

Non-credibility regarding Chinese soft power: an inverse mirror of the European Union soft power

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Official and political speeches of the government of the People's Republic of China are organized around some key words: harmony, multilateralism, and soft power. These notions are guided by one wish, to become a global power with its own vision.

China has an governmental organised policy to influence foreign public opinions with its public diplomacy and its soft power. This could be analysed by the Confucius institutes throughout the world, the promotion of Confucianism face the consumerism in the West as some scholars do, the CCTV channels, in French, English, Spanish, and the support Chinese language.

This communication presents some reasons in order to understand why Europeans yet perceive the Chinese messages as non-credible. At an anthropological level, we consider that the tense between authoritarian regime and the wish of spreading its culture as a soft power is an oxymoron. In other word, people accustomed to the link between soft power and democracy, especially in Europe, is disturbed by the situation. To say it hardly, China is, on that point, non credible.

On the other hand, soft power of the EU with its rules of law, democracy and human rights, is usually describe as a normative power. But since several years, some country like China might challenge the values and their influence. The Internet regulation at a world level is on that point an instructive example¹.

The context

A survey of the historical discourses of the Chinese's diplomacy since 1949 until now shows that the pacific co existence is the key word. The purpose of this position is that China want-

¹ See Arifon, O., *De la pierre au pixel, le contrôle chinois d'Internet*, Hermès n° 63 « Murs et frontières ». CNRS Editions, septembre 2012, pp. 160-164

ed to be considered as a responsible power. In order to support its internal growth policy, the international environment should be peaceful (Martin Necker, 2006).

A second dimension to take into account to understand the options of the Chinese leaders after 1989 is the development of a discourse based on cultural relativism. Face to permanent critics on human rights, freedom of expression and rules of law from activists and sometimes from governments of western countries, China argue that development should be considered regarding a context, a culture and social and some economical conditions relevant for one civilization and not for another one. Thus, since the mid 90's, this position has never change. Some years later a proper Chinese value was added to that context: the peaceful and harmonious co existence, a dimension profitable for the Chinese society and the rest of the world. The concept of harmonious society promoted by officials is said to include stability and openness of the society and relies on traditional conception of moral order developed by Confucius. It is said that the ruling government should take care of the people in a patriarchal approach as described in Confucius writings. Inside, the country should be conceived as a harmonious state and outside the Chinese government tries to promote this value. For the foreign policy, the theory of harmonious world trends to promotes China as a stable, reliable and responsible partner, and a power that does not have to be feared.

Since 2005, the official speeches of Chinese's official emphasize on China's development, characterized as peaceful, open, cooperative and harmonious in nature. Moreover, after the debates before and during the Beijing Olympics game in 2008, the government has understood that China should develops a positive demarche based on influence and culture, situation summarized as soft power.

Soft power is define as the capacity to convict others to adhere to norms, values and institutions, which incite or conduct to a comprehensive behaviour (Nye, 2004). We put here aside economical and military powers. On a theoretical perspective, we may argue that soft power concept has been extrapolated in non-American contexts and could be expanded to be more inclusive and historicized to take into account the role of civilizations and countries. An illustration of that theory is one definition proposed by several Chinese's scholars. On one side, the "political school", with Yan Xuetong as representative, on the other, the cultural school, with (Yu Xintian, 2007). He argues that soft power with Chinese characteristics

should include values and principles represented by the state, national and international institutions and political decisions driven by the state.

China has an organised policy devoted to influence public opinions with a public diplomacy, which serves four goals: be seen as a country that strives to build a harmonious society. Second, being a reliable economic partner with a dynamic market economy, an argument that seems to be a reason to rely on Chinese state policy². The third goal is to be an active and responsible actor in international affairs and fourth, a country with an ancient culture. Then soft power could be seen as a cocktail of several items. Some of the most visible and well-known actions are the rapid development of the Confucius institutes throughout the world, the CCTV channels, the national Chinese's network, in several western languages and the development of the Xinhua news agency, devoted to transmit official Chinese's view of the world. Ingredients of soft power are present and conceived in order to counter the reports and messages on China done by European media, considered as unable to understand China correctly.

In that context, we consider that there is a dissonance and a lack of credibility regarding Chinese messages and its influence on the world stage that could be considered from many ways, all linked with representations in European societies.

Finally, let's notice that it is not easy to measure a country's soft power that is why this paper is a contribution of elements devoted to give hints and a global frame on the topic. It is not a synthesis on polls or on articles provided in the press³.

Dimensions to observe

1 – European perceptions of China

- In Europe, as soon as the beginning of the 20th Century, many novels represent China as the yellow peril, linked with workers from China in the US and with the cliché of the enemy. Active during the 50's and the Cold war (in James Bond movies and comics), this perception is carried by Japan during the 70's and the 80's, then endorsed again by China due to

² Pr. Gao Fei, IEE Seminar "Mutual trust in international relations", ULB, 2013.

³ For polls on China perceptions by Europe, see BBC world service poll by www.globescan.org or Pew research centre at www.pewresearch.org

it's economical rise. Since 2005-2008, it could be politically correct form European politicians to do China bashing.

- Some elements in the political and economical approach of China, which make debates, in declarations of European politicians, are useful to present. For example, it was clear during the French presidential campaign in May 2012. Questions on economical policies to sustain growth and reindustrialisation were discussed between the candidates. In the background of this question relies on the role and on the power of China. With lots of limits due to the method and to the quality of results, an illustration of this perception of China could be provided with a Google research on “Faut-il avoir peur de la Chine ?” provide 672 000 results and for “Shall we be afraid of China? Provide 3 310 000 results (on the 16th April 2013.)



Actually, the dominant perception of China in Europe deals more with economical and military power than other elements. The Pew research Centre conduct a survey in 23 countries and the 2011 report shows that China is considered in Europe as a global economic actor able to compete with the united States⁴. But China also faces challenges that contribute to the puzzle. A content analysis of European media on that topic would give more empirical details on that subject.

2 - Challenges of the Chinese soft power

As Nye has pointed out, states most likely to project soft power in an information age are those whose dominant ideas are closer to global norms, which now emphasise pluralism and autonomy. Considering that, there are few countries that would look at Chinese political, legal or social system as real models for themselves. China as a global power faces majors' problems that can put asides the efforts for supporting cultural dimensions that he PRC wants to project even with long and rich historical tradition.

A culture with a long tradition

⁴ www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/13/china-seen-overtaking-us-as-global-superpower, consulted 21 May 2012.

In many cases, from officials to students, the discourse upon culture promoted by China relies on a 5000 years long tradition, and refers to medicine, cooking, martial arts, calligraphy and so on. Such items constitute the reference and the dominant representation of Chinese soft power for the Europeans, (but we may not here discuss the reasons of this situation). And if cooking, martial arts, medicine, Taoism or Buddhism are popular among the European citizens, such values are not presenting a modern dimension of China⁵. Some limits can be pointed out.

These aspects of Chinese culture is considered by some scholars linked to the intellectual tradition of May fourth movement in 1919 and later considered as a revolt, among others things, against Confucianism and traditional cultural values, at the origins of the weakness of the empire and the society at the end of the 19th century. Scholars and students claims for science, democracy, trade and industries to develop the country. Nowadays, even with the return of neo Confucianism, such dimensions of culture cannot attracts young generation, both inside and outside the country⁶. Any visitor can see that every day life in big cities in China is consumption oriented in a certain aspect similar to American modalities.

Another reason is that such cultural elements are “autonomous”, living their own life without support of the government of the PRC. For example, as a practitioner of Qi gong and Tai chi Chuan since 1994, we have seen three phases of the development of that practice in France. First, the teachers were coming from China or had an experience there. Then, the next generation of teachers went in China to learn the basis, at a moment which the government recognize such practice as part of the cultural heritage (renewing the tradition after the Cultural Revolution effects). The last period that we notice was the structuration of teachers and clubs thought a national federation and the opening of hundred of courses thought small villages or in health club centres. Part of those teachers went for some courses in China but part of them never went. They were recognizing able to teach after a degree delivered by a club affiliated to the federation, situation that we qualified of autonomous from China’s contemporary values and expression.

While products with ‘Made in China’ labels appear to be everywhere, China is still no match for the United States in cultural attractiveness; few Chinese companies, cultural icons, mov-

⁵ France faces the same problem when survey shows that its image and key points are luxus products and romantic approach of life.

⁶ For the exact contrary on that question on South Korea, see (Dayez Burgeon, 2012).

ies or brand names have the presence in consumer's mind. Very few Western citizens are able to suggest names of writers, filmmakers, rock singers or bands or football players. An expansion of contemporary Chinese culture requires a politically relaxed environment that encourages freedom of expression and a free exchange of ideas among Chinese and the world at large, which the political system remains loath to offer.

Lack of credibility and dissonance⁷

As Singaporean Senior Minister Lee Kuna Yew says, « soft power is achieved only when other nations admire and want to emulate aspects of that nation's civilization⁸. » As already said, analysis and debates concerning China's rise is mainly focused on the economic aspects. Beijing's ability to pursue a coherent and conciliatory foreign policy is crucial for advancing a benign and attractive image to its neighbours and around the world. We examine the key point of the system that conduct to lack of credibility and to cognitive dissonance.

1 - The question of dissonance

The question of dissonance is psychological and could be seen from an individual perspective. A culture become more powerful when people imagine themselves transformed and improved by adopting some new values of that culture. That's the case for migrants trying to settle in a society, or for young men and women adopting fashion styles form Paris, Milan or London. If a society considered itself unique because of its system or its style (for example United States or now South Korea), it can exert soft power and influence outside because people can imagine themselves taking part in that system and adopting the same style.

Perceptions by the media on the surface of facts could be positive or negative. On a cognitive dimension, dissonance is a discomfort caused by holding conflicting cognitions (e.g., ideas, beliefs, values, emotional reactions) simultaneously. In a state of dissonance, people may feel surprise, dread, guilt, anger, or embarrassment. We propose that such emotions

⁷ Dissonance: unsuitable in combination; clashing, Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2008. Dissonance could relate to music and harmony and to psychology.

⁸ Lam Pin Foo, "Only the Tang Dynasty Came Close to Having Influence", *The Straits Times*, 26 October 1996.

leads to controversial perceptions and opinions upon China because to reduce dissonance one person can either interpret the message or the fact to diminish the tension or raise question on the credibility of the broadcaster. A factor that hinders Beijing's efforts to mobilise soft power is the lack of coherence between actions, images and reality. The following figure is issued from a Globescan poll⁹.

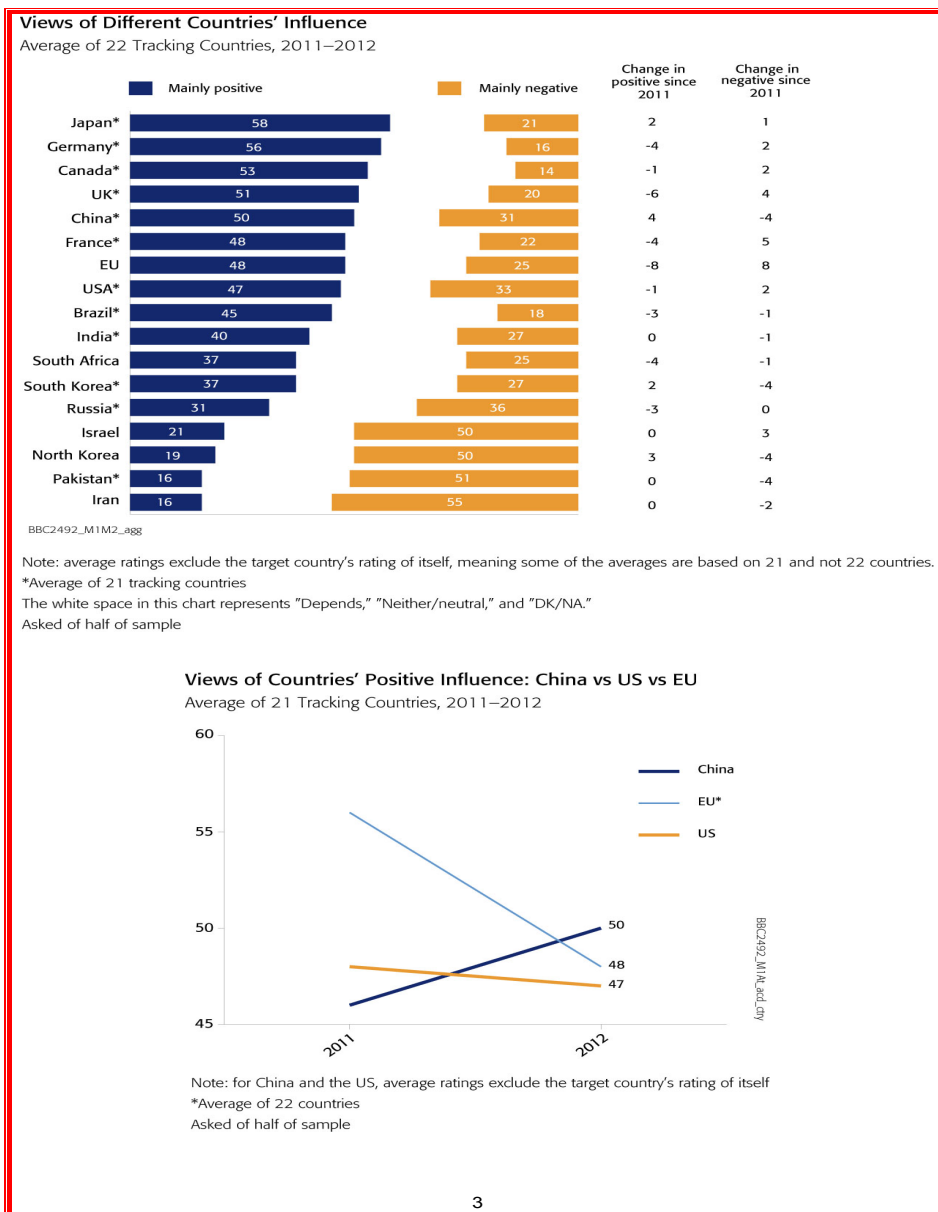
The poll reveals that views of China have improved; positive views rose from 46 to 50 per cent per average both in Westerns and emerging countries¹⁰. On a web site devoted to the debate in Europe there is a positive perception managed by the European commission, a reports shows that China should be feared because of its economical power¹¹.

The comparison between the improving image of China provided by the mentioned poll and the image of fear drawn by a research on the Web is astonishing. We may not discuss furthermore the question but it is sure that another work based on a comparison between available polls and E-reputation of China on the Web constitute one missing piece of the puzzle. It's also an indication of dissonance.

⁹ www.globescan.com/commentary-and-analysis/press-releases/press-releases-2012/186-views-of-europe-slide-sharply-in-global-poll-while-views-of-china-improve.html

¹⁰ It's also surprising to see how European union has failed, certainly based on the economical turmoil and debts crisis.

¹¹ www.debatingeurope.eu/home-report/2012report/



Source: www.globescan.org

On that side, China and its cultural values face a double bind. On one hand, the message seems to be “China is successful because we are Chinese” and, on the other hand, values promoted by the PRC are facing internal challenges and European fundamentals. To say it with others words, we may ask here which story China tries to promote to the rest of the world. If it is harmonious society, Europeans will compare with their own values and with the reality inside the country; If it’s creativity from citizens, from local actors or from civil

society, the examples of Confucius institutes, of Tai chi chuan practices, or the Ai Wei Wei case (a popular exhibition in France and a trial in China) are not efficient to convict well informed citizens of the attractions of Chinese values.

2 - Normative Power Europe, a mirror of Chinese soft power

Besides economical power, Europe (and United States) deal with cultural values such as promotion of democracy, human rights or freedom of speech and governance processes.

A comparative approach is here efficient. First, according to (Jullien, 1996), we start with philosophical aspects of Chinese and European cultures. Such notions may be considered as markers, or fundamentals elements for one society. This short presentation is an example of a comparative approach but some limits should be pointed out. The level of representation could always be contested, i.e. at which level should we stop to consider a certain generalization as representative? The danger of comparative approach is also to look for identical categories of items, in order to create representative categories and therefore analysis. And, finally, one should be aware of the culture and representations of the author, even if he cannot extract from them but he could stay vigilant according to anthropological methodology of research.

Comparative table on European and Chinese philosophical conceptions

In Europe	In China
To oppose a “No” in order to find its originality, its personality	To reach wisdom, by understanding the essence of the facts
Beliefs (in religion, in technologies)	Experiences
The goal	The path, the way
An absolute truth	A relative truth
A Creator	A cosmic energy (the Qi)
Man as a measure	Man as a part of the whole
Individual happiness	Social order

According to that, we propose a same kind of comparison between the social markers of Europe (Manners, in Laïdi 2008) and China.

<i>In EU</i>	Elements of dissonance	<i>In China</i>	Elements of dissonance
<i>Rule of law</i>	Migrant policy (?)	<i>Law</i>	IPO (?)
<i>Freedom of speech</i>		<i>Openness</i>	Internet Great wall
<i>Human rights</i>	Buying energy from Russia	<i>Place of individuals in the society</i>	Ratification of ICCPR ¹²
<i>Democracy</i>	Amrs sales for Lybia (2004)	<i>Democracy</i>	Individuals complaints, Social unrest
<i>Sustainable peace</i>		<i>Peace</i>	Neighbouring foreign policy Military expenditures
<i>Equality</i>		?	Core Labour Standards
<i>Sustainable development</i>	The EU climate and energy package, known as 20-20-20	<i>Development</i>	?
<i>Good governance</i>	DK / FI / SE/ NL / LU / BE / UK, 8 MS ranked among the 20st. With a CPI from 90 to 74.	<i>Corruption perception index of Transparency International¹³</i>	Rank 80 with a CPI 39

¹² See the resolution of European Parliament, www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2013-0097+0+DOC+XML+Vo//FR

¹³ <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2012/results>

The Corruption Perceptions Index ranks countries and territories based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be. A country or territory's score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 - 100, where 0 means that a country is perceived as highly corrupt and 100 means it is perceived as very clean. A country's rank indicates its position relative to the other countries and territories included in the index. This year's index includes 176 countries and territories.

Concerning EU, it is evident that coherence and impact of norm diffusion are undermined by its limited influence. In reality, while EU believes in the force and universality of norms, China chooses to defend its own positions, especially on sensitive issues, such as the ones mentioned above. For example, concerning human rights, a gap exists between the EU's human rights policy and the expectations of the civil society or the ones of the European Parliament. Facing the reality, the EU dialog policy on human rights should stretch the conception of HR face to partners ready to promote their own conception. China consider that economic rights is the key point of the debate, giving a secondary, relative and progressive role to HR, far from the fundamental position in the European sense (Balme, R. in Laïdi 2008 p. 172). The items in the column *Elements of dissonance* show that briefly. Each one can be a matter for a research and an article.

An image cannot only be framed by spending money on messages, digital broadcasts or communication capacity. Despite an expansive use of soft power, the government of the PRC has not yet developed an ideal mix of soft-power resources to achieve desired foreign-policy objectives. The gap between an increasingly cosmopolitan and confident foreign policy and a closed and rigid domestic political system is responsible for the imbalance between three pillars of soft power: cultural attractiveness, examples set by domestic values and policies, and values expressed through foreign policy.

Conclusion

Using culture to create soft power is not easy when they are inconsistent with domestic realities, as some scholars' reports, (Nye, 2011), (d'Hooge, 2012). Furthermore, "soft power in this context means that China is trying to project the image that it wants to project. Everything in China is political¹⁴." The developments of soft power need not to be a zero sum game: ideas should circulate, form many sources, including talents and actors from civil society.

¹⁴ Catherine Vuylsteke, « Culture perceptions and media in EU China relations », Friends of Europe Cafe crossfire, 18 April 2012, on www.friendsofeurope.org

It is worth to go beyond the media and the journalists' discourses or contestation to speak about the reception and about citizen's abilities. Two authors (Wolton, 2009) and (Garfinkel, 1967) consider that there is no "cultural fool" in the communication process. It means that each person, moreover in a digital world, is able to decode messages and communication strategies. In other words, to inform is not to communicate at its own level and, at the end of the chain, the public is used to make distinction between the messages, the broadcaster and the reality. For that, sending more information will never automatically conduct to a better understanding of the reality of China by Europeans. In other words, a desired image and culture by the Chinese government is different from its reception.

Concerning the difference between the perceptions and the results of soft power actions of the country discussed in this paper, the answer and the strategy of China is to argue that media in the West are not proposing a correct image of the reality. As consequence, the government support Xinhua agency to inform correctly upon China, arguments often heard since the beginning of our research¹⁵.

For the optimist Chinese scholars and diplomats, Harmony, notion belonging to the Chinese culture could become a universal and recognized value and therefore gaining more reputation and persuasions to the public. Traditional cultural values, with its priority to human dimensions can serve to overcome the default of the western societies focused on consumption and competition. And the discourse of the officials and media from China put forward economic growth, stability and harmony in order to institutionalize these values.

Several questions remain to clarify. Could we have precise indicators to evaluate soft power or credibility? What is the link between soft power and democracy, as some authoritarian states try also to promote soft power by others ways? What is the balance between the reports on a country by the media and the reception by the citizens?

One of the most famous Chinese political scientists gives a conclusion that we adopt. For Yan Xuetong¹⁶, Chinese reputation at a world stage depends at a certain point from the in-

¹⁵ On that topic, in French, *J'ai travaillé pour la propagande chinoise*, Anne Soetemont, Editions du moment, Paris, 2011

¹⁶ Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University and the Chief Editor of *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (Oxford University Press).

ternational perceptions of the internal policies. A global social equilibrium, a balance and sustainable growth, some flexibility for citizens, are key points for China to be recognised at a world stage. In some extent, the coherence between inside and outside soft power should be established. It leads to the key point: the importance of images and perceptions, a difficult cocktail to control. The lack of credibility is related to the authoritarian regime but also to economic growth. Here, China is its own worst enemy to make acceptable its culture at a world level.

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