Struggle and Success of Chinese Soft Power: The Case of China in South Asia

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Soft power is a significant attribute for a state that is a great power or that aspires to be one. While hard power is more visible in the international system in the form of military and economic might, it is soft power that often works subtly in the background. Joseph S. Nye defined soft power or the "second face of power" as the ability to get others to want the outcomes one wants using co-option and not coercion" (Nye 2004: 5). Essentially, soft power deals with the ability to shape the preferences of others. In world politics, this can be translated as a state's ability to shape the international agenda and attract the support of other states without having to threaten them with military force or economic sanctions. Nye pointed out three sources of the soft power of a state—its culture, its political values and its foreign policy (Nye 2004: 11). All these factors determine the attractiveness that a state enjoys in the world, and shapes international politics in ways that even hard power does not. The increasing acknowledgement of the utility of soft power in world politics can be seen in the ways states, especially great powers, have reoriented their international conduct in recent times. Most states today continue to invest in the promotion of their cultures and values. Moreover, these states also more actively seek to justify their actions (whether domestic or international) in a bid to win approval and moral legitimacy in the world.

The rise of China as a great power and its quest to overtake the United States of America is one of the most striking features of the international system in contemporary times. While China has visibly made impressive gains in terms of augmenting its hard power resources, it has also made great efforts in the expansion of its soft power. This paper attempts to present an analysis of China's notions of soft power, its efforts in increasing its soft power and the success and failure that it encounters in the process. This paper will also seek to analyse the aforementioned concepts using a case study that will revolve around Chinese influence in South Asia.

Chinese Notion of Soft Power

A state's efforts in augmenting its soft power are largely shaped by the meaning and significance it attaches to the concept. The concept of soft power or *ruan shili* has been an important component of China's rise. Many scholars have written about China's aspirations to be the "world's top great power" or *shijie yiliu qiangguo* (Mierzejewski 2012: 69). Therefore, soft power—a key ingredient for great power (*daguo*) status, has been a focus area for Beijing in international politics.

It has been argued that for China, soft power is an inevitable project to internationalize its voice in order to influence policy communities engaged in debating the consequences of its rise (Breslin 2011: 7). It is an attempt to familiarise the world with Chinese values, what it stands for, the historical roots of current thinking and identity formations, motivations and intentions (Breslin 2011: 7). Moreover, soft power is also crucial for China for toning down the negative rhetoric around its rise. Rhetoric that depicts a "rising China" as a threat to other nations has been plenty in recent times. China's soft power engagements with the world have thus been intended to improve its image by promoting the idea of "peaceful rise" instead (Mierzejewski 2012: 78).

There is a segment of scholarship in China which supports an alternate notion of soft power—a Chinese perspective that a West-biased understanding has not obscured. It critiques Joseph S. Nye's concept of soft power and its

unquestioned widespread acceptance. It has been pointed out that Nye's concept of soft power began with a strong orientation toward U.S. foreign policy (Zheng and Zhang 2012: 21). He limited the scope of soft power by making a "too simple division" of power into hard power (coercive/command power) and soft power (co-optive/attractive power) (Zheng and Zhang 2012: 23). One of the central arguments is that the classification of a power resource into hard or soft depends "on the perceptions and feelings of various actors in specific situations." Scholars use this argument to support the fact that China's idea of soft power includes those concepts that the western world may not regard. This constructivist analysis considers China's historical contexts, domestic factors along with the structural constraints of the international system. Thus, by employing a constructivist viewpoint like this, scholars are able to account for unique Chinese perceptions of soft power holistically. Unlike the conception of soft power in the West, for Chinese scholars, a clear differentiation between hard (*ying*) and soft (*ruan*) is not feasible, as sometimes hard becomes soft and soft becomes hard and a state can wield both at once, or *ruanying jianshi* (Mierzejewski 2012: 77). For example, science and technology can be used to bolster not only economic growth and military might, but also softer aspects of national power like high-quality research institutions for foreign students, etc (Lai 2012: 9).

Chinese Soft Power in South Asia

This paper will use the region of South Asia as a case study to analyse the performance of China's soft power. For the sake of uniformity, only the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) member states (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) will be referred to as the region of South Asia, in this paper.

Given South Asia's proximity to China and the strategic importance it holds for the latter, the region carries great potential for an insightful analysis of China's soft power overtures. In recent times, South Asia has elevated in significance for China's ambitions in Asia. The region has emerged as a strategic priority for China. South Asia is not only contiguous to Tibet and Xinjiang, but it also carries major trade routes and sea lanes of communications (Hazarika and Mishra 2016: 142). Additionally, the region provides China with a vast market and is a promising source of raw materials (Hazarika and Mishra 2016: 142). China has pivoted its attention to South Asia in recent times due to an increase in recognition of the fact that the Indian Ocean is a weak link in its energy and resources lifeline to the Middle East and Africa, and a risk area for its merchant ships (Copper 2016: 50).

This paper will analyse the struggle and success of Chinese soft power in South Asia, focusing on two areas: foreign assistance and cultural influence.

Foreign Assistance

The inclusion of foreign assistance in the ambit of soft power is debatable. Originally, Nye himself had excluded aid and investment from his framework, using the argument that they were more like coercive "carrots and sticks" and could be used as inducements or punishments (Varrall 2012: 139). However, many scholars have argued that since the exact notion of soft power is contested, if foreign assistance exports the donor's values and norms in a way that shapes the preferences of the recipient to want the outcome the former wants, it indeed is a measure of soft power (Varrall 2012: 139). As argued earlier, the Chinese notion of soft power is a more expanded version of the one that Nye has codified in his books. This paper will avoid this dilemma over the inclusion of foreign assistance under the rubric of soft power by assessing the end result of Chinese aid- whether it exports China's values in a way that recipient states desire the outcomes it does, or is it simply a means of getting the recipient states to do or give what China wants?

Some constructivist scholars have argued that China's foreign assistance decisions have ideological underpinnings. They argue that China's past humiliating experiences at the hands of Western imperialist powers are deeply ingrained in its national psyche (Varrall 2012: 140). These ideas have shaped its national identity in a way that it treats respect, prestige and equality as hallmarks of its foreign assistance offerings (Varrall 2012: 154). Thus, China's foreign assistance is often accompanied by statements that seek to promote the idea that Chinese assistance is benign, based on mutual respect and a better alternative to the often "patronizing" and "neo-colonial" aid from the West. China, not being a member of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), does not prefer to classify itself as a "donor" (Lynch et al. 2020). Rather, it classifies itself as a South-South cooperation development partner or provider (Lynch et al. 2020). Beijing has also been more careful in recent times not to use the term "aid", and it refers to its foreign assistance initiatives as "international development cooperation" that represent "mutually beneficial win-win" partnerships (Mardell 2018). Another striking attribute of Chinese development assistance is that while "aid" in the West is commonly understood as a low-interest loan or grant, China adopts a more flexible position which considers "trade, investment and finance"—all as part of its global development assistance (Wan 2018).

Chinese foreign assistance in South Asia has mostly been at the bilateral level. However, the most significant form of assistance in the region is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is noteworthy that China's BRI approach in South Asia is a unique, country-wise customised approach (Anwar 2020: 164). Therefore, the level of engagement and associated levels of success in the engagements differs from country to country in the region. Nonetheless, assistance via BRI has been used as a medium to promote Chinese values and ideas by Beijing. BRI engagements in South Asia have included several diverse sets of initiatives ranging from infrastructure development and railway connections to science and technology and human resource development projects. China's 2021 White Paper emphasised the "social foundation" of the BRI, thus highlighting its non-material and non-security aspirations from the project. The official document listed the BRI projects that are intended to foster a people-to-people friendship that would further enhance cultural cooperation and mutual appreciation and understanding between China and the BRI countries (The State Council Information Office, PRC 2021). Similarly, China also engages in programmes that involve sharing technology achievements, strengthening the vocational skills of locals, poverty reduction, improving access to public services etc. in the BRI countries of South Asia and other regions as well (The State Council Information Office, PRC 2021). In all the development assistance projects of BRI, China seeks to share its "experience" in overcoming the challenges that still trouble the South Asian countries facing low developmental challenges. China uses its foreign assistance to establish its image as "a builder of world peace, a contributor to global prosperity and a defender of international order" in South Asia and beyond (The State Council Information Office, PRC 2021). Thus, one can argue that since Chinese foreign assistance is rooted in its aspiration to promote a developmental model with Chinese characteristics and thereby increase goodwill for itself in the region, it is a crucial component of its soft power endeavours.

The success that China has had in augmenting its soft power using foreign assistance in South Asia has been mixed. The highlight of its achievement in bolstering its soft power in South Asia is its emergence as a strong contender to India, the biggest power in the region. Many scholars have argued that China has been able to significantly lower India's traditional influence in South Asia. However, similar analyses do not necessarily mean that China has established a concrete position in terms of its soft power. On the contrary, Chinese foreign assistance in South Asia has not translated into the promotion of its norms and values. This is especially evident with the more recent revelations about the Chinese economic assistance projects in South Asia, especially the BRI. China has been found to have spent USD 80 billion in South Asia (almost a tenth of its total spending on foreign assistance), only a quarter of which has been in the form of ODA (Official Development Assistance—concessional in nature) (Zeeshan 2021). The rest can be classified as OOFs (Other Official Flows—non-concessional loans/export credits which add a heavy financial burden on the recipient) (Zeeshan 2021). Moreover, lately, Chinese assistance has come to be associated with negative undertones like debt traps. The economic crisis in Sri Lanka, the lease of the Hambantota port and the grave shortcomings of CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) are a few of the many examples that have stirred anti-China sentiments among some sections of the population in South Asia.

Thus, though Chinese assistance in South Asia began in full swing, for the most part, it has not particularly enhanced the former's soft power in the region. Chinese foreign assistance was initially seen as an attractive alternative for South Asian states wishing to hedge against India—the dominant power in the region. However, almost all of these states have now grown cautious of China's assistance and its associated repayment conditions. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in Chinese foreign assistance projects also negatively impacts the way it is perceived by most South Asian countries.

Cultural Influence

Nye defined culture as "the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society" (Nye 2004: 11). He postulated that when a country boasts of a universalistic culture that promotes values and interests that others share, it creates relationships of attraction and duty, thus increasing the probability of obtaining desired outcomes (Nye 2004: 11). Many Chinese elites have believed that China's "cultural soft power" (*wenhua ruan liliang*) is attractive because of a certain "uniqueness" and can help ease negative external impressions that perceive rising China as a threat (Lai 2012: 85).

China's cultural diplomatic efforts have been divided into three categories (Lai 2012: 86):

First, formal official programs aiming to improve the international image of China via programs or policies that guide long-term development and export of cultural products. Second, international cultural exchange programs and the promotion of arts, entertainment (i.e. movies etc.), cuisine etc. Third, promotion of the Chinese language and studies of China. In South Asia too, China has sought to increase its soft power by means of these three approaches.

The Chinese culture is deeply rooted in a sense of national pride. For instance, the Chinese concepts of Tianxia (T'ienhsia)—"all under heaven" presided over by the "Son of Heaven", Chinese empire as the Middle Kingdom etc. are all based on notions of Sinocentrism. According to Chinese philosophy, while China formed the centre of the world, outer groups (including "barbarians") could move towards the inner of the concentric circles by learning Chinese values (Fairbank 1968). However, China does not subscribe to ideas like enforcing its values on foreign populations, as was established by Mao when he rejected "great nation chauvinism".

Confucius Institutes (CIs) are a classic example of China's cultural assurance or the level of cultural self-confidence. They have been a crucial component of the Chinese soft power strategy. CIs are "non-profit public institutions which aim to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries" (Krishnan 2020). A number of CIs operate across South Asia, imparting training in Chinese philosophy, values, culture and language. However, only cultural self-confidence is not enough to power through a country's soft power efforts. The attractiveness, accessibility and assimilability of a country's culture are crucial in determining how it is perceived abroad. In the case of South Asia, some aspects of Chinese culture like cuisine and television dramas are quite popular. Even so, Indian culture, which shares a lot more in common with the cultures of other South Asian countries, is dominantly popular in the region. Additionally, China's culture's "uniqueness" which it believes is key to enhancing its attractiveness, can become a major impediment to the contrary. For example, learning Mandarin is mostly seen as a difficult task, given its complex script. Therefore, the accessibility of Chinese culture is limited as comprehension becomes challenging for non-Chinese people.

China's soft power endeavours in South Asia also face two other key challenges. First, there is a rise in global concern against Chinese actions, particularly led by arguably the most influential soft power in the world—the U.S.A. Consider for example the case of Confucius Institutes. After the U.S. had accused Confucius Institutes to be "a propaganda front for the Chinese Communist Party", Confucius Institutes around the world were brought under intense scrutiny (Sim 2021). Second, certain policies employed by China to enhance its soft power are not perceived positively by a majority of spectators. For example, in Pakistan—China's South Asian ally aspiring to secure large-scale economic gains from the latter's BRI, Mandarin has been designated as a mandatory language in many educational institutions. Some critics have argued that the 'mandatory' aspect of this promotion of Chinese culture is equivalent to the "cultural colonisation of Pakistan by China" (Chaudhury 2021). Clearly, such arguments dilute the efficiency of China's soft power efforts in the region and beyond. Hence, one can argue that for the most part, instead of toning down the 'rising China as a threat' sentiment, China's soft power efforts are falling prey to the same.

A major struggle that China faces in the expansion of its soft power is due to the nature of its domestic governance and politics. For instance, Xinhua News Agency of China has ambitions to become a "real world international news agency", that would directly enhance China's soft power in the world (Shambaugh 2015). However, the official state press agency of China frequently witnesses a tarnishing of its image due to the high degree of censorship involved in its reporting. Moreover, China's involvement in international controversies also hampers its soft power endeavours. For example, contracts for foreign partners operating Confucius Institutes strictly require them to abide by Beijing's one-China policy and they are not supposed to have similar language arrangements with Taiwanese partners on

terms not politically acceptable to Beijing (Lai 2012: 93). It is also worth noting that in a 2019 report, the Human Rights Watch had stated that "Confucius Institutes are extensions of the Chinese government that censor certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds, and use hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration" (Human Rights Watch 2019). Thus, such instances damage the credibility of Chinese soft power instruments.

Despite the struggles, China continues its endeavour to deepen its cultural ties with South Asian countries. Over the years, Beijing has set up several friendship centres, cultural exchange programs, initiatives for cooperation over Buddhism, scholarships etc. with many of the smaller South Asian countries at the bilateral level. However, it is worth pondering if these attempts actually bolster the soft influence of Chinese culture or just solidify its image as a "wealth creator"—an economic powerhouse that has the potential to bring benefits to the poor economies of South Asia (Pal 2021).

Conclusion

Through this case study of China in South Asia, we can conclude that in contemporary times, the struggle of Chinese soft power outweighs its success. The spectacular ascendancy of China as a great power on the rise is largely attributed to its economic prowess. In terms of the charm of its values, norms and culture, the influence is still far below the level of many great powers—historical or present. Its soft power endeavours are heavily dependent on its economic might. While this does secure the friendship of many countries, it can be better seen as a strategic arrangement and not as some absolute result of the influence of Chinese culture and values. Moreover, most of China's economically powered "soft power" endeavours have been more recently brought under the radar by international agencies and the latest research findings. This not only undermines the future prospects for China's projects in other developing countries around the globe but also negatively alters the credibility of Chinese foreign policies and actions. This further makes us question: Have these efforts exported China's values so that recipient states desire the outcomes China does, or have they simply created an obligation on the recipient states to do or give what China wants?

Furthermore, though China has a rich cultural philosophy and strong cultural self-confidence, it struggles with making its cultural values universalistic, easily accessible and assimilable in other regions of the world. Its domestic challenges like violations of the human rights of minorities, severe censorship, lack of transparency in policy rollouts etc., further negatively impact the appeal of its political values. Moreover, the growing negative perception of, inter alia, Chinese soft power policies also exacerbates the situation further. Joseph S. Nye Jr. himself argued that "as long as the government fans the flames of nationalism and holds tight the reins of party control, China's soft power will remain limited" (Nye 2015).

Though there is a constant scholarly debate on the relevance of soft power vis-à-vis hard power for great power, contemporary times have shown that the former cannot be completely side-lined whatsoever. It remains to be seen how China the most prominent great power on the rise today, might be able to navigate its way past the present struggles of its soft power.

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