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Part I

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER

1

CHINESE OVERSEAS AND CHINA'S SOFT POWER

Tan Chee-Beng

INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power refers to the use of cultural and economic resources by a country to gain the support of overseas organizations and foreign governments or to get them to act in line with the interests of a country without the use of military power. This concept was proposed by Joseph S. Nye in 1990 (Nye 1990). He explains that “hard power is like brandishing carrots or sticks; soft power is more like a magnet” (Nye 2021, p. 6).

This paper describes China's soft power in relation to the Chinese overseas. It will show that the Chinese overseas constitute an important resource for China's soft power. Although there are similar patterns, the ways that China uses this resource may differ from region to region. The receptivity of, and impacts on, the Chinese overseas also differ from country to country. China's soft power policies are important for mobilizing international cooperation with China, gaining support for its promotion of national unification and rebuttal of Western anti-China rhetoric. Influential ethnic Chinese businesspeople and politicians in other countries play important roles in this and in enhancing cooperation that benefits both China and their country of residence.

The label “Chinese overseas” (海外华人 or *haiwai huaren*) is preferred by scholars who study people of Chinese origins living overseas. Strictly speaking, it refers to Chinese who have identified with their respective countries. However, its use, as in this paper, may include new immigrants who are mostly *huaqiao* (华侨 or overseas Chinese), meaning citizens of China residing overseas. As for the term “overseas Chinese”, it is historically a term that refers to *huaqiao* or “Chinese sojourners”. The term “Chinese

diaspora” is best used to refer to new immigrants who are sojourners, who still see China as home, but many scholars also use it to include ethnic Chinese belonging to different nationalities.

OVERSEAS CHINESE INSTITUTIONS

The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAO, 国务院侨务办公室) is the state institution that deals with the Chinese overseas. Its forerunners were the Republican government’s *Qiaowu Weiyuanhui* (侨务委员会) or Overseas Chinese Affairs Council (established in 1926) and the Chinese Communist Party’s Yan’an Overseas Chinese Office (established in 1937). Taiwan still has its *Qiaowu Weiyuanhui*, but in 2006, its English name was changed from Overseas Chinese Affairs Council to Overseas Community Affairs Council (OCAC) to avoid confusion with the one in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the PRC, the roles of the OCAO have changed over time. During the Maoist era, overseas Chinese played an important role in lessening the sufferings of the Chinese population in China in the face of the US economic blockade (Peterson 2012). Following China’s opening and reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, Chinese overseas were encouraged to invest in China and to help in the development of emigrant regions (侨乡 or *qiaoxiang*). The latter process was broadly and well facilitated by *Qiaolian* or the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese from the national to the county levels. In my contacts with *Qiaolian* leaders in Yongchun County and Quanzhou Municipality in Fujian, I was impressed with their knowledge of rich Chinese businesspeople and other well-known Chinese personalities in different Southeast Asian counties. These leaders conduct trips abroad to network with relevant Chinese associations and individuals. They connect visiting Chinese overseas groups and individuals with their respective ancestral villages and help arrange donations from rich Chinese from overseas to build schools, hospitals and roads.

In 2018, the OCAO was administratively placed under the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee (中共中央统一战线工作部, 简称中央统战部), as was the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (NEAC) of the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国国家民族事务委员会). This may be seen as a shift towards an emphasis on the grand unification of China internally (further integrating the minorities) and externally (the unification of Taiwan with the mainland). By the 2000s, China had become an economic power and no longer needed to rely on Chinese overseas for its development, and so placing OCAO under the United Front Work Department can be seen as paying

greater attention to soft policy consideration, to further engaging overseas Chinese organizations and individuals to promote China's national interest, especially pursuing national unification with regard to Taiwan. Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China established friendship associations in some countries to promote bilateral cooperation and friendship. For example, the China-Vietnam Friendship Association (中国越南友好协会) was established in 1950. In Indonesia, the Indonesia-China Friendship Association (印尼中国友好协会) was established in the 1950s. There was also the Thai-Chinese Relationship Association (泰中关系协会). Influential local Chinese were actively involved in these associations.

In 1987, China established its China Public Relations Association (CPRA, 中国公共关系协会). One of its aims is to strengthen links with organizations and individuals worldwide in aid of China's international relations.¹ In fact, the CPRA relies a lot on Chinese overseas. In Malaysia, there is a Malaysia-China Public Relations Association (马中公共关系协会). On 30 September 2019, a number of its executive committee members issued a statement to the press denouncing groups in Malaysia which had demonstrated in support of the protests in Hong Kong against its government and China.²

In 1988, China established the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification (中国和平统一促进会), seeking to promote a good relationship between Taiwan and the mainland as well as the unification of the island with the mainland. The council encourages the formation of Associations for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (APPRC) overseas. The president of APPRC in a country is always an influential local Chinese leader. In Trinidad, for instance, the president of the Trinidad and Tobago Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China is also vice president of Central and South America Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (中南美洲中国和平统一促进会), and president of the China Society (中华总会), Trinidad.³ In August 2013, I interviewed the President of the Indian Ocean-China Society for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification in Mauritius (印度洋中国和平统一促进会). He was quite influential as he was then also President of the Federation of Chinese Societies (Mauritius) (毛里求斯华人社团联合会, established in 1988), which aimed to unite the Chinese associations in Mauritius as well as to promote friendship with PRC.⁴

There are also APPRC associations in Southeast Asia, albeit with slightly different names. The Thailand-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China was established on 7 February 2001,

just after the Philippine-China APPRC was formed on 2 January 2001.⁵ The one in Indonesia originally was called East Java-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (印尼东爪哇中国和平统一促进会), although it has since been called Indonesian Chinese-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (印尼华人中国和平统一促进会). On the day of its official formation on 19 March 2007, it condemned Chen Shui-bian's call for Taiwan's independence.⁶

There is a transnational association of the Chinese overseas from Vietnam, Kampuchea and Laos for the promotion of peaceful reunification of China. Called World Vietnam Kampuchea and Laos Chinese-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (世界越棉寮华人中国和平统一促进会), it was established in 1983 in Guangzhou, and has been holding its general meetings and forums on a rotation basis in different countries, including Hong Kong and Macau.⁷ For example, it held a forum in Hong Kong on 4 July 2004,⁸ and it was active in criticizing the independence movement in Taiwan and the protests against mainland China in Hong Kong.

In Malaysia, the Malaysia One China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (马来西亚一中和平统一促进会) emphasizes *yizhong* (一中 or "one China"). It was initiated by the prominent Chinese Malaysian businessman Lim Geok Tong (林玉唐) and his business colleagues in 2004.⁹ On 8 October 2021, this association issued a statement to condemn AUKUS, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Indeed, overseas Chinese pro-China associations serve to speak up for China on major international issues. On 15 July 2021, for instance, various such pro-Beijing associations in Malaysia, including Malaysia's One China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China, Malaysia-China Public Relations Association (马来西亚中国公共关系协会) and the Malaysia One Belt One Road Committee (马来西亚一带一路委员会) issued a joint statement which called upon the US and Western countries not to politicize COVID-19 and insult China.¹⁰

China's soft power approach has been rather reliant on directly establishing organizations that blatantly promote China's interests as well as on encouraging influential Chinese from overseas to establish pro-China associations. While such efforts gain the support of the Chinese overseas who are generally already pro-China against the Western unfriendly treatment of China, its impact on non-Chinese is unclear. In countries where there are many ethnic Chinese, such as in Malaysia, such efforts are useful for China, and it is easy to form pro-China associations. This is not just because there are influential Chinese businesspeople who are close to China for business

or historical reasons, but also Chinese politicians and businesspeople who are interested in gaining prestige through such an association.

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

An important institution of Chinese soft power is the Confucius Institute (CI) which promotes the study of Chinese language and civilization overseas whilst cementing good relations between China and the host countries. Its headquarters under the Ministry of Education in Beijing was known as the Office of Chinese Language Council International (*Hanban* or 汉办); in July 2020, it was renamed Center for Language Education and Cooperation or CLEC (教育部中外语言交流合作中心). Besides the CIs which are attached to universities in foreign countries, there are also Confucius Classrooms (孔子学堂) established in local schools. The first CI was established in Seoul in 2004. By December 2019, there were 550 such institutes in 162 countries.¹¹

The institutes are welcomed by those who wish to study Chinese and are encouraged by the emergence of China as a global economic power. In countries where there is no good opportunity to learn Chinese, the local Chinese also welcome the services provided by CIs. In fact, a CI may be headed by a local Chinese academician.¹²

In ASEAN, as of 2021, there were thirty-three Confucius Institutes and thirty-five Confucius Classrooms.¹³ Only Brunei and East Timor do not have any Confucius Institute, whilst Myanmar has only three Confucius Classrooms. Thailand has the most, sixteen in all. This shows the popularity of learning Chinese in that country.¹⁴ There are eight Confucius Institutes in Indonesia, but they are called Pusat Bahasa Mandarin or Mandarin Language Centre, such as the one at Al Azhar University of Indonesia in Jakarta. This is most likely an adjustment in a country where any perception of intervention by China is sensitive.

Many universities outside China welcome Confucius Institutes as they are financed by China and there is a demand for studying Chinese. However, in Malaysia where the local Chinese already have a system of Chinese education, the introduction of Confucius Institutes (the first one established at the University of Malaya is called Kongzi Institute, adopting the Chinese name of Confucius) is not enthusiastically welcomed by the local Chinese. These Confucius Institutes serve mainly to teach Chinese as a foreign language to non-Chinese students, and this contradicts the local Chinese view of *Huayu* (华语 or Mandarin) as their mother tongue (Ngeow and Tan 2018, p. 106).

In most countries, Confucius Institutes are welcomed for providing opportunities for the study of the Chinese language and Chinese culture, and in some cases, Chinese medicine too. However, in the West, governments and China critics see Confucius Institutes as the Chinese Communist Party's attempt to carry out global propaganda. The anti-China attitude, no doubt, contributes to this but the management of the institutes under the Chinese Ministry of Education also adds to the suspicion that China has ulterior motives. Jennifer Hubbert points out that while the students in the US appreciated the learning of Chinese, they found the curriculum tedious, and they were sceptical of what they perceived as Chinese government propaganda (Hubbert 2019; Matthews 2021). The adoption of the new name, CLEC, and related administrative adjustments may be seen as an attempt to reduce the suspicious attitude towards Confucius Institutes.

China also pursues its soft policy by supporting local initiatives for the teaching of Chinese. An interesting example is the Asia International Friendship College (亚洲国际友好学院) in Medan, and its Indonesian name mentions specifically the study of foreign language (Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Persahabatan Internasional Asia). This college was initiated in December 2004 by the local Chinese leaders in Medan after the tsunami in Aceh to provide education for the disaster victims, Chinese and non-Chinese alike. To coordinate the various works of assistance and to collect donations, the Chinese in Medan formed a pan-Chinese association called the Association of Community of Social and Education of Indonesia North Sumatra Indonesian Chinese (印尼苏北华社慈善与教育联谊会), of which building an education facility was the main aim. One donation from the Malaysian-based newspaper *Sin Chew Daily* helped a lot towards establishing an educational centre. On 20 August 2008, Asia International Friendship College was officially established.¹⁵ The college offers the study of Chinese, and the students are mostly ethnic Chinese.¹⁶ It has the support of the School of International Culture of South China Normal University (华南师范大学) which provided teachers and helped to design the curriculum. The China Overseas Association (中国海外交流协会) in China as well as its branch in Guangdong also help in recruiting Chinese language teachers paid by the Chinese government.

MASS MEDIA

In our globalized world today, people have access to international media and therefore, global media coverage is important to soft power projection.

China has the English GCTN and the Chinese *Zhongguo Guoji* (China International), which broadcast news and feature programmes in English and Chinese respectively for the global audience. GCTN English news reporting generally does not follow the rather fixed pattern of other Chinese broadcast programmes by first reporting about President Xi Jinping and other senior ministers before reporting other news. However, when there is an important party celebration or forum related to China's soft power, GCTN often devotes time mainly to reporting about China. The audiences of China International are Chinese speakers. Based on the author's long-term observation, it is more blatant in its support of China: programmes can be taken out last minute to report matters of national interest, and programmes (including TV dramas) showing patriotism can be repeated a few times.

China's civilization, rich fauna and flora, diverse foodways, martial arts, and intangible heritage no doubt are of interest to many people worldwide, Chinese and non-Chinese alike. Programmes on these are not only informative but also serve soft power objectives. In rebutting Western anti-China rhetoric, China's media could be made more effective by relying on more concise reporting and analyses that do not appear propagandistic. However, there is a tendency to emphasize propaganda to the extent of counter-productiveness even when the audience is a global one. CNN and BBC are effective in convincing at least their internal audience (such as in portraying China and Russia as evil) because they report it in a concise way that does not appear propagandistic, even though their reports are rather biased and may be full of distortions. For example, when reporting about the war between Russia and Ukraine, they report as if this is a purely Ukraine problem due to Russian aggression and shift the audience's attention away from the security threat that the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have imposed on Russia. Even when CNN reports about certain achievements of China, it always reminds its audience about some negative aspects of China, such as its authoritarianism or human rights violations. China can learn to appear not propagandistic while not having to follow CNN's and BBC's biased reporting. It can give a concise and balanced news analysis and still exposes the real intention of the US and its lies about China.

China's mass media have a significant impact on Chinese overseas, especially those who speak Mandarin. This is because the Chinese overseas share with the Chinese in China the common Chinese civilization. In particular, the common language (Mandarin) brings people together even though the Chinese overseas identify politically with their respective

countries. Such civilizational identification (Tan 2001, p. 225) is, no doubt, significant in making the Chinese overseas an important resource in China's soft power policy. China's annual TV programme for Lunar New Year celebrations, for example, is of interest to many Chinese overseas and is planned to appeal to both China's citizens and the Chinese overseas.

Overseas, local Chinese mass media, especially Chinese newspapers like those in Malaysia, generally carry more news about China and Chinese culture than newspapers in other languages. Speeches of the Chinese ambassador are generally given more coverage, and this no doubt helps in furthering China's soft power. In the case of countries with a small Chinese population, the opening up of China allows the newspapers' management to hire editors from China, who run mostly news on mainland China (Tan 2016, p. 16). Ethnic Chinese users of Internet media like WhatsApp, WeChat, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok often receive and resend news and videos about China's infrastructure and socio-economic achievements, retorts of Western anti-China messages, Chinese civilization, food culture, Chinese arts and music, and China's natural beauty. While there are also negative messages found in mass media, all these reinforce the pride of the Chinese overseas about the Chinese civilization and influence their attitudes towards China positively, helping to oppose what is perceived as anti-China campaigns and strategies. Language and mass media thus play important roles in China's soft power.

A SOFTER APPROACH FOR CHINESE AND NON-CHINESE

In his comment on China, Nye points out that "China should realize that most of a country's soft power comes from its civil society rather than from its government" and that "[p]ropaganda is not credible and thus often does not attract" (2021, p. 10). The US has Hollywood and various types of popular culture industries to help promote its soft power. To promote their good image, the United Kingdom has the British Council and Germany has the Goethe Institute in many countries. While the Malaysian locals know that these are centres provided by the governments of the United Kingdom and Germany, to them these are centres that provide services which they can participate in without feeling that they are targets of propaganda. Before the COVID-19 period, the British Council in Malaysia conducted seminars such as leadership training and career advancement for youths in different cities in Malaysia. These seminars, although they serve the United Kingdom's soft power objectives, are seen as useful to

the locals rather than British propaganda. China can learn from their soft power approach instead of exhibiting patriotism in its outreach. A soft rather than a blatant approach is more effective for achieving soft power objectives. Such a blatant approach is different from Nye's "sharp power" which refers to inserting false information into the political processes of other countries (Nye 2021, p. 7), which can be better described as a subversive soft power.

An example of an institution from China that has a softer approach appreciated by both the local Chinese and non-Chinese is the China Cultural Center of Mauritius (毛里求斯中国文化中心), which offers instructions in Chinese language, Chinese martial arts and Chinese crafts. I was impressed with the local children, Chinese and non-Chinese, producing art of not only Chinese motifs but local motifs as well. Its Chinese language classes attracted both Chinese and non-Chinese. Even some older Chinese who were Hakka-speaking signed up as they wanted to learn to speak Mandarin.¹⁷

In fact, since the 1980s, China has established thirty China Cultural Centres worldwide, and these include ten in Asia (Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore and Vietnam). The one (not to be confused with Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre) in Singapore was opened in 2015. The aim mentioned on its website "is to introduce Chinese culture and arts to Singapore and to enhance the understanding and friendship between the two peoples". The centre "offers a variety of cultural activities, including lectures and training programs, performances, exhibitions and consulting sessions".¹⁸

The cultural dimension of China's soft power is focused on the teaching of Chinese language and civilization. Given China's achievements in economy, science and technology, organizing seminars and training camps on these themes for people from different walks of life would be most welcome. This would enhance its soft power impact in the long run.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot more one can write about China's soft power policy, and one can do so more comprehensively by using the six categories (government, culture, education, global engagement, enterprise, and digital) that scholars have used to analyse different countries' soft power.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the discussion above shows that China's soft power policy extensively involves the Chinese overseas. Over the years, the PRC has established a number of institutions that utilize the Chinese overseas as a resource for pursuing

China's soft policy interests. The Chinese language, Chinese education, as well as traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese arts and craftsmanship, music and dances, martial arts and culinary knowledge are all important cultural resources that play important roles in China's soft power, and they have influences on the Chinese overseas as well. The sharing of Mandarin and the Chinese writing script (in the case of those Chinese overseas who read and write Chinese) and Chinese civilization in general foster the cultural link with China as a land of Chinese civilization. This civilizational ethnicity (Tan 2001, p. 225) helps in contributing ethnic Chinese support to China against anti-China manoeuvres by the US and her Western and Asian allies like Britain and Japan.

However, the Chinese overseas are heterogeneous, and rather diverse from country to country, and their perception of China's soft power policy also differs. In island societies such as Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, and Tahiti, I observed that even the localized Chinese welcome China's economic and cultural inputs. Both the old and new immigrants rely on China's help to promote Chinese arts and cultural performances. Both Mauritius and Trinidad and Tobago governments (Tahiti is still under the French) are also friendly with China and support the local Chinese effort to involve China in local economic and urban development (such as the development of the Chinatown in Mauritius). In Southeast Asia (especially Malaysia and Singapore), the ethnic Chinese do not have to depend on China to promote their cultural activities although cultural troupes from China are always welcome. In both Mauritius and Southeast Asia, China's soft power strategies gain support from the ethnic Chinese leaders to liaise with the local governments, and this may include cooperation on major local economic projects.

The influential roles that ethnic Chinese business leaders and politicians play in Southeast Asia naturally make them an important resource for China's soft power strategy in the region. In return, China provides these ethnic Chinese leaders with status and socio-economic networks in China. Its ambassadors now and then show concern about ethnic Chinese interests by giving donations to Chinese schools and even imply giving protection (Ngeow and Tan 2018, pp. 108–10). Nevertheless, China needs to be sensitive to the feelings of both the ethnic Chinese and the non-Chinese populations. The local Chinese do not wish for China's activities to stir up the feelings of the non-Chinese majority against them. But while they may be proud of the achievements of China and welcome its support in cultural matters, they need to be careful about its "suffocating embrace" (Wang 1981, p. 278).

Indeed, with increasing US anti-China manoeuvres supported by its Western and some Asian allies, the local Chinese leaders who have been willing to support China for their business and personal interests need to attend to local Chinese interests in their relations with the majority local population and the government. It is necessary to help ensure that the local government is not caught in the conflict between the big powers, mainly between the US and China. The border wars between China and India in 1962 and China and Vietnam in 1979 show that any serious conflict between a local government and China is disastrous for the local Chinese. The local Chinese also cannot afford to ignore local corruption practices that benefit China as revelations of such practices may create not only anti-China but also anti-local Chinese feelings. In China's game of soft power involving China and the Chinese overseas, both sides need to be aware of such underlying tensions.

With its expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, especially in Africa, Middle East Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, China needs to pay more attention to building its image in the countries of these regions. Other than the Confucius Institutes and providing scholarships, China has also established various kinds of institutions of cooperation and for image-building. These include the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China-African Union Strategic Dialogue (China-AU Strategic Dialogue), and Manila Forum for China-Philippines Relations (Manila Forum). The Chinese investment in building dams, ports, railways, and other kinds of infrastructure in many countries is impressive, but it has to cope with accusations of putting these countries in debt, involvement in corruption and co-optation of senior government and military officials. It is essential for China to build a good image among ordinary citizens of the countries where it invests, not just the ethnic Chinese. This can be accomplished through establishing centres and organizations that provide services that benefit the local people. The present policy of providing scholarships for higher education in China, for example, can be expanded.

Notes

1. See www.cpra.org.cn
2. See <https://www.sinchew.com.my/20190930/斥大马撑港马中公共关系协会>
3. I interviewed Mr Yung Gen Siu (萧容庆) at his restaurant, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, on 19 May 2012.
4. Interview with Mr Tang Yun Sing (邓旭升) at his home in Port Louis, Mauritius on 29 August 2013.
5. See <http://www.pcpprc.com/portal.php?mod=list&catid=2>

6. See <https://xueshu.baidu.com/usercenter/paper/show?paperid=cc3f3457421e62f03e0694b730041ed7&site=xues>; see also the 21 March 2007 report in China Qiaowang (www.chinaqw.com.cn).
7. See http://www.zhongguotongcuhui.org.cn/hwtchzs/201210/t20121031_3258366.html
8. See www.chinanews.com
9. See <https://news.sohu.com/2004/06/03/96/news220369655.shtml>
10. See <http://yn.people.com.cn/n2/2021/0716/c372459-34822938.html>
11. See <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%AD%94%E5%AD%90%E5%AD%A6%E9%99%A2/812632>
12. For instance, the one in Tahiti was located on the campus of the University of French Polynesia, and it was headed by an ethnic Chinese professor from the university at the time of my visit in September 2015.
13. See http://union.china.com.cn/zfgl/2021-12/16/content_41824559.html, 16 December 2021.
14. See “Confucius Institutes around the World”, 2021, <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>
15. The information on Asia International Friendship College was derived from both interviews and the epigraphic record at the college, visited on 28 August 2017.
16. At the time of my visit on 28 August 2017 together with a colleague from Sun Yat-sen University, the President is a Batak, assisted by three ethnic Chinese.
17. I visited the China Cultural Center of Mauritius on 29 August 2013.
18. See China Cultural Center 中国文化中心, chinaculture.org
19. See <https://softpower30.com/what-is-soft-power/>

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