

## Chinese cultural soft power and its impacts on Vietnam and some East Asian Countries

Dr. NGUYỄN THỊ THU PHƯƠNG (Chief author, 2016), *Chinese cultural soft power and its impacts on Vietnam and some East Asian Countries*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 323 p.

Summarized by **Hoài Phúc, Lê Quang Minh**

Received 26 November 2016; published 15 April 2017

For a country, the soft power exists just in its culture, its values and policies. With increasing economic power, China wants to use cultural



influences and development support instruments to create the foundations for strengthening trade relations with partner countries and build an image of peaceful rising, erasing the concerns about a rising China which would have the possibility of threatening the world peace and security.

The contents of the book expose a newer vision on cultural soft power from the viewpoint of Vietnam, thence identify the

impact level of Chinese cultural soft power in order to be lucid and cautious about selectively acculturating the positive impacts and strengthen cultural “inner forces” in order to resist and neutralize the dangerous impacts from Chinese cultural soft power, to build the strategy of enhancing Vietnamese cultural soft power.

### 1. Cultural soft power and the goals to increase Chinese cultural soft power

According to the authors, “cultural soft power” is the attraction, the convincingness, the possibility of influencing and fascinating by a country on the others by means of cultural and spiritual values, of ideology, cultural institution and noncoercive cultural diplomatic policy. However, cultural soft power is understood as the possibility of a country in proactive reception, absorption

and selective acculturation of cultural quintessences from outside, having in the same time the ability to resist and dispel the dangerous impacts which would undermine the fundamental values and debase the cultural identity of a country.

The studies around cultural soft power showed that the countries often orientate this resource toward two main goals in international relations: 1. To build the good image of country, widen the influencing possibilities or attraction, enhance the cultural understanding and exchanges; 2. To reduce or dispel the misunderstanding, heal conflicts and turn towards the consensus and interest sharing. For China, *building the new values system and increasing the cultural influences* are two goals of cultural soft power that were put forth with the common goals in order to make the country more closing to the long goal of becoming the “socialist cultural power” able to lead the world. For this open goals, Chinese leadership continues to divide them into specific goals such as: To calm down the international opinion, propagate the good image of country; To contain the Western cultural factors which would undermine the values and harm the Chinese cultural sovereignty; To complete the structure of cultural soft power, creating the comprehensive link with national general power; To establish a “new cultural rim” in East Asia, step by step compete for leading status with other cultural soft powers in the world; To transform the Chinese cultural soft power into hard power in the case that it needs to defend national interests.

Participating relatively late in the competition for cultural soft power, but

China has the relatively big ambitions. With entire idea of “pacifying the world” that would determine all policies through the times, China always turns towards the dream of “world community” in which countries don’t line up horizontally (as in network) by Western system of international relations, but vertically (as in pyramid) with China as the peak (the leader).

## **2. The impact channels of Chinese cultural soft power in some East Asian countries and Vietnam**

According to the authors, having been behind the world great powers in competition for cultural soft power, China appeared to be more pragmatic than preceding cultural powers when it chose the *cultural diplomacy, media, funding and economic cooperation* as three main impact channels in order to enhance the attraction, fascination and bindingness of some East Asian countries - which ever have been long influenced historically by China in culture and politics, especially those countries which are similar in language, writing, religion, institution and political ideology. In having been deployed, the impact channels were applied by China first to the neighbouring South-Eastern and North-Eastern Asian countries, in the same time those neighbouring countries in which there are strong Chinese residents community have been given special attention.

### *\* The cultural diplomatic channel*

China has chosen the language propagation, education cooperation, promotion of spreading and exchanging culture, arts and sports and exporting cultural products... as main impact channels in order to change, attract and

convince the world in general and some East Asian countries in particular.

Through the official way, China signed the cultural agreements on governmental level with 145 states, signed 682 plans of annual cultural exchange, created Chinese cultural centres in France, Egypt, Korea... The cultural year is also one of main impact channels making the Chinese cultural soft power penetrate into social life of other countries. In early XXI<sup>st</sup> century, China has organized various activities of Chinese cultural week, cultural month and cultural year in France, United States, Egypt, Russia, India, Finland... Besides, China also has taken advantage of any chance to organize the global influential events, typically such as Shanghai Expo 2010. Sporting exchanges is also an impact channel that has been deployed rather flexibly by China in international relations. Having taken advantage of the fact that sporting activities has no frontier, China has invested giant expenditures in organization of Beijing 2008 Olympics in order to expose its sporting spirit and propagate worldwide its culture.

After the Cold War, education cooperation between developed countries quickly became a new and strong modality of foreign policy. In this context, China also transformed the educational exchanges into a channel of strengthening the impacting ability of cultural soft power on global scale, making cooperation with 189 countries and regions in the world. In a number of North-East Asian countries like Japan and Korea, education and training cooperation and cultural exchanges are important foci of China. In 1994, there

were 5,055 Japanese students learning in China, up to 2006 this figure increased to 18,363, making the percentage of Japanese students learning abroad to increase from 9.2% to 24%. The number of Chinese students learning in Japan also reached 18% of overall foreign students in Japan. In Korea, China also concentrated on enhancing cultural attraction through the channel of educational exchanges. In 2004, there were 130 Chinese universities and 120 Korean ones which signed the cooperation on training, studying and exchanging professors and students. In 2006, there were 54,000 Korean students learning in China, reaching 38% of overall foreign students in China and being the most of them here. In 2009, this figure increased to 66,800. In 2010, Chinese students learning in Korea occupied the most number, reaching 70% of 53,461 foreign students learning in this country. Together with development of Confucius academies network, the movement of learning Chinese also appeared widely in Korea. Beside the establishment of Chinese cultural centres abroad, the organization of cultural exchange events in Korea and Japan were also the channels of increasing impacts of Chinese cultural soft power.

In some South-East Asian countries like Thailand and Philippines, a series of "Merry Spring" was organized in the days of Chinese festivities and traditional New Year with various programs imbued with national culture of China such as theatre, minority dances, circus... Beside that, the cultural expositions were organized by Chinese Government as additional activities on anniversary occasion of diplomatic relation establishment with a number of South-East Asian countries like

Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Laos... Since 2008, the Governments of China and Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam have signed the agreements of educational exchanges and mutual academic degree recognition. In 2011, on the occasion of anniversary of diplomatic relation establishment between China and ASEAN, the two sides organized various activities of educational exchanges, in the same time putting forth the goal that up to 2020 the number of ASEAN students learning in China will increase to 100,000 and so will be the number of Chinese students learning in ASEAN countries. It is expected that in the coming 10 years, China will allocate 10,000 government scholarships to South-East Asian students, invite about 10,000 teachers, scholars and students from South-East Asia to China. Beside that, since 2004, China has sent over 2,000 teachers and volunteers to teach Chinese in many countries and regions, among which there are South-East Asian countries like Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

In Vietnam, China sends annually artistic ensembles to Vietnam to perform on the occasion of Vietnam Independence Day. Besides that, every year there were often dozens of ensembles coming and performing in various localities of Vietnam. For traditional theatre, based on advantageous similarity between Vietnamese classical opera (tuong) and Chinese classical opera (kinh kich), between Vietnamese Reformed theatre (cai luong) and Hopeh theatre and Cantonese classical opera of China, this country has co-ordinated with Vietnam in organizing several scientific workshops and artistic performances to affirm the

reception level of Chinese arts in Vietnam. The expositions and fairs also were strongly exploited by China in order to propagate its culture to Vietnam.

Especially, the birth of Confucius academies with the task of “diffusing the Chinese language, preserving and protecting the international status of Chinese, propagating culture and building the image of a harmonious, peaceful and friendly China” is one of strategies of strengthening of Chinese cultural soft power. Since 2004 (when the first Confucius Academy was founded in Korea) up to July 2014, the sum of Confucius academies in the world, including the Confucius classes, were up to 1,082 units in 120 countries. According to the authors, in taking lessons from the organizations of cultural promotion and language propagation of the West, Chinese Government has created the Confucius academy model as an international pedagogic organization, but also an important foreign affair propaganda channel for cultural soft power.

#### *\* The media channel*

In 2003, the Chinese Communist Party together with Army's Central Committee of Party officially announced the application of “three types of war art”, including psychological war art, opinion war art and legal war art, to protect the interests of China. Among these three war arts, the “opinion war art” is identified as a media maneuver to exert influences, to pilot the international opinion in direction of supporting China, in the same time to negate those ideas of rivals that are disadvantageous to China. The principal impact channel of opinion war art used to

increasing cultural soft power includes both traditional and new media, exploiting also the media of adversaries or of the third party to raise opinion. China often invited foreign journalists to the press conferences in Beijing. In official visits, the Chinese leaders often arranged the contacts with local press. International organizations, civil societies, academic fora and workshops also were used to propagate the news in accordance with interests of China.

The authors consider that the aim of Chinese opinion war art has two rather clear sides, especially it was applied in East Asia - where the Chinese has pushed and is pushing many countries into the situation of doubt, obliging them to defend themselves or seek another support. Through the filter of media under the direction of Government, China is trying to diffuse the message that the rising of China is not at all a "threat" but a opportunity for East Asian countries to cooperate together for development.

In Vietnam, by signing the arrangement of cooperation with radios and televisions of Vietnam, the Ministry of Radio - Television and Cinema of China especially facilitated to make telefilms and movies penetrate into cultural market of Vietnam. Real data showed that, the number of Chinese telefilms being showed in Vietnam in recent years have boomed with quite high frequency. According to incomplete statistics, in 2009 there were 348 Chinese telefilms showed on the television channels from the central to local televisions of Vietnam, this figure in 2010 being 304, in 2011 being 369. Only in April 2014 (before

China laid the HD981 drilling platform in the exclusive economic zone of Vietnam), there were even 182 telefilms showed on 65 televisions of Vietnam... According to the authors, not only the telefilms and attractive game shows, the Chinese media in Vietnam were also transformed into the "war art" to raise opinion in the direction of distorting truth in favour of Chinese interests.

The authors of the book consider that, the aim of "enframing" news of China is orienting opinion towards the indignation at the image of a kind and friendly great power whose sovereignty is bullied and violated by a small and less developed country. This indicates that, "opinion war art" reflected a part of truth: China wants both to rise as hard power and become great soft power; wants both to maintain the international status and keep its national interests and ambitions intact. China uses media channels as a war art to create disturbance of news, causing the doubt, even the deep division of viewpoints among international opinion about the sea disputes with neighbouring countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Japan. This fact made us to see more clearly the "second face" of a China that would defy every thing, even go inversely to the true meaning of cultural soft power - a power of behaviour beauty, a fascination and ability of sharing values in order to achieve ambitious core interests of this country.

*\* The funding and economic cooperation channel*

In face of South-East Asian countries - which were much influenced by Chinese culture in the past, and in the same time

are developing countries that always need investments, capital and technologies from other powers - China sees "Southern policy" as a strategy necessary to create basic foundations of widening process for leading the world in culture and values in the future through impact channels which have funding and economic cooperation as "levers".

According to statistics, in 2004, China canceled the debt of poorest countries in the region such as Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar; provided three ASEAN new member countries with favour tariff by zero on many goods exported into China in accordance with "Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN". The aids of China to South-East Asian countries have incessantly increased and quickly surpassed United States. In 2006, the aids of China to Philippines increased four times more than that of US, to Laos also three times than that of US. Today, China is considered as "the principal economic sponsor" of Cambodia and Laos - the two small but strategically important countries. In the moment when there were sea disputes between China and other countries in the region, the former often used major economic aids in order to divide the other countries.

On economic cooperation channel, China has highly expected that, through enhancement of ability to export the cultural products, it would compete for cultural propagation to East Asian countries with US, Korea and Japan. Unlike the importance-focused investment of culturally trade cooperation in two great powers of cultural soft power of East

Asia such as Japan and Korea, the investment cooperation with South-East Asian countries was oriented towards the aim of both ensuring strategic economic interests and increasing ability of China to attract, to bind and dominate culturally and politically.

### **3. Reactions of some East Asian countries**

According to the authors, Chinese cultural soft power was welcomed with open-heartedness in the first decade of XXI<sup>st</sup> century. First of all, there is a more open-heartedness with Chinese culture and language. The diffusion of Chinese language and culture in East Asian countries on the one hand is a manifestation of attraction of Chinese economic growth, but on the other hand it is the demonstration that Chinese culture has a fascination and a sympathy from other countries in the region.

However, in some recent years, Chinese cultural soft power were facing the doubt, even the violent reactions of East Asian countries. The negative reactions of this region to China is increasing, manifesting in: Not voluntarily receiving Chinese modality of ideology and values system; Not believing, lacking goodwill and disliking the image and conduct of China; Doubting the intervention of "Chinese governmental hand" and worrying about a new cultural invasion.

Chinese leadership often considers that cultural soft power is an important index of contribution in making China become social-cultural great power and a new world cultural centre of mankind with "modality of ideology, values system having attraction, fascination and convincingness for other countries".

However, the fact that having no actual resources to “export” common values system of contemporary moral-cultural ideas able to lead the world and be diffused abroad has made China bound to take the ancient civilization as a tool in order to express its leading role in the new definition of so-called Asian values.

Many Chinese people think that traditional values with the core that is Confucianism will represent Chinese values and vision in a quite different manner from Western civilization. And the fact that Asian countries, especially East Asian countries, have been familiar with Confucianism and Confucian values, will be a favourable condition for China to reestablish common values of the region. But in reality, those values for which China expects were received and localized by East Asian countries for thousands years ago. Even in the cases of Japan, Korea and Vietnam, this localization is quite deep and has particular features. Thus, according to the authors, it is hard to see this as a new success of Chinese cultural soft power in impacting on awareness of the region.

While China is encountering difficulties in creating new values system or seeking a new economic doctrine corresponding to its spectacular economic development, then even in China and most East Asian countries, the new Western doctrines are quickly welcomed and applied in various fields. This is just the reason that causes China to face the fact that those countries which have high development index like Japan, Korea, Singapore needn't receive, imitate, copy or conform to the values system, the economic model or political

institutions that China is trying to demonstrate. Even for the developing countries in South-East Asia, it is difficult to receive and imitate China, as many Western values are present everywhere and the cultural movements of Korea and Japan seem to have strong fascination.

In second decade of XXI<sup>st</sup> century, the conduct rule of “never sacrifice the core national interests regardless of any circumstance”, even if it regards the actions violating territorial sovereignty of other countries, has caused Chinese cultural soft power to lose most efforts of keeping the image of a peaceful and friendly rising state in face of neighbouring countries. In fact, the action of defending core national interests regardless of any circumstance of China has hurt the deepest psyche of others and awoken the defence awareness and protest spirit against China that were ever laid deeply in national psychology of many countries, causing a series of reactions: lacking sympathy, losing trust, doubting, protesting, indignation and hatred in entire region. As a domino effect, this series of reactions is ruining the efforts of building national image of China in East Asia.

According to results of social opinion poll on soft power realized in 2008 by Chicago Council on Global Affairs in association with Institute for East Asian Studies of Korea, there were 74% of Japanese respondents who feel worry about military threat of China in the future, this figure of Indonesia was 47%. Social opinion poll in 2008 of the Study Centre PEW in US showed that only 14% of Japanese respondents expressed sympathy with China. Another poll in Japan and China in

2012 also showed that 87% of Japanese respondents considered China as an “untrustworthy” country, 79% of respondents saw China as a military threat.

Most recently, according to the authors, the fact that China laid the HD981 drilling platform in the exclusive economic zone of Vietnam has caused the neighbouring countries and world community to lose trust, in the same time it has ruined the efforts of building the image of a friendly and peaceful China respecting for international legislation. Manifestation waves in Vietnam and Philippines against China have showed that, just “hegemony game” with the method of “spectacular history trickery” of which China is the author has quickly ruined and pushed the image of a “peacefully developed great power” into “malignant whirlwind” of extreme nationalism in Vietnam and Philippines.

For Chinese media, the attitude of countries in the region is basically negative. Because even when the phenomena such as polluted foods, intoxicated paints, unsafe toys, dangerous tyres... in China were denounced, then reactions of Chinese media still insistently claimed that “99% of Chinese exported products met the standard”. Therefore, the fact that China was the 183<sup>rd</sup> of 197 countries in 2014 freedom of press ranking by Freedom House is not surprising.

For Confucius academies in particular, today there are not less opinions that these academies are like those organizations which would bring the danger of cultural invasion and propaganda of Chinese state

ideology. The flourishing at lightening speed of these academies caused international opinion go from admiration to uneasiness and doubt about their quality. According to the authors of this book, through the development of Confucius academies, one is hard to believe that the double effect of them on development of positive attitude and policy’s influence might become reality, at least for Japan and Vietnam.

#### **4. Policy suggestions for Vietnam**

Vietnam is an especially important geostrategic place in the strategic crossroad that links North-East Asia with South-East Asia, between continent and sea. Therefore, Vietnam always is the first subject of the moves of China in realization of its ambition to determine East Asian order. The use by China of cultural soft power today as well as in the future is always closely associated with national general forces in order to determine, incite, bind and contain Vietnam. Namely: China has incited, conducted and bound Vietnam to unbalanced relation of power; attracted Vietnam into the model of “Chinese socialist cultural great power”.

Together with the growth of economy and military, China is increasing the pressure of cultural soft power on Vietnam. The Chinese policy of supporting to influence and seek interests while containing in order to control has put and is putting for Vietnam the great challenges to be resolved. To take the initiative in receiving, absorbing and acculturating selectively the positive impacts, while resisting and neutralizing the negative



impacts of increasing cultural soft power in close relation with national force system of China, the authors propose a number of policy orientations as follows: *First*, it must take the initiative in receiving under control the positive impacts of cultural soft power in relation with national general forces of China. *Secondly*, it must be flexible and soft in using impacts channels in order to widely propagandize the consistency of speech and action of Vietnam about the sea disputes caused by China, thence strengthening the trust and orienting the world opinion towards more clear awareness about hegemony ambition and inconsistent conduct of China. *Thirdly*, for direct impact channels of Chinese cultural soft power in aspect of cultural diplomacy and media, it must be lucid and cautious

in receiving, absorbing and acculturating selectively the positive impacts of Chinese cultural soft power, while strengthening cultural “inner forces” in order to resist and neutralize the dangerous impacts that would undermine the fundamental values, lower cultural identity and national cultural sovereignty. *Fourthly*, cultural soft power is a theoretic system that was deployed at many countries in the world. As for structure of soft power, Vietnam has many conditions and opportunities to increase cultural soft power. Due to diversity and complexity of national cultural soft power, the building and bringing into play this power request a penetrating and unanimous guideline. It must consider the possibility of building a “strategy of enhancing Vietnamese cultural soft power” □