



# China's Soft Power Diplomacy: Winning Hearts Through Cultural and Educational Exchange Programs in Southeast Asia

<sup>1\*</sup> Naureen Nazar Soomro

<sup>2</sup> Ghulam Murtaza Khoso

<sup>3</sup> Ronaque Ali Behan

## Abstract

This research analyses how China is pursuing its foreign policy objectives by means of soft power diplomacy. Educational and cultural exchanges have become essential part of foreign policy objectives of many states. The cultural and educational exchange programs promote people-to-people contacts and enhance regional integration. Southeast Asia, due to its geostrategic assets – economically significant waterways, underwater natural gas reserves, and about a tenth of global annual fish catch is the major goal for many major powers these days. Southeast Asia is as important to China as is for other major powers, since China's geographical proximity to the region collaborates with its "Open Door" policy and establishment of a "good neighbour" strategy. To win hearts and minds of people worldwide, China has employed education exchange programs along with other public diplomacy tools as the effects of soft power are long-term and seemingly intangible. The higher education and teaching language in other countries have become major soft power projection tools in 21st century. The students' mobility abroad supports in showcasing the culture, values and ideas of a state and in enhancing its image regionally and globally.

**Keywords:** Soft Power; Public Diplomacy; Cultural and Educational Exchanges; China; Southeast Asia.

## 1. Introduction

According to Nye (2009) "power means an ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not. Because the ability to control others is often associated with the possession of certain resources" (Nye, 2023: 4). Power in international relations and global politics is mostly an ability to influence others to achieve desired goals and outcomes on wants

(Nye, 2009). Although Joseph Nye (2009) suggests states to be smart by using smart power, which is combination of soft and hard power to achieve the desired goals. He further suggests that soft power alone cannot produce effective foreign policy. Coercion, payment and attraction are the three ways one can achieve the desired goals set by foreign policy makers (Nye, 2019 & Nye, 2009). The first two methods are used by states while adopting hard power diplomacy and the last one which is attraction is utilised when nations decide to win hearts and affect behaviours of other nations through soft power diplomacy. Wagner (2014) uses the term coercion for hard power and attraction and persuasion for soft power. He asserts that the hard power method - which is military or economic coercion can bring short duration outcomes in other country, whereas persuasion or attraction has ability to bring long-term changes in the society (Wagner, 2014). Since, hard power or coercion compels one's behaviour to change involuntary, however, soft power alters the way a person acts or behaves. Furthermore, he states that Gallarotti stresses that compulsion leads to conflict and voluntariness leads to consent (Gallarotti, 2011 cited in Wagner, 2014: 2).

The term soft power refers to a country's ability to persuade its foreign policy goals by means of cultural diplomacy, political ideology and values, diplomatic engagements and public diplomacy (Kumari, 2025). The cultural diplomacy is carried out by export of films, music, art, literature, while political ideology is the methods which is used by the states to promote democratic values such as human rights to build a soft image in the international arena.

The soft power goals are achieved by means of several forms or the pillars. Culture, academic and scientific exchanges, scholarships, publishing houses, artistic productions, local and international artistic festivals, and political values (Khayoun & Ajrash, 2023) are some of the most popular pillars of soft power diplomacy in present era.

The states, through diplomatic engagements, mediate and resolve conflicts to contribute towards maintaining of global peace and stability. These days, the cultural and educational exchanges are used by the states as public diplomacy tools. The scholarships for pursuing education in other countries are offered by the governments and other institutions to build mutual understanding and global connections (Kumari, 2025; and Goirizelaia, 2020). Fulbright scholarships by United States of America (USA), and Commonwealth Scholarships offered by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the United Kingdom (CSC) are some of the most common scholarships in the World. The commonwealth scholarships are awarded to students of low- and middle-income commonwealth member countries to pursue postgraduate degree programs in the United Kingdom (Commonwealth Scholarships, 2026). The Far East Asian states such as China, Japan and South Korea are also utilizing the educational and cultural exchange programs to pursue their public diplomacy goals as it supplements the state-to-state diplomacy. These states are deepening their friendship through cultural, arts, sports education exchange programs as key components of their foreign policy, public diplomacy and soft power strategies. China, besides establishing its institutions in other countries to enhance bilateral relationship, she also sends her students to other countries and receives students thus China is playing a dual role of sender and a prominent host country (Diao et al, 2026).

The cultural and educational exchange programs promote people-to-people contacts and enhance regional integration. Southeast Asia, due to its geostrategic assets – economically significant waterways, underwater natural gas reserves, and about a tenth of global annual fish catch is the major goal for many major powers now. Southeast Asia is as important for China as is for other major powers, since China's geographical proximity to the region collaborates with its "open Door" policy and establishment of a "good neighbour" strategy (Ramzan, 2020: 2).

## 2. Research Methodology

To analyse how China is utilising soft power diplomacy to pursue its foreign policy objectives, the present study focuses on educational and cultural exchange programs introduced by China in Southeast Asian states. Keeping in view this objective, the study follows the qualitative data collection and analysis method. Both primary and secondary sources of data is collected for the purpose. The primary data consists of government reports, whereas for secondary data books, journal articles, periodicals and conference proceedings are utilised. The thematic analysis method is used to reach the conclusions.

## 3. China's Soft Power Goals in Southeast Asia

The present research highlights the significance of soft power diplomacy in achieving the foreign policy goals by states. The soft power is one of the most important determinants of the foreign policy in 21st century. Particularly, the higher education has become a major soft power projection tool. The students' mobility abroad supports in showcasing the culture, values and ideas of a state and in enhancing its image regionally and globally (Soomro, et.al. 2019). China has been carrying out educational exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding initiatives in Southeast Asian countries to win hearts and minds of Southeast Asian population. The Chinese leadership attempts to attract and persuade the international community to comply with its interests. Thus, this research paper focuses on one of the soft power tools of educational exchange programs carried out by China in Southeast Asia.

## 4. China's Educational Exchange Programs in Southeast Asia

### 4.1 The Confucius Institutes (CIs)

The Confucius Institutes are established in all the states of Southeast Asia except for Brunei Darussalam. The table below presents all the Confucius institutes established in the region since the establishment of Confucius Institute in 2004. The National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Hanban - an agency of the Chinese Ministry of Education), was responsible for establishing Confucius Institutes around the world with the purpose of spreading the teaching of Mandarin and Chinese culture (Yang, 2007) and Chang, et al, 2025). Hanban is the Organisation which is responsible for spreading the Han language or commonly called Hanyu. The Confucius Centres are established by the Hanban within the universities in other country and it usually affiliated with a university in China (Suryadinata, 2024).

Chinese culture is based on the values of Confucianism. The Philosophy of Confucianism is an ancient Chinese belief system which was established by Confucius in the 6th Century BC. It focuses on ethics, morality, social harmony and justice and sincerity (Din, 2024). The Confucius Centres established with this philosophy in focus, are exhibiting Chinese culture around the world and helping China portray its soft image globally. These Centres are promoting Chinese cultural values by teaching Chinese language all over the world. They are primarily aimed at exhibiting Chinese culture in other countries and portraying a positive and soft image of China by promoting its language, values, music and dance (Din, 2024; and Bodomo, et.al. 2024). According to Chinese council for language promotion, in the period between 2004 and 2011, China established 353 Confucius centres and 473 Confucian classrooms in 104 countries (Pan, 2013). In 2025, with the establishment of 16 new projects including 15 institutes and one classroom, the total number of Confucius Institutes reached to 510 institutions across 164 countries and regions (Shuo, 2025). Bodomo, et al. (2024) state that the Confucius Institute's declared mission is "to strengthen the understanding, opportunities and bonds between individuals, enterprises, communities and

institutions in their home country with the People's Republic of China" (Bodomo, et al. 2024: 182). This purpose is served with establishing links of Chinese institutes with academic faculties and students at local universities of regional neighbours and other international partners of China.

#### **4.2 The Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia**

Since 2005, around 60 Confucius Institutes are established in Southeast Asia by Hanban, with highest number in Thailand that is 27 altogether, followed by Indonesia with eight (8) institutes and Malaysia with seven (7) institutes. The Philippines has five (5) institutes and rest of the countries in Southeast Asia have either 2 or 3 Confucius Institutes with no institute in Brunei Darussalam (Confucius Institute, 2025). The complete list of Confucius Institutes in Southeast Asia is given at the Annex-A.

The Confucius Institutes offer Chinese language courses to both ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese in Southeast Asia. Not only students, but the Southeast Asian government officials also learn Chinese (Mandarin) from these centres (Suryadinata, 2024; Zhu & Yang, 2023). The beneficiaries of these centres are also offered scholarships for further studies in China. These scholarships include tuition fees, medical costs and living expenses. These scholarships are offered by not only the Chinese government but various universities and foundations in China also take part in hosting international students in Chinese universities and institutions. Besides Chinese language, the programs offered to the international studies also include degrees in social sciences, technology, sciences, economics and business administration. The scholarships offered by the Chinese Government "also includes a research grant for international students that help international students to pay publication fees, laboratory expenses, conference fees, study tour costs, workshop fees, and other costs related to their study" (Latief & Lefen, 2018).

#### **4.3 Hosting International Students**

China has been hosting hundreds and thousands of international students particularly over the past decade. The Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) launched in 2013 in Southeast Asia has further caused the influx of students from ASEAN countries to China for higher education. Although Covid-19 restricted the movement of students to and from China, the enrolment reached to 114,112 in 2022. According to Chinese Ministry of Education Statistics of international students in China in 2018, there were 492,185 students from 196 countries studied at 1,004 higher education institutions in China. Out of these 492,185 students, 295,043 which is about 59.95 percent of total students came from Asia. The southeast Asian countries that topped 15 of the chart were Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam and Malaysia. These students after their stay in China and completing their studies will carry the Chinese viewpoint and interests, as they gain knowledge of not only Chinese language, but its culture, history and politics (Yang, 2007).

Belt and Road Initiative is primarily an economic initiative, nevertheless, through education and cultural exchange programs with BRI member states, China is enhancing its soft power in Southeast Asia. According to Ministry of Education of Peoples's Republic of China, over 60,000 scholarships were awarded to Belt and Road Initiative member states in Southeast Asia in 2022.

The BRI has played a positive role in China's economic and cultural footprints all over the world. China has provided funds for infrastructure, and has developed academic exchanges, and cultural partnerships with the partner countries. In Southeast Asia, China has increased its visibility by organizing joint exhibitions, art festivals, and language programs. These initiatives have been fruitful in developing China's image of peaceful partner (Trang & Dat, 2025).

#### 4.4 Establishment of Chinese Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Southeast Asia

China, in order to achieve its soft power goals through education expansion, has established the campuses of its universities in partner countries. In case of Southeast Asia, China established its first ever university in Laos in October 2012 called Lao Sookchow University. The disciplines offered in that university were international economics, and finances and trade. Chinese (Mandarin) was also taught there (Suryadinata, 2024). In Malaysia, Xiamen University is offering engineering, sciences, Chinese Medicines, Arts and Social Sciences, computing and Data Sciences and other modern subjects such as Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (Bing & Tien, 2021; Xiamen University Malaysia Website, 2026).

China, in order to enhance its cooperation with Indonesia, have been establishing Confucius Centres and have been providing scholarships to Indonesian students. China provides scholarships specially to those Indonesian students who are affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia. This strategy is to build an image of harmony between China's rise and Islamic moderation. Both China and these Islamic organizations have been cooperating with each other in the fields of education and culture (Arifianto & Utama, 2025).

In December 2023 Cambodia-China University of Technology and Science (CamTech) was established in Capital city of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. This University is considered as another achievement of Cambodia-China cooperation. The University aims at developing human resources and providing opportunity for Cambodia's youth to receive attain higher education. This establishment is seen as "a strong testament to people-to-people contact between Cambodia and China" (Belt and Road Portal, 2023).

Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU) signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with China's Tsinghua University in March 2025 for student exchange program between the two universities. The students participating in the exchange program, from both sides, will receive tuition fees, accommodation, healthcare and also the opportunity to participate in language and cultural activities (VNU, 2025).

#### 5. Conclusion

Many nations are adopting soft power tools – attraction and persuasion to influence other nations behaviours. Convincing other nations through coercion has devastating and negative consequences. The states though achieve foreign policy objectives instantly with economic threats, diplomatic pressures and military but it has long-term negative consequences. Contrastingly, soft power diplomacy is gaining popularity in 21st century because of its positive consequences and its builds long-term trust amongst the partners. China has been actively employing various soft power tools in showcasing its culture, values and ideas and in enhancing its image regionally and globally. Promoting educational and cultural exchanges through scholarships for higher education, organizing art exhibitions and cultural festivals in partner countries around the world including Southeast Asia. Not only China is offering educational and cultural initiatives by establishing language centres known as Confucius Institutes, but it is also hosting millions of students from these countries to carry out their higher studies in the universities of China.

China and Southeast Asian countries have bilateral relations in the fields of trade, commerce and people-to-people exchanges. China is one of the largest trading partners of Southeast Asian countries. No doubt, there are some territorial and political issues between Southeast Asian countries and People's Republic of China, the use of soft power diplomacy has brought positive results in bilateral relations of China with the region's states. China's exchange programs are undoubtedly

beneficial to both sides. China is building its soft image in the region, the region is receiving skilled, educated and technically sound youth. The soft power tools used by the states to build their soft image in the world is becoming popular foreign policy strategy of many states in 21st century. The cultural diplomacy is now a common tool used by China to enhance its positive image as an economically developed country in contrast to those who believe in hard power in achieving their foreign policy objectives.

### Authors

<sup>1\*</sup> Associate Professor, Area Study Centre, Far East & Southeast Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan. Email: [naureen@usindh.edu.pk](mailto:naureen@usindh.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Area Study Centre, Far East & Southeast Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan. Email: [gmurtaza.khoso@usindh.edu.pk](mailto:gmurtaza.khoso@usindh.edu.pk)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Area Study Centre, Far East & Southeast Asia, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan. Email: [ronaq.ali@usindh.edu.pk](mailto:ronaq.ali@usindh.edu.pk)

### References

- Arifianto, A. R., & Utama, V. R. (2025). *China's higher education initiatives in Indonesia: A form of soft power* (IDSS Paper No. 113). S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University.
- Belt and Road Portal. (2023). Cambodia-China University of Technology, Science launched in Cambodia capital. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/05RIU75P.html>
- Bodomo, A., Mboya, C., & Nkrumah, B. (2024). Confucius institutes and the promotion of Chinese language and culture: A case study. In J. Adeli & L. Ammann (Eds.), *New Silk Road narratives: Local perspectives on Chinese presence along the Belt and Road Initiative* (pp. 179–192). Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1370.c19725>
- Chang, P. T. C., Tien, N. I., & Leun, C. J. (2025). Analyzing China's soft power in Malaysia: The Confucius Institute and Xiamen University. *The China Review*, 25(2), 151–169.
- Commonwealth Scholarship Commission. (2026). Scholarships. <https://cscuk.fcdo.gov.uk/about-us/scholarships/>
- Chinese International Education Foundation. (2026). Worldwide. <https://ci.cn/en/qqwl/qqky>
- Diao, J., Huang, R., Tang, X., Ma, X., You, S., Chen, M., Gao, W., & Xu, D. (2026). Evaluating higher education service quality in an emerging education hub: Evidence from international students in Hainan. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 121, 103497.
- Dig Mandarin. (2024, October 12). Confucius institutes around the world – 2024. <https://www.digmandarin.com/confucius-institutes-around-the-world.html>
- Din, J. (2024). The impact of Confucianism on ancient Chinese society and governance. *International Journal of Foreign Trade and International Business*, 6(1), 124–127. <https://doi.org/10.33545/26633140.2024.v6.i1b.107>
- Gallarotti, G. (2011). Soft power: What it is, its importance, and the conditions for its effective use. *Journal of Political Power*, 4(1), 25–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2011.557886>

- Goirizelaia, M. (2020). Public diplomacy by educational and cultural exchange programs. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 16, 279–287. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-019-00154-2>
- Khayoun, A. H., & Ajrash, N. A. (2023). The pillars of soft power. *Russian Law Journal*, 11(12S), 206–213. <https://doi.org/10.52783/rj.v11i12s.2037>
- Kumari, M. (2025). The role of soft power in international diplomacy. *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 7(5), 213–216. <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2025.v7.i5c.542>
- Latief, R., & Lefen, L. (2018). Analysis of Chinese government scholarship for international students using analytical hierarchy process (AHP). *Sustainability*, 10(7), 2112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10072112>
- Nye, J. S. (2009). Get smart: Combining hard and soft power. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(4), 160–163.
- Nye, J. S. (2019). Soft power and public diplomacy revisited. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 14, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14101018>
- Nye, J. S. (2023). *Soft power and great-power competition: Shifting sands in the balance of power between the United States and China*. Springer Nature Singapore.
- Pan, S. (2013). Confucius Institute project: China's cultural diplomacy and soft power projection. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 2(1), 22–33. <https://doi.org/10.1108/20463161311297608>
- Ramzan, M. (2020, November 26). China's use of soft power through culture: Language and education in Cambodia and Malaysia. IRIS. <https://www.iris-france.org/chinas-use-of-soft-power-through-culture-language-and-education-in-cambodia-and-malaysia/>
- Soomro, N. N., Siddiqui, S., & Khoso, G. M. (2019). Achieving soft power goals through education diplomacy by Southeast Asian nations. *Asia Pacific Annual Research Journal of Far East & Southeast Asia*, 37, 21–23.
- Shuo, Z. (2025, November 17). Confucius Institute continues expansion with new projects. *China Daily*. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202511/17/WS691b147fa310d6866eb29f01.html>
- Suryadinata, L. (2024). Chinese language education in Southeast Asia: Towards greater significance. *ISEAS Perspective*, 2024(3), 1–10.
- Tien, N. I., & Bing, N. C. (2021). Soft power, Confucius Institute and China's cultural diplomacy in Malaysia. *Kajian Malaysia*, 39(1), 55–76. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2021.39.1.3>
- Trang, N. M., & Dat, W. T. (2025). Cultural diplomacy and soft power of China: Theory, strategy and application in Southeast Asia. *Economy*, 12(2), 90–99. <https://doi.org/10.20448/economy.v12i2.6849>
- Vietnam National University. (2025). Vietnam National University, Hanoi and Tsinghua University elevate scientific and educational cooperation between the two nations. <https://en.vnu.edu.vn/vietnam-national-university-hanoi-and-tsinghua-university-elevate-scientific-and-educational-cooperation-between-the-two-nations-post36496.html>
- Wagner, J.-P. N. (2014, May 14). The effectiveness of soft and hard power in contemporary international relations. E-International Relations. <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/14/the-effectiveness-of-soft-hardpower-in-contemporary-international-relations/>
- Xiamen University Malaysia. (2026). Academics. <https://www.xmu.edu.my/>
- Yang, R. (2007). China's soft power projection in higher education. *International Higher Education*, 46. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2007.46.7938>
- Zhu, K., & Yang, R. (2023). China's engagement with Southeast Asia in higher education. In *International encyclopedia of education* (4th ed., pp. 666–672).