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Identity and security in China: the negative soft power of the China dream

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Introduction

It has been twenty-five years since Joseph Nye introduced the concept of 'soft power'. The shift from thinking of international politics in terms of the security studies calculus of 'bombs and bullets' and institutional liberalism's networks of economic cooperation was path-breaking. Soft power's new attention to issues of culture, values and norms anticipated what came to be called the 'cultural turn' in IR (see Lapid and Kratochwil 1997).

Even so, discussions of the soft power of the People's Republic of China (PRC), like those of American soft power, generally treat it as an empirical question: rather than counting bombs and bullets, analysts measure the expansion of China's global media platforms, the growing number of Confucius Institutes, and the growth of other soft power 'resources'. Scholars thus generally treat culture and power as measurable entities, with many in the PRC lamenting that China 'punches below its weight' in terms of the international influence expected of a great power.

This essay, along other articles in this special issue on 'Soft Power in Hard States', questions the empiricist/positivist framing of the analysis of soft power. Rather, it locates 'soft power discourse' in a normative dynamic (Callahan and Barabantseva 2011). Instead of accepting that soft power is a material entity that can be measured, it argues that soft power, like identity and security more generally (Walker 1993; Campbell 1998), is a social

construction. Hence it shifts from an empiricist explanation that relies on a truthful representation of the facts, to a hermeneutic understanding that relies on persuasive interpretation (Shapiro 2013, pp. 29-30; Bryman 2012, pp. 26-32): rather than calculate 'how much', it asks 'what does soft power mean?', and 'does it mean something different in an authoritarian state?'

Simply put, the essay argues that soft power works in a different way in China. While Nye sees soft power as a positive attractive force that is useful for a state's foreign policy, Chinese discussion of soft power is interesting because it does the opposite: soft power is negative rather than positive, and is employed as a tool in domestic policy more than in foreign policy.

When thinking about China's curious approach to soft power, two recent events in London come to mind. To celebrate the 90th birthday of Henry Kissinger in May 2014, the Rothschild Foundation sponsored the first annual 'Henry Kissinger Lecture' at the Royal Academy of Art in London. The lecture was delivered by noted philosopher Tu Weiming on the topic 'Cultivating a Culture of Peace and Understanding: A Vision for 21st Century China'. For many, this is a prime example of China's growing soft power: a European foundation sponsoring a Chinese-American philosopher to promote Chinese values to an elite international audience in the United Kingdom. Even more interesting was how the otherwise arch-realist Kissinger responded to Tu's lecture by rehearsing the idealist narrative of China's 'Confucian Pacifist' strategic culture (see Kissinger 2011). Here, both speakers present China as a positive attractive force in world affairs.

London witnessed another Chinese soft power event in January 2014 when Ambassador Liu Xiaoming (2014) tried to build friendship with Britons

by denouncing Japan as ‘Voldemort’ in both the print and the electronic media. Many thought that such name-calling was strange for a diplomat, and were not impressed by China’s literal demonizing of Japan (Hayashi, K 2014; McCurry 2014; ‘Latest China-Japan Spat’ 2014). Yet Ambassador Liu’s high profile criticism of Japan in the UK was seen as very successful in Beijing; over the next month China’s ambassadors in the United States, Australia and other countries engaged in similar public diplomacy activities in those countries’ national media.

What are we to do with these two examples? Is one soft power because it presents China as an attractive force on the world stage, and the other not because it involves denouncing another country? Or does the Voldemort strategy of demonizing other countries constitute a different form of soft power? This essay will use Chinese president Xi Jinping’s new ‘China Dream’ discourse to explore what could be called China’s ‘negative soft power’ strategy. Rather than simply describing how China’s positive achievements and aspirations are being exported to the world, the essay explores how China dream discourse’s anti-Japanese, anti-American and anti-Western themes seek to build the positive Chinese self through the negative exclusion of Otherness.

While it is common now to dismiss Nye’s notion of soft power as a ‘fuzzy concept’, this essay takes it seriously by showing how soft power is employed in different ways in different contexts, specifically here how it takes a curiously negative form in Chinese discussions of the PRC’s relation to the world. This is increasingly important as China’s soft power strategy goes global due to the PRC’s growing wealth and confidence, in the context of

economic and political crises in Europe and the US since 2008 (Callahan 2013).

Power: Hard/soft, positive/negative, foreign/domestic

As mentioned above, Nye concentrates on the positive aspects of soft power as a foreign policy tool. He famously defines it as ‘the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments’ (Nye 2004, p. x). The Chinese case, however, suggests that we need a more complex view of soft power dynamics. Rather than limit our inquiry to ‘soft power’ as a ‘positive’ tool for ‘foreign policy’, it is helpful to understand the contingent dynamics of hard/soft power, positive/negative strategies, and foreign/domestic politics. Nye himself is going in this direction with the new concept of ‘smart power’, a strategy that describes a successful ‘combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction’ (Nye 2011:xiii). Here I will concentrate on the positive/negative and foreign/domestic relations that are less discussed in Nye’s work.

First we should note that Chinese soft power is not an under-researched topic. Since the mid-2000s there has been a large number of articles and books published in China, and many in English as well. Chinese interest in ‘soft power’ can be traced back to 1993, when Wang Huning (1993), who went on to become China’s most important establishment intellectual, published an article commenting on Nye’s new concept. Soft power was then employed in the early 2000s to explain Beijing’s shift to cultural views of domestic and foreign policy, most notably when President Hu Jintao launched his goal of ‘building a harmonious society’ in 2004, and

'building a harmonious world' in 2005. Discussion in China really took off after Hu (2007) declared his goal to build China's 'soft power' in his Report to the 17th Party Congress in 2007. This led to hundreds of articles in open-source academic journals, as well as classified research projects at official think tanks, including the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), and the Strategic Studies Institute of the Central Party School (see Men 2013, pp. 37-65; CICIR 2008; Li Mingjiang 2009). Outside China, academic, journalistic and think-tank analyses of Chinese soft power also began appearing in the mid-2000s (Gill and Huang 2006; Kurlantzick 2007; Callahan and Barabantseva 2011; Barr 2011; McGiffert 2009; Cohen and Greenberg 2009; Shambaugh 2013, pp. 207-268).

These sources suggest that Beijing generally frames soft power in Nye's terms (2011, p. 84; Nye and Wang 2009, p. 19; also see Armitage and Nye 2007): 'The soft power of a country rests heavily on three basic resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority).' Chinese scholars also develop Nye's ideas: for example, in a public version of his classified report to the Central Party School, Men Honghua (2013, pp. 43-44) defines China's soft power in terms of culture (including traditional culture), ideology, the China model of development (i.e. the Beijing Consensus rather than the Washington Consensus), the international system, and international image.

Certainly, as in other countries, in China soft power is a contested concept. There are vociferous debates, but they are generally about where to find China's soft power resources, with arguments about what should be

stressed: culture (ancient and/or modern), politics (socialism with Chinese characteristics), or economic development (the China model) (Men 2013; Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 212-15). Even so, the consensus in the PRC is that the objective of soft power is to fight against those who see China as a threat, and cultivate those who see it as an opportunity. Among many analysts both inside and outside China, for example, the 2008 Olympics is taken as a key success for China's soft power strategy because it presented the PRC to the world as a country that is physically strong, technologically advanced and deeply civilized.

Certainly, much of the discussion of China's soft power highlights the positive attractive nature of Chinese culture, values and foreign policy. What is under-researched is the theoretical dynamics of positive/negative and domestic/foreign. Rather than take for granted that we understand what the 'Chinese values' are that inform the PRC's soft power, debates over the sources of soft power show how Chinese values are being actively produced in an international dialogical process. Hence soft power is about more than the export of pre-existing essential values—it also involves the production of values both at home and abroad. Like in America, China's soft power actually takes shape through the romanticization of a particular national culture into 'universally desirable values'. Before it can spread values abroad, soft power policy first needs to produce and police values at home. Soft power thus is not an entity that can be empirically measured, so much as a domestic process of social construction that defines the symbolic borders of self and Other, and thus of identity and security (see Connolly 1991, pp. 36-63; Walker 1993; Campbell 1998; Callahan 2010).

Following this line of argument for the Japanese case, David Leheny (2006, p. 223) feels that the concept of soft power 'has less value as a tool for evaluating Japan's regional importance than it does as a heuristic device for grasping how Japanese policymakers now see their regional role.' I would push this argument one step further to suggest that soft power discourse is a useful heuristic device for understanding how Chinese policymakers and public intellectuals are actively constructing a 'China' and a 'world' to promote their ideological projects. In other words, soft power is primarily an issue of domestic politics—determining China's future direction—and only secondarily about international politics. While Chinese discussions of soft power certainly seek to build favour among foreign audiences, they are also concerned with the identity/security issue of safeguarding regime legitimacy at home (see Edney 2015).

This domestic focus is part of what Chinese Foreign Affairs University Vice President Qin Yaqing calls the PRC's 'identity dilemma'. Rather than worrying about how the PRC fits into international institutions like the WTO or the United Nations, Qin (2006) argues that the main issue for the PRC's engagement with the world is the identity politics of answering the question 'Who is China?' This identity dilemma is part of a broad and ongoing debate in the PRC about the 'moral vacuum' that China faces after three decades of economic reform and opening up. In other words, intellectuals from across the political spectrum—liberals, socialists, traditionalists and militarists—all worry about the 'values crisis' presented by what they call China's new 'money-worship' society (see Liu 2010; Xu 2011; Pan 2009). The heart of Chinese foreign policy thus is not a security dilemma between great powers, but an

'identity dilemma' within China as people ask 'Who is China?', and 'What kind of world does it want?' (Qin 2006, p. 13).

The domestic focus of soft power and foreign policy also leads us to the other contingent dynamic: positive/negative. Certainly, Chinese culture is presented as a positive 'treasure box' of soft power resources, and Chinese history as a positive example of peace and development that is still relevant today. China's domestic policy of 'harmonious society' and its foreign policy of 'peacefully rising' in a 'harmonious world' are all based on the idealized view of Chinese civilization as open to the world and tolerant of outsiders. 'Peaceful rise' refers not just to recent experience, but looks to China's imperial history as the benevolent great power that presided over hundreds of years of peace in East Asia (see Kang 2007; Katzenstein 2012, Callahan 2012; Rozman 2013). Chinese soft power discourse thus looks to traditional Chinese civilization as a resource for Chinese values in the twenty-first century, especially the values of peace and harmony.

Yet alongside this positive view of a benevolent China that embraces the outside world, identity and security are linked in the negative process of drawing symbolic borders between self and Other. Rather than a set of stable 'essential values', civilization here is better understood as a contingent discourse that takes shape in relation to its opposite: barbarism. As political theorist Walter Benjamin (1968, p. 256-7) argues, 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.' In these contingent self/Other relations, whenever we declare something civilized, we are simultaneously declaring something else barbaric (Todorov 2010; Campbell 1998). While Chinese texts often talk about 5000 years of

civilization, it is necessary to recognize that in order to affirm 'civilization', they first need to create and then exclude 'barbarians'.

Certainly, the difference between civilization and barbarism seems obvious; but as historian Arthur Waldron (1990, p. 190) points out that answering the questions 'Who is China?' and 'Where is China?' has never been easy. Foreign policy elites in imperial China had their own identity dilemma, and thus constantly debated where to draw the border between inside and outside as they defined their 'civilization' with and against the 'barbarian'. Identity and security are linked here in a moral hierarchy to divide the Chinese self from the barbaric Other, with 'China being internal, large, and high and barbarians being external, small and low' (Yang 1968, p. 20).

This is not just a debate about ancient history: the Civilization/barbarian distinction that informed Chinese domestic and foreign policy in imperial times is making a comeback today as a model for domestic politics and international affairs (see Ma Rong 2004; Leibold 2013; Tobin 2014). Domestic politics thus is tied to foreign relations through this distinction: a positive, civilized inside takes shape only when it is distinguished from a negative barbaric outside.

China's current identity/security dynamic operates in much the same way through 'negative soft power': the Chinese self is defined as 'civilized' through the deliberate creation and then exclusion of Others as 'barbarians'. This process polices what counts as 'Chinese' in a way that simultaneously creates imagined Others: 'America', 'Japan', and 'the West'.

This is similar to the process whereby the Russia seeks to generate soft power through the promotion of anti-American conspiracy theories on the RT television network: the goal is less to promote Russia values, and more to

'spoil the image of the United States' (Yablokov 2015, p. 12). Chinese texts likewise often promote anti-American conspiracy theories: like in Russia, the pro-democratic 'Colour Revolutions' are reframed as secret conspiracies for the immoral intervention of 'the West' into the internal affairs of legitimate states. Beijing's official media narrative for Hong Kong's 'Occupy Central' demonstrations in 2014 asserts that they are not a grassroots democracy movement, but an 'American' plot to Westernize and divide China (Bradsher 2014). According to Peking University academic Pan Wei (2010, p. 58), Chinese critics on the mainland who advocate deeper political reform really want to 'demolish the Forbidden City in order to build the White House' in China, so 'foreign forces can control China's military, politics, economy and society'. Democracy here is not an ideal or a practice, but a foreign conspiracy, a 'booby trap', which the West employs to enslave China.

While Russia's negative soft power strategy uses conspiracy theories as a populist tool to reallocate power between the US and the Russian governments (Yablokov 2015, p. 2), China's negative soft power strategy is employed primarily as a tactic for the domestic problem of building regime legitimacy (see Edney 2012, 2015). Domestic/foreign policy thus is closely linked to civilization/barbarism and positive/negative expressions of power. In other words, to understand the positive soft power of China's dreams, you need to understand the negative soft power of its nightmares.

Soft Power and the China Dream

The concepts of 'soft power' and the 'China dream' were linked by Chinese scholars even before the China dream became an official slogan in 2012 (Li

2011). Xi Jinping (2014) discussed them together most prominently when he declared that to 'realize the China dream', the PRC needs to 'enhance [its] national cultural soft power.' It should not be surprising that these two concepts are now commonly linked by scholars and officials in China (Zhang 2014; Cai 2013a, 2013b; Men 2014; Wang Yiwei 2013b; Wang Yiwei 2014), simply because they are invoked as a response to the 'values crisis' that has worried China's public intellectuals over the past few years.

The China dream became a major issue on November 29, 2012 when Xi Jinping declared that his 'China dream' is for the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation', which, as he later explained, means 'achieving a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people's happiness' (Xi 2013, pp. 3, 5). Like with Chinese descriptions of the PRC's soft power, Xi's China dream appeals to a combination of traditional China and socialist modernity: especially the China model of development and Confucian civilization. The role of political values in official China dream discourse is manifest in the current propaganda poster campaign that celebrates the China dream alongside traditional Chinese values and 'core socialist values' (see Fig. 1).

Certainly, the China dream is a positive expression of the PRC's goals in domestic and foreign policy: to make the Chinese nation wealthy and strong, while providing the Chinese people with the social and economic benefits of a 'moderately prosperous society'. In 2012-13, many people in the PRC were talking about their individual dreams: the China dream of getting your 'dream house' was a popular topic, as was the 'entrepreneurial dream' and the 'dream of the good life' (Ren 2013, p. 1; 'Zhongguo meng' 2013).



Fig. 1: Propaganda posters, Beijing, September 2014

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The *Southern Weekend* (*Nanfang Zhoumo*) newspaper joined this values debate with its January 2013 New Year's editorial, 'The China Dream, The Dream of Constitutionalism'. It called for legal limits on the power of the party-state, and argued that the quest for human dignity needs to go beyond economic prosperity: 'Our dream today cannot possibly end with material things; we seek a spiritual wholeness as well. It cannot possibly end with national strength alone; it must include self-respect for every person.' The editorial concluded that 'the real "China Dream" is a dream for freedom and constitutional government' (see Dai 2013; 'Nanfang Zhoumo' 2013; Bandurski 2013). Unfortunately, the *Southern Weekend* editorial was censored, and then

rewritten by the provincial propaganda chief to endorse a national dream of strong state power.

Indeed, when Xi (2013, pp. 3-4) introduced his China dream in November 2012, he stressed how the country and the nation have to come first: 'History tells us, the destiny of each person is closely connected to the destiny of the country and of the nation. Only when the country does well, and the nation does well, can every person do well' (also see Ren 2013, p. 1). He later told a group of elite youth that they did not just have a 'personal relation to the China dream,' but had a 'personal duty to completely achieve the China dream' (Xi 2013, p. 6). In other words, individual dreams are important, but only acceptable when they support the national dream.

Actually, the negative strategy of this soft power project was quite clear from the very beginning. Xi Jinping first discussed the China dream at the end of a tour of the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibit at China's National History Museum, where he declared that he had 'learned deep historical lessons'. History here is not merely China's five thousand years of glorious civilization, but also its 170 years of humiliation where 'capitalist imperialist powers invaded and plundered China', and imposed 'humiliating unequal treaties' after the first Opium War with Britain 1840 (Qiu Shi 2013). It is important that Xi launched the China dream as his signature slogan at the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibit because it is the institutional home of China's victimized sense of national identity as national humiliation (Callahan 2010).

Although the national humiliation historical narrative is presented as a 'fact' in Chinese textbooks, it is better understood as the party-state's response to the 1989 Tiananmen movement. A patriotic education policy was

formulated in the early 1990s to shift the focus of youthful attention away from domestic issues and towards foreign problems. National humiliation themes thus are utilized in patriotic education not so much to reeducate the youth (as in the past), as to *redirect* protest toward 'the foreigner' as the key enemy (Xi 2013, p. 6; Ren 2013, p. 1).

Ambassador Liu's depiction of Japan as 'Voldemort' thus is hardly exceptional. China's national humiliation/patriotic education campaign has made dehumanized images of Japanese as barbarians the stock-in-trade of the PRC's mediascape. In 2012, for example, sixty percent of the films and television shows made at China's premier Hengdian World Studios were about the Anti-Japanese War (1937-45), and around 700 million Japanese people were killed in all Chinese films that year (Johnson 2013, pp. 48, 54). (The total population of Japan in 2012 was 127 million.) This is not a coincidence or an unintended consequence of China's censorship regime that makes more contemporary topics off-limits for filmmakers. Especially since Xi Jinping came to power, painting Japan as a barbaric militarist state has become a key soft power objective. As a military scholar explains, 'All Confucius Institutes should shape world public opinion to revile Japanese militarism' (Peng 2014, p. 34).

The China dream thus is part of China's identity dilemma. It provokes discussions of Chinese identity that range from a broad aspiration for individual and national success, to a narrower victimized form of illiberal and xenophobic nationalism. The optimism of the China dream here relies on the pessimism of the national humiliation nightmare. The China dream thus is not just a positive expression of national aspirations; at the same time, it is a

negative soft power strategy that cultivates an anti-Western and an anti-Japanese form of Chinese identity.

China dream/American dream

Many discussions of the China dream in the PRC actually start with the American dream (Zhang 2014; Nanfang Zhoumo 2014; Zhou 2011; Liu Yazhou in Liu Mingfu 2010; Zhao 2006; Brady 2008, p. 5; Wang Yiwei 2013a; Shi 2013), which should not be surprising since the American dream is a global discourse. One scholar even stated that only great powers like China and the United States 'dare to have national dreams' (Shi 2013).

But the China dream is usually discussed as a challenge to the American dream. For example, just before Xi Jinping went to the US to meet President Barak Obama in June 2013, the *People's Daily* explained the 'Seven Major Differences between the China Dream and the American Dream' in terms of China's dream of national wealth and power, and Americans' dreams of personal freedom and happiness (Shi 2013). China here is defined as a nation united in its virtuous pursuit of global power, while America is portrayed as a collection of individuals bent on their own selfish schemes.

The morality of the China dream was brought home in a web-based forum called 'Immoral and Untrustworthy Americans' hosted by the *People's Daily* in May 2013, again, just before Xi's visit to the United States ("Wude wuxin Meiguoren" 2013). The forum invited Chinese readers to share their bad experiences in the United States as a way of reminding people that America has its own problems. Official commentators thus conclude that the

American dream as a whole is a 'failure' because not every single American has been able to achieve their individual dream (Xu 2013, p. 127).

Although he does not point directly at the American dream, Xi Jinping (2013, p. 27) told journalists from BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) that China 'can't follow other countries' development models'. A scholar fleshed out this point in the *Global Times*: 'We do not dream the dreams of other countries, especially not the American dream. The American model causes great harm,' and thus is a bad example for China (Wang Yiwei 2013a).

The goal here is first to convince people that values are 'national' (other than from some other form of community), and then to show them that Chinese values are not only different from American values, but are the opposite: Chinese values are good, while American values are evil (see Tian 2013; Zhang 2014). Once again, the Chinese self is formed against an imagined Other as the civilization/barbarism distinction is employed to draw lines between inside and outside, China and the world.

This is a matter of international politics because many commentators, including liberal intellectuals like journalist Hu Shuli (2013), argue that China and the United States are involved in a Cold War-style battle of the American dream versus the China dream. The military agrees: 'Silent Contest' (*Jiaoliang wusheng* 2013), a documentary film from China's National Defense University, sees American values as the main existential threat to the PRC. China's new National Security Council likewise sees 'Western values' as a major 'unconventional threat' faced by the PRC (Hayashi, N. 2014; Edney 2015). Hence liberal journalist Hu Shuli (2013) follows the general trend to argue that once Beijing has clarified its China dream, then 'Chinese diplomacy

will have found a new lease on life', and will be able to use its soft power to beat America on the global stage.

Wang Yiwei's (2013b) *Global Times* article 'Foreigners' 10 Mistakes about the "China Dream" neatly summarizes the logic of negative soft power (also see Men 2013, p. 40). To present 'China' as a positive force, it has to blame 'foreigners' (and ideologies that it labels as 'foreign') for misunderstanding or maligning China's rise. Foreigners' 'mistakes' include 1) calling it the 'China dream' rather than the 'Chinese dream'; 2) saying that the China dream will replace the American dream; 3) seeing the China dream as utopian rather than practical; 4) thinking that the China dream entails abandoning communist ideals; 5) thinking that the China dream means abandoning the pragmatic policy of reform and opening; 6) seeing the China dream as the constitutional dream, the dream of human rights, and the democracy dream; 7) seeing the China dream as a dream of modernization as Westernization; 8) thinking that the rejuvenation of China includes a resurrection of the imperial tributary system; 9) thinking that the China dream is the dream of China's rise; and 10) seeing the Chinese dream as one of liberal nationalism that is actually narrow nationalism.

While Wang blames 'foreigners' for 'misunderstanding' China, a closer look at these complaints shows that they actually reflect debates about the meaning of the China dream that are taking place within the PRC among Chinese citizens. China dream discourse here is a key site of the PRC's identity dilemma, with a range of answers to the question 'Who is China?'

As 'mistake number one' shows, even how to translate 'Zhongguo meng' has become a key political issue. It is common now for Chinese officials and

intellectuals to criticize non-Chinese who translate it as 'The China dream' because they are worried that it suggests that the dream is for China to be a strong militarist state. People like Wang say that 'Chinese dream' is the correct translation because, like the American dream, it suggests a grassroots dream of the people, rather than the top-down dream of the party-state. Actually before 'Zhongguo meng' became an official slogan, covers of various books showed that the standard English translation was in fact 'The China Dream' (Liu Mingfu 2010; Zhou 2011). In the first few months of the slogan's life as an official policy, it was translated both as 'The China Dream' and the 'Chinese Dream' in official and unofficial texts. The official English-language translation of 'Zhongguo meng', however, dramatically shifted from 'The China Dream' to the 'Chinese Dream' in March 2013 for the reasons noted above: it promotes a less threatening notion of Chinese aspirations (see 'Chasing' 2013). Hence this example shows two important things about soft power discourse in China: 1) the party-state seeks to use its tried-and-true domestic propaganda strategy to control discourse in international space (see Edney 2012); and 2) Chinese identity is constructed with and against the foreign Other.

The other nine points are involved in similar discursive politics. Rather than being a description of 'China' correcting 'foreign' mistakes, they rehearse many of the debates among Chinese that we examined above: some Chinese call for individual dreams, while others concentrate on collective dreams; some demand a constitutional dream, while others say this is inappropriate for the PRC; and so on. The point of China dream policy thus is not only to tell people what they can dream, but more importantly, what they cannot dream:

the negative soft power strategy thus serves to exclude many individual dreams, the constitutional dream, the American dream, and so on.

Wang's article thus exemplifies the two main arguments of this essay: 1) rather than extolling China's attractive strengths, soft power is often expressed in a negative way that equates 'the foreign' with 'mistakes' that are either stupid misunderstandings or evil conspiracies, both of which are accused of undermining China's rightful rise; 2) this discussion is largely taking place in domestic space through Chinese-language materials involved in the 'identity dilemma' about who China should be—and who it should not be.

Rather than being attractive and embracing difference, the China dream is part of a broad practice whereby identity is constituted by excluding difference. It is seen as a tool in a global soft power battle that will produce clear winners and losers in a life-or-death zero-sum struggle. As one of the first theorists of the China dream, Colonel Liu Mingfu (2010, p. 9), explained, 'If China in the twenty-first century cannot become world number one, cannot become the top power, then inevitably it will become a straggler that is cast aside.'

Conclusion

This essay has argued that we need to have a more complex view of soft power. First it questioned the dominant view that soft power is an entity, a variable, which can be empirically measured. It argued that soft power is best understood as a social construction that can tell us about identity and security

dynamics, in particular the contingent relations of hard/soft power, positive/negative strategies, and foreign/domestic politics.

While mainstream soft power theory looks to idealized notions of the self (e.g. 'national image') that are exported to benefit foreign relations, the essay used Chinese texts to develop the idea of 'negative soft power', where identity is constructed by excluding difference in an identity/security dynamic that primarily works in domestic space. Chinese civilization characteristically is seen as a major source of the PRC's soft power; the essay argued that civilization is not an 'entity' but generally takes shape against the negative idealization of 'barbarism'. Even very positive discourses like the China dream rely on mobilizing negative images of 'the foreign' as barbaric.

Although Chinese soft power discourse generally works in domestic space to generate national identity and regime legitimacy, China's negative soft power strategy is increasingly going global due to a combination of factors: especially, China's new wealth and confidence in the context of economic and political crises in Europe and the US since 2008.

One of the most prominent aspects of China's soft power policy is the spread of Confucius Institutes around the world since 2004. According to Vice-Minister Xu Lin, the Director-General of the Confucius Institute Headquarters (CIH), Confucius Institutes are the 'brightest brand of China's soft power' ('2006: Kongzi xueyuan' 2007). But as events at the European Association of Chinese Studies (EACS) biennial conference in 2014 showed, even China's brightest brand employs negative soft power strategies. CIH was one of the co-sponsors of the conference, where Xu gave a keynote speech. According to a report by the EACS president, Xu was upset by some of the paper topics,

and dismayed by the prominent display in the conference materials of information about Taiwanese sponsors. Xu's solution was to steal all of the programs and tear out pages that referred to CIH, Taiwan's Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation and the Taiwan National Central Library. When EACS President Roger Greatrex discovered this censorship, he ordered that copies of the excised pages be distributed to all conference participants. The EACS report concluded by proclaiming that 'Censorship of conference materials cannot and will never be tolerated by the EACS' (Greatrex 2014a, 2014b).

Such censorship was seen as a setback for China's soft power in many journalistic commentaries ('Beijing's Propaganda' 2014; Redden 2014; Cai 2014). But back in Beijing, Vice Minister Xu was cheered on by the *Global Times*, which saw her page-tearing as a heroic patriotic action in the fight against Taiwanese independence ('Hanban zhuren' 2014). Once again, the main audience for soft power activities, even those of China's brightest brand, is not outside China, but inside the PRC. It works through the negative strategy of censoring academic materials, rather than the positive strategy of spreading Chinese civilization. Trouble in Europe does not matter as much as success in Beijing.

The China dream likewise informs soft power discourse that is very popular within the PRC (Ma Haiyan 2013; Liu Xiaoying 2013; Cai 2013b), but which gains little traction abroad. This makes sense as it promotes largely negative portrayals of foreign countries in order to mobilize China's domestic audience (see Zhang 2014). In this way, the China dream's negative soft power evokes a form of nationalism that is employed to safeguard the CCP's regime legitimacy (see Edney 2015). China Dream discourse thus combines

the insights of Edney's and Yablokov's (2015) articles: soft power is generated through the negative dynamic of conspiracy theories in the service of building national 'cohesion' in domestic space. While the PRC is strong in economic and military terms, its regime security as 'fragile superpower' is more tenuous (Shirk 2008). Hence soft power in China takes on more negative forms that are directed at a domestic audience.

Yet according to Nye's version of soft power, foreign audiences are crucial; if soft power products are not attractive to them, then the soft power strategy is unsuccessful. Certainly, we could follow the current academic trend to celebrate how China has adopted and adapted the soft power concept to suit its needs. But if a goal is to turn enemies into friends, then it is not working very well. Here the PRC is a 'partial power' whose global influence is broad, but thin (Shambaugh 2013, p. 268).

This is a major problem for soft power in hard states.

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