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*The soft power of China in Europe*

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**ABSTRACT****The soft power of China in Europe**

The rapid development of China in the past thirty-five years astonished the outside world. However, while China's 'hard power', or economic, political and military might are widely recognized, the country's influence, prestige, or 'soft power' is still limited, especially in Western countries. In this regard, China is much weaker than its economic indicators may suggest. China is looked at very favourably in many developing countries, but there is a discrepancy between China's political, economic, and military capacities and its reputation in the West. If we look at the potential sources of its soft power, such as traditional and modern culture, sport successes, participation in aid programs and international humanitarian projects, etc., it is quite obvious that China's actual soft power is far from its potential maximum. The present article tries to find the reasons of this discrepancy.

**ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ****Kína puha ereje Európában**

Kína az elmúlt három és fél évtizedben megdöbbentően gyors fejlődésen ment át. Ugyanakkor míg Kína „kemény erejét”, vagyis gazdasági, politikai és katonai potenciálját széles körben elismerik, az ország befolyása, presztízse, „puha ereje” még mindig korlátozott, különösen a nyugati országokban. Ebből a szempontból Kína sokkal gyengébb, mint ahogy azt gazdasági mutatói indokolnák. Kína sok fejlődő országban kedvező megítélésnek örvend, de nyugaton jelentős szakadék van Kína politikai, gazdasági és katonai ereje, illetve elismertsége, elfogadottsága között. Ha figyelembe vesszük, hogy a puha erő milyen gazdag forrásai állnak a rendelkezésére – például hagyományos és modern kultúra, sportsikerek, nemzetközi segélyprogramokban és humanitárius akciókban való részvétel stb. – egyértelmű, hogy Kína tényleges puha erejemessze van a lehetséges maximumtól. A jelen tanulmány ennek az okait igyekszik feltárni.

## **GERGELY SALÁT**

### **THE SOFT POWER OF CHINA IN EUROPE**

The rapid development of China in the past thirty-five years astonished the outside world. Due to the size and importance of the country, the success story of China is more than a typical process of fast modernization and growth, a story that have been seen in many other parts of the world in the past centuries. China's case is completely unique: it has never ever happened in world history that the life of so many people were affected by so extensive changes in such a short period of time. What took many centuries for Europe, and at least one century for North America, took only a few decades for China, a much more populous entity. Hundreds of millions of people were lifted out of poverty, and the country has become the second largest economy in the world; presumably, it will become number one quite soon. To put it shortly, China has regained its historical position as a great power, and its global influence is greater than it has ever been.

It is interesting to note, however, that while China's 'hard power', or economic, political and military might are widely recognized, the country's influence, prestige, or 'soft power' is still limited, especially in Western countries. In this regard, China is much weaker than its economic indicators may suggest. China is looked at very favourably in many developing countries, but there is a discrepancy between China's political, economic, and military capacities and its reputation in the West. In other words, its soft power is not yet equal to its hard power. If we look at the potential sources of its soft power, such as traditional and modern culture, sport successes, participation in aid programs and international humanitarian projects, etc., it is quite obvious that China's actual soft power is far from its potential maximum. Why is it? That is the question I will try to answer in the present article.

#### **SOFT POWER**

Power, to put it simply, is the ability to influence the behaviour of others, the ability to make others do what we want them to do. There are many ways and many forms of power. We can coerce them to do (or not to do) something by using physical force or

threatening to do so—this is hard power. We can pay for getting the outcomes we want, that is, we can use economic power. Countries can also use a much more complicated form of power to influence the decisions of others—soft power.

The term ‘soft power’ was coined by Joseph Nye of Harvard University in 1990, and it became something like a buzzword in the past decade in international discourse. Scholars of international politics have analysed the concept thoroughly, and they provided a number of definitions. Soft power is generally understood as the ability of getting others to want the outcomes we want, by co-option rather than coercion, without the use force or material benefit. As Nye put it:

“A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries— admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness— want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them.”<sup>1</sup>

Soft power is the result of being liked, respected, trusted, or admired. ‘Soft power’ is itself a ‘soft’ term, so it is impossible to give it an exhaustive definition. More important, soft power is impossible to measure. Nevertheless, despite its elusive nature, it seems sure that soft power does exist, and countries that possess it have great advantage in politics, diplomacy, business and other areas over those who do not have it or have less of it. In contemporary world, where the price of using hard power is in most cases too high, it is essential for countries to have as much soft power as possible. This is especially true for China, a country largely dependent on its relations with the outside world.

China, as everyone knows, witnessed the fastest and most extensive development in history in the past thirty-five years. The path it chose made it essential for her to build its soft power. Opening up to the outside world made it the greatest trading nation in the world. Its economic development relied on exports, as well as imports of technology, raw materials, energy and other resources indispensable for its development. China’s development and stability depend on ‘soft power’ factors, most of all, trust. Long-term investment, trade, joint projects, technology transfer, brand building, and other necessary factors of progress are all based on trust. As the West is still the most

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<sup>1</sup> NYE 2004.

developed part of the world, both economically and technologically, and it was even more so when the reform and opening policy was introduced in China, Beijing could not do without winning the trust of Western decision-makers. Did it succeed? Is China liked, respected, trusted, and admired in the West? I believe it is only partially so; China still does not live up to its soft power potentials. To be sure, China achieved incredible successes in winning trust and building its soft power; on the other hand, however, it could do much better. After all, China is the country with the longest continuous history in the world, it is the second-largest economy, it has a magnificent culture, and a deep commitment to peaceful development, win-win cooperation and generosity toward other nations. If we look at this factor, its soft power in the West is surprisingly low. The case of the United States will not be discussed here, as it has direct conflicts of security interests with China in the Asia-Pacific, and is the main rival of China on many areas, which influences soft power relations deeply. Here we will focus on the European Union, the largest economy in the world, and China's number one trading partner, a community with which China does not have conflicts of great power politics.

### CHINA'S IMAGE IN THE EU

Soft power, as already mentioned, cannot be measured by exact means, but there are some ways that can lead us to a reasonable assessment of the soft power of a country in an area. Opinion polls are one of those ways. In the following section, I will illustrate my point about the low level of Chinese soft power in the EU by quoting two of the latest global polls regarding the view on the influence of countries. These polls, of course, should not be treated as absolutely reliable scientific sources, as their results are subject to temporary mood changes, miscalculations, sampling problems. However, they can still indicate important developments and phenomena.

One of the most frequently quoted opinion polls is that of Pew Research Center. Its latest poll relevant to our study was conducted and made public in 2013, and it brought quite interesting results on global opinion on China, including that in the EU.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, European results should be put in a global context; and it is worth to compare Chinese results to American ones, as China's main rival is the U.S. not only in politics and economy, but also on the field of soft power. Across the nations surveyed, a

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<sup>2</sup> "America's Global Image..."

median of 63% express a favourable opinion of the US, compared with 50% for China.

Table 1 shows more global results:

<b>Overall rating of the U.S. and China (%)</b>		
	U.S.	China
Favourable	63	50
Unfavourable	30	36
Don't know	7	10
<b>Is the U.S./China a ... (%)</b>		
Partner	59	39
Enemy	8	10
Neither	24	36
Don't know	5	6
<b>Does the U.S./China consider your country's interests? (%)</b>		
Great deal/fair amount	37	27
Not too much/not at all	58	63
Don't know	5	8

**Table 1**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

As we can see, 50% of the people surveyed look at China favourably, 39% see it as a partner, and 27% believe that China takes his country's interests into consideration when making foreign policy decisions. These numbers are not especially low, but not very high either, given the fact that China, unlike the U.S., has not waged a war for more

than three decades, solved all its conflicts peacefully, and upholds the principles of non-interference and mutual benefit. Ratings for the U.S. are still higher, even though Washington plays a much more active and controversial role in world politics.

If we look at results in Europe, it is clear that opinion on China is much more negative than the world average. Table 2 illustrated this:

<b>U.S., China favourability in certain European countries (%)</b>			
	U.S.	China	Difference
Italy	76	28	+48
Germany	53	28	+25
Poland	67	43	+24
Czech Republic	58	34	+24
France	64	42	+22
Spain	62	48	+14
Britain	58	48	+10
Russia	51	62	-11
Greece	39	59	-20
MEDIAN	58	43	

**Table 2**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

Compared to the world median of 50%, only 43% of Europeans hold positive views of China. If we take out Russia, a non-EU country, the number is somewhat lower (41%); and if we take out Greece, a crisis-stricken and deeply disappointed country in a very special position, it is only 38%. Actually, among all the regions surveyed, citizens of the European Union give China the lowest points in favourability; even North America looks at China more favourably (37% in the U.S., and 43% in Canada). The overall positive rating of China is 45% in the Near East, 58% in East and Southeast Asia, 58% in Latin America, and 72% in Sub-Saharan Africa. It's interesting to note that the only region where China is more popular than the U.S. is the Near East. The difference between Chinese and American favourability index is nowhere higher than in Europe.

One of the questions asked in the poll was whether people see China as their partner or enemy. As Table 3 shows, only a small minority considers China an enemy (except for Italy where 39% of the respondents are on that opinion); however, apart from Russia and Greece, less than a third of Europeans look at China as a partner.

<b>China is more of a... (%)</b>				
	Partner	Enemy	Neither	
Russia	53	11	28	
Greece	36	11	51	
Czech Rep.	30	6	61	
Germany	28	10	61	
Spain	25	8	65	
Poland	24	13	57	
France	21	10	69	
Britain	18	7	72	
Italy	12	39	44	

**Table 3**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

Does China care about the interest of their countries? This questions was also raised to the people surveyed, and most Europeans clearly say no (see Table 4). It means that Europeans consider China a 'selfish' state that only takes into account its own interest when making foreign policy or economic decisions. It also reflects an obvious lack of trust in the good intentions of China, in spite of the fact that Chinese leaders have been touring EU countries for a number of years, promoting the notion of cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

**How much does China consider your country's interests? (%)**

<sup>3</sup> For the reasons of the lack of trust and credibility, see for example „Mutual Trust and Soft Power...”



	Not too much / at all	Great deal / fair amount
Spain	85	11
Italy	83	11
France	83	16
Britain	82	14
Czech Rep.	79	17
Greece	73	25
Germany	70	27
Poland	65	27
Russia	51	39

**Table 4**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

An important aspect of the reputation of a country is whether it is seen as one respecting the personal freedoms of its population. This is especially important for Westerners who see their ideas about human rights as universal. China is not doing very well in this regard either, as attested by Table 5. Across the nations polled, a median of 36% say the Chinese government respects the personal freedoms of its people. Again, it gets its lowest points in the EU. In most countries in the Middle East, Asia Pacific, Africa and in many in Latin America, people believe that China does respect the individual rights of its people; however, throughout the European Union, large majorities, including more than eight-in-ten in Germany (87%), France (86%), Spain (84%) and Italy (82%), believe individual freedoms are not respected in China. These reflect even worse opinion than that in the U.S. (71%).

<b>Do you think the government of China respects the personal freedoms of its people? (%)</b>		
	No	Yes
Russia	30	47
Greece	63	25

Britain	71	15
Poland	76	14
France	86	14
Czech Rep.	78	12
Spain	84	11
Germany	87	9
Italy	82	7

**Table 5**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

Is the less-than-positive image of China a passing phenomenon of year 2013, or is it something more lasting? Has the image of China changed since the first similar poll was conducted before the financial crisis?<sup>4</sup> Table 6 indicates that no significant change has happened in the past six years in the favourability index of China; actually, while more Spanish and Polish people look favourably on China than before, the country's popularity fell in France, the U.K. and Germany, the three most important trade partners of China in Europe.

<b>Favourability of China 2007-2013 (%)</b>								
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	07-13 change
Spain	39	31	40	47	55	49	48	+9
Poland	39	33	43	46	51	50	43	+4
Russia	60	60	58	60	63	62	62	+2
Italy	27	--	--	--	--	30	28	+1
Britain	49	47	52	46	59	49	48	-1
Czech Rep.	35	--	--	--	--	33	34	-1
France	47	28	41	41	51	40	42	-5

<sup>4</sup> For European results of earlier polls, see D'HOOGHE 2010.

Germany	34	26	29	30	34	29	28	-6
Greece	--	--	--	--	--	56	59	--

**Table 6**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

Does that mean that the Chinese efforts to project soft power in Europe are in all in vain? This is not the case, as the poll shows that young people look at China much more favourably than older ones. Table 7 shows that the younger one is, the more positive view he or she holds on China. In other words, future generations will probably be much more receptive to thing Chinese than the present middle-age and older people.

<b>Per cent favourable on China in age group</b>				
	18–29 years	30–39 years	50+ years	Youngest-oldest gap
Poland	59	41	35	+24
France	55	41	37	+18
Britain	58	51	42	+16
Italy	38	31	23	+15
Czech Rep.	43	31	32	+11
Russia	68	65	58	+10

**Table 7**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

Thus the image of China in the EU, according to the Pew report, is not unequivocally positive. While the great majority of Europeans don't think China is their enemy, they also don't consider it as a partner. They don't believe that China takes into consideration their interest when making decisions. The favourable ratings of China are the lowest in the world. Though opinion polls only reflect some aspects of soft power, the result show that the soft power of China in the EU is not insignificant, but rather weak.

Let's now turn to another recent global poll, that of Globe Scan, conducted to assess the view of the influence of certain countries.<sup>5</sup> The same questions were raised in 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 in more than twenty countries: does a given country have a mainly positive or a mainly negative influence in the world? Results were published in 2012 and 2013, respectively. First, let's see the global ranking of the perception of some country's influence in 2012 (table 8).

<b>Views of different countries' influence, average of 22 tracking countries, 2011–2012 (%)</b>					
Position	Country	Mainly positive	Mainly negative	Change in positive since 2011	Change in negative since 2011
1.	Japan	58	21	+2	+1
2.	Germany	56	16	-4	+2
3.	Canada	53	14	-1	+2
4.	UK	51	20	-6	+4
5.	China	50	31	+4	-4
6.	France	48	22	-4	+5
7.	EU	48	25	-8	+8
8.	USA	47	33	-1	+2
9.	Brazil	45	18	-3	-1
10.	India	40	27	0	-1

**Table 8**

Source: [www.globescan.com](http://www.globescan.com), 2012.

The positive views of China reached their peak in 2012; ever since this kind of poll was conducted by GlobeScan first in 2005, China got its highest points in that year. Globally, a median of 50% of people asked said that the global influence of China was a

<sup>5</sup> “Views of China and India Slide in Global Poll...” Polling was conducted for BBC World Service by the international polling firm GlobeScan and its research partners in each country, together with the Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland.

positive phenomenon. It even surpassed the U.S. and EU, something unimaginable even a few years before. The relatively high points were not the results of a sudden leap in the improvement of the reputation of China; they reflected a trend that had begun many years ago.

However, the outstanding results of the year 2012 were not lasting; the latest poll, publicized in 2013, show the plummeting of global views on China. On average, positive views of China across 21 tracking countries have dropped eight points to 42 per cent while negative views have risen by the same amount to reach 39 per cent. It means that after improving for a number of years, views on China have sunk to their lowest level since polling began. EU and U.S. overtook China once again. The number of people worldwide who see China's influence in a negative light is almost the same as of those with a positive standing (Table 9).

<b>Views of different countries' influence, average of 22 tracking countries, 2012-2013 (%)</b>					
Position	Country	Mainly positive	Mainly negative	Change in positive since 2011	Change in negative since 2011
1.	Germany	59	15	3	-1
2.	Canada	55	13	+2	-1
3.	UK	55	18	+4	-2
4.	Japan	51	27	-7	+6
5.	France	49	21	+1	-1
6.	EU	49	24	+1	-1
7.	Brazil	46	21	+1	+3
8.	USA	45	34	-2	+1
9.	China	42	39	-8	+8
10.	South Korea	36	31	-1	+4

**Table 9**

Source: [www.globescan.com](http://www.globescan.com), 2012.

We do not know whether 2013 brought only a temporary setback for China, or its sharp fall means the start of a long decline or stagnation. The decline of the positive and upsurge in the negative views on the influence of China might be a result of momentary developments, such as the conflicts with Japan over the Diaoyu Islands or the disproportionate negative reporting on events in relation to the generation change in the Chinese leadership. However, the results clearly show that the enhancement of the reputation of China has its limits; maybe the process won't stop for good but will most probably slow down.

If we turn to Europe, we can see that perceptions on the influence of China are much more negative than the world average of 42%, except for Russia. While in 2012 there was one surveyed EU country, Great Britain, in which the relative majority of people were of positive opinion on China, in year 2013 there was not one single EU member with a majority with favourable opinion. Positive views declined everywhere (they fell 20% in the UK, 29% in Germany and 26% in Spain), and negative ones upsurged. Those who consider the global growth of Chinese influence a negative phenomenon, constitute a two-third majority in Germany, France and Spain, three important partners of China. It is interesting to note that these numbers are quite similar to those in the US, where 23% looks at China positively and 67% negatively.

<b>Views of China's influence (%)</b>				
	2012		2013	
	Mainly positive	Mainly negative	Mainly positive	Mainly negative
Russia	46	21	42	24
UK	57	32	37	50
Greece	42	47	34	41
Turkey	--	--	32	53
Poland	--	--	28	38
France	38	49	25	68
Germany	42	47	13	67

Spain	39	48	13	67
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**Table 10**

Source: [www.globescan.com](http://www.globescan.com), 2012.

The data above might be surprising for many, given the path China has taken in the past thirty-five years. China and Europe does not have territorial disputes that might harm the other's image; they haven't had a military conflict for a century; and economically they have reached a high level of interdependence that makes open conflicts very undesirable and risky. China is now the EU's 2nd trading partner behind the United States, and the EU is China's biggest trading partner. Chinese markets provide great opportunities for European companies, and have been essential for the 'survival' of the greater European economies since 2008; Chinese products contributed greatly to the rise of the living standards of Europeans. Political relations are quite good, Chinese leaders frequently tour the EU, and European leaders visit Beijing regularly. Given these facts, it is clear that China could be much more popular in Europe than it is now. In the following section, I will make an attempt to list some of the factors that may contribute to the rather negative image of China.

### **HISTORY AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

China has been a great centre of soft power throughout much of its history. Its neighbours in Asia have admired, emulated and learnt from it for millennia; its state, culture, thought, technology served as models for Japan, Korea, Vietnam and other countries in its vicinity. While the term 'soft power' was, of course, not used, the rulers of China consciously drew on China's magnificent cultural achievements to enhance the power of their nation.

China has been looked at with awe and respect for centuries in the West as well. In antiquity, it was conceived as the home of silk, a marvellous and expensive material, and ancient Romans called the country 'Seres', after the Latin word for silk. In medieval times the book of Marco Polo on China was something like a 'bestseller' in Europe; it pictured the country as the richest, greatest, and most developed empire in the world. The incredible information Marco Polo provided on China contributed greatly to the demand for the development of navigation and great discoveries in Europe. The wealth

attributed to China in the minds of Europeans was the main reason for Christopher Columbus to set out for the oceans. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century on, European travellers and missionaries started to write reports, books, and letters on China for the European audience, and in these writings China was still pictured as the greatest and most affluent empire in the world. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a 'China craze' swept through Europe: everything Chinese was extremely fashionable, Chinese porcelain, tea, silk and artefacts were the most sought-after commodities among aristocrats and wealthy civilians. Philosophers of the Enlightenment looked at China as a model; it was seen as an empire governed by reason, a state where good and just government was practiced by sages. In other words, as late as the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the image of China in Europe was unambiguously positive; the country was idealized, admired and envied.

19<sup>th</sup> century, however, brought a 'public relations catastrophe' for China. Together with its traditional government and ideas, its reputation collapsed in a few decades. In the eyes of the Westerners, from a model empire administered by wise philosophers, it soon became a poor and underdeveloped territory to be colonized and civilized. Hundreds of thousands of newspaper articles, books and travelogues were published describing the terrible conditions and 'strange customs' of China; one of the aims of these writings was to legitimize the efforts of Western powers to infringe on the sovereignty of the Middle Kingdom. Many Western notions on China that are still present in the thinking of Westerners have their roots in this age.

The vicissitudes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not improve the image of China. The fall of the imperial system, the age of the warlords and the ensuing civil war corroborated the picture of China as a weak, chaotic and backward country that does not fit into the modern world. During World War II, when China was needed for the Allied Powers to keep as many Japanese troops bogged down in China as possible, the country had a much more positive press than before. After the war, however, when civil war broke out again, leading to the victory of the Communist Party of China, the image of China was tarnished again. During the first two decades of the Cold War, China was considered an enemy of the West, in part because of its Communist system, in part due to its participation in the Korean War, a war that can be interpreted as a Sino-American conflict. In the Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe, China was presented as an ally in the same anti-imperialist camp, but as Communism was not very popular in these countries, China was only praised in official publications, without winning the hearts



and minds of the people. It was an ally they did not choose but was forced upon them. Moreover, after the Sino-Soviet split, even official reports on China became highly negative. However, we cannot say that good official relations between China and Eastern Europe did not have any effect on the thinking of people; as a result of common projects, many people-to-people relations were developed, especially in the fields of science and technology, and students of the countries started to study the language and culture of the other. Later, when political relations were normalized, they could build on these foundations. Such events as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution were looked at with horror in both the Capitalist and the Communist part of the Western world.

The breakdown of the relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, and the rapprochement between the U.S. and China at the beginning of the 1970's made China a quasi-ally of the Capitalist West, and the way it was pictured became much more positive. However, the new image of China as a friend was a result of great power politics, not a genuine change of minds. China was an 'enemy of our enemy' at these times, so media and politicians of the U.S.-lead camp refrained from scolding it continuously, but it was not because citizens in these countries developed a genuine liking towards Chinese. Diplomatic relations between Western Capitalist countries and China were normalized, some economic cooperation was started, but we cannot say that China was liked, respected, trusted, or admired in any way in the West. In other words, while its hard power was needed to counter Soviet influence, it obviously lacked soft power.

Beside the appearance of an appalling image of contemporary China, the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought about a new development: the beginning of the professional research and Western popularization of traditional Chinese culture. Modern sinology was founded in this era, and achievements of Chinese high culture, such as literature, painting, theatre, philosophy, etc. were introduced to a wide Western audience. A strange two-sided evaluation of China developed; while contemporary China was seen as weak, underdeveloped, backward and somewhat uncivilized, traditional culture was valued and appreciated highly. In many cases, such double approach can still be encountered. It is very unusual to come upon any serious critique of ancient Chinese poetry, Confucianism, martial arts, medicine, etc., as these are considered to be among the greatest achievements of humanity; in the same time, contemporary Chinese affairs

and attitudes are regularly castigated. We can frequently meet people who are fans of traditional Chinese civilization, but have very negative opinion on present China. Actually, during the years of Chairman Mao, it was explicitly stated that China broke with all its own traditions, and the rich heritage of China was repudiated. This contributed to the spread of a popular fallacy, according to which contemporary China has not much to do with the ancient Middle Kingdom, and the real treasures of China can be found outside its borders.

To sum it up, at the beginning of the reform and opening policy, Chinese soft power in the West was minimal, but it had some foundations to build on. As long as the basic line of China was self-support and isolation, the lack of soft power was not a serious problem. When reforms started, however, China needed foreign investment, technology, and markets; for acquiring these under favourable conditions, the image of China had to be changed. Partially, this image improved automatically, following the interior changes in the country; on the other hand, conscious efforts were and still are needed.

The heritage of the years of Mao Zedong and the previous century that China had to face at the end of the 1970's in regards to its soft power in the West can be described as follows:

- China was seen as a poor, weak, technologically underdeveloped country with huge problems in feeding its population, low level of culture and not much to offer for the outside world.
- Political relations had been tense and hostile for long decades between China and Western nations, generations had grown up in the belief that China was a dangerous enemy; rapprochement was made due to power politics, not sincere friendship.
- As a result of bad political relations, there had been no possibility for building good people-to-people relations for decades, except for some Eastern European countries. Students, scientist, engineers, businessmen, diplomats, athletes of other East Asian states were present in Western Europe since the 1950's; Chinese people, however, were practically unknown.
- The number of people who knew China and Chinese people well was very low. Only a handful of foreigners were allowed to live in China under Chairman Mao, so Western opinion-makers simply did not have enough first-hand information

on China to present an objective and reliable picture on it. Speculation, instead of experience was a source of news and stories on China.

- Chinese government had focused on political propaganda for decades, and did not spend energy on popularizing Chinese culture. Not only traditional culture was not presented to the West, but contemporary Chinese culture was also practically unknown. During the Cultural Revolution, China was seen as a country that was in the process of destroying its own culture.
- On the other hand, common interests and the still-existing respect for ancient Chinese culture formed a basis for improving the image of China in the West. China was seen as an ally to counter the Soviets, and it provided investment and export opportunities for Western companies.

To sum it up, China was a latecomer on the world scene of soft power politics and cultural diplomacy. While the U.S. had built its soft power for decades, China did not consider this area important, and Chinese cultural export was not more than some political propaganda.

After the end of the 1970's, the soft power of China grew significantly in Europe. This was, in part, spontaneous growth. At last, people-to-people contacts were established, more and more people travelled to China, and many Chinese could travel abroad. Business contacts flourished, joint ventures were established, and tourism to China was born. Political relations were improved as well. By the 1980's, China has abandoned its aggressive rhetoric, and decided to solve all its conflicts peacefully. The question of the return of Hong Kong was solved successfully, and the pragmatism and flexibility of the new Chinese leadership won the heart of many throughout the world. Economic reforms did not only provide business opportunities to the West; they showed all the people around the world that China had chosen a new path, a path of peaceful development, international cooperation and openness. The spontaneous growth of its soft power came hand in hand with conscious efforts of the Chinese government to improve the country's image.

The end of the 1980's, beginning of the 1990's brought significant changes. First of all, the Soviet Union collapsed, and its former satellite states in Eastern Europe became independent. At that time it seemed that all these countries chose Western-type liberal democracy as their political model. With the disappearance of the common enemy, there was no more need for China as a political and military ally, and differences

between China and the West, not talked about previously because of the common interests, came to the fore. While many in the West had hoped that China would choose liberal democracy like other communist countries, it became clear at the beginning of the 1990's that China would maintain its political system. China, once a counterweight in great power politics in a bipolar world, became a separate pole in a multipolar world, and as such, it emerged as a rival of the U.S., a development that deeply influenced the thinking of the old and new allies of the U.S. in Europe. In the same time, the economic opportunities it provided still had a magnetic effect, and its rapid development and the rebirth of its culture led to a renewal of interest in the country.

Since the beginning of the 1990's, the soft power of China in the West went through a complicated development full of contradictions, and this led to the less-than-ideal image of China described in the previous section. Some characteristics of this process are as follows:

- China has become a hard power great power, it became the second largest economy in the world in an astonishingly short time, with one of the strongest military in the world. The growth of hard power, especially economic development, automatically brought with itself the growth of China's soft power. The country is not seen anymore as a poor and backward state. Now it has something to offer to the world.
- The rebirth of traditional Chinese culture, as well as the achievements of contemporary arts and literature, led to the development of a genuine interest in Chinese culture. It became clear that China is again a great power in culture; its arts, movies, literary works, etc., no matter whether modern or traditional, are among the world's best. However, while many people respect them, few actually enjoy them, as shown by the fact that Chinese movies are extremely successful at film festivals, but much less at Western box offices.
- Chinese government invested huge resources in promoting the culture of the country. Especially since the beginning of the 2000's, there is a conscious policy in China to raise the level of the country's soft power. The network of Confucius Institutes was established, Chinese cultural years, film festivals and other events are held regularly, and the projection of soft power officially became a priority.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For Chinese discourse on soft power, see for example LI MINGJIANG 2008, WUTHNOW 2008.

- On the other hand, the notion of the so-called 'China Threat' appeared in the thinking of Westerners. While China was rather weak, it was quite comfortable to get along with it well. Now that China is strong again, many see it as a threat to their political influence, well-being, and way of life.
- Chinese economy was once an uncharted territory open for investment, technology export and other huge opportunities. By now, however, Chinese companies have become great rivals of Western ones. Once not more than suppliers of cheap consumer goods, now they pose great challenge to the economic systems of Western countries.
- With a better knowledge of China, cultural differences are seen more clearly than before. For example, Confucianism is highly respected as an ancient and remote philosophy; however, as soon as one meets a business partner, professional colleague or student who thinks and behaves in a 'Confucian' way, one has to make huge efforts to have a deeper understanding, and form fruitful cooperation.

#### CHINA'S IMAGE IN WESTERN MEDIA

When writing about the image and soft power of China, the question of Western press cannot be circumvented. In this regard, European and American media are quite similar, they usually select the same stories and share the same points of view on Chinese affairs. While the level of general knowledge on China in the West is on the rise, and hundreds of thousands of students, tourists, businessmen and diplomats have the opportunity to gain first-hand information on the country, public opinion is still largely shaped by the media. And Western media, unfortunately, generally does not strive to give an objective picture of China. It seems that both in choosing the news to be covered, and in presenting those news the press has strong bias.

One of the main methods of media to shape public opinion is agenda-setting, that is, choosing the events to report on and talk about. Technically, thousands of news are produced in China every day, and it is quite natural that Western televisions, newspapers and web pages do not cover all of them. They need to select the very few that will be presented to the audience, and this selection process is vital in the shaping of opinion about China. It seems that Western media has a tendency to choose news and stories that picture China in a negative light. Frequent topics are the following:

- problems with human rights
- internet censorship
- one-child policy
- Tibet issues
- good relations with pariah states
- military spending
- corruption
- environmental problems
- social inequalities
- food safety
- development failures, such as ghost cities
- poor working conditions
- economic problems

To be sure, these problems do exist, but according to my experience, many in the West *only* hear about these; the rate of negative coverage is disproportionately high. For example, everyone knows that internet is controlled in China, but the very fact that China went through an information revolution in the past decade, it has the largest number of internet users, micro-bloggers and online chat forums is simply overlooked. When a story is censored, it is widely reported in Western press; however, the tens of thousands of cases when internet users take active part in shaping the outcome of events, influence decisions and check those in power are found not interesting enough to cover. The few 'ghost cities', or large housing projects that ended up in failure (such as the one in Ordos) are favourites on online forums; but the millions of new apartment buildings built in the past twenty years are seldom mentioned. When the yearly GDP growth target is modified downward by a few tenth percent, it is highly publicized; when real growth exceeds expectations, it is only published in the business section of newspapers. Well-known critiques of China are frequently asked for comments on news, while those with a more balanced attitude are quoted much less frequently. Many positive news are simply not made known to European and American audiences.

This is, of course, not something unique to reporting on China. Plane crashes are always more interesting than the thousands of flights that arrive safely every day, and failures of governments are usually more spectacular than successes. Media in Western

countries tend to be very critical of their own government and social phenomena; however, in the case of domestic affairs, the audience has its own everyday experience and a wide choice of news sources to counterbalance sensational headlines. With regards to China, on the other hand, one has to rely on Western media coverage exclusively. This way, by the selection of stories, Western press shapes the notions on China very effectively.

Not only the selection, but also the presentation of news and stories on China is less than friendly. The application of double standard is quite frequent. Social inequalities are dealt with regularly, as if these were a specialty of China; ironically, Capitalist Westerners criticize China for not being Communist enough, that is, for failing to guarantee material equality for its citizens. Pollution in China is a fashionable topic, but it is hardly mentioned that at a similar level of development Western industrial countries were polluting the environment in an even larger scale. Working conditions in Chinese factories are harshly criticized, but the fact that cheap products made in these factories contribute to the maintenance of the high living standards in Western countries is easily forgotten. The growing military spending of the Chinese government is presented as a threat, even though the defence budget of the U.S. and the EU-27 is many times larger than that of China.

To sum it up, Western press conveys a rather negative image of China.<sup>7</sup> Of course, there are exceptions, but mainstream media does not strive to be as objective as possible. There are probably many reasons for this.

First of all, there obviously exist conflicts of interests between China and other countries on the political and economic field. The growth of Chinese power has a negative effect on the relative global positions of Western powers. While the U.S. is still Number 1 in many respects, Western European powers, such as France, Germany and the U.K. have seen their influence shrinking because of the rise of China. Chinese companies have become formidable rivals on many areas. Naturally, press reflects many negative feelings of power-holders who are, in many cases, the very owners of the media companies, or are closely interconnected to them. China, on the other hand, cannot really influence the content of foreign media.

Second, those in leading positions in media today typically belong to generations that were grown up in a time when China was considered an enemy. Now middle-aged

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<sup>7</sup> For typical negative opinions on China's soft power efforts, see for example FOLLATH 2010, KECK 2013.

men and women, they cannot get rid of their old notions on China; and many of their readers also expect 'China-bashing' from their press. Simply, not enough time has passed since the new, constructive and peaceful China appeared on the world scene. Many younger journalists are much more open, but their mainstream, as well as influential bloggers, are characterized by a deep mistrust and cynicism towards any government, especially towards authoritarian ones.

Third, Western media is deeply infused with the belief in the Western liberal interpretation of human rights and democracy. The proximity of a given country's political system to the idealized Western one is the main criterion in judging that country. Media workers consider themselves the main guards of freedoms in both their domestic environment and in the international field. It is clear that China's political model is not based on Western notions, so for most Western journalists its government will never be fully legitimate. Politicians, businessmen and other decision-makers must accept realities, but liberal media, as a vehicle of high ideas, is always much more critical.

Fourth, Western media seems to lack reliable information on China. Most journalists who report on China do not speak Chinese and do not trust Chinese official sources of information. The majority of opinion-makers do not have a training in Chinese history, culture and language, and interpret Chinese events in a way they interpret domestic ones. The uniqueness of China is simply not recognized, neither is there a need to hire more well-informed and well-trained correspondents.

#### **CHINESE APPROACHES TO SOFT POWER BUILDING**

Since the beginning of the new millennium, Chinese government have realized the importance of developing the soft power of the country. It became obvious that a negative image may slow down Chinese development and cause great harm to the country. Such negative effects are, among others, the following:

- The low prestige of the government hampers the realization of its interests in international politics, such as in the United Nations and other international organizations. It takes much more time and energy to achieve something for China than for a government that is more widely trusted.



- The prestige of Chinese products is relatively low, and the 'Made in China' label does not convey the notion of reliable quality. Chinese products sell well because of their low price, not because of being considered good products. This causes direct economic losses to the country. For example, practically no Chinese cars are sold in the EU.
- The disproportionate coverage on bad news in China affects Chinese tourism industry directly, and much less foreign tourists visit China than its great natural and cultural heritage would suggest.
- The international expansion of Chinese companies is impeded by the mistrust towards the country. In strategic areas, such as energy and info-communication, governments and public opinion are strongly against letting Chinese firms gain positions in internal markets.
- The effectiveness of Chinese companies that do invest abroad is affected by cultural differences and language barriers; communications is hampered by the lack of a common cultural ground. Chinese company culture is practically unknown outside the country.
- Lack of trust causes governments and companies to impose some limit on technology transfer and hi-tech export to China, slowing down the spread of the newest inventions.

Thus it is clear that the negative image of China causes direct losses to the country, and makes it harder to achieve its aims in the international community and economy. This does not stop the growth of its global influence, but the process is slower than it would be possible in a more favourable mental environment. Chinese leaders have realized this, and China has conducted a soft power offensive in the past decade. The literature on this offensive is quite extensive,<sup>8</sup> so it is useless to list all its elements. The establishment of Confucius Institutes, the hosting of the Olympic Games and the World Expo, and the providing of scholarship grants to tens of thousands of foreign students every year are just a few examples.

The efforts of the Chinese government to enhance the country's soft power were quite successful in many parts of the world. If we turn back to the Pew poll mentioned before, we can see that China's image is very positive in Sub-Saharan Africa (72% of

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, KURLANTZICK 2007.

respondents have favourable opinion on the country), it is rather positive in Latin America and the Asia-Pacific (58%), and not bad in the Middle East, where two traditional U.S. allies bring down the average (45%). This means that together with its hard power and economic presence, China's soft power has also grown in these regions to remarkable levels (see Table 11).

<b>U.S., China favourability (%)</b>			
	U.S.	China	Difference
<b>Middle East</b>			
Israel	83	38	+45
Turkey	21	27	-6
Lebanon	47	56	-9
Tunisia	42	63	-21
Jordan	14	40	-26
Egypt	16	45	-29
Palest. ter.	16	47	-31
MEDIAN	21	45	
<b>Asia</b>			
Japan	69	5	+64
Philippines	85	48	+37
S. Korea	78	46	+32
Australia	66	58	+8
China	40	--	--
Indonesia	61	70	-9
Malaysia	55	81	-26
Pakistan	11	81	-70
MEDIAN	64	58	
<b>Latin America</b>			
El Salvador	79	52	+27
Mexico	66	45	+21

Brazil	73	65	+8
Chile	68	62	+6
Bolivia	55	58	-3
Argentina	41	54	-13
Venezuela	53	71	-18
MEDIAN	66	58	
<b>Africa</b>			
S. Africa	72	48	+24
Ghana	83	67	+16
Uganda	73	59	+14
Senegal	81	77	+4
Kenya	81	78	+3
Nigeria	69	76	-7
MEDIAN	77	72	

**Table 11**

Source: [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org), 2013.

As we could see earlier (Table 2), results in Europe are worse than in other regions in the world. Given the strong economic ties, the friendly political relations, and the lack of direct security conflicts, one would expect that China's soft power offensive brings much more results; however, this is not the case. In other words, means of soft power enhancement that work well in other parts of the world do not seem to be very successful in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Why is it?

The Chinese interpretation of soft power is rather different from that in Western countries. Soft power—according to Western notions—is based on liking, respect, trust and admiration, and these cannot be 'manufactured' directly. In other words, soft power can only be built in a bottom-up fashion, through the active participation of artists, civil organizations, ordinary people, and other private actors. Their work can be supported and coordinated by governments, but cannot be strictly controlled or commanded by political leaders or bureaucrats. Chinese soft power efforts, on the other hand, are based on a top-bottom approach. Chinese soft power offensive is not one spontaneously

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, NYE 2012a.

conducted by private and civilian exertion, but a conscious process designed and controlled by Beijing.<sup>10</sup> In many countries, this is not a problem, but in Europe the active role of the state is frowned upon. In cultural affairs, participation of a government, especially of a government considered authoritarian, is frequently seen as sheer propaganda. And propaganda is something Europeans hold in abomination. For example, Confucius Institutes are very successful in promoting Chinese language, but their social impact in the West is limited, as many see them as organs of Chinese political propaganda, even if they have nothing to do with politics. The Beijing Olympics conveyed the image of a rich and technically developed state (hard power), but it did not convey the image of a country where people are happy to live and have the freedom to like or not like the sport event and the huge construction (and destruction) projects associated with it (soft power).

Another problem is the real or perceived state control over Chinese cultural actors. According to modern Western thinking, art works can only be valuable if they are produced in a free environment. This means that Chinese pieces of art sanctioned by the government are looked at with suspicions: how come those officials allowed or even supported the creation of that piece? Is this some kind of propaganda again? The fact that many Chinese artists are completely free to create is basically unknown. Actually, in the cases where censorship does exist, it does do harm to artistic creativity, as can be seen in the case of Chinese movies whose subject matter is limited. As a result of these limits, the creativity of Chinese artists in certain fields is restricted, which often leads to failure in international (and even in domestic) markets. In the same time, artists who succeed in selling themselves as 'independent' or 'dissident' ones, are hugely successful in the West, regardless of their artistic talent.

There are some contradictions in the policies followed by the Chinese government regarding soft power. For example, the most solid basis of soft power is the network of people-to-people contacts, but the fact that the usage of some online social networks, such as Facebook is restricted in China, undermines other efforts to build and maintain people-to-people relations. For example, tens of thousands of Chinese students who return from Western countries have difficulties in keeping contact with their old friends and classmates, which has a harmful effect on the image of China in the minds of future elites coming from the same universities. Another factor that undermines Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, NYE 2012b.

soft power efforts in the West is the rapid development of its military. While countries with a basically anti-American stance sympathize with the Chinese military built-up, U.S. allies look at it with deep suspicion. After all, China speaks of itself as a peaceful country that aims at creating a harmonious world, but in the same time it spend huge amounts of money on the modernization of its army. This is natural in terms of hard power, but harms Chinese soft power efforts. Its more and more assertive attitude towards its neighbours in the island disputes also contribute to the strengthening of the 'China Threat' syndrome.

The inexperience in Western ways of mass communication also contributes to the faults of Chinese soft power projection. Communication is one of the most culture-bound features of life, and one has to realize that methods that work in one country well will completely fail in other ones. According to my experience, many Chinese decision-makers have not realized the need to adapt to local circumstances in communication, public relations and marketing. Many events, publications, advertisement materials, public speeches, PR films aimed at foreign audience are simply translations or variations of those made for the Chinese public, and thus totally ineffective. For example, the presence of party leaders at cultural events or on the cover of magazines may enhance the prestige of that event or publication in China, but may be contra productive in a Western environment where political leaders are held in much less esteem.

According to Chinese tradition, the inner conflicts and problems of a community should not be exposed to the outside world. Conflicts are signs of weakness. In the case of the whole country, China tries to project the image of a unified state with a unified population, common aims and no debates inside. This image is much more idealized than it is believable to many foreigners. Actually, Westerners interpret the unified and harmonious picture Chinese presents of itself as unreal, which undermines the credibility of the Chinese leaders. For Westerners, plurality of views, open debates, conflicts of interests, and the sincere analysis of problems are not signs of weakness, but those of strength. Europeans are self-confident enough to talk about their problems openly; and the messages China wants to convey to them would go through much more effectively if they reflected the plurality of views inside China. Actually, open discussions and controversies do exist in China, but are not reflected in materials aimed at foreign audience. Changing this would greatly enhance the reputation of China as an open country.

## CONCLUSION

China has started from almost zero on the field of soft power thirty-five years ago, when the reform and opening policy was initiated. Since then, it accumulated huge resources of soft power, not independent from the spectacular growth of its hard power. The improvement of its image and reputation was partially a spontaneous process, a natural consequence of its economic development and incredible modernization. More recently, the Chinese government also made serious efforts to enhance the country's soft power. The Chinese soft power offensive was quite successful in territories traditionally neglected by Western powers, such as Sub-Saharan countries, or nations with a strong anti-American stance, such as many Muslim countries. Here, the presence of Western culture was less extensive and appealing, and China was welcomed as a counterweight of the U.S. The success of China also showed that not only liberal democracy, advocated by the West, can provide solution to basic problems; China proved that other political models can also bring modernization, development, and huge improvement in the livelihood of people. This is an encouragement for countries that do not wish to follow the West. Chinese cultural products also show that non-Western societies can produce values on a globally recognized level. Thus, Chinese soft power offensive can be deemed a great success in many developing countries; and as the process has just started, according to the trends, Chinese influence may soon overtake Western one in the hearts and minds of hundreds of millions of people in the world.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the enhancement of Chinese soft power has many obstacles in the Western world. This is quite natural in the case of the United States, China's main rival in world politics and economy. As China challenges American hegemony in many parts of the world, it is not a surprise that neither America's leaders, nor its population have developed a strong liking towards things Chinese. But the very presence of Chinese influence in the U.S. contributed to a deepening of interest in China. More young people study Chinese language and culture than ever, and Chinese cultural products are easily accessible for everyone, so while political views may not be favourable, the soft power of China in the U.S. cannot be neglected.

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<sup>11</sup> Moss 2013.

One would expect that the EU, a community of countries that have no direct political or security conflicts, territorial disputes or recent wars with Beijing, a community that profited greatly from the rapid development of China, holds more positive views on that country. This is, however, far from being the case. According to polls and other studies not quoted here, the image of China in Europe is less than perfect, and is the worst in the world. Only a small majority of people consider it as an enemy, but apart from Greece, there is not one EU member in the survey where more than one third of the population looks at China as a partner. Ironically, most of the people in China's largest trading partners in the EU does not consider China a partner (28% in Germany, 21% in France, and 18% in the U.K.). In Europe (including pro-China Russia), only an average of 43% hold a favourable view on China, while a relative majority of 47% have unfavourable notions. This shows that Europe, even when its self-confidence is shrinking because of the financial and debt crisis, is still not open to accept the values China may offer. At the same time, it is also clear that Chinese efforts to develop their soft power in Europe had some effect, but cannot be judged a complete success. Europe is not the most populous continent, and China's successes in other parts of the world may be said to make up for failures in the EU; however, EU is the largest economy in the world, and is China's largest trading partner, so building good relations with it is vital for China.

What can China do? There are some problems that simply cannot be overcome, such as the differences between European and Chinese political systems. Most Westerners believe in the universality of their ideals, and this is a serious obstacle in accepting Chinese values. However, more information on the Chinese political system, its historical roots, the way it is embedded in Chinese culture, its successes, and the risk of sudden change may somewhat soften European stance. This, however, cannot be done in the form of political propaganda, a thing Europeans are oversensitive to. Credibility of information is the key. There are quite reasonable arguments for the validity of the Chinese way, but these arguments are not presented in a convincing or acceptable form. Another key is the involvement of Chinese civil society and private actors in the country's soft power offensive. A state-sponsored exhibition of Chinese arts, for example, is much less effective in winning the hearts of Western audience than one organized jointly by Western and Chinese private galleries, without the participation of bureaucrats. When an independent Chinese artist or writer speaks of China, it is much

more credible than the words of politicians or diplomats; and even if that artist criticizes his or her country, the very fact that he or she can do that freely, and can still act as a representative of the People's Republic, promotes a very positive image of China. Less propaganda, more space for self-criticism; less politicians, more artists; less control, more freedom—these are other keys. State bureaucracy should surely be reduced in the field of cultural and people-to-people contacts.

China should not be afraid of letting its inner problems and debates be exposed to the world; a country with lively debate and a plurality of views is much more attractive in the West than one with an artificially preserved unity. China is not a monolith, and this is a strength, not a weakness. Ironically, the more critical voice Westerners hear from inside China, the less critical they will be. Finally, Chinese communicators should study, imitate and develop Western means of mass communication, understand how Western media works, and try to think with the heads of their Western audience. If they don't do that, their efforts might be contra productive.

Chinese soft power offensive has not started a long time ago, and it is natural that China, as a latecomer, faces many challenges in building its image. It has already achieved some success, but its influence is still limited. China has not lived up to its potential yet, at least in Europe. However, as we could see, young people look at China much more favourably than older ones, so the generation leading Europe in the future will be much more open. This gives us hope that Europe and China will build much more fruitful cooperation in the future, and their partnership will not only rest on economic interests, but on mutual trust, respect and admiration as well.

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