Growing China's soft power: free debate and creative thinking are key

Even with its efforts, China's soft power is not growing. Despite its soft power arsenal, Beijing faces many challenges in using it to its advantage. BY YU HONG

LOOKING at indicators of hard power in economic growth and military strength, there is no question that China is now a world power. Economically, China has made the jump to become the world's second-largest economy and one of the world's largest trading countries; there are over 100 companies among the world's 100 top companies, and it brings irresistible opportunities to global companies as one of the world's largest consumer markets. Militarily, China is sparring up the pace as modernizing its armed forces; its military expenditure is now the second highest in the world. With the Shanghai-led second generation of mid-range aircraft carriers, China now counts itself as a naval power, among the few countries in possess of two or more aircraft carriers. Other examples of China's growth in hard power are not hard to find.

Along with hard power, soft power has also become an important component of a country's overall power, and is becoming an increasingly important platform where big-country concepts and soft power, in a demonstration of a country's attraction, in France, and appeal to others. The concept of soft power was first proposed in the late 1980s by political scientist Joseph Nye, refer- ring to a third aim of power for a country's buy economic and military power, namely enhancing attraction or influence, or in an important element in the great rival of the Chinese nationalism. To this end, the Chinese government has put in a lot of money and come up with various policies in support of soft power. But when it comes to the current state of China's soft power and international influence, Western countries and China hold very different views. The government, intellectuals and media in Western countries看重 at the lack of freedom and democracy in China, in contrast with their own rich traditions on civil liberties and press freedom. And concludes that China has little or no soft power. On the other hand, China's cultural confidence is high, and it believes that its growing economic hard power will feed to greater soft power, and thus its cultural soft power is already spreading overseas.

The rise of China's soft power

Obviously speaking, China's soft power and international influence has grown in recent years, in terms of cultural influence, China is an ancient cultural civilization, with a long and glorious history and rich cultural resources, and the biggest number of UNESCO heritage sites in the world. The Confucian-centric Chinese civilization is the only one that has lasted for 5,000 years, laying a firm foundation for China's soft power developments. According to figures from the Confucius Institute (CI) headquarters or Hanban, at the end of 2018, China has set up 548 CIs in 143 countries, with some 74,000 staff. CI aims to promote the Chinese language and spread Chinese culture. From the perspective of mainstreaming a rule-based international system, the growing trend of international collaboration and competition between powers has seriously heightened multilateralism, and the authority of UN-centric multilateral institutional arrangements as the biggest beneficiary of the open multilateral system. China is actively advocating and safeguarding multilateralism, the emergence of this is based on the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), its active pushing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and its participation in addressing climate change, which have won praise from the global community. Actively participating in global governance and system reform, China leads in the establishment of the AIIB shows that it is starting to guide the course of regional development, and has a growing influence in global affairs. In the last four years, the AIIB has attracted the membership of over 100 countries, showing China's popularity. China's influence is growing rapidly in infrastructure and construction sectors, a difficult task for countries such as China. In 2012, China's super highway that connects many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the country has been used to connect China businesses and investment and their activities.

And when it comes to the appeal of its growth model, China's experience of "China model" is becoming increasingly attractive to many developing countries, China's effective management of domestic political stability, economic growth, and social governance has given developing countries an alternative growth model to the Washington Consensus. Of course, the China model also has its flaws, such as environmental pollution, corruption, lack of transparency is policymaking, uneven regional development, and a growing income disparity, and has become one of the major challenges facing the world.

Limitations and challenges in China's soft power development

China has to attest that apart from its hard power, soft power will also help the growth, that its soft power is far from strong. As a big country with about one-fifth of the world's population, China's soft power and influence is still weak.

The annual Soft Power 30 report by the US-based Portland Institute has concluded that China's soft power and influence is still weak. In its annual assessment of the comprehensive and quantitative analysis of coun- tries' soft power, based on subjective indicators, China's perceived image on countries' foreign policy, and its influence, including social media, news, culture, governance, culture, education levels, economic activity, and commercial reputation (the influence of trade and engagement). According to the 2019 Soft Power 30 report, China ranked 19th, while France tops the list. After ranking eighth in terms of culture, China ranked outside the top 20 in most other areas such as education, governance, culture and foreign policy. Overall, China ranked behind many other Asian countries such as Japan which came in eighth, growing rich-poor gap, which is the focus of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, which has not stemmed the Belt and Road Initiative in 2019, only 1 per cent of global overseas students are in China, while in Europe, China is ranked 1st in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, in 2018, China ranked 16th in the list, with tertiary and social sciences institutions flocking to China with its high reputation for leadership and had a negative impact on the international image.

Third, China's international influence in the Belt and Road Initiative is still weak. The Belt and Road Initiative is still weak, in which China has a dominant role. China also has not yet identified its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), etc., but China's soft power and influence is still weak, which has become a key factor in checking the growth of its overall strength.

Soft power calls for recognition and acceptance by the world, it can only be bought by money. China's rapid economic growth, rapidly growing social welfare systems, and accomplishments of encouraging free debate and cultural diversity have earned China the global community's praise, and its soft power, and the biggest challenge in its future development. China should not forget the vociferous debate among hundreds of years, develop an academic and cultural confidence, and the Warring States periods of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, to set up cultural and national pride.

How will China grow its soft power rapidly, how to rapidly change international geopolitical competition between powers and how to leverage its hard power to help its soft power to grow? How to leverage its soft power to influence more countries and enjoy international prestige? Then, how should it deal with the complex and challenging environment in the future? All these questions are a test for China.

Soft power development calls for more open debates and discussions. Soft power needs to grow to the international community, so that trust is earned. Soft power development needs to be further updated.

The views expressed are those of the author or the editorial board. This article is published as research paper at Belt and Road Think Tank. It has been translated from Chinese by Jenny Huan.