



សាកលវិទ្យាល័យកម្ពុជា
THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBODIA

UC OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES



Volume 1
Issue 2

The University of Cambodia Press
September 2017

To cite this article:

Po, S. (2017). The limits of China's influence in Cambodia: A soft power perspective. *UC Occasional Paper Series, 1(2)*, 61-75.

The Limits of China's Influence in Cambodia: A Soft Power Perspective

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Abstract

This analytical article is aimed at reviewing the concept of 'soft power' and figuring out the sources of China's soft power, its motivation, and its limits in Cambodia. The paper argues that China is able to promulgate its soft power through various channels while China's motivation behind the push of its soft power varies. The paper concludes that given the overwhelming influence of China's soft power in Cambodia, the actual influence is still relatively limited.

Keywords: China's influence in Cambodia; Soft power

I. Introduction

China with its economic rise and gradual military modernization has engaged its neighbors very actively. This can be evident through the ASEAN Plus Three Summit, ASEAN-China Summit, and ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement. Increasingly, the Beijing Consensus, a framework with the political and economic ideology for guiding the institutions and growth of developing nations has garnered support and popularity in Asia because it insinuates the plausibility of leaders pursuing economic growth while maintaining political authoritarianism (Cho & Jeong, 2008; Shutter, 2006, 2008). China has no doubt been seen to project its soft power through such engagement with the region (Gill & Huang, 2006).

As a small state in the Southeast Asia region, Cambodia cannot avoid the spillover effects from China's increased soft power. The Chinese aid, loans and investment in Cambodia have been tremendously augmenting in recent years. In the meantime, the number of Chinese language schools, especially the Confucius Institute is gradually growing. The Chinese New Year is usually celebrated among the Chinese Cambodian people as well as the native Cambodian people, even in the rural area of the country. What is

striking is that the current Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has also embraced the Deng Xiaoping's leadership ideology (Willemyns & Kuch, 2015). PM Hun Sen used to echo Deng's famous quote, saying that regardless of the color of the cat, either black or white, as long as it can catch the mice, it is a good cat (Willemyns & Kuch, 2015). In addition, PM Hun Sen publicly praised the book entitled *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* and encouraged his subordinates to read it so that they can gain insights into how a society should be governed (Touch & Maza, 2017).

The main purpose of this paper is to inform readers what 'soft power' is and explore the impacts of China's soft power on Cambodia. 'Soft power' as discussed in the following section is able to attract, if not compel the small countries to design its policy to serve the general interest of the big power. The meticulous comprehension of the concept and its implications is crucial for policymakers, academia, students of international relations and to a lesser extent the public to make informed decisions that serve Cambodia's interests. While the scope of this paper is mainly about Cambodia, its implications may well be extended to other similar contexts as well.

II. Revisiting the Concept of Soft Power

Many scholars and researchers have assiduously attempted to define the concept of soft power. To Joseph Nye, soft power is state's ability to attract and co-opt rather than to coerce, use force or give cash as a means of persuasion (Nye, 1990, 2004). The aim of such persuasion is to set and shape the agenda and preferences of all actors involved to realize the mutual interests and to allure a sense of cooperation rather than confrontation so that the ultimate employment of hard power is evitable (Nye, 1990, 2004). Based on this definition, however, one could conclude that the ultimate aim of soft power is to influence the behaviors of other states to our own preferences or interests. The powerful states can opt to do so via coercion with threats, persuasion with cash or attraction and co-option by the attraction of ideas (Wilson, 2008). State can utilize soft power through mobilizing non-physical, abstract, subjective and often subtle attribute of power along three dimensions: culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye, 2004, 2008).

Unlike Joseph Nye, Alexander Vuving (2009) offers three alternatives on how soft power is produced: benignity, brilliance and beauty. ‘Benignity’ is able to generate soft power through the production of gratitude and sympathy because when you as an agent have a positive attitude towards your client, your client will pay back its reciprocal altruism to you. ‘Brilliance’ generates soft power through the production of admiration that, for instance, when you can achieve the extraordinary result, people tend to learn the success from you and in this sense you have the influence over them. ‘Beauty’ defined as an aspect of actors’ relations with ideals, values, causes, or visions generates soft power through the production of inspiration that, for example, if state A shares values of state B, state A tends to follow what state B says (Vuving, 2009).

However, each of these three concepts has a flaw it itself. First, while a state is more benign to other states, it has not been proved to guarantee that the other states will follow the wishes of the benign one. Second, in the international anarchic system, it seems that if state A is more brilliant than state B, it can turn out that state B is fearful of state A. For instance, China is now so brilliant in terms of science and technology, especially the military capacity, which makes some Indian scholars view China as a threat (Verma, 2016). Third, Vietnam shares the Chinese communist regime but why is Vietnam still fearful of China’s long-term intention? These concepts remain contested.

III. Sources of China’s Soft Power in Cambodia

1. Chinese diaspora

One of the most crucial aspects of the sources of China’s soft power in the world is its policy of “huaqiao” (*Overseas Chinese*). One could argue that the political motivation behind the policy of ‘Overseas Chinese’ is to influence the decision and shape the agenda of other states through its overseas Chinese. The Chinese minority in Cambodia may be able to influence the decision made in the country in many ways. If they have Cambodian citizenship, for example, they can work for the government. In this case, they can choose to make the decision favorable to China. Moreover, most of the Chinese minorities in Cambodia are businesspeople who generally have the power to lobby the government to make the decision friendly to China. However, as argued by Chang (2013), while ethnic Chinese worldwide share linguistic and cultural bonds, most ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia,

including Cambodia do not possess a bond with China beyond purely economic interests and thus do not want to risk losing political and economic privileges to serve China's broader interests.

One of the crucial roles of the Chinese diaspora is to project China's soft power by spreading its culture. Generally, every person with their origin culture usually preserves it through practicing and nationalizing it wherever they live. Cambodia is a good example. The Chinese New Year which is not a national holiday and traditional festival of Cambodia is celebrated across the country by Cambodian people with the Chinese origin. Some schools and state institutions in Cambodia are closed to allow their students and staff to enjoy the Chinese New Year. Even those Cambodians who have no Chinese descent also celebrate the Chinese New Year because they believe that the celebration will bring them luck, wealth, and happiness throughout the year (Xinhua, 2014). Such a phenomenon is really a sign of the overwhelming Chinese influence in Cambodia.

2. Chinese film and philosophy

China's soft power in Cambodia is also generated from Chinese films and philosophy. Many of the Chinese folktales have been turned into the world-renown movies and the educational values in these movies are very influential in Cambodia. Take a movie, *A Tale of Three Kingdoms*, dubbed in Khmer as an example. In the meantime, several strategic concepts in this movie have also been pronounced among normal Cambodian citizen. There are several examples about such a case. As far as my personal observation is concerned, many people have posted quotes from the movie along with their favorite character who said those quotes on Facebook so that other fellow Cambodians are able to see and learn from the quotes. Some companies even use the similar approach to advertise their products by creating the image of the actor and their respective speech, along with their company's name and products or services. Such practices show how the Chinese ancient philosophy from the Chinese movies has influenced the perception of the Cambodian people. This influence is not likely to fade away but rather rooted in the Cambodian society.

3. Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institutes (CIs) have been increasingly set up around the globe and playing a leading role as a Chinese policy tool to project its soft power.

However, their operations have faced many challenges. While there are linkages in terms of finance and administrative monitor between CIs and the Chinese government, CIs have been perceived as a ‘propaganda tools’ or one of ‘China’s foreign propagandists (Brady, 2010) or spying tool (Zanardi, 2016). There are several cases, which could be found. In Canada, a Toronto District School board committee voted to terminate the Confucius Institute programs, accusing this institute of having hidden political agendas that try to influence their students (Howlett & Alphonso, 2014).

Despite the overwhelming skepticism about the activities of CIs, its number grows at a steady pace in Cambodia, up to 3 CIs now. The first one is located at Royal Academy of Cambodia. The second one is at Asia Euro University and the last one is at University of Battambang. There are also 3 Confucius classrooms. The first one is at Angkor High School. The second one is at the 70th Brigade, and the last one is at Police Academy of Cambodia. One should expect that the more presence and activities CIs have in Cambodia, the more influence China has on this small country.

4. Chinese initiatives of multilateral institutions

Another way China can advance its soft power is to actively participate in regional forums and play a leading role in establishing development projects in the region. China has participated in various ASEAN-centered forums and institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Tree (APT), East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), affirming the ‘ASEAN Way’ to demonstrate its sincerity in engaging the region, in abiding by various ASEAN norms, in partaking in multilateral cooperation, and in showing greater transparency in its dealings with Southeast Asian nations (Li, 2015).

The recent launch of ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR), later also known as ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to fund the infrastructure projects has received a warm welcome from Cambodia. As noted in Xinhua News, Prime Minister Hun Sen stated, “We particularly welcome the establishment of the AIIB, initiated by China but now involving a strong partnership of multilateral and bilateral agencies”. He continued, “Cambodia, as a founding member, will greatly benefit from this bank in terms of infrastructure investment needs” (Xinhua, 2016).

Furthermore, China has played a leading role in initiating many development programs in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV). Another new regional development initiative China has proposed for CLVM is the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). These initiatives have demonstrated China's commitment to strengthen bilateral relations and building trust with ASEAN nations. They can also reassure China's immediate neighbor of China's peaceful rise (Weissmann, 2014).

Among these initiatives, the LMC has generated significant influence of China's soft power on Cambodia and the region. The reason is that instead of using political means to influence the Mekong sub-region, China has incorporated economic incentives and policy of non-interference to forge closer ties and build new regional architecture (Lim, 2009). While every participating country within the context of the LMC could see the mutual interests, China has no reason to coerce the countries along the Mekong River to join the project with its mighty military force.

5. Chinese aid, loans, trade and investments

Another powerful source of China's soft power is how China is able to allocate its aid and loans and boost bilateral trade and investment in the kingdom. Since 1992, China has provided around \$3 billion in congressional loans and grants to Cambodia (Var, 2016a). Moreover, during the Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent visit to Cambodia, Xi pledged some \$237 million in aid, eliminated almost \$90 million in state debt, and additionally offered \$15 million in military support (Khy, Paviour, & Khoun, 2016). The bilateral trade between Cambodia and China reached \$4.3 billion in 2015, an increase of about 15.19 percent from the \$3.8 billion in 2014. China is the largest foreign investor in Cambodia with an aggregate investment of more than \$14 billion between 1994 and 2016 (Sum, 2016). In terms of foreign loans, Cambodia owes China \$3.59 billion (Ministry of Finance and Economy, 2017).

Remarkably, the Chinese aid is well appreciated by the top Cambodian leaders. Prime Minister Hun Sen has relentlessly praised the aid from China that it has no strings attached, unlike the funds from the US and the EU that are often predicated on liberal reforms and democratic commitments (Hutt, 2017). But to reiterate that China aid to Cambodia has no strings attached can be a huge fallacy. In return for the China's aid and loans, Cambodia has to advocate 'One China Policy' and support China's position at the South

China Sea, all of which is to serve China's strategic interest (Var, 2016b). Cambodia also supports 'One China Policy' by banning the Taiwan flag from being hoisted in the country (Chung, 2017). Moreover, in 2012 it blocked the ASEAN joint communiqué to avoid criticizing the Chinese assertive actions at the South China Sea (Bower, 2012). It again prevented any statement referent to the South China Sea dispute in the 2016 ASEAN joint communiqué in Laos (Baliga & Vong, 2016).

With the Chinese influence, Cambodia has recently postponed the Angkor Sentinel, a joint military exercise with the US (Ben & Meyn, 2017), and delayed indefinitely the Seabees aid program, known as the US Navy Mobile Construction Battalion whose mission is to carry out the community service at the underserved areas of Cambodia since 2008 (Hul, 2017). All of these decisions tend to serve China's strategic interests, proving that China's efforts in providing aid and loans to Cambodia have paid off.

IV. Motivations behind the Chinese Pursuit of Soft Power in Cambodia

There are several key factors encouraging China to actively promote its soft power in Cambodia. First, given its economic and military rise, China needs to assure its neighboring countries that its rise is and will be peaceful through its soft power promotion (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). Professor John Mearsheimer's simple but influential argument is that if China continues to rise economically for the next two or three decades, China will turn the economic might into the military superiority in the region in a way that no state can match and ultimately dominate Asia (Mearsheimer, 2014). How soft power is projected to combat the negative image of China will add up China's ability to establish good cooperation with its neighbors.

China's efforts in combating the 'China Threat' Theory have been very effective in Cambodia. Chheang Vannarith, a co-founder and Chairman of Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS) said during an interview that China's rise is good news for Cambodia. He further stated that China would remain a very important strategic and economic partner for Cambodia as the country strives to drive its economic development and combat poverty (May, 2016). When it comes to a security dimension, Jeffrey Becker also noted that the security cooperation between China and Cambodia continues to expand and its growing military capacity is likely to provide the public goods to the region that no one should concern (Becker, 2017). The Chinese intention to show that its rise is peaceful has enabled China to make friends

with Cambodia. Prime Minister Hun Sen who used to label China as a ‘root of all evils’ in the 1980s has changed his tone to praise and depict China as a ‘most trustworthy friend’ (Hutt, 2017).

In addition, China has realized that the global situations have been relentlessly evolving and that the use of military power to coerce other states and become a real superpower will only generate a harmful backlash. Nye (1990) perfectly pointed out that the demise of the Soviet Union was the result of the US’s wise approach to employ the ‘smart power’, integrating ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ to dissolve the Soviet Union’s ideological foundation. China is also able to enjoy the ‘latecomer advantage’ and learn that the failure of Japan and Germany during the World War II was because these two countries depended heavily on its military power.

It would not be too surprising to argue that the quest for natural resources to fuel its domestic economic growth has been a reason for China to promote its soft power. The Chinese leaders are fully aware of how scarce its resources are that they have to secure easy access to critical commodities both to feed an increasing population and to accelerate the output and export-oriented industries (Burgos & Ear, 2010). In this regard, China’s National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), which is one of Chinese state-owned enterprises, has signed the deal of joint production operation with the Cambodian National Petroleum Authority to burrow natural gas and oil in Cambodian shores (Lum, Morrison & Vaughn, 2008). This is part of the Chinese plan to secure its access to energy sources to advance its industrial growth.

V. Constraints of China’s Soft Power in Cambodia

Despite its enormous influence on Cambodia, there are some limits and constraints for China to project its soft power in this small country. Kurlantzick (2007) has noted that China only works with the ‘elites’, while leaving the ‘general public’, behind. Moreover, some scholars believe that the Chinese aid and investments have aggravated corruption, deteriorated good governance, and human rights and damaged Cambodia’s resources and natural environment (Heng, 2013). For example, a Chinese dam building on the upper Mekong River is being tolerated despite potential environmental devastation affecting millions of Cambodians who depend on this water for drinking, irrigation, fishing and income (Var, 2016a).

A recent survey conducted by a group of Cambodian students to understand the perceptions of 500 Cambodian university students on Cambodia's foreign policy toward the US and China revealed that although the majority of Cambodian students acknowledged the Chinese contribution to the development of Cambodia, about 70 percent of them preferred to see Cambodia developing a better relation with the US (Heng, Sao, Chet, & Chan, 2017). The survey has demonstrated that China's soft power in Cambodia is rather limited, at least from the perspective of Cambodian university students.

VI. Conclusion

As China is rising, its soft power is also improving. In Cambodia, there are, as discussed above, several channels China has pushed forward its soft power. However, this soft power influence is still limited at large. China has great influence on Cambodia, in particular when it comes to the South China Sea dispute; nevertheless, Cambodia is still able to make decision to cater for its own interests, not always for the Chinese interests. The way out for Cambodia, China and ASEAN when it comes to the South China Sea, for example, is to push forward the finalization of the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea. When finalized, this framework should be able to address the South China Sea dispute.

When it comes to Chinese aid provision to Cambodia, the study conducted by a group of Chinese experts has offered some policy recommendations for China (Haibing, et al., 2015). First, China should not only work with the government but also allocate its resources with the grassroots people and civil society. China should realize that the long-lasting relationship between the two countries rest on the people, so China should take the Cambodian people needs and views into critical consideration. Second, the proportion of Chinese aid should go to programs, which are aimed at improving the ordinary citizen's livelihood. Third, building a new set of collaborations with other sponsors, especially NGOs to alleviate the political sensitivity of the Chinese aid has to be prioritized (Haibing, et al., 2015).

All in all, it is undeniably true that Cambodia has enjoyed great relations with China, particularly in terms of aid and loans, military cooperation, bilateral trade and investment. However, people-to-people exchanges have not been at the forefront of this relationship yet. Both Cambodia and China should work more collaboratively to establish more platforms that facilitate

the interaction between the people of both nations. Inclusive initiatives and plans such as joint research projects, cultural events, commercial conferences and youth exchange programs should be encouraged. All of these would ensure better mutual understanding between Cambodians and the Chinese at a micro level, which would in turn enable the Chinese soft power to flourish in the Cambodian society.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Mr. Kimkong HENG, the Lead Editorial Assistant of UC Occasional Paper Series for his valuable comments on the earlier drafts of this paper.

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