

# Expanding the International Role of China's Educational Soft Power

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## Abstract

The objectives of this research are as follows: (1) to study China's concept of using soft power to expand its role in international education; (2) to study the mechanisms and operational models used to expand China's role in international education; and (3) to study the successful outcomes and negative impact of China's expansion in this field. This is a qualitative research study that utilizes Joseph S. Nye's concept of soft power in conjunction with document analysis. The research findings indicate that China's expansion in international education is a tool for using China's soft power. The mechanisms include establishing branches of the Confucius Institute, recruiting volunteer teachers, setting standards for Chinese language proficiency tests, promoting academic personnel exchange, and providing scholarships for international students. Additionally, China has raised the quality of its domestic educational institutions to meet international standards. China has also established an agency tasked with promoting Chinese language and culture at the international level, namely the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC), previously known as Hanban. The success of these efforts is evidenced by the number of Confucius Institute branches and classrooms, volunteer teachers, and international students receiving scholarships to study in China. These efforts have resulted in an improved image of China and a reduction in negative perceptions towards China from abroad.

**Keywords:** Education, Soft power, China's influence, Confucius institute, Chinese language

## Introduction

Amidst global competition and power struggles, soft power has become an important tool for many countries to build relationships with each other and demonstrate their ability to persuade without the use of force. China's use of soft power in the realm of education began to appear unrealized even before China began diplomatic relations with foreign countries. Chinese language and culture have been the main tools utilized. Kaewbut (2019) observed that Chinese language is important because it is a language with a long history. The Chinese-

speaking diaspora has spread wide and far around the globe. Chinese (comprising its major dialects) is one of the six languages adopted by the United Nations (UN) as a primary language and is associated with the growth of China's economy. Therefore, language and culture are important resources that China uses as a means of expanding its influence. Suvakunta (2017) has stated that China's influence has increased in ASEAN due to China's public diplomacy efforts, which include the use of soft power. One way in which China has implemented these efforts is through the dissemination of the Chinese language and culture. This is consistent with the study by Fan et al. (2021) **which** describes the Chinese concept of exporting language and culture. This concept began to emerge after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. As China began to open up to the outside world in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the government began to recognize the importance and necessity of expanding the use of Chinese. One strategy was to promote Chinese as a diplomatic medium. Accordingly, an agency named "Hanban" was established to promote Chinese language and culture at the international level. The government also pushed for the standardization of Chinese language and culture by establishing various criteria such as the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), and assuring the qualifications of instructors of Chinese as a foreign language, among other mechanisms. China views that expanding its role in education can create a new image for the country, and promote China as a cultural hub in the Asia-Pacific region.

From what has been mentioned, it can be seen that language and culture are important resources for China in conducting public diplomacy. The use of language and culture as a medium to expand China's role and influence is a topic that has been widely discussed. However, previous studies on China's soft power in the educational dimension mostly focus on Confucius Institutes. Studies that discuss the concept, management mechanisms, as well as the format of China's soft power export in the educational dimension are still limited, especially in the context of Thailand. Despite this, in reality, China's activities in many forms still have an influence on both China as the sender of soft power and the recipient countries as the receivers. Moreover, recently, China has adjusted its mechanisms and relocated some relevant agencies, which may have significant implications for China's image adjustment.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are as follows: (1) to study China's concept of using soft power in the international dimension of education; (2) to study the mechanisms and models of China's educational role expansion at the international level; and (3) to study the success of China, including the negative impact of using soft power in the dimension of education. The findings should help provide a clearer understanding of China's use of soft power in education.

### **Research methods**

This research used qualitative methods. The relevant information was gathered from review of the related literatures, news items, research reports, statistics, academic articles in printed and online journals, as well as other related documents in Thai, Chinese, and English, and synthesized into a descriptive discussion.

## **Conceptual framework and theoretical basis of the research**

### **Concept of soft power**

This research article uses Joseph S. Nye's concept of 'soft power' in the analysis. Nye defines soft power as the ability to cause others to act or consent voluntarily in a desired direction, totally without coercion. Soft power can be viewed as an exercise of authority through subtlety, i.e., without the use of overt pressure. The resources of soft power can be divided into three dimensions: (1) Culture: Nye observes that culture is an important part of soft power because culture is the foundation of values and ideal practices of a society (Prasertsuk, 2016). If the culture of one country is in line with the interests and values of another country, there will be more opportunities for the culture of that country to become the soft power. The avenues for the culture of one country to permeate in other countries are many and varied. They may consist of a trade, visits, friendly communication, and mutual exchange (Kruarattikan, 2008). (2) Values: Nye cites examples of a country's values as achievements and initiatives that enhance its image and charm, especially political values, e.g., democracy and human rights. (3) Public diplomacy: Nye proposed that an important tool for the realization of soft power is public diplomacy, which means interactions that do not target foreign governments per se. Rather, this type of diplomacy targets individuals and non-governmental organizations in other countries. In addition to creating a positive image for their own country, this dimension of soft power aims to create a constructive atmosphere in the long-term to support foreign policies that will follow in the future (Kruarattikan, 2008). Public diplomacy can take many forms: (1) Daily communication, such as press conferences; (2) Strategic communication, such as symbolic campaigns to promote an image; and (3) Developing sustainable relationships at the people level, such as scholarships, personnel exchange, etc., (Sukontasap, 2018).

### **Educational development in China**

Among countries in the world, China has one of the oldest documented histories of developing its formal education system. In the past, education in China was considered a matter of the elite, restricted to the family of nobles. Later, of course, education became more widespread, and gradually permeated all regions of the country (Fanchian, 2020). Early on, China's leaders recognized that education of the population was a key mechanism to build solidarity and strength within the country. Over time, this concept evolved to view education as a means to spread Chinese culture outside its borders.

In the initial decades after the founding of the PRC in 1949, under Mao Zedong, China faced many domestic upheavals. Mao's regime imposed draconian policies such as the "Great Leap Forward", the "Four Pests Campaign", etc., which were largely unsuccessful. The fledgling industrial sector of the PRC failed to thrive because of the lack of technological knowledge. As a result, Mao decided to build the capacity of the population by focusing on primary school students and teacher education to eradicate illiteracy and prepare the next generation of the labor force. However, a total reversal of this education-for-all policy seemed

to occur in 1966, when Mao launched the ‘Great Cultural Revolution,’ overthrowing all wisdom attached to the old education system. Many of the intellectual and historic artifacts and records were destroyed. As a result, this generation of Chinese had become rootless, with no tangible culture to pass on to the next generation, as had been done by the Chinese nobility in the pre-PRC era (Srisangnam, 2019). The Cultural Revolution had the effect of abruptly halting any progress in educational reform. After Mao’s death in 1976, the administration of Deng Xiaoping reversed this war on apolitical education, adopted the Four Modernizations policy, and opened up the country in 1978. After that, the socio-economic situation in China began to improve, both in terms of household income and people’s well-being. Deng thought that the key to China’s successful modernization was science and technology, and which requires the development of education as the foundation. Without that foundation, there could be no indigenous modernization of China. This policy cleared the way for a renaissance of education in China (Chokkunanantakul & Kovitsomboon, 2017). Deng’s policy, in a nutshell was that *“Education should be directed towards modernity to keep pace with the world and the future.”* (Chobsanchon, 2016, p. 7). In addition to the focus on science and technology, the educational reform policy of 1998 extended the compulsory education from 9 to 12 years, and required educational institutions to provide courses in morality too. The vision was to create a generation of patriotic citizens who embodied the ideal ethics and morality, combined with historical and ethnic ties to the Golden Age of China during the 400-year Han Dynasty. During this time, China encouraged the private sector to increase investment in the establishment of more educational institutions as well (Chokkunanantakul & Kovitsomboon, 2017). Such an educational reform policy brings great development to the Chinese education system.

## **Results of the research**

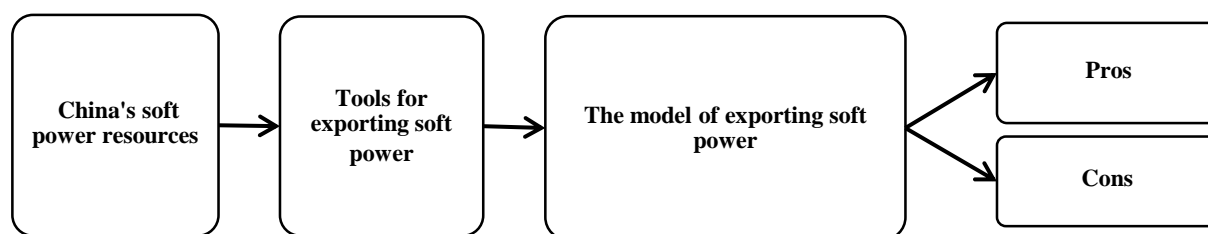
### **The concept of China’s use of soft power in the dimension of education**

While many scholars interpret soft power according to Nye’s ideas, many Chinese scholars see it differently. For example, they believe that the core of soft power is culture (Huning, 1993), which refers to ancient Chinese culture that embodies harmony and is deeply rooted in the values and operations of the nation. They also emphasize the important role of media and communication abilities (Mingjiang, 2008). However, the scope of soft power in Chinese academia is still being debated and there is no clear conclusion.

In the late 1990s, there was an increasing interest in soft power in China due to the country’s rapid economic growth, which led to greater confidence in its global status. The global reaction to the events in Tiananmen in 1989 made China realize the importance of building relationships with neighboring countries, and that relying solely on ‘hard power’ was not enough to achieve its various goals. The first objective of China’s use of soft power was to respond to the myth of the Chinese threat, in order to create a more informed understanding among the international community in order to gain more favorable global recognition and support. From reviewing documents, it was found that China began to use Soft Power seriously since around 2000 (Prasertsuk, 2016, p. 15), with the aim of creating stability with every

country, especially neighboring countries, to correct negative attitudes and perceptions that have arisen. President Hu Jintao spoke at the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007, emphasizing the importance of developing and promoting culture as a part of Soft Power to stimulate the unity and creativity of the people, respond to the cultural needs of the people, and promote the country's development. Since then, Soft Power has been widely discussed and there have been many related academic works. In 2014, President Xi Jinping announced that he would enhance cultural Soft Power by promoting Chinese culture and values, seeing that China needed to improve its ability to communicate with the international community and involving media, organizations, and individuals in this role (Xinhua News, 2004). Additionally, President Xi Jinping acknowledged that culture is a part of the ability to compete on the world stage (Prasertsuk, 2016, p. 40). Under the rule of Xi Jinping, Soft Power has been used more and more, particularly in the dimension of education.

The framework for this study can be represented as in the schematic below by fusing the idea of soft power theory with Chinese ideology.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework of the Study

### **Mechanisms of expanding the role of China in education internationally**

Any discussion of the evolution of the role of education in China must consider 'the Ministry of Education (MOE)', which is responsible for supervising and implementing legislative policy and plans in the sphere of education. One of the missions of China's MOE is to align the development of the Chinese education system so that it is consistent and comprehensive throughout the country, and adheres to national policy. The educational administrative system of China is divided into two parts: (1) Central Education Administration, whereby the National People's Congress is responsible for formulating education strategies; and (2) Provincial Education Administration, which devolves authority for education affairs to the sub-national and municipal levels of the country. Provincial administrative agencies can make decisions and implement certain matters by themselves without having to obtain approval from the central authorities, which is also a result of Deng's reform and opening up the country policy.

Education in China can be classified into the following four levels: (1) 12-year basic education; (2) Vocational education; (3) Tertiary education; and (4) Adult education (Chobsanchon, 2016, p. 7).

In addition to managing education within the country, the MOE also plays an important role in expanding China's educational activities internationally. The MOE is directly responsible for attracting foreigners to study in China, and provides scholarships to students from developing countries to pursue higher education in China. The MOE facilitates student visas and has increased remuneration of instructors to attract top scholars from the West to teach in Chinese educational institutions. This is part of a larger plan to upgrade Chinese universities so that they meet or even exceed international standards (Prasertsuk, 2016, p. 24).

Another agency that plays an important role is 'The Office of Chinese Language Council International (TOCLCI)' or commonly known as 'Hanban.'<sup>1</sup> This is a government agency under the MOE that plays an active role in carrying out Chinese educational activities through the export of language and culture. Founded in 1987, Hanban is responsible for supporting and promoting the teaching and learning of Chinese abroad by producing quality teachers and sending teachers to work in various countries. Hanban also supports the preparation of the Chinese Proficiency Test (covering the exams called HSK HSKK<sup>2</sup> YCT<sup>3</sup> BCT<sup>4</sup> MCT<sup>5</sup>). Hanban provides training and production of Chinese teaching materials. In addition, Hanban has the main task of establishing branches of the Confucius Institute (CI) abroad. Hence, Hanban has another overlapping role, namely being de facto 'Confucius Institute Headquarters'.

However, in 2020, two significant changes were made in the implementation mechanism for expanding China's role in education. First of all, the Hanban (i.e., Confucius Institute Headquarters) was renamed the 'Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC)'<sup>6</sup>. CLEC is still under the jurisdiction of the Chinese MOE which published a ministerial announcement dated June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020: *"...In order to enhance the language cooperation operations, Hanban and the head office of the Confucius Institute was renamed as the Center for Language Cooperation and Exchange, and is no longer named 'Hanban' according to the resolution of the Ministry of Education committee..."*. Accordingly, branches of Confucius Institute around the world were placed under the administrative authority of the 'Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF)', a newly established foundation under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, was established to unify cooperation of the 27 related entities involved in state-supported education. The purview of CIEF covers universities, museums, research centers, the private sector, and civil society.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally called the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL)

<sup>2</sup> HSKK, the Chinese Proficiency Speaking Test is a separate test from the HSK written test, and is divided into beginner, intermediate and advanced levels.

<sup>3</sup> YCT or Youth Chinese Test, is a proficiency test of Mandarin Chinese for youth under 15 years old. test of knowledge

<sup>4</sup> BCT or Business Chinese Test is a Chinese language proficiency test for foreigners

<sup>5</sup> MCT or Medical Chinese Test It is a Chinese language proficiency test for people in the medical profession

<sup>6</sup> In Chinese: 中外语言交流合作中心

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Although Hanban has been renamed, its operating model is still not much different from the original mission. The main purview of CIEF is to support the implementation of international Chinese language teaching through branches of the Confucius Institute, and advocate for personnel exchange programs to improve international understanding, multiculturalism, and create a shared future for mankind. Yang Wei, the president of CIEF, has described its mission and vision as follows:

*“...Chinese is one of the oldest languages in the world, and is a valuable heritage that the Chinese people should be proud of. At present, China is steadfastly pursuing cooperation and exchange with the world, and the popularity of learning Chinese at the international level is increasing. Thus, now is a great opportunity for China to develop Chinese language teaching and instruction assistance for interested countries and counterpart agencies. That is our most important mission...”* (CIEF, n.d.)

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that the MOE of China is currently the main mechanism for carrying out Chinese educational activities at the international level. This involves a collaboration between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Civil Affairs. In the past, under the aegis of the MOE, Hanban was an organization that played an important role in promoting the study and spreading Chinese culture abroad. However, more recently, China has adjusted its operating mechanism. As noted, Hanban was renamed to the CLEC, and the Confucius Institute (formerly affiliated with Hanban) is now under the supervision of the CIEF, whose main mission is to promote the activities of the Confucius Institute, organize personnel exchange, and foster better understanding and favorable international relations with China. The mission of Confucius Institute now consists of three main activities: (1) promoting the teaching of Chinese language abroad; (2) supporting Chinese teachers abroad; and (3) promoting Chinese cultural propagation activities overseas. All of these mechanisms are under the control of the State Council.

### **Models of expanding the role of China in education internationally**

A review of related documents shows clearly that China has expanded its role and influence through public diplomacy by using education as a tool. Chinese language and culture were initially the main resources, and later expanded to focus on Chinese abroad and international students. The essence of the operating model can be described as follows:

#### **(1) Establishment of overseas branches of the Confucius Institute**

China attaches great importance to the promotion of Chinese language teaching abroad. It views that teaching Chinese will help learners gain a deeper understanding of China and reduce negative prejudice and bias against China. As part of this effort, China has established a formal policy to propagate the use of Chinese language and culture in order to be the same standard around the world. Initially, those standards were defined by the Confucius Institute.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The reason why the Institute was named after Confucius is because Confucius is considered the paragon of wisdom in historic China. He is known globally as a profound thinker and philosopher whose principles and teachings have spread around the world over the 2,500 years since his death.

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Established in 2004 under the supervision of the MOE and Hanban at that time, the Confucius Institute was portrayed as a non-profit organization promoting Chinese language instruction. Confucius Institute served as a mechanism to forge relationships and promote language and cultural exchange, while disseminating Chinese wisdom and traditions (Svasti, 2015). Over time, branches of the Confucius Institute were set up around the world to teach Chinese and spread Chinese culture to tens of millions of foreigners. In this way, the Confucius Institute and its affiliates played a leading role in teaching Chinese at an international level and fostering the exchange of the humanities between China and the world. That said, the implicit aim of the Confucius Institute was to improve the image of China wherever anti-Sino sentiment existed.

As of 2021, there were 550 branches of the Confucius Institute, and 1,172 Confucius Classrooms in 162 countries in all populated regions of the world. Now overseen by CIEF, the Confucius Institute mission consists of three main activities: (1) Promoting the teaching of Chinese abroad; (2) Supporting Chinese language teachers abroad; and (3) Supporting activities to spread Chinese culture internationally. Since the establishment of the Confucius Institute just over ten years ago, the branches of the Confucius Institute have spread throughout the world and are playing an important role in propagating Chinese language and culture.

#### (2) Establishment of the Chinese Volunteer Teacher Program

The Chinese Volunteer Teacher Program originated from the rapid rise in demand for learning Chinese around the world. Initially, there was a shortage of Chinese language teachers to meet this demand. Accordingly, the MOE assigned Hanban to address this challenge by recruiting, training, and sending volunteers to teach Chinese abroad under a cooperative program between the MOE and partner countries. The Program has been in operation since 2004 and, at present, this Chinese Volunteer Teacher Program has deployed volunteers to teach Chinese in many countries upon request.

#### (3) Upgrading institutions of higher learning within China

Due to the rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the increase in its resource surplus, in 1994 China initiated the ‘Project 211’. This entailed a massive government investment to raise the quality of domestic education, scientific research, and education management efficiency. The Project provides a base for imparting high-level skills for people who are in a position to advance China’s economic and social development. In 1998, during the Jiang Zemin Era, China wanted to lay the foundation for its leading domestic universities to become world-class institutions. The MOE announced ‘Project 985’ to provide funding to build research centers, upgrade university facilities, and hold international conferences to attract world-renowned faculty and scholars. Project 985 has 39 universities registered with the program, most of which are ranked among the top 500 institutions of higher learning in the world.<sup>8</sup> In September 2017, the ‘Double First Class University Plan’ was announced. This plan replaces Projects 211 and 985, with the similar aim to elevate Chinese universities into world-class institutions by 2050.

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<sup>8</sup> Ranking of universities is from *Times Higher Education 2019-2020*

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#### (4) Establishing international standards for Chinese language proficiency testing

Now that teaching Chinese at the international level has become mainstream, China has set up a Chinese language proficiency test called ‘HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi)’. HSK is a Chinese proficiency test for foreigners to measure their ability to apply the Chinese language in their daily lives, academic study, and vocation. The HSK is divided into Levels 1–6, and the test is administered annually, both in China and abroad. The concept of a Chinese language proficiency test was first officially implemented in China and abroad in 1991 (Kaewbut, 2018, p. 309). Currently, the HSK is primarily a language proficiency test, and it is internationally recognized alongside other comparable exams such as TOEFL, IELTS, DELF, JLPT, etc. In addition to measuring a person’s proficiency in Chinese, the HSK is a gateway for international students wishing to study at various levels in China and is an important rite of passage for a career that requires Chinese language fluency.

#### (5) Promotion of student and faculty exchange

In 2016, the MOE announced a policy to introduce themes to inspire patriotism in the Chinese education system. One of the approaches was to create a network between Chinese students and faculty living abroad so that scholars would complete their studies and return to China to help develop the homeland. Some referred to these Chinese youth studying abroad as China’s “little ambassadors”. (Bislev, 2017)

According to the MOE, Chinese students studying abroad are the most numerous of any nationality in the world. As the income, livelihood, and quality of life of the Chinese people continued to improve in the new millennium, more middle-class Chinese saw the emerging possibility of higher education of their children. Even if Chinese youth could not pass the highly selective national entrance exam for the most prestigious universities, they could at least aspire to a degree from a university abroad. As a result, the number of Chinese students abroad has been increasing every year (DITP, 2021).<sup>9</sup> For example, in 2019, 703,500 Chinese students went to study abroad, most of whom enrolled in universities in Europe and North America. Within the ASEAN region, the top three destinations for Chinese students are Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (in order). The data also show that a significant number of Chinese students go for post-secondary education in countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

While more Chinese students have been pursuing higher education abroad, more of these students are also returning to China because of the rapid growth of the economy and expanding opportunity. As a result, many large companies offer high remuneration comparable to multi-national companies. In addition, returning to the homeland also gives this new generation of Chinese people the opportunity to start their own business or start-up venture. According to the MOE, in 2019, there were 580,300 Chinese students who graduated and returned to China. If looking at the period from 1978 to 2019, a cumulative total of 6,560,000 Chinese students went abroad to study. Of this number, 4,904,400 graduated, and 4,231,700 of the graduates returned home. This number accounts for an impressive 86 percent return rate of

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<sup>9</sup> Last data since before the Covid-19 pandemic

Chinese students abroad. (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2020) This trend has just taken place under Xi Jinping's provision of pursuing Chinese students who study abroad to come back to China.

The promotion of Chinese student exchange is not only carried out by encouraging Chinese students to leave the country for a higher degree. In 2018, China hosted 492,185 international students from 196 countries and territories around the world. These exchange students are distributed across 31 provinces in China and over 1,000 educational institutions. Nearly 60 percent of these foreign students in China are from countries in Asia, followed by Africa, Europe, North America, and Oceania. If considering by country, Korea accounts for the largest number of students in China, followed by Thailand, Pakistan, India, and the USA (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2019). The top ten Chinese cities/provinces with the highest concentration of international students are Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Liaoning, Tianjin, Guangdong, Hubei, Yunnan, and Shandong. In 2018, Beijing and Shanghai had the largest number of international students, with 81,000 and 62,000, respectively (Jantranukul, 2020).

#### (6) Educational scholarships for international students to study in China

China's government believes that the increasing number of international students enrolled in Chinese institutions is a by-product of promoting Chinese language teaching abroad. In that sense, Chinese language is a key element of China's soft power. Over the past decade, China has increased the number of full scholarships for qualified foreign students. Even if these students do not remain in China after graduation, at least it is expected that the students will have gained a more balanced understanding of China, and that should contribute to increased bi-lateral trade, investment, and joint ventures going forward.

In 2021, China offered an array of scholarships for international students such as the following: China Scholarship Council (CSC); Chinese Provincial Government Scholarships (CPGS); Confucius Institute Scholarship (CIS); Alliance of International Science Organizations (ANSO); Belt and Road Scholarships (RBS); and the Chinese Government Scholarship-Silk Road Scholarship Program (CGS-SRSP). Each scholarship program has different conditions or limitations. For example, the CIS only applies to language-related studies. The ANSO scholarships only apply to the scientific fields, with three educational institutions to choose from. The CPGS scholarships are not limited to an academic field, but only pay part of the cost. However, all Chinese scholarships are grants (not loans), and those receiving full rides bear no out-of-pocket costs at all throughout their period of study. The number of scholarships that China allocates to international students each year is large and growing. There are scholarships for short-term language studies, and degree programs cover bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Students can choose a field of study and university according to their needs. The largest and most popular scholarships are the CGS and CIS, both of which cover the cost of lodging, health insurance, and a stipend, in addition to tuition, fees and academic supplies. In 2019, 40,600 CGS grants were awarded to students from 182 countries.

### **Success of China's use of soft power in education**

China's expansion in the field of international education has consistently benefited the country by broadening its influence through the promotion of the Chinese language and culture globally. Each strategy for this expansion has clear guidelines and practices. For example, the Confucius Institute is an educational institution that does not seek profit, and has a mission to organize activities promoting Chinese culture and incorporating Chinese ideas into various activities. The Volunteer Teacher Program has a mission to promote Chinese language learning, aiming to make Chinese a significant global medium of communication. The majority of volunteer teachers are Chinese citizens who use teaching materials produced by the Chinese government. The Chinese government also provides scholarships to international students to study in China, and this program serves two purposes: To transmit Chinese knowledge and ideas internationally; and to allow international students to experience life in China and truly immerse themselves in Chinese society. As a result, these students may develop a more positive attitude towards China.

From the evidence presented and explained above, when analyzed together with the concept of soft power, it becomes clear without a doubt that China's approach to conducting business is a smooth expansion of influence through the use of soft power. The Chinese language and culture are resources that are used to connect China with the international community through various educational activities. This diplomatic approach reflects China's '*peaceful rise*' concept very well and is an effective form of public diplomacy. The results of such diplomatic efforts have led to an improved image of China in the eyes of other countries. Lhapeerakul & Saeitio's (2021) article titled "The Transitional of China's Soft Power to Sharp Power Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" states that the expansion of China's language and cultural influence not only allows China to expand its influence abroad quickly, but also helps to improve China's image. This is consistent with the research of Bislev (2017) who observed that the idea of promoting student and staff exchange reflects that China is increasingly interested in public diplomacy through various non-governmental channels. Such operations can help create a positive image and reduce prejudice towards China. Bislev argues that, although students are part of China's soft power, the receiving countries usually benefit more. This is consistent with the work of Jiracheewewong et al. (2020), who studied China's soft power through scholarship programs for international students. They found that Chinese government scholarship recipients do not prioritize creating soft power through education support. In addition, the study shows that Chinese government scholarship recipients have a more positive attitude towards China.

### **Concerns about China's soft power as a threat**

However, from another perspective, despite the success of China's operations in many countries, some of these activities have also created concerns for many parties regarding other implications that may be integrated with China's expansion of its role in education in recent years. Reports have shown that Confucius Institutes in many countries have been closed or

reduced in numbers because their activities and movements were not clear and were suspected to have political motivations. According to Eleanor's article "China's Big Bet on Soft Power", the dissemination of Chinese culture through Confucius Institutes, scholarships for foreign students, and support for teaching media has created dissatisfaction among some people in those countries (Eleanor, 2018), as Lhapeerakul & Saeiteo (2021) also observed. Although they stated in the article that promoting language and culture through the establishment of Confucius Institutes is a good diplomatic approach that benefits China's influence expansion, it may also lead to concerns and perceived threats by many host countries.

An article from Indo-Pacific Defense Forum also mentioned that China's Confucius Institutes, which are distributed worldwide, have characteristics of persuasive advertising and have significant impacts on a country's stability. They stated that the Confucius Institutes established along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) geography are part of the strategy to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa together. Furthermore, the article pointed out that the establishment of Confucius Institutes is another way for China to infiltrate and expand its influence into other countries. China uses these branches as a channel to collect news from various universities, as well as insights into research and technology. The Institutes also serve as a means of constraining academic freedom on sensitive issues in China.

China responded to these concerns by stating that the establishment of Confucius Institutes in foreign countries was a voluntary operation that could operate independently. China has never interfered with any host-country activities, and the renaming of Hanban and organizational restructuring, especially the transfer of Confucius Institutes to non-profit foundations, was only a general structural adjustment without any significant implications. King's study notes that Western countries often view Confucius Institutes as China's soft power. However, most of the establishment of Confucius Institutes is due to requests or cooperation from both parties. Therefore, it is still unclear whether Confucius Institutes are truly an example of China's direct assistance to foreign countries. Another point is that Confucius Institutes outside of China must have partner universities in mainland China. This aspect seems to lean towards mutual learning and cooperation rather than the nature of language institutes in European countries such as the British Council, Goethe Institute, and Alliance Française. (King, 2013)

However, although there are various international perspectives on China's education system, and many express concerns. In the author's perspective, only the establishment of the Confucius Institute is of concern, and its activities should be monitored. Additionally, it seems that China is quite concerned about international criticism and attempts to counter negative perspectives, as seen in the restructuring of the organization by transferring the Confucius Institute to a non-profit foundation established by 27 agencies from various sectors. That action can be understood as a reaffirmation from China that all of its operations are transparent and without a hidden agenda.

### Discussion and summary

Based on the concept proposed by Joseph S. Nye, 'soft power' is the ability to influence and persuade others to act or agree with one's desires willingly, without the use of force or coercion. China has embraced the idea of soft power, and has placed even greater importance on it in recent years, as China seeks to expand its role and peaceful influence in the world. Expanding its educational influence internationally is one of a variety of methods that China has chosen to employ soft power. In particular, during the presidency of Xi Jinping, there has been an official declaration to enhance soft power through the promotion of Chinese culture and social values. The field of international education is one of the more signification ways that China is wielding this soft power.

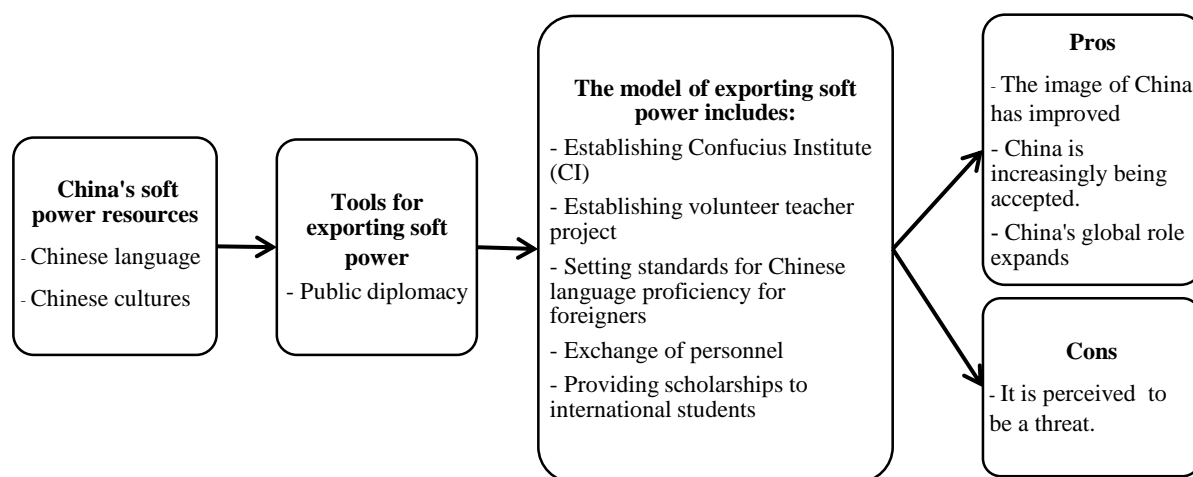
The use of soft power in the dimension of education by China is carried out through public diplomacy, which involves bi-lateral cooperation in providing educational assistance to countries of interest. For example, there is promotion of collaboration with educational institutions in foreign countries to establish Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms that promote the Chinese language and culture. China also collaborates with governments in several countries to establish volunteer teacher programs to enhance Chinese language teaching, with China playing a primary role in sending Chinese teachers and textbooks. At the same time, China is also elevating the quality of its domestic educational institutions to align with international standards and promote academic exchange of personnel and students. Additionally, scholarships are provided to international students from around the world to study in China. These efforts to expand China's role involve exchange between states, as well as within states with their citizens. This has both positive and negative implications for China. On the positive side, expanding its role in this manner increases China's influence internationally without resorting to force, creating a positive image of China's peaceful public diplomacy. Simultaneously, the international community gains a better understanding of China through joint activities, sharing of ideas, and disseminating knowledge. At the same time, in some countries, China's activities are closely monitored and seen as a potential threat, particularly in terms of content and the ideas presented through various activities.

The findings of this research can be summarized in the framework shown in the accompanying image.

Despite the criticisms and scrutiny surrounding its expansion of its role through education, China can be considered highly successful in using soft power. China's significant role in international education represents a remarkable advancement in utilizing soft power and reflects China's peaceful rise. Importantly, this success demonstrates that China is becoming a "controller" with the authority to guide and determine various activities in foreign countries. It may further expand its role to become a powerful influencer in shaping the direction of language education, culture, and various concepts of China on a global scale.

At the state level, Thailand has responded to China's soft power in education through various forms of collaboration. For example, Thailand has permitted the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, and has collaborated with the Chinese Ministry of Education to establish volunteer teacher programs. Each year, thousands of Chinese

volunteer teachers travel to Thailand, and numerous Thai educational institutions receive textbooks from China for Chinese language teaching. At the grassroots level, there is an increasing interest among Thais, especially youth, in learning Chinese. The Chinese language proficiency test has gained widespread recognition in both educational institutions and workplaces. Additionally, every year, hundreds of Thai students receive scholarships to study in China. These examples demonstrate China's successful expansion of its role in education in Thailand.



**Figure 2** Conceptual Framework and Results of the Research

At the same time, this expansion of China's soft power through education presents a significant challenge for Thailand and other countries who need to be cautious and vigilant in their cooperation and acceptance of educational assistance from China. China's activities may have hidden agendas, and excessive cooperation or reliance on China could lead to dependence or excessive influence in determining the direction of education, language, culture, and various concepts. Simultaneously, China itself is also subject to scrutiny for its expansionist aspirations. Therefore, the spread of Chinese soft power poses a challenge for both China and recipient countries to find a balance in public diplomacy and to build multi-lateral trust going forward.

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