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The chinese vision of *soft power*. General considerations

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Abstract

In the last half of the century, public diplomacy has gained great popularity worldwide, becoming one of the basic components of diplomatic practices. From this perspective, it is important to study how the concept of soft power is currently perceived and understood in China at the national level as well as by civil society and the target of China's public diplomacy. Various Chinese scholars from major Chinese universities concerned with the issue of soft power have published numerous articles systematically describing China's perspective on the concept and where their country stands at the beginning of the 2000s, with the intention of defining the concept and charting a trajectory for their country. Looking at the Chinese sources and comparing them with the general notions of soft power presented by Joseph Nye, we can state that we are witnessing a new process of assimilation and adaptation in China of a theory that does not originate in Asia. This article aims to illustrate how China defines soft power and how it has implemented this new tool of the new diplomacy by analyzing the specialized materials published in China during the period 2005-2017.

Keywords:

China; cultural diplomacy; soft power; new diplomacy.

Public diplomacy, new diplomacy and soft power

Public diplomacy is defined as the influence that public opinion or attitude has on foreign policy (Nye 2004, 8). In other words, public diplomacy goes beyond traditional diplomacy by conveying to the public the state of affairs regarding international decisions. A term frequently associated with this concept is communication. Being conceived more in terms of a propaganda movement carried out by diplomats, the term has been replaced in the literature by the new public diplomacy. A relevant example is the growth in the number of non-governmental organisations involved in this process. There has been a shift from the traditional style of approach, which was aimed at actors and people, which is also due to the development of technology and involves the propagation of not only national but also international information in a rapid way, to the new, innovative style, where communication takes place between people. However, in order not to undermine the credibility of the networks and inter-human connections created with the help of NGO structures, governments should limit their role to that of promoting their activities and not of exercising control over them.

With regard to the *new diplomacy*, the focus is on the concept of soft power. The term soft power was first mentioned in 1980 and developed by Joseph Nye in a paper he called *Soft Power, The Means to Success in World Politics*.

As defined by the author, the term refers to the ability to shape the behaviour and opinion of other actors, with the ultimate goal of achieving a desired outcome. Being in antagonistic relationship with the concept of hard power, which implies achieving a goal by means of coercion, soft power rather resorts to co-opting and attracting individuals in order to make them embrace the final goal. According to Nye, *a country's soft power consists of the combination of three elements: the culture of that country, especially its main points of attraction, the aspects that differentiate it from other countries and make it unique, its specificity, its political values and its foreign policy* (Nye 2004, 15). These elements, being represented and presented as a model of a society that functions on their grounds, can lead other countries to aspire to its level of prosperity and be willing to follow its example. However, soft power can be a difficult tool to understand, which would make it difficult for governments to control and direct it, and last but not least, as it is an indirect way of driving towards the desired outcome, its evolution could be very slow. There is a suite of elements of the *new public diplomacy* that are elementary and equally necessary to be promoted for the achievement of the goals that a given country has.

Chinese cultural diplomacy

The most important component of China's current foreign policy is cultural diplomacy. This type of diplomacy brings together the totality of exchanges of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of socio-cultural exchange. The aim of

implementing this type of cultural diplomacy is to create international links and promote a positive image of China.

We encounter in China an example of a soft power strategy that has been used since ancient times. More specifically, there are reports that as early as the Ming Dynasty, an expression of soft power can be traced back to the period between 1400 and 1433, when a Chinese eunuch named Zheng He, in imperial service, set out on naval expeditions to far-flung destinations such as India, Java, and Africa, telling foreigners about the greatness of the people of the *middle country*, Zhongguo. Zheng He was often caught talking about the virtues of the Chinese and tried to win over foreigners with gifts brought from China, in order to create a positive image of the country he came from and to some extent succeeded in arousing the interest and curiosity of foreigners about China. Moreover, Admiral Zheng He invited foreign leaders to travel to China to see for themselves what he had to say, to visit fascinating China and to have a cultural exchange between China and other countries he had travelled (McCarthy 2005, 5).

China's definition of soft power is somewhat different from Nye's valence of the same concept, this difference being that for the Chinese, soft power and its applicability include absolutely all measures that could be taken to achieve its goals, namely building a strong image and increasing its influence globally, excluding from this reasoning only those elements that have to do with military force (Zhu 2015, 56). Of course, cultural diplomacy is closely linked to exchange diplomacy, which creates a reciprocal relationship between different countries that receive and send their citizens abroad for study and intercultural experiences.

The term public diplomacy has been described and defined differently depending on the area to which we refer. We can thus consider that depending on the purpose that each country has in terms of the activities associated with public diplomacy, the definition of the term is subject to different interpretations, changes or transformations.

In the US, public diplomacy is defined in the dictionary of international relations terms as a government-supported program that seeks to influence public opinion in other countries. Its basic tools are publications, films, cultural exchanges, radio and television stations (Zheng 2009, 6). Joseph Nye argues that public diplomacy is the political form of what he later called soft power in the early 1980s (Nye 2004, 9).

In China, as early as 2007, with the Seventeenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the importance of highlighting Chinese culture internationally through soft power was emphasised, in order to guarantee, as Chinese experts claim, the basic right to culture and at the same time to support the interests of the people. A year before the Seventeenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2006, a Chinese academic in Shanghai proposed the use of the panda bear as a symbol of China,

rather than the dragon, which would blur any association with the use of hard power, violence or military force. However, his proposal has long been criticized on the grounds that replacing China's national symbol could lead to a process of cultural uprooting and could face the opposition of the Chinese population (Wu 2012, 5).

Analyzing this, it can be inferred that despite China's desire to integrate and assimilate soft power to implement it in as many areas as possible, and given its lack of experience with the perception, assimilation and implementation of soft power principles, it could commit serious errors that would attract the disapproval and skepticism of Chinese civil society, which might view these errors as an attempt to Westernize and a renunciation of its own value sets.

In China, the term *public diplomacy* is perceived as 外宣传 (waixuan chuan = foreign propaganda), although there is also the translation 公共外交 (gonggong wai jiao = public diplomacy), which is still not suggestive or sufficiently relevant to the Chinese. Although public diplomacy is perceived as propaganda, this term does not have, as it is perceived in Romanian, a negative connotation for the Chinese people.

China believes that a nation that is strong and large enough will implicitly gain both the respect and attention of other countries. Looking at the model of Northern European countries, however, we can confirm that this Chinese belief that a country's popularity and positive image is directly proportional to its size and economic or military power is unfounded. Another example of this is the image of the United States, which, despite its popularity, is viewed with scepticism by many countries in the world. At present, Chinese diplomacy is pragmatically oriented, neglecting its international image and more concerned with its position among the great powers (Glaser and Murphy 2009, 10-12). To confirm this point, we can note China's tendency to establish economic cooperation first, followed by cultural cooperation. Even in the situation of cultural diplomacy, China's position is still a traditional one, emphasizing the propagation of Chinese culture and not putting much emphasis on cultural exchange.

With regard to civil society, and taking into account the opinion of most Chinese scholars that public diplomacy involves both Chinese civil society and that of the target countries equally, a misconception has been created among the Chinese people which, according to Wang Yiwei, assumes that both China and the Chinese people, by default, should be recognised and respected worldwide because of their thousands of years of history, culture and civilisation, disregarding the theory that history is not a guarantor of influence in contemporary times (Wang, Wang and Zhang 2009, 95). Despite the country's growing interest in the concept, China needs to develop a transparent, coherent strategy that eliminates the fears the rest of the world may have about it, namely that once it achieves its goal of peaceful rise - 和平发展 (heping fazhan), China will not impose the Chinese socialist model on the rest of the world.

Chinese soft power

The first Chinese scholar to write an article on soft power was Wang Hunying, a close associate of former President Jiang Zemin. In an article published in 1993 in the *Journal of Fudan University*, Wang analyses Nye's theories and argues that in the case of China, the main source of soft power should be culture, reasoning that a country with a vast and ancient culture and a functioning ideological system should not resort to hard power, which is not only ineffective but also costly, because by presenting its culture, other countries will be won over by the Chinese model (Wang 1993, 24).

Although, as in the case of China throughout history, it has been and still is receptive to theories coming from the non-Asian space that concern the political sphere and not only, for example in the case of the sinicisation of Marxism, in the present situation we can also speak of the existence of soft power with Chinese traits. One of the possible reasons for China's growing interest in soft power may be that the use of non-violence, of attraction rather than coercion, is a feature that we find in Confucian philosophy, a philosophy according to which a sovereign must rely on moral rather than physical force. At the same time, another argument that can strengthen the veracity of this theory is the trend that China has been showing in recent years, namely a revival of Confucianism, including Confucian virtues among politicians who are in leading positions in the country's leadership and adding to the criteria for choosing them for various positions the attributes that Confucius claimed a good leader must possess.

However, at the government level, there is disagreement about the source of China's soft power, how this strategy should be used to best effect, and at the same time, to what level China should make use of soft power. The Chinese side, though, sees culture as the fundamental value underlying soft power. Cultural diplomacy works according to the principles of justice, equality, interdependence, cultural diversity, promoting values such as the protection of international human rights or global peace. Of course, cultural diplomacy is closely linked to exchange diplomacy, which creates a reciprocal relationship between different countries that receive and send citizens abroad for study and intercultural experiences. As we can deduce, the main reason for studying and discussing the phenomenon is China's desire to counter the stigma attached to it internationally, namely that of the new threat.

Jiangnan Social University published in 2012 an article written by Professor Wu Zelin entitled: *Report on Chinese Public Diplomacy Research* which presented a perspective offered by Chinese academics on the development theory of public diplomacy in China. According to the author, Chinese academics have three perspectives on the subject of public diplomacy research. First, they consider that the subject of public diplomacy can only be the government of a country. Second, the government considers the inclusion of civil, non-governmental diplomacy in the field of public

diplomacy. The third perspective makes a synthesis between the two and considers that any action under the guidance of the government can function as a part of public diplomacy and gives public diplomacy as an example as a way to engage in exchange activities organized by civil society (Wu 2012, 7).

Metaphorically, however, public diplomacy is called behind-the-scenes encouragement or personal involvement according to the government's determination towards external activities. Some diplomacy scholars have different perspectives on what object or partner Chinese public diplomacy should focus on. Zhang Qinmin believes that the public should be the target of public diplomacy (Zhu and Ma 2010, 14) referring to the word public in this structure and explaining that this new form of diplomacy should be presented and explained to the public, the population, who should be guided and trained in this direction. Qu Xing also believes that the focus should be on communicating with both the population inside the country and the communities outside, with the emphasis on the new period of Chinese public diplomacy and its specific features.

However, more and more Chinese scholars concerned with the issue of public diplomacy have come to the conclusion that the object of public diplomacy cannot be the Chinese public, but only the foreign public, foreign media, foreign scholars and foreign specialists, refuting the two theories and considering that the means of information transmission, communication between the government and the Chinese people has nothing to do with the target and objectives of public diplomacy. Li Yongzhi, one of the scholars who advocate the theory that Chinese public diplomacy should be directed and focused exclusively on the external environment, says that both external and internal exposure of public diplomacy goals can lead to confusion about its origins. The author notes that, in terms of the methods of Chinese public diplomacy, its approaches have been developed and improved in tandem with the development of the phenomenon of globalisation. In this vein, Zhong Longxuan believes that one of the methods of public diplomacy is the dissemination of news from abroad, along with foreign cultural exchanges, with the emphasis on the propagation of news from abroad (Zhu 2015, 57).

For a better understanding of the phenomenon and objectives of public diplomacy, he differentiates among three categories of public diplomacy:

1. *All official government communication channels addressed to foreign audiences;*
2. *Government public relations, media relations, marketing, individual roles;*
3. *Cultural exchanges, educational exchanges, popular culture, music, movies* (Zhu 2015, 57).

This three-level differentiation made in order of importance, relevance and level of effectiveness from the Chinese perspective leads to the conclusion that the tools available to the government for the implementation of public diplomacy are increasingly numerous.

From a technological point of view, social media has experienced increasing development and popularity among the Chinese people, playing an important role in the rapid spread of news about government activities abroad. The main purpose of public diplomacy is considered by Chinese scholars to be serving the interest of the country. These, in turn, have been divided into several categories.

Guo Hairu, for example, advocates promoting friendship and friendly contacts between China and other countries and transforming the political economic system and understanding the cultural values of the target country (Li 2009, 53). Thus, he believes that the purpose of public diplomacy differs depending on the country of reference and one cannot speak of identical purposes as long as there are larger and smaller countries.

Large countries focus on changing the global image or rebuilding the brand to gain sympathisers and protectors, while for smaller countries, the focus is on attracting media to promote understanding and perception of other countries with which the population might be interested in building friendly relations.

Zhu Liqun, a professor at Shanghai University, outlines in a comprehensive scholarly article called *New International Doctrine and Chinese Diplomacy* the ten attributes of Chinese soft power strategy (Zhu 2015, 21-25):

1. Soft power refers not only to institutional and cultural power, but also includes national identity, discourse practice and the art of diplomacy. In other words, the ability to promote the country's development, to internationalize civilization, and the ability of large countries to shape their own international image are all components of soft power. From this first point, drawing a parallel with the definition originally given by Joseph Nye, we can point out that in China, soft power serves more than just the propagation of a positive image among other countries, this objective being stated after the one referring to the harmonious development of the country.

2. Soft power has both a degree of independence and a degree of dependence. It has to rely on hard power and often uses hard power to enhance its features, but soft power can also act independently, having an impact on hard power itself. From this perspective, depending on the percentage in which the two are used, power can be a progress or an obstacle for the country. This second point also conflicts with Nye's theory, which proposes soft power as a much more effective and less costly alternative to hard power. In this situation, there is a paradox, a contradiction in the ideas put forward by Xi, who really does want China to rise, to revive the Chinese people through peace, for the peace of the whole world. According to Nye, we are currently witnessing a conversion of power, which is closely linked to evolution, in terms of technology, and at the same time implying that using force directly would be useless.

3. Soft power has both universality and specificity, but it must retain its universal character. Soft power requires links to the recognition of the international community

through certain methods and mechanisms. In other words, by stating the third feature of Chinese soft power, the author suggests that from China's perspective, soft power must have a universal perspective, but at the same time, the government's attention turns to how this feature is reflected in the propagation of Chinese culture in the rest of the world.

4. *Soft power is the current source of power for any country establishing international relations with other countries.* Large countries are not the only ones to face difficulties in linking hard and soft power, but small countries face the same problem, but at a lower level. The author gives the example of the Vatican which, despite its size and low GDP, has used the soft power strategy to promote its spirituality and to manifest its influence in the religious field worldwide.

5. *The objective nature of hard power is force, power, and the strength or strength of soft power is social construction.* Various actors in international relations have a strong support for hard power, which is why soft power is also used to a very high degree. Thus, the author points out that it is necessary to quantify the use of soft power in relation to hard power in order to avoid ambiguity.

6. *Increased use of soft power is sustainable.* The author gives as a hypothetical example the example of a country which he does not name directly, but which he claims to excel in the field of engineering, but which, because of its negative influence at international level and in terms of diplomacy, has little economic influence.

7. *Soft power is both endogenous and exogenous.* The two complement each other, with endogenous power being the basis on which, through exogenous power, new positions can be opened up and new perspectives identified. Through this feature identified by the Chinese author, he suggests the open character of soft power, later stating that soft power is built in an open world by the whole international community.

8. With the eighth feature, the author makes a comparison between soft and hard power, stating that *the influence of soft power, especially among the world's major powers, is growing*, due to both the progress made in the political sphere and even in the civilisation of countries, and the culture of international relations, which has acquired a social nature, and is also constantly developing.

9. The author believes that in the case of large countries, including China, *soft power and hard power must be built at the same time*. Hard power cannot be a priority, nor should soft power be left on the back burner, but the two must be in sync and complement each other.

10. *Soft power and hard power are inseparable and each can transform into the other.* The author gives the example of military forces, which belong to hard

power, but from his point of view, legal strategies for the use of military power belong to soft power.

The Chinese government thus believes that the realisation of the Chinese dream will only be possible by improving soft power strategies. The Chinese Dream is a concept launched by Xi Jinping in 2012 that sends out a nationalistically charged message in response to China's century of humiliation. Xi Jinping has repeatedly illustrated that the Chinese dream, 我的中国梦(wo de Zhongguo meng), is an alternative to The American dream, suggesting that his country is ready to take over global leadership, assuming the role of one of the world's greatest powers and competing with the US, at least in theory, for first place in terms of foreign preference.

The Chinese dream refers to the international recognition of the importance of Chinese culture, of the Chinese people, seen as a return, a revival of the Chinese nation. Moreover, while retaining a socialist flavour, the Chinese Dream, in Xi's view, represents the collective dream of the people through which each individual is given the opportunity to fulfil their own dream (Peters 2017, 8).

Conclusions

In contemporary society, especially in the last twenty years, the foreign policy of the great powers has been oriented towards replacing hard power with the new trend in public diplomacy, namely soft power. From studying the Asian space, we can see that in China, diplomatic figures are concerned with the evolution of the instrument called soft power, 软实力(ruan shili), seeking to find new approaches and different perspectives to make the most effective use of the potential benefits gained from applying its principles.

At the same time, we can see that, just as in the last century, when China took up Marxist philosophy and dialectical materialism, once adapted to its needs, today, discovering the commonalities of soft power in terms of its foreign policy, it is passing it through the filter of its own culture, building a functioning made-in-China soft power strategy that, with the passage of time, allows China to establish ties with both the world's great powers and the rest of the world.

Nowadays, Chinese culture and civilization are becoming more and more known, including in Romania, which is why we can say that, although new, China's soft power approach is starting to deliver the results that the Chinese government expects.

However, the concept of soft power is a difficult tool to understand, which can make it difficult for the Chinese government to control and direct it, as it is an indirect way of achieving the desired result, so that its development could be very slow.

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