



---

## **A Historical Review of Beijing's Soft Power**

Maria Merkouraki\*

*Ph.D. Candidate Maria Merkouraki specialized in Digital and Public Diplomacy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Postal Code 541 24, Thessaloniki, Greece  
Email: maria.i.merkouraki@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

Traditionally, the evolution of China's soft power and Public Diplomacy and particularly after the advent of Covid-19 is an issue that has been intense according to experts in International Relations and public diplomacy practitioners. This is mainly due to two important key factors: a timeless and a current one. First, China is one of the most powerful economic powers in the world, and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, China continued to consider Russia a strategically irreplaceable ally. These two crucial factors affect and will affect not only the public diplomacy of China, but also the global energy diplomacy, geopolitics, foreign policy, and public diplomacy of the majority of Western countries, including the EU and the US.

**Keywords:** China; Soft Power; Chinese Dream; Public Diplomacy.

### **1. Introduction**

Traditionally, the evolution of China's soft power and Public Diplomacy and particularly after the advent of Covid-19 is an issue that has been intense according to experts in International Relations and public diplomacy practitioners. This is mainly due to two important key factors a timeless and a current one. First, China is one of the most powerful economic powers in the world, and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, China continued to consider Russia a strategically irreplaceable ally. These two crucial factors affect and will affect not only the public diplomacy of China, but also the global energy diplomacy, geopolitics, foreign policy, and public diplomacy of the majority of Western countries, including the EU and the US.

---

*Received: 5/11/2023*

*Accepted: 6/23/2023*

*Published: 7/2/2023*

---

\* Corresponding author.

What we need to keep in mind as we look back on 2017 is that the results of Chinese public diplomacy identified China as a strategic competitor of the US, and concerning to U.S National Security Strategy Beijing is recognized as one of the most important economic competitors as central to a great-power rivalry. On the other hand, China is eager to strengthen its economic and energy connections across the international arena, but also to establish itself as a diplomatic and foreign policy ballast for the United States. Therefore, Washington wanted other nations to resist Beijing's authoritarian soft power mostly for geopolitical reasons (4, 14).

Thus, it is essential to understand the historical background of Chinese soft power to better understand and predict the nexus of China's contemporary foreign policy objectives. As the lines between soft and hard power in Beijing's tactics are blurred, it is important to stress that from the very beginning, China's soft power is fleshing out through the full control of public opinion. This Chinese choice is not accidental but is associated with the traditional Beijing concept of public diplomacy based on the significant interrelation between hard international economic competitiveness and cooperative domestic voices for a peaceful global rise. This simplistic contrast is characterized by the main goal of the Chinese soft power transition from influence tactics to Chinese power maximization strategies [7].

Before exploring the historical background of the unrealized or ambiguous Chinese soft power - as many Western scholars mentioned over time - it is worth mentioning that the cornerstone of Beijing's soft power - regardless of how it manifests itself around the world - is framed around the self-proclaimed Chinese Dream. The Chinese Dream, which was strongly promoted by Beijing in recent years and specifically by President Xi Jinping, is a central pillar in the practice of Chinese public diplomacy, consistently manifested through weaponized and instrumentalized Chinese communication diplomacy (9,11). According to political analysts, the Chinese Dream can be understood through the enumeration of the main political goals - which depend on a threefold strategy - that President Xi Jinping pointed out when he rose to power for the first time. Initially, in the first stage, he wanted to restore the old glory of his country by seeking to retrieve as a tool of foreign policy the traditional desire for a rich, contemporary, and super-powerful China that all Chinese emperors had imagined. This was achieved through the peaceful rise of harmonious Chinese society. The ultimate goal was to make Chinese citizens proud to maintain the required internal social stability and balance. This aspect of the real instrumentalization of soft power involves the element of introspective public diplomacy with a penchant for international reflection with a realistic background. In the second stage diplomatically, Xi Jinping increased China's public diplomacy by associating the Chinese Dream with super-tangible propaganda, which was concretized through a strategic narrative that promoted China's uniqueness around the world. In general, Chinese public diplomacy experts recognize the virtues and scope of Chinese propaganda by equating it to an extremely useful soft power super tool, even giving it a positive connotation associated with mostly soft and "benign" Chinese communication tactics, such as the publication of news stories with a strong element of ideological construction. More specifically, some of them consider public diplomacy as an extension of traditional domestic propaganda, as it almost always unfolds in a graded manner with a tendency that starts from within with a constant direction but outwards. Finally, in the third stage, the Chinese Dream is characterized by the polysemy and equivocation of this political slogan that has been impressively expanded, emphasizing that China can be seen as a state center of political and economic development globally, regionally, and domestically [13].

## **2. A Historical Overview of Chinese Soft Power**

In 2007, at the Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, China's soft power strategy was gradually put into practice and started to be implemented, mainly after Hu Jintao came into power. A critical review of the importance of China's soft power is, therefore, necessary to understand how soft power first developed in the US and was approached by a country with a completely different political identity, mentality, culture, civilization, and ideology from that of the United States. The main questions that could be highlighted at this point are as follows: How were the traditional tools of public diplomacy used to maximize the attraction of the foreign audience? Have these tools worked to China's advantage in a peculiar post-soft power influence strategy and tactics? How did soft power in China lead to the reconstruction and repositioning of Joseph Nye's ideas and theories? What strategies were adopted, and what effects did they have on the rise of this country in the international arena? How did the swing of the pendulum of soft power from Washington to Beijing affect the formation of the foreign policy of the two polars? What did this mean for the rest of the world? What are the limits of Chinese soft power, and how has it been shaped in recent years? These are just a few critical questions that arise when a systematic attempt is made to analyze the importance of Beijing's soft power (5, 11).

In the early 1990s, Joseph Nye paid attention to the changes in the international political landscape brought about by the collapse of the East Bloc and the subsequent reflection on the theoretical and practical aspects of power and policy in general. Nye argued that the rise of a bipolar system accelerated the development of a new type of power and he first noted that the elements of traditional power, such as military power, demographic strength, and geographic location, which he had previously identified as major components of hard power, were beginning to decline in importance and were replaced by other elements that formed what Nye called soft power. These elements of soft power include but are not limited to the support of a nation's institutions, educational diplomacy, technology, and cultural diplomacy (6, 7).

Nye further conceptualized the concept of soft power by stressing that it can enhance a state's ability to change what others desire through the power of attraction. This concept can be used to create a powerful "antidote" that serves as a counterpart to hard power. In a later conceptualization of soft power, Nye refined his idea by dividing the sources of soft power into three distinct categories: first, the value of culture; second, the redefinition of internal political values; and third, the value of foreign policy. However, for these sources of soft power to be considered genuine, they must be seen as credible and persuasive to other cultures across national borders through a real acceleration of the promotion of transition from attraction to conscious emulation. Furthermore, as Nye was deeply inspired and influenced by the bipolar model, he envisioned soft power through the example of the United States, which presented the polar opposite of the Soviet Union (6,7,8). In the '50s, G. Kennan proposed a variety of models for the manifestation of political power and foreign policy that could allow Washington to have the upper hand over Moscow. Of course, at the same time, Kennan placed the Cold War on the grounds of an ideological and cultural struggle that would not be limited exclusively to political-military competition. As he pointed out at the time, the most decisive influence that could be exerted by the United States at that time as an opposite pole and counterweight to Russia's domestic and international development was that which would be based not on influence as such, but on the importance of influence within the gradation of its intensity and its proper utilization [3].

The concept of soft power, as described by Nye, succeeded in fulfilling Washington's Cold War-era foreign policy goals. This was achieved through a series of exploitation of soft and often moderate tools that led to the questioning of the best and most tested strategic means available to a powerful state. Nye's (1988) first work on soft power was translated into 1992 by H. Xiaodong. The Nye concept of soft power in China flourished with the publication of an article by Huntington which for the first time raised the issue of influence through the use of soft foreign policy techniques [7, 8, 9]. However, Chinese experts on soft power strategies disagree with the significance of Chinese soft power and argue among themselves about its effectiveness as a positive tool for advancing Chinese foreign policy. For example, Glaser and Murphy felt that the idea of soft power was favorably received once it was introduced in China. On the other side, Ding and Mingjiang believed that this tool by the contrary, had little response and effectiveness for the strategic planning of Beijing's foreign policy. These ambivalent opinions concerning the real nature of Chinese soft power are explained by the ambiguous character of Beijing's long history of the Fang - Shou cycle in Chinese politics, which is also known as the fang (relaxing)-shou (tightening) cycle (12, 13).

As stated by Sheng, this wariness towards soft power was interpreted as such, especially after the events in Tiananmen Square. This event resulted in China's international isolation, precisely because it openly used its hard power as a key tool to advance its political ideology. According to Sheng, it was not until the mid-90s that China partially healed from the real trauma of Tiananmen. Academic and political circles gradually began to take a real interest in soft power and its importance as a foreign policy instrument [12].

Going back in time, China first attempted to promote a cultural campaign in the Third World and then sought, in the late 1960s, to spread the ideas of the Cultural Revolution. The aim of promoting a form of soft power through the promotion of culture was characterized as a weak prelude. It was not until the early 90s that a large number of Chinese leaders who were fully inspired by Xiaoping's ideas and insights on soft power rejected all attempts to return to soft foreign policy strategies. Today, soft power is often seen in internal discussions of the Chinese Communist Party. However, according to recent studies, even though China has invested in soft power and more in Public Diplomacy, in the end, they all conclude that discussions of soft strategic tactics were initially limited to academic circles; since the beginning of the decade 2000, interest in soft power gradually spread to the wider political class and the media (2, 11).

Throughout the course of the development of Chinese Public Diplomacy, Nye's ideas have been of particular interest. Over time, soft power has been redefined by Chinese academics to such an extent that there is now talk of not just the use of soft power, but of a separate school of thought in terms of shaping the culture of Chinese foreign policy, that of Chinese soft power. Chinese soft power has different characteristics from the concept originally developed by Nye, so Chinese soft power constitutes an interesting reconstruction of soft power as approached in the West. It should be noted that several schools of thought have developed in recent years. However, most Chinese soft power researchers theorize soft power in the same way, even if the approach changes. It is worth mentioning that among the various schools of thought, the so-called Shanghai School is of interest. This school of thought established itself as the dominant school for studying soft power in China. This school of thought, which is also metaphorically called the cultural school because of its importance in culture, largely argues that the soft power proposed in Huntington's article is also the prevailing one. For advocates of the

Shanghai cultural school, China's ancient history and traditional culture are the cornerstones of its soft power. To improve China's attractiveness on the global stage, this school of thought supports the promotion of Chinese culture internationally [5].

Finally, it is worth mentioning that during the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CCP in 2007, soft power was adopted as a foreign policy tool and officially established as a political tool to attract foreign audiences. It should be noted here that this was done at the time of the Ministry of Culture's initiative and not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, in the speech delivered by Jintao on this occasion, he inaugurated the formal adoption of the concept of soft power promoted by Shanghai School. Jintao then focused on the revival of socialist cultural initiatives, emphasizing the need to stimulate cultural creativity and extroversion of the entire Chinese nation (11, 12).

The Chinese government's vision of soft power has an interesting peculiarity in that it has relied exclusively on the tools of soft power, among which is cultural influence, without advancing even indirect economic or military issues. A key message was that China sought to play an important role in maintaining peace in the world. Perhaps the only shortcoming of the Chinese soft power was that it oscillated back and forth between long-term and short-term Public Diplomacy goals. In this sense, the promotion of Chinese soft power has mainly been characterized as the promotion of a peculiar national Nation Brand [14].

### **3. Oscillations in Chinese Soft Power**

The success of Beijing's strategic influence is the result of a process that has been organized slowly and steadily. The means that China has used in recent years to highlight its advantages also explains this success, just as Washington has found it difficult to maintain its American soft power. A pendulum swing from Washington to Beijing appears to have existed for many years, with difficulties amplifying the successes of the other. The deficit in promoting the image of the United States to the world, and especially to developing countries, over the past decade has been covered by significant improvements in China's image, at least until the advent of the Covid-19 Pandemic. This trend can be explained by going back in time to the Bush administration's foreign policy choices, which were hotly contested, as well as by the emphasis placed on a new multipolar vision by Chinese leaders, who perceived the unique opportunity presented to them at the time. Moreover, the means available to the United States at that time in terms of investment and development assistance diminished in tandem with the rise of Chinese capabilities and Beijing's desire to improve its image. At that time, China did not hesitate to invest large sums of this effort (1,15). At the same time, the international economic crisis that followed the countries of the West to intense isolation contributed to a series of fiscal restrictions. The economic situation was accompanied by inactivity in Public Diplomacy. Several studies, including those conducted by the Pew Research Center, have shown a sharp decline in the external image projected by the United States, while at the same time, there has been an extraordinary rise in China's role strength and popularity in third countries.

After Obama came to power, Washington embarked on a more seductive strategy of smart power, the main objective of which was the combination of hard and soft power. This new focus of the US ushered in a new and innovative foreign policy that started from scratch and concluded that soft power was necessary, and it became clear that hard power should not be completely neglected, not even as a form of power [8].

Ultimately, this continuous regressive relationship between the US and China on the level of soft power approach, both in the process of imitating and reconstructing the concept of soft power, closely links China's trajectory with that of the United States and raises the question of a possible long-term rivalry between the two powers, which would not result in a real conflict in the essential sense, but in a new form of bipolarity between two different aspects of soft power trying to one over the other. It should be noted that competition with Washington is and has been at the center of most reflections on how to exploit soft power in China. Fang Changping even codified the implications for China regarding the competition between the US and Chinese soft power by stressing that the US should try to reposition itself regarding the tools of Public Diplomacy at its disposal. It is worth mentioning here that Nye and Wang have for their part raised the question of what the consequences could be for the United States in the event of an overdevelopment of Chinese soft power, concluding that this would not necessarily be seen as a cause of inevitable competition [9].

In the 2000s, China met with resounding success thanks to its deception - disinformation strategy, while at the same time, the United States saw its international influence decline. Here, the question arises as to what the reaction of the United States might have been. Those wishing to maintain their influence on the international stage would have no choice but to go along with Beijing by increasing their investments in developing countries. American political scientists note for their part that it would be more difficult for the United States to defend its interests if it did not invest in international institutions where China has increasingly had a strong presence at both cultural and financial levels (10,14).

Therefore, the assumption of competition between American and Chinese soft powers is a reality. Nevertheless, Ye believed that despite the spectacular progress of Chinese soft power, the latter was still far from that of the United States because, as he argued, government initiatives alone could not ensure its success. He went on to say that great powers have tried to use culture to shape their soft power, but most successful Public Diplomacy is an outcome derived from civil society, not governments (1, 2, 6, 11).

#### **4. Beijing's Strategic Influence and Strategic Tactics**

China's soft power has quickly served its strategic need to maximize its economic influence in the world. According to official discussions in the early 2000s, this aim was twofold. On one hand, it was critical to use soft power to strengthen China's position in the Western world. As argued by Chinese political circles at the time, China's image depended not only on hard power but also on soft power. On the other hand, political targeting was identified by how there would be a real emergence of Chinese soft power that would simultaneously include both soft and hard forms of power [13].

On assessment, how soft power worked in the early years in China seems to have made it possible to create a set of favorable cooperative environments that enhanced Chinese influence within a stable, peaceful, international, and regional environment - a cooperative environment based on equality and mutual benefits [5]. However, interest in Chinese soft power began after the adoption of a series of internal reforms. Many initiatives were then observed, such as the opening of Confucius Institutes, intensified exchanges between Chinese and foreign universities, and Chinese cultural centers around the world flourished. In addition, the organization of the Year

of China was strongly promoted in various countries and, of course, the hosting of major international events, such as the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai World Expo, played a decisive role in promoting a more outward-looking foreign policy; the aim of the Chinese leaders, however, seems to have evolved more clearly since then (10, 11).

In recent years, soft power has not been seen as a means of promoting China's access as a great power to the Western world but was reframed in a way that it was treated as a means of recognizing China's great superpower status globally. Characteristically, in the mid-2000s, soft power began to be instrumentalized in Beijing with a completely different aspect. A huge propaganda operation for foreign audiences began, accompanied by a series of large financial investments abroad, especially in developing countries. For example, to strengthen its prestige, China symbolically strengthened its relations with foreign states through a series of tangible manipulation gestures, such as the reconstruction of the Cambodian Parliament or the Mozambican Ministry of Foreign Affairs [14].

In practice, as evidenced by the map of Confucius Institutes around the world, which now number in the hundreds and are spread over all continents, Chinese soft power aims to be not just global but a superpower that directs international developments. The beginning happened and not by chance in the so-called countries of the south. This is because regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America are of direct concern to China in terms of both building diplomatic alliances and economic feasibility. Within the framework of Chinese soft power, several free trade agreements were signed with six ASEAN member countries that entered into force in January 2011, confirming this trend.

The cooperation between China and African countries has also been an important example of China's soft power strategy. A landmark moment was in October 2000, when a very important forum took place that brought together almost 80 foreign ministers from 45 African countries. This was followed by a second forum held in November 2003 in Ethiopia, which concluded with the adoption of the Addis Ababa Action Plan. The main directions of this cooperation were outlined in terms of political, economic, commercial, and social background. At the end of these two forums, the so-called "Chinafrica" was born. All this diplomatic targeting rested on the narrative that, to fuel its economic growth, China needed energy resources. The African Continent has abundant energy resources; however, its development requires Chinese input and assistance. Additionally, China strategically wanted to moderate the influence of Western countries, so it had to act immediately and decisively. Therefore, for China, using the traditional version of public diplomacy was simply the pretext to reach its goal without losing diplomatically, while in reality, it followed tactics of give and take (5, 11, 14).

In Latin America, Beijing has promoted a series of soft power strategies for several years, again in the context of economic diplomacy, mainly because of energy reserves in Latin American countries. The American subcontinent is also of interest to China because of its agricultural resources. Brazil and Argentina are among the main exporters of agricultural products to China and act as a counterweight to its dependence on the US.

Finally, in the case of relations between China and the Middle East, soft power was used to increase trade relations between Beijing and Middle East countries. The New Silk Road was characterized by the resumption

of trade between the Arab-Persian Gulf and Asia. China's energy needs were at the center of these economic collaborations, which is why China diplomatically focused on economic diplomacy, avoiding focusing on the political regime of the countries in the region and the political relations they maintain with the other major powers of the International System. Despite the intense planning of the Chinese strategy, the "export" and promotion of Chinese soft power in the Middle East occurred more spontaneously and, in a way, consciously unpretentiously but always based on the special geopolitical interest that Beijing had and still has today for this region (15,19).

### **5. The Limits of Chinese Soft Power and the Need to Rebuilt**

The comparison with the US soft power promotion model highlights the successes of Chinese soft power and allows us to see its limits. According to Joseph Nye, one characteristic of soft power is national cohesion. In this regard, the many concepts proposed in China in recent years, from "harmonious society" to "peaceful ascent" peaceful ascent, highlight the importance of this cohesion, as well as the need not to jeopardize institutions and sink the country into chaos. Zicheng notes at this point that, in the case of China, soft power consists of open, stable, and adaptable economic, social, and political sub-systems. This has contributed to a better understanding of the importance and functionality of soft power. Apart from cultural issues in China's case, it is worth noting that soft power has been combined with its influence on the international stage. China initially sought to legitimize both deep reforms and the seemingly inappropriate conservatism of its political institutions. Chinese leaders seemed to seize the opportunity, as shown by Premier Wen Jiabao's calls for general mobilization after the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, which reflected a desire to strengthen a harmonious civil society so that the international public could see a positive look at the trend of change in Beijing's political culture. However, given the difficulty of social networks within China, this effort, as it appeared, could not be accepted (1, 11).

The nature of the Chinese regime itself constitutes a limit to the soft power Beijing seeks to develop. However, in the case of China, Nye did not directly connect soft power with democracy. The strategy of huge economic investments in developing countries was based on the combination of soft power and political realism, while it appeared to be indifferent to the real goals of Public Diplomacy, with the result that Chinese soft power tended to be indifferent to local balances and respect for human rights. in these countries. It is thus undeniably profitable for Beijing to follow the policy, but in the end, it could be more like a hard power nurtured around the network of virtual soft power. Similarly, from a theoretical perspective, China's foreign policy, centered on the defense of its interests, appears at first sight to be outside soft power theory. This paradox appears most clearly in the attempt to adapt an initial neoliberal idea to a neorealist strategy. From this point of view, the reconstruction of soft power in China is not limited to the outline of its objectives but extends to the entire range of its formation (12, 13).

Chinese soft power has also faced many practical problems from the very beginning of its manifestation, despite its positive results. The obstacles that Beijing faces at the regional level, for example, are a real dilemma for its soft power. How can it establish its credibility as a benevolent force on the international stage if its neighbors continue to view it with suspicion at best? In addition, public opinion remains highly skeptical, and the slightest show of strength from Beijing, both commercially and strategically, is greeted by an avalanche of negative



criticism. In addition, Beijing's ambivalent stance on increasing its military power and the issue of human rights are major problems for China's neighbors, who are unsure whether to give in to the siren calls for Chinese growth or position themselves as its supporters. Representatives of the Chinese power also know this in many ways. China's success in the coming years will therefore depend largely on its ability to ease regional tensions and emerge as a responsible and stabilizing factor in international relations. In this regard, while soft power is a welcome strategy, it competes with other countries in the region, particularly Japan [11].

In the rest of the world, we see that Chinese soft power succeeds in boosting its image where it is needed, especially at the level of investment. In more developed countries, where China is more of a competitor than a supporter, the situation is completely reversed. An overly visible Chinese presence fuels more or less valid fears: One wonders about the intentions of this state.

At that point, it is critical to highlight that during the Pandemic of the Covid -19 Chinese Public Diplomacy and soft power are associated with an inflating phenomenon of Wolf warrior diplomacy due to China's goal of protecting its geopolitical interests. This diplomatic choice prevented China from a real engagement with the international public and increased the limitations of its public diplomacy and soft power due to the shift to more Chinese mask diplomacy. Characteristically, China has not hesitated to use social media not for real and transparent digital public diplomacy, but the Chinese goal here has been to usher in a strategic narrative of hard power by promoting more nationalistic diplomacy while at the same time abandoning the possibility of a real negotiation with the international audiences. As a result, Chinese soft power has been curtailed to an extraordinary degree (15,16,17,18).

## **6. Chinese Soft Predominance**

If the soft power strategy was slow to be officially recognized in Beijing, its ultimate goals would remain unclear and, to date, have not yet been clearly defined. Several Western soft power scholars have considered the possibility of Beijing's acquiescence to be a genuine soft power strategy, which would also secure Washington's acquiescence, which they concluded would be difficult [1]. This is because the hypothesis of this consensus is currently categorically rejected by Chinese politicians themselves. Indeed, this finding intensifies as Chinese experts question the trajectory of Chinese soft power and ponder the possibility of a new governance model.

Nye, for his part, observed that the Beijing Consensus, which links authoritarian government and a thriving market economy, has become more popular in developing countries than the Washington Consensus, which links economic liberalization and democratic governments. This situation could eventually lead to the emergence of a new hegemon, with the countries concerned choosing to follow the path laid out by Beijing rather than Western powers. Thus, Beijing's consent would be the result of a "request" from developing countries rather than an actual program that China would propose to the rest of the world. Such a treaty could strategically lead to strictly win-win relations, which are supposed to characterize the ties between China and Africa. It would also be the source of a new bipolarity in which two models of soft power (Chinese - American) would compete [8].

Choosing a specific timeframe to promote Chinese goals is also an important element of China's deception strategy. China has strategic logic that responds to its long-term vision. Beyond its official words, China appears to be increasingly active, even arrogant, on the diplomatic stage. For example, Beijing's reactions to foreign leaders' references to the nature of the Chinese regime are increasingly uninhibited. Likewise, the rise of military power and the ongoing political implications, especially for an authoritarian regime that does not accept criticism, lead us to think that the more Chinese soft power proliferates, the stronger China will become. This is because, as noted earlier, Chinese soft power has been proactively built and nurtured by its successes on the international stage [15].

In addition, Chinese soft powers could evolve toward a more aggressive strategy. If China is currently seeking to misinform the world, can it ultimately succeed without much effort? This is evident in how its trade relations with other powers are shaped. Everything, then, seems to depend on the orientations set by Beijing in its soft power strategy and, therefore, the arrival of a new generation of leaders after 2010 has brought realignments comparable to those imposed by the Tandem Hu-Wen since 2002. Many experts who have studied the issue of soft power in China believe that Chinese leaders serve multiple goals through the use of soft power. According to him, the implemented soft power strategies are aimed at:

1. combating negative perceptions and misunderstandings of China by other countries
2. improving the international image of the Chinese regime
3. fending off the excessive influence of foreign cultures
4. refuting the Chinese threat position
5. to maintain a stable and peaceful region.

Also, it is worth noting here that the foundations of Chinese soft power doctrine, including the concepts of peaceful development and a harmonious world or political environment that favor international cooperation and the peaceful resolution of disputes, are essentially based on the promotion of multilateral relations - with Beijing simultaneously insisting on reinforcing a vague multipolarity. The idea of the winner of globalization clashes with the Chinese way of communicating with today's world. Beijing sees globalization as an opportunity, and its soft power success confirms this trend. Apart from the official discourse where the above thought is explicitly affirmed, this idea is very widespread among the Chinese, who see multipolarity as a just return to the balance between civilizations, while denying the principle of hegemony on an international scale. According to Wenchang, the condition for turning this desire into reality depends on the relations between great powers. Beijing intends to play the leading role in this delicate power game [11]. Finally, another important question concerns the creation of a real economic and social model, and by extension a political one that Beijing could seek to offer to other nations, starting with developing countries. For now, we see that China's temptation to propose a consensus to Beijing is not essential to its soft power strategy. However, things can change rapidly. With the arrival of a new generation of leaders in 2012, China, with its unprecedented economic and cultural power, could seek to take a leadership role in developing countries. Beijing's positions expressed at the Copenhagen Summit on global warming in December 2009 and the remarkable support Beijing received from countries such as India, Brazil, and South Africa are indicators of this concept.

## **7. Conclusions**

Finally, is China a powerful country? As a member of the BRICS group, China has been seeking for many years to establish itself as a leader of emerging economies and has succeeded in this to an extremely large extent. For this reason, its Public Diplomacy cannot be separated from the economic objectives of its foreign policy and it will never be severed from its Realpolitik aspect. This is a lasting blow to Chinese Public Diplomacy, but it brought about the desired results for Beijing, which took advantage of the negative political and economic circumstances that prevailed intermittently in the past decades in Western countries. However, as Cull has mentioned if a country wants a real engagement with international audiences has to be more credible. Nowadays, as social media has brought about the digitalization of public diplomacy the emphasis on credibility is even greater. If China wants successful public diplomacy and an effective soft power has to emphasize a more constructivist aspect of public diplomacy and rethink the importance of listening before advocating not only while practicing traditional public diplomacy but its digital diplomacy too (2,18).

Here it is significant to remark that after the explosion of Covid-19, the goals of Chinese Public Diplomacy and soft power were not certain to be crowned with success. This is mainly because, especially during the pandemic, any possibility of real transparency in the promotion of Chinese soft power has been severely damaged by China's ability to mislead not only its citizens but also the rest of the world. Therefore, it is doubtful whether China will succeed in gradually entering into the reality of substantial foreign audience attraction. Chinese soft power is presented today as an essential step in China's international ambitions, directly intertwined with economic goals that essentially express a contested modernity. The United States cannot prevent China's rise, but it can ensure that the rise respects the rules and institutions that Washington and its partners have put in place over the past century to better serve the interests of all countries in the future. Therefore, China is a huge challenge for the United States. Everything depends on how Beijing uses its soft power.

The reconstruction of the concept of soft power in China, especially after the pandemic, raises many questions about the foundations of the real strategic disinformation that is the basis of Chinese soft power and what will be the consequences of a new possible successful Public Diplomacy in the international scene. By putting pharaonic means at its disposal, the Chinese central government provides its soft power strategy with what it needs to respond to with utter success, particularly in developing countries where Chinese investment and China's image have advanced significantly in less than a decade, while the other soft power, that of the United States, experienced setbacks. Nevertheless, Beijing's soft power is limited. Moreover, the Chinese remain numerous and this forces Beijing to pursue a double-edged public diplomacy - both domestically and internationally - based on propaganda. This choice raises concerns the question that arises here is whether propaganda is really for China an ambitious strategy of asserting power or if it continues as a tool of soft power that would ultimately result in overturning the rules of the international economic system with profound political consequences for the rest of the world? This question will undoubtedly be one of the most sensitive questions in the study of international relations in the coming years. The answers largely determine the balance of power between Beijing, Washington, and, the EU.

In conclusion, if China wants better and adequate Public Diplomacy that will attract more and more friends it

needs to pursue more engaging storytelling and attractive communication. It should also promote a more human-centric model of public diplomacy cut from propaganda. Also, China has to abandon its hard power choices and rebuild its relationships of trust by strengthening the freedom of speech through a fruitful promotion of a new Chinese Nation Brand. Let's not forget that successful public diplomacy and soft power strategies contribute to the democratization of communication between citizens of the world. Hence, Beijing must create partnerships of mutual interaction while practicing its soft power tools through true, respectful, and solid information for better Public Diplomacy.

## **References**

- [1]. Birdsall, Nancy, and Fukuyama Francis (2011). The Post-Washington Consensus Development. After the Crisis. *Foreign affairs (Council on Foreign Relations)*, 90(2):45-53.
- [2]. Cull, N. J. (2008a). Public diplomacy: The evolution of a phrase. In: N. Snow and P.M. Taylor (eds.). *The Handbook of Public Diplomacy*. London: Routledge, pp.19 –24.
- [3]. Johnson, Stephen, and Helle Dale, (2003). How to reinvigorate U.S. public diplomacy. *The Heritage Foundation Background*, No. 1645, April 23, p. 4.
- [4]. Kennan George (1990). America and the Russian Future, *Foreign Affairs*, vol.29, n°3, pp.125-134.
- [5]. Leonard, Mark (2002). *Public diplomacy*. London: Foreign Policy Centre.
- [6]. Li Mingjiang (2008a). China Debates Soft Power, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol.2, n°2, pp.287-308.
- [7]. Misyuk, I., (2013), Propaganda and Public Diplomacy: The Problem of Differentiation. In: *Humanities & Social Sciences 2013*, 21-23 November, Lviv, pp. 76-77.
- [8]. Nye Jr., J. S. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York: Basic Books.
- [9]. Nye Jr., J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York: Public Affairs.
- [10]. Nye Joseph S. (2010a). American and Chinese Power after the Financial Crisis, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.33, n°4, pp.143-153.
- [11]. Nye Joseph S. & Wang Jisi (2008). The Rise of China's Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States in Richard Rosecrance & Gu Guoliang (ed.), *Power and Restraint: A Shared Vision for the US-China Relationship*, New York, Public Affairs, pp.28-30.
- [12]. Pang Zhongying (2008). *The Beijing Olympics and China's Soft Power*, Brookings Institution.

- [13]. Suzuki Shogo (2009). Chinese Soft Power, Insecurity Studies, Myopia, and Fantasy. *Third World Quarterly*, vol.30, n°4, pp.779-793.
- [14]. Sheng Ding (2008). *The Dragon's Hidden Wings: How China Rises with Its Soft Power*, Lanham: Lexington Books.
- [15]. Wang Hongying & Lu Yeh-Chung (2008). The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol.17, n°56, pp.425-447.
- [16]. Wagner, C. (2005). From hard power to soft power? Ideas, interaction, institutions, and images in India's South Asia policy. *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, Working Paper no. 26, South Asia Institute, Department of Political Science, University of Heidelberg, Germany.
- [17]. Zhao Alexandre Huang, Rui Wang (2021). Exploring China's Digitalization of Public Diplomacy on Weibo and Twitter: A Case Study of the U.S. - China Trade War, *International Journal of Communication* 15, pp.1912-1939.
- [18]. Zhao Alexandre Huang, Yuwen Zhang et Xifei Wang (2023). Atypical Wolf Warrior Strategy in China's Digital Public Diplomacy during the Pandemic, *Revue Française des Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication*.
- [19]. Zhang Xiaodong (1999). China's Interest in the Middle East: Present and Future, *Middle East Policy*, Vol.6, n°3, pp.150-159.