Transitioning Chinese Diplomatic Strategies: From Neo-Liberal "Soft Power" to Realist "Sharp Power" through Digital Media

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Abstract

This study explores the transition in Chinese diplomatic strategies, examining the shift from neo-liberal "soft power" to realist "sharp power" through the use of mass media. While China's "soft power" traditionally focused on cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and peaceful engagement, this research highlights how its strategic use of digital media has evolved into a tool of "sharp power", characterized by manipulation, censorship, and coercive influence. Drawing on both neoliberal and realist theoretical frameworks, the study contrasts the cooperative, attraction-based methods of "soft power" with more assertive, manipulative techniques associated with 'sharp power'. Through the perspective of media influence, the paper analyses China's global efforts to reshape narratives, manage perceptions, and counter Western influence, particularly in regions of strategic interest. This transition reflects China's broader shift from engagement to strategic competition, aligning its digital diplomacy with its geopolitical ambitions and the realities of the current international system. It explores how the dual nature of China's digital diplomacy; propagating mutual understanding and cooperation on one hand while engaging in covert operations to challenge the integrity of the global information on the other.

Keywords

Introduction

Diplomacy is important for understanding international relations and cooperation among nations. Chinese diplomacy is becoming a debated issue, whether one talks about "soft power diplomacy" (Nye, 1990)[1] "wolf-warrior diplomacy," (Dai & Luqiu, 2022)[2] or a new term associated with it, "sharp power diplomacy" (Walker & Ludwig, 2017)[3]. Western scholars residing in China are expressing concerns about various issues related to China's development on the international stage, describing its greatest threat as its national image (Wang, 2008). But China gives importance to its national interests and sovereignty over its international image (Chen, 2014). The fact that China is now emerging as one of the principal markets for fashion, food and cultural consumption is a lucrative prospect for multinational companies. However, what makes China an engaging and challenging market is the notion of "Chinese" nationalism being spread through these industries and therefore, affecting the market economy. This in turn has a polarizing intent on power hegemonies due to the sheer magnitude of the Chinese populace and China's own aggressive push towards self-aggrandisement.

The term "public diplomacy" is relatively new, first introduced in 1965 (Cull, 2008). Public diplomacy has now entered the information age. In comparison, traditional public diplomacy was

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[1] The "soft power" concept was first coined by the American political scientist Joseph Nye in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power (1990)*. He further developed the concept in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (2004)*, which he describes as the capacity to attract and persuade without the use of coercion (hard power) or economic incentives.
See more on Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, *80*, 153171-. https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580

[2] Wolf Warrior Diplomacy is a phrase coined in the late 2010s to refer to a new, forceful type of Chinese diplomacy. It is marked by aggressive rhetoric, particularly on social media and in public spaces, in which Chinese diplomats vociferously defend Chinese interests and berate foreign governments. The term is drawn from the Chinese patriotic action movies "Wolf Warrior" (2015) and "Wolf Warrior 2" (2017), which show Chinese soldiers defending national interests overseas heroically. It came to prominence during President Xi Jinping's rule, particularly after 2018, when China took on an assertive foreign policy stance amid growing tensions with the U.S., Australia, India, and others. One of the major players in this genre is Zhao Lijian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman famous for his confrontational tweets.
See Dai, Y., & Luqiu, L. R. (2022). Wolf Warriors and Diplomacy in the New Era: An Empirical Analysis of China's Diplomatic Language. *China Review*, *22*(2), 253283-. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48671506

[3] Sharp power diplomacy is the practice of manipulative and coercive manoeuvring by authoritarian regimes to affect and destabilize democratic institutions and societies. It was coined in the 2017 National Endowment for Democracy (NED) report by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, *"Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence"*. Contrasting with soft power (to attract and co-opt) or hard power (to compel by force or money), China's sharp power pushes into and influences the political and information spheres of target nations, typically using media control, censorship, disinformation, and influence operations.
See Walker, C., & Ludwig, J. (2017). *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*. National Endowment for Democracy. https://www.ned.org/sharp-power-rising-authoritarian-influence-forum-report/

rooted in statecraft and cultural exchange and involved deliberate efforts by governments to communicate and promote their national interests, values, and policies to foreign publics (Gilboa, 2008). In the information age, public diplomacy has transformed into a dynamic and multifaceted practice, leveraging digital technologies and social media platforms to allow for direct and instantaneous engagement with global audiences (Nye, 2008).

The People's Republic of China (PRC) uses the term *"xuan chuan,"* instead of the English word "propaganda". *"Xuan chuan"* has a positive meaning, as it includes congenial activities such as broadcast news, the overall formation of ideology, and advertising. "*Xuan chuan*" has two parts; *"nei xuan"* (internal propaganda) and *wai xuan* (external propaganda), which refer to the promotion of China's image at both the domestic and international levels (Wang, 2008). According to a report by the *Pew Research Center*, in 24 countries surveyed, perceptions of China's military and technological development were 54 percent and 69 percent positive, respectively. However, China lagged behind in terms of "soft power" (Silver et al., 2023).

China started to invest in "soft power" during the tenure of former President Hu Jintao at the government level in 2007. Terms such as "peaceful rise" and 'harmonious society' were associated with Jintao, particularly in his speech during the communique of the Sixth Plenum of the Sixteenth CPC (Communist Party of China) Central Committee (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Manchester). The term "peaceful rise" was originally introduced by Chinese Zheng Bijian of the China Reform Forum (Xinhua News Agency, 2004). Even Hu Jintao's successor, Xi Jinping, used the term 'soft power' in 2014. In an article in *China Daily,* he stated, "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world" (Biswas & Tortajada, 2018). A major speech by president Xi at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) outlined the concept of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era". The goal is to make China a "prosperous, powerful, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful country" by the year 2035 (Xinhua, 2017), fulfilling the promise of "Chinese national rejuvenation" and positioning China to lead the world through its national and international strength and influence (Xinhua, 2023).

Chinese "soft power" is also seen in its digital diplomacy. The renowned professor of journalism and public diplomacy, Philip Seib, in an interview, expressed his dislike for the terms 'digital diplomacy' and "cyber diplomacy," stating that these are "tools and substance, so cyber diplomacy and digital diplomacy are the tools, but diplomacy is the substantive part" (Seib, 2017). Similarly, tools such as social media have become indispensable in modern diplomacy, providing governments with direct channels to engage with global audiences, disseminate information, and counter negative narratives. For China, platforms such as Twitter (X), WeChat, TikTok, Sina Weibo,

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and Chinese games by popular companies like Tencent Games and NetEase. have opened new paths for projecting its "soft power," while simultaneously employing "sharp power" tactics to advance its geopolitical goals (Jiang, 2016).

Disinformation and propaganda spread online have contaminated the public sphere. Globally, internet freedom is declining, and this erosion is undermining the very foundations of democracy. Over the past years, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar have witnessed violent outbreaks against ethnic and religious minorities, fuelled by false rumours and hateful propaganda spread online (Shahbaz, 2018). On sensitive issues, China has used both online and real-world intimidation to silence dissent and encourage self-censorship. It has also taken action against corporations that are perceived to challenge its desired narrative on issues like Xinjiang. In democratic countries, Beijing has exploited open societies by taking legal action to supress critical voices. On WeChat, an app popular among Chinese-speaking communities outside the PRC, Beijing has implemented technical censorship and harassed individual content producers (Global Engagement Centre, 2023).

The PRC advances digital authoritarianism by using digital infrastructure to supress freedom of expression, censor independent news, spread disinformation, and infringe on other human rights (Shahbaz, 2018). An article in *The Guardian* disclosed TikTok's moderation guidelines, which involve censoring political content. These bans include prohibiting videos on "highly controversial topics, such as separatism, religion sects conflicts, conflicts between ethnic groups for instance exaggerating the Islamic sects conflicts, inciting the independence of Northern Ireland, Republic of Chechnya, Tibet and Taiwan, exaggerating the ethnic conflict between black and white" (Hern, 2019, para. 8), "demonization or distortion of local or countries' history such as May 1998 riots of Indonesia, Cambodian genocide and the Tiananmen Square incidents", and "criticism/attack towards policies, social rules of any country such as Constitutional monarchy, Monarchy, Parliamentary system, separation of powers and the socialist system" (Hern, 2019, para. 6). It also bans a specific list of twenty "foreign leaders or sensitive figures" including Kim Jong-Il, Kim Il-Sung, Mahatma Gandhi, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Barack Obama, Kim Jong-un, Shinzo Abe, Park Guen-hee, Joko Widodo, and Narendra Modi. Xi Jinping, the Chinese President, is absent from the list (Hern , 2019).

This study examines the evolution of Chinese diplomatic strategies through the lens of digital media, exploring how the shift from neo-liberal "soft power" to realist "sharp power" manifests in media practices and international communication. By integrating neoliberal and realist perspectives, the research provides a comprehensive analysis of how Chinese digital diplomacy reflects broader changes in its global strategy. The neoliberal perspective highlights the initial focus

on attraction and cooperation, while the realist perspective underscores the current emphasis on power dynamics, strategic competition, and influence operations. Social media has enabled the world to develop its own subjective notions of the Chinese nation, unlike the opacity of the past. It should be noted that the 'transparency' of Chinese mass and social media is alleged to be completely controlled by the State, with strict enforcement against non-compliance narratives. Media channels such as iQYI, Rakuten Viki, and WeTV have been used to gradually shape perceptions of China as a country with a normative state of social welfare and human rights.

Analysis of "Soft Power" and "Sharp Power"

The word "power" is associated with authority, coercion, force, influence, violence, manipulation, and strength (Lukes, 2007). For realist Hans Morgenthau, human nature is driven by the desire to have power (Morgenthau, 1948). Power is maximised by various states and non-state actors to fulfil their interests. Therefore, states enhance their capabilities in terms of military strength, economy, territory, population, political stability, and competence (Waltz, 1990). However, many terms have been invented to describe new concepts of power in the 21st century, as traditional uses of power are increasingly avoided by states and non-state actors in this globalized world. These include "soft power", "smart power," and "hard power," which are used by states in international relations.

1. Defining Soft Power

The present study incorporates "soft power" within a "neo-liberal" approach. Joseph Nye is most appropriately classified as a neoliberal institutionalist, although his writing includes pragmatic lessons from realism, especially in his theory of "soft power". Nye's theory of soft power-the capacity to influence preferences through attraction, cultural fascination, and values instead of "coercion-corresponds with neoliberal institutionalism's focus on non-material influence, cooperation, and institution-bound interdependence (Nye, 2004). Neoliberalism, as described in Nye's joint effort with Robert Keohane, *Power and Interdependence* (1977), problematizes realism's emphasis on military and economic "hard power" by pointing to transnational actors, mutual benefits, and the diminishing salience of force in an interconnected world (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Soft power illustrates this trend, as it flourishes where states use diplomacy, cultural products (e.g., Hollywood, education), and membership in multilateral organizations (e.g., the UN) to establish legitimacy-a process underpinned by neoliberal conceptions of common norms and institutionalized cooperation (Nye, 1990). While realists such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer critique soft power as inferior to material power (Waltz, 1990; Mearsheimer, 2001), Nye counters that soft power can accompany hard power as part of an overarching strategy

of "smart power", giving a nod to realism's preoccupation with coercion but subordinating it to neoliberal goals of persuasion and cooperative systemic action (Nye, 2009). Therefore, Nye's soft power theory, based on attraction and institutional structures, places him solidly in the neoliberal school, despite his pragmatic use of realist understandings of power relations.

The concept of "soft power," as articulated by Joseph Nye Jr., fits well within the broader framework of neoliberalism in international relations. Neoliberalism emphasizes the importance of institutions, cooperation, norms, and economic interdependence in shaping global politics. From this perspective, soft power is seen as a key tool for achieving influence without coercion, aligning with the neoliberal focus on diplomacy, multilateralism, and shared global governance. Nye defines soft power as "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants- might be called co-optive power or soft power in contrast with hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants" (Nye, 1990, p. 166). It is a persuasive or attractive form of power where nations do not use "coercion" to fulfil their national interests. Through soft power, nations create an atmosphere in which foreign publics voluntarily opt to align with their preferences. Nye identifies three primary sources of soft power; culture (which is appealing to others), political values (in which a country's values are upheld), and foreign policy (when foreign publics perceive it as legitimate and morally authoritative). The practice of these tools has a long-term impact and exerts a positive influence (Nye, 1990).

Neoliberalism highlights the importance of states leveraging cultural, political, and diplomatic appeal to influence global actors. For example, the appeal of democratic values, human rights, and open markets is central to the "soft power" of countries like the United States and the European Union. Neoliberal theory stresses the importance of states working within global institutions. Soft power enables states to lead through example, setting agendas within organizations like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. Countries gain influence by being perceived as responsible, cooperative, and aligned with global norms (Ganti, 2014). Soft power aligns with neoliberal approaches to international relations, where cooperation, non-coercive engagement, and diplomacy are seen as key to global governance. Institutions, norms, and values shape state behaviour, often allowing for a more harmonious international system. It is exercised through diplomacy, cultural exchange programs, international broadcasting (such as the BBC and Al Jazeera), and global media, allowing states to project an image that resonates with foreign publics. Non-state actors such as NGOs, international organizations, and multinational corporations also serve as vehicles of "soft power" by promoting ideas and standards that enhance a country's global appeal. The United States is often cited as a primary example, using its popular culture (Hollywood, music, brands), higher education system, and promotion of democracy as soft power tools to enhance its global influence (Wilson, 2008).

2. Defining Sharp Power

Neo-realist thinker Kenneth Waltz, posits that the international system is inherently anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority to regulate state behaviour. This leads to constant competition among states for power and security. Many times, global governance institutions (e.g., the United Nations) have proven unsuccessful in coping with the anarchic nature of world affairs. In this competitive environment, nations rely on self-help, practicing state-centric diplomacy and seeking to maximize their relative power to deter threats and maintain their sovereignty (Waltz, 1988). Nations practice different tactics to exert their influence and maintain their survival in such a competitive environment. These tactics can take any form of "diplomacy" aimed at fulfilling national interests. Within this framework, sharp power becomes an essential tool for states to exert influence, disrupt adversaries, and secure their interests in a world where survival and competition are paramount.

"Sharp power" is a term coined in the 2017 report *"Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence,"* published by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and co-authored by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig. They define it as the ability to "pierce, penetrate or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries," (Walker & Ludwig, 2017, para. 5) in contrast to soft power, which uses the attraction of culture and values to enhance a country's strength. Walker argues that "Sharp power is part and parcel of the international turn that authoritarian states have taken in recent years, and its effects are increasingly visible in the institutions critical to democracies' being able to function as free and self-governing societies" (Walker, 2018, p. 9). The tactics used in "sharp power" often have short-term impacts and can exert a negative influence on foreign states (Walker, 2018).

The realist and neo-realist perspectives view global politics as a zero-sum game, where states prioritize their national interests through competitive and coercive means. States deploy power through manipulative and aggressive tactics, seeking dominance rather than cooperation. This perspective is closely associated with authoritarian states like China and Russia, which use "sharp power" to assert their influence globally. Authoritarian systems focus on controlling the narrative, expanding political influence, and undermining rival democratic states. China uses "sharp power" through its global media networks (e.g., CGTN) and Confucius Institutes (CIs) to influence perceptions of its governance model. Reports of disinformation campaigns, censorship, and influence over foreign academics exemplify sharp power in action (Global Engagement Centre Report, 2023). Critics argue that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a form of "sharp power," as it offers infrastructure investment to developing countries while potentially trapping them in unsustainable debt, leading to political leverage (McBridge et al., 2023).

3. Soft Power and Sharp Power: A Debate

Nye believes soft co-optive power is as crucial as hard command power. When a state can make its power appear legitimate to others, it faces less resistance to its objectives. An attractive culture and ideology encourage others to follow willingly (Nye, 1990). But in comparison to sharp power, authoritarian regimes manipulate the political and information environments of targeted countries through covert, coercive, and manipulative means. These tactics include spreading disinformation, censoring or controlling the media, infiltrating and influencing foreign academic institutions, and leveraging economic dependencies to exert political pressure (Mankikar, 2023).

Nye believes authoritarian states like Russia and China try to interfere in international affairs through "sharp power". Russian interference in the United States' presidential elections of 2016 and Chinese media control is examples of sharp power diplomacy. In the words of Nye, "China wants both the soft power of attraction and the coercive sharp power of disruption and censorship, but these two hard to combine" (Nye, 2020, para. 106). One can understand the comparison of soft and sharp power in the Table 1. The global narrative of "China threat theory" is circulated by western countries who have termed it "securitization". The purported threat from China is comprehensive, impacting every conceivable aspect of life in western societies. "The refined and expanded activities of authoritarians jeopardize the integrity of institutions ranging from media and entertainment companies to universities and professional sports enterprises. These institutions are particularly vulnerable to manipulation because in free societies, they are open to the outside world" (Zeli, 2024, para. 6).

The United Kingdom's MI6 chief Richard Moore said "China is an authoritarian state with different values" and is "exporting technology that enables a web of authoritarian control around the world". Moore has criticized Beijing's overconfidence as a "miscalculation", especially in the light of China's "sharp power" tactics, where it interferes in other democracies through undemocratic and unfair means (Global Times, 2021, para 2). Chinese Confucious Institutes (CIs) are seen as tools of "soft power". CIs have been established around the world to propagate Chinese culture and language. Nonetheless, they infringe on the academic and democratic environments of host countries, thereby transforming into "sharp power" (Nye, 2018).

Therefore, it is crucial to recognize China's tactics of "sharp power", where global dynamics are manipulated under the facade of "soft power" initiatives.

Table 1   Comparison of Soft power and Sharp power

Aspect	Soft Power	Sharp Power
Definition	Power through attraction and persuasion	Power through manipulation and coercion
Theoretical Basis	Neo-liberalism, focuses on multilateral diplomacy	Realism, focuses on competition and non-cooperative hegemonies
Tools	Culture, political values, and foreign policy	Propaganda, Cyber diplomacy, and diplomatic coercion
State and non-state actors	Democracies, NGOs, and international organizations	Authoritarian regimes (e.g. Russia and China)
Examples	U.S. cultural diplomacy, European Union's promotion of democracy	Russia's election interference in US of 2016, China's media control
Impact on foreign public	Long-term, positive influence	Short-term, disruptive or coercive influence

Source- A literature summary of above section.

The Contribution of Digital Media in Chinese Diplomacy

Digital media have become fragmented in recent times due to the advent of a paradoxical globalized technology. While on the one hand one can see that globalization has led to an increased usage of digital media as a connecting medium, on the other hand it has also created a nationalistic discourse based on certain niche requirements of the state and the open markets. As per Marshall McLuhan's idea of the "medium is the message", the internet has become a forum for anonymous "nationalization," which leads to the moulding of spectators' opinions (McLuhan, 2005). The "message," therefore, becomes a symbolic intent that is internalized as a persuasive force of the State. Louise Althusser spoke about Ideological State Apparatus, and today we see that popular media has become the institution through which the State not only moulds public opinion but it also acts as a surveillance tool on its own citizens. With identity markers being controlled by the State censor boards, popular media functions like the Foucauldian panopticon (Althusser, 1970). On the other hand, this has led to extremely favourable versions of the Chinese State being showcased in popular media, resulting in the "image" becoming more powerful than reality. Thus, popular media is often seen as an inextricable part of Chinese soft power diplomacy.

In the context of Chinese "soft power," Nye explains it relies on culture, political values, and foreign policy. Chinese culture plays a vital role in advancing its soft power. China actively promotes its cultural heritage through initiatives such as the establishment of Confucious Institutes (CIs) worldwide, which are meant to teach Chinese language and culture (Nye, 2008). China also

shapes global perceptions through its movies, television shows, and literature. Chinese movies such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000)*, *Hero (2002)*, *Kung Fu Hustle (2004),* and *The Message (2009)* propagate its culture, win the hearts of foreign audiences, and have received several awards, including Oscars (Pep Talk Radio, 2024). Moreover, Hollywood not only provides legitimacy and credibility to Chinese claims by collaborating with Chinese movies to spread propaganda, but also helps China counter Western narratives. For instance, Disney's *Mulan,* which was shot in the Xinjiang region where China has been accused of human rights violations (Srinivas & Gupta, 2023), reflects these dynamics. In the information age, news platforms that disseminate information in English, such as Xinhua News Agency, China News Service (CNS), television networks such as China Central Television (CCTV), China Global Television Network (CGTN), radio stations like China National Radio (CNR), and newspapers such as China Daily, People's Daily, and Global Times, play a central role. CCTV is China's largest media company (BBC, 2023). Hence, this media strategy is part of China's broader "soft power" approach, which aims to build cultural influence, foster international goodwill, and ultimately support its geopolitical objectives.

China is heavily investing in its digital media to propagate its "messages" to the world. Chinese news agencies and social media platforms are becoming extremely popular among foreign audiences. China's technological advancement is highly appreciable in the sense that it can compete with western technology. People around the world are increasingly fascinated by Chinese apps and how they function. For example, "Baidu Maps" can be considered an alternative to "Google maps" in China, as it is widely used for navigation. Compared with Google Maps, Baidu Maps is a more powerful app for finding locations in China. Foreigners who use this app in China often find it more convenient than "Google Maps". This app supports multiple languages and provides real images and city views (Faster Capital, 2024). Therefore, China is advancing its "soft power" through technological innovation and gaining the support of foreign audiences. Digital media has indeed become a tool of Chinese diplomacy to capture the attention of the world.

Instruments of Transition from "Soft Power" to 'Sharp Power' through Digital Media

Although various analysts have studied Chinese soft power and its influence, Walker and Ludwig (2017) explain how a new form of power is evolving through China. China has used its soft power instruments to fulfil its national interests (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Nye believes that there is a need to understand the difference between Chinese soft power and sharp power, as there is a thin line between the two (Nye, 2020). This section deals with the transition of Chinese diplomacy from "soft power" to "sharp power," which involves a strategic shift from "attraction" and "persuasion to manipulation and coercion". Moreover, China is striving to become a leading

global economy; hence, it uses power tactics of realism to fulfil its national interests. Initially, the "low-profile" *(tao guang yang hui)* approach of China during the former presidents Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao was prominent. However, China has shed this "low profile" image under the tenure of incumbent realist president Xi Jinping, adopting a more proactive approach of *fanfa youwei* (striving for achievement) (Mankikar, 2023).

China refers to the aggressive diplomacy of Xi in the "western-dominated" international system as "true multilateralism". Chinese media describe this diplomacy as "*Xiplomacy*". "*Xiplomacy*" is based on five key elements: Xi's "thought, along with the economy, ecology, the military, and the rule of law" (Huang, 2022). With the implementation of different economic ventures, China rose from 4th place in 2022 to 3rd place in *Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index* in 2024, surpassing Japan and Germany. However, the world remains suspicious of its soft power diplomacy (Brand Finance, 2022). The mechanisms of China's transition from "soft power" to "sharp power" can be analysed through propaganda and information warfare, cyber diplomacy and online narratives, as well as strategic manipulation and disinformation campaigns.

Chinese diplomacy is controversial under the administration of Xi. Early evidence of "sharp power" was seen in the Special Autonomous Region (SAR) of Hong Kong, where China violated the region's democratic system. Now, such practices are evident across the world (Shen, 2020).

1. Propaganda and Information Warfare

Propaganda and information warfare have become central components of Chinese diplomacy, particularly under the administration of Xi. The Communist Chinese Propaganda *(Xuan Chuan)* has two parts. The tools of internal and external propaganda are considered "soft" but their practice under communist administration is a matter of concern. The internal propaganda *(Nei Xuan)* consists of state-controlled media, censorship and internet control, patriotic education, cultural promotion, and public campaigns. Domestically, the party's ideology is widely accepted, and any dissent is swiftly supressed. At the international level, China uses a combination of "soft" and "sharp" power tactics. Global media expansion, diplomatic engagement and public diplomacy, economic leverage, social media and digital platforms and academic and cultural exchanges are all parts of its external propaganda (Wu, 2019).

Initially, the world welcomed Chinese "soft power," embracing Chinese culture through CIs. However, when Beijing began funding Chinese studies centres to influence academic opinion, the world grew suspicious of its diplomacy (Shen, 2020). Over the last decade, China has developed a more sophisticated and assertive strategy, increasingly targeting international audiences. It aims to reshape the global information environment by investing heavily in paid advertorials, sponsored journalistic coverage, and carefully crafted positive messages from supporters (Lim &

Bergin, 2018). Since 2008, China has invested over $1.5 billion in spreading propaganda through traditional media, with a significant portion of these funds allocated to initiatives in the Global South (Bajĉić, 2023).

For decades, Beijing's strategy for shaping its image was defensive and reactive, primarily targeting a domestic audience. It used violent measures to supress dissenters, as seen in sensitive issues such as Tibet, Taiwan and the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 (Shen, 2020). Today, China is leveraging social media platforms to propagate nationalism among domestic audience. Zhang and Tang, in an article, explain how "Bilibili", a popular social media platform, is used by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to engage younger audiences and promote official narratives. Videos of MOFA's regular press conferences often incorporate humorous language and references to internet popular culture. This is evident in their eye-catching titles, catchphrases used by spokespersons, such as "hilarious" *(xiaodiao daya)* and "shrug off" *(hehe),* and clever rhetorical questions aimed at deflecting unfriendly inquires. This makes "Bilibili" a perfect platform to convey daily expressions of nationalism, especially to younger domestic audiences, and to reinforce official narratives (Zhang & Tang, 2024).

2. Cyber Diplomacy and Online Narratives

China's cyber diplomacy and online narratives are key elements of its modern international strategy, aiming to extend its influence and shape global perceptions. From Mao Zedong's idea of "making the foreign serve China," in which foreign media employees provided favourable coverage serving Beijing's interests, to Xi Jinping's call "to tell China's story well" through rapid media expansion (Lim & Bergin, 2018), the emphasis have been consistent. To achieve this, Beijing circulates information through many Chinese news outlets. China now boasts the world's largest media market and hosts the largest online population globally ("BBC view on China media guide", 2023). Chinese leaders believe that their government can enhance geopolitical influence and promote its values and social norms worldwide, thereby reshaping global narratives. This strategic objective is referred to as acquiring "discourse power" (Bajĉić, 2023).

Beijing and the Communist party disseminate their narrative and advise governments globally on shaping laws and policies to manage technology supplied by China (Bajĉić, 2023). The network identified by Meta's takedown- an ongoing rival to the previously exposed and dismantled network known as "Spamouflage"- extended well beyond Facebook and Instagram. Connections were found to around 50 other applications, including TikTok, Reddit, Pinterest, and Medium, as well as local online forums in Asia and Africa. Meta suggested that this shift to smaller platforms might be a deliberate response to increased monitoring, detection, and removal by larger firms (Cook, 2023). An analysis of *Freedom House* report noted that on 29 August 2023, Meta announced

it had removed thousands of accounts and Facebook pages, identifying them as part of "the largest known cross-platform covert operation in the world", managed by "geographically dispersed operators across China" (Cook & Kakutani, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China was perceived as extending a helping hand through "soft power" diplomacy by providing medical aid and equipment. To build a narrative, Beijing sought to co-opt prominent voices in the international information environment, including foreign political elites and journalists. However, it also faced criticism regarding the origin and spread of the coronavirus, prompting "sharp power" diplomacy responses from its assertive diplomats known as *"wolf-warriors,"* who vigorously defended their country on online platforms like Twitter (X) (Xiaolin, 2023). Initially, there was a "soft" establishment of media outlets aimed at propagating the Chinese message globally, but this strategy has since evolved into a "sharp" diplomacy approach that blurs the line between the two.

3. Strategic Manipulation and Disinformation Campaigns

China has increasingly employed strategic manipulation and disinformation campaigns to advance its geopolitical objectives and influence international opinion. These efforts have involved the coordinated use of state-controlled media, social media platforms and cyber operations to disseminate misleading and false information. They aim to amplify biased or false pro-PRC content by acquiring stakes in foreign media through both public and covert means and sponsoring online influencers. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese state media and government officials spread narratives suggesting the virus originated outside China, deflecting blame and creating confusion about the pandemic's origin (Scott, 2020). Beyond targeting content producers, the PRC has focused on platforms for global information dissemination, such as investing in digital television services in Africa and satellite networks (Cook & Kakutani, 2022).

The first documented Beijing-backed global disinformation campaigns date back to 2017, primarily targeting English and Chinese speakers on major platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook and YouTube. However, recent reports indicate that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime's manipulation efforts have expanded to numerous other platforms, languages and geographic regions (Cook, 2023). China uses "sharp power" in Thailand to influence public opinion and shape the political landscape through covert means. The #MilkTeaAlliance is a pro-democracy movement and online solidarity campaign that emerged in Asia, uniting activists from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and Myanmar. It represents a shared cultural preference for milk tea in these regions, and the alliance symbolizes a united front against authoritarian and in support of democratic values. Despite this, China leveraged healthcare diplomacy, particularly vaccine diplomacy, to bolster its image in the region during the pandemic, raising concerns about

its soft power strategies. Thailand's media landscape was impacted, with disinformation about vaccines spreading on social media, often driven by false claims attributed to reputable sources (Pongsudhirak & Pekanan, 2024).

China employs self-censorship as a tool to promote its influence by creating an environment where individuals, media outlets, and organizations limit their speech and content to align with government-approved narratives. Books deemed to contain "undesirable ideologies" and provocative cartoons have been purged from public libraries, with new acquisitions strictly restricted. Significant public artworks, like Jens Galschiot's "Pillar of Shame," have been dismantled, and museum collections have been rearranged. Chinese musician Cui Jian underscored the pervasive power of censorship, highlighting its effectiveness in preserving the status quo: "censorship here is extremely strong. When fear is present, it benefits those in power. You begin to worry even before you start writing, leading to compromises from the outset. It's terrible, ugly thing" (Wear, 2024, para. 5).

Conclusion

The transition of Chinese diplomatic strategies from neo-liberal "soft power" to realist "sharp power," particularly through digital media, reflects a significant shift in China's approach to global influence. Initially, China's soft power strategy sought to project a benign image through cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and the promotion of mutual benefits. However, as China's global ambitions expanded, this strategy has increasingly incorporated elements of sharp power-marked by coercion, propaganda, and strategic manipulation of information.

Digital media has played a pivotal role in this transformation, enabling China to reach global audiences while shaping narratives favourable to its interests. The strategic use of state-controlled media, social platforms, and online influencers has allowed China to exert influence beyond traditional diplomatic channels. By leveraging these tools, China has combined the subtlety of soft power with the assertiveness of sharp power, seeking to dominate both regional and global discourse. This evolution highlights the pragmatic nature of China's foreign policy, adapting its methods to maximize influence in a competitive international landscape. As China's digital strategy becomes more assertive, the global community faces challenges in responding to the blending of persuasive and coercive tactics in a new age of information-driven power dynamics.

China's transition from 'soft power' to 'sharp power' through digital media represents a significant shift in its approach to international influence. Traditionally, China's "soft power" strategy focussed on promoting its culture, values, and achievements to build a positive image globally. This involved leveraging cultural exports such as films, television shows and educational exchanges,

to win hearts and minds. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards a more assertive and strategic use of popular media to advance China's geopolitical interests- a phenomenon often described as "sharp power".

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