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China's Soft Power: From Wary Analysis to Implementation in African Policy

Abstract: This article examines the conceptualization of Chinese *soft power* and the implementation of the PRC's soft power strategy in Africa. First introduced into academic discourse by American political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990, the concept was subsequently adopted and critically re-evaluated by Chinese political theorists, most notably Wang Huning, Yan Xuetong, Yang Shengping and Zhang Guozuo. The term has undergone a complex process of semantic evolution, emerging as a primary tool of the PRC's foreign policy since 2007. The conceptual and methodological framework of this article synthesizes Quentin Skinner's linguistic contextualism and Yan Xuetong's moral realism. The application of Skinner's methodology enables a deconstruction of the evolution of Chinese *soft power* as a sequence of speech acts intended to legitimize the PRC's foreign policy within a shifting international context. The contemporary Chinese interpretation of *soft power*, largely shaped by the ideas of Wang Huning and Yan Xuetong, demonstrates a pivot from liberal idealism toward strategic pragmatism. The article provides a periodization of the concept's evolution within Chinese political culture, analyzes its core ideologemes and initiatives, and investigates the institutions, instruments, and practices of the PRC's *soft power* in Africa. The primary ideologemes of Chinese *soft power* are rooted in the four global initiatives introduced by Xi Jinping. These initiatives provide the conceptual substance of China's *soft power*, imbuing it with the meaning specific to the Chinese context. Unlike the United States, China does not demand that its partners alter their domestic systems; for many African and Asian nations, this lack of conditionality is precisely what renders Chinese influence "soft." The article concludes that contemporary Chinese soft power, while stripped of Nye's original political idealism, should not be construed as hard power. Rather, it remains firmly within the conceptual framework of *soft power*, albeit redefined through a Sinicized lens of pragmatic statecraft.

Keywords: Soft power, China's foreign policy, Xi Jinping, Africa, Realpolitik, Confucius Institute, Luban Workshops, Xinhua News Agency

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Китайская мягкая сила: от настороженного анализа к применению в африканской политике

Аннотация: Данная статья посвящена анализу понятия китайской *мягкой силы* и практическому применению стратегии *мягкой силы* КНР в африканском регионе. Понятие *мягкая сила* было введено в научный оборот американским политологом Дж.Наем в 1990 г., заимствовано и критически переосмыслено китайскими политическими теоретиками, среди которых ведущее место занимают Ван Хунин, Янь Сюэтун, Ян Шэнпин и Чжан Гоцзо. Термин прошел сложный путь семантической эволюции, после 2007 г. войдя в число основных инструментов внешней политики КНР. Концептуально-методологическую основу статьи составляют синтез лингвистического контекстуализма Квентина Скиннера и морального реализма Янь Сюэтуна. Использование методологии Скиннера позволяет деконструировать эволюцию китайской *мягкой силы* как последовательность речевых актов, направленных на легитимацию внешнеполитического курса КНР в меняющемся международном контексте. Современная китайская интерпретация *мягкой силы*, во многом сформированная под влиянием идей Ван Хунина и Янь Сюэтуна, демонстрирует отказ от либерального идеализма в пользу стратегического прагматизма. В статье приведена периодизация эволюции понятия *мягкая сила* в китайской политической культуре, рассмотрены основные концепции, идеологемы и инициативы китайской стратегии *мягкой силы*, а также исследованы институты, инструменты и практики *мягкой силы* КНР в Африке. Основные идеологемы китайской *мягкой силы* основываются на концепциях и понятиях четырех китайских глобальных инициатив действующего руководителя КНР Си Цзиньпина. Содержащийся в этих инициативах набор идей и понятий питает китайскую *мягкую силу*, придавая ей тот смысл, который заложен в ее китайской интерпретации. В отличие от США, Китай не требует от партнеров менять их внутреннее устройство, что делает его силу «мягкой» для многих стран Африки и Азии. Основной вывод статьи состоит в том, что китайская *мягкая сила* в ее современной интерпретации, хотя и лишена политического идеализма Дж. Ная, не может быть истолкована как жесткая сила, оставаясь в смысловом поле «мягкая сила».

Ключевые слова: мягкая сила, внешняя политика КНР, Си Цзиньпин, Африка, Институт Конфуция, Мастерские Лубаня, Агентство Синьхуа

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中国的软实力：从审慎分析到对非政策的实践

摘要： 本文探讨了中国软实力的概念化进程及其在非洲的战略实践。软实力这一概念最早由美国政治学家约瑟夫·奈于1990年引入学术话语，随后被王沪宁、阎学通、杨胜平、张国祚等中国政治理论家吸收并进行了批判性的重新评估。该术语经历了复杂的语义演变过程，并自2007年以来成为中国外交政策的核心工具。本文的理论与方法论框架综合了昆廷·斯金纳的语言语境主义与阎学通的道义现实主义。应用斯金纳的方法论可以使梳理中国软实力的演变过程，将其视为一系列旨在为瞬息万变的国际环境下的中国外交政策提供合法性的“言语行为”。受王沪宁与阎学通思想影响的当代中国软实力解读，体现了从自由主义理想主义向战略务实主义的转型。本文对中国政治文化背景下该概念的演变进行了阶段划分，分析了其核心意识形态语素与倡议，并考察了中国在非洲推行软实力的机构、工具与实践。中国软实力的主要意识形态语素根植于习近平主席提出的**四大全球倡议**。这些倡议构成了中国软实力的核心理念，赋予其中国语境下的特定含义。与美国不同，中国不要求合作伙伴改变其国内制度；对于许多非洲和亚洲国家而言，这种不附带条件的特性正是中国影响力之所以被称为“软”实力的关键所在。本文结论指出，当代中国软实力虽然剥离了约瑟夫·奈原始理论中的政治理想主义，但不应被视为硬实力。相反，它仍然牢牢处于软实力的概念框架内，只是通过中国式务实治国理念的视角进行了重新定义。

关键词： 软实力；中国外交政策；习近平；非洲；现实政治；孔子学院；鲁班工坊；新华社

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Introduction

This article analyzes the complex phenomenon of Chinese *soft power* and the implementation of the PRC's soft power strategy in Africa. First introduced into the American political lexicon in 1990, the concept of *soft power* was subsequently adopted and critically reimagined by Chinese political theorists, most notably Wang Huning, Yan Xuetong, Yang Shengping, Huang Su, and Zhang Guozuo. Over time, the term has undergone a complex semantic evolution, becoming an integral component of the PRC's foreign policy toolkit.

The article examines the connotations of *soft power* within Chinese political culture from the early 1990s to the present. The author pursues three primary objectives: 1) to identify the stages of the concept's semantic evolution in China during the late 20th and early 21st centuries; 2) to investigate the points of convergence and divergence between Nye's

“classical” understanding of *soft power* and the official Chinese interpretation embedded in Communist Party of China (CPC) policy documents; 3) to examine the practical application of this concept within the African dimension of Chinese foreign policy. The central research question of the article is whether Chinese *soft power* constitutes a fundamentally different phenomenon from Nye’s original formulation – a claim Nye himself supports by labeling China’s influence as “sharp power.” [Nye, 2023, p. 113–115; Nye, 2018].

The author contends that while the Chinese interpretation differs from Nye’s definition, China’s *soft power* nonetheless remains a distinct manifestation within the broader conceptual framework of *soft power*.

The methodological framework of this article relies on historical inquiry, utilizing periodization of the historical evolution of the concept of *soft power* as an effective tool to decode the concept’s contemporary meaning in China [Topychkanov, 2016, pp. 181–185]. Theoretically, the study synthesizes Quentin Skinner’s linguistic contextualism with Yan Xuetong’s moral realism.

Following Skinner, this article treats political concepts not as constants but as “tools in argument,” possessing specific illocutionary force; they embody the goals of an author situated within a particular historical context [Skinner, 2002, pp. 105–115]. In American discourse, Nye’s concept was initially inextricably linked to political idealism and used to legitimize a liberal world order where the attractiveness of values – such as democracy and human rights – functioned as a voluntary, non-state resource. As Skinner notes, shifts in historical context inevitably transform meaning; thus, when transplanted onto Chinese context, the term *soft power* underwent a rhetorical redescription. Applying Skinner’s methodology allows for the deconstruction of Chinese *soft power* as a sequence of speech acts aimed at legitimizing the PRC’s foreign policy within a shifting international environment [Skinner, 2002, pp. 179–185].

The contemporary Chinese interpretation of *soft power*, shaped by the ideas of Wang Huning, Yang Shengping and Zhang Guozuo, demonstrates a pivot from liberal idealism toward strategic pragmatism. This approach aligns with Yan Xuetong’s theory of “moral realism,” which distinguishes between “power” (the capacity to coerce) and “authority” (the capacity to lead). In this light, Chinese *soft power* emerges not as a “diluted” version of the Western idea, but as an autonomous concept. While it lacks Nye’s original idealism, it cannot be construed as hard power. It remains within the conceptual field of *soft power* because it prioritizes the cultivation of long-term, stable, and mutually beneficial relations over the threat of force. Consequently, China’s strategy in Africa should be qualified not as a destructive *sharp power*, but as a pragmatic *soft power* whose effectiveness depends on the strategic reliability of the parties and the fulfilment of mutual obligations [Yan, 2026, pp. 35–36].

The evolution of the concept of soft power in China

The concept of *soft power* was initially introduced into academic discourse in 1990 by Joseph Nye in his work “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power” [Nye, 1990]. Just one year later, in 1991, Huang Su, a scholar at the Institute of World Economics

and Politics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, characterized the concept of *soft power* as follows: “The United States uses this ‘invisible power’ to mask its economic decline and continue exercising global dominance, misleading other countries regarding their true national interests” [Huang, 1991, pp. 59–61]. This marked the first introduction of *soft power* (软实力 – ruǎn shíli) into the Chinese political science lexicon.

It is not entirely clear whether Huang Su intended to propose a formal scholarly definition or was merely offering a critical journalistic characterization. This ambiguity is unsurprising, as a formal definition was also absent from Nye’s initial work; it only appeared in 2004 in his book “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics”. Nye defined it as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments,” arising from “the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideas, and policies” [Nye, 2004, p. X]. Thus, while the early semantic evolution of *soft power* in American political culture spans the period from 1990 to 2004, the chronological boundaries of this stage in Chinese political culture followed a distinct trajectory.

In 1993, the Chinese political scientist and party official Wang Huning offered an interpretation that diverged significantly from Huang Su’s. In his article “Culture as National Power: Soft Power,” Wang characterized *soft power* not as a tool of imperialist propaganda, but as a vital instrument of foreign policy. Notably, Wang employed the term ruǎn quánli (软权力), or “soft authority,” to translate the concept. Echoing Nye’s logic, Wang argued that *soft power* was not merely a supplement to military or economic might, but a critical component of a state survival in the 21st century. He asserted that “elevating the development of ‘soft power’ to a strategic level is a general requirement of the contemporary international situation, and a defining trend for the international community in the 1990s and even into the 21st century” [Wang, 1993, p. 96].

This perspective was bolstered in 1997 by the diplomat and scholar Pang Zhongying. In his review of “Bound to Lead”, Pang analyzed the significance of *soft power* – which he translated as 软力量 (ruǎn lìliang) – in international relations. He largely agreed with Nye’s original interpretation, arguing that a state’s soft power must rely on resources situated outside the realms of military force and economic coercion [Pang, 1997, pp. 49–51].

A defining feature of this stage was the extensive debate within Chinese academic circles regarding the most accurate translation of “soft power” into Chinese. As noted, Huang Su used ruǎn shíli (软实力), Wang Huning used ruǎn quánli (软权力), and Pang Zhongying used ruǎn lìliang (软力量). For a Chinese speaker, the distinctions are profound: *shíli* (实力) refers to actualized power and tangible resources; *quánli* (权力) pertains to political authority or the right to command; and *lìliang* (力量) denotes “strength” in the sense of physical or energetic force.

By the mid-2000s, the translation ruǎn shíli (软实力) became dominant in Chinese scholarship, adopted by prominent figures such as Yan Xuetong, Qin Yaqing, Yu Xintian, Men Honghua, Chen Yugang, Guo Shuyong, Lu Gang, and others. These scholars collectively argued that for China’s *peaceful rise*, it was essential not only to define China’s *soft power* but also to facilitate its development to ensure sustainable growth [Yan, Xu, 2008; Men, 2007; Chen, 2007; Guo, 2007]. Consequently, Chinese scholars identified Chinese culture as the primary source of *soft power*, leading to the formalized concept of “cultural soft power”, wénhuà ruǎn shíli (文化软实力) [Chen, 2006].

After 2007, the positive connotation of *soft power* finally prevailed, having shed its earlier reputation as a tool of imperialist propaganda. At the 17th National Congress of the CPC in 2007, the Central Committee's report explicitly set the goal to "enhance the country's cultural soft power" [Hu, 2007].

The development of *soft power* concepts in the US and the PRC proceeded along parallel tracks: the initial formative stage in the US took place from 1990 to 2004, whereas the conceptual content of *soft power* as a vital instrument of state foreign policy, as codified in CPC documents, took shape between 1991 and 2007. While Joseph Nye interpreted the American concept as a symbiosis of a specific country's culture, foreign policy, and political values, the Chinese version initially identified culture as the sole foundation of the nation's *soft power*.

A new stage in the evolution of China's soft power began in 2008 and concluded in 2014. During this period, the concept gained official recognition and was integrated into both foreign and – notably – domestic policy,¹ and was gradually supplemented with new ideas, becoming grounded in indigenous philosophical traditions and socialist values.

A significant milestone occurred in 2009 with the foundation of the Center for China's Cultural Soft Power at Hunan University, which did much to enrich Chinese soft power concept with fresh theoretical perspectives. The Center's director, the prominent political philosopher Zhang Guozuo, developed a new interpretation, defining *soft power* as dependent on the comprehensive strength, cohesion, and organizational capabilities of the Party and government. He identified the "core socialist values" (社会主义核心价值观, *shèhuì zhǔyì héxīn jiàzhíguān*) as the "ideological foundation" of Chinese *cultural soft power*. Following the Chinese tradition of using vivid anthropomorphic imagery for ideological terms, Zhang described socialist values the "soul" (魂, *hún*) of *soft power*. He viewed *soft power* as an instrument of both foreign and domestic Chinese policy, rooted in the understanding of socialist values as universal principles of social development [Zhang, 2011, p. 12; Zhang, 2012, pp. 13–14].

In 2012, Yang Shengping, a prominent Chinese philosopher and editor-in-chief of Capital Normal University Press, further advanced the conceptualization of Chinese *cultural soft power*. Yang argued that China's *soft power* must be a deliberate, state-led construct tailored to the unique Chinese political identity, conceptualized across three mental levels: the discourse level (narrative construction), the value level (ideological core) and the operational level (strategic practice) [Yang, 2012, pp. 23–25].

Upon taking office in 2013, Xi Jinping began incorporating the concept of *cultural soft power* in his speeches, often weaving in quotations from classical Chinese historical and philosophical treatises [Lukin, 2023, p.90]. At a Politburo meeting on February 26, 2014, he officially formulated the thesis of the inextricable link between China's *cultural soft power* and "core socialist values." [Xi, 2014] It is in this specific interpretation that has been disseminated by PRC media ever since.

In 2020, Zhang Guozuo published "Several Issues Concerning 'Soft Power' and 'Cultural Soft Power'," providing a definition that became an ideological benchmark for many Chinese scholars: "Cultural soft power is everything invisible, intangible, and difficult to measure; it is a force manifested through spirit, feelings, wisdom, morality, and character,

¹ The concepts of "regional soft power", "urban soft power", "soft power of the enterprise", and "soft power of the ruling party" have been developed in the Chinese scientific literature [Hu, 2018, p. 129].

capable of exerting a soft, attractive influence. It encompasses the attractiveness of culture, the persuasiveness of language, the appeal of ideals, the inspiring power of spirit, the creative might of wisdom, the enlightening power of morality, the guiding force of theory, the orienting power of public opinion, and the infectious and captivating power of art.”² Zhang contrasted this with “material hard power” – defined as “everything visible, tangible, and quantifiable (...) that is capable of exerting hard coercive influence,” including military and economic [Zhang, 2020, p. 6–7].

In summary, the Chinese concept of *soft power* progressed through several distinct stages before acquiring its contemporary content. This modern iteration integrates centuries-old cultural foundations with “core socialist values,” which extend to nearly all other spheres of social life, granting the Chinese interpretation a significantly larger scale and political weight than Nye’s original formulation. Contemporary Chinese *soft power* is the power of a pragmatic example; it remains “soft” as long as its primary instrument is the voluntary participation of partners in Chinese-led projects (such as the “Belt and Road Initiative”), even when such participation is driven by rational calculation rather than idealistic motives.

In Western scholarly literature, numerous studies criticize the Chinese concept of *soft power* and the state’s dominant role in its implementation [Nye, 2023, p. 113–121; Walker, Ludwig, 2017]. In response, official Chinese media accuse Western opponents of bias, “double standards,” and a hypocritical denial of the forceful methods to achieve their foreign policy goals. These mutual accusations generally align with the phenomenon Edward Bernays characterized as “propaganda”³ as early as 1928 [Bernays, 1936, p. 25].

In the author’s view, both interpretations of *soft power*, embedded within their respective governance systems, have proven their viability, allowing them to be viewed as phenomena of the same phenomenological order [Spiegelberg, 2025]. Consequently, it is more important to examine the conceptual content rather than the external contour of the phenomenon. The next section will analyze the primary ideologemes that constitute the conceptual content of Chinese *soft power*, as they circulate within Chinese society and are broadcast abroad.

Concepts, Ideologemes, and Initiatives in China’s Soft Power Strategy

Since 1949, the PRC has consistently put forward domestic and foreign policy objectives, broadcasting specific concepts and initiatives to the world in a concise and ideologically calibrated form. Prior to the ideological rift with the USSR, the focus remained on the anti-imperialist struggle and socialist principles of social organization. During the Cultural Revolution, the foundational slogans shifted toward “self-reliance” and the struggle against “superpower hegemonism.” By 1976 – the year of Mao Zedong’s death – the dominant foreign policy narrative emphasized support for the global revolutionary process based on

² Chin. “文化软实力”是一切看不见摸不着、难以计量，表现为精神、情感、智慧、情操、品格，可以发挥柔性亲和作用的力量。例如，文化的吸引力、语言的说服力、理想的感召力、精神的鼓舞力、智慧的创造力、道德的教化力、理论的指导力、舆论的引导力、艺术的感染征服力等，都属于文化软实力。”

³ According to Bernays, propaganda “is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group” [Bernays, 1928, p. 25].

socialist values and a readiness to repel external military aggression. Under Deng Xiaoping (1978–1989), ideological priorities shifted: a narrative of development became dominant, and the threat of direct military confrontation was largely dismissed. This transition was facilitated by the shift from a bipolar to a unipolar world led by the US and its NATO allies. The concept of “opening up” (to investment, technology, and education), the removal of ideological barriers in economic affairs, and peaceful development began to dominate the Chinese ideological vocabulary. The tenures of Jiang Zemin (1989–2002) and Hu Jintao (2002–2012) generally maintained the trajectory of global cooperation established by Deng Xiaoping, though each leader refined foreign policy based on their personal leadership style and experience [Borokh, Lomanov, 2018, p. 61].

In 2013, a leader of an entirely different magnitude, Xi Jinping, assumed power, wielding influence comparable to that of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Unlike his predecessors, Xi has championed “major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics”, which asserts a degree of Chinese autonomy from the conventional rules of modern global politics [Xi, 2017, p. 443]. In Xi's interpretation, being a “responsible power” entails building a distinct Chinese model for the country's integration into the global system of international relations [Voskresenskiy, 2019, p. 721–724].

The current PRC leadership has four global initiatives, each containing ideologemes designed to address specific foreign policy tasks. These include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, 2013), the Global Development Initiative (2021), the Global Security Initiative (2022), the Global Civilization Initiative (2023), and the Global Governance Initiative (2025). This suite of initiatives nourishes Chinese *soft power*, imbuing it with the meaning rooted in a Sinicized interpretation of international order.

The foundational project dominating the Chinese *soft power* agenda for the past fifteen years remains the BRI. Launched in the first year of Xi Jinping's rule, the BRI was global in scope but fragmented in implementation across sub-projects involving China's neighbors in Asia as well as broader continental systems in Europe, Latin America, and Africa. The core ambition of the BRI is to create a global infrastructural framework for world economic development on “win-win” terms for equal partners – presenting an alternative to the framework established by Western nations.

In Africa, the BRI has been integrated with another key instrument of Chinese *soft power*: regional pan-African forums. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was inaugurated in 2000 and has since been held every three years, alternating between China and African host countries. The ninth FOCAC summit took place in Beijing in September 2024.

Currently, a three-tier structure of China-Africa relations has emerged: first, FOCAC serves as a selection mechanism for countries aligned with China's strategic direction; second, the signing of BRI agreements de facto “formalizes membership” in the club of China's followers, securing them within the China's political and economic orbit; third, at the level of strategic partnership, African countries confirm their readiness to support the PRC internationally, particularly within UN platforms where China relies on the backing of this influential voting bloc.⁴

⁴ See, e.g., the vote on the UN Human Rights Council resolution A/HRC/RES/37/23 dated 6.04.2018, which mentions and supports the concept of a “Community with a common destiny for humanity.” URL: <https://docs.un.org/A/HRC/RES/37/23>

Central to the ideologemes of Chinese *soft power* is the concept of a “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” (人类命运共同体, *rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ*) (2012), which emphasizes equality and mutual respect among states. This concept promotes “common human values – peace, development, justice, democracy, and liberty” and seeks to overcome civilizational barriers through dialogue and mutual learning [Xi, 2022].

Xi Jinping’s presentation of this concept in Africa during the 2018 FOCAC was accompanied by a reaffirmation of the “Five No’s” (五个不, *wǔ gè bù*): no interference in African countries’ development paths; no interference in African countries’ internal affairs; no imposition of China’s will; no political strings attached to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation [Xi, 2018]. This proposal was reinforced by an announcement of 60 billion USD in financial support, which significantly heightened interest in the project. Following the summit, the Beijing Declaration, “Toward an Even Stronger China-Africa Community with a Shared Future” was formally adopted [Guanyu guojian..., 2018].

Xi Jinping’s policy as the leader of the PRC demonstrates a clear symbiosis of two core paradigms: the concept of comprehensive development in a conflict-free world, tracing back to Deng Xiaoping, and the concept of comprehensive security aimed at countering external threats, rooted in Mao Zedong’s strategy of repelling imperialist aggression. In their updated forms, these concepts were formally articulated by Xi Jinping in the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI), respectively.

The GDI was launched by Xi Jinping in 2021 at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly as a framework for implementing the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The proposal identifies eight priority areas: poverty alleviation, food security, pandemic response, development financing, climate change, “green” development, industrialization, and the digital economy. Researchers view this initiative as Beijing’s bid to lead the “social” agenda of the Global South [Small, 2022, p. 95]. Within the GDI framework, China’s soft power strategy is built on contrasting the Chinese “effective growth” model with Western developmental paradigms. This strategy emphasizes: first, the primacy of the sovereign right to development over debates on political freedoms; second, the sovereign equality of all nations regardless of size, fostering “true multilateralism”; third, assistance without interference (investment without political conditionality); and finally, a “green and digital future” modeled on China’s economic success. Conversely, Western scholars argue that Beijing uses aid to the Global South to construct a new global governance system where China serves as the central node and Western standards become secondary [Economy, 2022, pp. 84–118].

The GSI represents a logical evolution of the PRC’s “comprehensive security” concept, a principle Xi Jinping championed even prior to taking office. Official documents – most notably the State Council White Papers “China’s Military Strategy” (2015), “China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation” (2017), “China’s National Defense in the New Era” (2019), and “China’s Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations” (2020) – consistently underscore that China’s military buildup is purely defensive. Current military-strategic doctrine regarding nuclear weapons is defined as a “nuclear counter-strike” (核反击), which explicitly precludes a first-strike policy [Xin shidai..., 2019].

Beyond military defense, this security paradigm encompasses cyber, economic, political, social, and ideological dimensions, ultimately converging into *soft power* narratives designed to shield China from external criticism.

On March 15, 2023, at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting, Xi Jinping introduced the Global Civilization Initiative. He outlined four pillar principles: mutual respect (相互尊重, *xiānghù zūnzhòng*), the priority of common values (共同价值优先, *gòngtóng jiàzhí yōuxiān*), the inheritance and innovation of civilizations (传承与创新, *chuánchéng yǔ chuàngxīn*), and enhanced international exchange and cooperation (深化国际文明交流, *shēnhuà guójì wénmíng jiāoliú*) [Xi, 2023]. The GCI positions itself as an alternative to Westocentric and Eurocentric cultural paradigms. Although it lacks a formal enforcement mechanism, its foundational principles signal an “alter-globalist” stance, offering an opposition to Western-led globalization models.

In September 2025, during the SCO Summit in Tianjin, Xi Jinping introduced the Global Governance Initiative. While reaffirming commitment to UN principles, the Chinese leader called for structural reforms within the organization. Through this initiative, China frames itself as a “defender of the international order” and urges the Global South to unite against “historical injustice.” While supporting the UN “Pact for the Future,” Beijing proposed its own roadmap based on non-interference, inclusiveness, and collective decision-making [Xi, 2025].

Collectively, these initiatives constitute a comprehensive program for global transformation across social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. The GGI, in particular, seeks to transition long-standing debates on reform from theoretical discourse into practical implementation.

While these four initiatives have drawn criticism, their positive reception across the globe – particularly in Africa – is of greater strategic consequence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) now includes 147 of the 193 UN member states (approx. 75%). In Africa, 53 out of 54 sovereign states have joined the BRI, and the vast majority participate in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Many African leaders view the BRI as complementary to the African Union’s “Agenda 2063” and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). Some African thinkers even identify a convergence between Chinese and Pan-African interests in the realm of spiritual and civilizational values [Ndzendze, Monyae, 2019]. Thus, China’s policy of ideological neutrality and non-interference fosters an environment of mutual understanding among the participants of the Sino-African dialogue.

From the linguistic contextualist perspective, China has achieved “ideological innovation” by maintaining the terminology of *soft power* while pivoting its internal mechanism from the “promotion of values” to the “demonstration of governance reliability.” The generally positive reception of Chinese initiatives by African leaders indicates that they view China’s soft power strategy neither as coercion (*hard power*) nor as “disinterested charm,” but as a model of pragmatic order, sovereignty, and economic success – or, in Yan Xuetong’s terms, an example of “humane authority.”

China's Soft Power in Africa: Institutions, Tools, and Practices

China's *soft power* is most visible Africa, the only global region where Chinese influence extends to nearly every country. With the sole exception of the Kingdom of Eswatini, 53 out of 54 nations have signed cooperation agreements with the PRC under the BRI and actively participate in the FOCAC.

China's five global initiatives are operationalized across the continent through a robust diplomatic network comprising 53 embassies, 8 consulates-general, and the PRC's Permanent Mission to the African Union in Addis Ababa. There are 3,266 Chinese companies officially operating in Africa; today, these entities wield not only economic leverage but also significant socio-political influence. The security of these enterprises is supported by approximately 30 registered Chinese Private Security Companies. Furthermore, China maintains its only overseas multifunctional military base in Djibouti, strategically located on the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, with an estimated capacity of 3,000 to 10,000 personnel [Downs, Becker, deGateño, 2017, p. 4].

The practical implementation of China's soft power strategy is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and approximately nine other ministries, overseen by relevant departments of the CPC Central Committee. Various state agencies, commissions, private firms and Chinese Migrants Communities serve as indirect instruments of this power [Liu, 2019]. According to Chinese officials and scholars, the most effective spheres for soft power projection in Africa are education and culture. Since 2007, Beijing has rolled out an ambitious project to establish a network of Confucius Institutes (CIs) across the continent.

To date, 62 CIs have been established in 46 African countries. In nine nations, two or more CIs operate autonomously. South Africa presents a unique case, hosting six CIs across five cities (Johannesburg, Cape Town, Stellenbosch, Makhanda, and Durban), while Kenya and Morocco host four and three CIs, respectively. Each institute follows a dual-leadership model, with one director from the host nation and another appointed by the PRC.

The core mission of CIs is Chinese language instruction and cultural outreach, primarily targeting the African middle class and intelligentsia. Each CI is funded by the Chinese International Education Foundation, often supplemented by local co-financing in the form of facilities and infrastructure. While some researchers characterize CIs as "loyalty incubators" or components of a vast foreign policy propaganda apparatus, their primary function is to engage local citizens through language and culture, thereby securing sympathy for the PRC [Shambaugh, 2015, pp. 104–106]. Although CIs avoid overt political activity, they socialize students into the core ideologemes of Chinese soft power through educational materials and interaction with instructors.

A complementary educational project is the Luban Workshops, launched in 2016 at the initiative of the Tianjin Municipal Education Commission. Named after the legendary Chinese artisan and inventor, these workshops provide vocational training in engineering, IT, construction, and robotics. Unlike CIs, Luban Workshops focus on technical skills tailored to local economic needs. The first African workshop opened in Djibouti in 2019, followed

by others in South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt, Uganda, Mali, Morocco, Madagascar, and Ethiopia among others. Under the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027), China has committed to upgrading or opening 10 Luban Workshops and 20 schools in Africa [Forum on China..., 2024].

Furthermore, China actively recruits African students for higher education within the PRC. For the 2026–2027 period, 20,000 government scholarships are slated for African students annually, with the total number of African students in China estimated to exceed 70,000. Scholars highlight the “impressive success” of these educational programs in fostering long-term ties [King, 2025, pp. 673–674].

The media is another pillar of Chinese soft power. In Africa’s information landscape, where many rely on accessible media, Beijing’s policy is pan-African in scope. All major actors—the “Big Four”: Xinhua News Agency, CCTV (China Central Television), CRI (China Radio International),⁵ and China Daily—are active on the continent.⁶

Xinhua, in particular, promotes the “Chinese alter-globalist development model,” maintaining offices in 46 African countries and covering over 90% of the continent’s population [Madrid-Morales, 2016, p.86]. Researchers define the work of Chinese media as “constructive journalism,” which emphasizes positive news. This serves as a deliberate contrast to Western media, which often focuses on economic crises, crime, and conflict [Zhang, Matingwina, 2016].

Empirical studies show mixed results regarding media efficacy. Catie Bailard (2016) found that increased access to Chinese broadcasting correlates with more favorable perceptions of the PRC, though she notes this may be due to China’s infrastructure investments rather than the media content itself [Bailard, 2016, pp. 468–469]. Conversely, Lina Benabdallah (2017) argues that professional training programs for African journalists are even more effective than media itself, as long-term fellowships in China encourage participants to internalize Chinese values [Benabdallah, 2017, pp. 512–513].

China leverages humanitarian aid and peacekeeping operations to bolster its regional image. While some see these projects as highly successful [Morgan, 2019, pp. 405–406], others suggest that while Chinese aid is popular among political elites, it may fail to resonate as strongly with the general population [Blair, Marty, Roessler, 2019, pp. 1371–1373].

The “Made in China 2025” (中国制造 2025) strategy plays a pivotal role in advancing Chinese *soft power*, aiming to transform China from the “world’s factory” into the “leading global technological power” by 2049 [Guowuyuan guanyu..., 2015]. Estimates suggest that Chinese firms – primarily Huawei and ZTE – have constructed approximately 70–80% of Africa’s telecommunications infrastructure. Furthermore, due to competitive pricing, a willingness to transfer technology, and integrated financing, China leads the African market in renewable energy, space technology, and satellite communications, as well as the integration of facial recognition and Big Data analytics into “smart city” environments [Feldstein, 2019, pp. 8–10].

⁵ CRI broadcasts in Arabic, English, French, as well as Swahili and Hausa, operating affiliated radio stations and internet channels globally. Its subsidiary, the China International Broadcasting Network (CIBN), was founded in 2011 to expand its reach.

⁶ For more information, see [Zhang, Wasserman, Mano, 2016].

In practice, the PRC's strategic plans for digital infrastructure in Africa are framed through narratives familiar to global audiences. Specifically, the expansion of telecommunications networks, smart city technologies, and e-commerce systems is branded as the "Digital Silk Road" [Dekker, Okano-Heijmans, Zhang, 2020], while the development of satellite navigation and aerospace cooperation is termed the "Space Silk Road" [Kong-zhong ... 2025].

In recent years, digital platforms have emerged as essential *soft power* instruments for Beijing, facilitating the expansion of its cultural and ideological influence across the continent. A notable example is TikTok, which now rivals YouTube in audience reach across Africa. In low-income Sub-Saharan nations where social media penetration is below 20% (and as low as 2% in the CAR and Niger), Chinese companies provide affordable hardware and services, making them the primary partners for local telecom operators. African nations are encouraged to adopt the Chinese model of "digital sovereignty," which involves establishing localized digital ecosystems to insulate domestic cyberspace from external influence. These projects are spearheaded by tech giants Huawei and ZTE [Sytnik, Ladygina-Glazunova, Bazlutsкая, 2024]. By providing these services, the PRC integrates itself into the digital fabric of African states, exerting strategic influence over their media landscapes and data management systems.

The expansion of Chinese technology in Africa reached a new threshold in 2023–2024 with the emergence of the DeepSeek and Qwen large language models, which have become direct competitors to the American GPT family. A key feature of these AI systems is built-in content moderation that strictly adheres to the official ideology of the CPC. The large-scale deployment of free access to these platforms is a calculated geopolitical move by Beijing. It aims to solidify China's status as a technological leader and foster a long-term information dependency on Chinese digital solutions, potentially shifting the continental balance of power and diminishing Western influence in favor of China.

Conclusion

The evolution of the concept of *soft power* in the United States and the People's Republic of China initially proceeded in a nearly parallel and synchronous manner. In the USA, fourteen years elapsed between the emergence of the term and Joseph Nye's formalized scientific definition (1990–2004). A similar period for the semantic development of *soft power* in the PRC – from its first mention to its formal adaption in official CPC documents – spans from 1991 to 2007. By the early 21st century, American and Chinese interpretations of *soft power* occupied roughly the same semantic field, despite their differences. While Nye's American construct was a symbiosis of a nation's culture, foreign policy, and political values, the early Chinese iteration identified the country's culture as the sole foundation of its *soft power*.

The turning point for the American concept was the events of September 11, 2001, after which *soft power* was superseded by the doctrine of the "War on Terror." Reconciling *soft power* with a global counter-terrorism campaign proved nearly impossible. Consequently, the US adopted dualistic and often contradictory foreign policy approaches, resulting in what scholars describe as "self-sabotage" [Colebatch, 2022]. The further erosion of

the American concept is analyzed by Ilan Manor and Guy Golan in their article “Soft Power is Bullshit! How Shared Interests, Not Values, Shape International Relations.” They observe that by the 2020s, US policy had effectively eliminated *soft power* as a functional instrument of contemporary diplomacy [Manor, Golan, 2026].

In contrast, the Chinese conceptualization of *soft power* progressed through several distinct stages: initial criticism and denial (early 1990s); establishment as a foreign policy tool based exclusively on Chinese cultural values (2007); the inclusion of “Core Socialist Values with Chinese characteristics” (2008–2013); and finally, the acquisition of its current officially recognized content after 2014.

A comparison between this modern Chinese interpretation and Nye’s 2004 definition reveals a stark divergence. While Nye identifies three pillars of *soft power* – culture, political ideals, and foreign policy – China’s official resources are defined as Chinese culture and Core Socialist Values. These values encompass not only political ideals but also nearly all spheres of social life, affording the Chinese interpretation significantly greater scale and political weight. From the perspective of *Realpolitik*, while US *soft power* and its “hard” interests entered a state of diametrical opposition, the modern Chinese concept has absorbed both Nye-ian elements and *Realpolitik* components, evolving into a unique ideological hybrid. Crucially, it maintains one absolute constraint: Chinese *soft power* categorically rejects all forms of armed or economic coercion. This suggests that while modern Chinese *soft power* lacks Nye’s original political idealism, it cannot be interpreted as *hard power*, remaining firmly within the semantic boundaries of *soft power*.

All three stages of China’s soft power policy toward Africa align with the third period of African modernization. Defined by the eminent historian Mu Tao as the era of “re-starting” (from the 1990s to the present), this phase is characterized as a “Renaissance” [Mu, 2025]. In this contemporary context, the core concepts of China’s soft power strategy have found profound resonance with the historical trajectories of African development.

The primary ideologemes of the modern Chinese *soft power* are rooted in the five Global Initiatives introduced by Xi Jinping. The institutions, instruments, and practices of Chinese *soft power* in Africa constitute a systemic, pan-African phenomenon. China eschews a selective approach in favor of a strategy aimed at the entirety of Africa’s territory and population. Assessing the results, analysts generally agree that while this strategy deviates from the “Nye canon,” it is highly effective.

Through the lens of linguistic contextualism, Chinese leaders and theorists have performed a “speech act” of redefining *soft power*, replacing the “attractiveness of values” with “political trust.” From the standpoint of moral realism, by shedding its “idealistic” nature, China’s *soft power* has become “reputational.” It remains “soft” because it is predicated on the voluntary recognition of China’s authority as a stable, predictable, and reliable center of power.

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