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RESEARCH ARTICLE

China's Soft and Sharp Power in Europe

Telling the 'Right Chinese Story' Through Confucius Institutes

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Abstract

This article examines the interaction between soft power and sharp power in China's global strategy, focusing on Confucius Institutes as instruments of both cultural diplomacy and political influence. While China's soft power has been extensively studied and sharp power has recently gained academic attention, the complementarity between these two forms of power remains underexplored. Through this article, we argue that China employs a strategic combination of attraction and manipulation to shape favourable narratives, suppress sensitive discussions, and advance its international agenda. This research adopts a qualitative approach, investigating the role of Confucius Institutes in Europe as a case study of this China's dual strategy. Our findings suggest that Confucius Institutes function as channels for both soft and sharp power, subtly influencing academic and public discourse while simultaneously projecting China's geopolitical interests.

Keywords: China; Soft Power; Sharp Power; Confucius Institutes; Right Chinese Story.

Introduction

According to the realist conception, states act in the international arena with the goal of acquiring power. Political power is thus seen both as an end in itself and as an indispensable tool for states to execute their strategies and satisfy their national interests.

Power is among the most debated concepts in Political Science and International Relations, with no single definition or framework achieving consensus among scholars. Two of the most recognized conceptualizations are those of Kenneth Boulding and Robert Dahl. Boulding defines power as "the ability to get what one wants," emphasizing that "power is a concept without meaning in the absence of human valuations and human decision" (Boulding, 1990, p. 15). His conception underscores that the relevance of power depends on the value attributed to it and the ability to materialize it. Similarly, Robert Dahl approaches power from a relational perspective, describing it as "a relation between people", specifically as "a mediating activity by A between A's base and B's response" (Dahl, 1957, pp. 201–203). In alignment with the perspectives of Boulding and Dahl, Nye defines power as "the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye, 2021, p. 197), emphasizing that it exists to achieve a purpose. More importantly, Nye views power as non-absolute, contingent on the context in which it is exercised, and subject to the influence of 'social forces' and structure (Nye, 2021). Revisiting Robert Dahl, Nye maintains that power cannot be considered in abstract terms; in other words, it is impossible to assert that a state

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possesses power without specifying relative to what (Nye, 2021). Power, therefore, always depends on the existence of a relationship.

Traditionally, power was viewed in military terms, a conception now referred to as ‘hard power’. However, in the late 20th century, Joseph Nye observed that states also employed another form of power, one that seeks to achieve objectives not through coercion and compulsion, as is typical of hard power, but through attraction and persuasion (Nye, 1990). Nye coined the term 'soft power' to describe this type of power (Nye, 1990). More recently, Walker and Ludwig introduced a term referring to a new type of power (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b). Recognising that certain states, particularly authoritarian regimes, have sought to manipulate, censor, and distort the domestic environments of other states to avoid sensitive discussions and promote a more favourable image, Walker and Ludwig distinguished this practice from soft power, introducing the term ‘sharp power’ (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b).

Several studies have focused on themes related to the use of soft power. Specifically concerning China, there are numerous studies on Chinese soft power. Some address broader issues (Kivimaki, 2014; Liang, 2012; Wang, 2008; Y. Zhao, 2013), while others concentrate on cultural and academic aspects (Aukia, 2014; F. Zhou & Zhou, 2016; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016), economic and commercial aspects (Duarte et al., 2024; Sharma & Khatri, 2019; Siddique & Shafqat, 2021), and even sports-related aspects (Chaziza, 2024; Delgado, 2016; Giulianotti, 2015). Studies related to sharp power are relatively scarce, and research on China’s sharp power, while limited, is not entirely absent. Notable exceptions include the works of Wu (2019), Chan and Fung (2021), Chen (2022), Ateed and Ozcan (2023), and Huang (2023). While there are studies on China’s soft power and sharp power, we find that few works address the complementarity between soft power and sharp power in China’s global strategy. The main exception is the work of Santos (2024). More specifically, despite existing studies on the role of Confucius Institutes (Hartig, 2020; Lahtinen, 2015; Zanardi, 2016; Y. Zhou & Luk, 2016), we identify a gap in the literature regarding the analysis of the dual function of Confucius Institutes as instruments of both soft power and sharp power for Beijing.

This article therefore aims to investigate the complementarity between soft power and sharp power in the pursuit of the national interest of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Arguing that China has used soft power and sharp power complementarily in its attempt to attract, persuade, penetrate, and manipulate other states and their societies, imposing a more favourable narrative – the "right Chinese story" – we will explore the contours of this strategy through the concrete case of Confucius Institutes in Europe. Our research will thus be guided by the following research question: How does China integrate soft power and sharp power through Confucius Institutes in Europe?

Our investigation is based on a predominantly qualitative methodology, using an exploratory approach in conjunction with the case study technique. This methodological choice is justified by the need to thoroughly explore how China utilises its soft power and sharp power strategies, with particular emphasis on Confucius Institutes in Europe. Through the exploratory method, we can identify patterns, relationships, and potential effects of Chinese strategies, addressing an area in which the existing literature is still scarce or insufficiently detailed. Additionally, the case study provides a more detailed and contextualised analysis of a specific phenomenon: Confucius Institutes as instruments of China’s cultural diplomacy and political influence in Europe. In our research, we will use data collection and analysis techniques such as literature review, document analysis, and statistical analysis. Furthermore, we will rely on secondary sources such as scientific articles and reports from renowned think tanks like the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, the China in Europe Network and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations

"Clingendael", which provide a critical and detailed perspective on Chinese foreign policy and the role of Confucius Institutes.

The structure of our article is as follows: In the first section, we will present our conceptual framework, discussing the concept of power and introducing the notions of soft power and sharp power. The second section will explore the contours of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership, before examining the use of soft power and sharp power tactics. In the third section, we will focus on China's soft power, highlighting its role in the country's strategy. The fourth section will discuss how China has employed sharp power to achieve its objectives in the international arena. Finally, the fifth section will present our case study on the Confucius Institutes in Europe. Through this case study, we will explore how China has complemented its soft power with sharp power to maximise the achievement of its objectives. The conclusion will summarise our findings.

Conceptualising Power: Soft Power and Sharp Power

This section introduces and develops the concept of power, defining it as a mean through which states pursue their objectives in the international arena. Recognising that hard power is no longer the sole form of power available to states, this discussion emphasises the significance of two additional forms: soft power and sharp power. The conceptual framework established here serves as the foundation for analysing Chinese foreign policy in later sections, with a specific focus on the case study of the Confucius Institute.

Traditionally, power is perceived as "the possession of resources that can influence outcomes" (Nye, 2008, p. 28), such as quantifiable assets like "population, territory, natural resources, eco, nomic size, military forces, and political stability" (Nye, 2007, p. 60). However, as Nye highlights, power is neither measurable nor entirely predictable (Nye, 2007). Although possessing certain resources may increase the likelihood of one state being stronger than another, it does not guarantee that the state will prevail or demonstrate greater power. Power is thus inherently contextual, meaning it depends on the context in which it is exercised (Nye, 2007, 2021). Based on this conception, Nye identifies three ways to exercise power: 1) "coerce them with threats"; 2) "induce them with payments; 3) and "attract or co-opt them" (Nye, 2008, p. 27). Thus, viewing power as a means, Nye distinguishes it between two types: hard power and soft power (Nye, 1990), later expanding this typology with the concept of smart power. While hard power is associated with coercion and the use of military (and economic) instruments, soft power relies on the attractiveness of a state.

The term 'soft power' was introduced by Nye to explain the reasoning behind the alleged decline of American power. In contrast to Paul Kennedy's thesis, Nye observed that the mere reduction of the United States' military (and economic) power did not equate to a decline in its global power (Nye, 1990). Nye thus recognized that hard power alone was no longer sufficient to safeguard the interests of states and needed to be complemented by strategies of attraction (Nye, 1990). Accordingly, Nye notes that states are sometimes able to achieve their objectives "without tangible threats or payoffs" (Nye, 2004, p. 5), instead relying on intangible and soft means.

As Nye defines it, soft power is a tool to "getting the outcomes one wants by attracting others rather than manipulating" (Nye, 2008, p. 29). The essence of soft power lies in a state's ability to charm and attract, enabling it to "obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – ad miring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it" (Nye, 2004, p. 5). In this way, soft power operates by influencing and "shape the preferences of others to want what you want" (Nye, 2008, p. 29) or by making others aspire to be like us.

According to Nye, soft power rests on three sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004). A state's power of attraction increases with the universality of its culture

and values, as well as through the adoption of policies aligned with values shared by other nations (Nye, 1990, 2004). However, Nye emphasises that 'culture' is not limited to 'popular culture'; it also encompasses commerce, education, technology, and more (Nye, 2004). Regarding political values, the same principle applies as with culture: the more universal a state's political values are, the greater its power of attraction. This means that the more people see themselves reflected in a state's adopted policies, the more likely they are to admire and follow it (Nye, 2004, 2008). Finally, foreign policy also contributes to a state's attractiveness. Participation in international institutions and the values and policies a state pursues on the international stage foster identification with that state, making others more inclined to follow its lead (Nye, 1990, 2004).

In 2017, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig coined the term 'sharp power'. Walker and Ludwig developed this concept in response to what they viewed as the overextension of the term soft power to describe all "forms of influence that are not 'hard' in the sense of military force" (Walker & Ludwig, 2017a, p. 13). In their perspective, some states, particularly authoritarian regimes, have developed the ability to achieve their objectives without resorting to coercion, attraction, or traditional hard power techniques, instead employing methods of influence based on manipulation (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b).

As conceived by Walker and Ludwig, sharp power refers to a type of power aimed at "pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries," (Walker & Ludwig, 2017b, para. 15) thereby manipulating and distorting the internal environments of democratic states. By using techniques that "threaten the integrity of institutions from media and entertainment companies to universities to professional sports enterprises" (Walker et al., 2020, p. 127), authoritarian regimes are able to infiltrate democracies and weaken them. The openness characteristic of democratic societies in these sectors – particularly in the so-called CAMP sectors (culture, academia, media, and press) – makes them both especially attractive and uniquely vulnerable to sharp power actions from third states (Walker, 2018; Walker et al., 2020).

Sharp power operations are orchestrated "manipulatively, coercively, and often covertly, and are aimed at infiltration and disinformation" (Wu, 2019, p. 134). Through these, authoritarian states undermine democratic institutions and create tensions within civil society, weakening democracies' ability to counter the policies and interests of authoritarian regimes (Walker, 2018; Walker & Ludwig, 2017a). Furthermore, they can suppress discussions on sensitive topics that might tarnish the image of these regimes (Walker et al., 2020). In doing so, they project a more favourable image of their culture and governance models, thereby strengthening their soft power (Walker, 2018; Walker & Ludwig, 2017b). Additionally, through sharp power, authoritarian regimes "delegitimize democracies and other universal human-rights regimes" (Chang & Yang, 2020, p. 315).

Despite its differences, sharp power often complements soft power. Its acts of censorship and manipulation help present authoritarian regimes in a more favourable light – or at least cast democracies in a more negative one. This serves as the starting point for our analysis of Chinese foreign policy, which we will further substantiate through the case study of the Confucius Institute in Europe.

Contextualizing Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy

In this section, we will explore the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy under the leadership of Xi Jinping. This is essential for later analysing and understanding how Xi's China has sought to utilise both soft power and sharp power as elements of its foreign policy. We will then apply this framework to our case study of the Confucius Institutes.

The transition of power from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping between 2012 and 2013 marked a significant restructuring of the foreign policy priorities and strategies of the PRC. Since Deng

Xiaoping's leadership, China's approach to the international system had been encapsulated in the strategy of 'keeping a low profile' (taoguang yanghui). This doctrine suggested that China should maintain a 'low profile' on the global stage until an opportunity arose to enhance its international position (Cai, 2022; Yan, 2014).

In 2008, following the global financial crisis that destabilised Western economies and the financial strain on the United States due to the war in Afghanistan, China was finally able to demonstrate its true capabilities. It rose to become the world's second-largest economy (Goldstein, 2020; Yan, 2014). This moment was perceived as the window of opportunity foreseen by Deng Xiaoping (Yan, 2014). In the subsequent years, still under Hu Jintao's leadership, China adopted a more assertive stance, particularly regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the East China Sea (Cai, 2022; Yan, 2014). However, this adjustment did not represent a fundamental departure from the general orientation of its foreign policy, which remained defined by the 'Low Profile' motto, even with the corollary 'Peaceful Rise' added by Hu (Goldstein, 2020; Yan, 2014).

In 2012, when Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a new rhetoric in Chinese foreign policy began to emerge. This shift was evident in Xi's early speeches, where he deliberately moved away from references to "keeping a low profile" or "peaceful rise" (Chang-Liao, 2016). Instead, Xi adopted a more assertive posture. The pivotal moment came in October 2013, when Xi emphasised the need to "strive to create a favourable surrounding environment for China's development" (Xinhua, 2013), highlighting the importance of achieving new accomplishments. This marked a clear departure from the doctrine of 'keeping a low profile' and inaugurated the doctrine of 'striving for achievements' (Chang-Liao, 2016; Yan, 2014).

Seeking a more prominent role in global governance, China proposed in 2013 to involve itself in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and subsequently adopted a more assertive and uncompromising stance on maritime disputes in the East China Sea (Cai, 2022; Chang-Liao, 2016). Xi's determination to assert China as a dominant international actor signalled the beginning of a new era. Xi sought to restore China to what he considered its rightful place in the international system, rejecting the notion of China's 'rise' in favour of the concept of 'restoration' (Chang-Liao, 2016; Xiang, 2016).

Under the banner of the 'Chinese Dream,' Xi aims to transform China into a "a powerful, modernized socialist country that is prosperous, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful by the middle of this century" (Xinhua, 2017). This vision positions China as capable of rivalling any global power and asserting itself as a world leader in terms of national power and international influence. To this end, Xi's China proposes to establish a "new type of international relations" based on mutual respect, fairness, justice, and reciprocity (win-win cooperation), thereby promoting the creation of a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" (Xinhua, 2017).

In this context, Beijing has sought to reconcile the pursuit of its interests, particularly security concerns, with regional and international stability (Chang-Liao, 2016; Goldstein, 2020; Xiang, 2016). A key element in this framework is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initially conceived to connect Asia and Europe, this initiative has evolved into a global project, aiming to link the entire globe logistically and commercially (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Ferdinand, 2016).

To advance this initiative, China has developed partnerships and projects with other states, employing both bilateral diplomacy ('railway diplomacy') and multilateral diplomacy. It has provided financial resources to support the development of critical infrastructure for establishing trade routes, such as the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Garlick, 2021; Tomé, 2023). These tools allow China to attract other states into its orbit of influence, mainly by offering a more appealing

financing model compared to the West – what can be termed the Beijing Consensus (Duarte, 2017; Harper, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2023).

More recently, in early 2023, Xi Jinping introduced new rhetoric regarding China's international posture. Reinterpreting Deng Xiaoping's 24-character maxim, Xi introduced the phrase "dare to fight," signalling that China is willing to act decisively to safeguard its interests (People's Daily, 2023).

In summary, Xi Jinping's administration has been characterised by increasing assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy. Xi has determined that China's foreign policy should no longer be reactive to the actions of other states but should focus more clearly on defending China's interests (Chang-Liao, 2016; J. Zhang, 2015). Consequently, Xi has adopted a policy that promotes stability, similar to previous doctrines, while also prioritising the pursuit of achievements that would grant China the role it believes is rightfully its own (Wei, 2020; Yan, 2014). Thus, through Xi Jinping's so-called 'Third Revolution,' Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive, demanding a more advantageous position in global governance that reflects its power and influence (Harper, 2024).

Soft Power as a Path to China's Global Influence

In this section, we explore the development and application of soft power within the framework of Chinese foreign policy. Acknowledging that soft power has become a key tool for China in projecting its power and influence globally, we will focus on analysing how Xi Jinping's leadership has utilised this tool to further his foreign policy objectives. This analysis will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy. Subsequently, in conjunction with the following section, it will allow for a better understanding of China's combined use of attraction and manipulation strategies through the case of the Confucius Institutes.

Soft power has been a topic of debate in China since the 1990s, when Wang Huning introduced this concept to the Chinese academic sphere, defining it as "the culture that represents the power of a country" (Huning, 1993, p. 91). At that time, Wang Huning was a promising academic in the fields of Political Science and International Relations, and his desire for China to adopt this new form of power was fulfilled by the President of the PRC, Hu Jintao (Patapan & Wang, 2018; Xiao, 2017). Thus, in 2006, Hu Jintao introduced the concept of 'cultural soft power' and, in 2007, at the 17th Congress of the CCP, called for the need to "enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests" (Xinhua, 2007b).

The introduction of this concept in the Academy immediately sparked an intense debate about the framework within which soft power should be guided in Chinese foreign policy (Wuthnow, 2008). In the view of Huning and other scholars, Chinese soft power should be distinct from American soft power, a conviction that led to the development of a 'soft power with Chinese characteristics', based on the uniqueness of Chinese culture as a means of seduction and attraction for other peoples and states (Glaser & Murphy, 2009). This distinction is crucial when considering the evolution of Chinese soft power, which goes beyond Joseph Nye's conception, traditionally characterised as a power of seduction and attraction aimed at influencing the behaviour of another state. Thus, and distinctively from American soft power, Chinese soft power "covers both foreign policy and domestic policy", focusing not so much on the attractiveness of the political model and popular culture, but rather "on China's traditional culture and its economic development model, and touches upon China's national cohesion, social justice, political reform, anticorruption, moral level and so on" (Zheng & Zhang, 2012, p. 23). In this sense, Beijing's soft power is based on historical, economic, and cultural aspects, acting both externally and internally, with the

objective of spreading its culture and economic model, closely resembling public diplomacy (Michalski, 2012).

The Chinese conception of soft power thus places emphasis on the economic aspect – the foundation of which lies primarily in the attractiveness of the 'Chinese development model' in less developed countries and the financial aid provided by Beijing to these nations – as well as on cultural aspects, leading cultural diplomacy to become "the primary tools for China to develop its soft power" (Lai, 2012b, p. 13). Therefore, it is evident that China has supported and promoted the development of the cultural sector and the export of culture, drawing on authors and themes from classical Chinese thought, thereby explaining its worldview in order to counter the thesis of the 'Chinese threat' (Lai, 2012a). In fact, In fact, when Hu Jintao adopted soft power, he did so with the awareness of the added value it would bring to China's international assertion, as well as to the strengthening of the power of the CCP, but above all as a tool to combat the thesis of the 'Chinese threat', that is, the notion that China's growth and its consequent rise in the International System were far from peaceful (Glaser & Murphy, 2009; W. Zhang, 2010). Furthermore, Chinese soft power has also sought, through the adoption of a more active international stance, "to build an image of 'a responsible big nation' in the international community" (Xiao, 2017, p. 31).

> They [Chinese scholars] suggested that China could enhance its popular appeal in the world through acting as a responsible great power on the world stage; advocating a harmonious world and peaceful rise; demonstrating the virtues of the Chinese path of economic development; expanding its foreign assistance; and developing its own discourse in world affairs. (Lai, 2012a, p. 84)

In this sense, we observe that, although soft power is typically associated with the economy, popular culture, and the ability to attract and seduce through civil society, in the Chinese case the "interpretation and implementation of soft power is characterized by the involvement of state power and economic coercion" (Chan & Fung, 2021, p. 64), as well as the diffusion of its values and traditions and the limited use of civil society, which is due to the very nature of China's political and economic system, whose attractiveness is inferior to that of the United States of America (Chan & Fung, 2021; Xiao, 2017; Xuetong & Jin, 2008).

China has generally sought to base its soft power on the attractiveness of its economic and social development model, especially appealing to less developed countries, and on the transmission of a narrative grounded in the ideas of harmony, development, and balance (Lai, 2012a; S. Zhao, 2020). One of the main examples of Chinese soft power is the previously mentioned Beijing Consensus (Duarte, 2012, 2020). Another project related to Beijing's soft power is the cooperation instruments developed around China's neighbourhood, but not only, which, by relying on a narrative of respect, equality, and mutual benefit (win-win), present China as a reliable and supportive partner (Duarte, 2012, 2020; Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira, 2022). Associated with these cooperation frameworks, China has developed the BRI, a vast infrastructure investment project aimed at commercially and logistically connecting the entire globe, for which Beijing offers a wide range of financial aid (Ahmed & Lambert, 2022; Tomé, 2023).

Alongside this, Beijing has also sought to utilise its soft power through participation in international organisations, such as the World Trade Organization, and by attempting to mediate in some international conflicts, such as the Israeli-Arab Conflict or the recent war between Russia and Ukraine, adopting a responsible stance and a commitment to International Law (Cai, 2022; Duarte, 2012; Lai, 2012a; Prebilič & Jereb, 2022). Simultaneously, Beijing has sought to promote its values and ideas, conveying a sense of harmony and the 'right Chinese story', using, for this purpose, Confucius Institutes, its presence in various

international fora, and the internationalisation of its news agencies (Becard & Filho, 2019; Xiao, 2017).

Chinese soft power has thus facilitated the emergence of new opportunities for Beijing. By promoting the Chinese language, culture, and development model, China has been able to project a new image, which is corroborated, among other things, by the increase in Chinese language learners outside China and the rising number of foreign students in Chinese universities (Hagström & Nordin, 2020; Lai, 2012a). It can even be stated that soft power aligns seamlessly with Chinese tradition, particularly when considering the strategic principles of Sun Tzu and the Confucian principles of harmony and abstention from the use of force (Bell, 2009; Hagström & Nordin, 2020). In this way, Chinese soft power aims to demonstrate the Chinese worldview through the transmission of its culture, history, and philosophy, thereby explaining and legitimising its international behaviour (Bell, 2009; Lai, 2012a). However, its goal extends beyond this, seeking to convey the 'right Chinese story' to counter unfavourable narratives and transpose the principles that characterise its culture and traditions into the international order, with Confucius Institutes and the BRI playing a fundamental role (Mendes & Wang, 2023; S. Zhao, 2020).

Manipulation and Coercion: Understanding China's Use of Sharp Power

In this section, we will explore the use of sharp power in Chinese foreign policy. Acknowledging that China's soft power has not been fully effective in supporting its international assertion, we argue that Beijing has, in a complementary manner, resorted to strategies of manipulation and censorship. This framework enables us to understand the complex dynamics of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership, which will be exemplified through the case study presented in the following section.

Despite Beijing's efforts to develop capable soft power, its initiatives have encountered several challenges. Externally, notable challenges include scepticism from Western nations and neighbouring states, controversial diplomatic efforts, and growth of its military capabilities, while internally, they encompass social and ethnic unrest, inadequate protection of personal freedoms, weak legal frameworks, corruption, and declining ethical standards (Lai, 2012b). In fact, "with the exception of Africa and Oceania, opinions about China have largely deteriorated in the past decade," showing that "China has largely failed to promote its benevolent image" (Yuan et al., 2016, p. 343).

The failure of Chinese 'charm' to seduce and convey its narrative has led to the use of a new type of tool, sharp power. Unlike the USA, China does not have a culture based on universal values, nor an attractive political model, meaning it has not been sufficiently capable of fascinating other peoples to adopt its values and customs (Ateed & Ozcan, 2023; Cristobal, 2021). Thus, Beijing adopts a new tactic, seeking not to become more attractive, but rather to appear more attractive, while simultaneously discrediting its 'enemies' (Wu, 2019). In its attempt to project a positive image and disseminate the 'right Chinese story', Beijing has, through manipulation and censorship, adopted tactics that "aim to discourage challenges to its preferred self-presentation, as well as to its positions or standing" (Walker, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, the primary objective of Chinese sharp power is "to manipulate or coerce the international community into accepting its agenda" (Wu, 2019, p. 141), particularly on issues involving Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, or other matters that are detrimental to the image China wishes to project to the world.

This capacity for influence and manipulation is most evident in the academic and media sectors, but also in the political sphere, where Beijing seeks to control local elites, influencing them to adopt policies favourable to Chinese interests. According to Singh, Chinese sharp power in the political sphere materialises in four ways: "win over the political elite by offers of investments"; "win over pliable and pro-China elites by inducements and

offers"; "create dependence and seek favourable political responses" (Singh, 2018, p. 10). The most paradigmatic case is that of New Zealand, where, through Chinese-descendant members of Parliament, Beijing may have influenced the policies adopted by this state regarding relations with China and its policy on Tibet (Feng & Carrico, 2020; Singh, 2018). Conversely, Beijing has also applied political and economic pressure on Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as on those supporting its claims, in an attempt to isolate and combat these two issues (Chan & Fung, 2021).

In the media sector, Beijing has sought, through the expansion of its network of news agencies, to disseminate its own narrative. However, "China is not averse to manipulating local media and networks, laws and policies, and even using intimidation to further its agenda" (Singh, 2018, p. 13). Through its state-run news agency, Xinhua, China has not only promoted its narrative but also censored discussions on certain sensitive topics. As a result of investment agreements and partnerships established with various African states, China has expanded its news network across the continent, thereby ensuring the ability to "rejecting, censoring, or altering their content when Chinese interests are involved" (Walker, 2018, p. 16).

Within the United States, China, through China Radio International, has managed to circumvent laws "which prohibits foreign governments from holding a radio licence" (Singh, 2018, p. 14), thus securing a privileged mechanism for spreading its narratives within the territory of its primary adversary. Another strategy employed by Beijing has been the provision of informational content to foreign television networks to promote its narrative. One such instance occurred in 2016, when Peru's public television broadcast a Chinese documentary during the APEC meeting (Singh, 2018). Similarly, in Australia, an agreement between the ABC television network and the Shanghai Media Group led to the removal of all content critical of China from ABC's Mandarin-language channel (Walker, 2018).

In the academic sphere, Chinese sharp power has successfully censored the publication of academic works addressing divisive topics or spreading narratives contrary to Beijing's. In 2017, Cambridge University Press, under pressure from the General Administration of Press and Publication of the PRC, decided to remove "roughly three-hundred articles from a Chinese website that hosted the China Quarterly" (Walker, 2018, p. 14). That same year, Springer Nature, another reputable academic publisher, "withdrew articles on sensitive topics like Taiwan, Tibet, human rights and elite politics from its mainland site on the request of the Chinese government" (Singh, 2018, p. 14). Thus, through the administration responsible for controlling the Chinese press and under the threat of banning access to Chinese territory and population for institutions and academic publishers, the Chinese government has censored academic discussions and the dissemination of various topics sensitive to Beijing's policies.

Due to the weaknesses of its soft power and taking advantage of the openness of democratic regimes, China has utilised censorship and manipulation tools to project a narrative more favourable to its national interests while undermining democracies. In doing so, it diminishes its charm and legitimises autocracy (Singh, 2018; Walker & Ludwig, 2017b; Wu, 2019). Consequently, "Beijing is expanding its repressive practices outward and increasingly harnessing new technologies to spread its values and its vision for the world" (Walker et al., 2020, p. 125).

The Dual Nature of Confucius Institutes: Bridging Cultures and Propaganda

In this section, we will focus on the case study of our analysis. While acknowledging that the Confucius Institutes have become an integral part of China's soft power strategy, we argue that beneath their seemingly benign objectives, their primary aim is to promote Chinese interests. Thus, by exploring the role of the Confucius Institutes in Chinese

diplomacy, we seek to identify how they serve as instruments of both Chinese soft power and sharp power. To this end, we will focus on the specific case of the Confucius Institutes in Europe.

Confucius Institutes are presented by Beijing as "non-profit educational institutions jointly established by Chinese and foreign partner institutions based on principles of mutual respect, friendly consultation, equality, and mutual benefit" (Confucius Institutes, n.d.). These are created through a cooperation agreement between the Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF), a Chinese institution, and a foreign institution, generally universities, with a commitment to "establishing a global network of partners and a community with a shared future" (Confucius Institutes, n.d.). The operation of the Institutes depends on the institutional partners, with the CIEF solely supporting the establishment of new Institutes worldwide and providing financial assistance to partner institutions to carry out the Institutes' activities (Confucius Institutes, n.d.). Their scope of action focuses on promoting and teaching Chinese language and culture, as well as facilitating linguistic and cultural exchange, thereby functioning similarly to the Alliance Française, the Goethe-Institut, and the Instituto Camões (Xinhua, 2007a).

Self-described as organisations aimed "to develop friendship with other countries and promote a world of diversity and harmony"(Xiao, 2017, p. 33), Confucius Institutes seek, through various activities and events, to convey their culture and philosophy, as well as their own narrative, in order to attract other peoples and justify their international behaviour(American Association of University Professors, 2014; Singh, 2018). Thus, having successfully spread across the globe, Confucius Institutes aim to enhance the attractiveness of Chinese culture, presenting China as an ancient civilisation willing to cooperate with all nations. They therefore serve as "the most prominent instruments of public diplomacy, as well as the most visible manifestation of China's cultural soft power agenda" (Becard & Filho, 2019, p. 6). Through these Institutes, Beijing has skilfully been able to utilize "the current global fascination with Chinese language and culture" to find "interested international partners to co finance the Confucius Institutes and thus partially fund China's 'charm offensive'" (Hartig, 2012, p. 70).

The first Confucius Institute was established in 2004 in Seoul, South Korea, and by 2009, over seventy Institutes had been set up worldwide (Lai, 2012a). In Europe, Confucius Institutes numbered forty in 2007, and as of 31 December 2022, eighteen years after the launch of the first Institute, there were 492 Confucius Institutes and 819 Confucius Classrooms across a total of 160 countries, with 1,500,000 students enrolled, 4,318,000 teaching hours delivered, and 79,000 courses offered (Chinese International Education Foundation & Confucius Institute, 2023; Xinhua, 2007a). Of these, 184 Institutes and 355 Classrooms were located in Europe, representing a 9.59% increase compared to the previous year (Chinese International Education Foundation & Confucius Institute, 2023).

Despite the growth of Confucius Institutes in Europe, this does not appear to have translated into greater receptivity or attractiveness towards the Chinese regime. A paper published in 2010 by the Clingendael Institute, based on various opinion studies drawn from three cases (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany), concluded that despite growing admiration for Chinese culture, European perceptions of China worsened from 2006 onwards due to "fear of a rising China and dissatisfaction with the slow pace of China's political reform and the human rights situation" (Hooghe, 2010, p. 27).

In 2020, the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, in collaboration with other entities such as the Real Instituto Elcano, published a report concluding that European perceptions of China, particularly in Northern and Western Europe, were 'predominantly negative,' particularly regarding China's military expansion, its environmental impact, and its effect on Western democracies (European Public Opinion on China, 2020). The only exception noted

was the perception of trade between Europe and China, though opinions of the BRI remained negative (European Public Opinion on China, 2020). In general, it was concluded that "even in countries where there is a generally positive attitude towards China, there is a recognition of the downsides" (European Public Opinion on China, 2020, p. 3).

Another study conducted by the China in Europe Network affirmed the existence of a "solid common ground among the general public in terms of negative (and worsening) perceptions of China" (European Public United on China, 2021).

China appears to have failed, through soft power, particularly via the Confucius Institutes, to project a positive image and attract European populations. Recognising that its soft power would never achieve the same victories that American soft power had secured for Washington, China shifted its seduction strategy, complementing it with the manipulation and censorship of sharp power (Singh, 2018; Wu, 2019). Though not entirely recent, Confucius Institutes are part of this new approach, leveraging their seemingly harmless appearance to attract foreign audiences while penetrating, undermining, and manipulating the domestic environments of other states, preventing the spread of narratives that conflict with their own and promoting the official narrative, the right Chinese story (Walker, 2018).

The lack of transparency in the agreements between Confucius Institutes and national institutions, as well as concerns about their links to the CCP and the CIEF, casts doubt on many of their activities. This has led Walker to state that these Institutes "are CCP cells on college campuses in the United States and other democracies" (Walker, 2018, p. 13).

Under the guise of soft power, aiming to attract foreign audiences through fascination with the Chinese language and culture, these institutions have taken advantage of their affiliations with reputable academic institutions and the funding they provide to censor discussions on topics likely to harm the image China seeks to project, such as those related to Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, or human rights(Ateed & Ozcan, 2023; Walker, 2018). Confucius Institutes, therefore, seek "to promote China's policies and interests in manipulating views of the target population through a combination of literature, cultural events and exhibitions" (Singh, 2018, p. 13). As Ateed & Ozcan argue, "signs of coercion, deviation and manipulation in these institutions," which "often act as a cover for clandestine activities by the Chinese government" (Ateed & Ozcan, 2023, p. 390).

In 2014, an incident at the University of Minho, in Braga (Portugal), harmed the reputation of Confucius Institutes, sparking a wave of concern across Europe. During a meeting of the European Association for Chinese Studies, the Director-General of Hanban – the organisation then responsible for coordinating these Institutes – ordered the removal of several pages from the event programme. These pages contained information about one of the sponsors, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, Taiwan's counterpart to the Confucius Institute, claiming that their "contents were contrary to Chinese regulations" (European Association for Chinese Studies, 2014, para. 10).

In recent years, several European higher education institutions have severed their ties with the Confucius Institute. In Sweden, the Confucius Institute at Stockholm University, inaugurated in 2005, was closed in 2015 due to criticism of its activities. This was followed by the closure of all Confucius Institutes in the country (Ateed & Ozcan, 2023; Bentzen, 2018; European Parliament, 2022). Other institutions, such as the University of Düsseldorf in 2016, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Université Libre de Bruxelles in 2019, and the University of Hamburg in 2020, "have decided to terminate their cooperation with Confucius Institutes because of the risks of Chinese espionage and interference" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 132).

In 2018, a report by the European Parliamentary Research Service acknowledged that the Confucius Institutes promote "official Chinese narrative on Tibet and Taiwan, which often clashes with academic research at the hosting institutions," in an attempt to "'correct' the

perception of China as a hard authoritarian state that violates human rights" (Bentzen, 2018, p. 11). The following year, in 2019, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence recognised, through another report, that the Confucius Institutes act "as promotion centres for Chinese culture abiding by the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and, ultimately, the Communist Party of China" (Hybrid Threats: Confucius Institutes, 2019, p. 49).

In 2022, through its Resolution on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation, the European Parliament expressed its concerns to Member States regarding the Confucius Institutes, stating that they "are used by China as a tool of interference within the EU" (European Parliament, 2022). Furthermore, the European Parliament recognised that the Confucius Institutes "enable the theft of scientific knowledge and the exercise of strict control over all topics related to China in the field of research and teaching" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 126), thus limiting academic freedom.

In addition, the report also revealed concerns about the lack of transparency regarding the funding of European institutions by these Institutes and the CIEF, highlighting the existence of "clauses that perpetuate Chinese propaganda or encourage support for Chinese Communist Party standpoints or political initiatives" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 127). The European Parliament, therefore, stated that the "Confucius Institutes serve as a lobbying platform for Chinese economic interests and for the Chinese intelligence service and the recruitment of agents and spies" (European Parliament, 2022, para. 132), advising caution and vigilance regarding agreements made. It also recommended swift, and adequate action whenever acts of interference are proven, to safeguard European sovereignty.

Conclusion

Through this article, we have explored the dynamics of Chinese foreign policy during Xi Jinping's leadership. To this end, we sought to explore the instruments Xi's China has relied upon to satisfy its national interest. Through this study, we confirm that, in pursuit of its interests, embodied in the 'Chinese Dream', and guided by an assertive and pragmatic foreign policy doctrine, termed 'striving for achievements', China has sought to complementarily use both soft power and sharp power tactics to achieve its interests on the international stage.

First, we identify that, at an early stage, Beijing sought to rely on a soft power strategy, aiming to seduce and attract other peoples and their governments. As we observe, this strategy predates Xi Jinping and was primarily used by his predecessors to counter the 'Chinese threat' thesis. To achieve this, China sought to leverage the attractive potential of its traditional culture, as well as its economic model, which, following the 2008 crisis, proved its effectiveness. Some of the main assets of this strategy have been the Confucius Institutes and the Beijing Consensus, now embodied in the BRI and the creation of financial mechanisms competing with the Western ones.

However, the inability of Chinese soft power to achieve the same results as American soft power led to a shift in Beijing's strategy, incorporating another tool into its foreign policy: sharp power. While soft power aims to seduce and attract, the latter seeks to penetrate, manipulate, and censor the domestic environment of target states, avoiding the discussion of sensitive topics for the Chinese regime, and simultaneously undermining democracies to make them less attractive and reduce their ability to oppose Chinese interests in the international arena.

With Xi Jinping, under a more assertive and pragmatic foreign policy, China has used soft power and sharp power complementarily. By seducing other peoples with its culture and, from there, penetrating and distorting their societies, Beijing seeks to promote a more

positive and attractive image, spreading the 'right Chinese story'. In this endeavour, the Confucius Institutes play a prominent role. Originally conceived as a soft power mechanism designed to promote Chinese culture abroad – which they succeeded in doing, despite this not translating into approval or admiration for the Chinese regime – their seemingly harmless appearance makes them one of the ideal vehicles for Chinese sharp power. Thus, China has turned to these institutes to manipulate and censor the academic environments of other countries, preventing narratives contrary to its own and the discussion of topics that may harm its image. Their ostensibly benign nature allows them to penetrate institutions, posing challenges to academic freedom and liberal-democratic values. For these reasons, the Confucius Institutes are agents of the dissemination of the 'right Chinese story', representing a serious threat to liberal democracies and the Western way of life.

In terms of political implications, this study demonstrates that European governments and institutions must remain vigilant regarding Chinese initiatives, especially those that could grant Beijing a platform to promote its interests to civil society and even within government circles. Moreover, this study also shows that China is determined to achieve its objectives on the international stage, seeking to establish itself as a superpower, which, if realised, will have implications for the International System and the Global Order.

Obviously, this study has its limitations. By focusing primarily on the European case, it may not capture dynamics that are specific to other regions. Therefore, future research should explore additional cases, potentially including comparative studies across different regions and countries.

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