

# Critically Analyse the Role of "Soft Power" in China's Rise

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**Abstract:** *The concept of soft power was put forward by Nye in the 1990s and soon became popular in China. In 2007, the concept of "national cultural soft power" emerged and was elevated to the level of national strategy. This article argues that cultural soft power is only one aspect of soft power. Under the background of the new era, soft power is no longer limited to the cultural field, but has the tendency to expand to the economy, society, health and other fields. China has begun to attach importance to the role of soft power in all aspects, especially through policy. China's policy behaviour of actively providing international public goods supports this view.*

**Keywords:** *Soft Power; China; International Public Goods*

## 1. Introduction

Soft power became a popular theory worldwide after it was proposed by Joseph Nye in the 1990s, and soon gained attention in China. In the 21st century, with 'Peace and Development' becoming the theme of the era, China has paid more attention to soft power, even more than the United States, where the concept originated. At the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007, the concept of 'national cultural soft power' was emphasized and elevated to the national strategic level as a long-term strategic task. It became an important part of the plan for domestic 'cultural construction'. During the collective study sessions of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPC from 2013 to 2014, Xi Jinping emphasized that the improvement of the country's cultural soft power was closely related to the 'Two Centenary Goals' and the realization of the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, proving that the promotion of soft power is still a major strategic task and is closely related to the development of China. Soft power has been enthusiastically embraced and widely used by China, and we expect it to play an important role in the process of China's rise. However, under China's political background, how soft power has been reinterpreted and applied to meet the needs of national development, and whether this process has changed with time, is worth studying in detail.

For a long time, soft power in the Chinese context has been basically linked with culture, and 'cultural soft power' has become a proper term, almost synonymous with cultural attraction, and it focuses on countering the influence from the West [1]. When Nye gave a speech on soft power at Peking University in 2012, the dean of the School of Marxism also said that 'We prefer to restrict it (soft power) to cultural issues' [2]. This is related to the interpretation of soft power by China before. China's official discourse indicates that the source of soft power is culture, domestic institutions and values [3][4]. Although the government sometimes connects soft power with other areas, the officials often employ the Phrase 'cultural soft power' and emphasize culture's key role in their understanding of the concept [5]. Culture is the most important content under the concept of soft power, especially the Chinese traditional culture.

This article holds that cultural soft power is only one aspect of soft power, which is not enough to explain the connotation and extension of soft power. In the Chinese context, cultural soft power is more like a narrow definition of soft power. If we only focus on the link between soft power and culture, it may cause conceptual loss, which is not conducive to its application in a wider range. I have observed that in the context of contemporary China with Xi as the core leader, soft power is no longer strictly confined to the cultural field, but has a tendency to expand to other fields like economy, public health and so on. China began to pay attention to the penetration, function and promotion of soft power in different dimensions, especially through policy channels. As Edney [1] points out, 'More than an

analytical concept, the idea of soft power implication policy tracked for governments in areas such as public diplomacy'. This article attempts to prove that China's policy behavior of providing international public goods supports this view. This behavior is usually associated with economic power, military power, technological power and other material content, which is not considered as the source of soft power. But China has come to realize that the provision of international public goods is not unrelated to soft power. On the contrary, it may promote the soft power of the state and promote the rise of great powers. When the government takes the concept of soft power seriously, it expects to develop active and effective policies that seek stability and support for the regime at home and a good international image and reputation abroad.

This paper first discusses the basic theory of soft power and the reinterpretation and application background of soft power in China. Next it combines China's policy behavior of providing international public goods with soft power, and explain how soft power is enhanced in this process and how it plays a role in China's rise from two dimensions. Then it uses the typical case 'The Belt and Road' and the recent hot topic of vaccine assistance as arguments. The third section deeply analyzes the strategic significance of China's promotion of soft power and its impact on the international order. By providing international public goods, China promotes soft power in order to play the role of modifier and innovator, so as to further integrate into the norms of the international order rather than overturn it. Finally, the paper argues that China's behavior of providing international public goods has the purpose of promoting the national soft power, and the demand for soft power growth also guides the content of the diplomatic policy. This process reflects the expansion trend of soft power beyond the cultural field and indicates China's pursuit of the all-around rise of great power.

## **2. Soft power and its application in China**

The concept of soft power was first formally proposed by Joseph Nye, which is a kind of capability as opposed to hard power [6]. Nye defines soft power as the ability to attract and engage others through agenda-setting. This capability is based on cultural, ideological and political values and the attraction and influence of the morality and legitimacy of diplomatic policy [7]. It can motivate other states to act voluntarily in order to achieve to the strategic vision of their own national interests. Nye not only identified the three major categories of soft power sources but also emphasized that the government should attach importance to the use of soft power [7].

Soft power has gained popularity in China since it was first mooted. China sees soft power as the ability of a country to get what it wants by attracting and persuading others to conform to its goals. This definition is basically the same as Nye's definition, and in line with the Chinese tradition of 'convincing people by reason'. Although China's understanding of the sources of soft power is rooted in and includes the three components of soft power identified by Nye: Culture, political values and foreign policies [7], China has reconceptualized soft power, which is different from Nye's original theory in terms of connotation and usage.

From the perspective of culture, both of them attached great importance the role of culture in soft power and the necessity of cultural competition. Nye's discussion of American soft power highlights the contemporary American pop culture, while China emphasizes the influence of Chinese civilization, especially the traditional culture. Xi has mentioned more than once that 'Excellent traditional Chinese culture is our deepest cultural soft power'. In China, culture and soft power almost appeared at the same time, and soft power was limited to the cultural field. In terms of values and political institutions. Nye emphasizes American democracy and human rights, as well as the appeal of universal liberal values. China emphasizes the appeal of socialist theories with Chinese characteristics such as 'core socialist values' and economic development. What is the most different is that China's soft power is closely associated with improving national coherence and regime legitimacy, which Nye did not mention. For China, the goal of improving soft power is not only a diplomatic policy concept, but also an important goal of enhancing domestic social cohesion [5]. National consistency means a strong national identity, which is the necessary glue for national unity and cohesion, thus achieving the growth of soft power, which in turn continues to feed national cohesion. Legitimacy is another equally important goal. For China, gaining popular support at home is the basis for gaining international influence. Soft power helps the government gain public support, and the improvement of legitimacy is also an important soft power to support China's policy behavior. In short, in the Chinese context, soft power is not confined to the realm of diplomatic policy but is closely related to domestic politics, which is even more important. I think this has become an important starting point and the ultimate goal of China's reinterpretation of soft power.

### 3. Promoting soft power by providing international public goods

When we observe the process of soft power introduction and reconceptualization in China, it is not difficult to find the frequent occurrence of 'cultural soft power' as a proper term. In the early official discourse, soft power was always associated with culture. In other words, soft power was limited to the cultural field and was always combined with the cases of the foreign communication of Chinese civilization. For example, the number of Confucius Institutes abroad has increased significantly, the number of international students in China has increased, and various cultural and educational exchange activities have been held. My argument is that this feature has been gradually changing. Although cultural soft power still dominates, soft power has gradually permeated and played a role in other fields such as economy and society, which corresponds to the grand goal of China to pursue the all-around rise of the country.

With the deepening of globalization, there are more and more problems with global commonalities, such as climate change, financial crisis and infectious diseases. An important goal of international cooperation is to provide common tools for addressing common challenges [8]. Samuelson [9] pointed out that public goods are non-exclusive and non-competitive. The scope of international public goods is very wide, and goods, resources, services, rules or policy systems with transnational externalities can all be regarded as international public goods [10]. International public goods are generally initiated by one or more major powers, which bear the main responsibilities and are recognized, accepted, adopted and promoted by most countries [11]. In recent years, China has shown a positive attitude to providing international public goods. From 'The Belt and Road' Cooperation Initiative (BRI) put forward in 2013 and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2014, to the active provision of vaccine assistance to the international community in the post-pandemic era, all these have shown China's strong desire to participate in the provision of international public goods. BRI is defined as a public good provided by China to the international community, aiming to actively develop economic partnerships with countries along the Silk Road and build a community of interests and responsibilities by borrowing historical symbols of the ancient Silk Road. Until January 30, 2021, China has signed 205 cooperation documents with 171 countries and international organizations to build the BRI jointly, and the BRI has been evaluated as 'the most popular public good' provided by China. China's desire to provide international public goods is not only manifested in the BRI. Since 2020, the COVID-19 has profoundly affected the world. Now, the vaccine is playing a key role in overcoming the pandemic. Xi has emphasized on many international occasions that 'Chinese vaccines should become global public goods'. Until July 2021, China has provided 500 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine and original solution to more than 100 countries and international organizations, which is equivalent to one-sixth of the current global total COVID-19 vaccine production. China has demonstrated its ability and determination to provide international public goods.

My main purpose is not to analyze how China provides international public goods, but to explore how China provides international public goods and soft power, so as to promote the rise of China. This will be analyzed from two dimensions: the international external environment and the domestic environment. From the perspective of the international environment, the policy of providing international public goods enhances national soft power through producing good effects. Nye believes that when a policy is regarded as having legitimacy and moral authority, it becomes a kind of soft power of a country [7]. In the past, China was often negatively labeled as 'hegemonic ambition' and became the focus of geopolitical and great power competition due to the inherent ideological biases and institutionalized stereotypes. It not only damaged China's international image but also made it difficult for China to carry out its diplomatic policy. Therefore, when China provides international public goods, it pays more attention to the interpretation of policy legitimacy and moral authority. As far as the BRI is concerned, the legitimacy of the policy lies in 'Consultation' and 'Contribution'. China believes that the BRI is a policy based on joint development rather than hegemony, and equal consultation is the basis of this policy. Moral authority comes from 'Shared Benefits' and 'Win-Win'. China hopes that all countries involved can develop, which is not only in line with the moral principle of universality in the world, but also in accordance with the economic development and modernization goals of all countries [12][13]. Judging from the current practical effect, the BRI policy has been widely responded to and approved by the outside world, which is actually transformed into a soft power resource to support China to continue deepening the policy.

Providing international public goods can help China promote 'Chinese norm'. A norm is a principle of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, and regulate appropriate and acceptable behavior, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior [14]. Norms are not only a kind of international public goods, but also an important source of soft power. If a country can provide

norms, it means that it has the soft power of norms, because norms are binding and attractive to members. The BRI, led by China, first formulated technical standards and provided the international community with technical and market norms. From those activities, China established The Standard Information Platform Contributed by The Belt and Road Countries. The general situation of standardization in China and other countries is published in detail. When China joined COVAX in October 2020, Xi said that China would like to strengthen cooperation with other countries in the development, production and distribution of vaccines. China has provided technical support for vaccine development to more than 10 countries such as Argentina, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. While the provision of technical specifications is considered to be the content of hard power, it can be an important foundation for soft power. Strong material norms are conducive to the formation of institutional norms, and can transform tangible normative forces into intangible normative forces. China is trying to introduce Chinese norms to the world. After the formation of norms, they can serve as an important soft power resource to strengthen China's ability to shape and create international institutions.

Providing international public goods to promote the dissemination of China's ideas is conducive to building a good national image, enhancing its attraction and influence, and thus improving its international status. China has not been considered as a country with strong soft power. Especially after the outbreak of COVID-19, China's national image has been greatly negatively affected and its soft power has weakened significantly [15]. China has taken the initiative to provide vaccines to the international community, partly in an effort to restore its reputation and political legitimacy. On the other hand, it adapts to the larger narrative background of China in the new era. The concept of 'A Community of Shared Future for Mankind', proposed in 2012, is an important guiding idea put forward by China after Xi took office. This idea aims at accommodating the legitimate concerns of other countries while pursuing one's interests and promoting the common development of all countries while pursuing one's development [16]. In recent years, the idea and its related concepts such as 'common development', 'common interests' and 'global governance' have been constantly mentioned, which have become the narrative background and important support for the legitimacy of China's diplomatic policy. According to China's official discourse, the commitment of 'making vaccines a global public good' and 'sharing experience and diagnosis and treatment technologies' reflects China's responsibility as a major country, and is a vivid interpretation and positive practice of 'A Community of Shared Future for Mankind' [17][18][19]. The BRI also operates on the background of the community. The reason why China attaches so much importance to combining the community narrative with the provision of international public goods is that economic cooperation based on common interests can help spread the Chinese model and Chinese ideas, such as China's economic growth, the successful practice of modernized governance, and the remarkable effect of fighting the pandemic, which is an important component of soft power in China's rise. To a large extent, they have attracted part of the foreign audience, which is the potential motivation to become members of China's interest alliance.

The policy behavior of providing international public goods also influences the increase of China's soft power from the perspective of domestic politics. The provision of public goods to the international community itself does not directly benefit the domestic public, but China still wants to gain the support and recognition of the domestic public through this policy act, so as to enhance domestic cohesion. The most commonly used and effective way is propaganda. The government creates a responsible 'image of a big country' in front of the domestic public through various forms of publicity and reports. The government has provided a large amount of assistance to the international community for the COVID-19 vaccine, which has effectively helped people who are still suffering from the pandemic. Unlike propaganda aimed at foreign countries, China's domestic propaganda focuses on evoking national emotional memories, preferring the word 'revival' to 'rise'. From backwardness to rejuvenation, the government has shown to the domestic public that China is becoming stronger and stronger under the leadership of the CCP, and that China is now willing and able to shoulder international responsibilities. The government obtains the domestic public's approval for the diplomatic policy through propaganda, which is conducive to enhancing national identity, cohesion and unity, and further forming the domestic soft power necessary for the rise. This is not only the important goal of China to provide public goods to cultivate soft power, or even the primary goal. We cannot avoid the goal of China's pursuit of long-term and stable rule, which requires the government to attach importance to the cultivation of domestic soft power.

#### **4. Soft power in China's rise**

China has realized that although China has made remarkable achievements in modern construction, overemphasizing the enhancement of hard power will not get general recognition of the international

community, but may also enhance other countries' sense of threat to China's rise, which in turn hinders China's development. If we do not pay attention to the role of soft power in many fields, it may lead to the imbalance of the country's soft and hard power. In the early stage of developing soft power, China limited it to the field of culture, reflecting the characteristics of separating soft power from hard power. We must realize that soft power and hard power are not isolated from each other, but are closely related to the organic composition of national comprehensive power [20], and their boundaries are sometimes even blurred. The proper use of hard power will enhance the attractiveness of soft power, and soft power may also create a favorable external environment for the use of hard power. As Nye said, 'Smart power is neither hard nor soft. It is both [7].' Someone may criticize that the provision of international public goods reflects China's ambition to dominate the world, the BRI is just China's economic means to attract potential members of the interest alliance. Vaccine aid is just China's 'vaccine diplomacy' to win over allies. My response is that China has a bigger development vision. Policy action to provide international public goods focuses on the economic sphere, but the soft power that it can generate may be beyond imagination. It tries to create a 'China model' that portrays China as a benevolent leader. China is clearly not only seeking economic benefits, but also gain more support and recognition at home and abroad to pave the way for future development. This process also reflects the expansion and penetration of China's national soft power from the national field to the traditional hard power field such as the economy. Compared with hard power, soft power has the characteristics of a long cycle, slow effect but the far-reaching impact, which has a profound bearing on the future of the rise of China.

Whether it is soft power or hard power, China's common purpose of using them is to safeguard national interests and seek great power development, which is universal, but in the process, China must find the connection between national interests and international general interests, and combine them so as to avoid isolationism, criticism and attack. Seeking 'common interests' is the focus of China's foreign soft power development. If more countries support China's claim, it will be a testament to China's growing soft power and support its rise. As a rising power, China's strategy of boosting its soft power will also have an impact on the international order. China's use of soft power helps its neighbors reduce their sense of threat, and China is trying to play the role of reviser and innovator while integrating into existing international norms. Although China's comprehensive national strength is constantly rising, the serious imbalance in its development cannot be ignored. China does not intend to overthrow the existing international order or replace the US as the sole provider of international public goods. Instead, China has shown friendliness and a co-offer attitude. Ikenberry believes that China's economic interests are very adaptable to the existing international system. China tends to revise international public goods within the existing international system, so as to further achieve the revision and innovation of international order. This approach of elevating the strategic position of the country's soft power and combining it with hard power is the focus of China's lasting development. China wants to maintain its image as a great power, gain more voice, improve its international standing and reduce obstacles to future development.

The interaction between soft power and the domestic environment must not be overlooked when we discuss the link between soft power and the rise of China. I suppose that the primary goal of China's soft power development is to enhance domestic cohesion and maintain domestic social stability and regime security. Edney [1] pointed out that the effort to increase China's international voice was undertaken primarily to shape a public opinion environment conducive to the pursuit of the CCP's domestic political agenda. Indeed, the country's goal in developing soft power is to gain broad support from the domestic masses and to persuade the international audience, but the former is the priority. The increasing international appeal related to soft power makes it easier for the regime to convince citizens of the authenticity of its propositions [21]. Extensive social recognition and national identity are the important basis for the ruling of the CCP. In other words, the expansion of soft power will help China respond to domestic security challenges and further strengthen domestic cohesion and centripetal force, which is the key to the rise of great power.

## 5. Conclusion

This article argues that the application of soft power in China in the new era is no longer limited to the culture, but tends to expand to many fields, especially the traditional hard power field. This not only reflects China's strategic emphasis on soft power, but also reflects its adaptability to the all-around rise of great power. This view is supported by typical policy actions of providing international public goods, such as the BRI and vaccine assistance. The provision of international public goods has produced a good external effect, and the policy has been widely supported and responded to improve the legitimacy and moral authority, which has become an important soft power resource for China. Policies promote the

internationalization of 'Chinese norm'. The combination of tangible technical norms and intangible institutional norms helps China strengthen its national institutional creation capacity and enhance its soft power. In addition, the policy increases China's attractiveness and influence by disseminating Chinese ideas and shaping the image of a responsible major country. In terms of the domestic environment, the soft power brought by policies has shaped a good domestic environment for public opinion and helped to enhance domestic cohesion and maintain social stability.

With the development of globalization, China has a new understanding of the domestic and foreign environment. It is a new direction for China to enhance soft power and safeguard its national interests to coordinate the use of soft power and hard power rather than separate them. China has put forward the idea of 'A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind' and has made the search for 'common interests' a focus of its soft power development. The logic behind this is that China is not willing to overturn the existing international order, but to revise and innovate within the framework of the order and strives to shape more norms in line with its own interests. However, the domestic political goal of developing soft power is the most important. The policy behavior related to soft power and the increase of international attraction can enhance the ruling legitimacy of the government and obtain broad social recognition, so as to keep the government maintaining its rule for a long time. Therefore, the importance of soft power to domestic cohesion and national identity has always been placed in the first place of China's national soft power. However, there are also weaknesses and limitations in the development of soft power, such as the coordination problem in different dimensions at home and abroad, the weak ability of agenda-setting and interest mobilization. These development dilemmas are caused by comprehensive national strength, ideology, external constraint and other reasons [22]. Moreover, if the government still tighten strict control, China's soft power will remain limited. How to coordinate the relationship between the two is important for China's rise.

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