Articles
The language of soft power: mediating socio-political meanings in the Chinese media

Qing Cao

Abstract

This article aims to examine the discursive structure of 'soft power' in China, its cultural, historical and political backgrounds and the role the mass media play in mediating its meanings. Conceptualised within critical discourse analysis, this study assesses soft power discourse as a form of articulating traditional values on the part of China's political and intellectual elites, as well as views about China's future directions. Specifically, it focuses on three levels of analysis: 1) a *description* of the language of 'soft power'; 2) an *interpretation* of soft power as an institutional practice; and 3) an *explanation* of the broad socio-political dynamics that shape the discourse of soft power. The article concludes with an initial evaluation of the significance and implications of the soft power discourse.

Keywords: Chinese media, Confucianism, discourse analysis, soft power

Introduction

In the closing years of the 2000s, China staged two high-profile international events – the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Coinciding with China's rising influence, the events carried extra symbolic significance – the first emergence of a non-Western global power since the ascent of Europe. The potential shift in global structure is not only economic or political, but also cultural. As the

Qing Cao is affiliated to Liverpool John Moores University. Q.Cao@ljmu.ac.uk

7

only surviving civilisation among the oldest cultures in the world, China is deeply shaped by its own traditions and values, which have never been better appreciated within the country since the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1911. Following centuries of struggle for national salvation and acquiring (Western) tools for wealth and power subsequent to the first Opium War (1839–1842), China has gradually regained its cultural confidence, boosted by recent strong economic growth. The economic take-off, however, has only intensified China's unremitting search for its own road to modernity, drawing increasingly on China's time-honoured traditions. Widely seen as a coming-of-age party, the Beijing Olympics proved an astounding debut on the world stage of a 'cultural China' in contrast to a 'political China' – an image plagued by human rights abuse in the post-Cold War Western media (Cao 2006),[1] especially during the 1990s.

Both the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai World Expo were (and continue to be) seen as important occasions to project China's soft power – to influence the hearts and minds of people in other nations through 'attraction'. Following its introduction into China in the early 2000s, Joseph Nye's concept of 'soft power' gained immediate currency and prominence in China's official, academic and popular discourse, largely because it arrived at a time when China tried to project a peaceful international image amidst perceptions of a 'Chinese threat'. Soft power provides the Chinese elites with a useful conceptual frame to develop a strategic approach to enhance China's international standing, dispel suspicions of the country's wider roles and activities, and articulate a Chinese vision of a world order inspired by Confucian values. Domestically, soft power discourse creates a multiplicity of spaces whereby the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) constructs fresh political identities underpinned partially by traditional values, and envisages the revival of a cultural China that the nation has long aspired to, since European colonial encroachments centuries ago. While the academic community broadly endorses and commends the move, some intellectuals have extended the discussions to debates on how best to rejuvenate China's cultural traditions, abandoned since the May Fourth Movement in the early 20th century. Others, however, have critiqued and contested official formulations of soft power, and expressed reservations. Discussions, debates and contestations are facilitated primarily by the changing landscape of the mass media, spearheaded by the rapid emergence of the Internet as the primary platform (if not a 'public sphere') for public debate in China. The prolific use of soft power generates large areas of consensus, solidarities and a sense of common purpose, reinforcing a shared national identity connecting a rich cultural heritage to a new future. But it also produces a plethora of tensions and controversies, reflecting a complex, dynamic, but evolving system of meaning production, negotiation and mediation in the intriguing process of China's economic and socio-political transformations.

This article attempts to delineate broad patterns of Chinese formulations of soft power, its cultural, historical and political backgrounds, and the pivotal role the mass media play in disseminating and mediating the soft power discourse. Conceptualised within traditions of critical approaches to discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 1989, 1995; Shi-xu 2007, 2009), this study focuses on soft power discourse as a form of a return to China's cultural traditions amidst the value vacuum left by a declining Marxist ideology, as well as an articulation of a Chinese vision of global issues. In particular, it examines how this process is facilitated by the changing functions of the Chinese media following three decades of economic reform and media commercialisation. Structurally, the article focuses on three levels of analysis (Fairclough 1989: 1) a *description* of the language of 'soft power'; 2) an *interpretation* of soft power as text and as an institutional practice of the mass media; and 3) an *explanation* of the broader socio-political dynamics that largely shape the soft power discourse.

Data collected for analysis include the CCP's official documents, elite academic writings, and – more importantly – mass media reporting. The study focuses principally on texts made available online for mass consumption, including summaries of academic writings and the views of leading intellectuals. This focus enables a delineation of the media's choice of reporting on soft power, whether it be a convergence of official, academic and popular views, or a divergence of views between different discourse producers. Hence, this study is not an exhaustive survey of Chinese academic literature on soft power or indeed official policies; rather, it provides an analysis of the key features of soft power discourse, as propagated in the media for popular consumption. This discursive examination is contextualised in the interplay between the mass media and politics as part of the socio-political processes in Chinese society, which determine to a large extent the production, circulation and consumption of soft power discourse. The article concludes with an initial assessment of the significance and implications of such a discourse.

Discourse and social change

Language use is a socially constituted and historically situated mode of action that is in a dialectical relationship with other processes and aspects of society. The discourse of soft power is no exception. It is both socially shaped and socially shaping. It is this character of social constitutiveness of soft power discourse that the study seeks to unravel. Following Fairclough (1995: 56), I see discourse as the use of language to represent social practices from a specific point of view. The connections between language use and social practices are not always apparent but are often hidden, in particular when language use occurs at a national level and in a cross-cultural context. Needless to say, the transformations of economies, politics,

societies, communities and cultures, in recent decades, facilitated by the onset of globalisation and development of information technology, have an important bearing on the way we see the roles of culture, and how we relate and communicate with one another. Indeed, many (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Giddens 1991; Habermas 1987) argue that these transformations are, to a significant degree, transformations in language and discourse. This is because discourse constitutes core mechanisms through which social practices evolve. In this sense, the accelerating changes brought about by modernity *exist* in discourse as well as in processes outside of discourse. Moreover, as the world shrinks rapidly in the process of globalisation (or global capitalism), societies, communities and individuals try to make sense of, and adapt to, their changed circumstances by constantly reassessing and negotiating with their cultures, traditions and assumptions; but, more importantly, they have to interact with other cultures and assumptions in ways hitherto unimaginable in a globalised world.

In such a process, any discourse involving national identities will be intertwined with a complex web of internal and external relationships. The circulation and exchange of ideas and practices across national boundaries are not at all equal, due to the dominant positions of the West – politically, economically and culturally. The articulation of indigenous values, standpoints and attitudes from a non-Western society will inevitably enter a symbolic world, where established norms and principles with Western origins and cultural characteristics dominate. It is in this sense that cultural critics (De Bary & Tu 1998; McQuail 2005; Shi-xu 2009) argue for a non-universalist, culturally inclusive diversification of discourse in communication across cultures. Furthermore, it is contended that discourse – as conceptualised and understood in Anglo-American intellectual traditions – may not be the natural vehicle through which people in other societies experience the world and articulate their feelings and visions (Hall 1992; Said 1993; Shi-xu 2007, 2009). This not only adds to the complexities of reading non-Western discourses such as soft power, but points to the urgency and imperative of understanding discourse as culturally differentiated, mutually competing and epistemologically diverse socio-cultural practice.

Changing political identities: the official discourse

It might be useful, right at the outset, to state clearly how soft power is understood by the present study: it is a set of values that a given community articulates and practises as its own foundational principles which might exert some form of appeal at times to members outside that particular community.

Translated in Chinese as *ruan quan li*, *ruan shi li* or *ruan li liang*, soft power entered China's mainstream discourse in the early 2000s, first in international

politics and then in domestic policies, inter-provincial competition and corporate governance (Han & Jiang 2009). A proliferation of academic papers emerged around the mid-2000s. In 2006 alone, over 200 journal articles were published on soft power. More importantly, soft power was adopted by Chinese leaders and policymakers in their speeches and policy documents. However, it is in the political report to the 17th CCP National Congress by General Secretary Hu Jintao in 2007, that soft power was given strategic significance at the highest level. Hu (2007) stressed the vital importance of culture and its critical role in international competition: 'In today's world, culture has increasingly become a crucial source for national cohesion and creativity. It is an essential factor in the competition for comprehensive national power.'[2] For the first time, Hu (2007) called on the Party 'to enhance the national soft power' as a strategic goal in the new century. Here, soft power is subsumed under the broad concept of culture, defined not only in terms of its instrumental values in international competition, but more substantially in terms of its communicative values in reinforcing national cohesion, identities and solidarity. Culture takes such a central focus that soft power almost equates to 'cultural power' (Sheng 2008).

The culture-based conception of soft power was further emphasised by Hu (2007) highlighting the urgency to 'develop the Chinese nation's spiritual homeland … and enhance Chinese culture's international influence'. Statements on soft power objectives are substantiated by a policy-oriented strategic approach: 'fostering a harmonious culture', 'promoting traditional culture' and 'encouraging cultural innovation and regeneration'. Beneath the 'socialist culture' rhetoric lies a decisive return to China's cultural traditions in Hu's vision to enhance China's soft power and to underpin his blueprint for China's future. In contrast to a 'socialist core value', which moves little beyond a ritualised rehearsal of Marxism, policy guidelines on China's traditional culture development are detailed, specific and substantive – from reinforcing traditional cultural teaching, exploiting classical cultural resources and protecting material and non-material cultural heritage, to launching cultural industry projects and enhancing national communications systems for the effective promotion of national culture. Following the 17th CCP Congress, soft power has rapidly proliferated in official discourse in a wide range of discussions on both domestic and international issues.

This conception of soft power differs from Nye's definition in two crucial ways. First, Nye describes soft power primarily in terms of its instrumental values – 'getting others to want the outcomes that you want' (2004: 5). It was conceived essentially as a 'soft' approach to American foreign policy when the US was left as the only superpower in the post-Cold War world. The major difference between hard and soft power, for Nye, lies only in a different approach to achieving the same desired foreign policy goal: the former 'coerces' while the latter 'coopts' people, as illustrated in the latest formulation of 'smart power' – a coordinated and optimal use

of hard and soft power – in the Obama administration's foreign policy. The Chinese conception, however, emphasises communicative values – to reach an understanding of the imperative to build a strong, coherent national culture and identity as the basis for China's soft power. Thus, Hu's exposition could be seen as a broad discursive consensus-building exercise, or 'communicative action' (Habermas 1998) at the highest level – the mobilisation of a cultural campaign. Given the hierarchical structure of China's communication system, top leaders' speeches carry explicit political validity for a national project, which will be promoted and carried out by government departments. Second, while Nye's externally oriented soft power is aimed exclusively at changing the behaviour of people outside the US, China's soft power is both internally and externally directed, focusing primarily, however, on changing domestic priorities and practices to develop soft power resources. Moreover, China's soft power is conceived as an integral but crucial part of national culture building. Its external dimension is viewed largely as a natural extension of China's expected cultural rejuvenation. Consequently, reviving traditional values, enhancing communication infrastructures, but more importantly developing a strong national identity constitute central components, and therefore defining characteristics, of the official discourse of soft power.

Furthermore, as a new concept to discuss China's national strength and strategic direction, soft power has also become a discursive vehicle through which the CCP's ideological underpinnings have surreptitiously shifted. A new two-tier discursive formulation has emerged in talking about value systems – Marxist socialism and traditional culture. Each component is a self-contained package with its own system of description, vocabulary, imagery and meaning, but more crucially the mode of relating to realities. The former, representing more of the past, is characterised by a discursive reductionism, abstraction and ritualisation. It consists largely of a close-knit bundle of slogans, concepts and imageries providing an ideologically coloured frame for key political speeches and policy formulations, serving to maintain discursive continuities with a revolutionary past and with current political legitimacy. By contrast, China's cultural traditions are constructed as comprising real soft power – where China's true strengths and enduring values lie. Departing radically from imported Marxist orthodoxies, the political elites have effectively and substantially underpinned a newly formulated value system with traditional cultures, aiming to sustain a rapidly changing society, maintain a minimal level of socio-political stability, but to crucially search for a Chinese road to modernity.

A discursive unity is thus forged between soft power and traditional values, achieved through a range of discursive innovations centering on the notion of 'comprehensive national power' (*zhonghe guoli*) – a term Chinese elites prefer to use in assessing China's overall capacities in relation to other nations. As a pragmatic, non-ideological term, 'comprehensive national power' incorporates soft power as a

key component, but bears flimsy relevance to Marxist socialism. Soft power is applied as a conceptual tool through which the 'superstructure' (the dominant ideology that serves the economic base) is reinvented. Marxist socialism often carries nominal discursive accord with subsequent policy formulations. Its largely symbolic existence provides legitimacy for a political party that has transformed from a revolutionary to a governing party. Still dominant in the economy, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), arguably the strongest indicators of socialism, contribute significantly to the Chinese economy, but at the same time create various tensions that the CCP is yet to resolve. One is the 'free market' nature of the Chinese economy that China has to adopt in order to join the 'global economy' led by the capitalist West. The other is the role and functions of SOEs, which are yet to be redefined amidst a widening gap between rich and poor in China, to the detriment of the 'socialist' image.

By contrast, the highly visible and substantive discourse of revitalising traditional cultures has taken on a new level of importance, underscored by the top leaders' emphasis. It facilitates an ideological transfiguration that orients identity politics toward national strength building. Undoubtedly, nation building has always been tinted with nationalism that renders an emphasis on traditional cultural revival pertinent to an internal audience. Contrary to the Marxist orthodoxies largely renounced in post-reform China, traditional values are ideologically neutral and much less threatening to external constituencies. Significantly, the externally absent Marxism is equated to 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' that, in turn, is subsumed under a Confucian discourse of harmony, as typified in Hu's political report:

> Social harmony is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics. There is an inherent unity between a scientific approach to development and social harmony …. Building a socialist harmonious society is a long-term historical task that extends to the whole process of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Hu 2007)

As with Hu's hallmark contribution to the CCP theories, the scientific approach to development is nevertheless infused with traditional values, in contrast to Jiang Zemin's 'three represents' that coopt capitalist class into China's new political elites. Though the 'three represents' broadened the CCP's political base, the alleged power/money fusion has aggravated social tensions stemming mostly from an unequal distribution of wealth. The scientific approach to development, however, becomes a rebalancing act to alleviate such tensions. Soft power, premised on a cultural revival, has emerged as a significant part of a political and cultural campaign for sustainable development, as well as an external strategy for enhancing China's external soft influence.

The traditional cultural focus in soft power is made clear by a state council minister:

13

> Values, in particular core values of a nation, have evolved over a very long period of time in a country's history. It is a comprehensive system that includes ways of thinking, ethical codes, beliefs and convictions. They derive from people's social life and practice, reflecting a continued cultural tradition. A nation's core values, therefore, constitute the key component of cultural soft power. (Cai 2009)

Subsuming traditional values under soft power is part of the pragmatic nationalism that underlines the Hu–Wen (President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao) leadership's key policy innovations. The 2002 CCP 16th Congress, when Hu officially took over the Party's stewardship from Jiang Zemin, represented the transition from a broadly 'national spirit', boosting patriotism to a policy-oriented Confucian humanism. A fresh discursive package, centering on the Confucian concept *he* (peace, harmony, union) was created. New codes of meaning were framed into *he*, promoted as representing China's core values with contemporary relevance. The leadership also derived from the Confucian *minben* as a centrepiece in formulating the 'harmonious society' policy throughout the 2000s. *Minben* is even portrayed as the Chinese approach to a 'socialist democracy' through two Confucian notions – *min wei bang ben* (people as the basis of the state) and *min gui jun qing* (people as more important than rulers). Traditional culture as soft power has become the latest addition to the discursive packaging of a new political identity for the CCP and the cultural identity of the nation.

Academic discourse: depoliticised culturalism

Compared to official rhetoric, academic discourse on soft power is far more diverse, complex and intercalated. More importantly, it has been infused with a broader and much longer intellectual resurgence of traditional values in recent decades (Tang 2009a). Assaulted and blamed for China's 'backwardness' in the May Fourth Movement (1910s–1920s) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Confucianism made a strong comeback in the 1980s, tolerated by conservative elders but supported by a reform-minded leadership for a 'new authoritarian' style of government to push forward the reform agenda, despite contestation by a liberal campaign for democracy. However, the 1990s witnessed China's indigenous values being embraced more widely, against the backdrop of rapid economic growth and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 2000s, the Hu–Wen leadership incorporated much of Confucianism in its revamping of political ideologies in a *renben* (people first) approach to government. Thus, the idea of soft power is intrinsically intertwined with this discursive genealogy and subsumed under the general concept of cultural revival in the academic community.

Consequently, most scholars broadly share Nye's definition of soft power as an intangible, non-material and often abstract power that produces certain capacities

to influence perceptions and attitudes toward another country (Liu 2006; Pan 2006; Wang 2006). Nonetheless, their understanding of the term derives principally from China's classic thinking on interstate competition during the Warring States Era (475–221 BC) (Ding 2008). A wise king, according to Confucius, attracts peoples from far and wide through his virtues (*yi de lai zhi*). Confucius compares a country's moral power to the northern polar star: 'He who exercises government by virtues is like the northern polar star that stays in its place but all other stars turn toward it.' The idea of attraction by moral appeal is further developed by Mencius, the second founding father of Confucianism: 'To subjugate people with force you lose their hearts; to convince people with your virtues you win their hearts.' Sun Zi, China's ancient military strategist, echoes this line of argument in his classic *The art of war*, stressing the wisdom and moral superiority of winning adversaries' hearts and minds, rather than attacking their fortified cities. Nye's characterisation of soft power as consisting of 'attraction' appears to be similar to the Confucian philosophy of winning people's loyalty through moral appeal. The Confucian belief that a country can obtain a great power status through a 'benevolent government' (*renzheng*) and through 'rule by virtues' (*dezhi*) comes close to Nye's (2004: 6) soft power as a combination of institutions, values and practice which are seen as legitimate and carrying moral authority to people beyond national boundaries.

The academic focus on soft power also orients toward domestic practices – the imperative to develop a coherent national value system, a sustainable developmental model, and national cohesion and cultural innovation (PUCSPRP[3] 2009a; Tong 2008). Similarly, they too see China's strong internal development as a way of enhancing its external influence – a traditional emphasis on self-cultivation as a means to strengthen one's position. In ascertaining soft power resources, Chinese scholars identify a similar but wider spectrum: the culture, political values, institutions, foreign policy and quality of its citizens (PUCSPRP 2009b), though with the overwhelming priority being placed on culture. However, while Nye sees American popular culture as part of its soft power, Chinese academics view China's traditional culture as the basis of soft power:

> Promoting Chinese culture refers, in fact, to disseminating traditional culture, not a modern one; though traditional culture could be packaged in a modern fashion. China's traditional culture is unique with potential universal values. It constitutes the foundation of China's cultural appeal. (ibid: 3)

Thus, despite complaints about China's popular culture being dominated by American cartoons, Japanese computer games and Korean TV soaps, the real concerns revolve around China's capacity to establish a national cultural identity that can incorporate traditional values and contemporary life, but also underpin future development (Men 2007a and b, 2008). The key to developing such a capacity, many believe, lies in the

effective and successful resolution of the tension between seeking inspiration from traditional values and pressing ahead with the country's modernisation project, i.e. 'modernising' China's cultural traditions (Tang 2009b; Zheng 2010).

The external dimension of soft power discussions is characterised by an articulation of a Chinese perspective to global issues based on the Confucian ideal of harmony (Huang et al 2006). In contrast to Nye's call to extend American liberal values and maintain a leadership position in the world, Chinese academics emphasise the need to develop a 'harmonious' relationship with different countries, nations and societies, through an appreciation of their cultures, traditions and values (Yang 2008). Thus, they are opposed to seeking global leadership as a soft power objective (Jia 2008). Most scholars believe the Confucian concept *he* represents China's core values. *He*, as a word with multi-dimensional meanings, can be translated as 'harmony', 'union' or 'peace', depending on the context. Prior to the arrival of the soft power concept, leading Chinese scholars (Fei 2000a, b and c; Zhang 2004) had already highlighted *he* as embodying China's time-honoured wisdom. However, it is *he er bu tong* (harmonising without homogeneity) that Chinese scholars argue symbolises a Chinese approach to global issues, and therefore constitutes the cultural foundation of a Chinese conception of soft power (Fang 2007).

As a quotation from Confucius' *Analects*, *he er bu tong* originally refers to a desirable personal quality that only a *junzi* (true gentleman) possesses. A *junzi*, as an idealised man, has achieved the highest level of virtue through self-cultivation. A *junzi* is capable of interacting harmoniously with others, without compromising his principles. The *he er bu tong*-based soft power articulates a Chinese vision of a desirable world order in an implicit critique of the Western-dominated and -promoted discourse of liberalism. *He er bu tong* as a Chinese approach to international conflicts assumes, first, that *he* should be the ultimate objective in international interactions. Second, it argues for an appreciation of cultural differences. Third (more importantly), it presumes that no values should be imposed upon others, because any claim of universal values has to be tested by the attraction they may exert on people of other cultures – a defining characteristic of 'soft power'. Implicitly, *he er bu tong* recognises the limit to any truth claim of universal values, and recognises that values are culture-specific and tradition-bound (Yang 2008).

Tapping into the deep well of Confucian traditions, Chinese intellectuals have constructed a discursive package of a traditional value-based soft power. However, most academics recognise that China's soft power lags far behind its hard power, gained mainly through economic growth. As a 'civilisation-state', China's external influence is seen as disproportionately weak. One scholar (Pang 2009) contends that China has not developed a 'China model' that can pass the test of time in tackling global issues and contributing to global governance. China's cultural repertoire merely provides a soft power potential, not soft power itself.

Institutional dynamics of soft power discourse

Given the nature of the political communication system in China, official formulations of soft power are propagated and circulated largely in the state media. However, increasingly, discussions, debates and contestations of dominant interpretations of soft power are taking place in wider media outlets, due largely to spaces being created by media transformations in three decades of media commercialisation as well as economic, social and cultural changes in post-reform China. Most notable is the change 'from control to negotiation' (Huang 2007) in the media system. That is, facing increasing resistance, pressure and challenges from various social sectors, the state has gradually relaxed its control over the media and allowed some negotiation to take place among different actors – the state, society, the market and the media. Though uneven in power relations, differing and dissenting views have steadily made their way into the mass media. Taking advantage of new channels of communication, individuals have started to participate in public debates to articulate their views on a wide range of issues. Moreover, parallel to linear top-down political communication by key state media institutions, managed by government departments, horizontal and rapidly expanding media platforms have emerged that engage closely with the public as media consumers, creating a nascent though limited civil sphere. It is in this changed and changing context of mass communication that the wider public have actively participated in the discursive formation of soft power.

Thus, a two-tier system operates in the dissemination and discussion of soft power. On the one hand, still defined as the CCP's mouthpiece, key state media organisations such as the *People's Daily* and China Central Television (CCTV) propagate official formulations. Hu Jintao's 17th CCP Congress speech, as a primary policy document, was extensively reported, thus providing guiding principles for soft power development. On the other hand, a host of other media outlets are engaging in a more open discussion of soft power, in addition to relaying official views. The Internet is by far the most popular and freest channel of communication favoured by the young, educated and relatively well-off urban population, which has largely switched off from conventional media (like television and newspapers) in seeking information. Thus, disparate views on soft power appear mostly on the Web. Significantly, in an effort to engage the general public but in particular the rapidly expanding number of 'netizens' – 450 million in total by the end of November 2010 – key state media organisations like the *People's Daily* have started to operate websites that provide a much broader range of information. These websites host a variety of forums that discuss momentous or controversial issues that may not appear in the print media. Open discussions of soft power can also be found on state media-sponsored online discussion forums, such as the 'Great Power Forum' (*qiang guo*

lun tan). So China's media have become far less linear, and consequently dominant interpretations of soft power are less hegemonic. It is in such a media environment that the concept of soft power, its mode of promotion and development and its wider role have been scrutinised, debated and contested, thereby contributing to a broader discursive formulation of the term.

The first area of contention revolves around strategies for developing China's soft power. Some (Gan 2008) insist that China should concentrate on the 'commonality of humanity' rather than the 'particularity of Confucian values' in extending its 'soft appeal'. Others focus on the approach to soft power, accusing state cultural management bureaucracies (entrusted by the CCP to do soft power development) of constraining China's soft power with their conservative attitudes towards artistic innovation and creation (Zheng 2008). Politicising cultural management, they argue, suffocates China's cultural creativity. Furthermore, it is contended that soft power development should not rely on state-centric, bureaucrat-led grand projects; rather, the state should help foster a favourable socio-political environment in which arts and culture can truly flourish. In a similar vein, some critiques focus on the official confusion over external communication (*dui wai xuan chuan*) to soft power projection, maintaining that soft power lies in the content, rather than the form (Ding 2008). A more radical view, however, questions the whole idea of soft power projection, claiming that Western soft influence is so strong that China does not stand a chance when it comes to a truly equal dialogue with the West (Du 2010). The soft power concept itself, it is argued, was designed in the US as a strategy to contain the rise of non-Western cultural influences, in the same way as Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' and Fukuyama's 'end of history' theses.

However, more substantial contestations relate to China's domestic politics. It is contested that soft power derives essentially from China's current situation – what China does now – rather than its traditional values (Jiang et al 2009). A comment typical of this view comes from an international relations scholar:

> Resolving domestic problems of disharmony[4] is directly relevant to the government's capability of domestic political mobilisation. It constitutes the foundation of China's capability of international political mobilisation. When a country is perceived as representing moral integrity, social progress, and the right direction of development, it will exert political appeal to other nations. Soft power is a form of international mobilisation capability. How the international community perceives our country is part of the basis upon which we can effectively enhance our international status and mobilisation capability. When the international community approves of our behaviour, our international status and mobilisation capability will rise, and vice versa. (Yan 2007: 1)

Significantly, this incisive but dissenting voice is not only posted on the intellectual elite website *Love Thinking* (*aisixiang[5]*), but is included in Peking University's

PUCSPRP report that is made fully available online in the CCP flagship *People's Daily*-sponsored website *People's Net* (*renmin wang⁶*). Thus, such a standpoint carries additional discursive weight in counterbalancing dominant interpretations of soft power. Indeed, as a major research project on soft power, Peking University's PUCSPRP report is forthright in assessing the importance of 'domestic institutions' in soft power development:

> For years, people in our country debated on whether we should adhere to the CCP one-party rule or follow the Western example of a multi-party system. Whether or not a multi-party system suits China's circumstances, the extent and duration of such a debate indicate that this Western-derived political system is more appealing to some people in China. (PUCSPRP 2009b)

This reflects the broader context of political development and debates, as well as the openness, extent and intensity of debates in some elite academic and political institutions. One Peking university professor (Pan 2008) complained about the CCP Central Party School emitting too many disparate voices – some argued for liberal politics, while others argued for authoritarian control. As a CCP senior official training agency, Pan believes it should maintain a consistent system of beliefs and leave intellectual debates on politics to academia.

The diversified understandings, interpretations and debates on soft power and criticisms of domestic politics manifest the increasing weight of the so-called 'people's character' of China's mass media, brought about largely by the economic momentum that has helped the media to expand 'negative freedom' (Berlin 1969) in non-political areas, and progressively depoliticised the state, the economy and culture, resulting in considerable media liberalisation (Lee 2001). The explosive growth of the popular media, unleashed by market forces and facilitated by advances in information technology, contrasts with declining Party paper circulations. The unchanging, stern-faced communication style of key state media institutions and ritualistic (though diminishing) chanting of Marxist ideology can hardly appeal to new and much better-informed generations of audiences.

The 'people's character' contrasts with the 'Party's character' of the mass media that demands that journalists toe the official line and identify with the CCP's political stand as an absolute principle. The Party character derives from the Leninist idea of journalism – subjugating journalism to political imperatives. The people's character emphasises that journalists put people's interests above all else. However, like 'people' in the traditional political ideology of *minben*, it remains an abstract and intangible category. According to CCP journalism orthodoxy, since the Party represents the best interests of the people, the Party's character *equates* to the people's character. Nevertheless, the Party vs. people tension has never eased and often surfaces when media practitioners seek greater freedom from the CCP ideologues in the name of the latter. Discursive negotiations on soft power, played out in the

19

media, reflect the changing nature of China's reform – change is no longer brought about by a simple implementation of policies determined solely by the political elites. There is growing space for political, intellectual and social actors to be engaged in an interactive process. Winning public support has become imperative for the CCP, because the broad social base and increased media space which alternative voices have gained, place growing pressure on the political elites. They have to try to use their dominant discursive position to cultivate a public attitude and knowledge congruent with these policies, though with increasing difficulty.

Conclusion

The most significant aspect of soft power discourse in China lies in a broad consensus by the political and intellectual elites that China's traditional values provide a much-needed ontological and epistemological underpinning for the country's future development. Despite their differences, policymakers and academics concur on the imperative of traditional cultural revival bolstered by popular support. Although it remains to be seen how traditional values can actually be applied through sustained institutional practice, it nonetheless seems inevitable that Marxist rhetoric will one day be displaced by an indigenous value system. It is reflected in the changing media systems in which soft power discourse is negotiated, mediated and reshaped, but ultimately reproduced and consumed in Chinese society. In the rapidly fragmented, diversified but expanding media and in the gradual shift of the media's role from a mouthpiece of the CCP to the 'modern bard' of the people, much broader-based voices are starting to emerge in shaping public opinion. For this reason, soft power discourse has become a significant part of China's identity politics, informed by wider social, cultural and political forces and processes, as China transforms itself from a revolutionary state to an emerging global power. As part of this identity transition, China has gradually changed its mindset in terms of its international outlook, from a 'victim' of Western powers to a 'responsible great power', as epitomised by the 2006 CCTV series *Rise of great powers.*[7] Witnessing the waning American influence following the Iraq invasion, China has become more convinced that balanced hard and soft power is vital for any great power to be sustained and respected. Thus, projecting soft power is not only strategically imperative in fending off China's negative external portrayal, but morally preferable in extending China's soft influence commensurable to its growing international roles.

In anticipating China's rise in the early 1990s, Lucien Pye (1994: 18) asked two fundamental questions: 'Where indeed are the Chinese headed?' and 'What will be the essence of state power in the new post-Cold War world order?' Capturing key Western concerns, these perceptive questions point to the nature of Chinese internal and external politics and identity. However, though recognising China as

a 'civilisation state' radically different from Western 'nation-states', Pye (1990: 58) nonetheless applied a largely Western 'transition model' to predict that China would either go astray or successfully convert to a Western polity – a typical end-of-history perspective. Yet China has kept moving ahead without adopting the Western mode of politics, while resorting increasingly to its own traditions for inspiration. Despite limited academic study on what China is, rather than what China should be, as in *When China rules the world* (Jacques 2009) and *The Chinese Communist Party as organisational emperor* (Zheng 2010), most research still seeks to understand China through a largely Western frame. Just as China prefers to use the 'China model' (Huang & Cui 2005; Yu et al 2006) rather than the 'Beijing Consensus' (Ramo 2004) in summarising China's reform in recent decades, soft power discourse is deeply embedded in China's own traditions. It is too early to evaluate the success of such a discourse and practice, but one thing is certain – China will follow its own mode of development and pathway to modernity that will connect meaningfully with its own cultural heritages as well as still evolving global norms.

Notes

1   Even trade with China, in the post-Cold War era, was politicised and framed as a Western choice between 'Mammon' (trade) and 'God' (human rights) (BBC2 1998).

2   Unless indicated otherwise, the translation from Chinese to English is the author's own.

3   Peking University China's Soft Power Research Project (PUCSPRP) is sponsored by the State Commission of Development and Reform (*guojia fagai wei*). The project *Study on strategies of enhancing national cultural soft power* is hosted by the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies at Peking University.

4   'Disharmony' insinuates social tensions and conflict. It normally refers to tensions created by widening gaps between rich and poor, for example.

5   Its homepage: www.aisixing.com. For this article, see www.aisixiang.com/data/13332.html

6   Its homepage: www.people.com.cn

7   The 12-episode documentary recounts the rise of nine 'great powers' in modern times – Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia/the Soviet Union, Japan and the United States.

References

BBC2. 1998. *East and West.* Television documentary series.
Berlin, I. 1969. *Four essays on liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cai, W. 2009. *Cai Wu: soft power is a hard priority* [*Cai Wu: ruan shili ye shi ying daoli*]. http://theory.people.cn/GB/166866/10062579.html

21

Cao, Q. 2006. Western representation of the 'Other'. In *Discourse as cultural struggle*, ed. Shi-xu, 105–122. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Chouliaraki, L. and N. Fairclough. 1999. *Discourse in late modernity: rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

De Bary, T. and W. Tu, eds. 1998. *Confucianism and human rights*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ding, S. 2008. *The dragon's hidden wings: how China rises with its soft power*. Plymouth: Lexington Books.

Ding, X. 2008. Misunderstanding of soft power by China's elites [*Zhongguo jingying dui ruan shili de wujie*]. http://www.aisixiang.com/data/22747.html

Du, W. 2010. Having a dialogue with the West with Confucian core values [*Yi rujia hexin jiazhi guan duihua xifang*]. http://www.aisixiang.com/31573.html

Fairclough, N. 1989. *Language and power*. New York: Longman.

_____. 1995. *Media discourse*. London and New York: Edward Arnold.

Fang, C. 2007. A comparative study of Chinese and American soft power [*Zhong mei ruan shili duibi*]. In *China's soft power strategy* [*Zhongguo ruan shili zhanlue*], ed. H. Men, 149–167. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House.

Fei, X. 2000a. On 'Harmonious without Homogeneity' [*Lun he er bu tong*], *People Daily Overseas Edition* 15 November: 3.

_____. 2000b. Economic globalisation and cultural reflections on China's 'two jumps over three levels' [*Jingji guan qiu hua yu dui zhongguo liang tiao san ji de wenhua sikao*]. *Guangming Daily*, 7 November: 8.

_____. 2000c. 'Harmonious without homogeneity' will be the only road to a multicultural world [*He er bu tong shi shijie wenhua duoyuan de weiyi xuanzhe*]. *Wenhui Daily*, 26 July: 10.

Gan, Y. 2008. On China's soft power [*Guanyu zhongguo de ruan shili*]. http://www.aisixiang.com/data/19116.html

Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, J. 1987. *The theory of communicative action, Vol 2: Lifeworld and system: a critique of functionalist reason*. London: Heinemann.

_____. 1998. *On the pragmatics of communication*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hall, S. 1992. The West and the rest: discourse and power. In *Formations of modernity*, ed. S. Hall and B. Gieben, 275–332. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Han, B. and Q.Y. Jiang. 2009. *Soft power: Chinese perspective [Ruan shili: zhongguo shijiao]*. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe.

Hu, J. 2007. *Report to the 17th CCP National Congress [Hu Jintao zai dang de shiqi da shang de baogao]*. Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, available in Chinese at http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2007-10/24/content_6938568_6.htm

Huang, C. 2007. From control to negotiation: Chinese media in the 2000s. *The International Communication Gazette* 69(5): 402–412.

Huang, P. and Z.Y. Cui, eds. 2005. *China and globalisation: the Washington Consensus, the Beijing Consensus, or what*? Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.

Huang, R.W. et al, eds. 2006. *International system and China's soft power [Guoji tixi yu zhongguo de ruan liliang]*. Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe.

Jacques, M. 2009. *When China rules the world: the rise of the Middle Kingdom and the end of the Western world*. London and New York: Allen Lane.

Jia, X. 2008. China's cultural soft power: win-win, contribution and harmony [*Zhongguo wenhua ruan shili: gongying, gongxian yu hexie*]. http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/166866/1002602.html

Jiang, P., et al. 2009. *How can China develop soft power [Zhongguo ruhe liancheng ruan shili]*. Beijing: Zhongguo Fazhi Chubanshe.

Lee, C.C. 2001. Rethinking the political economy: implications for media and democracy in greater China. *The Public* 8(3): 1–22.

Liu, J. 2006. Some essential issues in developing China's soft power [*Zhonguo ruan liliang jianshe de jige jiben wenti*]. In *The international system and China's soft power [Guoji tixi yu zhongguo de ruan liliang]*, ed. R. Huang, 101–115. Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe.

McQuail, D. 2005. Communication theory and the Western bias. In *Read the cultural other: forms of otherness in the discourses of Hong Kong's decolonization*, ed. Shi-xu, M. Kienpointner and J. Servaes, 21–32. New York: Walter de Gruyter & Co.

Men, H. 2007a. Report on China's soft power. *International Observation* 3: 37–46.

Men, H., ed. 2007b. *China's soft power strategy [Zhongguo ran shili zhanlue]*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House.

Meng, X. 2008. Cultural soft power in international exchange [*Duiwai wenhua jiaoliu zhong de wenhua ruan shili*]. http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/166866/10062641.html

Nye, J.S. 2004. *Soft power: the means to success in world politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Pan, W. 2008. Return to Minben: re-establishing China's political values [*Hui gui menben zhuyi, chongjian zhongguo de zhengzhi jiazhi*]. http://www.wyzxsx.com/Article/Class18/200801/31634.html

Pan, Z. 2006. On China's soft power. *International Review* 42(1): 1–14.

Pang, Z. 2009. The China model that will benefit the world has not taken shape [*Hui ji renlei de Zhongguo moshi yuan mei xingcheng*]. http://ccwe.org.cn/ccwe/upfile/file/pangzhongying(1).pdf

PUCSPRP. 2009a. *The practice of soft power in China, Part 1: the concept of soft power [Ruan shili zai zhongguo de shijian zhiyi – ruan shili gainian]*. Beijing: Beijing University.

_____. 2009b. *The practice of soft power in China, Part 2: national soft power [Ruan shili zai zhongguo de shijian zhi'er – guojia ruan shili]*. Beijing: Beijing University.

Pye, L. 1990. China: erratic state, frustrated society. *Foreign Affairs* 69(4).

_____. 1994. China: a superpower? *The Oxford International Review* (Winter): 18–25.

Ramo, J.C. 2004. *The Beijing Consensus*. London: the Foreign Policy Centre.

Said, E. 1993. *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Sheng, Z.H., ed. 2008. *Soft culture, real power: why should we enhance national cultural soft power [Ruan wenhua, zhen shili: wei shenme yao tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili]*. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe.

Shi-xu. 2007. Discourse studies and cultural politics: an introduction. In *Discourse as cultural struggle*, ed. Shi-xu, 3–16. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

_____. 2009. *A cultural approach to discourse*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

23

Tang, J., ed. 2009a. *Renowned scholars forum: soft power of a great nation [Gaoduan jiangtan, daguo ruan shili]*. Beijing: Huawen Chubanshe.

_____. 2009b. *Great power strategies*: *the rise of Chinese traditional culture and cultural regeneration [Da guo ce: guoxue ren yu wenhua chuancheng]*. Beijing: Renmin Ribao Chubanshe.

Tong, S.J. 2008. *Cultural soft power [Wenhua ruan shili]*. Chongqing: Chongqing Chubanshe.

Wang, Y. 2006. Summary of the Workshop on Building Chinese Soft Power [*Zhongguo de ruan liliang jianshe zhuanjia zuotan hui zongshu*]. In *the International system and China's soft power [Guoji tixi yu zhongguo de ruan liliang]*, ed. R. Huang, 134–142. Beijing: Shishi Chubanshe.

Yan, X. 2007. China needs to enhance its soft power [*Zhongguo ruan shili you dai tigao*]. http:www.aisixiang.com/data/13332.html

Yang, F.X. 2008. *From 'being friends to all nations' to 'harmonious world' [Cong 'xiehe wanbang' dao jianshe 'hexie shijie']*. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe.

Yu, K.P. et al., eds. 2006. *China model and the Beijing Consensus: beyond the Washington Consensus*. Beijing: Social Science Academic Press.

Zhang, D. 2004. On Chinese traditional culture [*Lun zhongguo chuantong wenhua*]. *People's Daily* website, 4 August.

Zheng, B. 2010. *China's soft power: two approaches that will determine China's future [Zhongguo ruan shili: jueding zhongguo mingyun de liang zhong silu]*. Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe.

Zheng, Y. 2008. What hinders the rise of China's soft power? [*Shi sheme zu'ai le zhongguo wenhua ruan liliang de jueqi*]. http://.aisixiang.com/data/19795.html

_____. 2010. *The Chinese Communist Party as organisational emperor*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.