

Can Authoritarians “Do” Soft Power? The Case of China’s Confucius Institutes

Are the world’s leading authoritarian states overtaking the United States in the areas of culture, values and policies--what Nye calls “soft power”? To a growing legion of scholars, the answer to this question is a resounding “Yes”. Recently, in a series of articles, ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) several distinguished political scientists argue that “a new global competition in ‘soft power’ is underway,” warning that “only one side seems to be competing seriously.” Once believed democracy’s most effective foreign-policy lever, these experts contend, instead, that soft power has now become a crucial weapon for nations like China and Russia to expand their influence, undermine global support for democratic development, and “hollow-out” democracy through subversion of human-rights institutions. Indeed, many even claim that both of these nations now seem to be taking soft power even more seriously than the United States.

If true, the implications for American foreign policy are ominous: For the first time in a quarter century, American efforts to promote democratic development will face a major challenge from an alternative model that instead champions authoritarian solutions to the economic and political development of the world, solutions that are antithetical to long-held American principles. But are these dire warnings accurate? Have Russia and China found the soft-power formula to upend liberal democracy? Is the United States losing what we might call the “great soft-power game”? We would argue that the answer is no--at least not yet.

Without doubt both Russia and China are substantially increasing the *amount* of resources they are investing into their soft-power campaigns. What is less clear is the actual *impact* of these efforts, particularly in the regions which, ironically, are most highly targeted by Chinese and Russian soft-power efforts. How serious a challenge these efforts are depends not merely on the resources they consume but on the outcomes. States invest in soft-power strategies to increase their attractiveness so that other nations will willingly accept leadership. Thus, it is essential that we determine whether authoritarians’ soft-power efforts have actually improved their international image and made their leadership more palatable to the world.

Many contend that America’s greatest challenge comes from China. For that reason, we concentrate on the centerpiece of China’s soft-power strategy--its network of Confucius Institutes designed to educate the world about Chinese culture and promote the study of the Chinese language. In the interest of brevity, we leave out China’s use of economic aid, as well as its information-warfare activities as the latter do not fit squarely into the soft-power rubric. However, the unimpressive record of China’s Confucius Institutes indicate that serious doubts are warranted for other modalities of Chinese soft power as well.

Beijing’s “Confucius Institutes”

For more than a decade, Beijing has committed [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) to establish so-called [Confucius Institutes](#) and “classrooms” throughout the world as part of its global, [multi-billion-dollar soft power offensive](#). To date, China has already established nearly 500 institutes with the aim to add an additional 500 by 2020; they also have 1000 classrooms located world-wide. Officially, these institutes were founded to promote Chinese language, culture, and history, and [enable](#) China to “disseminate modern Chinese values and show the charm of Chinese culture to the world.” Celebrating the program’s tenth anniversary, China’s President Xi Jinping declared the institutes central to Beijing’s national security policy, [noting](#) that they were “a symbol of China’s unremitting efforts for world peace and international cooperation” and a

[means to link](#) “the Chinese people and people of other countries.” Li Changchun, the propaganda head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), [put it more bluntly](#), stating that the institutes were “an important part of China’s overseas propaganda set-up.” Beijing clearly hoped that the institutes would serve as a beachhead to spread the country’s political and cultural influence around the world

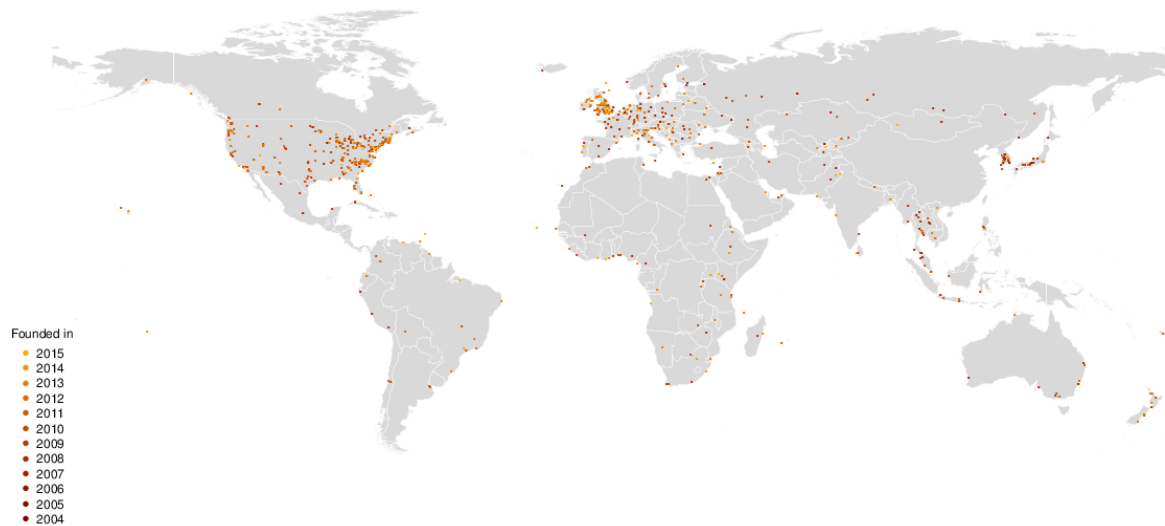


Figure A. Distribution of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms Across The Globe.

China’s efforts to influence foreign publics have raised red flags, particularly in the west, as [scholars](#) and [analysts](#) warn of the dangers of Beijing’s charm offensive. The “father” of soft power himself, Joseph Nye has [stated](#) that “the so-called ‘Beijing consensus’ on authoritarian government plus a market economy has become more popular than the previously dominant ‘Washington consensus’ of market economics with African and Latin American countries”.

Despite considerable hand-wringing in western capitals, the results of Beijing’s campaign to date are far from impressive. In the West, Confucius Institutes are often dismissed as poorly disguised agents of the Beijing government, spying on Chinese nationals, engaged in whitewashing Chinese history, and yielding to the prevailing concerns of the CCP. Based on the intensity of this opposition, we give Chinese soft power poor odds of generating favorable western public opinion. We conclude that Beijing’s campaign reveals more about their concerns for the ongoing impact of western soft power than their ability to employ soft power themselves.

China’s Experiment with ‘Directed Soft Power’

Authoritarian states feature top-down social and political control; civil society is either illegal or highly constrained. As a consequence, soft power campaigns undertaken by authoritarian powers such as China and Russia tend to be “directed” from the top-down by the government. By contrast, liberal democratic states with strong civil societies are more likely to give rise to *undirected* soft power, where cultural attractiveness arises not just through government actions, but through cultural and other products generated by the many social actors. “Hollywood” is the best example of undirected soft power. The case of China’s CIs illustrates why *directed* soft power, the primary tool of authoritarian states, is unlikely to achieve much success in the west. The very functioning of directed soft power is off-putting to most western and/or democratic publics--revealing the outsized influence of the government in the day-to-day lives of ordinary

citizens. It is for this very reason that authoritarian soft-power efforts are unlikely to achieve their goal of cultural attraction in the west. To the denizens of liberal societies, *directed* soft power often appears little different than government propaganda, and as such is unlikely to achieve its goals of seducing western, liberal societies, where overt displays of government power are more likely to be viewed with suspicion. Even the U.S. has suffered from this problem—as seen most recently with the negative reactions to the Bush administration’s public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. There, too, government efforts to generate more positive views of American society was seen as little more than propaganda.

In like manner, China’s Confucius Institutes have earned a reputation for serving as an arm of Communist Party censorship. For instance, even CIs in democratic countries prohibit any organizational activity that runs against the Chinese law including the promotion of human rights and democracy or independence of Taiwan and Tibet. CIs [suppress](#) all but the official mainland Chinese views on such controversial topics as Taiwan, Tibet, and the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. The CI Headquarters in Beijing, known as [Hanban](#), severely limits how the CIs may discuss potentially controversial topics--should such a discussion take place, Hanban makes sure it is fully in control. For example, in 2012, a CI at Sydney University organized a [lecture](#) by Chinese academics on Tibet, at which no Tibetan representatives were allowed to participate; indeed, the Tibetan perspective was simply ignored. Hanban also vetoes prospective employees who might have been members of organizations promoting democracy, human rights, or religious beliefs. This creates a backlash among the free-thinking individuals and groups in open societies. In July 2015, American Association of University Professors [castigated](#) CIs as “an arm of the Chinese state” aimed at threatening the independence and integrity of academic institutions in host countries”. On September 25, 2014 the University of Chicago [discontinued](#) its agreement with Hanban after 100 faculty members submitted a petition in favor of shutting down its CI. A number of other Western universities, including McMaster University (Toronto), Université de Sherbrooke in Quebec, University of Lyon, Pennsylvania State University and Stockholm University had already closed their CIs citing range of issues from human rights to academic freedom to security.

Moreover, Confucius Institutes have been plagued with internal issues that further corrode Chinese soft-power efforts. One of them is the shortage of language instructors proficient in local languages. This shortage compels local CIs to [recruit college graduates](#) regardless of their majors. Down the road, such under-qualified teaching staff undermines the academic quality of the instruction. In turn, the proliferation of poor language programs tarnishes the image of CIs and China. Another issue is the shortage of handbooks in local languages, which deters students who are not proficient in English from enrolling in the CI language programs. To alleviate this, CIs [purchase](#) local textbooks from third parties, which may create a rift between a message that CI Headquarters would like to transmit and those that are actually taught at the local level.

Chinese or Western Soft Power?

But are the Confucius Institutes really part of a “directed soft power” strategy? Following Nye, a soft power strategy would imply a certain placement and operation of the Confucius Institutes that we frankly do not see. Recall that Nye argued that a country is most likely to enjoy soft power in countries that share one’s culture and values. Therefore, a soft-power conscious Beijing should be more likely to place CIs in *neighboring countries*, where societies have substantial similarities with China and which already host considerable ethnic Chinese populations. The presence of a significant Chinese minority in these countries may serve as a strong conduit for

soft power transmission. Indeed, Nye observes that China has invested considerable resources to show that its rise is non-threatening to neighboring countries. Cultural outreach would further these efforts to show Beijing in a benign light to neighboring societies. Second, the CIs should be placed in China's *top trading partners*, which also likely have a strong interest in strengthening ties with China. This is because trade interdependence leads to more cooperation in other fields, generating the demand for Chinese language in the host country and promoting additional intercultural communication. Third, CIs should be located in areas with *large Chinese populations*. Some even suggest that ethnic Chinese living abroad have become vital to Beijing's global charm offensive. For example, Beijing has buttressed relations with ethnic Chinese organizations around the globe—groups ranging from cultural associations to clan organizations to business chambers—and directly called on these diaspora Chinese to help boost relations between China and the developing world. Fourth, China should get more soft power bang for its buck in *non-democratic countries* whose populations are likely to feel marginalized by existing international system and US foreign policies and therefore open to following China's lead as an alternative global leader. This marginalization may allow Beijing to establish itself as a role model of economic success in such host countries. Finally, where CIs have been established in dissimilar host societies (such as western democracies) we should expect CIs to operate in ways that are consistent with the host country's values--in order to maximize its cultural appeal, following Nye's prescription.

Our work suggests that the establishment of Confucius Institutes may be a better reflection of *western soft power* than nascent Chinese soft power. Although it is true that China has placed a greater number of CIs in its most important trading partners, this is not universally the case; major powers such as Japan and India, and middle powers like South Korea appear to be under-targeted, due to complicated inter-state relations. Instead, the CIs tend to be concentrated in rich countries with open societies that have universities with global reputations. Altogether, the number of Confucius institutes and classrooms in a given country can be to a large extent be predicted based on the country's population size, GDP per capita, and number of well-ranked universities (CIs are disproportionately located in large, wealthy and *democratic* societies). Even accounting for these four factors, the UK and US host still many more CIs than what this model would predict, and countries such as Japan and India fewer--despite their importance in China's neighborhood. This indicates that China may be "chasing prestige" by establishing CIs in western democracies with high levels of influence, in cooperation with highly ranked universities such as the Columbia University, Stanford University and the University of New York. This supports the notion that Beijing is strongly influenced by *western* (particularly American and British) soft power in making its own bid for influence.

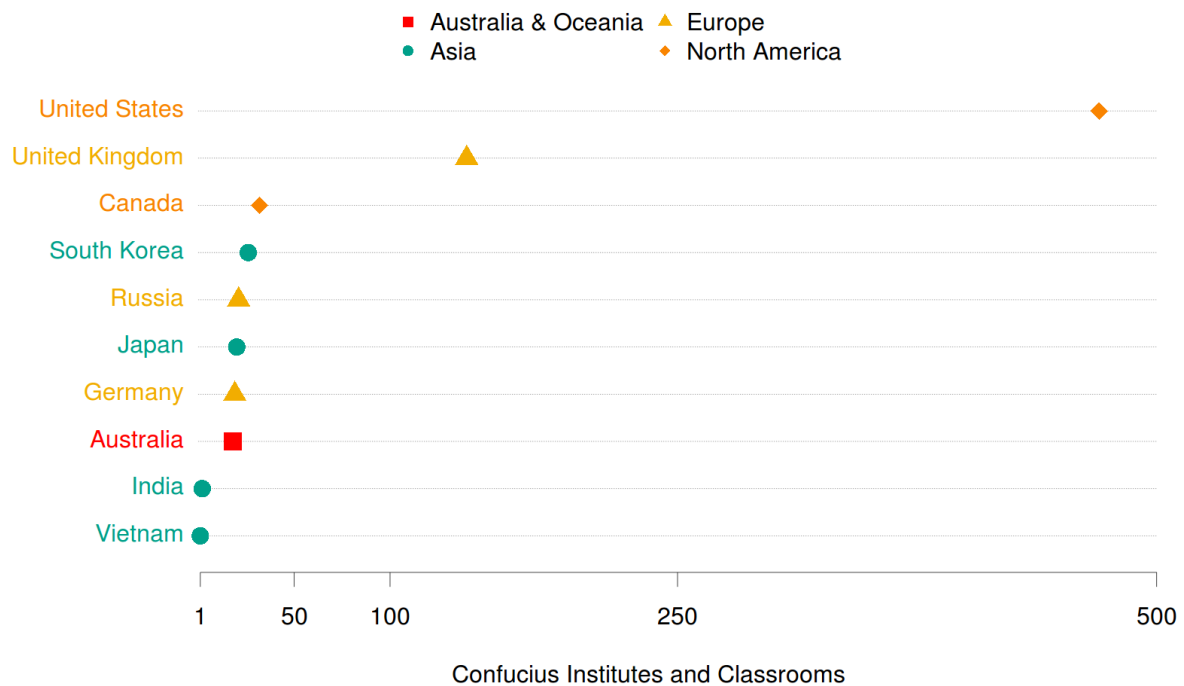


Figure C: Numbers of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in selected countries.

In sum, not only are the targets of China’s soft power strategy generally unreceptive to China, in light of the negative responses both at the university level and in public opinion, but Beijing’s “directed soft power”—associated as it is with authoritarian governance—is poorly designed to influence western populations. If true, this means that CIs, and probably other instruments of Chinese soft power, are only likely to improve China’s image in societies that are already predisposed to viewing China in a positive light—which should lead us to question whether these institutes can do what they aim to do, win over the hearts of publics that are not already won.

China’s Crumbling Image Abroad

China’s soft power campaign appears to have largely failed in its aims to promote more favorable views of the country abroad. A recent BBC opinion poll illustrates that global opinion on China has either remained constant or has actually plunged. In 2005, less than a third of the world public viewed China negatively; today that figure is nearly half. After more than a decade, Confucius Institutes have also failed to move public opinion in China’s favor. Although the Chinese government has located a disproportionate number of CIs in US and the UK (nearly half of the total number of CIs), these two countries registered a significant *drop* in positive public opinion toward China. A 2013 Pew Research Center poll [shows](#) that there has not been much improvement in views of China among the top CI hosts between 2007 and 2014. In the US and UK, moreover, favorable views toward China declined by 10-15 points in just the last two years. Meanwhile, less than 30% of Germans have a positive opinion of China’s influence, while Japanese antipathy towards China has skyrocketed by a factor of three since 2011. While it may be argued that the CIs have mitigated even worse views of the country in light of China’s militarization of the South China Sea, US trade deficit, and cyber-attacks during this time, the ham handed operations of these institutes in the west (see above) are unlikely to have done more than reinforce negative views of China.

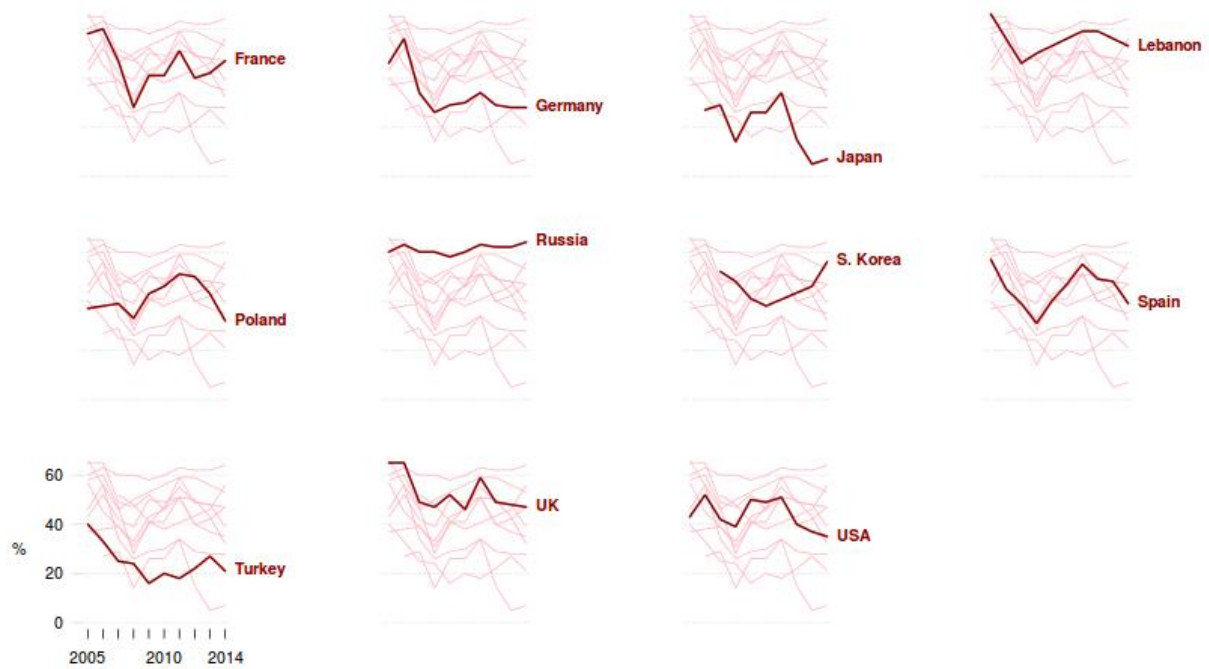


Figure Y. Percentage of Positive Views of China, Pew Research Poll (2005-2014)

Conclusion

There is an old adage--“quantity has a quality all of its own.” This may hold well when counting divisions on the battlefield but does not when it comes to soft power where outcomes depend much less on resources committed. China has invested heavily in a “charm offensive” designed to improve its global image and promote Chinese leadership throughout the world community. The centerpiece of its strategy is the Confucius Institute network, with 500 branches distributed across all continents. Yet, despite the scope and ambition of the project the evidence suggests that their impact merely serves to reinforce pre-existing foreign opinions about China’s authoritarian nature. This may be attractive to some Third-World elites but are certainly not to the Western audiences.

If the institutes are to improve China’s image, they will need to reach out to local audiences and practice an openness for new ideas and cultural experiences, similar to how America has built its soft power for over a century. But can they? Will the Chinese leadership be willing to jettison a long tradition of social and political authoritarianism in order to improve its image around the world, particularly in the West? Can Beijing endow the CIs with sufficient independence from government-sanctioned ideology? Or instead, will the CI’s remain a clumsy and unsuccessful imitation of Western soft power that only promotes negative Western impressions rather than improving China’s global image.