

Original Paper

Zheng He's Soft Power Discourse in Indonesia: Identity in Power Relation

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Abstract

This article proposes an identity turn in the ongoing discourse of China's peaceful rise. While economic diplomacy remains as China's leading trade, a robust social relation has been deliberately promoted in maintaining the relationship between states. To symbolize the peaceful relation, China does not need to look further as Zheng He, an ancient sea admiral of the Ming dynasty, posed as a powerful figure for peaceful diplomacy. The social constructivist approach to soft power will be used in analyzing the concept of collective identity and power relations. To illustrate this approach, a specific case study on China-Indonesia Muslim's connection that exists since Zheng He's era, will be highlighted as a landscape where the shared identity meet. The qualitative method will be applied to interpret shared values between the two societies. Despite the fact that the state level of analysis is generally used in depicting soft power discourse, this article tries to step beyond the boundaries of states by emphasizing the relationship of soft power in society level.

Keywords

identity, social constructivism, soft power, Zheng He

1. Introduction

For Indonesians, Zheng He symbolizes two historical events: the Nusantara encounter with China's maritime power and the diffusion of Islamic values. In his first expedition in 1405, Zheng He has stopped in Java, Samudera Pasai and Lambri (in northern Sumatra) (Yang, 2014). Although Zheng He was not the first Chinese messenger to interact with the Nusantara, however, the arrival of his fleet consisting of 317 ships and 27,000 crew (Guan, 2005) was the first exposure of the archipelago's maritime power to precede the entry of European traders. Zheng He's mission also has other meanings than diplomacy and trade, namely the third wave of diffusion of Islamic values in the archipelago

known as the, which occurred after the first wave (Gujarat traders) and the second wave (from the Arabian Peninsula) (Muljana, 2005). These two historical events later became a milestone for China's relations in the archipelago, as well as China's relations with post-independence Indonesia.

Six centuries later, the discourse about Zheng He is still relevant, especially when discussing China's peaceful rise. The Chinese maritime history that was built by Zheng He under the rule of the Ming dynasty provided a comparable construction for European maritime forces that carried the narrative of colonialism and imperialism. Mingjiang (2009) mentions that the embryo of Chinese soft power and the conception of China's peaceful rise is reflected in Zheng He's expedition which was solely aimed at demonstrating the superiority of technology, trade, and Chinese culture. In the 28-year expedition, the Ming dynasty did not implement expansion policies, but prioritized peaceful relations with political entities in its destination region, covering Southeast Asia, India, West Asia to East Africa (Pollard, 2015). Yoshihara (2009) mentions that on the one hand, Zheng He's maritime history forms the ideal idea of China's current power projections by indirectly giving direction to Chinese diplomacy and strategy within the international system. On the other hand, Zheng He's expeditions to various regions have succeeded in introducing Chinese culture and values, an image that has become the capital for China's current soft power practices.

There are countless studies on Zheng He's maritime expedition—from historical, archeological, to its diplomatic aspect. The wide range of Zheng He's studies has provided this article a deep understanding of the famous Ming admiral's influence on the global level, yet a problem occurs in finding a novelty in the discourse of Zheng He. Fortunately, Zheng He's discourse in Indonesia is rather dynamic since the Chinese-Muslim in Indonesia offers an interesting study of the relation between power and identity. The social landscape of Chinese-Muslim identity will perform a case study with social constructivism as an analytical framework. By using Wendt's theory of social construction (1999), this research outlined two key questions in analyzing Zheng He's soft power discourse, which is: (1) To what extent the Zheng He's maritime history constructed Chinese-Muslim identity in Indonesia?; (2) How it relates to the power relation between Chinese and Indonesia? In the scope of International Relation theories, social constructivism is known for its capacity in bridging the gap between traditionalist and reflectivist by that emphasizing the importance of global ethics and the role of norms, cultures, and identities in relations between countries. It also highlights the importance of identity and social collective consciousness in mapping the power relation between countries (Wendt, 1995). By placing social constructivism as a theoretical guideline, this article will discuss how identity can play an important role in maintaining a good relationship between the countries.

2. Method

The method of this article is qualitative for depth understanding the Zheng He's soft power and uses library sources.

3. Theoretical Framework

Power has many forms—at least there are three forms of power according to Dahl (1961) who defined power into coercion, consent, and persuasion. Coercion is practiced by displaying military capabilities, consent often achieved by the positive economic deal, while persuasion mostly refers to the power of attraction. In practice, however, the use of three forms of power is often combined to attain the intended goal. By the end of the twentieth century, an advanced usage of power is coined by Joseph Nye (1990) as soft power, a shifting perspective from the traditional usage of direct power to the subtle attraction of persuasion. The term changed radically the conceptualization of power, and it gave way to the realization of culture and identity as a means of power.

As defined in Nye's "Soft Power" thesis (1990) it works by forming the interests public through fascination. Nye called it "the means to success" in world politics which emphasizes "*the growing importance of national values, ideas, domestic and foreign policies that make up countries' attraction, which is instrumental in helping states achieve foreign policy goals and therefore maximize their power vis-à-vis others*" (2004). Later on, this definition extended into wider scope as Soft Power is also defined as the capacity to influence others through the co-optive methods for framing other state's motivation, by convincing and inspiring positive attraction to achieve the intended result (Nye, 2011). Unfortunately, Nye's conceptualization of Soft Power does not provide a solid reason for how and why interests can be changed. Therefore, in further study of Soft Power often connected with other conceptualization of power to develop its method and dimension (Feklyunina, 2016). For instance, Dahl expression's on the third form of power (the power of persuasion), perceived as a solid method of achieving Soft Power. Dahl (1961) comprehends power as the capacity to persuade others to conduct something even though it is against their will. Another method in achieving Soft Power also can be traced back to another conception of power that emphasizes setting the interest of others to be in line with ours (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Lukes (2005) provides an indicator to measure the successful practice of Soft Power by examining the changing interest of other by manufacturing consent; in his word: "*A can achieve what they want from B by transforming B's understanding of their interests*" (Lukes, 2005). In other words, Nye's Soft Power has gone through a dynamic evolution and reconceptualization into what we know as Soft Power nowadays.

Social constructivism is another approach that can be applied to the practice of Soft Power. It provides an understanding of the transformation of the state's interest which plays a fundamental role in practicing Soft Power. Interest, according to Wendt (1999), is not given but constructed, formed, and develop as actors change their perception both inward and outer. Wendt also mentioned that it was an identity that provides an inner "motivational power" derived from "desire" and "trust" (Wendt). In

addition to identity, Alexandrov (2003) formulate three factors that can perform as indicators of the state's perception of others, which are: the state's image, the condition of domestic politics and culture, and the driving force of international norms. The three factors play an essential role in shaping the state's perception of Soft Power. China's image of "peaceful rise" is an appropriate example of state's constructing image. In relating soft power and identity, Feklyunina (2016) mentioned that "*soft power is significantly more likely to be present in a relationship between actors who broadly see themselves as part of the same socially constructed reality, which would entail compatible interpretations of their identities, compatible understandings of their interests and compatible definitions of the situation*".

Another connection between identity and soft power is reasoned by International Relations prominent, Reich and Lebow (2014) that discussed the significant roles of identity to persuade other to cooperate (Miskimmon, 2014) consider three constructing narratives in transforming a state' image; (1) the international system narratives (constructing image and position in global structure), (2) national narratives (projecting image of individual state), and (3) issues narratives (provide narratives and interpretations of various "problems" in various level of society). Mingjiang (2009), illustrates China's soft power agenda by quoting the statement of Party chief and President Hu Jintao at the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group meeting on January 4, 2006: "*The increase in our nation's international status and influence will have to be demonstrated in hard power such as the economy, science and technology, and defense, as well as in soft power such as culture*". Hu Jintao's statement of soft power comes to be agenda-setting for China's soft power projection at the international level, national level, or social and cultural level. In the Indonesia case, China's soft power narratives can be observed in three levels of analysis, structural, national, and social levels. Altogether are vital in analyzing the construction of interest of both states. However, this article is limit solely on the aspect of the social construction of identity where Zheng He performs an important role in constructing Chinese-Muslim in Indonesia.

4. China's Soft Power: A Power Relation

The International system operates based on a specific pattern of power relations. However, the evolution of the system has indicated a changing form of power as perceived in Nye's thesis on soft power written in the early 1990s. A decade later, practically every state has paid greater attention to soft power in achieving its interest in the international system (Mingjiang, 2009). China, which turns into a leading power, also adopts the form of soft power as one of the approaches in their agenda-setting. Hongyi (2012) mentioned the main reason for China's practice of soft power is based on "*China's growing international influence has aroused deep uneasiness among segments of the elites, the establishment, and the public in a number of countries. Some elites in the United States and Japan, however, are concerned with China's possible rivalry in Asia-Pacific and even in the world, and have sounded the alarm over China's threat*". Chinese elites realize the imperative to ease the discomfort from the West and the rest of the world concerning China's rapidly rising trading, economic, and

political power. To overcome the negative perception, China begins to use all the necessary capabilities to convert traditional power into soft power.

Yoshihara (2009) explained that: *“For the past several years, Beijing has been attempting to ‘shape’ the diplomatic and strategic environment in maritime Asia, projecting an image of itself as an innately trustworthy great power. As a part of this public relations campaign, Chinese leaders have retailed the story of Zheng He, the Ming Dynasty eunuch admiral who voyaged to destinations throughout the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean six centuries ago”*. In recent years, the Chinese elites have come to believe that China’s rise should rest not only on its economic, scientific, technological, and military power, but *China’s cultural diplomacy* (Mingjiang, 2009) as also on its soft power. Culture has been regarded as an important tool for China to augment its soft power.

China offers a perfect chance to measure the practice of soft power. In this article, Zheng He history offers a powerful value to attract others by shaping the conception of a peaceful rise. It relies on the degrees to which China’s remarkable maritime power in the Indian Ocean has merged with Zheng He’s stories of reconstructing the image of China. Lastly, compared to other perceptions, it is also interesting to analyze how other states responded to China’s narrative, drawing several preliminary conclusions on the effectiveness and the prospects of Chinese soft power in the Indian Ocean (Yoshihara, 2009).

5. Zheng He as Soft Power: Constructing Similar Identity

Peaceful rise or *“heping jueqi”* is mentioned in 2001 the annual Boao Forum for international business as a strategic pathway for China in the 21st century (Mohan, 2004). The statement rejects the international notion that perceived China as a threat to the world by disrupting the existing system. Therefore, the official statement explained that *“the only choice for China under the current international situation was to rise peacefully, namely, to develop by taking advantage of the peaceful international environment and at the same time, to maintain world peace through its development”* (Zheng in Mohan, 2004). However, to attain the idea of peaceful rise, China needs a strong narrative to convince the international system and construct their image, and the government likely realize that traditional power is insufficient to reach this objective. Therefore, the narrative of peaceful rise is shaped by following Nye’s soft power pillars of national values, ideas, domestic and foreign policies (Nye, 2004). As the foreign policy is driven by forming strong diplomatic infrastructures, national values and ideas are constructed by narrating national memories of the Chinese glorious past (Mingjiang, 2009).

This is where the history of Zheng He entered China’s soft power discourse. Mohan (2004) emphasizes that in China remembrance of the past is never about history alone, it also has relevance with present China. In the 600th commemoration of the primary voyage of Zheng He, an official of China’s government talked evidently about the political reason for the present commemoration. The embodiment of Zheng He’s voyages does not lie in how strong the Chinese navy once was, but in that China adhered to peaceful diplomacy when it was a big power. Rather than expressing an expansive

policy, Zheng He treated different nations with kinship, since the inheritance of Zheng He's seven voyages toward the west is an embryo of China's "peaceful rise" narrative. Zhao (2005) illustrates Zheng He expeditions as follow:

"He had sailed on the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, further south to Java in today's Indonesia, then northwest to Iran and the Holy City of Mecca and further west to today's Somalia in East Africa. During his visits to more than 30 countries, he brought with him the desire of Chinese emperors to build up friendly contacts by presenting valuable gifts and inviting the rulers to send emissaries to China".

In Indonesia, Zheng He symbolizes a warm relation between the two countries. One of his memorable deeds is when his armada encountered his naval force experienced the Chinese pirate Chen Zuyi, who had ruled the Malacca Strait and represented a danger to the exchange courses. Zheng He's armada vanquished the pirates; annihilated their den in Palembang; and caught Chen, who was deported to Nanjing and executed there. This military task cleared the entry from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean. He also visited Java and leave a good impression on the political elite in Java which giving him and his armada a permission to stay (Yang, 2014). The good impression and his warm diplomatic nature came from his cosmopolitan background, Levathes (1994) mention:

"Though born to a Muslim family, Zheng He was reportedly also a Buddhist. He also meticulously performed the state ritual sacrifice to the goddess of celestial consort, 'Tianfei', a popular deity believed to provide protection for seafarers. He may have known Central Asian languages. Zheng He's eclectic religious attitude and broadened cultural horizons made him a good candidate for the armada's commander".

Zheng He influence remained even after his armada leaves Palembang and Java. Zheng He became a representation of Chinese-Muslim assimilation in Nusantara, an event after the state' reach its independence. Dickson (in (Mahfud, 2014)) mentioned that *"the role of Zheng He mosque as a symbol of unification for Indonesian Chinese is supported by the organization 'PITI/Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia' (Unity of Islamic Chinese in Indonesia)"* The organization also symbolize the cultural diffusion and assimilation of Chinese's in Indonesia' society. The Cheng Ho Mosque is an image of harmony among individuals of various religions in Indonesia. Zheng He clarified the harmony of two societies, Chinese and Islam. Furthermore, it also symbolizes amicability, love, and fellowship regardless of race or language. Tan (2009) stated *"that Zheng He's voyages took place within the larger context of 'culture contact' in China and beyond"*. The social values of peace and harmony that attached to the Zheng He expedition have become a pillar of China's soft power narratives, particularly in Indonesia. The Zheng He mosque becomes an image of harmony among individuals of various religions. Mahfud (2014) clarified that the harmony of two societies, Chinese and Islam, speaks of solidarity. He noticed that Cheng Ho mosque is a position of love that symbolizes amicability, love, and fellowship regardless of race or language.

The memory of Zheng He has set as a pivotal point for China in international history. Also in terms of China's relation today it sets as social capital for China's peaceful rise narratives. In Indonesia, the narrative of Zheng He's harmony has turned to be a central narrative in constructing common identity and interest. One of the examples is the plan for reforming the silk road. The discourse on the new silk road turned out to be "issue narratives" to bind the two societies in a common interest. The "old" silk road was a significant pathway for China's strategic relations with different nations from Asia, Africa, to Europe during the Han Dynasty. Today, the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia shared the initiative and commitment to rebuild the track with the Zheng He mosque in Indonesia as part of assembly points (Mahfud, 2014). In this case, a shared interest and identity can clearly be observed from the multifunction of Zheng He mosques. It is not only as media to connect Islamic, Chinese, and Indonesian, but also an embodiment of China's soft power in Indonesia that operates in the society level. As stated in Mohan's thesis, that "*there is nothing random about the intensity of the current Chinese campaign to convince its neighbors in Asia that its new profile in the world system does not threaten anyone*" (Mohan, 2004). Another example of China's soft power also can be found, since both states are forming an intimate economic relation. However, soft power can only be achieved when a state can attract the people and construct harmony of interest in society level.

6. Conclusion

Several conclusions emerge from this study. To begin with, the narrative of soft power is generated in China's elite level to counter the negative perception of China. Second, Chinese discourse on soft power is narrated according to Joseph S. Nye's theoretical structure, but is not strictly limited to the scope of that conceptualization. Third, in contrast to Nye's essential spotlight on the viability of soft power in accomplishing international strategy objectives, the practice of Chinese soft power is operating in three-level: structural, national, and issues (social) narratives. Fourth, soft power connection in China's quest for extensive national power and to a great extent saw as an instrument for cautious purposes, including developing a superior picture of China to the outside world, revising remote misperceptions of China, and battling off Western social and political advances in China. Fifth, the use of China's cultural values is vital in constructing identities, in this context the identity of China's peaceful rise. And lastly, the China soft power discourse, in Indonesia for example, is vital in shaping and reconstructing the identity of both states that can contribute to the harmonization of interest.

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