

Exploring the Interplay of Soft Power, Culture, and Cinema on a Global Scale: A Review of Current Research and Future Directions

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Abstract: This paper examines the significance of soft power in academia, policy-making, and international relations. It reviews the current state of soft power research, identifies gaps in the literature, and explores the interplay of soft power, culture, and cinema. The paper analyses the research hotspots in Chinese soft power research and highlights the need for further research to enhance soft power strategies on a global scale.

Keywords: Soft power, China, cinema, Culture, Global diplomacy.

1. Introduction

The concept of soft power has become increasingly important in recent years as a means of influencing others through attraction rather than coercion or inducement. Ukraine's First lady Olena Zelenskaya said in a video address at the Global Soft Power Summit 2023 in London that her country's use of soft power to counter Russian aggression has won support from around the world and given the world a new understanding of Ukraine's history, culture, and language. Soft power is composed of a country's resources of culture, values, and policies, which can be used to achieve desired outcomes (Nye, 2008). The Global Soft Power Index, compiled by Brand Finance, ranks countries based on their soft power, with the United States coming out on top in 2023 (Finance, 2023).

Yukaruc (2017) explains that culture can generate soft power if it upholds universal values and promotes shared interests and values with other countries. Yukaruc (2017) further argues that culture is the glue that holds society together, with media providing the necessary infrastructure to form and consolidate social connections.

One area where culture and soft power intersect is in the film industry. Hollywood, in particular, uses cinematic imagery to inspire both Americans and foreigners while contributing to America's soft power. The US government has recognized this potential and issued policies to help Hollywood penetrate overseas markets (Kim, 2013). However, the impact of films on soft power can be limited if the content is not engaging or fails to resonate with audiences. Nye (2008) cautions that if the contents of culture, values, and policies are not attractive, then public diplomacy efforts to "broadcast" these contents may not generate soft power and could even produce the opposite result.

Despite the potential of films to enhance a country's soft power, there are also risks associated with their consumption. The critical role of films as a communication tool that can show a nation's strength and image most intuitively, as highlighted by Walter (2006), can also lead to cognitive biases among audiences (Huang, Li, & Yang, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to develop engaging and meaningful narratives that positively promote a country's soft power on a global scale.

While the concept of soft power may seem relatively new, its roots can be traced back to ancient Chinese culture (Ding, 2008). Additionally, Yukaruc (2017) has explored the similarities between soft power and Gramsci's hegemonic view,

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suggesting that these concepts may be interrelated in interesting ways. Moreover, film has emerged as a vital tool for conveying a country's values, beliefs, and identity, as highlighted by Voci and Luo (2017)

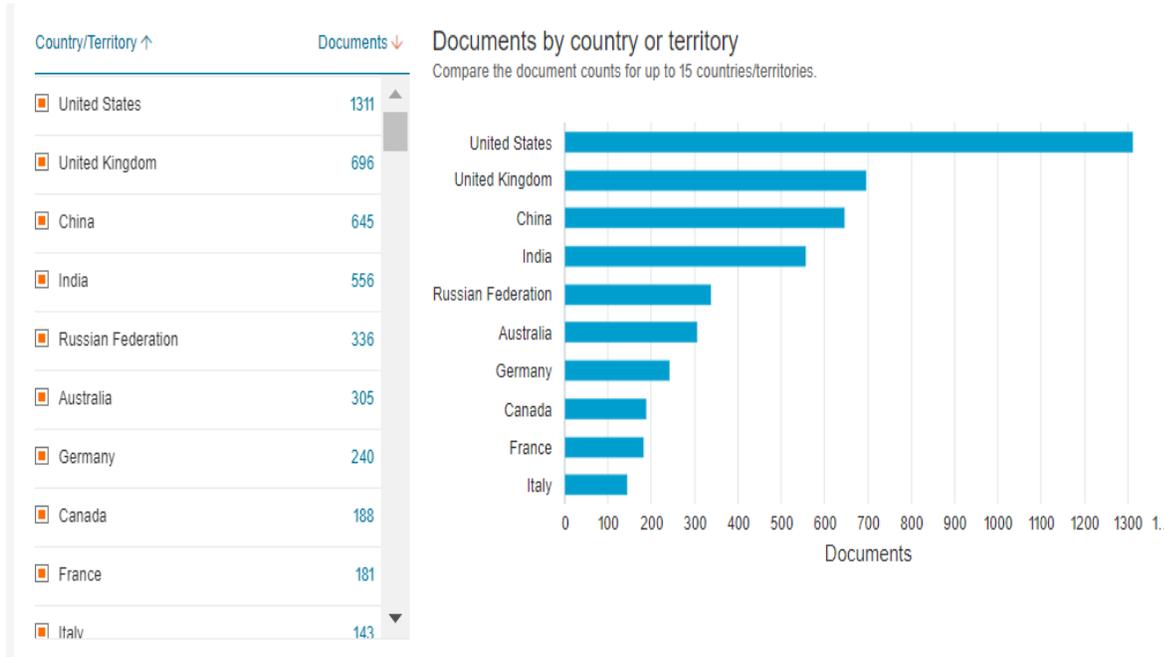


Fig.1: Documents by country or territory.

With the increasing importance of soft power in international relations, the concept of soft power has received a great deal of attention in academia, particularly in the theoretical and practical political arenas (Fraser, 2004). It is noteworthy that Mattern (2005) emphasizes that no empire can afford to ignore the impact of soft power and Froehlich (2021).

In conclusion, films have become an essential component of a country's soft power, but their impact depends on the attractiveness of the content and its ability to promote the identity of values and enhance the country's influence and attractiveness. It is crucial to create engaging and meaningful narratives that resonate with audiences and positively promote a country's soft power on a global scale.

2. Current Research Status of Soft Power

The literature output from various countries between 1990 and October 2022 is depicted in Figure 1. The United States stands tall with an impressive 1,311 publications, a staggering 50.8% more than China, which ranks third with only 645 publications. The United Kingdom comes in second with 696 publications, a mere 51 publications ahead of China. Thus, the United States emerges as the birthplace of soft power research, leading the world in research on this intriguing concept.

resources. In this era, many countries, particularly the United States, have pursued soft power to an unprecedented extent. However, Layne (2010) offers a critical perspective on the concept of soft power, while acknowledging that it has resonated with American foreign policy makers. Similarly, Ifantis (2012) underscores the significance of Nye's work on soft power, which has gained tremendous authority and impacted the foreign policies of the United States and other countries/regions. In his view, the terms and concepts of soft power are indispensable for analyzing and discussing this topic.

Moreover, statistical data on box office sales, computed by cross-tabulating movies and countries/regions, indicate a trend toward increasingly converging global tastes, a remarkable outcome indeed. On the other hand, this trend may suggest that people recognize the American culture depicted in American movies, underscoring the soft power attributes of the United States, particularly its cultural appeal (Treverton, 2014). Nye (2009) contends that a range of different resources can

contribute to soft power, and he advocates for combining hard power and soft power to achieve optimal results. The United States has employed this strategy by promoting democratic and human rights values using its powerful technology and media capabilities. Fu and Govindaraju (2010) research, which uses global movie ticket revenue panel data from 2002 to 2007, demonstrates that over the years, the tastes of various countries have converged with those of American audiences.

In sum, cross-tabulated statistical data on box office sales reveal a trend toward global convergence in taste. While this result may appear incredible, it underscores people's recognition of the American culture portrayed in American films and the soft power attributes of the United States, especially its cultural appeal (Treverton, 2014). Soft power is a concept that has garnered tremendous attention in academia, with many countries, particularly the United States, pursuing it aggressively. Although some scholars have criticized the concept of soft power, it has resonated with American foreign policy makers and has become a key element in the foreign policies of many countries/regions. Furthermore, the innovative strategy of combining hard and soft power has enabled the United States to expand its soft power, promoting democratic and human rights values using its powerful technology and media capabilities.

Exploring the Extent of Soft Power Research in China.

In China, the significance of soft power has gained increasing attention, and various studies have been conducted to explore this concept. Using the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest and most comprehensive Chinese-language journal database, a study was conducted to identify the research status of soft power in China from 1992 to October 2022. This time frame was chosen as discussions on Chinese soft power can be traced back to 1992, when Nye's book "Bound to Lead" was translated into Chinese and published in mainland China (Li & Rønning, 2013).

The study revealed an astonishing 20,467 documents related to soft power during the specified time period, surpassing the number of documents published on Scopus during the same period. However, a deeper analysis of the top ten themes in Chinese soft power research indicates that culture is the most prominent issue. This finding is further supported by the report delivered by General Secretary Xi Jinping at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2022, where he stressed the importance of developing advanced socialist culture, promoting revolutionary culture, and inheriting excellent traditional Chinese culture. This highlights the significant role of culture in enhancing China's cultural soft power and influence.

The current literature review indicates that soft power has become a critical topic in China-U.S. relations, and culture plays a vital role in the competition of soft power. In addition, the globalization of national films has raised the issue of output and protection of culture, which has become an urgent matter that requires attention.

In conclusion, the research on soft power in China has seen significant growth, with a focus on the cultural aspect. The country's emphasis on developing and enhancing its cultural soft power and influence is evident in recent policy statements. It is clear that soft power will continue to be a significant area of interest in Chinese academia and policy circles.

3. Analysis of Research Hotspot

In the pursuit of Chinese soft power research, the Scopus database search was constrained to "soft power and chin*," and resulted in an overwhelming 1,305 records. In order to generate a scientific knowledge map of high-frequency keywords, co-occurrence analysis was performed on the keywords contained within these records, leading to the identification of 3,495 different keywords. High-frequency keywords, defined as those that appeared at least 5 times, were extracted from this pool, with a total of 172 high-frequency keywords being used to generate a scientific knowledge map of the co-occurrence of keywords in the field of Chinese soft power research between 1990 to 2022. The results were segregated into 7 distinct clusters (see figure 2), with different colors representing 7 research directions in the field, and the size of the circle indicating the frequency of occurrence of the keyword.

Table 1. The occurrence frequency and connectivity of 30 keywords.

No.	keyword	occurrences	total link strength	No.	keyword	occurrences	total link strength
1	china	395	978	16	africa	29	92
2	soft power	334	685	17	political relations	15	90
3	international relations	66	311	18	globalization	25	86
4	political power	52	256	19	russia	28	86
5	foreign policy	52	234	20	beijing [china]	12	80
6	united states	50	225	21	hegemony	14	69
7	power relations	40	179	22	japan	18	63
8	eurasia	27	173	23	confucius institute	27	63
9	asia	26	161	24	nationalism	14	62
10	far east	25	160	25	cultural diplomacy	25	59
11	geopolitics	31	125	26	taiwan	10	58
12	public diplomacy	44	116	27	governance approach	12	58
13	strategic approach	18	113	28	soft balancing	19	58
14	diplomatic relations	19	100	29	economic growth	11	57
15	india	26	96	30	culture	17	57

Cluster 5 (purple): This cluster is related to Chinese culture and its influence on China's soft power. The keywords included in this cluster highlight the role of Confucianism and cultural diplomacy in enhancing China's soft power. The cluster also discusses the impact of Chinese media, censorship, and propaganda on China's image and identity. The keywords with the strongest linkages in this cluster are "Chinese culture," "cultural heritage," "cultural policy," "cultural power," "soft power," and "UNESCO."

Cluster 6 (light blue): This cluster is related to China's power and influence in the world. The keywords included in this cluster highlight the role of China's diplomacy, hard power, and smart power in shaping its image and influence in different regions of the world. The cluster also discusses China's relationship with major powers like the US and its impact on global politics. The keywords with the strongest linkages in this cluster are "communication," "hegemony," "power," "public opinion," "smart power," and "USA."

Cluster 7 (orange): This cluster is related to China's economic diplomacy and its efforts to enhance its economic influence globally. The keywords included in this cluster highlight the role of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in promoting economic development and infrastructural connectivity in different regions of the world. The cluster also discusses China's engagement with different countries and regions, such as Ghana, Thailand, and Latin America, to enhance its economic influence and soft power. The keywords with the strongest linkages in this cluster are

4. Analysis of Research Trends

This study utilized the overlay visualization view function in VOSviewer to conduct an in-depth analysis of China's soft power hotspots' temporal changes. As illustrated in Figure 3, the darker the color (closer to purple), the longer the research time for the hotspot, while the lighter the color (closer to yellow), the more recent the research hotspots. By comprehensively analyzing current research hotspots and existing literature trends, it can be observed from the time axis that, among the three soft power concepts, i.e., foreign policies, political values, and culture, research on soft power trends mainly concentrated on the political values category before 2014. This finding is confirmed except for a few region-specific keywords like "policy making," "peaceful rise," "Beijing consensus," and "regional politics." From 2016 to 2020, new hot keywords emerged, including foreign policy, international relations, diplomacy, and public diplomacy. Consequently, the research trend of soft power moved towards the foreign diplomacy category. After 2020, research hotspots have shifted towards new popular terms such as Hollywood, cultural heritage, censorship, globalization, Ghana, and the Belt and Road Initiative, indicating recent research trends have primarily focused on the study of culture, media, and policy.

Table 2: The development of soft power in China.

Year	Policy Document	Summary
2011	Opinion on Strengthening and Improving External Communication in the New Situation by the State Council (国务院关于加强和改进新形势下外交工作的意见)	This document sets out new requirements and deployment for external propaganda work under the new situation, clearly pointing out the need to strengthen China's soft power construction.
2012	The Twelfth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China The Twelfth Five-Year Plan (中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十二个五年规划纲要)	This plan, issued by the State Council, clarifies measures and work objectives to strengthen external dissemination and enhance China's cultural soft power in the cultural field, and is an important guiding document for the construction of China's cultural soft power.
2013	Decision on Several Major Issues in Comprehensively Deepening Reform by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定)	This decision proposes to implement cultural system reform, strengthen the development of cultural industries, promote the going-out of cultural products, and further enhance China's cultural soft power.
2015	National Security Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国国家安全法)	This law explicitly proposes to enhance China's national security awareness and cultural confidence to enhance the country's soft power and promote China's characteristic diplomacy.
2019	Outline of the Implementation of Patriotic Education in the New Era (新时代爱国主义教育实施纲要)	This outline proposes to strengthen patriotic education, enhance the country's cultural soft power, and social cohesion.

2021	Outline of the Implementation of Citizen Morality Construction in the New Era (新时代公民道德建设实施纲要)	This outline explicitly proposes to strengthen citizen morality construction, promote the construction of China's moral civilization, and enhance the country's soft power.

4.1. China's Soft Power Policy

Soft power, a multifaceted concept encompassing culture, political values, and foreign policy, is a subject of intense scrutiny and interest among scholars and policymakers alike. As noted by Nye (2004), popular culture is an undeniable resource of soft power. The complexity of soft power's development in China is a topic of much debate, however. While cultural soft power has received explicit policy support, there are also limits to its growth stemming from other policy areas. The intricate interplay between the various components of soft power and government policies in China underscores the challenges and opportunities facing the country in this realm.

4.2. Policy Support

The development of soft power in China has been actively supported by national policies. As evidenced by Table 2, over the past decade, China has produced several policy documents regarding soft power, which mainly focus on building a strong socialist cultural country, improving national cultural soft power, promoting the prosperity of Chinese culture, and telling the story of China well. The Communist Party of China has repeatedly emphasized the importance of building a strong socialist culture and enhancing the country's cultural soft power during national congresses. This has been echoed by high-ranking officials, including former President Hu Jintao and current President Xi Jinping, who have given great importance to the construction of national cultural soft power.

In 2014, President Xi Jinping stated that the prosperity and wealth of Chinese culture are necessary for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This sentiment was further emphasized in the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, which proposed that by 2035, China's cultural soft power would significantly increase. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2022 also highlights the need to promote the prosperity and development of cultural undertakings and industries and enhance the influence and dissemination power of Chinese civilization.

China's policies have had a positive impact on the development of its soft power. According to the Soft Power 30 report published by Portland Communications in 2020, China ranked 30th on the list, while the United States ranked first. However, according to the 2021 Global Soft Power Index, China rose 22 places to rank 8th, demonstrating the effectiveness of China's policy on soft power. The rankings take into account various factors such as governance, culture, education, digital, and business.

Overall, China's top leaders have consistently emphasized the importance of promoting the country's cultural soft power and the influence of Chinese culture, and policy documents have reflected this priority. As a result, China's soft power has seen significant growth and improvement in recent years.

5. Policy Constraint

As Hunter (2009) suggests, various entities, including government, corporations, NGOs, citizens, and particularly filmmakers, athletes, writers, musicians, and other artists, all contribute to their country's soft power in some way. However, the root of China's government problem is that it exercises too much control and is unable to "release the talent of civil society." Without such freedom, China's soft power will continue to be weak (Nye, 2012b). Hence, the film industry in China faces significant pressure from a censorship system that hinders its ability to enhance the country's soft power.

Nye (2012a) further argues that it is civil society rather than government that generates a nation's soft power. However, China's reluctance to release civil society limits its soft power. Moreover, China's strict censorship system makes it more difficult for Chinese filmmakers to create, as Yang (2016) points out. While Chinese cinema has adjusted its role with the development of Chinese society, its primary function is still that of a propaganda tool. This policy arrangement creates a tense relationship between the "attractiveness" of soft power and the country's attraction to the censorship system, resulting in limited room for Chinese cinema to make any meaningful contribution to China's soft power.

The situation is even worse for Chinese filmmakers as censors will delete much of their content, making it difficult for them to compete with Hollywood and South Korea, China's prominent "soft power competitors" (Peng & Keane, 2019). As a result, filmmakers tend to self-censor before submitting their projects to the state regulatory agency. Chinese writer and director Hanhan has repeatedly stated that the censorship system has been a significant obstacle to cultural development. He began to self-censor while writing his book and had to delete many contents. The situation is even more challenging for filmmakers responsible for larger teams.

In 2014, the renowned Chinese director Ang Lee attended an event at New York University and talked about China's film censorship system, admitting that there is little room for free creativity, which is unhealthy. Therefore, the Chinese film industry is facing internal and external troubles in its attempt to spread culture and enhance China's soft power. Suggestions alone are not enough to deal with this complex situation.

In conclusion, culture is an important indicator of soft power, and cinema is one of the crucial channels for spreading culture. However, current research is still insufficient to study cultural soft power fully. For Chinese cinema to enhance its soft power, it faces complex situations both internationally and domestically. Therefore, to make research more targeted, the next section will explore all current literature related to film and soft power from the perspective of China, which will aid in deeper research.

5.1. *The Soft Power Dilemma of China's Cultural Transmission Development*

China's cultural influence faces a significant challenge from the popularity of Korean and Japanese pop culture, in addition to Hollywood films, which have gained massive followings in China and beyond. However, despite this challenge, China's cultural influence has expanded in recent years, with a growing interest in Chinese cuisine, music, and film (Jain, 2020). Nevertheless, there remain several obstacles to China's soft power development in the realm of cultural communication.

One of the most significant challenges facing China is the difficulty in conveying its culture to the world. According to Samovar and Porter (2004) context model, which classifies twelve countries based on tradition, language, and personal relationships, China is ranked second to last, indicating that its culture is complex and difficult to understand for the rest of the world. This complexity makes it essential for China to prioritize its cultural exchange efforts, and one key method to do so is through the medium of film. Although film is not primarily intended for educational purposes, it can have an unconscious influence on viewers due to the content presented (Jain, 2020).

Furthermore, Chinese culture has a rich history and many traditional elements that have been passed down to the present day. However, it often gets represented in a stereotypical and biased manner in Western media, as pointed out by Sykes (2021) Sykes. This biased representation frequently aligns with anti-Chinese sentiment and contributes to the formation of negative impressions of China and its people. Therefore, China needs to improve its communication strategies to better promote its culture and values to the world.

Concerning film, China has struggled to gain international exposure despite signing a film co-production agreement with Australia in 2008 and acquiring the Hoyts Group in 2015, allowing Chinese cinemas to gain access to mainstream cinemas in Australia (Talmacs, 2020). However, there is a concern that exposure to contemporary Chinese films may negatively impact the desire to watch them again in the future and worsen impressions of China and Chinese society. In contrast, Hollywood films are often depicted as effective ambassadors of the American way of life and seen as an embodiment of 20th century democracy (Athique, 2019).

In conclusion, China faces many challenges in developing its soft power through cultural communication, particularly in light of the influence of Korean and Japanese pop culture and Hollywood films. Nevertheless, there is hope for improvement through better communication strategies, including the use of film as a medium for promoting Chinese culture and values to the world (Jain, 2020; Sykes, 2021; Talmacs, 2020).

6. Research Conclusions and Future Directions

By analyzing relevant papers on the topic of China's soft power in English-language databases between 1992 and 2022, this study found that the academic community has maintained a steady increase in research interest in China's soft power. Scholars have focused on seven main themes, including 1) the importance of human rights and perception management in enhancing China's soft power. 2) Strategic orientation of China's foreign policy and international relations. 3) China's economic diplomacy and its role in promoting sustainable development in emerging economies. 4) China's political system and its approach to governance and international relations. 5) Chinese culture and its influence on China's soft power. 6) China's power and influence in the world. 7) China's economic diplomacy and its efforts to increase its global economic influence. Hence, that research on China's soft power is multidimensional and covers a wide range of topics, including culture, education, politics, and economics, as well as their interplay with regional and global relations. Under the impetus of national policies and practical development, China's soft power has achieved fruitful research results. From initial policy-oriented research to international diplomacy research on foreign diplomacy, and now to micro-level studies of cultural and media soft power, research has increasingly focused on the dissemination and development of soft power, as well as the cultural influence and high-quality media communication.

As China continues to assert its global influence, the role of soft power in shaping its international image has become increasingly important. The use of films as a tool for enhancing China's soft power has gained attention from scholars and policymakers alike. However, the question remains: how can China effectively leverage films to promote its socialist cultural power and enhance its soft power on the global stage? Despite the growing interest in this topic, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding effective solutions for utilizing films to enhance China's soft power. This presents a perplexing challenge for policymakers and researchers alike, as they seek to navigate the complexities of global cultural influence and projection.

To address this gap, future research must focus on developing innovative approaches and solutions that are tailored to the unique cultural and political context of China. This requires a burst of interdisciplinary collaboration, soft power research involves various disciplines such as political science, economics, communication, and sociology, it is important to strengthen interdisciplinary cross-fertilization to expand the breadth and depth of research on China's soft power, and to examine the reality of China's soft power development from multiple perspectives.

One potential solution may involve a focus on promoting high-quality media communication that emphasizes Chinese cultural values and norms. Such an approach would require careful consideration of the content and messages conveyed in films, as well as the methods used to disseminate them globally. Additionally, in terms of research methods, it is necessary to integrate multiple research methods, and measure the efficiency of media dissemination of soft power using quantitative methods. Such as the degree of involvement of media producers in the dissemination of soft power and the audience's acceptance level. Additionally, qualitative research should be employed to conduct in-depth analyses of the depth of soft power in communication content, and focus on media producers' problems during the creation process through in-depth interviews.

Another potential avenue for research may involve examining the role of film festivals and other cultural events in promoting China's soft power. Such events provide an opportunity for showcasing Chinese cultural achievements and promoting a positive image of the country on the global stage.

In conclusion, the question of how best to leverage films to enhance China's soft power remains a pressing issue that requires further research and exploration. Through interdisciplinary collaboration and innovative approaches, researchers and policymakers can work together to deepen our understanding of China's soft power and its practical applications in the global arena.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

LY DK and NCF contributed to conception and design of the study. LY organized the database and performed the statistical analysis. LY wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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