

CHINA'S GLOBAL PROJECTION: EDUCATION, MEDIA, AND CULTURE AS SOFT POWER TOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study¹ examines the development and effectiveness of China's soft power, focusing on how Beijing extends its global influence through education, media, sports, cinema, and digital platforms. The analysis encompasses the global network of Confucius Institutes, media expansion through CGTN, Xinhua, and TikTok, as well as sports and film initiatives. The findings highlight regional differences in strategy implementation and how authorities, academia, and the public perceive them. According to the Global Soft Power Index, China's influence has steadily increased in education, technology, and international relations, though limitations persist regarding values and governance. The study demonstrates that the success of Chinese soft power depends on external perceptions, credibility, and the balance between material resources and moral authority-key factors in maintaining China's position as a global leader.

Keywords: *Soft power, China, Confucius Institutes, Global Soft Power Index, mass media.*

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Introduction to Chinese Soft Power

At the end of the Cold War, the redefinition of the concept of international power led Joseph S. Nye to introduce the term *soft power*, which he describes as the ability of a state to achieve its objectives through attraction rather than coercion or reward (Nye, 2004). In a context where the use of military force was becoming less and less viable, and globalization was accelerating cultural and technological exchanges, Nye outlined this alternative form of influence in his seminal works (Nye, 1990). He emphasized that *soft* power relies on resources such as culture, political values, and foreign policy, but its effectiveness depends on credibility and the ability to set the agenda (Ohnesorge, 2019). In comparison, *hard* power relies on military or economic coercion, and sharp power on media manipulation and disinformation (Walker, 2018). In contrast, *soft* power seeks genuine attraction, whose effects tend to be more lasting (Cook, 2021).

The discussion about types of power evolved with the introduction of the concept of *smart power*, defined as the ability to combine elements of hard and soft power in a complementary manner, so that the two reinforce each other (Wilson, 2008). Historical examples, such as the Marshall Plan, illustrate how economic incentives were combined with cultural and political narratives to generate legitimacy and foster cooperation (Ko and Nye, 2021). This logic is also found in the current context, where the development of digital platforms and artificial intelligence demonstrates the fluidity of categories: seemingly neutral tools, such as TikTok, can function as expressions of soft power through cultural attraction, but can also be perceived as sharp power when associated with the manipulation and control of information (Froehlich, 2021).

Based on this theoretical framework, the analysis of Chinese soft power becomes crucial to understanding the dynamics of global power. Beijing has developed a comprehensive strategy for projecting its attractiveness, focusing on promoting both traditional and modern culture through the Confucius Institute, cinema, and digital platforms, while also making efforts to consolidate its image as a responsible leader in global governance. However, this projection is vulnerable to accusations of censorship, lack of transparency, or coercive policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, confirming Nye and Ohnesorge's observations that soft power is context-dependent and can be rapidly eroded by legitimacy crises (Ohnesorge, 2019; Nye, 2023).

Thus, the study of Chinese soft power involves not only identifying the cultural, political, and diplomatic resources mobilized by Beijing, but also analyzing how external audiences perceive them. In a world where "states can no longer control the narrative, but at most influence it" (Singh and Nye, 2012), the effectiveness of Chinese soft power will depend on its ability to generate genuine appeal and respond to credibility challenges in an increasingly competitive global information environment.

China's Soft Power through Education, Media, Sports, and Cinema

Over the past two decades, the People's Republic of China has invested significantly in strengthening its international presence through a range of cultural and educational tools, targeting both traditional areas of academic collaboration and emerging markets. From the global network of Confucius Institutes to the expansion of state media, image promotion through sports and cinema, and the use of digital platforms, China has developed a complex set of initiatives designed to attract interest and strengthen ties with partner countries. This analysis follows these strategic directions, highlighting both the progress made and the difficulties and controversies that have arisen from these efforts.

■ Education as a vector of influence: Confucius Institutes
Confucius Institutes were created in 2004 by Hanban (now the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation – CLEC) as part of China's "Going Global" strategy, drawing inspiration from Western models of cultural diplomacy such as the British Council and the Goethe-Institut. By 2024, there were over 500 Confucius Institutes in more than 150 countries (Zhao, 2019; Custer et al., 2018).

The expansion was achieved through partnerships between Chinese universities and educational institutions abroad, reducing China's costs and leveraging existing academic infrastructure. The institutes offer Mandarin language courses, calligraphy, gastronomy, and traditional music workshops, as well as academic exchanges and joint research projects (Yang, 2020; Gil, 2015).

The geographical distribution reflects a carefully calibrated strategy. Western and Central Europe have a significant number of institutes – the United Kingdom (30), Germany (17), France (15), Italy (12), and Spain (9). In East Asia, South Korea (22) and Japan (14) stand out

as major partners, while Russian Federation (18) covers a transcontinental area. In Africa, important centers operate in South Africa (6), Kenya (4), Nigeria (2), and Egypt (4). In Oceania, Australia (13) and New Zealand (3) play key roles, while in Latin America, Brazil (11) and Chile (3) serve as strategic platforms (DigMandarin, 2025).

This distribution reveals a dual objective: to consolidate presence in areas traditionally academically connected to China and to penetrate emerging regions in the southern hemisphere, such as Africa and Latin America, which are considered future markets. The numerical evolution of Confucius Institutes between

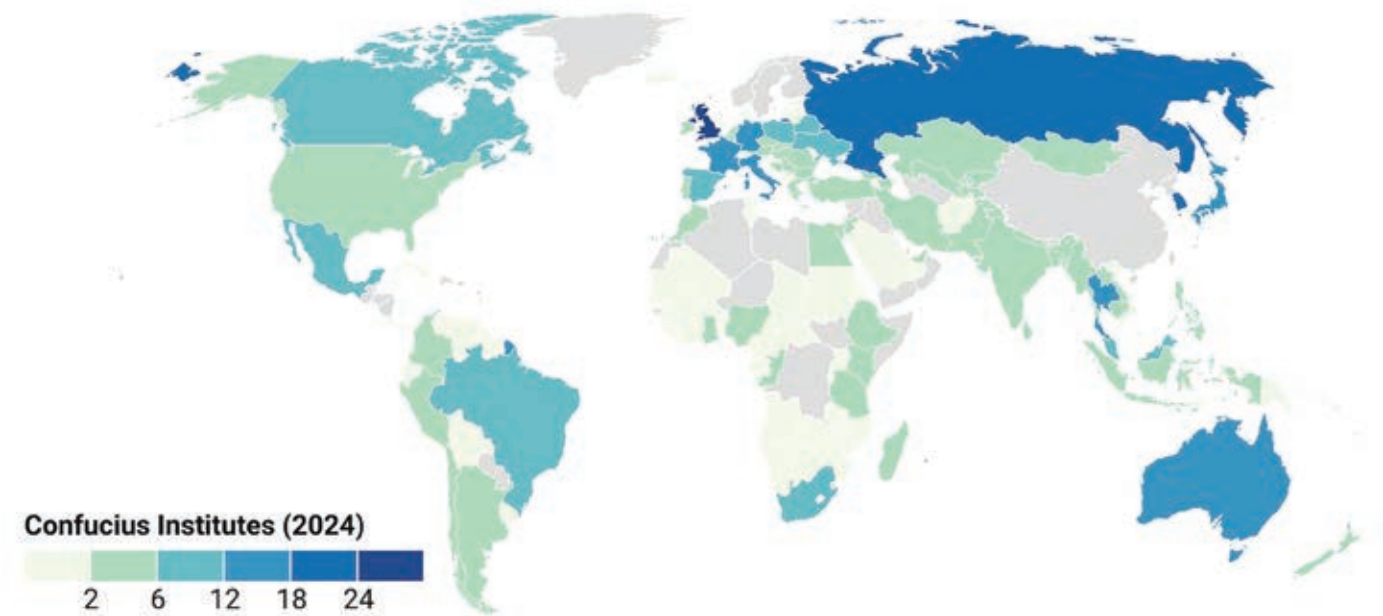


Fig. 1 Distribution of Confucius Institutes in 2024, DigMandarin, 2025

2010 and 2025 is uneven. In Asia, there has been steady growth (from 135 in 2010 to 144 in 2025), and in Africa there has been significant expansion, from 46 in 2015 to 67 in 2025 (Chinese International Education Foundation, 2023). In contrast, Europe has seen stagnation and a

moderate decline, and in North and Latin America, the number of institutes has fallen sharply, from 138 in 2020 to just 84 in 2025, due to political pressures and concerns about national security and academic autonomy (S.C. Sun, 2023; Hartig, 2015).

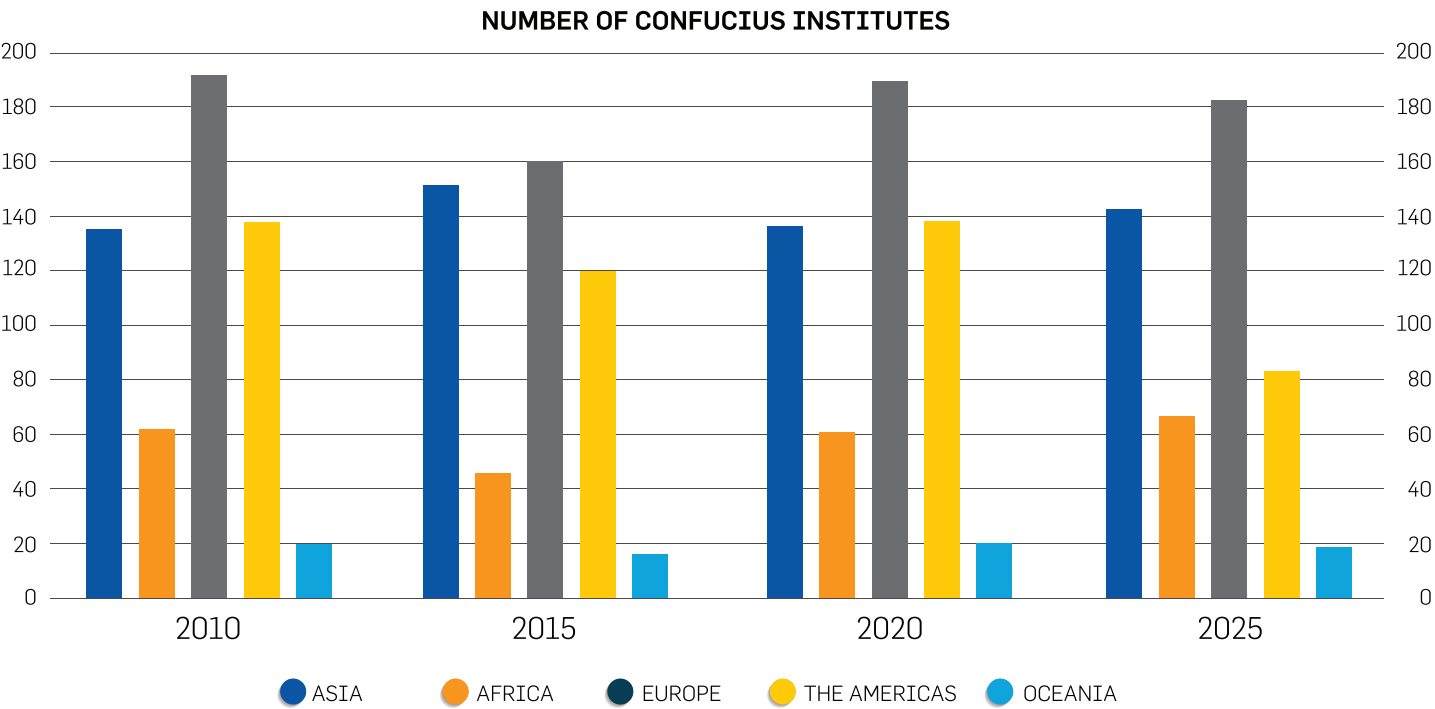


Fig. 2 Evolution of the number of Confucius Institutes, 2010-2025, Annual Reports of the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC) and DigMandarin, 2023-2025

Criticism, particularly in the West, focuses on the lack of transparency, financial dependence on Beijing, and the risk of censorship of sensitive topics, such as Tibet, Taiwan, or human rights (Gil, 2015; Peterson, 2017). Numerous universities in the US and Europe have decided to close or restructure their institutes, citing the threat to academic freedom. Notable examples include the University of Chicago (2014), Pennsylvania State University (2014), Stockholm University (2025), and several German institutions between 2020 and 2023 (Peterson, 2017; S.C. Sun, 2023).

On the other hand, in Africa and Southeast Asia, institutes continue to expand, being less affected by controversy, which reflects the different receptivity of regions to Chinese soft power.

■ The media as an instrument of influence

Another dimension of Chinese soft power is the development of global media networks. China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Daily newspaper, Xinhua news agency, and TikTok/Douyin platform are the channels through which Beijing seeks to project its positive image.

CGTN, available in several languages and with over 30 international offices, promotes China's economic growth and cultural heritage (Hartig, 2015). China Daily has partnered with prestigious Western publications for supplements, such as "China Watch," aimed at political and academic elites (Reny, 2010). The Xinhua Agency, with over 180 offices abroad, combines international news with material reflecting the views of the Chinese government, thereby reinforcing Beijing's agenda (Hartig, 2015).

A special case is TikTok, developed by ByteDance, which has been accused of censoring politically sensitive content. Although most of the material is entertainment, the platform has significant potential to influence young people's perceptions, thereby becoming a subtle cultural tool (Hartig, 2015; Cook, 2021).

However, Pew Research Center (2022) surveys indicate that in many Western countries, the level of trust in Chinese state media remains low, which limits the impact of this strategy (Silver, 2024).

■ Diplomacy through sports and cinema

Sport has played a central role in China's soft power strategy. The Beijing Summer Olympics (2008) served as a "grand showcase" for China, while the 2022 Winter Olympics reinforced its image as a modern, innovative, and resilient power (Xue, 2014; S.C. Sun, 2023).

At the same time, the "2015 Football Reform Plan" aims to transform China into a football superpower by 2050, utilizing the sport as a vehicle for national pride and global

prestige (S.C. Sun, 2023).

In the film industry, China has invested heavily in both the development of its domestic industry and partnerships with Hollywood. Companies such as Dalian Wanda have acquired Western cinema chains and co-financed major productions, and films like *The Great Wall* (2016) have illustrated the attempt to integrate Chinese culture into global media (W. Sun, 2010).

At the same time, strict control over the access of foreign films to the Chinese market causes international studios to avoid sensitive topics, which gives Beijing an indirect tool to influence the global industry. However, the appeal of Chinese cinema has not yet matched the power of traditional Hollywood.

International perceptions of China

Over the past two decades, China's rise on the global stage has been accompanied by a significant increase in its soft power resources, i.e., those non-coercive tools through which a state seeks to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of other societies. The concept defined by Joseph Nye (2004) encompasses not only economic and military power, but also a nation's ability to attract through culture, values, and foreign policies that are considered legitimate. In China's case, soft power tools have diversified, from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to cultural or digital diplomacy. However, the perceptions generated by these tools differ significantly depending on the geographical, historical, and political context of each region.

Data provided by the Pew Research Center confirms that China's image remains largely negative in North America and Western Europe. A 2023 survey shows that 83% of Americans and 72% of Germans reported an unfavorable impression of Beijing (Wike, 2015; Silver, 2024). This attitude clearly reflects the geopolitical tensions between China and the West, as well as persistent concerns about human rights, technological security, and trade disputes. In contrast, data show that perceptions are much more favorable in Southeast Asia and Africa, particularly due to Beijing's significant economic role in these regions.

A relevant example in this regard is the Afrobarometer report (2024), which shows that in 34 African countries, the majority of respondents consider China to be a positive external force. 63% of Nigerians and 59% of Kenyans appreciate Beijing's contributions to infrastructure and trade (Afrobarometer, 2020). This

positive image is not accidental, but rather reflects China's development diplomacy policy, which involves massive investments in infrastructure, granting loans, and promoting "South-South" economic cooperation.

Research conducted by Sinophone Borderlands also confirms this polarization. In countries such as Kazakhstan and Pakistan, favorable perceptions of China are fueled by geographical proximity and economic interdependence. Beijing has invested in infrastructure, energy, and transportation, thereby establishing a reputation as a reliable partner. In contrast, in countries such as Vietnam and India, perceptions are predominantly negative, strongly influenced by territorial disputes in the South China Sea or border tensions (Cao et al., 2023).

In addition to economic instruments, cultural diplomacy has become a crucial component of China's soft power. Confucius Institutes, spread globally, have facilitated the learning of the Chinese language and culture, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia. Although these institutions have attracted many young people through scholarships and educational programs, they have been criticized in the West for conveying an official image of China and for limiting academic freedom. However, in emerging countries, these institutes have reinforced the perception of a friendly and generous China in terms of educational opportunities.

Another important pillar is technological innovation. In areas such as 5G, artificial intelligence, green energy, and electric vehicles, China has positioned itself as a global leader. Brands such as Huawei, BYD, and TikTok enhance the country's international appeal, not only as the "world's factory" but also as a pioneer in high-tech industries (Finance, 2025). This dimension contributes to creating a modern, progressive image that contrasts with reservations about internal governance.

Last but not least, health diplomacy has strengthened China's image during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Mask diplomacy" and the distribution of vaccines to developing countries have been interpreted as signs of solidarity and global responsibility (Finance, 2025). However, this image capital was fragile and fluctuating, influenced by debates on the transparency of medical data and national-level crisis management.

Examining these perceptions collectively, we observe a fragmented geography of Chinese soft power. While concerns about security, democracy, and human rights dominate in the West, in the Global South, China's image is associated with economic opportunities, infrastructure, and access to education. However, this dissonance raises questions about the sustainability of Chinese soft power: can it be a lasting influence when it is based predominantly on material benefits rather than universal values?

China's evolution in the Global Soft Power Index

A relevant indicator for assessing Chinese soft power is the Global Soft Power Index, published annually by Brand Finance. This ranking provides a comparative picture of states' ability to influence through attraction and legitimacy, analyzing the perceptions of over 170,000 participants from over 100 countries (Finance, 2025).

The report's methodology is based on three fundamental dimensions—familiarity, reputation, and influence—which are then broken down into eight pillars: Business & Trade, Culture & Cultural Heritage, Education & Science, Governance, International Relations, Media & Communication, Sustainable Future, and People & Values. Each pillar has specific indicators, such as the attractiveness of national brands, university rankings, or participation in international organizations. The results are then normalized on a scale from 0 to 100, and the final score represents the weighted average adjusted annually according to the geopolitical context (Finance, 2025).

Analyzing China's evolution between 2020 and 2024, we observe a steady increase of over 12 points, reflecting a coherent strategy to strengthen its soft power. In 2025, China ranked second in the world in Business & Trade and third in Education & Science. This performance confirms the transition from the image of the "world's factory" to that of a global leader in cutting-edge industries. Investments in science and education, together with rapid technological progress, have contributed to the increased academic prestige and international recognition of Chinese universities.

In addition, through institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and participation in UN peacekeeping missions, China has managed to convey the image of a responsible actor in international relations. At the same time, media expansion through CGTN and Xinhua has increased China's visibility in emerging markets, strengthening its ability to offer an alternative narrative to that of the West.

However, the Brand Finance report also points to structural limitations. China's weakest point remains the People & Values pillar, where global perception is affected by concerns about human rights and government transparency (Silver, 2024). Thus, even though Beijing has made significant gains in areas such as technology, education, and international relations, deficits in civil liberties and the rule of law continue to affect its long-term credibility.

This dissonance between economic performance and reputational deficit poses significant challenges for the future of Chinese soft power. A sustainable consolidation strategy would require not only investment in infrastructure or innovation, but also internal reforms that address the international community's concerns about governance and fundamental rights. Only by balancing material resources with a solid moral foundation could China build a credible and attractive narrative globally.

The Global Soft Power Index analysis highlights a paradox: on the one hand, China is asserting itself as one of the most powerful actors in contemporary soft power, thanks to investments in education, technology, and economic diplomacy; on the other hand, its image is affected by structural deficits in the areas of values and governance. The outlook remains favorable, however, especially if Beijing succeeds in integrating the dimensions of equity, social inclusion, and global cooperation into a coherent strategy. The future of Chinese soft power thus depends on its ability to reconcile economic power with moral prestige in order to become not only an economic superpower but also a credible global partner.

Conclusion

Beijing has developed a complex and multidimensional strategy, utilizing cultural, educational, media, sports, and economic resources to extend its influence worldwide. Investments in Confucius Institutes, expanding

international media networks, promoting cinema and sports, and developing digital platforms showcase a coordinated effort aimed at attracting diverse audiences and boosting China's global prestige.

However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on external perceptions, which vary from region to region. In the Global South and emerging economies, China's image is associated with economic opportunities, infrastructure, and education, which generates attractiveness and strengthens bilateral relations. In Europe and North America, on the other hand, concerns about human rights, academic freedom, and technological security reduce the credibility and limit the impact of Chinese soft power, highlighting the fragility of influence based primarily on material resources.

The Global Soft Power Index indicators demonstrate significant progress in areas such as education, technology, and international relations, while also highlighting structural limitations in terms of values and governance. This duality highlights the necessity of an integrated approach that combines economic and cultural resources with internationally recognized moral legitimacy. China's ability to generate genuine appeal, respond to criticism, and integrate universal values into its global discourse will determine the sustainability of its soft power and its role as a credible actor on the international stage. Thus, China's global projection is not limited to instruments of economic or technological power but requires balancing cultural appeal with moral prestige and international responsibility.

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