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China, soft power and imperialism

Colin Sparks

Introduction

The development of China has not only altered the balance of global power economically but also politically, militarily and culturally (Rudd 2013). Alongside the second largest economy in the world, China has the second largest military budget in the world, and it is in the middle of a substantial drive, launched at the seventeenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2007, to promote its media and culture internationally (Wang 2011: 2; Li and Sligo 2012). Most recently the new President, Xi Jinping, has popularised the notion of the ‘Chinese Dream’ as a way of increasing China’s international influence and considerable efforts are being devoted to developing this both internally and internationally (Li 2013; Keane 2007). All of these changes are related, and all have been the subject of an enormous amount of political, journalistic and scholarly attention. This chapter, however, is primarily concerned with developing an approach that facilitates the understanding of the international cultural impact consequent upon China’s rise.

The dominant discourse on this issue is that advanced by Joseph Nye under the label ‘soft power’. This concept has provided the starting point for many western commentaries about China and it has been argued that it is even more influential inside China, where: ‘soft power has become one of the most frequently used phrases among political leaders, leading academics, and journalists’ (Li 2009: 1). Nye’s account, derived from his work on international relations, has the great merit of seeing cultural activities not as some separate field of human activity but as an aspect of power. It thus provides an excellent starting point for discussion of the Chinese case. Much of the debate in China takes place within discussions of ‘comprehensive national strength’, including not only soft power in all its aspects but also hard power (Ding 2008: 28). From this perspective, the integration of different aspects of power under government control means that ‘soft power has already become the key component of the comprehensive power of a nation’ (Li and Hong 2012). The current success of this ‘going-out’ policy, and its possible long-term consequences, are a matter of debate. Estimates made in the United States tend to be sceptical of the likely value of this huge investment, while Chinese views are much more positive (Pan 2006; Glaser and Murphy 2009; Zhao 2009).

The concept of soft power is not, however, the only way in which the relationship between the economic, military and cultural power of a nation can be considered. The concept of cultural

imperialism addresses the same issues, albeit from a rather different normative perspective. This concept was once fashionable in debates about international communication and still commands considerable resonance inside China both among scholars and more broadly. It is often argued that China, along with the rest of the developing world, is subject to US cultural imperialism. Senior media figures have suggested policies to rectify that situation taken directly from earlier discussions about constructing a New World Information and Communication Order as a counter to media and cultural imperialism (Li 2011). Occasionally it is even suggested that too aggressive a promotion of soft power might result in China itself being accused of such imperialism (Li 2009: 4).

This chapter compares these two approaches from the point of view of their utility in helping us understand current developments. It begins with a brief statement of the two positions and makes some comparisons between their claims. It then considers them from the point of view of their ability to illuminate a number of key problems raised by the role of culture in international relations. These approaches, both developed with the US experience very much in mind, are shown to be lacking in some important dimensions necessary to explain current developments. Neither on its own is sufficiently developed as to provide an adequate theoretical framework to study the contemporary situation. In response to these shortcomings, an attempt is made to use these insights to develop a theoretical framework that is adequate to solve the problems presented by the distinctive features of the Chinese case.

Soft power

Nye introduced the concept of soft power as long ago as 1990 and has continued to deploy and develop it up to the present, most recently arguing that it is a component of the more general category of smart power (Nye 2011). Over this long history, the emphasis of the concept has changed in a number of important ways, not least in terms of the specific problems towards which its critical edge has been directed. In its original formulation, promulgated in the last years of the Cold War, the idea was a general one, involving a wide range of resources which were held up as evidence that the USA, far from entering terminal decline, would likely remain the world's major power over the foreseeable future (Nye 1990: 31–2). If military and economic strength provided the resources of hard, 'command' power, endowing the USA with the ability to force or bribe potential opponents to accede to its wishes, culture provided those of soft power. This soft, 'indirect or co-optive' power permitted the USA to achieve its objective through its powers of definition and attraction: other countries do what the USA wishes because they can be persuaded that they want the same things (Nye 1990: 31). In Nye's view, while the overwhelming preponderance of the USA as an economic and military power might be reduced in the future, it would retain a broad range of cultural advantages over any competitors that would ensure its continued overall dominance. In stressing the importance of cultural power, Nye was certainly not attempting to discard the use of economic or military power, which he agreed remained central mechanisms in realising the national interest. His concern was to supplement the classical 'realist' view that regarded coercion and bribery as the only effective means of achieving state objectives in international relations with a recognition that 'soft, co-optive power is just as important as hard, command power' (Nye 1990: 32).

Just over a decade later, Nye gave the idea perhaps its most influential articulation in the course of a critique of the foreign policy of the Bush administration, and in particular its invasion of Iraq (Nye 2004). In this formulation, Nye stressed the reciprocal links between hard and soft power, and was particularly concerned with the way in which, he believed, the Bush administration's profligate use of hard power was damaging US soft power and thus leading to

an overall decline in the international influence of the USA. While the USA was able to invade and conquer small countries almost at will, it did so at the cost of serious damage to its ability to persuade others, both inside the conquered countries and more generally in the world, of the benefits of its prescriptions. The military adventures of the first Bush presidency and their disastrous outcomes had, he noted, transformed the USA from a state that had been admired, and perhaps even loved, all around the world into one that was perceived, particularly in the Muslim world, as embodying a ruthless and brutal arrogance towards others. As the limits of US military power became evident and its economic dominance was increasingly fragile, its actions had made it harder and harder to achieve its foreign policy objectives through the third leg of cultural influence.

Rebuilding US soft power, particularly in the Muslim world, was and remains a major preoccupation of Nye's work. Up until very recently, this dimension of US soft power concerned him more than any other possible challenges to US influence (Nye 2011: 231–3). It is only relatively recently (perhaps as a result of changes to US foreign and military policy) that China has begun to emerge in his writing as a major contender with the USA. An earlier phase of US and Chinese policy sought to build a common approach to contentious issues and this found one expression in a degree of scholarly cooperation, involving Joseph Nye himself, dedicated to exploring areas of possible collaboration (Rosecrance and Gu 2009; Nye and Wang 2009). This overall situation is currently changing, and some US journalists and scholars are quite vocal in expressing concern at the 'rise of China' (Landler 2012; Friedberg 2012). At their most alarmist, US scholars are raising the question: 'Will China's rise lead to war?' (Glaser 2011). Nye is certainly following the Obama administration's 'pivot towards Asia' and devoting more critical attention to China. His recent work displays a marked change of tone from his writing of only two or three years previously. He is convinced that, whatever other challenges it may offer, China does not offer any serious challenge to US soft power for the familiar reason of its internal authoritarian policies (Nye 2010a, 2010b, 2012). The USA, by contrast, is able to enjoy considerable advantages since 'the values of democracy, personal freedom, upward mobility, and openness that are often expressed in popular culture, higher education, and foreign policy contribute to American power in many areas' (Nye 2002: 11).

Cultural imperialism

The concept of cultural imperialism had a dominant role in discussions of international communication in the 1970s and 1980s, but it was eclipsed in the 1990s in scholarly debate by theories of globalisation. More recently, the same political developments as made soft power a fashionable concept, notably the increased use of military force by the USA (exemplified in the invasion of Iraq), have provoked a renewed scholarly interest in the general theory of imperialism, and provide the opportunity to reconsider its cultural dimensions (Callinicos 2009; Fuchs 2010). Cultural imperialism comes from a much more critical tradition than does the notion of soft power. Although writers using the term have adopted a range of different positions, the dominant current has been a version of Marxism. The most influential theorist was unquestionably the US scholar Herbert Schiller who, like Nye, was mainly concerned with the impact of US culture on other countries.

Schiller began by contrasting US world domination in the 1970s with the domination exercised by earlier imperial powers, notably the United Kingdom. In that earlier phase, military force had been the key determinant of power, and the subordination of huge territories and populations was achieved by the establishment of direct imperial rule. Schiller argued that in the post-1945 world, the USA had replaced the UK as the dominant power, but its characteristic

form of domination was not through building an extensive colonial empire. US rule was much more dependent upon the exercise of economic power and the domination of international communication: ‘What lends sophistication to the still-youthful American imperial structure is its dependence upon a marriage of economics and electronics, which substitutes in part, though not entirely, for the earlier, “blood and iron” foundations of more primitive conquerors’ (Schiller 1970: 5).

Schiller thus operates with a very similar tripartite structure of power as Nye: military power, economic power, cultural power. Like Nye, he also believed that the three operated together to establish the power and influence of the USA on the world stage. Unlike Nye, however, Schiller did not have a wholly positive view either of US power or of US culture. He believed that US culture was complex and diverse, but its representation, both domestically and internationally, was filtered through the needs of the commercial companies, primarily broadcasters, that dominated its production and distribution. These were dependent upon revenues from advertisers seeking to reach large audiences and thus: ‘whether at the beginning of the “creative” process or at its conclusion, the advertiser’s influence in American programming is paramount’ (Schiller 1970: 101). It was what he saw as an homogenised and conformist version of US culture, rather than its diverse reality, that was dominant nationally and was being exported internationally, at the expense of the rich local cultures of smaller and poorer nations: ‘What is involved is the cultural integrity of weak societies whose national, regional, local, or tribal heritages are beginning to be menaced with extinction by the expansion of modern electronic communications, television in particular, emanating from a few power centers in the industrialized world’ (Schiller 1970: 109).

The spread of modern means of mass communication, and notably television broadcasting, facilitated the spread of programmes made in the USA. This was part of a more general process which involved a combination of economic influence, military power and cultural persuasion. This had the effect of influencing the attitudes and behaviour of the ruling classes of the developing world and effectively subordinating them to the will of the USA. It was this combination of factors that, in a much-quoted passage, he labelled ‘cultural imperialism’:

the concept of cultural imperialism today best describes the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system.

(Schiller 1976: 9)

Schiller was overwhelmingly concerned with the cultural and economic power of the USA. To the extent he considered other cultural centres, he saw them as in a cycle of decline, like the UK, or as relatively weak and defensive, as with the Soviet Union (Schiller 1970: 5). Unlike Nye, however, Schiller did not operate with an unquestioned category of national interest. Alongside the dominant commercial culture, he identified a range of cultures of resistance embodied in ‘the forces of enlightenment’ that provided an alternative and, in his view, preferable, vision of America (Schiller 1970: 158).

Common strengths, common weaknesses

The most striking feature of any comparison between these two approaches is how much they have in common. Nye’s formal definition of soft power, which is that ‘soft power is the ability

to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes'. This could very easily be inserted into Schiller's claim that the USA achieved its ends through means by which foreign elites were 'attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed' (Nye 2011: 20–1). Both of these writers are, in practice, exclusively concerned with the USA. Nye's concept of soft power could in principle be applied to any country but, while there are some passing references to other cases – for example, the soft power wielded by the Soviet Union in the days when communism commanded a substantial international following – there is no detailed examination of the general conditions for the possession of such influence. Similarly, despite mentioning Western Europe more or less in passing, nowhere in a long career did Schiller devote significant attention to the cultural activities of any state other than the USA. Both seek to explain the distinct nature of US domination of the international scene and neither really has any conception of it facing a serious challenge from another state in the realm of culture. Both make a clear distinction between military and economic power on the one hand and cultural influence on the other, and both hold that the latter is of unique importance for understanding the international influence of the USA. Both see the exercise of US domination as arising from a combination of these different forms of power, although Schiller's analysis is more concerned with economic domination while Nye's gives relatively more weight to military force.

The most obvious difference between the two positions is, of course, normative. Whereas Nye sees his own country as in every way superior to others, Schiller effectively argues the opposite. Nye, particularly in his elaboration of a foreign policy based on 'liberal realism' remains unquestioningly committed to the pursuit of what he sees as the US national interest (Nye 2011: 231). Schiller, on the other hand, argued that the pursuit of the US national interest, at least as defined by the US elite, had served to advance a situation in which the cultural life, first of the USA and then increasingly of the world, had been subordinated to the narrow commercial ends of large communication companies: 'It is, after all, the global market imperative of the US- and West European-controlled multinational corporations that energise and organise the world system. It is the imagery and cultural perspectives of this ruling sector in the center that shape and structure consciousness throughout the system at large' (Schiller 1976: 17). The result of the spread of what he termed 'cultural mush' was the destruction of distinct local cultures and the distortion of the economies of poorer nations away from urgent developmental priorities like education into satisfying elite personal consumption modelled on that of the USA (Schiller 1970: 110–15).

Examined more closely, however, these wildly divergent normative judgements demonstrate a similar structure. Both offer a very one-sided view of US culture, albeit they evaluate that culture very differently. For Schiller, there is a constant emphasis upon the ways in which US commercial culture is imposed upon other countries. There is little or no recognition that there might be aspects of the dominant US culture that others find seductive, although there has long been evidence that such artefacts can be popular precisely because they articulate issues that are invisible or repressed in the national culture (Miller 1995). More generally, Schiller was apparently blind to the appeal that the profusion of commodities characterising US life and celebrated in the dominant version of US culture might have for those from cultures poorer in material goods. Edward Luce caught this point very well when he wrote: 'When my British mother spent several months in the US in the 1950s, it was dazzlingly futuristic. There was air-conditioning, an icebox in every fridge, ubiquitous neon lights and an open road on which even the working class could afford to drive' (Luce 2012).

For his part, Nye (2002: xi) dwells only upon what he sees as the attractive elements in US culture: 'There is no escaping the influence of Hollywood, CNN, and the Internet. American

films and television express freedom, individualism, and change (as well as sex and violence).⁷ While he is clear that other countries, and notably China, have aspects of their culture that are unattractive, he does not consider whether this might also be the case for the USA – unless he supposes that ‘sex and violence’ do not attract a certain audience. Certainly, he seems unaware that a culture obsessed with gun ownership, that legitimises the death penalty, and in which religious fundamentalists have enormous and intrusive political and intellectual influence, might not be universally attractive.

Neither writer is willing fully to accept that every culture has both positive and negative aspects. Indeed, some commentators on soft power have argued that this selective assessment is a necessary part of the exercise of international cultural influence since states attempt to filter their culture so that only the attractive elements are visible: ‘A state only attempts to display the good part of its culture that the outside world believes is enjoyable or agreeable and hides those elements that may cause uneasiness or misgivings in other states’ (Li 2009: 8). In reality, all cultures, even that of the USA, are contradictory: positive elements are attractive and the negative ones are repellent. The international influence, or otherwise, of a culture is the result of the balance between the two. Any adequate theory of cultural power, and its ability to influence other aspects of international relations, would require an assessment of both the positive and negative aspects of a national culture. There would not, of course, be general agreement upon what is positive and what is negative about US culture, and neither would these judgements necessarily be constant terms: something that makes a particular country’s culture unappealing in one context might have a positive valuation in another. As Nye (2011: 84) puts it: ‘Soft power is a dance that requires partners.’ More generally, the international impact of the culture of any particular country might, at one and the same time, display elements which are attractive to one group and repellent to another, and might be perceived by one group of people as having both positive and negative aspects at the same time.

The complexities of international cultural influence

While there is this surprising degree of overlap between two positions that might be thought to be completely antithetical, there are several issues, all central to understanding contemporary Chinese cultural activities, upon which there is no such implicit agreement, and to some of which neither writer gives serious attention. The first and simplest is the scope of the activities that can be considered under this heading. Schiller does not spell out in any detail the exact scope of cultural imperialism, although the burden of his overall work is to concentrate upon the electronic technologies of communication and the ways in which they have promoted an increasingly commoditised form of culture that could be traded internationally. Nye certainly includes such material, but he argues for a very broad definition of soft power. It includes popular culture and higher education, as well as diplomacy (Nye 2002: 11). In proposing a broader definition of the potential influence of culture, Nye offers a better starting point than Schiller. Not all international cultural influence is the result of the sale of television programmes or the control of information sources; diverse other factors also need to be considered in judging the extent to which a state can wield such power effectively.

Adopting this broader perspective, however, leads to a second and more intractable issue: the broader approach covers quite different social phenomena and finding a way of assessing their impact that can account for such diversity poses very great problems. Diplomacy, even public diplomacy, upon which much of Nye’s writing concentrates, operates in a quite different way to Hollywood or Harvard. Different institutions, even within the mass media, have

different potential for realising cultural power and should not be judged by a single standard. It is therefore very hard to find a simple way to measure international cultural influence.

For example, Nye notes quite correctly that the 24-hour news channels upon which China Central Television (*Zhongyang dianshi tai*, CCTV) and Xinhua have devoted so much time, effort and resources have attracted only very small audiences (Nye 2012). However, the broadcasters he holds up as alternatives and important elements in soft power – CNN and the BBC – also attract very small audiences. In its UK home BBC News 24 attracts around a 1 per cent audience share and CNN's audience share of less than 0.1 per cent is so small it cannot be measured accurately (BARB 2012). In its home market, CNN attracted a median prime time viewership of around 626,000 out of a total US 18+ population of 228 million, or less than 0.3 per cent of the potential audience in 2012, while the BBC's audience is unmeasured but presumably tiny (Nielsen 2011: 12; Holcomb and Mitchell 2013). These are hardly mass audiences even at home, and internationally even the news channels produced by relatively proximate cultures have very few viewers indeed. Any claim to their international cultural influence can therefore hardly be based on the relative size of their audiences. Hollywood blockbusters, on the other hand, attract very large audiences, both in their US home and abroad, including China: in the first half of 2012, 9 out of 10 top-grossing movies in China were from Hollywood (Cain 2012; Coonan 2012). It is certainly the case that the cultural power exerted by an international news channel differs in scale, and probably in social composition, from that of a mass-market cinema film. The difference between the influence of each of these and that of the reputation of higher education institutions is certainly even greater, and there is no obvious way in which they can be added together to create a composite category of international cultural influence.

This problem is compounded by the fact that it is also likely that the nature and degree of influence will differ between such widely different experiences as watching a Hollywood movie and spending a year on a scholarship at Harvard. While Hollywood movies may have some influence on widespread popular images of the USA, immersion in an elite academic environment is aimed at a small group who are assumed either already to be, or to be on the road to becoming, power holders in their country of origin. These are important differences in terms of both the cultural influence and the forms of behaviour that they are intended to produce. A popular taste for Hollywood movies may or may not be generalised into a more favourable attitude towards US trade policy, and even if the majority of ordinary people hold such an attitude it is by no means certain that they will influence elite decisions, since governmental indifference to popular sentiment is a commonplace in all existing political systems. Training actual or potential members of those elites, on the other hand, whether soldiers at Fort Benning, economists at the University of Chicago, or politicians and bureaucrats at the Kennedy School of Government, is intended profoundly to shape the intellectual culture of the elite, and thus, at least indirectly, to influence what they do. While it is unclear whether movies have significantly influenced attitudes towards US policy, there seems to be some evidence that these latter institutions have been successful in this aspect of their mission and to have resulted in policies which, however advantageous or deleterious they may have been to the general population of the countries in question, fitted well with US foreign policy objectives.

The problem of measuring the impact of cultural power is further complicated by the fact that these different aspects of cultural power operate on different timescales and in different ways. A religious or philosophical position – say Buddhism or possessive individualism – may have a very great influence over very wide areas, but its effect is likely to be measured in decades if not in centuries. A news item – a report of an earthquake, for example – on the other hand,

may have a very great influence over very wide areas but its effect is unlikely to be measured in weeks, let alone months. Similarly, an imaginative work, whether poem, painting, novel or film, may have an effect on the emotional life of an individual or group, but a course in quantitative social science will probably produce a different and less emotionally charged response.

Overall, it seems difficult to conceive of any way in which this range of different impacts, operating at different levels over different timescales on different groups of people, can simply be aggregated into one single 'effect' that we might term soft power and which permits that state to exercise international cultural influence. The likelihood is that the international cultural influence of any country will be contradictory and shifting, with some aspects appealing strongly to some people at some times, and others proving similarly repellent. Just because of the very wide range of items that are, quite correctly, gathered under this heading, attempts to sum these positive and negative dimensions into a single balance of soft power are doomed to failure.

Articulations of power

Another major issue concerns the relationships between different aspects of power. Both writers stress the need to see cultural power as part of the overall power of a state, but they differ significantly in their assessment of the links between the three domains. Schiller's analysis tended to stress their mutual interdependence as different aspects of what he termed the 'power complex' (Schiller 1970: 16). In his account, there were close institutional and organic links between the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Department of Defense, on the one hand, and the development of communication technology on the other, notably as embodied in the development of satellite communications. Similarly, the stress placed by the government upon the 'free flow of information' was, he argued, a powerful factor in allowing US entertainment companies to establish their domination over the world market. This interdependence was embodied at the level of personnel by individuals like Frank Stanton, then president of the Columbia Broadcasting System who was also 'Chairman of the United States Advisory Commission on Information . . . which . . . assesses the operation of the United States Information Agency (USIA), the propaganda arm of the American Government overseas' (Schiller 1970: 55).

Nye, on the other hand, stresses the relative autonomy of the different aspects of power, arguing that 'soft power does not belong to the government in the same way as hard power does . . . many soft power resources are separate from American government and only partly responsive to its purposes' (Nye 2002: 11). Some important aspects of what Nye includes in this category, notably public diplomacy, do in fact belong to the government, and others, for example academic exchanges, are largely funded by the government and follow its priorities, but core aspects of what he identifies as the sources of US soft power like films, television programmes and popular music are indeed produced by commercial organisations that are relatively distant from the government. It is true that the links between Hollywood, Harvard and the White House are present – Nye is a living embodiment of at least two-thirds of that reality – but they are relatively weak. For example, during the period when the USA was undertaking the invasion and occupation of Iraq, Hollywood made a number of movies that were either directly or indirectly highly critical of that policy. Neither is the US higher education system entirely linked to US government policy. After all, while there are well-known figures like Nye who flit between Washington and Boston, the most famous living member of the US academic community, at least in terms of online visibility, is Noam Chomsky, who can hardly be considered a promoter of US soft power.

All of this evidence of the distance between the institutions of soft power and those of hard power is certainly persuasive, and the substantive products of those institutions are not necessarily such as to promote US soft power. It is, however, possible to overstate the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the organs of soft power. There is a degree of interchange between the leadership of governmental institutions and that of commercial organisations even in the USA that fits quite well with Schiller's notion of a power complex.

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) provides a good example of the interpenetration of institutions producing soft power and the government that disposes of hard power. The MPAA is a body organised and financed by the six major film and television studios and it most certainly is not an arm of the US government. On the other hand, it has always had very close relations with US politics. At one time, it described itself as the 'little State Department' and devoted the majority of its efforts to supporting the establishment of free trade agreements between the US government and other states. More recently, its focus has shifted to the protection of intellectual property, and it lobbies the US government to take firmer action against piracy and copyright theft. In pursuing these aims, it has always been led by individuals with good links to the US government: its first chairman was a former US Post-master General under President Harding; its second served in government posts under presidents Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower; its third was a former special adviser to President Johnson; the fourth was agriculture secretary under President Clinton; the current, fifth, incumbent was a US Congressman for thirty-six years, served as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and in 2007 ran unsuccessfully for the post of Democratic nominee in the upcoming presidential election. At the highest levels, at least, talk of a plurality of competing elites seems a little off-key.

The analysis of the international cultural influence of a country requires, among other tasks, the investigation of the precise links between the different institutions that wield the different dimensions of power, and of the two considered here the one advanced by Schiller offers a much better starting point. The positions of Schiller and Nye, and the evidence concerning the degree of autonomy or interdependence between the institutions of the state and those of cultural power can best be seen as points upon a spectrum between an extreme of integration, perhaps most clearly embodied in an earlier period of China's modern history, and an extreme of autonomy, of which perhaps the Nordic countries are the best modern examples.

Filling the gaps

Overall, we may say that while the approaches advocated by Nye and Schiller both provide valuable starting points for a comprehensive assessment of the cultural consequences of China's development, neither separately nor in combination do they provide a completely adequate guide. While we can accept the contention of both writers as to the importance of cultural power, and its linkage with economic and military power; and while we can accept Nye's broad definition of cultural power as well as Schiller's greater willingness to analyse the links between soft power and hard power, there are six points at which we need to diverge from both of them, or at least to clarify the issues at stake, if we are to understand both the overall nature of the problem and the precise ways in which it is developing in the Chinese case:

- No culture can be seen in terms that are wholly positive or wholly negative. Any really existing culture will have elements that certain groups find attractive and others that they find repellent. Analysing the cultural influence of a state requires specifying which others

are supposed to be subject to this influence, and accepting that in most situations there will be ambivalence, if not contradiction, present in their attitude.

- We cannot arrive at an estimate of the cultural influence of any given state simply by adding up the positive and negative aspects of this or that dimension of culture. Different dimensions of culture have different audiences, different potential influences and operate over different timescales. These dimensions may act to reinforce one another or they may contradict one another, and their overall effect is unlikely to be the simple sum of their discrete elements.
- The complexity of the different kinds of activities and possible influences grouped together under the term 'soft power' means that the concept is an inappropriate starting point for serious analysis, whatever its popular currency. It would be better to begin from the cultural resources of a state, to analyse the different ways by which such cultural resources are projected, and to measure, if at all possible, the influences that these projections have in particular contexts. Only this latter is a measure of something we might term 'soft power'.
- The articulation of different dimensions of power and influence is not a given. In some contexts the three dimensions of economics, culture and coercion are only loosely connected, but in others they are tightly packed together, invariably under the direction of the state machine. It is likely that the nature of these linkages will have some influence on the ways in which different aspects of culture are received. The close linkages that Schiller analysed between the state and the electronic industries were the reason that he used the term 'imperialism' in discussing the international dimension of US culture; where cultural activity is not linked to state organisations and policy, the term is inappropriate. Later attempts, including those by Schiller himself, to extend the term to cover the entire gamut of international cultural exchange significantly reduce the analytic power of the concept. Only in circumstances where it can be demonstrated that the use of state power is a significant element in cultural projection can we legitimately speak of 'cultural imperialism'.
- While recent experience has indeed been of one dominant culture, that of the USA, having much more international exposure than any of its possible competitors, such a situation can best be seen as exceptional. During most of the Cold War, for example, the USA faced not only a military challenge from the Soviet Union but also an ideological one. A more accurate picture of the record of at least the last century is that just as there has been economic and military competition and conflict between major power centres, so too there has been ideological and cultural conflict. Any analysis of cultural influence must place it within the field of international competition rather than considering it in isolation and entirely in terms of its own self-image.
- Although Schiller recognised, as Nye does not, that there were important counter-currents that provided an alternative to the dominant commercial culture of the USA, the stress in his analysis is upon that dominant culture. So, too, in his estimation of the alternatives to cultural imperialism, he tended to stress the defence of national cultures, although it should be remembered that he also recognised that these could be contested from within (Schiller 1976: 95–6). An adequate account of international cultural influence would give greater prominence to a recognition that 'national cultures' are much more contradictory, contested and changeable than either Schiller or Nye is prepared to acknowledge. While almost by definition those aspects that are most likely to be promoted by both the political and commercial elites of any society will be examples of the dominant culture, it might be that alternative or oppositional cultural forms are also internationally influential – the example of Black music in the USA immediately springs to mind.

If neither soft power nor cultural imperialism, at least in their canonical forms, provides a wholly satisfactory theoretical framework within which to analyse the present and future international cultural impact of China, they both provide valuable starting points for a more adequate approach. The two writers share a surprising amount of their analyses in common, and the insights of each writer overcome some of the weaknesses and gaps in the other's work: Nye's stress upon the broad range of factors that contribute to cultural influence usefully extends Schiller's concentration upon electronic media, while the latter's attention to the links between state action and cultural influences improves upon Nye's vague statements about the relative autonomy of soft power institutions.

China's cultural resources

If we begin our assessment of the current cultural influence along these lines, we obtain a quite different picture from the easy dismissal of China's soft power that Nye has repeated so often. Rather than following his lead and generalising from the reaction of this or that group in one particular country to one particular aspect of Chinese culture, a more convincing picture would accept that China's international cultural influence will be contradictory. Alongside the negative assessment of its political regime, for example, there might be more positive responses to other aspects of Chinese culture. Tracking the different ways in which aspects of contemporary China are received by different social groups around the world is a much more challenging, but also much more productive, response than simply sneering at the allegedly repulsive features of this or that particular facet of the whole.

It is true that there are many egregiously unattractive features of contemporary Chinese society, economically, politically and culturally. These are, of course, important in shaping the international image of China and giving it a distinctively negative twist, certainly among western intellectuals, but to focus exclusively on these is to take a ludicrously narrow and short-sighted view of the issues at stake. Considered in the broader perspective that we have argued is a more realistic starting point for assessing international cultural influence, the resources available to China are clearly very considerable; indeed they may well be more substantial than those available to any other state, with the possible exception of India (Thussu 2013).

The enormous scale and long histories of these two countries means that they both have well-developed philosophical systems, strong literary traditions, robust linguistic resources, distinctive musical forms and vibrant popular cultures that owe little or nothing to western models. No one would ever imagine that the cultures of these countries were in danger of being 'swamped' by that of the USA, although they might welcome and absorb many of its artefacts. Irrespective of political system, neither of them is likely to be a short-term competitor with the USA across the full spectrum of cultural production, and particularly not in the audiovisual field, since they both currently lack the material abundance that is both the material and symbolic foundation for much of the attraction of those aspects of US culture. The scale of their cultural and creative industries is constrained by this relative poverty, but economic growth will, if it continues, eventually level that particular playing field. With equal material resources at their disposal, it is difficult to see why Chinese or Indian cultural influence should not be able, at the very least, to provide a viable alternative to many aspects of US soft power, as indeed Indian film production already does for some markets. In the meantime, other aspects of their cultures, less dependent upon the size of their internal markets than film and television, are more strongly placed to exercise international influence.

In the case of China, these abundant cultural resources have in fact proved themselves historically to be extremely influential, certainly in the immediate 'sinosphere' and arguably

much more widely, for example in important aspects of European poetry and visual culture. 'Chinoiserie' was certainly never an accurate copy of its original inspiration, but the different imaginary renderings that embodied it are a recurrent theme in many aspects of European culture over the last 500 years. This cultural influence, however, has operated over relatively long timescales and it may be argued that its major impact is now in the past, although it is in fact still possible to purchase contemporary Chinoiserie from John Lewis (tableware) and Macy's (bed linen).

The undoubted historical influence of Chinese culture in general exists alongside the immediate impact of aspects of the contemporary society and any rounded assessment of China's potential cultural influence must analyse the interaction of these disparate elements. We can explore this dynamic interaction if we consider political philosophy, which is one of the aspects of Chinese culture that proved attractive to particular foreign social groups in the past. Historically, a world-view that stressed continuity, embedded in a culture that displayed remarkable stability in the face of severe historical shocks like invasion and conquest, and embodied in what was then the most advanced extant civilisation, had an understandable attraction to the ruling elites of other similarly un-dynamic but less sophisticated societies. Those conditions, however, no longer apply either in terms of China itself or of potential emulators. What does remain is the persistence of a cultural framework that provides an alternative to the dominant western models and which can have a very real, if diffuse, international influence (Ding 2008: 73). While a full-blown Confucian philosophy might not give much purchase on the contemporary world, the core idea of a society in which the common lot can best be advanced through the recognition of mutual interdependence and collective responsibility is far from alien even in the west. The ideology of the state as the expression of the collective will required for necessary social and economic projects retains a powerful appeal in quite surprising places, for example the US House of Representatives, where some of the prescriptions of neoliberal deregulation are increasingly viewed as outdated and inadequate to solve contemporary problems of infrastructure (Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure 2013).

On the other hand, there are more immediate and short-term aspects of contemporary Chinese society that offer a quite different perspective to the stability of the historical model. This is the China that has lifted more than 600 million people out of abject poverty; the China where a politically quiescent middle class happily squander fortunes on luxury brands; the China that has opened itself economically to the world but at the same time retains a state monopoly of symbolic production. Today, a political philosophy that justifies authoritarian rule, embedded in a culture that is undergoing rapid transformation, and embodied in the most dynamic economy on earth, has an understandable attraction to the ruling elites of other relatively impoverished societies seeking to stimulate social change while retaining their own unquestioned power and privileges. After all, China provides what appears to be a triumphantly successful developmental alternative to the notorious prescriptions of the Washington Consensus and for this audience its cultural influence certainly challenges that of the USA.

At the same time, these features of contemporary China will have no attraction whatsoever to those concerned with resisting the ruthless exploitation and savage repression that are always and everywhere the hallmarks of this kind of primitive accumulation, whether they happen to be living in impoverished or wealthy societies. The enormous economic achievements have come at a colossal price. China is a society rife with social unrest, with 'mass incidents' involving peasants and workers running at around 200,000 a year and often boiling over into full-scale local uprisings. It is a society in which the oppression of national minorities has driven more than 100 Tibetans to public self-immolation in the year prior to this writing and resulted in

the virtual occupation of the cities of the Muslim west by armed police. It is a society ravaged by ecological disasters in which polluted rivers and poisoned food are mundane items of news.

The undoubted economic success of China over the last three decades, and the ideological and political models that have accompanied it, can be and are interpreted in quite different and contradictory ways. The gleaming, modern, albeit sometimes dangerously unreliable infrastructure that China is constructing so expeditiously without doubt holds a powerful appeal for other national elites seeking to improve their competitive position in the world market. It took China seven years to build the 2,200-kilometre high-speed rail line from Beijing to Shenzhen. It is taking ten years to build the last 25 kilometres from there to the West Kowloon terminal in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The latter is no democracy, but it does enjoy many democratic liberties that do not exist in mainland China. These permit popular opposition to schemes that destroy people's homes and livelihoods and which make it much harder and slower to railroad through developmental projects irrespective of social cost. Depending upon the relative weight accorded to development and democracy, so the cultural influence of China will be judged differently.

Just because of these different and quite contradictory cultural resources, we would expect to find that contemporary China wields different and equally contradictory cultural influences around the world. We cannot dismiss the whole of the 'going-out' strategy, as one prominent Chinese scholar privately does, as 'mission impossible' – an expensive exercise in national vanity that can achieve nothing in the way of positive results. There is certainly some element of that involved: despite the huge investment, it is unlikely that, at least in the short term, either of the two international news channels will supplant CNN as a source of information for the global elite. On the other hand, the longer-term influence of Chinese culture, in both its elite and popular forms, is already a reality: the Confucius Institute and Classrooms programme, with nearly 700 locations around the world, has undoubtedly increased the number of people who are learning something of the Chinese language and thus of Chinese culture; contemporary Chinese visual art enjoys a high reputation, and high prices, in art centres throughout the developed world; at a more popular level, various elements of *wuxia* (i.e. martial arts) have influenced cinema and potentially provide an alternative mythological resource for computer gaming (Blum 2013).

The mass media

A similarly uneven influence can be expected in terms of efforts to expand the influence of China's mass media, and in particular its substantial investment in international news outlets. As we saw above, the audiences for all international news channels are small in size. Only Al Jazeera's Arabic service really has a substantial viewership, particularly in moments of great crisis in the Middle East. At such times, it provides an alternative to the sterile propaganda of the state broadcasters and is eagerly watched by large audiences. The other international channels have many fewer viewers, even in moments of international crisis, but these will tend to be from elite groups and thus these channels do have a significant international political influence. While it is improbable that either CCTV News or Xinhua's CNC World will replace CNN as the dominant global news channel in the foreseeable future, it is possible that one or both might join Al Jazeera English as a serious source of alternative perspectives that do not share the essentially imperialistic assumptions that underlie so much of the reporting on the main international channels. Similarly, while none of the cinematic or broadcast organisations that China is trying to develop are likely, in the short term at least, to replace Hollywood as the

capital of the world's imagination, it is certainly feasible to move from being an importer (and sometimes thief) of foreign films, programmes and formats towards developing markets for products that originate in China and are produced by Chinese organisations.

To identify such relatively modest, but more realistic, objectives, however, is to confront directly the issue of the articulation of cultural, political and economic power. It is certainly the case that in China these three moments of power are very closely intertwined and Nye and other critics are quite correct to point to the ways in which that close relationship can damage the prospects of Chinese international cultural influence. In China, the gamut of soft power is much more firmly under government control than in the USA, although perhaps in the nature of things this control cannot be as tight and direct as is party control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Nevertheless, it remains the case that, unlike the current situation in the USA, 'the Chinese government can centrally coordinate Chinese TV stations at all levels – by command or coercion – to work together and expand public diplomacy activities abroad' (Zhang 2011). Even though some commentators have noted that organisations like universities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increasingly become players in China's soft power projection, it still true that 'China's authoritarian regime lies at the root of both China's successes and shortcoming in public diplomacy' (D'Hooge 2011: 29).

The contradictions that this close articulation raises can be seen most clearly in the case of international news. The condition for the recently expanded Chinese international news channels to exist is that they receive, now and for the foreseeable future, massive subsidies from the Chinese state. Whether in the direct form of payments from the state budget or in terms of payments for 'advertisements' placed by provincial governments and state-owned corporations, the budgets of these channels are overwhelmingly the result of political decisions. On the other hand, the condition for them to achieve a serious international audience is that they are able to provide a credible news service which demonstrates some political autonomy and does not simply repeat official statements from Beijing. If they continue to be perceived by their potential audiences as propaganda instruments, pure and simple, then they will never be able to win even the modest audiences of a CNN or a BBC (also see Gary D. Rawnsley, Chapter 28 in this volume).

The perception of credibility will only be a possibility if the Chinese international news channels are able to operate with at least the same degree of independence from Beijing as Al Jazeera does from Doha. The independence of the latter is, of course, very far from complete, but it is nevertheless real enough for its Code of Ethics, which stresses the need for accuracy, transparency and diversity, to be considered a serious guide to its operations (Al Jazeera 2013). Such a code of ethics, particularly with regard to the stress upon the presentation of the diversity of opinion, is not even a remote approximation to the rules governing the domestic output of China's media. Whether, as many of the journalists employed by the new channels desire, these rules can be sufficiently different for the international output of these media as to make them credible remains very uncertain, although recruiting experienced western journalists to work alongside young and enthusiastic Chinese citizens in the overseas offices has already increased pressure for more than mere presentational changes (Liang 2013).

A similar contradiction faces attempts to export Chinese entertainment programming. A number of provincial TV stations, most notably Hunan TV, have in the past begun to develop very successful domestic entertainment shows and to explore the possibilities of international collaboration and export. In autumn 2011, however, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) ordered them to shift their programming towards more serious material and to drop some of their most popular shows (Branigan 2011). This decision was justified in terms of the need for television to do more to build a harmonious society, but at

least in part it was designed to limit competition with CCTV. Examples like this demonstrate how political influence can still be used to gain economic advantage at the expense of commercial factors, in cultural production as much as in other areas of business. Unless China can adopt cultural policies that allow an entertainment-oriented broadcasting sector to develop and mature according to its own dynamics, then the chances of producing material that can be a success on the international market are seriously reduced.

The close relationship between political, economic and cultural power that prevails in China is both the condition for China's international effort in broadcasting and an obstacle to achieving success. It does not prevent the country from developing international cultural influence but it does make it very much more difficult. A large and increasingly wealthy industry contains enough diverse talent, both journalistic and creative, to ensure that new and attractive ideas and methods of working will be developed. As things stand, some of these innovations will find favour with the party censors, some will be blunted or sidetracked into safer channels, and some will be stopped by the authorities, while still others will simply be adapted to the prevailing conditions. This is not the atmosphere in which an irresistible challenge to Hollywood is likely to develop.

Cultures in competition

Alongside the recognition of the likelihood that China's international cultural influence will differ depending upon which aspect we consider, and which country, region or social class we analyse, we need to remember that this effort will take place not in a vacuum but in an environment of competition, primarily with the USA. The latter is the incumbent power, economically, politically and militarily, and it undoubtedly enjoys very considerable advantages in terms of international cultural influence, particularly at the popular level.

As we have seen, in some important respects the close relationship between culture and power in China, which generally produces some difficulties, brings important advantages. The international spread of culture requires interstate agreements at least as much as the trade in any other commodity, and the economic growth of China has involved an increasing number of such international agreements. In the field of culture, China has been perceived as adopting protectionist policies restricting both imports of production and ownership of media outlets while at the same time failing adequately to police the trade in stolen cultural goods.

The former policy is undoubtedly a reality. While there is some confusion as to who actually owns the mass media in China, there is little doubt as to the extent to which foreign participation is limited (Zhao 2008: 105). Protecting creative and cultural industries is not, of course, something unique to China; it has been recognised as a legitimate exception to the free trade logic since the founding of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, now the World Trade Organization or WTO). Numerous states of various kinds, most famously France, have used this exception to support indigenous production in one way or another. While the motivation of Chinese control of ownership and content is no doubt largely political in nature, the fact that it leads to a relatively closed environment for the creative and cultural industries has permitted them to benefit from the increasing wealth of the internal market in which they would otherwise have faced very strong competition from foreign companies. In these industries as much as any other, protection of an infant indigenous producer allows it to grow and develop the potential, if not the actual ability, to become an international player in its own terms. This 'mercantilist' calculus is clearly present in the history of the various relaxations of the restrictions upon foreign films and broadcasters. The slow relaxation of the number of permitted foreign films allowed into China per year has been accompanied by efforts, not necessarily successful, to produce

Chinese films that are capable of finding reciprocal international markets. Similarly, the agreements allowing foreign broadcasters limited access for their satellite services has contained clauses guaranteeing CCTV access to their home markets (Chin 2011: 197).

With regard to the protection of intellectual property rights, China is frequently perceived internationally as one of the states failing most egregiously to take vigorous action against offenders. In its 2012 filing to the Intellectual Property and Innovation Office of the US Trade Representative, the MPAA identified a number of notorious offenders around the world. In China, it specified Xunlei.com and Paipai.com, both hosted by state-controlled China Unicom, as major providers of illegal online content, and the Hailong mall and the San Li Tun district in Beijing as major sources of illegal physical items. The latter, shockingly, 'is especially popular with foreign tourists' (Motion Picture Association of America 2012).¹ None of these outlets are obscure or beyond the easy reach of Chinese law enforcement agencies, which in other respects demonstrate high levels of activity in the surveillance and control of illegal activity, so the suspicion of the MPAA appears to be that they are officially tolerated. More generally, Chinese television has long used foreign programmes as, at the very least, 'inspiration' for its entertainment programming. Many successful dramas and game shows bear unmistakable evidence of their foreign originals (Keane et al. 2007). Only relatively recently, and still very unevenly, have these borrowings been sanctioned by the legal purchase of a format.

Both of these examples, one in which the state acts to protect Chinese concerns and the other in which it more or less consciously fails to act to protect foreign companies, demonstrate the importance of state policies in the international trade in cultural commodities. They have in common, however, the fact that they are both predicated upon the Chinese industry's 'weakness' compared to its competitors. This situation will certainly change as the Chinese economy develops and matures. The export of Chinese films and television programmes is still very modest in scope, but as the home market grows richer and the quality of local productions increases so that situation will change and China can expect to become a substantial exporter of such goods. The ambitions of its media companies will also change as they grow larger, richer and more experienced. If today they worry about the threats posed by foreign competition, in due course they are likely to want to acquire overseas assets themselves. Already one of the motivations for the shift from the theft to the purchase of TV formats is because some broadcasters in China now have the ambition to sell their own products internationally and see the need legally to protect their own property, which is difficult to do if one is notorious for the abuse of the rights of others (Keane 2008).

Greater cultural ambitions will undoubtedly develop with the increasing wealth and self-confidence of Chinese media, but they will also then encounter the reality that China is not the only state that acts to protect its cultural and creative industries. Other states besides China place obstacles in the way of foreign companies selling goods and acquiring assets. Given its size and importance, the US broadcasting market will eventually become a target for Chinese media companies just as it is a market for other Chinese exporters and investors. The US audience is notoriously insular, and the US industry is rich enough to supply that market with indigenous products, so there is unlikely to be a significant direct market for Chinese programmes. There is, however, a thriving market for foreign formats, even in the USA, which Chinese companies might hope to enter without too many problems (Moran 2009). The next logical step, the move to vertical integration through acquiring broadcasting outlets, is a much more difficult question. US law prevents non-citizens from owning a controlling interest in a radio or television broadcaster, which is why previous entrants in the market, like Rupert Murdoch, have had to go native in order to build their empires. Such a passport-switching exercise would not be so easy for the Shanghai Media Group or the Hunan Broadcasting System. Allowing a Chinese

company to acquire control of a US television station would require an amendment to the Federal Communications Act. Given the furor that has surrounded other Chinese acquisitions and attempted acquisitions, this would be likely to be strongly resisted. The close relationship between culture and power in China would at that point be an important asset in the diplomatic pressure and international bargaining necessary to resolve such an issue. Today the US State Department works closely with the US media industry to prise open markets around the world, including China. In the longer term, we can expect the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs will work closely with the Chinese media industry to prise open markets around the world, including the USA.

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter we have made two assumptions about the near future: first, the Chinese economy will continue to expand, not perhaps as rapidly as in the last decade but at least fast enough to ensure that China plays an increasingly important role in the world. Second, the current political system will remain, perhaps experiencing some important modifications but not any fundamental changes. Both of these assumptions can be challenged, and if either or both of these prove to be wrong it will be necessary to conduct a fresh analysis of the prospects for China's international cultural influence.

The rate of growth of the economy is certainly slowing from the dizzying pace of the early years of the century, but at the time of writing it remains at an annualised rate of 7.5 per cent and is not, apparently, a cause for concern among the Chinese leadership (Rabinovitch 2013). Growth rates are closely tied to the prospects for political stability, since a rapidly expanding economy and rising living standards are powerful arguments for the status quo among those who have benefited so conspicuously from widening social inequality. Currently, the drive for political change comes from mass movements of workers and peasants, like those in the Guangdong village of Wukan, whose determination won them genuinely democratic village elections in 2012. The only kinds of mass protests that involve a broad spectrum of society are those over environmental issues: as in Victorian London, pollution and poisoned food kill the middle classes just as much as they kill workers and peasants. It is commonly noted that 'getting rich' is the dominant popular ideology in contemporary China and, with rapid economic expansion, it has been an ideology that works for millions of people. If the economy suffers big problems and can no longer deliver these material goods, then some sections of the middle class might also turn to political action with unpredictable consequences.

With those caveats in mind, however, we can draw a number of conclusions about this influence. In the first place, China has substantial cultural resources and its international influence is likely to increase. This will confound some of its harshest critics who are not prepared to allow for the complexity both of the different cultural resources available and for the variety of responses that the intended audiences may have. At the same time, however, there are very important impediments to success which will also confound some of the more enthusiastic proponents of the going-out strategy and limit the appeal of the Chinese Dream. The long-term influence of Chinese language and culture is likely to grow but the attempt to win influence in the world's media may prove much more difficult to achieve even over an extended timescale.

In terms of the relatively recent past, China is a newcomer to the role of contender for international influence – economically, politically and culturally – and it confronts an established system which is dominated by a powerful incumbent. To a large extent, that incumbent sets the rules of engagement, in the nature and form of news reporting as much as in the rules of international trade, and it will use all of its power to hang on to its existing position. Rapid

transformations of the patterns of international regulation, of the trade in cultural artefacts or in the world's lingua franca, are unlikely to occur. As noted above, the abundance embedded in the artefacts of US culture retain a powerful and understandable attraction to those in less fortunate material circumstances and the scale of its internal market means that it is able to deploy vastly greater resources in the production of cultural commodities than any other country. China's per capita income today is a small fraction of that of the USA, and it will be a very long time before a similar level of individual, as opposed to aggregate, abundance prevails in China as a whole. The reality of the American Dream may be fading with static living standards and much lower social mobility, but it is likely to remain significantly more attractive than Xi Jinping's rather nebulous Chinese Dream for some time to come (Patience 2013).

In the longer term, however, it is probable that in the cultural realm, as much as anywhere else, China's international influence will increase substantially, and this will involve the seductive power of Chinese culture. To the extent that this occurs it will represent not a new global order but a reassertion of the cultural realities that have dominated most of human history. Up until the nineteenth century, China could claim to be the world's largest economy and its most advanced civilisation. Its culture was, correspondingly, extremely influential internationally. It will not, however, be a simple process of cultural osmosis. In both the history of China and in the contemporary world, soft power does not exist in isolation. Chinese culture's increased influence will also rely upon the strength of the Chinese state to, as Nye would put it, bribe or coerce other nations into accepting a different world order.

Note

- 1 In fairness, it should be noted that the MPAA commends Taobao, the largest Chinese e-commerce site, for its increasing efforts to stamp out piracy.

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