

The Securitization of Chinese Soft Power

Written by Alfredo Zeli

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/03/26/the-securitization-of-chinese-soft-power/>

ALFREDO ZELI, MAR 26 2024

As is well known in International Relations (IR), Joseph Nye came up with the notion of “soft power” in the late 1980s. The concept was introduced in China soon thereafter, that is during the 1990s (Li 2008). As during that decade China was further deepening the policies of reform and opening up started in the late 1970s, it was imperative for the country to ensure a peaceful environment conducive to economic integration and stable relations with other countries. To fulfil that end, soft power (Zhang 2011) arguably played an important role and explained China’s turn to multilateralism and increasingly proactive engagement in global governance. In that historical context, a number of scholars engaged in research and debate on the new concept of soft power. Zheng Bijian (Zhang 2011) influentially discussed China’s peaceful development strategy, emphasizing the importance of soft power in achieving great power status (Zheng 2005). Another advocate of Chinese soft power is Yan Xuetong (Zhang 2011), a prominent and well-known intellectual figure and IR realist in China, who argued that developing soft power is crucial for China to become a global power (Yan 2001). Finally, a figure who prominently pushed forward the discussion on soft power is Wang Huning (Zhang 2011), a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Party of China (CPC). Back in the 1990s, Wang was the one who introduced and explored the concept of soft power in China, arguing for its significance in international relations and China’s global strategy.

What is important to point out is the fundamental theme of China’s reflection on soft power throughout the 1990s and 2000s. This theme is the concern of what is called in China the “China threat theory” and the need to challenge and disarticulate it through the effective use of soft power. The idea of the China threat theory refers to the perception held by some foreign individuals and analysts that China’s rise poses a threat to regional or global stability, economic interests, or existing international order (Pradt 2016). In response to the China threat theory, China has sought to address concerns and enhance its global standing through various means, including the use of soft power by means of cultural diplomacy (including the Confucius Institutes), economic engagement, and public diplomacy (d’Hooghe 2015). The overall theme of Chinese soft power theorizing is the fundamental concern of combating and rebuking the distorted narratives and images of China produced by foreign communicative actors. Particularly important to Chinese scholars and leaders is to recover China’s “discursive power” (Zhang 2011), which is defined as the ability to shape and control the narratives, meanings, and discourses surrounding certain topics or issues in the international arena, which is now believed to be disproportionately unbalanced in favor of the West (Pang 2021).

Overall, the debate on soft power in China showcases a positive engagement with the idea of soft power that emerged in the context of the post-Cold War globalized world. However, Chinese soft power in the present historical phase is facing significant challenges and drawbacks, especially among Western countries. As this contribution points out, the most remarkable obstacle to Chinese soft power in the West currently lies in the “securitization” of it on the part of a Western discourse which perceives and frames Chinese soft power as a threat to the security of democratic countries. Drawing from IR, securitization means the perception and framing of a given (normally non-threatening) issue in terms of security threat, which allows the application of extraordinary measures in terms of anti-liberal and militarized policies in response to such perceived threat (Waever et al 1998). The securitization of Chinese soft power appears as a historical trend which can hardly be reversed at any time in the near future.

The Western framing of Chinese soft power in the Xi era

It is a conventional perspective in the West that China’s strategy for national development and foreign policy has

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undergone a dramatic change in the Xi Jinping era. William A. Callahan memorably interpreted China's understanding of soft power in the new era as "negative soft power" (Callahan 2015). International observers in academia and policy decision-making apparatuses lay stress on China's increased emphasis on military modernization, coupled with the development of territorial disputes with neighboring countries that started in 2012 in the East and South China Sea and since 2017 along the India-China border. China's approach to global development through investment in transnational infrastructure building, embodied in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is at once (A) hailed as the world-changing fact of the era that will fantastically improve the condition of the world thanks to increased connectivity, economic growth, and cultural exchange; and (B) perceived with fear and suspicion as an obscure and dangerous plot of the Chinese leadership to take over the world surreptitiously through the penetration and appropriation of foreign resources as well as technological, logistical, and military assets (Wolf et al 2013).

Quite predictably, such narrative of the surging ambitions, capabilities, and assertive behaviors of China in the new era also has a branch in the international discourse on the development of Chinese soft power. As a matter of fact, international sources often mention Xi Jinping's call to "tell China's story" as a turning point in China's pursuit of soft power through image projection on the global stage (Ho 2021). President Xi has emphasized the importance of "telling China's story" on multiple occasions as part of China's pursuit of soft power. To substantiate the thesis of the Chinese race to soft power in the new era, commentators situated in the West often point to the expansion of China's broadcasting networks (Xinhua News Agency, China Television Global Network, and China Radio International), the continued efforts in cultural diplomacy, and a number of public diplomacy campaigns throughout the globe.

The Western interpretation of China's quest for soft power displays two interesting features: first, the oblivion of the original motivation of China's soft power strategy (namely, the need to tackle and amend the false, distorted, and unfavorable images of China abroad, that amount to the China threat theory); and, second, the incorporation of China's overall international behavior and global governance in the discourse on Chinese soft power. China occupies a prominent position in the Western discourse on sharp power. According to Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), China's use of information manipulation and other non-military tools to shape global affairs is a paradigmatic case of "sharp power". In their most recent work, co-authored with senior NED director Shanthi Kalathil, Walker and Ludwig speculate on how media censorship, disinformation campaigns, and surveillance technology are exploited by the People's Republic of China to shape global narratives. The threat purportedly posed by China is all-round and affects all thinkable areas of life in Western societies: "The authoritarians' refined and expanded activities threaten the integrity of institutions from media and entertainment companies to universities to professional sports enterprises—all of which are vulnerable to manipulation precisely because, in free societies, such institutions are open to the outside world" (Walker et al 2020: 127). Their alarm carries a techno-phobic undertone, inasmuch as China's supposed prowess in mastering what they call the current technological revolution for political goals occasions them to lament the autocracies' success "at manipulating dominant social-media platforms through computational propaganda (which draws on algorithms, automation, and big data to aim content at receptive audiences)" (Walker et al 2020: 130).

Securitization during COVID-19

The denial of China's claim to discursive and soft power on the basis of a sharp power logic, albeit not explicitly mentioning the concept, is best and most spectacularly epitomized in the case of China's global governance during the 2020-21 Covid-19 pandemic and its framing by the Western media, politics, and academia. China's engagement in multilateral institutions for global governance has been a significant aspect of Chinese foreign policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, in the Western framing, China's engagement in global governance amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated not only with a scheme to enhance soft power but also with geopolitical implications. According to some observers, COVID-19 has allowed China to expand its influence and strengthen its relationships, particularly in developing countries. By offering medical assistance, sharing expertise, and supporting international initiatives, China has sought to position itself as a responsible global player and, according to some, an alternative leader to the United States, especially as the U.S. was facing difficulties in its pandemic response. (Lee 2023; Kobierecka 2023; Manfredi-Sánchez 2023). Nonetheless, China's global governance efforts also occasioned the well-known Western allegations of China hijacking global institutions (first and foremost, the World Health Organization) and narratives during the early stages of the outbreak (Feldwisch-Drentrup 2020). Such interpretation and framing of

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China's international behavior and global governance amid Covid-19 cuts across all levels of media, political, and academic discourses in Western societies throughout the years of the pandemic.

For instance, at the level of policy discourse, the US State Department released in November 2020 the paper *The Elements of the China Challenge*, in which the People's Republic of China is depicted as a Marxist-Leninist state with ambitions of global domination endeavoring in a mass disinformation campaign on the real origin of the novel coronavirus. At the level of policy advocacy, the French military academic strategic research institute IRSEM produced a hefty treatise on the Chinese information operations' "Machiavellian moment" and their "Russification" (sic) during the Covid-19 pandemic (Charon and Vilmer 2021); Germany's MERICS foresaw the likely involvement in "hybrid warfare or disinformation" on the part of China's People's Liberation Army. At a level intersecting the media and IR scholarship, Italian journalist Mattia Ferraresi claimed in his infamous Foreign Policy article that China's coronavirus aid to Italy – at a time when the southern European country was the world's hardest hit by the pandemic – was actually masking a surreptitious (negatively connoted) soft power stratagem of China to influence the Italian and European audiences (Ferraresi 2020). Mr Ferraresi even went on to boldly argue about China's mask diplomacy to Italy in the securitized terms of information warfare.

As the evidence shows, the overall historical trajectory of soft power in China signals two dialectical moments: first, China's claim to soft power is justified by the perceived need to contest the hegemony of the Western discursive power and the universalistic claims displayed by Western soft-power internationalism; second, the Western academic, media, and policy circles respond to the Chinese articulation of soft power by disarticulating it in terms of sharp power. The Chinese danger is perceived by the sharp power theorists as encompassing all spheres of society (including the economy, technology, culture, and political process), interfering in and threatening the very foundations of the social pact in Western polities. That is why they consistently push for a "full-spectrum response" to the perceived challenge of China's sharp power (Walker and Ludwig 2021). The existential undertone of the Western reception of Chinese soft power was most visible during the paradigmatic years of the Covid-19 pandemic. China's global governance in the context of the pandemic was then at once interpreted as a suspicious soft power move and a potential threat to the security and integrity of Western democracies.

Conclusion

As it is reasonable to consider, sharp power is not the only existing discourse in the West that frames the soft power of certain non-Western countries in negative terms. Additionally, it is yet to be proven that such a discourse has had any impact and role in the relevant policy formulation of Western states. The discourse of sharp power, which is one of the virtually infinite possible discourses that can be constructed to securitize foreign soft power, just provides the discursive substratum that would allow future extraordinary measures whenever required by circumstances but does not imply that such measures are yet an actual thing, neither does it necessitate their actualization any time in the future. While this remains true, what is relevant to understand here is the fact that the presence of such securitizing discourses, of which sharp power represents but one apparent example, occasions the enabling condition – that is to say, the *structural condition* – for the securitization measures to be enforced. At least for China, it is a hard truth to realize that international politics has become (once again) something more serious and tragic than the beauty contest of nation-states being reduced to soft power clichés as – so it was fancied by some – during the postmodern, post-historical age of mankind. If soft power is a marker of globalization, then this force of globalization appears to be subordinated to the diverging and conflicting interests of nation-states in an anarchic system no less than the fantastical liberal panacea prescribed by erstwhile soft power enthusiasts.

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About the author:

Alfredo Zeli is a PhD candidate at the School of International Relations and Diplomacy of Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). He holds a B.A. in Foreign Languages and Literatures and an M.A. in International Relations from the University of Bologna. His current research interests include political philosophy, IR theory, public diplomacy, global governance, and strategic studies.

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