjective indicators (such as population surveys, interviewees' views on their countries' foreign policy, and food), as well as objective indicators (such as governance, culture, education levels, economic and commercial influence, digitisation, and engagement).

According to the 2019 *Soft Power 30* report, China ranks 27th, while France tops the list. Apart from ranking eighth in terms of culture, China ranked outside the global top 20 in most other areas such as education, governance, digitisation and foreign policy. Overall, China ranked below many other Asian countries such as Japan which came in eighth (also the only Asian country in the top 10), South Korea at 19th, and Singapore at 21st.

First, Chinese culture still has very limited influence around the world, especially in the West. Historical palace dramas such as *Kangxi Dynasty*, *Empresses in the Palace*, *Story of Yanxi Palace*, and *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*, are popular only in Asian countries and regions with an ethnic Chinese population. According to 2019 figures by McKinsey & Company, China exports only one-third the volume of TV series that South Korea does.

Recently, China media has also cited Sichuan Internet celebrity Li Ziqi as an example of how China is exporting its cultural soft power. Ms Li's video clips show her surrounded by nature, cooking Chinese dishes, showcasing a self-sufficient, idyllic rural lifestyle, which has attracted audiences (especially young people) who are tired of the noise and crowds of urban life and want to go back to a life in the fields. Ms Li's Youtube clips have over a million clicks.

Commercially speaking, there is no doubt that Ms Li and her production team have been successful. However, to speak of her as exporting cultural soft power is overstating it somewhat. According to figures from the Chinese language edition of *Financial Times* and Malaysia's WebTVAsia, Ms Li's audience is mainly concentrated in Asian regions that share a common culture and that have an ethnic Chinese population (such as Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and India). In Europe, Africa, and America, which have different cultures and a mostly non-ethnic Chinese population, she has few followers, much less broken into the Western cultural mainstream.

Second, in terms of international image and recognition, the *Pew Global Attitudes Survey* released in December 2019 shows that except for a handful of countries such as Greece and central and eastern Europe, in most Asian and European countries, as well as the US and Canada, far more respondents had negative views than positive views of China.

The 2019 *State of Southeast Asia* report by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute also showed that respondents – the elite of Southeast Asia – had the lowest levels of trust and highest level of mistrust for China, as com-

pared to other big countries. These survey figures are embarrassing, given China's current efforts in publicity and image. Obviously, China's treatment of minorities in Xinjiang and the recent demonstrations and violence in Hong Kong have damaged China's global reputation for leadership and had a negative impact on its international image.

Third, China's international influence in education, especially in the social sciences, remains limited. A 2019 report on China by McKinsey & Company showed that in 2017, only 3 per cent of global overseas students came to China to study. And since China started its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, there has been an academic wave of BRI studies, with tertiary and social sciences institutions flocking to set up various bodies and think-tanks for BRI studies. The embarrassing part is that so far, China's academia has still not developed a framework to study the theory or lay out the policy of the BRI. Most studies are carried out from China's perspective and lack an international perspective, or they repackage and regurgitate official publicity and say their own thing without the support of original theory or structure, quantitative figures, or detailed case studies into other countries. So, although China started the BRI, so far it still cannot claim international speaking rights on the topic.

Without soft power to match its hard power, China will find it difficult to be a truly globalised power. At most, it will only be a "lame" power. Hard power provides the material basis for soft power development (the top ten soft power countries are all developed economies), but growth in hard power does not mean a corresponding rise in soft power. China has a long way to go in developing its soft power. China's weakness in soft power has become a key factor in checking the growth of its overall strength.

Soft power calls for recognition and acceptance from the international community. It cannot be bought with money. China's rapid growth in soft power has to be built on the grounds of encouraging free debate and creative thinking. This is an Achilles heel in China's soft power, and the biggest challenge in its future development. China should not forget the vociferous debate among hundreds of scholars during the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods of the Eastern Zhou dynasty when thought and culture thrived.

How will China grow its soft power amid a rapidly changing international geopolitical economy and competition between powers? How should it leverage its hard power to help grow its soft power? How should it improve its international image? Also, how should it use its soft power and international influence in the future? All these questions are a test for China's wisdom.

Soft power development calls for more than confidence. It also needs to be proven to the international community, so that trust is earned. THINKCHINA

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