



## The Promotion of Chinese Language Learning and China's Soft Power

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### Abstract

China is currently promoting Chinese language learning throughout the world as part of its effort to accomplish its foreign policy goals through the use of soft power. This paper begins by defining soft power and discussing how and why China is attempting to establish and spread it. It then goes on to describe the ways in which China is promoting Chinese language learning and the results of such efforts. It argues that although China's efforts have been successful in creating a positive image of the Chinese language and attracting learners, there are still obstacles to the promotion of Chinese language learning and by extension China's soft power.

**Keywords:** China, Chinese language learning, Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students, Confucius Institute, National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Soft power

### 1. Introduction

A prominently displayed sign in the Foreign Languages Bookstore in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China says, in Chinese characters with English below:

China needs foreign languages, the world needs Chinese

The first part of this equation has received much scholarly and practical attention, particularly in regards to the learning and teaching of English. However, the second part, concerning the learning of Chinese throughout the world, has so far received very little such attention.

So why should we concern ourselves with this sign's seemingly simple claim that "the world needs Chinese"? One compelling reason is that the Chinese government is promoting the learning of Chinese throughout the world almost as much as they are pushing foreign language learning in China. This can be seen as part of a broader effort to accomplish China's overarching foreign policy goal of resuming its once central place in both Asia and the world (Harris, 1995, p. 14; Hubbard, 2008, p. 94; Roy, 1998, p. 1) through the spread of soft power (Kurlantzick, 2007).

This paper will set the promotion of Chinese language learning within China's efforts to increase its soft power, describe the ways in which China is promoting Chinese language learning and discuss the outcomes of these efforts.

### 2. Soft Power in World Politics

In the field of world politics, power is one of the most important and central concepts (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2006, p. 57; Nossal, 1998, p. 44; Ray & Kaarbo, 2002, p. 99). It is usually defined as the ability of a particular actor to control or influence others and the outcomes of events (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002, p. 253). An actor's power is derived from the resources available to it and is used to accomplish and protect goals (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002, p. 253; Nossal, 1998, pp. 96-97).

Although traditionally power was seen to derive from population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military forces and political stability and be exercised mainly through military means (Nye, 1990, p. 154), there are other sources of power and ways for actors to accomplish their goals. Joseph Nye developed the concept of soft power, which he explains as follows:

A country may achieve its preferred outcomes in world politics because other countries want to emulate it or have agreed to a system that produces such effects. In this sense, it is just as important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics as it is to force others to change in particular situations. This aspect of power – that is, getting others to want what you want – might be called attractive, or *soft power* behavior. Soft power can rest on such resources as the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences others express. Parents of teenagers know that if they have structured their children's beliefs and preferences, their power will be

greater and will last longer than if they had relied only on active control. Similarly, political leaders and constructivist theorists have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions (2005, p. 61).

The essence soft power in world politics is that other actors do what the holder of soft power wants them to do because they see the soft power holder and its goals as legitimate, rather than out of a sense of fear or desire to gain a reward (Oğuzlu, 2007, p. 83). Soft power thus contrasts with traditional kinds of power or hard power. In the case of China, however, soft power has a slightly different meaning than Nye's original definition. As Kurlantzick puts it, soft power in China refers to "all elements outside of the security realm, including investment and aid" (2006, p. 271).

Although soft power is not new, Nye (1990; 2005) has argued that it is becoming more important in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world. This point has not been lost on China's leadership who, as we shall see in the next section, have made a significant shift in China's foreign policy and approach to the outside world.

### **3. China's Shift to a Soft Power Strategy**

From the 1950s to the late 1970s, China's foreign policy was focused on encouraging and supporting revolution in other parts of the world, particularly Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America (Bergsten et al., 2006, p. 129; Kurlantzick, 2007, pp. 13-14; see also Van Ness, 1970 for a detailed discussion of this aspect of China's foreign policy). After Deng Xiaoping came to power, China focused instead on its own economic reform and modernisation while purposely keeping a low profile in world affairs (Harris, 2005, p. 481; Kurlantzick, 2007, pp. 16-17). Beginning in the late 1990s, however, China again changed its focus and began to concentrate on soft power. Several factors prompted this shift. Firstly, China's spectacular economic development gave both the Chinese leadership and public greater confidence in China and its place in the world. Secondly, in the wake of the world's reaction to the Tiananmen Square Massacre, China realised it could not depend solely on the USA and needed to improve ties with neighboring countries as well as take a greater international role in order to achieve its goals. Perhaps most importantly, China's attempts to achieve its goals through the use of hard power, such as dispatching warships to disputed areas of the South China Sea and firing missiles in the Taiwan Strait, did not work, which not only demonstrated that China could not yet hope to compete with the USA in terms of hard power but also antagonised and alienated other countries (Goldstein, 2003, p. 67; Kurlantzick, 2006, p. 271).

At about the same time, Chinese academics also began to argue that the USA's soft power had declined significantly since the end of the Cold War and that China could indeed compete on this front (Kurlantzick, 2006, p. 272; Kurlantzick, 2007, pp. 32-33). All of these factors combined therefore resulted in China's adoption of a soft power strategy to achieve its goals.

### **4. What China Hopes to Accomplish**

What then does China hope to achieve through the use of soft power?

To begin with, China wants to create a peaceful international environment in which its economic development can continue and in which it can portray itself as a responsible and constructive player in world politics (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 39). China is the world's second largest consumer of energy and requires significant amounts of resources to sustain its economic development so it is not surprising that China's second goal is to secure a range of resources such as oil, timber and various minerals (Harris, 2005, p. 483; Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 39). Thirdly, China would like to create a circle of like-minded allies, all sharing its disdain for outside interference in a country's own affairs (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 41). Another of China's goals is to convince other countries that China is a great power and may even be capable of becoming the USA's equal in the long term (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 42). Finally, China aims to use its soft power to isolate Taiwan by convincing other countries to cut ties with Taiwan and instead establish formal relations with the People's Republic of China (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 42).

In order to implement its soft power strategy and accomplish these goals, China employs a number of tools, which Kurlantzick (2007) divides into two groups, the tools of culture (Chinese culture, arts, language and ethnicity), and the tools of business (aid, trade, investment and the appeal of China's economic model).

The next section focuses specifically on the Chinese language by drawing on official Chinese government sources to describe the main ways in which China promotes Chinese language learning around the world.

### **5. China's Promotion of Chinese Language Learning**

There is little doubt that China sees the promotion of Chinese language learning as one of its soft power tools. The Ministry of Education's website, for example, states that:

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) is an integral part of China's reform and opening up drive. To promote TCFL is of strategic significance to popularize the Chinese language and culture throughout the world, to enhance the friendship and mutual understanding as well as the economic and cultural cooperation and exchanges between China

and other countries around the world, and to elevate China's influence in the international community (Ministry of Education website).

An even more direct statement regarding the promotion of Chinese language learning was made recently by a National People's Congress (NPC) deputy, Hu Youqing, who said that:

It can help build up our national strength and should be taken as a way to develop our country's soft power (quoted in Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 67).

Chinese language learning is promoted through the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Confucius Institutes, volunteer and state sponsored teachers and the Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students.

### 5.1 National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Established in 1987, the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL), also known as the Office of Chinese Language Council International and in Chinese as Hanban, is the main organ for the promotion and spread of the Chinese language. According to its website:

Hanban is committed to making the Chinese language and culture teaching resources and services available to the world, to meeting the demands of overseas Chinese learners to the utmost, to contributing to the formation of a world of cultural diversity and harmony (Hanban website, a).

Members from 12 state ministries and commissions make up the NOCFL: the General Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Culture, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (China Radio International), the State Press and Publications Administration, the State Council Information Office and the State Language Committee (Hanban website, b).

NOCFL is similar to the Japan Foundation and the Korea Foundation in that it conducts a range of activities aimed at promoting and spreading the Chinese language and culture (Lo Bianco, 2007, pp. 11-12).

### 5.2 Confucius Institutes

Beginning in 2004, China, through NOCFL, has been setting up non-profit education organisations outside of China known as Confucius Institutes to teach Chinese language and culture. According to the *People's Daily Online*:

Confucius institutes provide Chinese-learning-related courses and programs, such as Chinese language teaching at all levels, professional training for university, secondary and elementary school Chinese teachers, tests for a certificate of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Chinese competitions, consultations for further Chinese studies in China and introductions to Chinese culture (29/04/2006).

Each Confucius Institute is set up through a partnership between a Chinese university and a university in the host country (*Asia Times Online*, 17/05/2006). The three Confucius Institutes opened so far in Australia, for example, are partnerships between Zhejiang University and the University of Western Australia (located in Perth), Nanjing University and the University of Melbourne (located in Melbourne) and Shandong University and the University of Adelaide (located in Adelaide).

All Confucius Institutes are coordinated through the Confucius Institute Headquarters in Beijing which is responsible for formulating rules and regulations, assessing applications for establishing new institutions, approving annual programs and budgets and providing teaching and management staff (*People's Daily Online*, 10/04/2007; 13/12/2007).

There are currently over 260 Confucius Institutes in 75 countries and regions (*People's Daily Online*, 30/07/2008; 27/08/2008). In addition, NOCFL established a radio-based Confucius Institute in December 2007 in cooperation with the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, Confucius Institute Headquarters and China Radio International. This broadcast Confucius Institute offers Chinese language teaching programs via both wireless and online broadcasting in 38 foreign languages (*People's Daily Online*, 06/12/2007a). An online Confucius Institute has also opened ([www.confuciusinstitute.net](http://www.confuciusinstitute.net)).

Thus far, China has spent a total of US\$26 million on the Confucius Institute project (*People's Daily Online*, 11/12/2007; 12/12/2007) and has plans to expand it further in the near future. It aims to have established 500 Confucius Institutes by 2010 and 1000 by 2020 (*People's Daily Online*, 02/10/2006; 02/01/2007), and plans are also underway to set up a television-based Confucius Institute (*People's Daily Online*, 06/12/2007a).

### 5.3 Volunteer and State Sponsored Teachers

Also in 2004, China begun recruiting volunteers for Chinese language teaching positions overseas under the Program of International Overseas Volunteer Chinese Language Teachers (*People's Daily Online*, 06/06/2007). These volunteers are mainly undergraduate, graduate or recently graduated students and receive an allowance of US\$400-600 per month for

teaching Chinese in primary or high schools (*People's Daily Online*, 07/04/2006). From the inception of this program to the end of 2006, more than 2000 volunteers had been sent to 34 countries, including Thailand, Singapore, the USA, and various African nations (*People's Daily Online*, 08/10/2004; 07/12/2005; 07/04/2006; 20/03/2007; 06/06/2007).

In addition to volunteers, China also sends state sponsored teachers to teach Chinese around the world. These teachers must have a university degree, Putonghua (Mandarin) level of 2A or higher, be under 55 years of age and speak the language of the country in which they will teach. They must then pass a foreign language test, a general test covering expression, psychology, speech, personality and appearance, and a professional skills test involving performing a teaching task (*People's Daily Online*, 07/04/2006). Those who satisfy these requirements will teach in a university or college and receive between US\$1200-1500 per month from the Chinese government. In 2006, 1004 state sponsored teachers were sent to some 80 countries (*People's Daily Online*, 07/04/2006; 20/03/2007; 22/03/2007).

#### 5.4 Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students

NOCFL also runs an international Chinese language competition called the Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students, or Chinese Bridge for short (Kane, 2006, p. 18). Preliminary rounds are held in individual countries all around the world with semi-finals and finals held in China. Winners receive the title of Chinese Language Envoy and scholarships to study in China (*People's Daily Online*, 25/07/2006).

Similar to China's other promotional activities, Chinese Bridge has the explicit objective of "expanding exchange and cooperation between China and the rest of the world" (*People's Daily Online*, 04/05/2008). Seven competitions have been held since Chinese Bridge began in 2002 with themes such as "China in the New Century" (2003), "China: A Multinational Country" (2006) and "Olympic Excitement, Chinese Fun" (2008) (*China Daily Online*, 12/12/2003; *People's Daily Online*, 19/07/2006; 04/05/2008).

### 6. Results of China's Promotion of Chinese Language Learning

According to Harris (2005, p. 491), China's soft power is not only growing but also becoming increasingly noticeable throughout the world. What then can be said about the results of China's promotion of Chinese language learning as one aspect of its soft power strategy?

There is certainly evidence to suggest that the promotion of Chinese language learning has been successful in creating a positive image of Chinese and attracting learners. Commonly cited statistics say that there are currently 30-40 million people learning Chinese around the world (*People's Daily Online*, 10/03/2006; 19/09/2006) and it is by no means difficult to find examples of the increased popularity of Chinese language learning in individual nations. In Russia, 10 000 people are enrolled in Chinese language programs (*People's Daily Online*, 21/03/2007) while in Spain more than 5000 students are undertaking Chinese language studies across 30 universities and a second Confucius Institute opened in late 2007 at the University of Valencia (*People's Daily Online*, 30/11/2007). Italy also established its second Confucius Institute in 2007 (*People's Daily Online*, 21/12/2007).

Egypt presently has the greatest number of students studying Chinese out of all African countries, with three of the country's universities already having Chinese language departments and a further 11 planning to establish them. According to the Egyptian Ministry of Education, Chinese is also the second most popular foreign language in high schools (*People's Daily Online*, 07/11/2006). Egypt has also established two Confucius Institutes, the first at Cairo University and the second at Suez Canal University (*People's Daily Online*, 19/03/2008; 02/04/2008).

In America, 800 universities, or over 25% of the total, have Chinese language courses (*People's Daily Online*, 12/05/2006) and, according to the Society of Modern Language Research, the number of primary and high school students studying the language rose from 33 000 in 2002 to 50 000 in 2006 while the number of college students increased from 24 000 to 35 000 (*People's Daily Online*, 21/06/2007). Approximately 100 schools teach Chinese in Britain (BBC website, 16/02/2007) and the number of college and university students studying it as their main subject doubled from 2002-2005 (BBC website, 09/01/2007). Brighton College in England's East Sussex also recently became the first school in Britain to make Mandarin Chinese compulsory (BBC website, 25/01/2006; 16/01/2006).

Student numbers in South Korea have increased dramatically as well. Currently 160 000 high school and university students are studying Chinese, which represents an increase of approximately 60% from five years ago (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 117). In Japan over 20 000 high school students study Chinese in more than 500 schools and the country has 12 Confucius Institutes (Hanban website, c; *People's Daily Online*, 13/07/2006). In Central Asia, Confucius Institutes have been set up in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 199; *People's Daily Online*, 06/12/2007b) and in 2006 some 40 secondary and university Chinese language teachers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan went to Lanzhou University in China's Gansu Province for a month long training course in Chinese language and teaching methodology (*People's Daily Online*, 30/06/2006).

It is therefore reasonable to say that China's efforts have contributed to creating a situation in which Chinese is seen "as providing a kind of popular cachet, the way English long has" (Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 116).

However, even in situations where such a perception exists, there still may be obstacles to Chinese language learning and therefore China's soft power. Wang (2007) for example points out that Chinese language teaching in the USA is hampered by a number of policy, resource and organisational problems despite high levels of demand to learn the language while Liu & Lo Bianco (2007) outline a number of issues exacerbated by the increasing popularity of Chinese language learning in the Australian context such as grouping learners, continuity of programs across different levels of schooling and catering for background learners.

There is also much that could undo the promotion of Chinese language learning. Scholars such as Gordon Chang (2001) have argued that China faces a multitude of serious problems which could well overwhelm it. As much of China's soft power depends on its economic and political prominence, if China were to lose this for any of the reasons suggested by such scholars, or for reasons that have yet to be foreseen, there is likely to be a significant decrease in the desire to learn Chinese. The appeal of learning Chinese could also decrease as people become more familiar with China's problems and as some of these problems, such as pollution, organised crime and support for authoritarian regimes in other nations, begin to affect people outside of China (Bergsten et al., 2006, p. 9; Kurlantzick, 2007, p. 230). A parallel could be drawn here with the decline in interest in Indonesian language studies in Australia as a result of recent political events, for example the Bali bombings, and economic events, like the Asian financial crisis, and their effect on Australia's relationship with Indonesia (Slaughter, 2007, p. 319).

Therefore, although China's efforts to promote Chinese language learning have contributed to a positive image of the language and attracted learners in significant numbers, which is likely to be helpful in achieving its goals, there are still many obstacles that stand in the way and it is by no means certain that these gains will last forever.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has set the promotion of Chinese language learning within the context of China's soft power strategy. It has shown that the Chinese government has established a range of institutions and infrastructure to promote Chinese language learning throughout the world and that these efforts have met with some success in creating a positive image of the Chinese language and attracting learners. Such efforts look set to continue into the future, although their direction and outcomes in the longer term remains to be seen.

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