

Culture – China’s Choice in Soft Power. A Case Study on the Political and Intellectual Chinese Discourse on Soft Power

Iulia Elena GÎȚĂ¹

Abstract

Soft power concept is an increasingly researched topic and one which gained the attention and interest of national governments. In the international competition between countries, a rising number of nations started to notice that culture and language play an important role in their global image, China being one of the pioneers which placed great importance on the promotion and development of soft power with culture as its core. The aim of this paper is to analyse the tools of culture promoted and implemented by China, through its agents of soft power and think-tanks. In achieving the proposed objectives, the research will focus on the position and conceptualization of soft power by the several Chinese schools of thought and on investigating the Chinese political discourse from the first acknowledgement of the concept during the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in 2007 to the latest in 2017.

Keywords: *soft power, culture, political discourse, international attractiveness, China*

Introduction

The notion of soft power was developed by Joseph Nye, Emeritus Professor and Dean of the John F. Kennedy University of Harvard University in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. Nye then developed the concept through which the attractive resources of some countries allowed them to set the political agenda and, therefore, to attract other countries. He defines soft power as “a country's ability to achieve its goals or aims” or “the ability to initiate things and control others” (Nye, 1990a: 25-26). Soft power is also the ability to “make others do what they otherwise would not do” (Nye 1990b: 154). In another description of the concept, Nye (2004) exemplifies the notion of US soft power through the effects of Hollywood films, of American ideas of

¹ Iulia Elena Giță, “Lucian Blaga” Univeristy, Sibiu, Romania, iulia.gita@ulbsibiu.ro

freedom, democracy and other aspects of the country's culture. Soft power is the cultural, ideological and institutional force of a state. More than mere influence or persuasion, soft power is the ability to attract others, which has the effect of accepting or wanting to imitate, favouring the takeover of the initiative (Nye, 2004: 29-33).

Nye explains the difference between soft and hard power such as:

The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. This dimension can be thought of as soft power, in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength

(Nye, 1990a: 32).

An alternative and easy way to define the concept of soft power would be to put it in opposition to hard power, which consists of coercive activities, the most obvious of which are the military ones. Using force or constraint to get a result is the traditional method of power. In direct comparison with its opposite, hard power, Nye (1990, 2004) describes soft power as opposed to coercive command power:

[C]ommand power can rest on inducements ("carrots") or threats ("sticks"). But there is also an indirect way to exercise power. ... This aspect of power, that is, getting others to want what you want – might be called indirect or cooptive power behaviour. It is in contrast to the active command behaviour of getting others to do what you want. Cooptive power can rest on the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express ... This dimension can be thought of as soft power (181).

Therefore, soft power is the power which got the consent and agreement of both parties, and such, it is a liberalist cooperation idea between countries. The advantages of soft power can be found in Nye's words:

If a state can make its power legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. [...] If it can help support institutions that encourage other states to channel or limit their activities in ways the dominant state prefers, it may not need costly exercises of coercive or hard power in bargaining situations.(Nye 1990b: 32-33)

Joseph S. Nye's speech on power in international relations, in general, and soft power in particular, has developed over the years, perhaps taking into account some of the criticisms expressed towards his theory. He developed the concept in a long series of articles and books published in 1990, 1991, 2002, 2004, 2008, and 2010. In his book *The Future of Power* (2010), Nye describes power in international relations as linked both to the definition of a country's power in terms of resources, but also to the reactions and behaviours it can generate in other countries (Nye, 2011: 5-9). In this sense, speaking of "military power" and "economic power", without clarifying the definition of power referred to, behavioural or resource-based, makes the two notions "hybrids" combining both resources and behaviours (Nye, 2011: 9-10). Nye provides an example of the debate around China's growing power, arguing that those who question it mainly refer to the country's resources without taking into account that the relationship between resources and outcomes may be unequal. In addition, Nye recommends that the ability to put into practice useful strategies, to turn resources into desired outcomes, and the context in which this transformation takes place should be taken into account. Nye states that power is "the ability to change the behaviour of others to produce the desired results", making the results and not the resources, the key to the problem (Nye, 2011: 10).

1. Soft power in China's perspective

China's scientific literature on the country's soft power is a rich one that has advanced understanding of several specific aspects of the concept. These issues include popularity and soft power causes in China, China's efforts to expand its soft power in the world, but also the tools China has committed to for the development of its soft power.

One of the earliest and most relevant attempts to describe China's motivation to develop soft power in a comprehensive manner is the work *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World*, written in 2007 by Joshua Kurlantzick, in which the author tries to describe China's soft power in a more comprehensive way than Joseph S. Nye's initiative (2005). Kurlantzick (2007: 6) points out that soft power originally created by Nye fits into a rather limited definition that excludes elements such as investment, trade, diplomacy and national aid.

A point of interest identified by Kurlantzick in China's global strategy is what he calls a variety of "influence instruments", which fall into two categories: "culture tools" - Chinese culture, arts, language and ethnicity, "Business tools" - trade, investment, aid and the charm of China's economic model (Kurlantzick, 2007: 61, 84). In addition, Scott (2012: 39) defines a third category, that of "language tools", which China uses to enrich its global image. As further developed in this paper, China's public diplomacy includes aspects of expanding international influence through national media, promoting cultural exchange and visiting programs, improving the diplomatic corps, disseminating culture and Chinese language worldwide, but also of strengthening relations with the Chinese Diaspora (Kurlantzick, 2007: 61-81).

Huang Yanzhong and Ding Sheng (2006) noted that when talking about China's soft power concept, it is essential to separate it from economic power, although this is not easy, given China's economic performance. In this sense, a country's economic power is useful in designing soft power if the attraction generated is not given by purely utilitarian purposes, such as business, commerce, market access, business opportunities etc. (Yanzhong & Sheng, 2006). They conclude, fairly convinced by China's ability to turn its soft power resources into the desired foreign policy outcomes, that although China is becoming the "cultural magnet of Asia", with a growing global interest in culture, language and values, it was China's economic capabilities and its moral characteristics and Confucian humanitarianism that have helped to improve its reputation and increase its attractiveness (Yanzhong & Sheng, 2006): 26-29).

Making a connection between the concept of soft power, culture & the ancient Chinese ideology and exploring contemporary China, Ding Sheng emphasizes the unique manner of Chinese scholars in the interpretation of Nye's concept in the way that draws our attention to the fact that Chinese soft power has different features compared to the original concept developed by Nye:

The term soft power has frequently appeared in Chinese media and scholarly works, but Beijing's top leaders have rarely used the exact term of ruan lilian (soft power) in their speeches or government's documents. They may not want to credit Joseph Nye for the idea of soft power. In fact, what Chinese political elites have said about

soft power is different from Nye's definition of soft power. They believe China's soft power is embedded in China's traditional culture and ideology (Sheng, 2008: 28).

The difference in interpretation given by Chinese scholars can be also found in connection with China's "peaceful development", or "a world in harmony", found in the discourse of Chinese officials and researchers.

1.1 Soft power in the perception of Chinese scholars

In the process of assimilating the concept of soft power in China, which began in 1992 with the publication of the Chinese translation of Joseph Nye's book at China's Military Translation Press, the theoretical framework on which the soft power speech was built suffered a process of transformation and expansion, having features that originally lacked in Nye's theory.

The first Chinese author on this subject was Wang Huning's 作为国家的实力的文化：软权力 *Culture as National Power: Soft Power*, published in March 1993, where the author remarks: "If a country has a culture and an admirable ideology, other countries will tend to follow it. [...] It does not have to use a hard power, too costly and less efficient" (Wang, 1993: 23-28, quoted. in Barthélemy Courmont, 2015).

However, the research on soft power have truly begun in China in the mid 2003-2004, as the problem has changed beyond the academic research of Nye's theory, and Chinese theorists have expanded their theoretical framework by developing the concept of "soft power with Chinese characteristics", when this concept began to capture the attention of political leaders as well as the general public.

The process of developing and evolving the concept of soft power in contemporary China can be divided in two phases: the first phase in the 1990s when discourse on "the concept of soft power and the concept of cultural power [were] hand in hand" (Liu Deding, 2013: 38), and in the second period since the 2000s, which is characterized by the "initiation and popularization of the concept of soft power" (Liu Deding, 2013: 39). Liu Deding identifies Jia Chunfeng 贾春峰 as the first theorist of the concept of cultural soft power (文化力) in 1993. According to him, cultural soft power includes four aspects: the *intelligence factor* (智力因素 zhili yinsu), which includes science, education, technology etc; the *spiritual force* (精神力量 jingshen liliang) which includes moral values, ideals, etc.; the *cultural*

network (文化 网络 *wenhua wangluo*), consisting of libraries, cinemas, sports centres and other entertainment facilities; as well as the *traditional culture* (传统文化) (in Riva, 2015: 115).

Zhou Mingwei, director of China Foreign Languages Press, is also one of the pioneers of the cultural soft power concept in China. Shambaugh (2013) considers him the author of the most comprehensive book about China's efforts to build an image abroad. Published in 2008 *国家 形象 传播* (*Dissemination of National Image*) is a comprehensive analysis of the "building process" (构建) of the international image of China; one of the few Chinese studies that analysed China's international image based on data from surveys undertaken abroad. Zhou's conclusion is that the country should be promoted from three fundamental perspectives: Ancient China, Modern China (including economic progress, political system and cultural modernization), and Peaceful China. Shambaugh points out that the most relevant question that China should ask itself is what is the universality of the country, not what is unique about the country, because ultimately, the essence of soft power is to have attributes that go beyond the country's own borders and become attractive and interesting for the others.

Discussions on the concept of Chinese soft power can be grouped into several distinct but complementary schools of thought that have analysed the characteristics and objectives of the national concept, thus providing different definitions and approaches.

Among the first schools of thought, the *Cultural School*, also known as the *Shanghai School*, following the ideas of Wang Huning, quickly became the main engine of soft power conceptualization in China, focusing on culture as the mainstay of soft power. Yu Xintian, director of the Shanghai International Studies Institute, summed up the position of the Cultural School by saying that soft power consists of ideas and principles, institutions and political measures that function within a nation's culture and which cannot be separated (Yu Xintian, qtd in Glaser, Bonnie & Murphy, 2009, "Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: The Ongoing Debate", op. Cit.: 13). For Cultural School supporters, China's ancient history and traditional culture are the main elements of soft power. In order to improve China's attractiveness in the world, the school advocates the intensive promotion of Chinese culture abroad, the national project of the Confucius Institutes being a direct consequence of this process.

The second school of thought belongs to Professor Yan Xuetong, who believes China's political system is very important, being even the main index of the country's soft power development. Yan, together with Xu Jin, has proposed a soft power quantification method by which China's soft power is measured by *international attractiveness* (国际吸引力), *international mobilization capacity* (国际动员力) and *national mobilization capacity* (Yan Xuetong & Xu Jin, 2008). International attractiveness refers to the ability and the charm of the country to make others follow them and voluntarily imitate the model and principles, and according to the theorists, it is born from two sources - "the attractiveness of the national model" and "the attractiveness of the culture" (Yan: 26). The first capacity occurs when a country's successful model is also suitable for the development of other states; while the second feature includes affinity between countries with a similar culture, making them closer to international relations. The international influence which a country's culture can exert on others, which facilitates the understanding and acceptance of the country in general is also another component of the second source of soft power (Ibid.). For Yan, China's soft power includes *capacity* 能力 and *legitimacy* 合法性, but he believes that the country should make more efforts in strengthening them, as they are currently insufficiently powerful for the Chinese political system to be attractive to other nations.

China's soft power is weaker than the US, mainly with regard to its political system. The development of China's [international image] has provided only economic success but not political and social success. Culture is a resource like the military or the economic power, but the political power is the ability to use these resources - without political power, we cannot use soft power (Interview, Shambaugh July 14, 2010, Beijing).

In another interview with Shambaugh (January 22, 2010, Beijing), Yan Xuetong has made a connection between China's power deficit and the lack of a clear international identity of China:

China's international identity has a big problem. Our credibility as a developing country is ridiculous! Who are we friends with? North Korea, Iran, Myanmar, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Venezuela! We have a big problem [in terms of our image]. We do not have a priority identity. We have no main identity in the world, so we cannot prioritize. Who are we? We should identify ourselves as a quasi-superpower; if we do so, we can clearly define our national interests (Shambaugh, 2013: 171).

Another school of thought which researched on soft power is the one that considers China's soft power to be the result of economic development, using syntagms such as the "Chinese Model" (中国 模式), "China's Experience" (中国 经验), "China's Way" (中国 道路) and "The Chinese Example" (中国 例子) (Shambaugh, 2013: 187). This manner of thinking is detached from the basic idea of soft power, which does not regard economic power as a soft power component, but it derives from the approach of Beijing authorities which tend to rely strongly on the economic resources of the country to develop its soft power.

Another group, in agreement with the Cultural School, led by Men Honghua, is the school of "values as culture", which considers that China's soft power has an advantage given by its archaic culture, which is found not only in the nature of the traditional Chinese culture, centred on Confucianism, but also in the role of the Confucian culture played in promoting the connection with East Asia. Based on the advantage of its traditional culture, China has been able to disseminate its culture through international exchanges that has built a strong system of values around culture (Men Honghua, 2017: 15). Thus, contemporary China makes use of the historical influence of its civilization and traditional culture to improve its soft power.

Professor Men Honghua is one of China's leading soft power researchers, author of numerous articles and editor of *China's Soft Power Strategy* (2007). In his work and interviews, Men emphasized the universality of the four values China should disseminate abroad to develop its soft power: 和 (peace and harmony) 德 (morality), 礼 (label) and 仁 (benevolence) (Men, 2007: 92-93). "These values are China's greatest contribution to international culture" Men said in an interview with Shambaugh (May 2, 2010, Beijing). A year later, however, in another interview with Shambaugh (October 5, 2011, Washington DC) Men seem less convinced of the existence of Chinese traditional values, arguing that the core values have been "destroyed" during the Cultural Revolution: "We have lost our values - we have no common values. There is a vacuum of values in China. And we have no ideology", Men reported in the interview.

Li Jie (2007: 21) argues that traditional Chinese cultural values, such as *Harmony* (和谐) and *Unity* (合), are a natural and unique soft power resource in China which not only had a strong impact on the progress of Chinese civilization, but also on the development of global civilization. In

times of conflict, Chinese culture emphasizes the principles of “conquering people by virtue” and “subduing the enemy without struggle”, and in terms of power, it emphasizes values such as “good neighbourliness” and “harmonious coexistence” (22).

The diplomat and writer Wu Jianmin declared in an interview (Shambaugh, January 18, 2010, Beijing) that China's most powerful “weapon” is its culture. “Chinese culture [...] is the core of our soft power. But we do not seek to transform others with it. We believe deeply in 和而不同 (seek common ground while reserving differences) and we have understood for 2000 years that cultural diversity is a reality that cannot be changed” (Shambaugh, 2013: 170). Wu is also aware of the fact that contemporary China currently lacks in new values: “Today, Chinese society has an identity crisis, an intellectual and moral vacuum, so we need to reinvent our culture” (170).

Quoting *The Analects of Confucius* (551-479 BC), Zhao Gang and Xiao Huan (2010: 180) make a clear analogy of Confucians teachings on the soft power: “管理國家要以身做則。如同北極星，安然不動而衆星繞之”- “He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the North Polar Star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it” (<http://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng>). This highlights the strong effects of soft power measures, which, unlike hard power, have the ability to attract other nations towards the features that represent and define it, to its culture, its values and its specificity - which is the very basis of the modern concept of soft power.

These ideas have had a profound and lasting effect not only on China's development but also on the international environment, especially after the beginning of the reform of the state and the opening to other countries when the charm of China's traditional values began to awaken deep interest in the international community. This is confirmed by Li Mingjiang (2009b: 25), who claims that traditional Chinese values have been recognized as the most valuable source of Chinese power, thanks to its long and uninterrupted history and abundance of traditions, symbols and teachings. According to Li Jie (2007: 23), Chinese culture, having Confucian teachings in its centre, is able to overcome the boundaries of space and time to become a driver for better communication and understanding between China and the international community.

Liu Deding (2013: 31) presents the concept of soft power, dating from two thousand and five hundred years ago, from Lao's Taoist texts,

which had ideas similar to what is currently known about soft power. Through Lao's teachings, the state leaders were recommended to develop hard-power resources such as the politics, the economy and the army, but much more to pay special attention to the state's soft power tools in terms of "文德教化" (Civilization through culture and morality). The origins of what we now call "cultural soft power" (文化软实力) can be found in *The One Hundred Schools of Thought* (Zhuzi Baijia 诸子百家) from the beginning of Han Dynasty in the Spring and Autumn Period and the War Period (770-220 BC) when there was a long debate on the opposing concepts "文德教化 wende jiaohua" (civilization through culture and morality) and "武功霸道 wugong badao" (military achievements and leadership by force) (2013: 31).

The real challenge for the Chinese theorists and political leaders is to ensure and find the right means for a culture that has lasted for thousands of years now, to leave aside the old and embrace the new, to show the world "a China that has a strong cultural foundation and distinctive ethnical style, which keeps the rhythm of the present" (2013: 31). Authorities and political leaders also support a cultural approach to soft power of both the Cultural School and the subsidiary developed by Men Honghua, promoting a revival of the traditional Chinese culture and values to both the nation, as well as to the international community. A large number of studies have debated this feature of China's soft power, including Pang Zhongying, 2006; Kang Xiaoguang, 2007; Li Jie 2007. According to Kang Xiaoguang, the revival of Confucian culture is extremely important for building China's soft power because of its role in restoring "ethics and morality" (道德), "social order" (社会秩序), and "political legitimacy" (政治正当性), but also in terms of "identifying the Chinese people with their nation and ethnicity" (Riva, 2015: 109).

In addition to influencing the modelling of modern Chinese society, traditional values also contribute to China's foreign policy and diplomacy. Thus, the concept of "harmony" is the core value of traditional Chinese culture that has traced most of China's current foreign policy (Zhang Lihua, 2013). Zhang Lihua explains this concept, following four key ideas for China's foreign policy: 1) harmony, but not uniformity; 2) mutual respect between countries, regardless of their size; 3) "there's loneliness in the top" (高不胜寒) for powerful countries, a proverb suggesting that a strong country should not aim to become a unique and lonely superpower, but should seek collaboration and cooperation as a source of development and power; 4) engagement in the right struggle and only when it is imperative.

Developing soft power is, for China, a way to build national strength on a global stage, but also an essential skill in defining effective strategies to improve the image of the state. China's soft power is currently being assessed, both by the national and the international environment, as it still requires improvement. All the theoretical groups of the concept draw attention to the need for sustainable development of the country's soft power. In addition to the remarks of Chinese theorists and Chinese scientists, affiliated think-tanks, renowned journalists have joined the awareness-raising movement of the need to develop China's global image. Daily People's journalist Ding Gang identifies a number of reasons for a lack of more developed soft power: poor quality products, low brand recognition and poor global advertising, lack of an "exportable" religion, poor reputation for "guanxi" culture (business-based relations), and non-universal folk culture (Shambaugh, interview, November 2, 2009, Beijing).

Huang Renwei, vice president of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and researcher of China's soft power speech, identifies other causes for China's slow development of soft power:

China's soft power is low both quantitatively and qualitatively. First there is a serious shortage in China's culture - compared to Western countries, Chinese culture is in a position of inferiority. Secondly, there is a delay in our policy on democracy, and feudalism still limits our democratic political development. Thirdly, our strong sense of nationalism is an impediment (Pan Zhongyi & Huang Renwei, 2008: 44).

There is, therefore, a wide range of views among Chinese scholars on the course and pace China has in development and improvement of its global image through soft power. There stands, however, a common denominator among them, the emphasis on culture, and especially on traditional culture, which is seen as a powerful resource for advancing the soft power of the country.

A particular feature of the soft power concept development in China is given by the clear existence of a close link between the studies of Chinese researchers and theorists and the official vision presented by the Chinese authorities, both of which influence and guide each other's directions for analysing the subject. The Chinese leaders' speech has served and continues to serve as guidance in evolving the ways in which experts, scientists and the general public in China talk about soft power.

Thus, after Hu Jintao's 2007 speech during the National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the number of academic and press articles on soft power increased intensively in 2008, followed by conferences and forums on the subject, organized and funded by universities and research institutions such as Fudan University, Beijing University, Tsinghua University, China Foreign Studies and Culture University, The Central Party School, and China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.

Following the evolution of the concept into Chinese theories, it can be observed that the theoreticians' view has gradually evolved from a basic understanding of the concept in the American context to the present approach of the concept in a more adapted and appropriate version suitable for the contemporary China. Studies have experienced a gradual but significant improvement, identifying and providing pragmatic solutions to the need to develop strategies to improve China's soft power. However, from the studies surveyed, it is clear that Chinese scientists still support the need for a clearer definition of the concept and call for the development of a more personalized soft power theory for the Chinese context.

The Chinese discourse on soft power is influenced by China's past history and traditional thinking model. The role of culture and civilization in the governance of China has had a strong impact on the proper interpretation of soft power. Contemporary Chinese speech on soft power has emerged from the historical importance given to culture, which is one of the essential features of the concept in China. However, no one can deny the great influence of Joseph S. Nye, which was a stimulus for the renaissance of a foreign soft power concept based on local ideas and strategies in the form of "Wenhua ruan shili" - "cultural soft power".

1.2 Soft Power in Chinese Official Political Discourse

1.2.1. The 17th National Congress, 15th October 2007

The 16th National Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2002 was the moment of launching the official political discourse on soft power by initiating cultural reforms to promote Chinese culture to serve the strategic interests of country. However, only after the 17th National Congress in 2007 soft power was officially adopted as a political strategy. Particularly, and suggesting once again the primacy of culture in the development of

China's soft power, this decision was taken at the initiative of the Ministry of Culture, and not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (The 17th Party Congress Demands Boosting Cultural Creativity "Soft Power", 2007). In addition, President Hu Jintao's speech during the Congress confirmed the formal adoption of the soft power concept promoted by the Shanghai School.

The terms soft power and culture repeatedly present in the president's speech were taken over in most of the written and television releases after the Congress. Similarly, according to Cao Qing (2011: 17), Hu Jintao's main speech, which represented, as all the speeches of Chinese presidents at national congresses, a primary legislative document that sets the trend and direction in research, has received increased attention from the media and has served as a guideline for soft power development in China.

The 17th National Congress was the moment when the concept of "cultural soft power" was officially proposed in the political sphere, and since then the concept has been ubiquitous in national media, speeches, articles and research.

Hong Xiaonan et al. (2013: 82-83) highlights how "*tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili*" - the development of the cultural soft power of the country - has become an important cultural development strategy. Another important aspect highlighted in 2007 by the Minister of Culture is the relevance of the traditional national culture and values arising from the cultural revival triggered by the national soft power strategy. His speech called for an intensification of the internationalization of Chinese culture and its power to exert influence in the international environment through active dissemination of Chinese traditions, but at the same time and with the same intensity of modern Chinese culture.

Traditional culture is the fountainhead and source on which our nation has relied upon to sustain its long existence, which has developed and transmitted values and civilization to generations. The reason the Chinese are who they are now is that this culture, with a history of more than five thousand years, has kept us together. [...] and this is an important factor and a real source for national cohesion (Renmin Wang 2009).

The years that followed the 17th National Congress continued to be abundant in theoretical research as well as discourses, documents and policy measures on how to approach China's culture and traditions in the

process of intensifying soft power. An eloquent example of this is the *Proposal to Formulate the Twelfth Five-Year Plan for the Development of China's Economy and Society* promulgated by the CCP Central Committee (中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展规划的建议) for the period 2011-2015, which included a special article dedicated to the development and prosperity of culture and the promotion of cultural soft power (Xinhua She, 2010). Article 9 of the Proposal largely reiterates the concepts proposed by Hu Jintao in 2007, reviewing the strategies needed to take full advantage of the potential of Chinese culture in order to strengthen China's cultural soft power, including the improvement of the ethical quality of the entire nation; promoting cultural innovation; and a prosperous development of businesses and cultural industries (Xinhua She, 2010).

1.2.2. The 18th National Congress - November 14, 2012

The 18th National Congress was a crucial political event for China because it marked Hu Jintao's departure from the position of president and the establishment of the fifth generation of Chinese leaders led by Xi Jinping.

A close look on the selection of discourses of the current president highlights China's present vision on cultural soft power, reflected in the newly-established goal of making China a "great socialist cultural power" (社会主义文化强国). "We should bring Chinese culture to the world, develop cultural soft power compatible with China's international standing, and increase the influence of Chinese culture in the world" (Hu Jintao, June 2011, "Speech at the Meeting Commemorating the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of Communist Party of China"). "China should actively engage in public diplomacy in order to comprehensively develop its soft power and further boost its international appeal and influence. . . This is both a pressing task and a long-term strategy" (Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, September 2011, "Promoting Public Diplomacy", China Daily).

Hu Jintao's political report at the 18th National CCP Congress devoted an entire chapter to the issue of the development of Chinese society in all its aspects, from which the global cultural power is an important point. The chapter was called "全面建设小康社会和全面深化改革开放的目标" – "The objective of completing the construction of a moderately prosperous society in all aspects and deepening the reform and opening up in an all-encompassing way", which debates on how to achieve

the great goal of building a “moderately prosperous society” by 2020 (Xinhua She 2012; Xinhua News Agency 2012).

Xi Jinping also offers some detailed directions for improving soft power in China, initially by observing some of China's contemporary needs - (1) the need to “build a solid foundation for the country's cultural power”, (2) the need to “disseminate contemporary Chinese values”, (3) the need to “present the world to the unique charm of Chinese culture”, and (4) the need to “strengthen the power of the country's international discourse” (Ibid.). Among the solutions presented, it is worth mentioning – “perseverance on the development of the socialist culture with Chinese characteristics”, “deepening the reform of the cultural system”, “developing the study and education on the system of socialist values” (Ibid.). There is also a need to pay more attention, according to the Chinese leader, to “modelling China's national image”, with a focus on portraying an image of a civilized power with rich history, ethnic unity, and harmonious cultural diversity, as well as an Eastern power with a well-organized government, with a developed economy, cultural prosperity, national unity and beautiful mountains and rivers (Xinhua Wang, 2013).

1.2.3. The 19th National Congress – October 18, 2017

President Xi Jinping's report from the 2017 National Congress has had a very large international media impact, being a key event in assessing and clarifying China's position on the global stage in the coming years. A series of signs indicated that over the next five years, Xi Jinping will pursue a foreign policy that intensifies the lines of action defined during his first term (2012-17), detaching himself in his approach to the international environment from his predecessors, who were the followers of a “low profile”, modest strategy, synthesized by “hide your strength and bide your time” (Deng Xiaoping, 1990). Apparently, Xi Jinping believes that time has come for China and that “it is [China's] time to occupy a central place on the world stage and to contribute more to humanity”.

Focusing on the sections of the Congress dedicated to China's cultural power, there can be noticed a resonant approach to Hu Jintao's methods to boost China's soft power, but a notable difference is the degree of openness and communication with the outside that Xi Jinping proposes: “Openness brings progress, while self-isolation leaves you behind. China will not close its door to the world; but we will become more and more

open [...] We need to continue with the One Belt, One Road initiative with the highest priority, placing an equal emphasis on <import> and <global expansion>” (Xinhua, 2017).

At the heart of China's impetus to take a stronger global leadership are President Xi's ambitious initiatives that have been a diplomatic triumph for China. Addressing soft power and increasing international influence, Xi Jinping referred to the foreign diplomatic achievements of the last five years (2012-2017), which included not only the One Belt, One Road initiative and the creation of the Asian Bank of Infrastructure Investments, and the Silk Road Fund, but also to the host of the first Forum One Belt One Road for International Cooperation, host of the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in Beijing in 2014, the Hangzhou G20 summit in 2016 and the BRICS summit in Xiamen, in September 2017. All these, the president noted, led to a “new increase in China's international influence, the ability to inspire and the force to influence and model”.

What the latest congress highlights is that, perhaps for the first time in the contemporary era, China has succeeded in combining hard power with soft power through an inclusive, cooperative narrative that emphasizes common prosperity and regional development. The effect of the union between the two “powers” will be reforming for Asian and global geopolitics (The Soft Power 30. A Global Ranking of Soft Power, 2017).

2. Conclusions

The evolution of the Chinese soft power discourse from Joseph S. Nye's theory until now has been enriched with new Chinese characteristics to build a vision that has been progressively formed according to the characteristics of contemporary China. Developed in a relatively short period, in less than three decades, the concept can be considered to be the embodiment of what Westerners called “soft power with Chinese characteristics” (Glaser and Murphy 2009), from which a national powerful symbol emerged – “wenhua ruan shili” (cultural soft power).

Zhang Guozuo (2015) explains that, after being disseminated in China, the concept of soft power “fed with the water and soil, the sun and the rain of Chinese culture”, which not only allowed it to develop in China, but also to manifest “distinct Chinese characteristics” and form a “single force” of the nation (Renming Wang, 2015):

*The objectives of soft power have been transformed. The United States views soft power as an important method to put into effect hegemony and power politics. On the contrary, China views the enhancement of cultural soft power as **an important way to increase comprehensive national power and international influence**: domestically, it serves the purpose of strengthening the construction of socialist core values, **promoting China's outstanding traditional culture, cultivating noble ideology and ethics**, reinforcing the cohesiveness of the Party, the military, and the people; externally, it serves the purpose of **disseminating China's standpoint and voice, establishing a positive international image**, constructing a favorable international environment, and promoting the construction of a peaceful, harmonious, and cooperative world. [...]*

*China no longer talks about soft power in a general way, but places the two characters for wenhua in front of soft power, making **culture become the core word of soft power**; it no longer juxtaposes culture together with the other components constituting soft power, but **allocates to culture the highest level in soft power**, emphasizing the leading role of culture towards the other constituents. This is because institutions, systems of values, control of international discourse, and foreign strategies all receive, without exception, the restrictions and influence of culture.*

(Renming Wang, 2015, translated by Riva, 2015)

Therefore, in China, culture plays an overriding role in the soft power discourse. While Western scholars describe soft power as a culture, a system of values, institutions, policies, and the ability to master international discourse, Chinese scholars regard culture as “a special irreplaceable place” (不可替代的特殊地位) in soft power: Culture is the “soul, longitude and latitude of soft power” and it “must not be juxtaposed to other factors” (Renmin Wang 2015).

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