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Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the United States ^[1]

Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the United States by Bilal Zubair (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023) is an excellent addition to the growing body of literature exploring US-China relations. The book describes how China has effectively employed the concept of soft power to counter the notion of the “China threat,” by branding the so-called “rise of China” as “peaceful development.” The text also offers insights into the dynamics of cooperation and competition (coopetition) between the U.S. and China and highlights the evolving nature of diplomatic engagements in addressing complex contemporary challenges.

Zubair, an Assistant Professor at National Defence University, Islamabad, delves into the strategic utilization of soft power, particularly through public diplomacy, by Beijing to enhance its global image and influence international relations. He discusses how soft power, which involves achieving foreign policy objectives through appeal rather than coercion, is critical in today's world where hard power alone is inadequate.

The book outlines China's approach to redefining soft power beyond its Western conceptions to better suit its domestic and international agendas. This redefinition involves integrating culture with public diplomacy to connect with international audiences effectively, a strategy supported by the theories of Joseph Nye and adapted by Chinese leadership under Presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

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China made unprecedented economic progress under President Deng Xiaoping's economic plan based on “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” During his time in office, China transformed from an agro-based economy into an industrial giant. Modernization of China in educational, scientific and socio-economic spheres took place. By the dawn of the 21st century, this rise of China posed a serious challenge to the Western-dominated unipolar world order led by the United States.

In the late 1990s, the debate on China's “threat theory” came to the limelight against the “Rising China” debate in American academic discourse. The United States foresaw China as

a potential competitor that could become a hegemon in the Eastern Hemisphere to shatter its superpower status in the international system. Academicians have tried to elaborate “rise of China” through lenses of realism, liberalism and constructivism.

Realists argued that Beijing has the aim of revising the existing international order through an overhaul, which could be a new world order with Chinese characteristics. Liberals believe that due to complex economic interdependence, China’s economic integration would ensure economic and sociopolitical changes within China and transform the country into a liberal democratic state in future. Constructivists provide an alternate point of view against the American-centric realist perspective about the “rise of China.” To address the negative perception of the “rise of China,” Beijing started using jargon like “peaceful development” and “harmonious world” to project a progressive image in the international system.

Mediated public diplomacy has entitled states to strategically present key foreign policy issues through news and digital media to influence and gain favorable opinions of the foreign public. China’s strategy to engage with the American public through different channels of mediated public diplomacy such as social media, international broadcasting and cyber domain has gained prominence at a constant pace. China’s “Diplomacy 2.0” has the goal of framing and projecting the information to shape opinions on subjects that matter to China on the global stage. The use of apps like *X/Twitter* and *Facebook* by Chinese officials denotes their interest in engaging with American audiences. Many Americans are using Chinese apps like *WeChat*, *QQ*, *Zoom*, *Alibaba* and *TikTok* for gaming, e-commerce and entertainment. There are two main functions of these platforms. First, to present a candid face of China and project its culture. And second, to counter the ‘China Threat’ perspective from the minds of the Western audience.

Building a country’s image and projecting its credibility through advertisement is known as “Nation branding.” The term was used by Simon Anholt in 1996 to delineate a state’s reputation in the international system. Public diplomacy helps a nation to secure its political interests while nation branding is the key to secure economic interests.

Nation branding of China has three pillars: cultural rejuvenation, economic development model and the Chinese developmental model specified for developing countries. Beijing has advertised these goals for the past two decades. According to the Brand Finance Nation Report of 2021, the value of China’s brand was \$19.9 trillion while the brand value of the United States was \$24.4 trillion. This economic progress has defined China’s image as the leader of developing nations.

Culture is the most significant aspect of “brand China.” China has developed a cultural industry based on unique Chinese characteristics. This industry has supported economic reforms and technological innovations in China. In 2021, this cultural industry made up approximately 4.56% of China’s GDP. Mega investment projects like AIIB, NDB and BRI played a crucial role in portraying China’s image in the International System. Projection of 5000-year-old Chinese culture in the United States through Confucius Institutes, Chinese restaurants and collaboration between local Chinese production and Hollywood proved very effective. Despite stress in US-China relations in the post-COVID-19 environment, around 12,000 students from the US are studying in China in 2023.

The factors responsible for the negative perception of the American public about China include the COVID-19 outbreak, the China-Russia alliance and the human rights situation in China. But China’s seriousness to the commitment of building a positive image in the eyes of

the American public can be observed through initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes, cultural and educational exchange programs, diaspora diplomacy, panda diplomacy and sister/twin-city diplomacy.
