

The Role of Soft Power along the Current Silk Road

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Abstract

The Silk Road/Routes have long been a passage for exchange of goods and commodities as well as the exchange of religion and culture. One aspect in the exchange of culture, was the soft power that was generated along with it, which in turn facilitated closer ties between states and/or formed unique bonds between people of different cultures. Soft power is the ability of obtaining the desired result through attraction and cooperation and hence, it arises due to the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. The network of Silk Routes helped with the exchange of various aspects of civilization's culture, like art, religion, technology, language and science, which had been carried along with commercial goods the merchants traded. Hence, cross border trade and cultural exchange helping to build mutual respect and trust between states became the legacy of the Silk Routes. The current Belt and Road initiative seeks to directly build upon this legacy, increasing economic and cultural connectivity to reduce suspicion and promote common prosperity.

Keywords: Soft Power, Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

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Introduction

With the recent advent of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the relations between states who have joined the BRI has popped as a question in the international sphere. Since China, who is at the helm of the BRI, is building upon the old overland and marine time trade routes in order to connect all the member states, they have a variety of interaction options at their disposal. One of the more subtle options, but important in understanding the relation between states on a micro and macro level, Soft Power, was also available. Since soft power was also a force on the old Silk Road, it can be used as a measure of amount and depth of interaction between states. Hence, the objective of this paper is to compare the role and flow of soft power between the old Silk Road and the Belt and Road initiative and understand the role it plays in their respective time periods. To help this comparative review, a definition of soft power and the brief backgrounds of the BRI and old Silk Road will be looked into. The methodology adopted for this paper was a review of research articles and books done on this topic.

Soft Power

Power wielded by the state can be divided into types, soft and hard power. Wagner (2005) states that hard and soft power are two extremities on a continuum of power. Wagner (2005) further explains that hard power strategies focus on military intervention, coercive diplomacy, and economic sanctions in order to enforce national interests resulting in confrontational policies vis-à-vis neighbouring countries. Soft power is the ability of obtaining the desired result through attraction and cooperation and hence, it arises due to the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies, that is, through elements which are 'real but intangible' (Mohan, 2003). The importance of soft power is due to its ability to influence others unintrusively and unconsciously (Purushothaman, 2010). It has been said that greater attention to soft power itself reflects the changing landscape of international relations (Chatin and Gallarotti, 2016).

Soft power comes from 3 sources:

Culture - The way of thinking of a culture, cultural tradition, ethnic customs, social system, lifestyle etc. can be a source of attraction and can influence the international scene into taking positive and cooperative attitudes towards the state (Rahman, 2019).

Vuving (2009) said the following about this aspect of soft power:

"The various forms of culture can generate admiration, which can lead to imitation, or emulation, and respect, or fear, or reverence. Consequently, in international relations, other countries may adopt part or whole of the successful country's practices, policies, institutions, ideology, values, or vision".

Domestic political values and ideas - The ideology and domestic values of a state can set internal practices and policies which can influence the ways on how to states interact with each other (Rahman, 2019).

Vuving (2009) said the following about this aspect of soft power:

"Shared or admirable ideals, values, causes, or visions creates a resonance that draws states closer to each other. This gives states a sense of warmth and security, hope and self-extension, identity and community, and vindication and praise. Jointly pursuing ideals, values, causes,

or visions will allow states to create. Shared values lead to the perceiving the other states as beautiful and opposite values lead to seeing each other as ugly”.

Foreign policy – A state can generate soft power by making foreign policies which prioritizes the other state’s interest (Rahman, 2019).

Vuving (2009) said the following about this aspect of soft power:

“The attractiveness of these policies can lead to cooperation. Policy directed towards foreign actors is stated to produce gratitude and sympathy. It reassures others of the state’s peaceful or benevolent intentions, thereby inviting cooperation which then translates into soft power. It is paradoxical in nature, with aggressive attitudes begetting resistance, while benevolence and kindness beget reciprocation”.

Background on the Silk Road

Ghosh (2015) says that the term Silk Road was first coined in 1887 by German geologist Ferdinand von Richthofen. It refers to the multipurpose, multi-directional flows and networks of an ancient world trade system, consisting of both overland routes and marine time routes, which connected China and the Far East to middle eastern and European countries. The Silk Route started as a channel through which silk textiles and yarn were exported from the ancient Chinese empires of the Han dynasty and later Tang Dynasty to the West in Persia, India and the Mediterranean in the second century BC. The network included trading posts, ports and markets that were used to store, trade and exchange goods. Ghosh (2015) states that goods such as glasses, grapes, horses went east towards China, while silk, papermaking, printing, gunpowder, the compass, windmills and porcelain made their way west. Ghosh (2015) further states, that along with goods, technology, art, culture, philosophy, religions like Christianity and Buddhism, were exchanged along the route and this helped create and shape the many states and civilizations which emerged during this period of archaic globalization.

Background on the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative is a modern day Silk Road, initiated by China as a long term project that seeks to integrate and strengthen the economic and diplomatic ties of Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa (Hielscher, 2019). Launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, BRI includes 65 countries, 4.4 billion people, about 40 per cent of global GDP and 70 per cent of the world’s energy reserves (Hielscher, 2019). The road consists of two branches, the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (Hielscher, 2019).

The Silk Road Economic Belt connects China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road runs along China’s coast towards Europe in one direction and from China’s coast, cutting through the South China Sea and the South Pacific, in the other direction (Lu, Rohr, Hafner, & Knack, 2018). The overland path will leverage existing international transport routes and key economic industrial parks as springboards for cooperation, while the sea route aims to build transport routes bridging major seaports across the BRI (Lu, Rohr, Hafner, & Knack, 2018).

The BRI is based around 5 coordination properties (Hielscher, 2019):

Policy coordination – Promotion of intergovernmental cooperation around various projects.

Facilities connectivity – Improvement of connectivity of infrastructure construction plans and technical standard systems.

Unimpeded trade – Encourages the reduction of investment in trade barriers and the promotion of regional economic integration.

Financial integration - This refers to the coordination and cooperation concerning monetary policy and the setting up of finance institutions.

People-to-people bonds – This is the cultural and academic exchange between states and the cooperation of their media.

Soft Power along the Ancient Silk Road

Though soft power was a term coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980's, examples of this phenomenon of intrinsic and domestic traits being a source of attraction and cooperation for states are as old as civilization itself. Due to the exchange of goods, art, philosophy, culture, religion etc., individuals and groups of individuals were aware of another state's policies, political and domestic values and the various aspects of their culture. The admiration of these various aspects of the states lead to imitation and emulation by individuals or/and groups. If the states recognized this positive and cooperative attitudes taken towards them because of one these intrinsic traits, they could capitalize and create various policies based on these attitudes.

The Silk Road/Routes, throughout its 1500 years of existence, was a hub of cultural knowledge and its exchange. Multicultural civilizations rose and fell along the routes and further prompted cultural exchange among states and eventually states began using their cultural exports and foreign policies as the basis of their soft power. The role and flow of soft power along the routes can be viewed through the lens of a few examples.

The Kushans were one of the five tribes of the Yuezhi nomadic confederacy, who migrated to Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan) and united all five tribes to form the Kushan empire (Liu, 2010, pg. 15). They were key players in the creation and trade on the Silk Road. According to Liu (2010, pg. 47), the Silk Road trade had created connections from China to the Mediterranean Sea by the first century CE. With the Chinese and the Romans being on the east and west ends of the Silk Road respectively, Liu (2010, pg. 47) states that the Kushans began to issue coins that both displayed their authority and facilitated the trade between the states along the routes. The Kushan empire was a multicultural civilization, being nomads from the Eurasian steppes who had taken up the culture of the Hellenic influenced region they migrated to. As a result, they understood the importance of accommodating their major trading partners and hence as a foreign policy move, based their coins on the aureus, a Roman gold coin according to Liu (2010, pg. 47). This can be seen as soft power achieved through foreign policy. The Kushan empire accommodated the need of the Romans by establishing a similar coin and hence facilitated more trade through the Silk Road.

The next example of soft power can be seen in the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Road. The Kushan empire is once again important to this story. According to Liu (2010, pg. 43), the empire embraced the beliefs and practices of the Buddhists after they crossed the Hindu Kush Mountains. Liu (2010, pg. 43) mentions that many believers of the Buddha were attracted to the flourishing commerce in the Kushan-held areas of north-western India. Liu further states that during the Kushan period, stupas, or monuments containing the relics of the Buddha, as well as pilgrimage sites commemorating the Buddha's life were built in north-western India and that the statues of the Buddha were erected and became idols for worship. For people

outside India to understand and become proponents of Buddhism, a branch called Mahayana Buddhism rose into prominence. It emphasized the doctrine of eliminating material desire, which traders were able to understand as making payments for religious merits, according to Liu (2010, pg. 52). Thanks to society at the time being extraordinarily rich, generous donations were made, and Buddhist monasteries came to possess many material things, including grandiose stupas and monastic buildings (Liu, 2010, pg. 52). The valuable goods of the trade on the silk routes, such as silk textiles and rare gems, became the primary donations to Buddhist monasteries, changing the way the religious society operated. Liu (2010, pg. 52) observes that, thanks to the large wealth of Buddhist monasteries, they became huge economic enterprises which were involved in all sorts of businesses, from trade to alcohol. This facilitated their primary activity of building, maintaining and expanding monasteries, in order to promote the spread of Buddhism. The luxuries of the Silk Road adorned the monasteries and helped attract more followers.

With the help of the Kushan Empire and wealthy traders, Mahayana Buddhism travelled upwards towards Central Asia and into China. Liu (2010, pg. 85) states that despite the collapse of urban centres from the Kushan period in the 4th century, Buddhist stupas became pilgrimage sites and the monasteries which enclosed the stupas provided both facilities and guidance for the travellers on the trade routes. With the help of these basic facilities, Chinese pilgrims eventually made their way to India in the 5th and 6th centuries. Liu (2010, pg. 85) mentions that The Northern Wei ruler, an empress dowager, sent a group of pilgrims representing her to the court of Gandhara. They carried silk textiles, which had seen increased use in Buddhist ceremonies, as donations to the monasteries in the region. As the monasteries could also use them as commodities by selling them, this benefited the entire region as well. With pilgrims facilitating trade and communication, the states in India and China were able to establish stronger ties with each other based on religion and trade. Here, Buddhism acted as a soft power for the states in India, allowing them to establish connections due to the spread of a religion from their region.

The Byzantines were also prime examples of the usage of soft power. Liu (2010, pg. 91) states in his book that the quality of the sophisticated designs of silk textiles created by the Byzantine looms kept increasing thanks to improved technology and that this continued development made them extremely precious. In particular, purple silk textiles symbolized the highest prestige in the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines used resources from the Roman empire to develop a sophisticated silk industry under state monopoly, which was able to produce fancy silk textiles comparable in quality to those from China and Sassanid Persia (Liu, 2010, pg. 74). Due to the limited amounts of silk with royal and Christian themes released to Rome and to churches in western Europe, the Byzantines maintained their monopoly on the purple silk textiles. This associated the textiles with royalty and sanctity and increased their perceived value. Since the acquisition and association to these royal silks were desired by all Christians, rich or poor, common or noble, these purple silk textiles were an effective tool for diplomacy in the Byzantine emperors' efforts to manage domestic and international crises (Liu, 2010, pg. 92). Liu (2010, pg. 92) lists of the different ways the silks were used, from making political allies to sending silk gifts to the powers in the Islamic world as well as the rising powers in western Europe. They were also used in the eighth century, to negotiate and arrange more than sixteen marriages with the German empire and many envoys were dispatched from Constantinople to the West with gifts and dowries as stated by Liu (2010, pg. 92). In conclusion, the Byzantines were able to monopolize their purple dye and silk textiles to create objects of admiration, using them as tools to gain

outcomes in their favour and hence demonstrate an effective use of soft power via culture and foreign policy.

Soft Power along the Belt and Road Initiative

The soft power produced along the BRI can be divided along the three sources of soft power.

Culture as Soft Power

According to Rahman (2019) culture, which is a set of practices that have been normalized, can be transmitted by commercial activities and visits. The BRI intends to embody a set of practices through trade and exchange programs and China hopes that normalizing these set of practices will help soft power manifest by itself (Rahman, 2019). Rahman (2019) states that the BRI has two ways of proliferating trade: first by reducing trade barriers and costs between countries perceived to be important trading partners and secondly, exploring potential trade routes with isolated states. Rahman (2019) notes that by August 2018 China had signed 5 free trade agreements and the traded goods between the companies have exceeded 5 trillion dollars. In terms of exchange programs, Confucius Classrooms, Confucius Institutes, academic programs and partnership programs between China and BRI countries have been started, states Rahman (2019). China hopes that the academic exchange and cultural events held by these institutes will generate goodwill for the host countries and eventually these individuals will contribute to a set of practices that the BRI embodies and hence become cultural practices and exchanges which will benefit the BRI over time.

Domestic Values as Soft Power

According to Rahman (2019) the Confucian ideal of harmony is embedded into Chinese domestic values and at the same time is the core of their soft power strategy called peaceful development. Rahman (2019) notes that, according to the White Paper, which is a report or guide on complex issues, titled China's peaceful development (State Council, PRC, 2011), the distinctive features of the path to "peaceful development" are, a path of scientific development, self-reliance, opening to other nations, and seeking common development. Through economic progress, social development, applying science and technology, enhancing social services and utilizing resources, the BRI intends to promote the path of scientific development and by extension, of the path to peaceful development (Rahman, 2019). An example of this can be seen with China's plan to develop its western regions, which has fallen behind its urbanized eastern regions, using the BRI. Rahman (2019) observes that the BRI is used to connect the western regions like Xinjiang and Tibet to neighbouring countries and will be used to mobilize more economic activities with these countries so that the gap with the east can be closed. In return, the landlocked neighbouring countries of Central Asia can gain access to the global trade routes, be connected to China and European countries, as well as gain access to seaports. This will help them gain access to the global economy and improve their infrastructure. This example of peaceful development centring on domestic policy should appeal to the common desire of economic prosperity and make the BRI attractive in terms of economic cooperation.

Foreign Policy as Soft Power

Rahman (2019) states that the expression of “mutual benefit” is the spirit of BRI in dealing with other nations. Rahman (2019) mentions infrastructure development as a common ground to for mutual benefits. One way according to Rahman (2019) is that the BRI intends to improve accessibility to advantageous locations and resources and offer various choices of transportation modes and routes through the combination of land use and sea channels. Additionally, China has taken the lead in funding BRI by means of foreign aid which plays a double role. Besides helping to legitimize China as a state actor, it also leads to China gaining benefits from BRI development according to Rahman (2019). Developing countries can at times fail to meet the conditions for financial aids by traditional donors like IMF or the World Bank. Also, these donors usually only offer 3 types of financial foreign aid namely, grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans. Rahman (2019) states that the financial foreign aid provided by China are of 8 different types and all the aids allows recipient the freedom to use it however they see fit. As a result, China’s foreign policy allows developing countries to gain funds in times of emergency and otherwise. This legitimizes China as a dependable state actor in their eyes, prompting further cooperation from their side.

The following are a few small illustrations of how China’s soft power proliferates through the BRI.

Kenya’s role in the BRI

China was the fourth country to recognise Kenya’s independence in 1963 and since then the countries have been taking apart in an increasing number of political and military engagements. Kenya is a natural point of entry for the MSR into Africa from Asia (Farooq, Yuan, Zhu, & Feroze, 2018). Farooq, et al (2018) says that the state is a major source of raw materials for China’s industry, whose finished products constitute the largest imports for Kenya. It is also mentioned that Chinese businesses in Kenya have an average employee count more than twice of the size of the employee count of local businesses. To Kenya, the most salient impact of the MSR is on improvement of its infrastructure (Farooq, Yuan, Zhu, & Feroze, 2018). Hence the cooperation of the two states on the Marine time Silk Route part of the BRI has proven beneficial to both the states, with China at least benefitting financially from this endeavour.

Myanmar’s role in the BRI

Malik (2018) states that China is flexible on loans and pricing to enmesh Myanmar in China’s regional economic network provided its government ‘remains friendly and cooperative’. Malik further explains that this enmeshment strategy also has gotten China deeply involved with Myanmar’s domestic politics and has a role as a mediator in peace talks between rival ethnic groups and governments, making China better placed to tailor investment projects to bring peace to insurgency-hit impoverished areas. Myanmar provides access to the Bay of Bengal and by extension the Indian Ocean. Hence, it can allow China to establish a presence there. As a result, China’s maritime strategy considers Myanmar as ‘a strategic asset’, and its long shoreline is seen as ‘China’s west coast’ (Malik, 2018). But due to China’s one-sided investment into the state, there has been pushback on China’s methods and the hold they have on the country. Debt accumulation, poor environment standards, imported labour and foreign investment from other states are some of the reasons, Malik (2018) states, that are causing a pushback in Myanmar towards China.

Conclusion

Although soft power exists and plays a role in relations between states in both the current Silk Road (Belt and Road initiative) and the old Silk Road, their role, the directions they flow in, and types of sources are all different. Soft power of the old Silk Road freely encouraged trade between multiple nations and the incentives to join in on this vast network were abundant, from prosperity of states to greater relations between states and the procurement of rare goods or objects of admiration. The soft power involved all 3 of its sources. Foreign policy was used to accommodate, and help states when in need. Culture created objects of admiration which led to cooperation among states, the construction of settlements meant to come together and appreciate these objects and even state policies were created for these objects. Domestic values were transported along the silk routes by the proponents and traders of a state. States which came to admire or share these same values, came together and established ties with each other. The role that soft power had on the Silk Road was to encourage states to interact with each other, create and capitalize on their own sources of soft power as well as increasing and diversifying the cultural exchange on the Silk Road and as a result leading to the rise of multicultural civilizations. The effects of soft power on the Silk Road echo to this day.

On the other hand, with China's hegemony over how the BRI operates, most nations are required to interact directly with China via foreign policy. This results in the flow of soft power mainly coming from China. China must actively encourage cultural exchange via foreign policy (like investments in academic and partnership programs), but as we can see from the previous illustrations of their soft power, this mostly benefits China, with the soft power of other nations not reaching China. This is mostly because China is in the driver seat of the BRI, but it could be also because the soft power of the other states is stunted by their lifestyle being in constant turmoil or not having enough wealth and resources to propagate and capitalize on their soft power. Or in some cases, China's soft power fails to keep the promises it espouses and fails to generate the goodwill it needs for cooperation. So, the role that soft power currently has is to propagate China's culture, values and foreign policy amongst the countries of the BRI.

Since the paper attempted to do a comparative review of soft power in the two routes, certain limitations became clear. First is the use of secondary sources such as research articles and books pulled from the internet and the lack of primary source materials. This severely limits the depth of research that can be done on both past and present-day cases of soft power. Secondly the scope of the paper as most present-day research is focused on China and its relationship with the BRI countries and hence there is a lack of research of soft power between BRI countries. Thirdly, the BRI is a fledgling state, so a lot of the relationships in this project are yet to be tangible. Due to these reasons, it will take some time before a paper on this topic can reach completion. Going forward, researchers should look at the active or potential soft power of different countries in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative so there can be interaction and cultivation of relations between states.

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