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China and Chinese Overseas: A Softer Soft Power[?] Policy Needed?

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As of 2021, there were 33 Confucius Institutes and 35 Confucius Classrooms in ASEAN. In this picture, a banner advertising training for Mandarin teachers in Malaysia at Universiti Malaysia Pahang.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Confucius-Institute-100623258174139/photos/389365545966574>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This paper describes China’s soft power in relation to Chinese overseas who as a whole constitute a potentially important resource for it.
- Major institutions involving Chinese overseas include the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, the China Public Relations Association and the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification, as well as similar associations established among Chinese overseas, such as the Malaysia-China Public Relations Association, the Thailand-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China, and others.
- Confucius Institutes and Chinese mass media play important roles in China’s soft power policy, and these have an impact on Chinese overseas too. As of 2021, there were 33 Confucius Institutes and 35 Confucius Classrooms in ASEAN.
- China will need to be sensitive to the feelings of both the ethnic Chinese and the non-Chinese population of other countries. It has to, at the same time, deal with allegations of exploitation made by hostile western governments, and by local politicians and NGOs. Such accusations may also have a negative impact on how local Chinese are viewed. Chinese overseas will also have to be careful about China’s “suffocating embrace”.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power refers to the use of cultural and economic resources by a country to gain the support of overseas organizations and foreign governments or to get them to act in line with the interests of the country without the use of military power. This concept was proposed by Joseph S. Nye in 1990.¹ He likens it to “hard power is like brandishing carrots or sticks; soft power is more like a magnet”.²

This paper describes China’s soft power in relation to the Chinese overseas. Its soft power policies are important for mobilizing international cooperation with China and gaining support for its promotion of national unification and for rebuttal of western anti-China rhetoric. Influential ethnic Chinese business people and politicians in other countries play important roles in this and in enhancing economic cooperation that benefit both China and their country of residence.

While the label Chinese overseas is preferred by most scholars in studying people of Chinese origins living overseas, its use, like with the terms “overseas Chinese” and “Chinese diaspora”, is not without problems. Strictly speaking, the term “Chinese overseas”, *haiwai huaren*, refers to Chinese who have identified with their respective countries, but often its use, as in this paper, may include new immigrants who are mostly *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese), meaning citizens of China residing overseas. At the same time, the term “Chinese diaspora” is best used to refer to new immigrants who are really sojourners, who still see China as home; but many scholars also use it to include ethnic Chinese belonging to different nationalities. As for the term “overseas Chinese”, it is historically a term that refers to *huaqiao* or “Chinese sojourners”.

Overseas Chinese Institutions

The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAO, 国务院侨务办公室) is the state institution that deals with Chinese overseas. The roles of the OCAO have changed over time, however. During the Maoist era, overseas Chinese played an important role in lessening the sufferings of the Chinese population in China in the face of the US economic blockade.³ Following China’s opening and reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping, Chinese overseas were encouraged to invest in China and to help in the development of designated emigrant regions (*qiaoxiang*). The latter process was broadly and well facilitated by Qiaolian or the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese from the national to the county levels.

In 2018, the OCAO was administratively placed under the United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee (中共中央统一战线工作部), as was the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (NEAC) of the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国国家民族事务委员会). This may be seen as a shift towards an emphasis on the grand unification of China internally (further integrating the minorities) and externally (the unification of Taiwan with the mainland). By the 2000s, China had become an economic power and no longer needed to rely on Chinese overseas for its development, and so the reorganization and the reorientation of focus were understandable.

Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China established friendship associations in some countries to promote bilateral cooperation and friendship. For example, the China-Vietnam Friendship Association (中国越南友好协会) was established in 1950. In Indonesia, the Indonesia-China Friendship Association (印尼中国友好协会) was founded in the 1950s. There was also the Thai-Chinese Relationship Association (泰中关系协会).

In 1987, China established its China Public Relations Association (CPRA, 中国公共关系协会). One of its aims is to strengthen links with organizations and individuals worldwide in aid of China's international relations (www.cpra.org.cn). In fact, the CPRA relies a lot on Chinese overseas. In Malaysia, there is a Malaysia-China Public Relations Association (马中公共关系协会). On 30 September 2019, a number of its executive committee members met the press to issue a statement denouncing groups in Malaysia which had demonstrated in support of the protests in Hong Kong against its government and China.⁴

In 1988, China established the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification (中国和平统一促进会), seeking to promote the unification of Taiwan with the mainland. The council promotes the formation of Associations for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (APPRC) overseas. The president of APPRC in a country is always an influential local Chinese leader. In Trinidad, for instance, the president of the Trinidad and Tobago Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (interviewed in May 2012) was also vice president of Central and the South America Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (中南美洲中国和平统一促进会), and president of the China Society (中华总会) in Trinidad.

There are also APPRC associations in Southeast Asia, albeit some with slightly different names. The Thailand-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China was established on 7 February 2001, just after the Philippine-China APPRC was formed on 2 January 2001.⁵ In Indonesia, we have the Indonesian Chinese-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (印尼华人中国和平统一促进会, 原称: 印尼东爪哇中国和平统一促进会). On the day of its official formation on 19 March 2007, it condemned Chen Shui-bian's call for Taiwan's independence.⁶ There is also the World Vietnam Kampuchea and Laos Chinese-China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (世界越棉寮华人中国和平统一促进会) which was established in 1983 in Guangzhou, and it holds general meetings and forums in China and overseas.

The one in Malaysia is called Malaysia One China Association for Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (马来西亚一中和平统一促进会), emphasizing *yizhong* or "One China". It was initiated by Chinese Malaysian businessman Lim Geok Tong (林玉唐) and his business colleagues in 2004.⁷ On 8 October 2021, this association issued a statement to condemn AUKUS, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Indeed, overseas Chinese pro-China associations serve to speak up for China on major international issues. On 15 July 2021, for instance, various such pro-Beijing associations in Malaysia, including the Malaysia One China Association for Promotion of

Peaceful Reunification of China, the Malaysia-China Public Relations Association (马来西亚中国公共关系协会), and the Malaysia One Belt One Road Committee (马来西亚一带一路委员会), issued a joint statement which called upon the USA and western countries not to politicize Covid-19 and insult China.⁸

In addition to encouraging the establishment of pro-China associations, China may appoint a local Chinese as a special envoy, giving him special standing with regards to China. For example, in 2014 one MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) politician in Melaka was appointed by China to be its special business envoy in the state (马六甲州政府对华商务特使). He was instrumental in getting the Melaka government to approve joint economic projects in the state involving China and local firms. One example is the US \$7.3 billion Melaka Gateway project, which involves reclaiming land along the coast for real estate development.

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

An important institution of Chinese soft power is the Confucius Institute which promotes the study of the Chinese language and Chinese civilization overseas whilst cementing good relations between China and the host countries. Its headquarters under the Ministry of Education in Beijing was known as the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban 汉办); in July 2020, it was renamed Center for Language Education and Cooperation or CLEC (教育部中外语言交流合作中心). Besides the Confucian Institutes which are attached to universities in foreign countries, there are also Confucius Classrooms (孔子学堂) established in local schools. The first Confucius Institute was established in Seoul in 2004. By December 2019, there were 550 such institutes in 162 countries.⁹

In ASEAN, as of 2021, there were 33 Confucius Institutes and 35 Confucius Classrooms.¹⁰ Only Brunei and East Timor do not have any Confucius Institute, while Myanmar has only three Confucius Classrooms. Thailand has the most, 16 in all. This shows the popularity of learning Chinese in that country.¹¹

There are eight Confucius Institutes in Indonesia, but they are called Pusat Bahasa Mandarin or Mandarin Language Centre, such as the one at Al Azhar University of Indonesia in Jakarta. This is most likely an adjustment in a country where any perception of intervention by China is sensitive.

In Southeast Asia in general, Confucius Institutes are welcomed for providing opportunities for the study of Chinese language and Chinese culture. However, in the West, governments and China critics see Confucius Institutes as the Chinese Communist Party's attempt to carry out global propaganda. The general anti-China attitude, no doubt, contributes to this but the management of the institutes under the Chinese Ministry of Education also adds to the suspicion that China has ulterior motives. Jennifer Hubbert points out that while students in the US appreciated the learning of Chinese, they found the curriculum tedious and they were generally suspicious of what they perceived as Chinese government propaganda (Matthews 2021).¹² The adoption of the new name CLEC and related administrative

adjustments may be seen as an attempt to reduce the suspicious attitude towards Confucius Institutes.

China also pursues its soft power policy by supporting local initiatives for the teaching of Chinese. An interesting example is the Asia International Friendship College (亚洲国际友好学院)¹³ in Medan which was officially established on 20 August 2008 by the Association of Community of Social & Education of Indonesia North Sumatra Indonesian Chinese (印尼苏北华社慈善与教育联谊会) that was formed to help tsunami victims in Aceh. The School of International Culture of South China Normal University (华南师范大学) helps to provide teachers and to design the curriculum. The China Overseas Association (中国海外交流协会) in China as well as its branch in Guangdong also helps in recruiting Chinese language teachers who are paid by the Chinese government.

MASS MEDIA

In the globalized world today, people have easy access to international media and therefore, global media coverage is important to soft power projection. China has the English GCTN and the Chinese Zhongguo Guoji (China International), which broadcast news and feature programmes in English and Chinese respectively for the global audience. Unlike the news for domestic audience, GCTN English news reporting generally does not follow the rather fixed pattern of first reporting about President Xi Jinping, and about other senior ministers before reporting other news.

China's civilization, rich fauna and flora, diverse foodways, martial arts, intangible heritage, etc., no doubt, are of interest to many people worldwide. Chinese and non-Chinese. Programmes on these are not only informative but also serve soft power objectives. However, in rebutting western anti-China rhetoric, China's media could be made more effective through reliance on more concise reporting and analyses that do not appear propagandistic.

China's mass media have a significant impact on Chinese overseas, especially those who speak Mandarin. In particular, the common language (Mandarin) brings people together even though politically the Chinese overseas have identified with their respective countries. Such civilizational identification¹⁴ is, no doubt, significant in making Chinese overseas an important element in China's soft power policy. China's annual TV programme for Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations, for example, is of interest to many Chinese overseas and indeed it is planned to appeal to both China's citizens and Chinese overseas.

SOFTER SOFT POWER?

In his comment on China, Nye (2021: 10) points out that "China should realize that most of a country's soft power comes from its civil society rather than from its government" and that "[p]ropaganda is not credible and thus often does not attract."

China can learn the soft power approach of British Council and Goethe Institute in contrast to the Communist Party's felt need to control everything. A soft rather than a blatant approach is more effective in achieving soft power objectives.

An example of China's institutions that resemble British Council is China Cultural Center of Mauritius (毛里求斯中国文化中心). It has a spacious building, and it offers instructions in Chinese language, Chinese martial arts and Chinese crafts. During my visit in August 2013, I was impressed with the local children, Chinese and non-Chinese, producing arts of not only Chinese motifs, but local motifs as well. Its Chinese language classes attracted both Chinese and non-Chinese. Even some older Chinese who were Hakka-speaking signed up to learn to speak Mandarin.

The cultural dimension of China's soft power has focused on the teaching of Chinese language and civilization. Given China's achievements in economy, science and technology, organizing seminars and training camps on these themes to people of different walks of life would be most welcome. This would enhance its soft power impact in the long run.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot more one can write about China's soft power policy, and the discussion above shows that it potentially involves the Chinese overseas a lot. The latter can be rather diverse from country to country, and their perception of China's soft power policy also differs. In island societies such as Mauritius, Trinidad & Tabago, and Tahiti, which I had observed, even the localized Chinese welcome China's economic and cultural inputs. Both the old and new immigrants rely on China's help to promote Chinese arts and cultural performance. In Southeast Asia, the ethnic Chinese do not have to depend on China to promote their cultural activities although cultural troupes from China are always welcome. In both Mauritius and Southeast Asia, China's soft power strategies gain from the support of ethnic Chinese leaders to liaise with the local governments, and this may include cooperation on major local economic projects.

The influential roles that ethnic Chinese business leaders and politicians play in Southeast Asia naturally make them an important resource for China's soft power strategy in the region. Pro-China organizations argue that China is not aggressive internationally, rebut western anti-China rhetoric and support the unification of Taiwan with the mainland. In return, China provides these ethnic Chinese leaders with status and social and economic networks in China. Its ambassadors now and then show concern about ethnic Chinese interests by giving donations to Chinese schools. Nevertheless, China needs to be sensitive to the feelings of both the ethnic Chinese and the non-Chinese populations. The local Chinese do not wish for China's activities to stir up the feelings of non-Chinese majority against them. But while they may be proud of the achievements of China and welcome its support in cultural matters, they need to be careful about its "suffocating embrace" (Wang 1981: 278).¹⁵

With its expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese investment in building dams, ports, railways and other kinds of infrastructure in many countries is impressive, but it has to cope with accusations of putting these countries in debt, involvement in corruption and co-optation of senior government and military officials, etc. It is essential for China to build a good image among ordinary citizens of the countries where it invests, not just the ethnic Chinese. It can do this by having centres and organizations that provide services that benefit them. The present policy of providing scholarship for higher education in China, for example, can be expanded.

ENDNOTES

¹ Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books, 1990.

² Nye, Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept," *Journal of Political Power*, 2021. Doi: 10.1080/2158379X.2021.1879572.

³ Glen Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

⁴ <https://www.sinchew.com.my/20190930/斥大马撑港马中公共关系协会...>

⁵ <http://www.pcpprc.com/portal.php?mod=list&catid=2>

⁶ See the 21 March 2007 report in China Qiaowang: <http://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/stzx-yz/200703/21/65879.shtml>

⁷ <https://news.sohu.com/2004/06/03/96/news220369655.shtml>

⁸ <http://yn.people.com.cn/n2/2021/0716/c372459-34822938.html>

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¹⁰ See union.china.com.cn, 16 December 2021: http://union.china.com.cn/zfgl/2021-12/16/content_41824559.html.

¹¹ See Confucius Institutes around the World, 2021, <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>.

¹² Gordon Mathews, "Book Review of *China in the World: An Anthropology of Confucius Institutes, Soft Power, and Globalization* by Jennifer Hubbert, 2019," *Asian Anthropology*, 2021, 20 (4): 290-292.

¹³ Visited on 28 August 2017.

¹⁴ Tan Chee-Beng, "Chinese in Southeast Asia and Identities in a Changing Global Context," in *Chinese Populations in Contemporary Southeast Asian Societies: Identities, Interdependence and International Influence*, eds., M. Jocelyn Armstrong, R. Warwick Armstrong, and Kent Mulliner, Richmond, U.K.: Curzon, 2001, p. 225.

¹⁵ Wang Gungwu, "China and the Region in Relation to Chinese Minorities," in Wang Gungwu, *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese*, Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd., 1981, p. 278.

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