

Navigating Contradictions in Chinese Diplomacy: The Dual Narratives of “Peaceful Rise” and “Class Struggle” in Soft Power Discourse

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Abstract: This research paper explores the intricate and paradoxical nature of China’s soft power, focusing on the dual narratives of “peaceful rise” (PR) and “class struggle” (CS) within its diplomacy and global strategy. The study contrasts Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power with China’s unique approach, highlighting the interplay between China’s soft power ambitions and its global image. Critical discourse analysis, particularly Fairclough’s three-step approach, is employed to dissect political language and narratives, offering a deeper understanding of the intersection of language, power, and ideology in Chinese diplomacy. The paper’s pivotal section analyzes Xi Jinping’s rhetoric on PR and CS, revealing China’s portrayal of a harmonious global emergence alongside a realist perspective on international power dynamics. The paper delves into the implications of these contrasting narratives for China’s global image and diplomatic relations. It underscores the significance of understanding China’s soft power in a connected and multipolar world, providing insights into China’s rise as a global power and its interactions with the international community. In conclusion, the paper highlights China’s struggle to balance its historical cultural identity with contemporary geopolitical realities.

Keywords: Chinese Soft Power, Chinese Diplomacy, Xi Jinping, Discourse Analysis, International Relations

1. Introduction

In an era where global influence hinges on persuasion as much as power, the concept of “soft power” has become crucially important. Joseph Nye’s introduction of the term signified a shift in understanding how nations extend their influence beyond military and economic might. This research paper delves into China’s soft power’s intricate and often paradoxical nature. It examines the dual narratives of “peaceful rise” (“PR”) and “class struggle” (“CS”) within its Chinese diplomacy and global strategy.

Section II compares Joseph Nye’s original concept of soft power with China’s unique approach to exercising this intangible influence. This analysis lays the groundwork for understanding the interplay between China’s soft power ambitions and global image. In Section III, the paper adopts a methodological lens, introducing critical discourse analysis as a tool for deconstructing political language and narratives and focusing on Fairclough’s three-step approach, which facilitates a deeper

understanding of how language, power, and ideology intersect in political discourse. This is essential for dissecting the subtleties in political communication, especially regarding Chinese diplomacy and international strategy. Section IV presents the discourses selected from Xi Jinping.

Section V, the most critical part of the paper, investigates the dual nature of Xi Jinping's rhetoric about "PR" and "CS" by applying Fairclough's approach to selected discourses from Xi. Xi portrays China's global emergence as harmonious and non-threatening, yet some of his speeches reflect a realist perspective on international power dynamics and national interests. This contradiction is pivotal to understanding the complexities of Chinese foreign policy and its soft power approach.

Through a detailed analysis of these discourses, this paper aims to unravel how these narratives interact, overlap, and sometimes conflict, shaping perceptions of China on the global stage. The implications of these contrasting narratives for China's global image, diplomatic relations, and role in the international arena are significant. Understanding China's soft power is essential in a connected and multipolar world, providing insights into its rise as a global power and its interactions with the international community.

2. Soft Power and Chinese Approach

Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of "soft power" in 1990. This soft power means "getting others to want the outcomes that you want-co-opts people rather than coerces them." Soft power is a power of attraction or seduction. Soft power stems from a country's cultural appeal, adherence to political ideals, and foreign policies' perceived legitimacy and moral authority. This contrasts with hard power, which relies on coercion and inducements [1]. Some scholars view soft power as synonymous with discourse or discursive power, encompassing a nation's cultural allure, economic strength, and political credibility [2-3]. However, Nye's definition is often critiqued as U.S.-centric, focusing heavily on American lifestyles and liberal free-market principles [4].

Although influenced by Nye's concept, China's soft power interpretation is distinct. China's diplomatic history, predating Nye's 1990 introduction, has always emphasized Confucian virtues such as benevolent governance and inclusiveness in domestic and international relations. Imperial China fostered cultural dominance in East Asia through the concept of "Tianxia" (all under heaven), establishing a hierarchical order based on cultural attraction [5]. In modern times, however, China is often viewed as a state leaning towards hard power. Nye also thinks that China has a "soft power deficit." The Chinese government often interprets soft power as discourse power or "speaking rights." [6-8] China cannot fully adopt Nye's soft power because of cultural and systematic differences between China and the U.S. Beijing is constructing its soft power, grounding it in traditional cultural values perceived as inherently peaceful and cooperative. Chinese diplomatic strategy significantly manifests its soft power. This strategy is evident in China's "PR" narrative promotion. Beijing first introduced the phrase "PR" in 2003 and introduced a similar concept of a "harmonious world" in 2005. Xi Jinping further complemented the "PR" narrative by promoting concepts like the "Chinese Dream" and "a community with a shared future for mankind." Policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to achieve greater international cooperation and connectivity, strengthen this narrative [5, 9-10]. It is important to note that China's perspective on soft power is a zero-sum game against the West, diverging from Nye's notion. [11] In this context, the "PR" narrative becomes crucial for China to assure the world that its ascent will be peaceful and beneficial, creating a secure international development space.

3. Discourse Analysis Methodology

Discourse analysis studies how language is used in texts and contexts to convey meaning and shape interactions and social relations. This research paper employs the holistic approach to discourse

analysis developed by Normen Fairclough. Fairclough considers discourse analysis a critical tool for investigating how language and communication are used to exert power, manipulate social identities, and shape ideologies and beliefs within cultural and societal contexts. His method underscores the interplay between language, energy, and social structure, advocating for an in-depth and critical examination of texts in their social and political environments [12].

His approach is encapsulated in three steps: {1} Textual analysis comprehensively examines the text's language, style, and structure. It includes analyzing grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and the employment of rhetorical devices to understand the text's construction and its direct meaning. {2} Discourse practice focuses on text production, distribution, and consumption. It scrutinizes how audiences interpret the text, the context in which it is communicated, and its interrelation with other texts. {3} Sociocultural practice involves placing the text within its broader social and cultural contexts. It explores the effects of the text on social relations, power dynamics, and ideological developments, considering the broader societal and historical factors that shape and are shaped by the discourse. This step seeks to understand how the text contributed to or reflects broader societal narratives and power structures [2, 12, 13].

4. Xi Jinping's Discourses on "PR" and "CS"

This part selects certain representative extracts from some of Xi Jinping's speeches and remarks about the "PR" and "CS" over time.

4.1. "PR"

Xi Jinping's speech in 2013 when visiting Moscow [14]:

"We are now living in a rapidly changing world, and that peace, development, and win-win cooperation have become the trend of our times."

"the Chinese nation has always been a peace-loving nation, and the Chinese people deeply appreciate the value of peace and also need a peaceful environment to build their nation."

"China's development, as outlined in the notion of the Chinese dream, will benefit not only the Chinese people but also the people of all countries."

Xi Jinping's speech in 2017 in Geneva [15]:

"Pass on the torch of peace from generation to generation, sustain development, and make civilization flourish: this is what people of all countries long for; it is also the responsibility statesmen of our generation ought to shoulder. And China's proposition is: build a community of shared future for humanity and achieve shared and win-win development."

"Big countries should treat smaller ones as equals instead of acting as a hegemon imposing their will on others."

"The Art of War, a Chinese classic, begins with this observation, "The art of war is vital to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road to either survival or ruin. Hence, it demands careful study:" ...For several millennia, peace has been in the blood of us Chinese and a part of our DNA."

"Several centuries ago, China was strong, and its GDP accounted for 30% of the global total. Even then, China was never engaged in aggression or expansion. In over 100 years after the 1840 Opium War, China suffered immensely from aggression, wars and chaos. Confucius said, "Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you.""

4.2. "CS"

Address by Xi Jinping in 2021 at the Party School of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee [16]:

Warning of the significantly increased risks and challenges as the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has entered a critical period, Xi told young officials to "cast away illusions and dare to struggle."

"Communists should have character, integrity, and courage so that we'll never be taken in by fallacies, never tremble in the face of danger, and never be spineless cowards."

Address by Xi Jinping on 26th March 2023 during the "two-session" [17]:

"The external environment for my country's development has changed dramatically, and uncertain and unpredictable factors have increased significantly. In particular, Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-around containment, encirclement, and suppression against China, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development."

"In the face of profound and complex changes in the international and domestic environment, we must remain calm, maintain determination, seek progress while maintaining stability, take active actions, unite as one, and dare to fight...In the future, the risks and challenges we face will only increase in number and become more severe."

Remarks by Xi Jinping at the 15th BRICS Summit on August 23, 2023:[18]

"We gather at a time when the world has entered a new period of turbulence and transformation. It is undergoing major shifts, division and regrouping, leading to more uncertain, unstable and unpredictable developments."

5. Analysis

This section applies Fairclough's three-step approach to the discourses above, comparing their differences and exploring the reasons behind these discrepancies, particularly in the third step.

5.1. Textual Analysis (Description)

The language used in "PR" discourses emphasizes peaceful development and global harmony. Key phrases such as "peace-loving nation," "win-win cooperation," and "community of shared future for humanity" reflect a diplomatic and conciliatory tone. Xi's 2013 Moscow speech highlights a rapidly changing world, but peace and development are the main themes. He portrays China as a peace-loving nation that appreciates and needs peace for its development. The notion of the "Chinese dream" is linked to China's prosperity and to the benefit of all countries, suggesting an inclusive and non-threatening global vision. In his 2017 Geneva speech, Xi extends the theme of peace, underscoring its importance across generations for sustainable development and civilization. He references "*The Art of War*" to emphasize peace in Chinese culture and contrasts China's non-aggressive history with external aggression, echoing Confucius's principle of reciprocity. Perhaps implicitly, Xi juxtaposes China's rise with that of Western powers, using its unique history and tradition to assert China's non-revisionist power stance.

In the "CS" discourses, Xi Jinping employs assertive, somewhat combative language, reflecting a sense of urgency and resilience. Critical phrases like "dare to struggle," "cast away illusions," and "unite as one" indicate a call for unity and strength in the face of adversity and external challenges. The use of terms such as "containment, encirclement, and suppression" against China by Western countries, particularly the United States, suggests a perception of external threats and challenges. This rhetoric is geared towards rallying support and strengthening the resolve among party members and the nation. Xi did not mean that China would invade any other country; on the contrary, China must be ready to defend itself.

5.2. Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

Xi, as producer, gave these two speeches on “PR” abroad, indicating that he intended his messages to be disseminated and consumed by the international community. The strategic use of these platforms suggests an aim to influence global perceptions and to counter the narrative of China as a rising threat.

Xi’s “CS” discourses are delivered both domestically and internationally. The address at the Party School of the CPC Central Committee and the “two-session” is primarily aimed at domestic audiences, particularly party officials and members. This context indicates that the speeches are intended to mobilize party members, instill a sense of purpose, and reinforce party ideology. Nevertheless, given these are public discourses, they are distributed and consumed abroad [19]. Xi probably intended his discourses to be widely distributed and consumed in the West so that the West could understand China’s stance. Interestingly, his “Western containment” remarks are omitted from the official English version of the Xinhua webpage [17, 20] (Xinhua is the mouthpiece of the CCP and represents the official stance of the Chinese government [21]), suggesting that Xi might want to downplay his hardline stance simultaneously. While the address at the BRICS Summit still has a domestic audience in mind, it also targets an international audience, mainly countries from the Global South that may share similar perspectives on global power dynamics. The choice of venue and audience suggests a strategic effort to shape both domestic and international perceptions about China’s stance on global affairs and its approach to perceived pressures.

Though Xinhua first distributed all of Xi Jinping’s discourses, they always drew wide attention from other foreign media that spread his discourses worldwide, considering China’s importance.

5.3. Socio-Cultural Practice (Explanation)

The “PR” discourses are within the broader context of China’s role in the global order. They align with China’s foreign policy strategy to project itself as a benign and cooperative global power. Xi seeks to mitigate fears of China’s rise by emphasizing historical continuity and cultural identity, portraying it as a stabilizing rather than a disruptive force in international politics. The emphasis on peace, development, and mutual benefit in these speeches aims to bolster China’s soft power and establish an image supporting China’s broader international objectives [9]. This is especially important in the context of the West’s apprehension about China’s growing influence.

These “CS” discourses indicate a shift towards a more assertive stance in response to international dynamics and domestic nationalism. Factors such as the U.S.-China trade war, Coronavirus, technology war, and escalating tension in the Taiwan Strait have fundamentally reshaped the global landscape. The U.S. has moved away from its engagement policy with China, leading to heightened competition that characterizes the Sino-U.S. relationship. The Sino-U.S. relationship has arguably been at its most strained since the 1970s, further complicated by a challenging geopolitical and diplomatic environment for China [22]. Additionally, the ongoing Ukrainian War and Israeli-Hamas conflict adds further uncertainty to these unstable international relations. During the “two sessions” meetings in 2023, the Chinese Government announced a military budget of roughly \$224.8 billion, marking a 7.2% increase from the previous year [23]. Over the past decade under Xi Jinping’s Administration, nationalism in China has been on the rise. Xi is shifting focus from the “Century of Humiliation” narrative to the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” This change necessitates a more assertive stance in international politics to cater to the rising tide of Chinese nationalism, a vital pillar of the CCP’s legitimacy. Some consider the new style of Chinese foreign policy as “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy [24-25]. This narrative aligns with a broader strategy to maintain domestic stability and assert China’s position on the global stage.

6. Conclusion, Implication, and Future Direction

This research paper has delved into the complexities and dualities of China's soft power strategy, as epitomized by the "PR" and "CS" discourses. The concept of soft power, as conceptualized by Joseph Nye, takes on a distinctive character in the Chinese context, shaped by historical, cultural, and ideological factors. China's adaption of soft power, steeped in traditional values and influenced by contemporary geopolitical realities, presents a multifaceted and sometimes contradictory image internationally.

The "PR" narrative, underscored by Xi Jinping's speeches, portrays China as a benign, cooperative, stabilizing global politics force. This strategy is rooted in China's historical identity and cultural ethos, aimed at assuaging fears about its ascent and fostering an image of a responsible global player. However, the "CS" discourse adopts a more assertive and aggressive stance, indicating China's response to perceived external threats and challenges. This narrative resonates with rising domestic nationalism and China's determination to uphold its sovereignty and global position in a dynamic and often contentious international environment.

The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights China's challenge in maintaining a cohesive and effective soft power strategy. While the "PR" narrative seeks to enhance China's attractiveness and moral authority globally, the more combative tone of the "CS" discourse could potentially undermine these efforts. This dichotomy may lead to confusion, skepticism, or distrust among international audiences, impacting the overall effectiveness of China's soft power. Some think this "PR" narrative is just typical Chinese rhetoric, and Chinese foreign policy behavior often diverges from the facial meaning of its rhetoric and is realism in practice.[10]

Furthermore, the evolving global geopolitical landscape, marked by increasing tensions and competition, particularly with the West, adds intricacy to China's soft power dynamics. The intensifying Sino-U.S. rivalry, shifting alliances, and global perceptions shaped by China's so-called "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy further complicate the picture. As a Marxist-Leninist, Xi Jinping's worldview is shaped by historical materialism and dialectical materialism. The former underlines progress through class struggle, while the latter highlights change through resolving contradictions. Therefore, Xi perceives the rise of Chinese socialism and the decline of Western capitalism as inherently contentious. The intensifying contest between China and the West fuels his perspective [26]. Xi is becoming dubious about the feasibility of a peaceful rise despite seeing China in a primarily defensive position against Western aggressiveness.

Recent Pew Research Center surveys indicate that attitudes towards China across the 24 countries are predominantly negative, except in some African and Latin American countries, which represent a minority of surveyed countries. This sentiment is particularly pronounced in the Global North, where unfavorable views of China are near historic highs [27]. While this paper cannot fully explore the reasons behind this trend, China's increasingly assertive, sometimes aggressive, foreign policy is undoubtedly a contributing factor. Any considerable improvement in China's image in the Global North seems unlikely as China's diplomacy does not seem to become benign in the foreseeable future due to the intensifying competition between China and the U.S. (and the West).

In conclusion, China's soft power strategy, characterized by the "PR" and "CS" discourses, illustrates its struggle to balance its historical-cultural identity with contemporary geopolitical realities. While China endeavors to present itself as a peaceful, cooperative global power, its assertive responses to perceived threats and challenges reveal a more complex and nuanced approach to international relations. As China continues to rise, its ability to effectively manage and reconcile these narratives will be crucial in shaping its global image and influence.

Last but not least, other contradictions that exist in the Chinese soft power discourse warrant further exploration. For example, Xi Jinping's advocacy for cultural particularism is juxtaposed with

assertions of Chinese cultural and political superiority—these contradictions in discourse and their impact on Chinese soft power merit future research [24].

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