

***China's view of European cultural soft power and recommendations for Europe to strengthen its soft power positioning***

For realist scholars, the concept of power and more importantly the distribution of power explain international relations. At the end of the cold war, many Chinese scholars were curious to see if the European Union (EU) could be regarded as an independent power from the United States and also if the EU was more than just an economic power. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a gradual shift from a realist perspective of power politics to a liberal and constructivist approach was observed worldwide. Europe watchers in China thus have paid more attention to the EU model as a normative and cultural soft power. The purpose of this paper is to define China's perception of the European cultural soft power and to explore how Chinese academics and authorities see this model as a possible inspiration for China's rising cultural power in the world. In particular, are globalists and constructivists really influential in China? Secondly and from the opposite view, taking into account the European interest, what should be the EU's position to maintain its cultural weight and enhance its political influence in the future international order?

China's peaceful rise is a hotly debated topic in China, although the Chinese government has officially abandoned the term in favour of "peaceful development" (和平发展). One of the ideas of soft power is China's peaceful rise and the experience of Europe as a soft power. According to contemporary scholars like Song

Xinning<sup>1</sup>, some European characteristics can be learnt by China. According to Song Xinning, the EU wisely and successfully managed its relationship with its neighbouring countries and with the international community thanks, among others, to the cultural factor. According to another contemporary Chinese academic Xu Jin<sup>2</sup>, the EU never had a policy of promoting culture and it was until recently the domain of each member state to decide how to promote its own culture. However, since the new millennium the EU has insisted on the promotion of culture as a vital element in its foreign policy with the aim of enlarging the influence of European cultures and values in the rest of the world (via an agenda for culture: “文化议程”). Furthermore, the EU tries to create a spontaneously cooperative environment in which people from different cultural backgrounds can live, work and create together to overcome the tensions and conflicts caused by different political and social systems (via the concept of the Alliance of Civilizations: “文明联盟”). According to Xu Jin, these measures help the EU to spread its cultures and values to developing countries and exert a fine influence on the people’s way of producing, living and thinking, a sort of Unity In Diversity (“多样性中的一致性”). For Xu Jin concretely, this policy of cultural exchange has different levels: 1/ the “European neighborhood policy” level which primarily targets countries and regions on the periphery of Europe, the Mediterranean Basin and near Central Asia. As a large number of these countries

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<sup>1</sup> Song Xinning - 宋新宁, Professor of International Relations, Deputy Dean, School of International Studies; Director, Centre for European Studies, Renmin University of China: *conference at the European Studies Centre, Sichuan University*, May 2009

<sup>2</sup> Xu Jin (徐进), Associate Professor at East Asia Normal University, “文化与对外关系: 欧盟的作法及启示 – *Culture and Foreign Relations: EU’s approaches and their Implications*”, September 2009

are Islamic, the cultural exchange is based on a Christian-Muslim dialogue<sup>2/</sup> the “Balkan countries policy” (including Turkey) level for countries considered as European and potential candidates to join the EU 3/ “the development world policy” level associated with the issue of assimilating cross-cultural diversification globally. Song Xinning and Yu Xin address the question of Europe’s response to a multicultural diversity and establish regional integration and unity in diversity as key factors of success. Establishing good relationships with neighbouring countries in Europe through the regional integration process in several fields such as economics, politics and cultural affairs contributes to the European cultural soft power and may hold promise to the future evolution of East Asian Community.

Beyond an intellectual point of view, what is China’s perception of the EU today? In China, the EU reflects more of a cultural image than an economic one. The EU is considered at the origin of discoveries and seen as an important contributor to scientific progress or literature, as described in the book written by Zheng Lihua, Anne-Sophie Boisard and Dominique Desjeux on the way Chinese see Europeans: “modern physics in England with Newton, arts and literature in France, Germany with its genius figures, good or bad, who have the ability to rule the world”<sup>3</sup>. The EU’s principal weakness, from a Chinese popular perspective, is a continuing disharmony between countries. On the basis of these statements and testimonies, Chinese ways of understanding European cultural soft power is fairly multidimensional: on one hand, it is described as a political tool aimed at enhancing regional integration and promoting unity in diversity, on the other hand it reflects

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpts of interviews of Chinese people, Zheng Lihua, Anne-Sophie Boisard and Dominique Desjeux. « *Comment les Chinois voient les Européens. Essai sur les représentations et les valeurs des Chinois* »

the bright past experience of European discoveries which is, nevertheless, happening in slow motion nowadays as a result of disharmony between European countries.

China's growing cultural power in the world is highly debated by Chinese authorities and scholars, and the European experience is closely analyzed. The objective for China is to outline the way forward in terms of cultural matters and avoid pitfalls. In the past three decades, China's economic performance has captured the attention of the world however little consideration has been paid to China's sustained efforts in exporting and exercising its cultural power. Chinese debates on the sources of soft power tend to adhere to Nye's conceptualization that soft power derives from three aspects: a national culture, political values and foreign policy (when endorsed by moral authority). Since Chinese political values and foreign policy are to some extent under criticism, of these three the most neutral aspect consists of national culture. As a result, Chinese culture has been the most promoted source of Chinese soft power in the latest years. The recent examples of Chinese cultural expressions are abundant and the most obvious examples are traditional Chinese arts and crafts, ranging from Beijing Opera, calligraphy, traditional medicine, Chinese language etc. The Shanghai World Expo last year is probably the latest notable event that put China on the global stage of the soft powers nations. On the long run, the most striking symbol of Chinese cultural expansion is probably the network of Confucius Institutes worldwide. This network is coordinated by the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Han Ban - 汉办) in Beijing and is equivalent to the Alliance Francaise or German Goethe Institute. Resources at stake are huge: since the inauguration of the first Confucius Institute in 2004, 55 institutes have opened every year (one each week) with an objective of 1000 institutes by

2015-2020. The total budget, wholly financed by the Han Ban, was about 160 million USD in 2008 about the same budget as the Alliance Francaise. Around 120 000 students are enrolled<sup>4</sup> compared to 440 000 students in the Alliance Francaise network. Current discussion of the cultural dimension of China's soft power has been predominantly focused on the Confucius Institutes and the growing popularity of learning the Chinese language. Yet, some Chinese scholars like Professor Ting Wai<sup>5</sup> believe that China must have significant inventions or innovations in culture, thoughts, ideas, institutions and values in order to contribute to the development of human civilization and thus see China become a truly great power. In his article, *Lessons on China's soft power from the Eiffel Tower*, Ting Wai explains on what China should rely on to build up its soft power and how the European experience can be seen as a model. In his opinion, what matters most in terms of culture is innovation. For instance, the Eiffel Tower has become a world famous landmark, not because of its usefulness in the 20th century as a television broadcasting transmission tower, or because it attracts a large number of tourists, hence securing large earnings for the city of Paris every year, but because it represents a pioneering construction work that increased tremendously the height of man-made structures. In Ting Wai's view and to other intellectuals like Shogo Suzuki<sup>6</sup>, while Nye's original work had examined the role of contemporary popular American or European culture and its role in enhancing soft power, Chinese scholars tend to look to history and lack creativity.

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<sup>4</sup> Barthelemy Courmont : « *Soft power, le nouvel outil marketing des états* », December 2010

<sup>5</sup> Ting Wai belongs to the Department of Government and International Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University and is the President of Hong Kong Association for European Studies.

<sup>6</sup> Soft Power and US foreign policy, Chapter 12 by Shogo Suzuki "*the myth and reality of China's soft power*", 2010

This would explain why China's current cultural power is not on par with its economic weight globally.

There is no doubt that Chinese effort to export its culture and language help to generate and project China's soft power abroad: more and more foreign students flock into China, the Confucius Institutes continue to proliferate across the world, cultural and academic interactions between China and the outside world are multiplying. Taking into consideration the European experience, some Chinese scholars like Song Xinning think that building an East Asian community where China's sphere of influence is traditionally the greatest makes sense. Additionally, it is critical to increase the outside world's appetite for the China model by boosting China's inventions or innovations in culture, as stated by Ting Wai.

Despite a real political desire of some Chinese leaders and scholars to become a cultural and global soft power, China's foreign policy reflects several elements simultaneously, and the spectrum of discourse on China's international identity internally is very wide<sup>7</sup>. Although the globalists have a public voice, their resonance has been diminished. According to David Shambaugh, if China sends conflicting signals, realists are yet predominant and China pursues a realist and self-interested global policy<sup>8</sup>.

How could the EU maintain its cultural soft power and further enhance its influence in the future international order? What kind of conclusions should the EU politicians draw from observations made by Chinese scholars? While cultural soft power is associated more with the EU than with any other actor, the EU is also

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<sup>7</sup> Yves Tiberghien, *"What does China expect from global economic and environmental governance?"*, Conference held at Nanjing Hopkins Center on May 16<sup>th</sup> 2011

<sup>8</sup> David Shambaugh: *Coping with a conflicted China*, Washington Quarterly, Winter 2011

unfortunately often associated with internal disharmony. It is thus a mistake to think that soft power is a natural strength of Europe since it is until very recently only that the EU has insisted on the promotion of culture as a vital element in its foreign policy. Nonetheless Europe does have a certain number of natural strengths. Expressions of the EU as a cultural soft power are as very diverse as the capability to attract tourists (France ranks ahead of the US albeit in number of tourists and not in funds raised), soccer/football (Europe's primary sport is far more popular globally than American football or baseball), technology and science as a destination for students. The EU should take note of these facts and adopt a pragmatic view to boost its cultural power. As noted by Evan Osnos in his article *the Grand Tour*<sup>9</sup>, tourism is one field of action. By 2009, a British travel-industry report had concluded that "Europe" was such a successful "single, unified" brand in China that individual countries would be wise to put aside pride and delay promoting "sub-brands" such as France or Italy. Europe was less a region on the map than a state of mind. Another field of action, as regulated by article 167 of the Treaty of Lisbon<sup>10</sup>, is public diplomacy. This process is already under way: Europeans start to invest in international cultural relations<sup>11</sup> but still in a very timid manner. The recent example of the German-French fund for cultural projects in third countries<sup>12</sup>, with a insignificant budget of 460 000 Euros (650 000 dollars) in 2010, is interesting.

Beyond the question of the European cultural soft power, with regards to the question whether the EU can hold an important position and play a big role on the

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<sup>9</sup> Evan Osnos, The New Yorker: "*the Grand Tour*", May 2011

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.lisbon-treaty.org/wcm/the-lisbon-treaty/treaty-on-the-functioning-of-the-european-union-and-comments/part-3-union-policies-and-internal-actions/title-xiii-culture/455-article-167.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theglobalist.com/StoryId.aspx?StoryId=3886>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.france-allemande.fr/Le-fonds-de-financement-des-5315.html>

international stage there is no consensus in China. Some Chinese scholars seem quite optimistic about the strength of Europe while some believe it is limited to the economic domain. The soft power of the European Union is certainly perceived as a success despite a lack of orchestrated action. Until recently, softpower was more the result of a successful cultural model than a common policy.

As a conclusion, my opinion is that soft power is one thing but I believe the EU should respond to a realist China with realist methods when necessary, while keeping a soft and globalist vision. Hard power and soft power are two sides of the same coin<sup>13</sup>. The EU and its member states will need to think carefully about their global role and the comparative advantages they possess such as their cultural power in order to be better organized and further spread its influence. Disharmony between its members on some matters is a real challenge though and countries like China or the US prefer dialoguing with a divided EU, in other words with weaker individual states, than facing a powerful and unified bloc of countries. In response to this issue, the EU's Lisbon Treaty (December 1<sup>st</sup> 2009) created the post of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU. This meant to give the bloc a more coherent international voice by combining in one person the representative of all 27 member states. The European Union's new Foreign Minister, Catherine Ashton, said she believes the EU can't rely on its vaunted "soft power" strategy of negotiation, but must be hard at times when dealing with affairs both foreign and domestic. "We must mobilize all our levers of influence - political, economic, plus civil and military crisis-management tools - in support of a single

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Cooper: *"hard power, soft power and the goals of diplomacy"*, 2004



political strategy,” Ashton said. The demand for Europe to engage globally, culturally and otherwise is huge. The Lisbon Treaty gives the European Union the chance to do so.

It is striking to see how China is now a practiced exponent of soft power on global scale and how this has led, wrongly in my opinion, to alarm-bells ringing in both Europe and the USA. Chinese cultural soft power lacks innovation as pointed out by Ting Wai and East Asian regional integration may be on its way but it is not achieved yet. Indeed, despite some common cultural grounds such as the use of Chinese characters and the diffusion of Confucianism in East Asia, so far there is no consensus on an East Asian community as far as politics or common institutions are concerned<sup>14</sup>. Potential conflicts are more at stake than anywhere else in the world.

A last and personal opinion is that building cultural soft power requires an element of dream: people from third-world countries do not dream (yet?) of becoming Chinese like they do dream of becoming European or American. Likewise, integration in Chinese society is impossible for foreigners. This is probably the limit of cultural soft power and perhaps a reason why realists in China are still predominant when considering foreign policy.

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<sup>14</sup> 庄国土: 论东亚经济共同体的形成基础及其发展趋势, *Journal of Contemporary Asia Pacific Studies*, 2010