



# Building Bridges or Walls? China's Soft Power Efforts in the 21st Century

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*In the 21st century, the concept of power has transcended military might and economic dominance. Soft power, the ability to influence through attraction and cultural appeal, has become increasingly important. China, with its rich history and economic clout, has actively pursued soft power initiatives like Confucius Institutes and media expansion. Yet, concerns regarding censorship, human rights, and assertive foreign policy linger. Does China's soft power strategy foster genuine cultural exchange and understanding, or does it inadvertently erect walls of suspicion? This article explores this complex question, examining China's soft power efforts, their successes and limitations, and the ultimate impact on its global image.*

The international arena is witnessing a transformation in power dynamics. While military might and economic prowess remain significant, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power – the ability to influence through attraction and cultural appeal – has become increasingly crucial [1]. Soft power stems from a nation's culture, values, and policies that inspire admiration and emulation [1]. China, experiencing phenomenal economic growth and expanding global influence, has actively embraced soft power initiatives. From Confucius Institutes promoting Chinese language and culture to media expansion initiatives shaping global narratives, China is actively projecting its image on the world stage. However, a central question persists: How effective are China's soft power efforts? Do they cultivate genuine understanding and build bridges of cooperation, or do lingering concerns about censorship and human rights practices inadvertently create walls of suspicion?

In the 21st century, China's rise as a global power extends beyond economic might. The nation is actively engaged in shaping global perceptions through a multifaceted soft power strategy. This strategy utilizes various initiatives, each with its own successes and limitations.

Confucius Institutes (CIs), established in 2004, are non-profit institutions promoting Chinese language and culture at universities worldwide. With over 600 institutes currently operational, China aims to spark interest and understanding of Chinese traditions. CIs offer language courses, cultural events, and educational exchanges, fostering a global appreciation for Chinese perspectives. Millions have benefited from learning Chinese language and culture through CIs, contributing to a growing fascination with China. However, concerns linger regarding academic freedom within CIs. Critics allege censorship and limitations on discussing sensitive topics like human rights and Taiwan, potentially undermining genuine cultural exchange [2]. Additionally, the extent to which CIs promote a state-sanctioned view of China remains a point of contention.

China has also significantly invested in expanding its global media footprint. Media outlets like CCTV (China Central Television) and Xinhua News Agency aim to disseminate Chinese perspectives and counter Western dominance in media. By offering news coverage and content showcasing China's development and achievements, China seeks to shape global narratives. Programs featuring Chinese culture, documentaries, and entertainment can foster cultural appreciation and understanding. CCTV's rapid growth has solidified its position as a major global news provider [3]. However, accusations of bias and one-sided reporting limit the effectiveness of these efforts. The lack of independent media criticism within China creates limitations in presenting a multifaceted view of the country.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive infrastructure development program aiming to connect China to other parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe. While primarily an economic project, it carries a soft power dimension. BRI offers developing countries opportunities for infrastructure development, potentially fostering positive perceptions of China as a reliable economic partner. Additionally, infrastructure



projects can facilitate cultural exchange through increased interaction between Chinese and local populations. However, concerns surround potential debt burdens on participating countries and the environmental impact of large-scale infrastructure projects [4]. Accusations of "debt-trap diplomacy" raise questions about China's ultimate goals in the initiative, casting a shadow over its potential for genuine partnership.

Beyond CIs, media expansion, and BRI, China actively promotes its culture through various events and exchange programs. Hosting cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and film screenings worldwide can enhance understanding and appreciation for Chinese art, cuisine, and traditions. Scholarships and exchange programs for students and artists allow for cultural immersion and personal connections between China and other countries. These initiatives have contributed to a growing global appreciation for Chinese culture and fostered positive connections between people.

China's soft power strategies exhibit both successes and limitations. While initiatives like CIs and cultural diplomacy have increased interest in China, concerns regarding censorship and human rights create challenges. Media expansion efforts are limited by accusations of bias, while the long-term sustainability of BRI remains uncertain. The effectiveness of China's soft power hinges on its ability to address these limitations and promote genuine cultural exchange. By fostering open dialogue, upholding human rights principles, and ensuring transparency in its global projects, China can build bridges of understanding and cooperation on the world stage.

China's pursuit of soft power has yielded a range of positive outcomes, fostering a more multifaceted global perception of the country. A key success lies in the surge of interest in Chinese language and culture. Confucius Institutes, despite facing criticism, have undeniably played a role in this. Millions worldwide have learned Mandarin through CIs, opening doors to career opportunities, cultural understanding, and deeper connections with China. This growing interest extends beyond language, with a rising fascination with Chinese art, cuisine, and traditions. Cultural events like film festivals and art exhibitions hosted by China showcase its rich heritage and foster appreciation for a different aesthetic.

Furthermore, China's soft power initiatives have demonstrably benefited developing countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while facing concerns about debt and environmental impact, offers substantial infrastructure development

support. Roads, bridges, and communication networks built through BRI projects create vital connections within and between countries, facilitating trade, travel, and economic growth. These projects create jobs, improve access to essential services, and contribute to poverty reduction in developing nations. For instance, BRI projects in Africa have helped improve transportation infrastructure, connecting landlocked countries to ports and boosting regional trade [5]. This economic assistance fosters positive perceptions of China as a reliable and supportive partner, particularly in regions where Western influence has traditionally been strong.

China's technological advancements are another area where soft power flourishes. The country's high-speed rail network, for example, is a marvel of engineering, attracting international interest and admiration. Similarly, China's space program achievements, including lunar exploration and satellite technology, showcase its growing scientific prowess and inspire awe on the global stage. These advancements not only solidify China's position as a technological leader, but also contribute to a sense of national pride that resonates with the Chinese diaspora and fosters a more positive global image.

It's important to acknowledge that China's soft power successes are not without limitations. However, the undeniable growth in interest in Chinese language and culture, the economic benefits extended through BRI projects, and the admiration for China's technological advancements all contribute to a more nuanced global perception of the country. These successes pave the way for potential future collaborations and highlight the potential of soft power to foster understanding and cooperation on the world stage.

While China's soft power initiatives boast undeniable successes, they are not without limitations and challenges. These limitations hinder the country's ability to fully harness the potential of soft power for building genuine trust and fostering positive global perceptions.

A key challenge lies with Confucius Institutes (CIs). Despite their role in promoting Chinese language and culture, concerns regarding censorship and limitations on academic freedom cast a shadow over their effectiveness. Critics allege that CIs prioritize a state-sanctioned view of China, potentially stifling critical discussion and hindering genuine cultural exchange [6]. This not only undermines the academic credibility of CIs but also raises concerns about intellectual freedom, a cornerstone of open and collaborative societies.



The perception of censorship within CIs alienates potential students and scholars, ultimately hindering China's soft power goals.

Furthermore, China's human rights record and increasingly assertive foreign policy create negative perceptions that impede its soft power efforts. Issues surrounding human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet, coupled with a crackdown on dissent within China, raise concerns about the country's commitment to universal values [7]. Additionally, China's territorial disputes with its neighbors and its growing military presence in the South China Sea project an image of assertiveness that can be perceived as aggressive by other nations. This disconnect between China's soft power messaging, often promoting peace and cooperation, and its actions on the world stage creates a sense of distrust and undermines its efforts to build positive relationships.

China's media expansion efforts also face limitations due to accusations of bias. While media outlets like CCTV have achieved global reach, their perceived lack of neutrality and independent reporting hinder their effectiveness. Content that primarily focuses on showcasing China's achievements and presents a one-sided narrative fails to resonate with international audiences accustomed to diverse perspectives. Furthermore, restrictions on foreign media operating within China limit the flow of information and create an image of a closed society, hindering genuine cultural exchange and understanding [8].

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while offering economic benefits to developing countries, also faces sustainability concerns that challenge its role as a soft power tool. Critics highlight the potential for debt burdens on participating countries, raising concerns about neocolonial practices by China. Additionally, the environmental impact of large-scale infrastructure projects raises questions about China's commitment to sustainable development, a critical concern for many nations. Opacity surrounding project details and a lack of transparency in loan agreements further erode trust and hinder BRI's potential to foster positive perceptions of China.

The weight of research evidences suggests that China's soft power strategy has yielded successes in promoting its culture and advancements. However, limitations related to censorship, human rights concerns, media bias, and BRI's sustainability issues create significant challenges. To truly harness the power of soft power, China needs to address these limitations. By fostering open dialogue, upholding human rights

principles, diversifying its media content, and ensuring transparency in BRI projects, China can build bridges of understanding and cooperation on the world stage. Only through genuine engagement and a commitment to shared values can China truly translate its growing economic and technological might into lasting global influence.

China's soft power efforts unfold within a complex domestic context. A surge of national pride accompanies China's economic rise, fostering a sense of cultural confidence and a desire for global recognition. This national sentiment fuels support for initiatives like promoting Chinese language and culture, and celebrating technological advancements. However, it's important to acknowledge the existence of diverse perspectives within China. While the government pushes a strong national narrative, intellectuals and citizens engage in critical discussions and debates, offering alternative views on social and political issues [8]. Recognizing this internal discourse adds nuance to China's soft power strategy and highlights the potential for future evolution.

A significant challenge to China's soft power comes from the rise of "sharp power" tactics. Sharp power, in contrast to soft power's attraction, utilizes coercion and manipulation to influence other countries. Examples include cyberattacks, economic pressure, and media manipulation [9]. While China hasn't explicitly acknowledged employing sharp power tactics, its assertive actions in the South China Sea and its growing influence operations raise concerns. The use of sharp power tactics can backfire, generating resentment and distrust, ultimately undermining China's soft power goals.

However, the future of global power dynamics is not a zero-sum game. Collaboration and coexistence between China's and other countries' soft power strategies hold promise. Cultural exchanges, educational programs, and joint initiatives on pressing global issues like climate change can foster mutual understanding and cooperation. For instance, China's soft power efforts could benefit from collaborating with Western countries on environmental projects, showcasing its commitment to sustainable development and fostering a more positive global image.

Looking ahead, the effectiveness of China's soft power hinges on its ability to address limitations and embrace a more collaborative approach. Moving beyond censorship concerns within CIs, upholding human rights principles, and ensuring transparency in BRI projects are crucial



steps towards building trust. Diversifying media content to present a multifaceted view of China, and engaging in open dialogue with other nations, will contribute to a more genuine and sustainable soft power strategy. Ultimately, China's soft power success lies not just in projecting its own narrative, but also in its willingness to engage with, learn from, and collaborate with others on the world stage.

The future trajectory of China's soft power hinges on its ability to address current limitations and build trust with the international community. By adopting a more collaborative and transparent approach, China can transform its soft power efforts from image management to genuine cultural exchange and influence.

A crucial step towards building trust lies in promoting academic freedom within Confucius Institutes (CIs). Concerns regarding censorship and limitations on critical discussion currently hinder CIs' potential for fostering genuine cultural exchange [10]. Encouraging open dialogue within CIs, allowing for the exploration of diverse perspectives, and upholding academic integrity will enhance their credibility and attract a wider range of students and scholars. This shift would showcase China's commitment to intellectual freedom, a cornerstone of open societies, and resonate with international audiences who value critical thinking and open debate.

Furthermore, improving China's human rights record is essential for enhancing its soft power. Issues surrounding human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet, coupled with a crackdown on dissent within China, create a negative perception on the global stage [11]. China can address these concerns by engaging in constructive dialogue with international human rights organizations and adopting reforms that uphold universal values. Additionally, demonstrating respect for freedom of speech and assembly will foster trust and project an image of a nation committed to the well-being of its citizens. Such efforts will not only improve China's human rights record but also contribute to a more positive global image.

The effectiveness of China's media expansion efforts also depends on a shift towards content diversification. Moving beyond a state-centric narrative and presenting a multifaceted view of China through its media platforms is crucial. Encouraging independent journalism, fostering diverse voices within the media landscape, and creating platforms for genuine exchange of ideas will resonate more with international audiences accustomed to a variety of perspectives. This shift

towards a more open and inclusive media environment will not only enhance the credibility of Chinese media outlets but also showcase China's confidence in its own narrative and its commitment to open dialogue.

Finally, ensuring transparency and sustainability in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is critical for enhancing China's soft power. Addressing concerns about debt burdens on participating countries and fostering a more transparent approach to loan agreements will alleviate anxieties about neocolonial practices [12]. Additionally, prioritizing environmentally sustainable infrastructure projects and collaborating with international partners on environmental protection initiatives will demonstrate China's commitment to responsible development. Transparency in project details, combined with a focus on sustainability, will not only enhance the long-term success of BRI but also project an image of a responsible global leader.

In conclusion, China's soft power strategy has the potential to be a powerful tool for fostering understanding and cooperation on the global stage. However, addressing limitations related to academic freedom, human rights, media bias, and BRI's sustainability is crucial for building trust and enhancing its effectiveness. By promoting open dialogue, upholding human rights principles, diversifying its media content, and ensuring transparency in BRI projects, China can transform its soft power efforts from image management to genuine cultural exchange and influence. The future of China's soft power lies not just in projecting its own story, but in its willingness to engage with, learn from, and collaborate with the international community in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

China's pursuit of soft power paints a complex picture. Initiatives like Confucius Institutes and cultural events have sparked a global interest in Chinese language and culture, fostering understanding and appreciation. The Belt and Road Initiative offers infrastructure development support to developing countries, contributing to economic growth and poverty reduction. China's technological advancements, from high-speed rail to space exploration, inspire awe and solidify its position as a global leader in innovation.

However, limitations hinder the effectiveness of these efforts. Concerns regarding censorship and academic freedom within Confucius Institutes raise questions about genuine cultural exchange. China's human rights record and assertive foreign policy create negative perceptions



that undermine trust. Media expansion efforts struggle with accusations of bias, limiting their ability to resonate with international audiences. Additionally, the Belt and Road Initiative faces concerns about debt burdens and environmental sustainability.

The central question remains: **Are China's soft power efforts building bridges or walls?** While successes undeniably exist, limitations related to censorship, human rights, media bias, and BRI's sustainability create significant challenges. The answer hinges on China's willingness to address these limitations and embrace a more collaborative approach.

China's future soft power trajectory lies in fostering open dialogue, upholding human rights principles, diversifying its media content, and ensuring transparency in BRI projects. By promoting genuine cultural exchange and collaboration on pressing global issues, China can transform its soft power efforts from image management to a force for positive change on the world stage. Ultimately, China's soft power success will be measured not just by its ability to project its own narrative, but also by its willingness to engage with, learn from, and collaborate with the international community in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

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