Sino-U.S. Comparisons of Soft Power

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Abstract: This article proposes a method for measuring soft power. Overall, it is estimated that China has roughly a third of America's power in this respect. Three factors constitute the soft power of a country: its international appeal, its external and its internal mobilization capabilities. In the short term, China cannot hope to catch up in international appeal and needs to find a balanced way to develop both hard and soft power. It needs to set policy guidelines based on equality and justice, enhance its capabilities for rallying both external and domestic support, and concentrate on improving its social credibility and international strategic reputation. In doing so, it is hoped that China will be able to narrow the gap in these areas within four to five years.

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Chinese academics have discussed soft power in some depth over the past few years but the absence of a quantitative analysis has hindered comparisons between China and America in this area. This article proposes a method to assess the gap. It explores the factors at work and looks at a number of ways in which China could close the gap.

Achievements and Shortcomings

Until 2007, Chinese research was conducted from a number of perspectives. There were discussions about how the term "soft power" should be translated, its origin and development, what it meant and what its flaws were.[1] There was heated discussion in many international relations periodicals and there was debate about the best ways for China to boost its soft power, with one school of thought stressing the political and other cultural factors involved.[2]

At present research is still mostly confined to the debating the character of soft power, with assessment of its size or extent left virtually untouched. Some say that since such a concept cannot be quantified, its size and extent defies assessment. For example, some scholars think that soft power cannot be quantified with a couple of indicators, because its impact is uncertain and often determined by subjective impressions.

Wang Jingbing compared China and Japan's soft power by distributing questionnaires among Japanese students at Osaka Sangyo University. However, his analysis, based on concrete evidence, lacks objectivity, because the answers were only the subjective impressions of Japanese students, which did not necessarily represent the views of other peoples of the world.[3] Similarly, favorable impressions of Iran in the eyes of Pakistani students do not necessarily indicate that America is inferior to Iran in terms of soft power.

Although some scholars have admitted the necessity for a quantitative analysis, they have failed to find to an appropriate method. Others have advocated a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, but ended up in producing only a qualitative analysis. Although aware of the need to indicate the dimensions of soft power, others were unable to propose a formula by which these could be measured.[4] Yet others have asserted that the same power cannot be clearly separated into hard or soft elements, being sometimes one, and sometimes the other and thus a dynamic approach was called for. They even talked about horizontal and vertical variations of both hard and soft power and the relation between the two.[5]Yet in the end, all these different approaches were limited to a qualitative analysis, only describing China.

The absence of a quantitative analysis has therefore resulted in subjective impressions rather than an objective analysis and comparison of soft power between China and other countries. Some scholars discussed this comparison between China and America only in philosophical terms, such as soft power in a relative or absolute sense, in an independent or related context, under government or non-government dominance, and its origin and components.[6] However, none of these shows how big the gap is and nor even which element of soft power is the most effective.

A distinction has been drawn between government-dominant and non-government-dominant soft power, but this cannot show which is more influential, government-driven or private endeavor. Post-war Japanese soft power has been mainly non-government-driven, but Japan is not ahead of China in this arena. In fact, even without such comparison, it is easy to see that America is ahead of China. One analyst lists the multiple components of China's soft power including culture, concepts, development model, and participation in the international system and rankings in international institutions. However he fails to show methods to measure and compare them. For example, he considers that rankings in international institutions and development models are important and says that China's model has captured world attention.[7] But numerical ranking cannot be used as a measure of extent. Similarly, we cannot ascertain whether or not America's development model is the more attractive. It is evident, therefore, that listing components alone cannot reveal the gap between the two.

Furthermore, absence of a quantitative measurement makes it impossible for an international comparison of strong and weak points. Therefore such suggestions for enhancing China's soft power would be devoid of relevance.[8] Some scholars have opted for an expansion of inter-personal communication, attracting still more foreign capital and encouraging Chinese enterprises to go global and promote China's cultural

heritage in order to enhance its international image.[9] But such suggestions suffer from a lack of direction. In fact, there was no noteworthy rise in China' s soft power in the 20 years of reform and opening up in the period 1978-1998. By contrast, Japan is ahead of China in expanding inter- personal communication through the channels mentioned above, yet Tokyo still remains behind in comparison, for foreigners now learning Chinese far outnumber those learning Japanese.

In the Cold War years, the Soviet Union was behind Western developed countries such as Britain, France, Germany and Japan, in the same three areas of political liberalization, global enterprises, and the preservation of national culture. Yet in soft power at least Moscow did not lag behind, and, if anything, rose above these countries in soft power. This shows that without a quantitative measurement, it would be difficult to gauge the exact impact.

A quantitative analysis, moreover, serves as the basis for effective policy suggestions. Some experts hope to preserve the vitality of a socialist system with Chinese characteristics and indeed there is some truth in their argument.[10] But internationally, socialism is now at low ebb. It is hard to assess the appeal of the Chinese social system. If the international environment and the Chinese social system remain unchanged, how can the appeal of socialism be rationalized? Others suggest spreading Chinese culture across the world, a good idea indeed! But cultural appeal comes from a long, natural cumulative process. Here state policy stimulus would get us nowhere.

A Case Study

Thus far scholars have yet to reach consensus on the components of soft power[11] despite their heated discussion ever since former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye came up with the concept. In his words, "soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others….It is leading by example and attracting others to do what you want."[12]Later on, he added that it is composed of a country's cultural attractiveness, the appeal of its ideology or political values, and its influence in the international system. Even so, the concept as it stands is not a useful way of assessing the gap between countries. We therefore wish to redefine the concept as "a combination of a country's international attractiveness, and its external and internal mobilization capabilities."[13]

By international appeal we mean the power of a country to attract other countries voluntarily to follow and imitate it. This appeal comes from the attraction of its political system or cultural model. The success of its political system will create an international example for others to follow of their own accord. Cultural homogeneity also breeds affinity among like-minded countries and facilitates their solidarity in international affairs. Moreover, the international influence or dissemination of a country's culture likewise promotes understanding, an acceptance and admiration of its cultural concepts among nations with different cultures.

By international mobilization capacity we mean the non-compulsory influence of a country to allow others to accept its proposals or demands. It is derived mainly from strategic partnerships with other countries or its powers for formulating international rules and regulations. The more partnerships it has the easier it will be for that country to win wider support in the community of nations. By the same token, the more formulating powers it enjoys the greater will be the possibility for the acceptance by other nations of its policy stance on international affairs.

As for domestic mobilization capability, we mean the internal political support a country can muster through non-compulsory means. Failure to win extensive domestic support for its policy stance on world affairs would translate into international apathy. So a country's internal mobilization ability has a direct bearing on its international influence. Such ability is evident among two social sectors, the elite and the grassroots.

The three component concepts of soft power listed in the definition above need to be translated into indicators that can be quantified. Only then can a related quantitative comparison be possible between China and the United States. For this, we have designed the following quantifying indicators:

1.Appeal of political system: a comparison between the number of countries following similar political systems;

2.Cultural allure: comparisons in the number of countries with similar national culture, of films exported, and of international student enrollment;

3.Powers for laying down international rules: comparisons in the number of allies in the UN Security Council, voting rights in the World Bank and IMF;

4.Mobilization capacity among the domestic elite: proportion of representatives from the ruling party;

5.Mobilization capability among the domestic grassroots: proportion of members of the ruling party among the adult population.

[1] Liu Qing, Wang Litao, "A Summary of Discussions on Soft Power in China in Recent Years," *International Forum*, Vol. 3, 2007.

[2] *World Economics and Politics*, No. 7, 2007; *Global Times*, May 22, August 2, and others.

[3] Wang Jinbin, "An Analysis of Chinese and Japanese Soft power with Concrete Evidence: Examination of a Questionnaire Survey among Japanese Students at the Osaka Sangyo University," *World Economics and Politics*, No.7, 2007, p. 30.

[4] Meng Honghua, "An Evaluation Report on China's Soft Power," (Part I) International Observer, No. 2, 2007.

[5] Zheng Yongnian, Zhang Chi, "Soft Power in International Politics: A Case Study of China," *World Economics and Politics*, No.7, 2007.

[6] Fang Changping, "Soft Power in International Politics and Observes of China's Soft Power," *World Economics and Politics*, No. 7, 2007, pp. 22-25.

[7] Meng Honghua, "An Evaluation Report on China's Soft Power," (Part II) *International Observer*, No. 2, 2007.

[8] We do not deny that some suggestions are clearly aimed at problems.

[9] Wang Jinbin, "An Analysis of Chinese and Japanese Soft power with Concrete Evidence: Examination of a Questionnaire Survey among Japanese Students at the Osaka Sangyo University," *World Economics and Politics*, No.7, 2007, p. 35.

[10] Zhang Zhan, Li Haijun, "Three Factors of China's Soft Power in International Politics," *Research on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, No. 4, 2003.

[11] Joseph Nye, Jr., *Hard Power and Soft Power*, compiled by Meng Honghua, Beijing University Press. 2005. Elaboration on soft power by Joseph Nye can be found in his following works: "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, Issue 80, Fall 1990; *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power,* New York; Basic Books 1990; *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone,* New York; Oxford University Press, 2002; *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,* New York: Public Affair, 2004.

[12] Joseph Nye, Jr., *Hard Power and Soft Power*, pp. 106-110.

[13] International attractiveness, international and domestic mobilization capabilities all interact with each other. They are treated here as three separate elements for greater understanding.