

CHINESE SCHOLARSHIPS AND EDUCATION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: TARGETED TOOLS FOR GREATER CHINA'S USE OF SOFT POWER

การให้โอกาสทางการศึกษาผ่านทุนรัฐบาลสำหรับนักศึกษาต่างชาติ:
เครื่องมือหลักในการสร้างซอฟต์แวร์ของจีน

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Received: December 27, 2019 / Revised: May 8, 2020 / Accepted: June 4, 2020

Abstract

The objective of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of provision of Chinese scholarships for international students as tools for implementing China's soft power. The research sample consisted of 34 foreign students who came from different countries, with different educational qualifications and different scholarship sources. The research explored their attitudes toward the People's Republic of China and compared the attitudes of the students who received scholarships from different sources. The findings from qualitative research showed that the research sample group did not give importance to the issue of implementing China's soft power via the provision of Chinese scholarships. However, the findings from quantitative research showed that the research sample group had increased their positive attitudes toward China, especially their attitudes toward the culture and education of China which affected their advices to their close friends to further their study in China. This research has presented the issue of the strategy for creating China's soft power via the issue of provision of educational scholarships. The research findings suggest that even if the students do not perceive the process of creating soft power, they still are influenced by their scholarship experience in terms of their positive attitudes toward China.

Keywords: Soft Power, Chinese International Scholarships, OBOR (One Belt One Road), Confucius Institutes, Chinese Soft Power Strategy

บทคัดย่อ

วัตถุประสงค์การวิจัยในครั้งนี้เพื่อประเมินประสิทธิผลของการสนับสนุนทุนรัฐบาลจีนสำหรับนักศึกษาต่างชาติในฐานะเครื่องมือที่สำคัญในการเสริมสร้างซอฟต์แวร์ การวิจัยในครั้งนี้ได้ใช้กลุ่มตัวอย่างคือ นักศึกษาต่างชาติที่มีวุฒิการศึกษา และที่มาของแหล่งทุนที่แตกต่างกัน จำนวน 34 คน เพื่อสำรวจทัศนคติที่มีต่อสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีนและวิเคราะห์ความแตกต่างทางทัศนคติของกลุ่มที่มีที่มาของแหล่งทุนที่แตกต่างกัน ผลการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพพบว่ากลุ่มตัวอย่างไม่ได้ให้ความสำคัญต่อประเด็นในการสร้างซอฟต์แวร์ผ่านการสนับสนุนทุนรัฐบาล อย่างไรก็ตาม ผลการวิจัยเชิงปริมาณได้แสดงถึงทัศนคติในทางบวกของกลุ่มตัวอย่างที่มีต่อสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีนเพิ่มมากขึ้น โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งทัศนคติต่อวัฒนธรรมและการศึกษาของจีนซึ่งส่งผลต่อการแนะนำและบอกต่อบุคคลใกล้ชิดเพื่อมาศึกษาต่อในจีน การวิจัยครั้งนี้ได้นำเสนอประเด็นกลยุทธ์การสร้างซอฟต์แวร์ของจีนผ่านประเด็นการให้โอกาสทางการศึกษาว่าแม้กลุ่มตัวอย่างจะไม่เกิดการรับรู้ถึงกระบวนการสร้างซอฟต์แวร์แต่กลับมีอิทธิพลต่อทัศนคติในทางบวกต่อจีนเป็นอันมาก

คำสำคัญ: ซอฟต์แวร์ ทุนรัฐบาลจีน โครงการหนึ่งแถบหนึ่งเส้นทาง สถาบันขงจื่อ กลยุทธ์ซอฟต์แวร์ของจีน

Introduction

Culture has been exerting a greater influence on China's image construction and national branding in today's challenging world. As "culture" is the main of Chinese soft power strategy, the concept of "soft power" has been reformulated as "cultural soft power" in the Chinese context (Wu, 2018). Cultural instruments, including the educational opportunities and Chinese language, are extensively implemented as the tools to implement Chinese soft power. Cultural soft power is also considered as a potential way to promote an understanding of China's thoughts, and enhance Chinese national security in wide-ranging, and sustainable ways. Using of cultural soft power is increasingly recognized as an effective way to carry out the great power status, and culture is the core of Chinese soft power strategy (Guo, 2012).

However, all the cultural resources could not be utilized as soft power, and some cultural tradition might even harm a Chinese soft power when the foreign audiences find them unappealing.

Therefore, when the positive part of a nation's culture plays an important role in building the national image or framing the public opinion, it could be considered as a successful projection of soft power (Hu, 2011).

China is providing scholarship to foreign students and opening up the universities around the world to strive influence and deliver national interest in different way. Striving for economic development and flourishing political impact in the world, China is making momentous progress in shaping up soft power capacities by applying education as the pivotal mechanism to expand its influence abroad. China uses scholarship and education to boost its impact of soft power, especially in the countries across the One Belt One Road initiative. It is considered typical process and is very typical for powerful countries, as part of their policy to broaden their impact in the international countries, to enhance soft power by launching numerous scholarship programs.

Research Objectives

1. To indicate the differences between the pre-experience and post-experience rating of attitudes to Chinese government.
2. To investigate the influence of attitudes toward China on willingness to recommend study in China.
3. To analyze the attitudinal differences between groups receiving different scholarship.
4. To examine the effectiveness of Chinese scholarship as targeted tools for enhancing soft power.

Literature Review

China's rise to international prominence since the early 1980s can be attributed in part to its increasingly skillful use of public diplomacy as well as an explicit soft power strategy that nation has used to position itself positively in the minds of people worldwide (Wang, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Activities like targeted economic development in Africa (Ding, 2008), and major infrastructure and trade route development projects for the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative (Ferdinand, 2016) have increasingly positioned China as a major world power without requiring that country to challenge the U.S. or other major military powers – a strategy deliberately chosen to maximize its potential impact on the world political milieu peacefully (Wilson, 2008). Despite the importance of soft power in the Chinese political strategy, there remain some serious problems in the conceptualization and understanding of this strategy as discussed in the literature (Blanchard & Lu, 2012). One of these problems is how the success of soft power activities can actually be measured or

assessed (Blanchard & Lu, 2012). In some cases, such as in the Beijing Olympic Games, there was a clear audience, and it was determined at the time that the Chinese government did not take full advantage of that worldwide event to promote a positive view of China (Manzenreiter, 2010). In part, this phenomenon was due to the basic ambiguous nature of soft power, which tends to resist manipulation and prevent the identification of a clear audience (Fan, 2008). In other cases, such as the educational programs offered by the Confucius Institutes and others, these programs communicate directly with the students who take advantage of both their scholarships and training programs, whether studying in China and elsewhere. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to evaluate the effectiveness of China's use of a particular soft power strategy as seen through the lens of those students who have received scholarships to study in China in these programs.

Methodology

The current research used a mixed methods approach. The approach was chosen because it can provide both detailed and broadly applicable information and also different levels of information (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The study was qualitative-led, with certain quantitative findings used to confirm and strengthen the qualitative findings further.

The first stage of the research used qualitative methods. Data were collected from documents and interviews with international students who received scholarships from the

Chinese government to study in China for at least one year. The 34 participants were grouped according to their study levels. These levels included non-degree students (ND), undergraduate students (UG), Master's degree students (MA), and doctoral students (Ph.D.). A total of 34 countries were represented: Australia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Laos, Mexico, Mongolia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Poland, Russia, Rwanda, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The qualitative data were collected using a series of face-to-face interviews with the participating students, a selected group of international students. There were 4 groups (non-degree, undergraduate, master, Ph.D.) in each group with different nationalities and a sample also from each country and continent. The interviews were completed at a location of the student's choosing (on campus or in their student accommodations). The interviews were conducted in English and also recorded for future analysis. The transcripts were then subjected to tabular analysis to identify key themes.

Results

Participants had a wide range of demographic and academic experiences (see Table 1). All graduate students received funding from the China Scholarship Council, sometimes in coordination with their own university and local institutes. For all these exchange students, there is collaboration between local

universities and Chinese universities. They send students to each other using the scholarships for international students to study in China coming from the Chinese universities. Undergraduates and non-degree students had diverse funding sources, which include joint agreements between their home and host universities, university-issued scholarships, Confucius Institute scholarships, and Beijing Municipal Government scholarships. Most of the students were not studying Chinese language and culture, with the exception of the non-degree students. (The table below summarizes these student groups).

Table 1 The characteristics of the student participants

Gender	Num	%
Male	22	64.7
Female	12	35.3
Program Type	Num	%
Non-degree	6	17.6
Undergraduate	7	20.6
Master's	12	35.3
Doctorate	9	26.5
Major	Num	%
Chinese Language	4	11.8
Education	3	8.8
Economics and Trade, Business, and Management	14	41.2
Engineering and Mathematics	7	20.6
Computer Science and Software Engineering	6	17.6
Scholarship Source	Num	%
Confucius Institute	6	17.6

Table 1 The characteristics of the student participants (Cont.)

Scholarship Source	Num	%
Home University Scholarship/Agreement	4	11.8
Beijing Municipal Government Scholarship	5	14.7
China Scholarship Council	19	55.9

The quantitative stage of this research was a survey of students that received scholarship funds from four main sources of in country funding, including scholarships from the Confucius Institutes, scholarships from the Chinese national government and from local Chinese governments, and from Chinese universities, and who had been studying in China for at least one year at the time of the study. The goal of the quantitative survey was to examine student experience with the scholarships and thus support the qualitative findings. Students were not asked about soft power specifically, but about their perceptions of China over time and their responses to their experience as Chinese scholarship students. A questionnaire was designed to collect responses from a broad, representative sample of this population of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The questionnaire collected information about the student's perceptions of China at the beginning of their course and at the time of the questionnaire, then compared the two to determine if there were differences.

The survey was conducted online to reach the largest possible sample while balancing the number of respondents between the four sources of in country scholarship funding. Respondents were selected via

snowball sampling, and initial respondents were asked to refer other participants who met the criteria for this part of the research. This process broadened the reach of the survey beyond the initial recruitment numbers. The sample was $n = 100$ students. While this was smaller than the minimum suggested sample of $n = 385$ members needed for a large, but unknown population size (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), the sample size was sufficient to reach significance for the sample. The data were analyzed using SPSS. Analysis techniques included descriptive statistics, independent t-test for difference in means, regression, and one-way ANOVA. The inferential statistical methods were used to identify differences in the students' pre-study and post-study attitudes and beliefs, influence of attitudes and beliefs on willingness to recommend study in China to others, and differences in attitudes between groups of different scholarship holders.

The total sample size was 100 students. Personal characteristics were collected for all participants in the survey (see Tables 2 and 3). These characteristics included gender, country of origin, scholarship source and degree program. Most participants (62%) were male. The largest group of respondents came from Asia (27%), followed by Australia and North America (22% each group). Participants were most likely studying at the Master's level (52%) or the Bachelor's level (38%). The respondents were equally divided between the four sources of scholarships.

Table 2 Demographics of survey participants

Gender	Number	%
Male	62	62.0

Table 2 Demographics of survey participants (Cont.)

Gender	Number	%
Female	38	38.0
Country of origin	Number	%
North America	22	22.0
Europe	17	17.0
Asia	27	27.0
Australia	22	22.0
South America	9	9.0

Table 3 Degree levels and scholarship sources of survey participants

Education Level	Number	%
Bachelor's degree	38	38.0
Master's degree	42	42.0
Higher than master's degree	20	20.0
Scholarship Sources	Number	%
Confucius Institute Scholarship	25	25.0
Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	25	25.0
Chinese Government Scholarships	25	25.0
Chinese Universities Scholarships	25	25.0

Descriptive statistics show the means and standard deviations of all items for the pre-experience and post-experience questions. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “Strongly disagree” and 5 indicating “strongly agree”. The descriptive statistics show that evaluation of the statement

“I think China is a good country” increased between the pre-experience and post-experience period. This is also true of “I like Chinese people”, “I have a positive feeling toward Chinese culture”, “Chinese education is good”, and “Chinese government is strong and powerful”. Therefore, it can be generally stated that individual evaluations of China have improved over the time period. The correlations of the items are generally significant, although relatively moderate. However, there is a need to examine whether these differences are statistically significant.

Paired samples t-tests (Table 4) were used to determine whether the mean differences between the pre-experience and post-experience ratings were statistically significant. The significance level of $p < .05$ was used to evaluate the significance of the mean differences. The results showed that Pair 1 ($t = -5.714$, $p < .001$), Pair 2 ($t = -8.553$, $p < .001$), Pair 4 ($t = -3.000$, $p = .003$), and Pair 5 ($t = -2.369$, $p = .020$) all had significant mean differences. In all four cases, the post-experience mean was higher than the pre-experience mean, by between .20 points and .72 points. The only pair that did not show this characteristic was Pair 3 ($t = -1.884$, $p = .063$), which had a mean difference of .16 points. Thus, it can be stated that the respondents' positive evaluations toward China, its people, education, and government, are significantly higher than their rating when they arrived for their experience. However, the rating of Chinese culture did not significantly change.

Table 4 Paired samples t-tests

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Differences				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre China - Post China	-.57000	.99752	.09975	-.76793	-.37207	-5.714	99	.000
Pair 2	Pre People - Post People	-.72000	.84184	.08418	-.88704	-.55296	-8.553	99	.000
Pair 3	Pre Culture - Post Culture	-.16000	.84948	.08495	-.32856	.00856	-1.884	99	.063
Pair 4	Pre Education - Post Education	-.20000	.66667	.06667	-.33228	-.06772	-3.000	99	.003
Pair 5	Pre Government - Post Government	-.26000	1.09747	.26002	-.47776	-.04224	-2.369	99	.020

Linear regression was used to measure the influence of attitudes toward China in the post-experience period on willingness to recommend study in China to friends and family members (Table 5). The ANOVA result showed that this measure was significant ($F = 32.641$, $p < .001$). The r-square value indicates that the model is a good fit (r-square = .678, adj. r-square = .657). One way to interpret this result is that 67.8% of the variance in willingness to recommend study in China is associated with differences in the five key attitudes toward China. However, the individual coefficient t-tests show that not all of the

attitudes were significant in the relationship. Significant factors included Chinese culture ($t = 6.807$, $p < .001$), Chinese education ($t = .2550$, $p = .012$), and overall attitude ($t = 3.603$, $p = .001$). Factors including general impression of China as a country ($t = -.685$, $p = .495$), Chinese people ($t = -.126$, $p = .900$), and Chinese government ($t = -1.262$, $p = .210$) were not significant for this relationship. Thus, it can be stated that attitudes toward Chinese culture and Chinese education had a significant positive effect on willingness to recommend study in China, as did general attitude toward China.

Table 5 Regression analysis

R	R Square	Adjust R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
.823*	.678	.657	.36750		
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	32.641	.000 ^b
Regression	26.450	6	4.408		
Residual	12.560	93	.135		
Total	39.010	99			

(Constant)	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
	.631	.330		1.914	.059
Post China	-.044	.064	-.058	-.685	.495
Post People	-.011	.085	-.010	-.126	.900
Post Culture	.467	.069	.512	6.807	.000
Post Education	.180	.071	.199	2.550	.012
Post Government	-.079	.062	-.112	-1.262	.210
Attitude	.352	.098	.364	3.603	.001

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Finally, one-way ANOVA (Table 6 and 7) was used to examine significant mean differences in general attitude toward China between the four scholarship groups, with LSD multiple comparison tests (Table 8) used as a tool for post hoc analysis to identify significant differences between the groups. Once again, a significance level of $p < .05$ was used to evaluate these responses. The descriptive statistics do show some mean differences between the groups. It is noticeable that the Confucius Institute Scholarship group has a lower mean attitude ($M = 3.56$) than any of the other three groups, including Local Chinese Government Scholarships ($M = 4.00$),

Chinese Government Scholarships ($M = 4.22$), or Chinese University Scholarships ($M = 4.12$). The one-way ANOVA result ($F = 5.748$, $p = .001$) confirms that there are some significant statistical differences between groups. Finally, the post hoc comparison shows that the only significant difference was between the Confucius Institute Scholarship holders, who had a significantly lower mean willingness to recommend than any of the other three groups. There were no significant differences found when an ANOVA test was performed between groups on willingness to recommend. Therefore, while the Confucius Institute scholarship holders are significantly less

likely to have a positive attitude toward recommend study abroad as an experience
China in general, they are not less likely to for friends or family.

Table 6 Descriptive statistics of general attitude for all four scholarship groups

Descriptive Statistics									
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Attitude	Confucius Institute Scholarship	25	3.5600	.46368	.09274	3.3686	3.7514	3.00	4.50
	Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	25	4.0000	.62915	.12583	3.7403	4.2597	2.50	5.00
	Chinese Government Scholarships	25	4.2200	.64679	.12936	3.9530	4.4870	3.00	5.00
	Chinese Universities Scholarships	25	4.1200	.66583	.13317	3.8452	4.3948	3.00	5.00
	Total	100	3.9750	.64891	.06489	3.8462	4.1038	2.50	5.00

Table 7 One-way ANOVA of attitudinal differences between scholarship groups

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Attitude	Between Groups	6.347	3	2.116	5.748	.001
	Within Groups	35.340	96	.368		
	Total	41.688	99			

Table 8 Post hoc analysis of differences between scholarship groups

Multiple Comparisons							
LSD Multiple Comparison Tests							
Dependent Variable	(I) Source	(J) Source	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Attitude	Confucius Institute Scholarship	Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	-.44000*	.17161	.012	-.7806	-.0994
		Chinese Government Scholarships	-.66000*	.17161	.000	-1.0006	-.3194
		Chinese Universities Scholarships	-.56000*	.17161	.002	-.9006	-.2194
	Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	Confucius Institute Scholarship	.44000*	.17161	.012	.0994	.7806
		Chinese Government Scholarships	-.22000	.17161	.203	-.5606	.1206
		Chinese Universities Scholarships	-.12000	.17161	.486	-.4606	.2206
	Chinese Government Scholarships	Confucius Institute Scholarship	.66000*	.17161	.000	.3194	1.0006
		Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	.22000	.17161	.203	-.1206	.5606
		Chinese Universities Scholarships	.10000	.17161	.561	-.2406	.4406
	Chinese Universities Scholarships	Confucius Institute Scholarship	.56000*	.17161	.002	.2194	.9006
		Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	.12000	.17161	.486	-.2206	.4606
		Chinese Government Scholarships	-.10000	.17161	.561	-.4406	.2406
Recommend	Confucius Institute Scholarship	Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	.14000	.17944	.437	-.2162	.4962
		Chinese Government Scholarships	.02000	.17944	.911	-.3362	.3762
		Chinese Universities Scholarships	.12000	.17944	.505	-.2362	.4762

Table 8 Post hoc analysis of differences between scholarship groups (Cont.)

Multiple Comparisons							
LSD Multiple Comparison Tests							
Dependent Variable	(I) Source	(J) Source	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Recommend (Cont.)	Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	Confucius Institute Scholarship	-.14000	.17944	.437	-.4962	.2162
		Chinese Government Scholarships	-.12000	.17944	.505	-.4762	.2362
		Chinese Universities Scholarships	-.02000	.17944	.911	-.3762	.3362
	Chinese Government Scholarships	Confucius Institute Scholarship	-.02000	.17944	.911	-.3762	.3362
		Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	.12000	.17944	.505	-.2362	.4762
		Chinese Universities Scholarships	.10000	.17944	.579	-.2562	.4562
	Chinese Universities Scholarships	Confucius Institute Scholarship	-.12000	.17944	.505	-.4762	.2362
		Local (Chinese) Government Scholarships	.02000	.17944	.911	-.3362	.3762
		Chinese Government Scholarships	-.10000	.17944	.579	-.4562	.2562

Discussions

One of the key points of the qualitative study is that many, though not all, of the participants were aware of the soft power intent of the scholarship programs, even if they did not specifically identify that intent as such. Several respondents identified the positive presentation and the development of positive perceptions of China and its culture and people as motivating factors in the scholarship program. At the same time, the quantitative research showed that it did not really matter if

the respondents were aware of the soft power intent of the scholarship programs. Instead, the results showed that in most cases, attitudes improved significantly over the course of the student's year or more in China. The development of such positive perceptions is indeed at the heart of Chinese soft power policy and its use of public diplomacy. These have long been a goal of Chinese communication with external audiences (Gill & Huang, 2006; Wang, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

The result showed that International students who have been granted scholarships are evidently beneficial. Scholarships are effective targeted tools in strengthening and promoting Chinese soft power. In addition, positive impact for each academic institution in their home country as returning scholars apply and transfer the academic experience they have had; this may attract more talented people and scholars to conduct researches in these institutions.

It is also the explicit design and intention of Confucius Institute and other university-level programs to engage with an international student audience (King, 2010; Yang, 2010). Thus, even though the students in the qualitative research mainly perceived the benefits to their own education, they were also aware that the program was serving state or national objectives. This finding means that even though students are taking part in these programs for primarily educational reasons and goals, they do know that the programs also serve state or national objectives of soft power and thus are wary about accepting this designation is an appropriate goal for China as a nation. However, the quantitative results raise the question of whether this would truly change the choices made by students, since whether or not the students were aware of the soft power objectives of the scholarship programs, they were still willing to recommend that their family and friends studied in China as well.

Of course, since different students were included in the qualitative and quantitative research and different questions were asked of them, there is still the question of whether recognition of the soft power objectives of the

program negatively affect their accomplishment. The participants' positive reports on the experience of the scholarship program, along with their positive views of their ongoing contact with the Chinese language and culture and their perception that they could not have had these experiences anywhere else, suggest that these programs were indeed quite effective in reaching their audiences. Still, in line with Manzenreiter's (2010) evaluation of soft power at the Beijing Olympic Games, there are clearly opportunities that remain to improve the messaging and communication. For example, students tended to report a poor perception of English language programs at the university, which in some cases impeded their personal acceptance of the message. The quantitative results also suggested that some programs; especially the Confucius Institutes program were not as effective at promoting positive attitudes toward China as others. Of course, the attitudes of students would be influenced by a range of factors, not just the program structure, which means that the attitudes cannot be directly compared. However, it is worth questioning whether there are changes that could be made to improve program performance.

This conflict between the different sources of information resulted in conflicting views of China's position and is consistent with Fan's (2008) characterization of soft power as a power of confusion rather than a policy of attraction. Ultimately, certain structural barriers have existed in the Chinese soft power programs for some time, and these are difficult to overcome with a single program (Gill & Huang, 2006; Shambaugh, 2013). These structural

barriers are also unlikely to be eliminated through only the use of scholarship programs, but these programs do present an opportunity for improving all China's communication strategies in the future.

The quantitative study of this research demonstrates that attitudes toward China in general and willingness to recommend study in China was positive, although there were some differences seen between the different groups. For example, Confucius Institute students were less likely to have positive attitudes about China in general. In part, the positive viewpoint associated with some programs may be due to the clearly perceived openness of the scholarship initiatives. These are designed to promote positive views of China and encourage international cooperation (Blanchard & Lu, 2012; Ding, 2008; Ferdinand, 2016; King, 2010; Yang, 2010). The inclusion of a large number of countries in the scholarship program, as clearly shown in the interviews, also increases the opportunities for greater interaction between students from different cultures. However, there is still a concern that the program may not be meeting some student academic needs fully, as noted above. This response suggests that there remains a confusing element to the use of soft power, although the goals of this program are generally positive, if often hidden from students.

It is also interesting that the participants in the qualitative study identified some internal perceptions of openness (and the opportunity to develop cultural openness and diversity), since there has long been a historic divide between internal and external communication in China (Wang, 2008). This response may signal

a shift in Chinese soft power diplomacy with increasing levels of cultural openness becoming increasingly more important. Further, it is clear that this ever increasing openness and diversity of viewpoints will contribute to achieving other intended objectives of the scholarship program, including transferring knowledge and building infrastructure and trade links with many other countries (Blanchard & Lu, 2012; Ding, 2008; Ferdinand, 2016; King, 2010; Yang, 2010).

Conclusions

This research has shown that while soft power is a strong explanation for why the Chinese state offers international scholarships, that explanation is an incomplete one. The qualitative study here showed that there are real benefits to be gained from the Chinese scholarships given to international students, including increased societal openness, communication, knowledge and technical skills, and greater economic relationships with closely tied trading partners in the global south. Thus, these student scholarships use tools like agricultural development and OBOR as strategies and positive channels for both greater soft power and substantive objectives like technological and economic development. The quantitative study showed that the experience of being in China for at least one year did significantly improve most attitudes and beliefs about China, including beliefs about China in general, Chinese people, Chinese education and the Chinese government, although students did not achieve these improved beliefs equally. In particular, Confucius Institute students were likely to

maintain slightly lower attitudes toward China in general than other students. Furthermore, at least some of these beliefs influenced the student's willingness to recommend study in China to family and friends. Thus, even if students are not aware of (or not reminded of) the role of scholarship programs as a tool of soft power, the programs and the study experiences in China are generally effective at improving student attitudes toward China. Taken together, however, this finding does suggest that scholarships as such may be a tool for soft power development, as many students can easily ignore the scholarship gift or use it for their own benefit without necessarily forming positive attitudes toward China and acting on them in the future. However, this is not to say that students do not recognize the underlying principle of soft power in the scholarship program, even if they are willing to take advantage of the program and even if it does change their attitudes toward China.

Scholarships, like other tools of soft power, are by nature imperfect and ambiguous, as this research has clearly shown. Not all students receive the message, and not all of those who receive it will believe it. However, there is clear evidence from these interviews that even though students do understand that promoting a positive image of China's culture and China as a country is part of the objective of these scholarships, many of the students still formed positive perceptions. Furthermore, the quantitative results showed that it did not really matter if students were aware of the soft power objective: in general, attitudes toward China improved over the period, even if soft power

was not brought up. Thus, these international student scholarships are a somewhat effective tool to produce soft power for China, although how effective the tool is in long term remains a question that was raised by the quantitative findings in this study. The research was also conducted as a cross-sectional study, while in practice a longitudinal study may collect more accurate changes over time.

There are also several questions this research could not answer. For example, the study did not examine in detail where the different perceptions came from or whether the perceptions were different for students enrolled in Chinese language programs and those who were not. There was also no evaluation of whether external programs, such as the Confucius Institute chapters that are embedded in external campuses in international universities, achieve similar effects. There has also been a strong academic focus on only China's soft power activities with little attention paid to other countries who may be seeking soft power. Thus, there is ample opportunity for further research on the question of how the targets of soft power initiatives actually perceive and receive such communications. This observation relates to the general weaknesses of soft power studies, and the argument that Fan (2008) and others have offered on the effectiveness of soft power as a serious tool of public diplomacy. It is a question that needs much more research to resolve effectively. It is also a topic often hampered by a lack of full clarity about the overall concept of soft power and its focuses and related outcomes. Future research should investigate educational delivery as a deliberate

and precise soft power tool to resolve the questions raised by this study and the earlier documented literature. In so doing, a complete and clear picture of the uses of soft power as

a national communication tool by China and other nations in the 21st Century will be clearly available for the future.

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