

# A PEACEFUL LION

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHINESE SOFT POWER

Patrick Ho

**N**APOLEON once described China as a “sleeping lion” that would “shake the world” when woken. Some 200 years later, at a meeting celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations with France, President Xi Jinping declared that the lion had finally woken. Importantly, however, he described the Chinese “lion” as “peaceful, amicable, and civilized.”

President Xi’s remarks were received by some with cynicism and skepticism. Anxiety is a common reaction to change, such as the change represented by China’s rise to prominence. This anxiety, however, is neither justified by the context of the statements—which took place at a conference celebrating diplomatic exchange—nor by China’s history. Read more deeply, President Xi’s metaphor captures a strategy for Chinese soft power.

Whether one responds to the change with hope or anxiety, China has returned as a major power—an “awak-

ened lion,” with a powerful economy and a strong military. But unlike most other major powers, past and present, China has rarely embarked on significant military expeditions. Force has not been a major feature of Chinese diplomacy, and China does not see force as being necessary to establish its position as a leading nation. The lion is peaceful.

But it should still be a lion—and not just symbolically. China’s historical experience has frequently involved witnessing force, often applied by outsiders, undoing the progress and stability of its civilization—to name the more notable examples: the invasion of the Mongols, the Opium Wars fought with the British, and the Japanese invasion in World War II. This is something that skeptics of President Xi’s statements should keep in mind.

**T**hese accrued experiences are also in part what fueled the development of traditional Chinese values, which do not glorify conflict and war,

*Patrick Ho, an ophthalmic surgeon by training, is Deputy Chairman and Secretary General of the China Energy Fund Committee, a Hong Kong-based think-tank. He formerly served as Hong Kong’s Secretary for Home Affairs.*



Photo: CIRSD

Patrick Ho

but rather harmony and collaboration. And it is these ancient, tried and tested values—this identity as a peaceful lion—which China can, and should, use to promote its image around the globe.

In an increasingly connected and diverse world, China’s style of global engagement and diplomacy—its historical development, values, and culture—are becoming increasingly relevant. This essay argues that China can utilize its cultural identity—particularly its values—as a source of soft power. Together with its growing economic and military strength, China can use this soft power not only to ensure the development of the Chinese people, but also as a means to promote global peace and prosperity.

### SOFT POWER

**T**he concept of soft power features prominently in international affairs and has been embraced by many Chinese experts and scholars. But soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument. It is the ability to attract. As coined by the Harvard Kennedy School’s Joseph Nye, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”

However, soft power is by no means a standalone concept. As important as it may be, soft power is founded upon a country’s hard power: without the backing of military and economic might, it is meaningless.

Today, it is generally recognized that soft power can take many forms. Economic prosperity and military strength, once seen as aspects of a nation's hard power, are now understood as being able to also project soft power. An example is the use of military forces for humanitarian relief—which often reflects well on a nation's image and reputation. More traditional forms of soft power include cultural products, brands, and media.

Even Nye later noticed that soft power alone could not produce effective foreign policy. And that is why he introduced a new term called “smart power,” which combines hard and soft power in policymaking.

The impact of soft power also varies by audience. Less developed countries aspire to a more developed lifestyle—one that is comfortable and provides fulfillment of both basic and spiritual needs. Developing countries are therefore more likely to admire the values and strategies of prosperous countries. The result is generally that the latter have more extensive opportunities to extend their soft power within the former.

#### AMERICAN SOFT POWER

The United States is generally recognized as having extensive soft power, using brands and cultural symbols as channels for spreading American values. Hollywood and global media spread

values such as “democracy,” “freedom,” “individualism,” and “human rights” to all corners of the world. American soft power is largely ideology-driven, imposing so-called “universal values” on developing countries, with a focus on mass democratization. By energetically exporting its core values, the United States has cast itself as having the moral high ground over other countries.

However, a major weakness of American ideology is that it frequently pays little regard to local conditions and often treats less developed countries as societies in which Western institutions will automatically take root. As Fudan University's Zhang Weiwei wrote nearly a decade ago in the *International Herald Tribune*, it imposes liberalization before safety nets are set up, privatization before regulatory frameworks are put in place, and democratization before a culture of political tolerance and rule of law is established.

The Philippines, Haiti, and Iraq (amongst others) have shown that the end result of imposing ideology on a foreign country—without taking into account the traditions and heritage of that country, as well as the state of development and its inherent needs—is often mixed at best, and devastating at worst.

#### ZHONGHE GUOLI

While the West's foreign policy is certainly backed up by their military power and national strength,

what the Chinese government stresses is reinforcing the country's ‘comprehensive national power’ (or *zonghe guoli*)—the combined weight of its economic, military, and cultural power. This is something similar to Nye's smart power concept. An additional component of China's ‘comprehensive national power’ is social power, namely, the influence it gains as a result of people-to-people exchanges.

The world is changing. In 2008, the G20 replaced the G8. That same year, the United States gave birth to the global financial crisis, while, across the Pacific, China hosted the Beijing Olympics—an exercise in soft power. Developing economies continue to emerge, while historical powers are beginning to experience difficulties. Rising inequality, environmental problems, and low quality of life—among many other issues—are causing many to re-evaluate the hegemony of American values.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF VALUES

Values are the moral standards of society. They regulate our behavior, shape our character, influence our choices, and set our aspirations. Values are at work in the background of every economy, influencing the market. Ultimately, core values define a country's spiritual aims, and, more importantly, form the foundation of soft power.

Values are attractive only if they are applicable to a country's existing problems. The state of development and the unique circumstances of a country, therefore, weigh heavily on the effectiveness of soft power.

Psychology can provide an understanding of how different stages of economic development affect what values an audience will be receptive to. Various theories of developmental psychology have concluded that there are, in essence, three levels of existence. This is true for countries, as much as individuals. The primary goal is survival, followed by growth and propagation, and, finally, by spiritual aspirations—feeling valued, satisfied, and strong.

On the most fundamental level, individuals pursue personal security. In order to prevent starvation, freezing, and death, people need to acquire food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and health-care. At the next level, people start to pursue personal development and a better life, which may finally end with a sense of greed. In addition to self-preservation, propagation, and other physiological needs, people may have an excessive desire for resources—especially for property, such as money, real estate, or other symbols of wealth. Once their living standards reach a certain level, people yearn for the highest level of need, comprised of self-esteem and self-actualization.

Likewise, the policies and behaviors of a state are reflective of the collective will and desire of its people across different stages of development. American economist Walt Whitman Rostow has developed a model of economic growth for countries. The model postulates that economic growth occurs in different stages of varying length.

The traditional society is characterized either by subsistence agriculture or hunting and gathering. During the “take-off” stage, urbanization increases, industrialization proceeds, and technological breakthroughs occur. According to Rostow, the “take-off” period for Great Britain occurred during 1783–1802; America’s was a little later, around 1843–1860; and China only entered this phase in 1952.

The “take-off” stage is followed by a long interval of sustained growth, known as the “drive to maturity.” In Rostow’s words, that is the period when a society has effectively applied the range of modern technology to the bulk of its resources. The “maturity” years for Great Britain and the United States were 1850 and 1900, respectively,

but China had not reached “maturity” before Rostow died in 2003.

This tells us why developed countries and developing countries always have different policy priorities and vary in social norms. This also helps to explain why China polled more positively than the United States in Pakistan, Tunisia, Russia, Lebanon, Greece, Egypt, Jordan, Indonesia, Argentina, and other developing countries in notable surveys. What most developing countries need is perhaps not a liberal democratic government with American standards, but a good government capable of fighting poverty, ensuring security, delivering basic services, and improving people’s living standards.

*What most developing countries need is perhaps not a liberal democratic government with American standards, but a good government capable of fighting poverty, ensuring security, delivering basic services, and improving people’s living standards.*

are far more appealing to them. Soft power only accrues when conditions are right. Efforts to export ideas like Western democracy may succeed in one country and fail in another, as they depend on many cultural, political, and historical factors, as well as the developmental stage of a particular country.

## CHINESE SOFT POWER

To understand what soft power with Chinese characteristics really means, one must start by looking at the traditional cultural heritage of China together with Chinese practices.

The Renaissance brought humanism to Western European society, which was previously dominated by the Catholic Church. Western humanism centers on the ‘self,’ emphasizes individualism, and promulgates what it describes as the “universal values” of individual rights, personal achievement, efficiency, equality, freedom, and justice.

Oriental humanism focuses on interpersonal relationships that prescribe the essence of a Chinese person. Chinese people have consistently stressed collective rights and responsibilities, a strong sense of community, tolerance, acceptance, charity, collective solidarity, discipline, and harmony. The essence of the Chinese humanist alternative is a society built not on individualism, but around a deeply engrained moral code that is the basis for strong family ties, resilient social structures, and closely-knit com-

munity life. In this Chinese society, the government is regarded in high esteem as a necessary good, and not a necessary evil. Such a world outlook helps foster a civilization with a sense of tolerance in pursuit of coexistence and harmony.

That is to say, the most important core value in the Chinese civilization is har-

*The essence of the Chinese humanist alternative is a society built not on individualism, but around a deeply engrained moral code that is the basis for strong family ties, resilient social structures, and closely-knit community life.*

mony or ‘he.’ Throughout history, China—comprising 56 different races—has always subscribed to the principles of tolerance, forgiveness and self-commitment. Through such broad mindedness, China has been able to embrace the world, and digest and absorb foreign cultures and ways of thinking without being insistent of its might and assertive of its power.

The concept of soft power—the ability to get what you want through cultural attraction—is also deeply rooted in Chinese history. With 5,000 years of history and the experience of more than 15 dynasties—seven of which had a longer history than the United States—China has experienced how a country’s soft power can rise and fall in different historical cycles.



The Chinese have recorded at least four periods of prosperity. The first is the Zhou Dynasty (1042–996 BC), during which the Chinese feudal system of administration was introduced. The second is the Han Dynasty (180–141 BC), when emperors governed through a principle of non-interference, overseeing progress in farming, and peaceful development. They were not only able to repel the invasions of the Mongols from the north, but were also able to dispatch envoy Zhang Qian to forge the first contacts with the West, opening up the Silk Road for trade. The third was in the Tang Dynasty (627–649 AD), when China's GDP was about one third of the world's, and students came from Japan and neighboring countries to study in China. The fourth rise of China occurred in the Ming Dynasty (1403–1435), when Admiral Zheng He and his powerful fleets were sent to sail from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, to Africa and perhaps, some have argued, even to America—some 71 years before Columbus.

During the times of its great dynasties, China typically advocated policies of non-interference

and peaceful development. Whereas Julius Caesar said “I came, I conquered,” the Chinese said “I came, I saw, I made friends, and I went home.” In their expeditions abroad, the Chinese fought no battles, seized no colonies, and captured no slaves. China attracted tributaries from far and wide, many seeking protection, trade and growth. But what also drew them to China was admiration for its culture and the knowledge that it symbolized a better way of life. China achieved this through demonstration—its actions, and not its words.

*Whereas Julius Caesar said “I came, I saw, I conquered,” the Chinese said “I came, I saw, I made friends, and I went home.” In their expeditions abroad, the Chinese fought no battles, seized no colonies, and captured no slaves.*

China attracted even prospering societies. In the thirteenth century, we had the Venetian geographer Marco Polo striding across Asia for 24 years in search of the then modern values of the Orient. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit priest, visited China. Not only did he come to preach Christianity, but also to spread the Western knowledge of mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. At the same time, Western priests admired Chinese culture and values. Ricci once wrote that the ideals of Plato's *Republic*, defining justice and order in the city-state, had already been realized in China.

Joachim Bouvet, a French priest and Sinologist, is likewise worthy of note. In 1688, after Bouvet arrived in Beijing as a French royal mathematician, he took over as Emperor Kangxi's teacher of Western studies. He made a thorough study of the Chinese Classics and concluded that a certain period in the Chinese history does not belong only to the Chinese, but to all of mankind. In his letters to German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Bouvet wrote favorably about the ancient Chinese book of I-Jing and the Chinese philosophy of “yin-yang,” from which Leibniz later drew reference in the development of both his binary system and the theory that, centuries later, led to the development of the computer. These values were not disseminated abroad by the Chinese. It was the aforementioned Western admirers themselves who took them home.

Up until the seventeenth century China, with its rich history and philosophy, had been the world's top cultural powerhouse, attracting not only its East Asian neighbors, with whom China shared a Confucian heritage, but also a wider international community. However, in the late Kangxi era, mandarins were still enthralled by their own cultural refinement and did not feel challenged at all. Following a lengthy dispute over religious protocol between China and the Vatican, the door for cultural exchange

was callously closed, leading to a state of mutual isolation.

In the eighteenth century, the British Industrial Revolution, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution dramatically changed the face of Western civilization. Western countries, aiming to enrich themselves with natural resources through their military supremacy, forcibly expanded colonialism to the East.

In 1840, Great Britain, prompted by its opium merchants, invaded China and launched the First Opium War. China then, as the main power in the East, generated about one-third of global GDP and had military forces numbering 800,000. The British had just 7,000 men in their expeditionary force. Nonetheless, China lost the war. The Qing Government had hardly negotiated grossly unequal treaties with Great Britain and the other invaders when the Second Opium War broke out in 1860, at which point China's GDP was 1.6 times that of Great Britain. China lost again. Then the disastrous Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1894, when China's GDP was five times that of Japan. And China lost that war, as well.

For much of the last 2,000 years, the GDP of China was the highest in the world. Even following the two Opium Wars of 1840 and 1860, which

China lost to the British, China's GDP constituted one-third of the world's total. China then realized that its GDP represented prosperity, and not proportionate national strength. China was big and prosperous, but not healthy and strong. China became the "sick man of East Asia."

Consequently, China's soft power was no longer effective. It had lost the moral high ground. After being brought to its knees at gun point by the West, China realized that it had to catch up with the Western world, and has since strived successfully to strengthen its military, economy, and political institutions. The Self-Strengthening Movement of 1861

attempted to introduce military reforms but failed. In 1898, the Hundred Days' Reform, aimed at setting up a constitutional monarchy, was crushed by the Royal Court. Sun Yat-sen was successful in overthrowing the Qing dynasty and, with it, bringing the imperial system of governance in China to an end in 1911, but the reformed governing structure that was put in its place did not last long. The May Fourth Movement, which took place in 1919, was a cultural revolution that

attempted to instill Western values of democracy and science in order to strengthen the country.

China, taken to task by the West, began to question whether the traditional core values of its ancestors were still applicable in managing the cogent problems of the modern era.

The reforms and self-renewal movements that occurred throughout the various stages of China's modernization process over the last century embraced the ideals of inheriting the past and ushering in the future. Even into the formative stages of the new People's Republic after 1949, China has been preoccupied with one major task—modernization through a series of processes of self-reflection, self-renewal, and self-fortification, trying to re-endow traditional core values with new meanings and applications.

Because of the unfavorable international environment and domestic limitations, repeated reforms and movements failed to provide a forlorn and war-torn China with all-round modernization. Culturally, however,

*China's experience is also one to which many countries today can relate: unequal treatment by major powers, the difficulties of development, and the desire to maintain one's national identity and culture, while simultaneously stepping into the modern world.*

these difficult times helped to fortify Chinese values. These values—which at times have been on the verge of being forsaken and denounced—provided the necessary cohesive spiritual force to bind the Chinese people together throughout these periods of trial and tribulation.

China's experience is also one to which many countries today can relate: unequal treatment by major powers, the difficulties of development, and the desire to maintain one's national identity and culture, while simultaneously stepping into the modern world. And what China can offer the world is not only its time-tested values, but also the lessons it learned from having to leap into modernity.

Until recently, the twists and turns China experienced throughout its modernization process compromised its ability to effectively exert its soft power. But with its success in recent years, and against a backdrop of failing international institutions and systems of governance, the socialist system with Chinese characteristics is beginning to gain traction abroad.

Over the past 30 years, China has transitioned from a revolutionary state to a developmental state; from a planned economy to a market economy with Chinese characteristics;

and from a poor, backward agricultural country to the second-largest economy in the world. Six hundred and fifty million people were lifted out of poverty, accounting for 80 percent of the world's poverty alleviation over that period. This was vital to China's modernization, as it was conducive to integrating such an ancient giant civilization into the modernized international system.

China's modern system of governance is based on traditional values. But unlike in the past, when China's acclaimed culture and social system was a powerful source of attraction in and of itself, modern China is re-establishing its attractiveness by demonstrating to the world that its ancient values are still applicable to today's problems.

#### **'ONE BELT, ONE ROAD'**

Beijing has started to pay more attention to enhancing its soft power since the start of the new millennium. In 2002, then-President Jiang Zemin announced the decision to build a system of "socialist spiritual civilization" at the 16<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China (CPC) Congress. Although the CPC Report did not explicitly employ the term "soft power," it highlighted the importance of culture and the fact that "its status and functions are becoming more and more outstanding in the competition of overall national strength."

At the 17<sup>th</sup> CPC Congress in 2007, then-President Hu Jintao urged China “to enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country in order to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests.” This was the first time that a document from the highest authoritative government body had explicitly promoted the use of “soft power.”

In a speech at a group study session for members of the Political Bureau of the CPC in 2014, President Xi vowed to promote China’s cultural soft power by disseminating modern Chinese values and showing the charm of Chinese culture to the world. “China should be portrayed as a civilized country featuring a rich history, ethnic unity and cultural diversity, and as an oriental power with good governance, a developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity, and beautiful mountains and rivers,” Xi said. In the same speech, he affirmed that China should also be marked as a responsible country that advocates peaceful and common development, safeguards international justice, and makes contributions to humanity as a socialist country which is open, amicable, promising, and vibrant.

Recently, President Xi put forward this strategic concept of building the ‘One Belt, One Road.’ This represents China’s third “knock” on the door of the West—after the expeditions of envoy Zhang Qian and Admiral Zheng He.

The ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative is an ambitious trans-Eurasia and cross-oceanic economic strategy aimed at boosting the connectivity of countries and peoples. Realized through the construction of an economic and cultural corridor

along the ancient Silk Road (extending from the West Pacific coast in the east to the Baltic and Mediterranean seas in the west), it updates the historical Silk Road with new ideas.

The new Silk Road initiative is open to all countries and peoples interested in being connected for mutual de-

velopment—regardless of their forms of government, cultural and religious backgrounds, or geographic location. This initiative focuses on tolerance, reconciliation, peace, and win-win cooperation in which no one will be left out, and no one will have to take second place. Crucially, the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative is neither about seeking spheres of influence nor striving for hegemony. Rather, it is about making connections, accommodating

*President Xi put forward his strategic concept of building the ‘One Belt, One Road.’ This represents China’s third “knock” on the door of the West—after the expeditions of envoy Zhang Qian and Admiral Zheng He.*

differences, embracing diversity, realizing potentials, sharing capacities, and enabling other joint goals and prospects.

Since the initiative was first proposed in 2013, more than 60 states have responded positively and nearly all major states—including the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and some other American allies—have applied to join the nascent Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Building institutions and providing global public goods is a new chapter for Chinese soft power.

*Building institutions and providing global public goods is a new chapter for Chinese soft power.*

#### CONTRASTING APPROACHES

In contrast to America’s proactive and assertive use of its soft power, China’s soft power remains subtle, low profile, defensive, and reactive—primarily aimed at allaying fears about China’s rise, improving China’s global image, and clearing up misunderstandings about its intentions. The objective is not to convert others to a particular way of thinking or way of life. This is because the Chinese have learned from history that there is no perfect civilization, just as there is no civilization that is devoid of any merit. Beijing’s diplomatic policy always stresses the preservation of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, upholding the principle of noninterference in other countries’ internal affairs, and respecting the different ideologies and social systems of other countries.

Furthermore, unlike the American approach of serving as the self-ordained missionaries of the world—seeking to change it through soft power exports of American values and the American dream—the Chinese approach to soft power is more holistic. The Chinese seek to develop their soft power simultaneously in both domestic and international spheres. For instance, the notion of building a harmonious world is not meaningful only at the international level. It is also a domestic policy goal: China strives for the develop-

ment of social equality and justice, in order to achieve the “moderately-prosperous society” imagined by Confucius—the *xiaokang shehui*.

By practicing these values and putting them into action, China is approaching soft power in a novel way. China projects its soft power through projects that demonstrate what it believes in, and through implementation of a domestic system that has been proven to work. It does not project soft power with words, or by preaching from a moral pulpit, but through leading by example. China never requires others to copy its ways. It accepts that what it has to offer is one of the many possible ways to run a country and lead a nation to success. Rather than trying to ‘sell’ its values to others, China acts in ways that makes others seek to emulate it.

In this globalized world, we are witnessing important revolutions that are profoundly reshaping the world. Not too long ago, English poet John Donne wrote “No man is an island entire of himself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” With our interests so intertwined, we rise and fall together. We should resist the temptation of zero-sum games and a winner-takes-all approach. As Nye argued, “the development of soft power need not be a zero-sum game. If Chinese soft power increases in the U.S. and vice versa, it will help make conflict less likely.”

We have different values and sometimes they appear contradictory. But the wisdom of Chinese thinking is in seeing different values as complementary rather than incompatible opposites. Different values are seen as two ends of a singular spectrum, just like the yin and yang of tai chi. The two sets of values operate with one another, as two

opposing principles in nature, complementing and supplementing one another. One would be incomplete without the other.

In the Chinese mindset, modernization is neither a zero-sum game nor a life and death competition. It is a free zone offering unlimited opportunities for diverse development and mutual cooperation, while our respective heritage can be preserved. By combining the strengths of the East and the West, we can make possible a multi-polar world order for the modern era.

The sleeping lion has awakened, but “it is a peaceful, amicable and civilized lion.” In choosing whether to believe the argument laid forth in this essay, I would ask the reader to bear in mind the old Chinese saying that “actions speak louder than words.” For soft power is, indeed, not only what one says; it is what one does, and, most importantly, what one is. ●

*Rather than trying to 'sell' its values to others, China acts in ways that makes others seek to emulate it.*

zone offering unlimited opportunities for diverse development and mutual cooperation, while our respective heritage can be preserved. By combining the strengths of the East and the West,