

The return of China's soft power in South East Asia: An analysis of the international branch campuses established by three Chinese universities

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between China's soft power and the international branch campuses (IBCs) established overseas by Chinese universities, and to identify which aspect of China's soft power has the greatest impact on these campuses. We adopted a qualitative research design that involved interviews with managers, faculty and staff at three Chinese international branch campuses in Laos, Malaysia and Thailand. Our findings suggest that China is leveraging its existing soft power to assist or promote its education export, and China's soft power is returning to South East Asia. Although each of the three IBCs contributes to disseminating China's soft power to a certain extent, their effort is still quite limited. The aspect of China's soft power that has the greatest influence on the Chinese IBCs is the necessity of the Chinese language, as well as Chinese cultural history and heritage. Another important factor is the economic power of China, albeit a type of hard power. It is China's rapid economic development that is driving students' desire to take courses delivered in Chinese, and to learn the Chinese language at these branch campuses. The study's findings have implications for policy makers, educators and researchers with an interest in IBCs.

Keywords: China; higher education policy; soft power; transnational higher education; international branch campuses

Introduction

With the development of globalization, the internationalization of higher education has become an increasingly prevalent trend for many universities. China has been at the receiving end of this trend for the past 30 years, but it is now commencing its export of education. This is a new phenomenon and little has been written about it in the scholarly literature. The few statistics on this issue could only be retrieved from popular media. By March 2016, 98 transnational higher education programs had been established overseas by Chinese universities (Guangming Daily 2016). With the approval of the Ministry of Education of China, four Chinese universities have established international branch campuses (IBCs) in four different countries: (1) Soochow University in Laos (the first IBC of a Chinese university); (2) Xiamen University Malaysia Campus; (3) Bangkok Business School of Yunnan University of Finance & Economics in Thailand; and (4) Beijing University of Language and Culture Tokyo College in Japan (China Daily 2015, Hu and Zhao, 2016). In fact, the actual number of the IBCs of Chinese universities exceeds four, as not all of them have been officially approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education; but in this study, we only focus on the ministry-approved IBCs.

IBCs are defined by the Cross-Border Education Research Team (2016) as 'an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; engages in at least some face-to-face teaching; and provides access to an entire academic program that leads to a credential awarded by the foreign education provider.'

With the economic rise of China, the influence of its soft power has been increasingly visible in many spheres and has been subject to a growing number of publications in academic circles (Cho and Jeong, 2008; Courmont, 2013; Ding, 2008; Lampton, 2008; Wang, 2008). Joseph Nye, the American political scientist who pioneered the theory of soft power, defines soft power as the ability to get what is wanted through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye, 2004). Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies. When illustrating the sources of American soft power, Nye identified culture as an important dimension of soft power in which education plays a significant role (Nye, 2004). When policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, soft power is enhanced. In transnational higher education, soft power can be achieved by both source and host countries. For example, Malaysia and Singapore were motivated to be recognized as education hubs to achieve both economic and soft power goals (Lee, 2015). Among the different modes of international education, the IBC is probably the most effective organizational form to promote the home country's soft power in a host country, as it creates an intercultural environment which combines the education mode, culture and management features of both the home country and the host country. Therefore, we believe that it is sensible to study the interrelation between the IBCs opened abroad by Chinese universities and the soft power projection of China.

There have been extensive academic discussions and debates on China's soft power in relation to China's education export, mainly focusing on Confucius Institutes (Ding and

Saunders, 2006; Hartig, 2015; Paradise, 2009; Wheeler, 2014; Yang, 2010). Although Confucius Institutes have been quite successful in spreading Chinese soft power, these institutes can be negatively affected by political and ideological concerns (Hartig, 2015). Wheeler (2014) observed that there is sometimes a mismatch between the expectations of host country stakeholders and the Chinese diplomats' intended goals for the Confucius Institutes. In some countries, the public's attitude toward Confucius Institutes has been less optimistic and China's government is taking measures to address this. For example, in the *Opinions on Properly Conducting the Education Opening-up Work of the New Era*, enacted in April 2016 by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, it urges the development of IBCs: '(China) shall encourage universities and vocational colleges to engage in establishing IBCs abroad to assist Chinese corporations' reaching out in overseas markets (Gov.cn, 2016). Therefore, Chinese IBCs may be considered as a governmental strategy to promote China's higher education and soft power in the host countries. However, it should be noted that the development of IBCs, is influenced by a mixture of government support and the autonomous choices of individual universities. Admittedly, national governments would like to promote soft power through IBCs, but individual universities may have independent reasons for establishing IBCs, e.g. increasing profits from tuition fees, expanding the scale of the university, and enhancing their own competitiveness in the global education market. Instead of only serving as the 'proxies' of soft power projection, IBCs may even leverage national government's soft power to promote themselves in the home country and host country.

This article is concerned with the relationship between Chinese soft power and education, but it focuses on the IBCs established overseas by Chinese universities rather than Confucius Institutes. Bellini et al. (2016) conducted a case study on Tongji University's campus in Florence, Italy and discussed the local embeddedness of such IBCs. However, there have been few studies of the IBCs opened recently by Chinese universities in South East Asia, which is the key region for China's education export. For this research, the IBCs of Chinese universities in Laos, Malaysia and Thailand were chosen as the subject of study. This is because these three universities represent, respectively, the precedent in establishing IBCs (Soochow University), an example of a 211-project university (Xiamen University), and a regional university that focuses on specific disciplines (Yunnan University of Finance and Economics). Project 211 was launched by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 1995, with the aim of raising the research standards of high-level universities and cultivating strategies for socio-economic development. Soochow University was the first Chinese university that established an IBC abroad. It was set up in 2011 and was also the first foreign IBC that was approved to be established by the government of Laos. This IBC represents the first attempt of a Chinese university's exploration of an overseas market, as well as the Lao government's first step towards opening up its education market. Xiamen University Malaysia Campus has recruited over 3,000 students

locally, making it the largest Chinese IBC. Bangkok Business School was established within Rangsit University of Thailand and has only recently started recruiting students. Therefore, this research, based on the three IBCs with varying scales, degrees of academic reputation, levels of development, and modes of education delivery, provides a comprehensive picture of the interplay between China's soft power and transnational higher education institutions established overseas by Chinese universities.

The purpose of this research is to: (1) investigate the relationship between China's soft power and the IBCs established overseas by Chinese universities; and (2) identify which aspect of China's soft power has the greatest impact on these IBCs. This study involves an in-depth case analysis of the three IBCs previously mentioned, to provide insights into the relationships and dynamics between China's education export and its soft power.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the literature on soft power and education export, focusing on IBCs. Then, the theoretical framework and methodology are presented. Following this, the results are presented, which are based on the data gained through a series of semi-structured interviews. Finally, we conclude with a discussion that summarizes our key findings, and a conclusion that highlights our contributions and limitations.

Soft power and education export

The export of education has long been associated with the export of a country's culture and soft power. The influence of ancient Greek and Roman culture and education on today's Western world is still quite evident. Today, projects like the Goethe Institute of Germany and New Colombo Plan of Australia have been very effective as proxies of soft power export of those countries (Byrne, 2016; Lanshina, 2015). China is no exception. The influence of China's soft power can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (630 AD – 895 AD), when the Japanese court sponsored 19 missions to Imperial China, which were the diplomatic ambassadors (referred to as *Kentoshi* in Japan) intermittently sent to China to study Chinese culture and Buddhism (Yoda, 1996). These diplomatic encounters produced a profound impact on Japan's feudal social system, political institutions, literature, writing system, architecture, dress codes and religion. These missions may be regarded as early examples of China's successful export of its culture and soft power to other countries.

However, the influence or the effectiveness of soft power also rests upon the receiver's perception of the sender's attraction. Mattern (2005) noted that soft power depends on 'the other's knowledge of one's alluring qualities'. Lee (2011) also pointed out that for soft power to be productive, there needs to be some level of congruence between the sender's projection of the sources of attractiveness and the receiver's appreciation of them. Therefore, the shared belief system, values, culture, or common understanding between the sender of the soft power and its receiver is crucial to the effective conveyance of the influence of soft power. For example, the countries which are the most receptive to the soft power of the United States are

naturally its Western allies, while an Asian power (e.g. China and Japan) projects its soft power most effectively on Asian countries.

China's economic and political power have been particularly influential in spreading Chinese soft power throughout South East Asia, where most of the countries have a long history of separation and reunion with China. The material and cultural exchanges between China and South East Asia started 2,500 years ago via the land Southern Silk Road (Hall, 1981). The ancient Chinese dynasties established a tribute system where the neighboring countries kept their sovereignty but paid tribute to the Chinese court, which was reciprocated with gifts from the Chinese emperors. Under this system, the ancient China and its neighboring countries (nowadays South East Asia) sent numerous envoys to each other throughout history (Wang, 1998). The rise and fall of a myriad of ancient Chinese dynasties had little impact on this system. Therefore, the ancient China was able to exert a continuous cultural influence on South East Asia which is reflected even today by the commonality in lifestyle, architecture, social customs and religion between China and South East Asian countries. The prevalence of the influence of Confucianism in South East Asia, especially among the Chinese community of these countries is clear evidence of the legacy of China's soft power in this region, despite the fact that the tribute system has ceased to function in modern times. However, it should be noted that the relationship between China and its neighboring countries had not always been harmonious. In addition to the ancient scrimmages, China's traditional world view was disrupted by the modern order of sovereign nation states (Stuart-Fox, 2003). Now faced with an increasingly stronger South East Asia, China has an urgent need to project a more positive image in this region.

Arguably, the soft power projection modes of democratic society and authoritarian states demonstrate quite a few differences. Barr et al. (2015) identified the following divergences: identity, importance of domestic audience, credibility, and the need to understand the intersubjective nature of persuasion. Wilson (2015) stated that the political elites in Beijing have sought to resist the pressure from the West by reinterpreting China's identity and by positioning China as alternative normative poles in the international order, which has been further enhanced by China's economic success. In addition, authoritarian states tend to target their soft power narratives at domestic audiences as much as international ones (Callahan, 2015). Chinese analysts view soft power as a legitimate response to domestic security challenges (Edney, 2015). Therefore, soft power offers a way to benefit from being open to international cultural influence and exchange without undermining domestic national cohesion.

However, the top-down state-led soft power projects of China may not have achieved the desired results due to credibility issues, as evident in Hartig's (2015) analysis of the Confucius Institutes. In addition, the motivation of those who consume soft power narratives and products may also be different so we need to pay attention to the intersubjective dynamics of influence and persuasion. One obvious question related to this study would be whether the image of the Chinese IBCs could be affected if they are perceived as a top-down government-led soft power

project. However, different from Confucius Institutes, which are often accused of having an ideological agenda, Chinese IBCs are in fact market-driven projects initiated and operated by individual universities. We found through our analysis that the Chinese IBCs have had only limited interest and capability to project China's soft power.

Furthermore, when discussing the projection of China's soft power in South East Asia, we cannot neglect the fact that ethnic Chinese are an important minority in this region. On the one hand, the ethnic Chinese in South East Asia are themselves symbolic of China's soft power representing Chinese traditional culture; on the other hand, they are often the second or third generation immigrants who have identified with local culture, which also renders them receivers of China's soft power projection. Therefore, in this study, we also take into consideration the influence of China's soft power on the ethnic Chinese people in the host countries.

Not surprisingly, when China started its export of education, and the exploration of overseas markets for its education industry, especially higher education, South East Asia has become a focal point. From 2008 to 2016, Chinese institutions signed nearly 800 agreements for educational exchanges and articulation/credit transfer with ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries (People's Government of China, 2016). Currently, there are over 70,000 ASEAN students studying in China and most of the ASEAN countries hold a welcoming attitude towards strengthening education exchanges and ties with China (China News Agency, 2016). China hopes that these international students will change their political attitudes and identify with China as a result of positive experiences, and then, when they return home and reach positions of influence, they will use such influence to favor China (Lomer, 2016).

Given the fact that China projects its soft power most effectively in South East Asia, and South East Asia has the highest concentration of the IBCs established by Chinese universities, the relationship between the two is worthy of examination. Previous studies have not delved into this issue, or only treated the IBCs or China's soft power as two separate topics.

Theoretical framework

In most of the literature on soft power, including Nye's own analysis (Nye 2004), there hasn't been any mention of a theoretical framework for the different aspects of soft power and their relative importance. Nye (2004) did identify 'culture' (including education and popular culture), 'domestic values and policies', and 'foreign policy substance and style' as sources of soft power. However, for the education-related soft power, there was no detailed breakdown for the different aspects of such power. To undertake an in-depth analysis on soft power and its

different aspects, a theoretical framework is needed, as a means of better organizing and presenting the findings. For the purpose of this study, we adopted Holyk's (2011) framework as it is the only framework that expands on Nye's 'culture' category of the source of soft power and breaks it down into seven sub-categories related to culture and education. We adapted this framework to assess the interaction between the education-related soft power of China and the Chinese IBCs established overseas (See Table 1).

Table 1 Framework for education-related soft power (adapted from Holyk, 2011)

Education-Related Soft Power	
<i>Human Capital Soft Power</i>	<i>Cultural Soft Power</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University reputations • Education level of population • Science/Technology capabilities • Necessity of main language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular culture appeal • Cultural history and heritage • Tourist appeal

Methodology

This study aims to answer the following two research questions: (1) What is the relationship between China's education-related soft power and the IBCs established overseas by Chinese universities? (2) Which aspect of education-related soft power has the greatest influence on such IBCs?

A case analysis approach was adopted, which involved conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with managers, faculty members, administrators and students at the three previously mentioned Chinese IBCs located in Laos, Malaysia and Thailand. A list of 11 interview questions were devised, based on the above indices of soft power, which covered university reputation, education level of population, science/technology capabilities, necessity of main language, popular culture appeal, cultural history/heritage, tourist appeal as well as other general questions on the relation between China's soft power and the IBCs.

Our interviewees comprised six presidents or senior managers/administrators; four faculty members; and six students at the sites of the three IBCs. Among the sixteen interviewees, six of them were local stakeholders, including four students and two managers. It is acknowledged that the limited number of local stakeholders had the potential to limit the reliability of our findings. However, we selected our participants using a purposive sampling approach, which ensured that all of the interviewees were able to answer our research questions. Therefore, we tried to keep a balance between seeking unbiased responses and obtaining the data necessary for this research. Most of the interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, while a few interviews were conducted in the form of a focus group at one institution. The fieldwork also included campus tours and informal meetings with other staff and students, for background information. In addition, one of the IBCs provided a written report on the status of the campus.

The interviews used only open-ended questions, which intended to seek the interviewees' opinions on the influence of different indices of soft power on the status of the branch campus. Questions for managers/faculty and students were designed with slightly different wording in order to account for the different perspectives of the managers/faculty and students on the same questions. As the questions were designed to elicit the interviewees' views on the relationship between Chinese IBCs and China's soft power, the questions were designed with this intention, and as a result the questions may be perceived as being a little leading, although this was not our intention. It should be mentioned that most of our interviewees appeared to voice their opinions without being influenced by the question design. For example, when asked how the reputation of the home university influenced the status of this branch campus in the host country, some of interviewees still denied that there was any relationship between the two.

Examples of our interview questions include the following:

For managers/faculty members:

- (1) How does the reputation of the university in China influence the status of this branch in the host country?
- (2) To what extent do you perceive there is a relationship between educational achievement levels in China and the status of the branch campus?
- (3) To what extent do you perceive there is a relationship between China's science and technology capabilities and the status of the branch campus in its host country?

For managers, there were four additional questions that aimed to elicit responses to the more general interrelation between soft power and the IBC, as well as the index that has the greatest influence on the IBC:

- (1) What were your university's motives for establishing this overseas campus?
- (2) Does your university want to contribute to spreading Chinese soft power, and, if so, why?
- (3) Do you agree that your university increases China's soft power abroad, and, if so, how?
- (4) Can you rate the relative importance of the above indices of soft power in relation to your branch campus?

For students:

- (1) Do you think that the reputation of this Chinese university influenced your decision to study at this campus, and if so, why?
- (2) Do you believe that most of the Chinese population is well-educated, and what influence did this have on your decision to study at this university?
- (3) Do you think that China has strong science and technological capabilities, and what influence did this have on your decision to study at this university?

The conversations in the interviews were transcribed, and then a process of content analysis was used to draw the common patterns and themes from the data. We also referred to online sources for supplementary information related to China's overseas education programs/branch campuses, and specifically to the three case IBCs.

Results

The following subsections discuss the coded data for each index of the education-related soft power framework, in order to provide a basis for further analysis in the discussion section.

Reputation of the Chinese universities

The results for this index are mixed. The interviewees at two of the IBCs (Soochow University in Laos and Xiamen University Malaysia campus) stated that the Chinese universities enjoy a good reputation in their host countries, which is especially true for the latter. Xiamen University was established by a Singaporean Chinese, Mr. Tan Kah Kee, and it still receives large donations each year from Chinese businessmen and communities in South East Asia. There is quite a close and extensive connection between Xiamen University and overseas Chinese in this region. In addition, both universities are prestigious national and regional universities in China. Therefore, the reputation of these two IBCs undoubtedly enhances their status in the host countries and positively impacts upon students' decision to study at these IBCs. However, for Yunnan University of Finance and Economics, the interviewees all denied that there was a connection between the university's reputation and the status of the IBC. Most of the students who study at this IBC had not even heard of this university prior to enrolment. The main reason for them to enroll at this IBC is their advisors' introduction and encouragement. In addition, as the students at this IBC will be awarded double degrees, most of them regarded this as an extra bonus. Therefore, for prestigious Chinese universities, their reputation has a strong influence on the status of the IBC and the students' decision to enroll at the IBC.

Education level of China's population

When asked about whether they think China's average education level influences the status of the IBC or the decision of students to enroll at the IBC, the managers and faculty members from all three IBCs acknowledged that there was a positive influence. They stated that the local people or partner universities fully recognize the quality of education offered by Chinese universities, particularly in business and engineering. Soochow University in Laos also functions as a student recruitment office to recruit local students to study at the main campus in China for the entire duration of their study. However, almost all of the students we interviewed admitted that they had no knowledge about the Chinese population's education level and thus it did not have any influence on their decision to enroll at the branch campus. It seems that although the quality of Chinese education is recognized by managers and faculty, it does not have an impact on the students' decision to enroll at the IBCs.

China's science and technology capabilities

For this index, almost all managers and faculty members agreed that there is an influence of China's science and technology capabilities on the status of the IBCs, but they also realized that the students really do not have much knowledge in this area. One manager from Xiamen University Malaysia Campus said, "Most of the Malaysians, especially Malaysian Chinese know that science and technology in China are developing very fast... However, in Malaysia, the science and technology level is not very advanced. So, they are quite open and want to learn from China. That's also why we are offering engineering programs at this campus." By contrast, the students did not think there was such a connection of influence and said that they did not know anything about this topic. Thus, the overall result for this index is similar to the previous index.

Necessity of Chinese language

There is unanimous agreement on this question. Every one of the interviewees clearly stated that it was very necessary to learn the Chinese language. Students believed that Chinese will be an important language given that China's economy is developing quite rapidly. Some students plan to engage in business activities or international trade with China; others intend to work in Chinese enterprises which are investing in their countries. Therefore, there is a very materialistic or practical incentive which motivates students to study the Chinese language. Although the Xiamen University Malaysia campus uses mostly English as the language of instruction, and the other two IBCs use a combination of Chinese, English and local languages as the languages of instruction, they all offer some Chinese language classes to the students. Furthermore, most of the students who enroll at Xiamen University Malaysia Campus and Bangkok Business School are overseas Chinese who have learned the Chinese language from their family or in high school, and they believe it would help their study at the IBC. Therefore, there is a very strong influence of the necessity of Chinese language on the status of the IBC and students' enrolment decision.

Popular culture appeal

When asked about this question, almost all interviewees believed that there was not much of a connection between this index and the status of the IBC or students' enrolment decision. One manager from Soochow University in Laos said, "In terms of disseminating Chinese culture in Laos, it is still not the right time, and it is too early... When you talk about culture, it must be based on a certain level of economic development. People would have to first be able to have enough food to eat, and then you can talk about culture. Now, Laos is still a developing country, so the main motivation for our students to study at our campus is to get a better degree and a decent job." Although two students at Bangkok Business School explicitly said that they were really interested in Chinese popular culture including Chinese pop songs, movies and sitcoms,

at the same time, they also denied that their interest in the popular culture of China had influenced their decision to study at the IBC.

China's cultural history and heritage

For Soochow University in Laos, the interviewees said that Chinese culture, history and heritage did not have much influence on the IBC or its students. This is due to the fact that most of the students at this campus are not Chinese immigrants but local Laotians. In fact, the number of Chinese immigrants or Laotian Chinese in Laos is very small which makes the influence of traditional Chinese culture negligible in this country. However, in Thailand and Malaysia where the Chinese community has a very strong presence, China's culture history and heritage has a very prevalent influence both on the status of the IBC and on the students' decision to study at the two IBCs. Almost all of the managers, faculty members and students interviewed stated that the traditional Chinese culture is very important to them. Some of the students at these two IBCs especially mentioned that they were really interested in traditional Chinese culture and history books of China, and that the reason they decided to study at this IBC was that they must not forget the culture of their ancestors. Therefore, depending on the size and influence of the local Chinese community, the Chinese traditional culture may or may not have an influence on the IBC and/or the students.

Tourist appeal of China

For the reason mentioned in the analysis of the previous index, the tourist appeal of China does not seem to have much influence on Soochow University in Laos and its students. However, the managers, faculty and students at the other two IBCs all agreed that the tourist appeal of China had a great impact on them. Some of the students had participated in a trip or exchange program in China organized by the Chinese universities, which motivated them to enroll at the IBC, or even at the main campus of these universities. For example, one student from Bangkok Business School said, "I have been to China on the student exchange program organized by Yunnan University of Finance and Economics. The weather there was very good and the air was clean. Chinese students are very hard-working. I liked it there and I hope I can work in China in the future."

Other factors of influence

For the other more general questions regarding the interrelation between China's education-related soft power and the IBC, all Chinese managers and faculty members of the three IBCs stated that they were making a contribution to China's soft power abroad. In fact, Yunnan University of Finance and Economics has donated 1,200 books to set up a library of Chinese literature at Rangsit University, its local partner university. Soochow University in Laos also published locally a series of books on Chinese traditional culture and gave out them to the local

students free of charge. The managers of Xiamen University Malaysia campus regarded themselves as cultural ambassadors to help improve the friendship between the Malaysian people and Chinese people through education. However, when asked about the universities' motives for establishing overseas campuses, the interviewees from all three IBCs answered that when they started planning the establishment of their IBC, soft power was not really a major concern.

The main motives of the Chinese universities were the need to expand their market internationally, or to have an IBC as a flagship project in the universities' scheme of internationalization development, or to increase the number of international students. Therefore, there is an interesting contrast or dynamics between country policies and university strategies. Although the managers at all three IBCs admitted that they were contributing to spreading China's soft power, they were doing so more for promoting their IBCs than for disseminating soft power. In fact, the three IBCs have consistently leveraged their status as 'serving soft power projection goals' to obtain government support and funding. The fact that establishing the IBCs were the result of autonomous decisions made by the home universities provides further evidence that the Chinese IBCs were mostly driven by economic or market motivations rather than political factors. For the question of why the Chinese universities want to contribute to spreading China's soft power, some of the managers at the three IBCs said that this was related to the *Belt and Road Initiative* recently proposed by China, and that they would like to offer services and support to the development of this initiative by spreading China's soft power.

For the rating of the relative importance of the indices, the managers at Soochow University in Laos and Bangkok Business School all identified the economic development or economic power of China as a very strong factor which impacted the IBCs and their students. More specifically, the economic power of China has rendered Chinese language into a very important skill that almost all the students at the IBCs are interested in learning. In addition, what motivates the students to study at the IBCs is the students' knowledge and education in the Chinese language. The managers at Xiamen University Malaysia Campus believed that the Chinese cultural heritage and the connection with the Malaysian Chinese community are the most important indices. Interestingly, economic power is not one of the indices we used in our analytical framework. Economic power is usually categorized as a form of hard power. However, its influence on the IBCs and their students is quite salient.

Discussion

The seven indices analyzed in the previous section can be categorized into three groups: (1) the relationship between the IBCs and the quality of China's education, science and technology; (2) the relationship between the IBCs and Chinese language; and (3) the relationship between the IBCs and Chinese culture. For the first group, it seems that China's soft power only exerts an influence on the IBCs when there is already a general recognition of the quality of China's

education, science and technology in the host country. It is, in fact, very difficult to project China's soft power through the IBCs to those countries where there has not been much knowledge or recognition of China's soft power. For the second group of the indices, the Chinese language, as an important index of China's soft power, has a strong impact on branch campus status and student recruitment. The necessity of learning the Chinese language appears to be the primary impetus behind the development of the IBCs and students' willingness to study at these campuses.

Regarding the third group of indices, Chinese culture also has an influence on the IBCs. If students have learned about Chinese culture, or if they have a Chinese family background, they are positively influenced to enroll at the branch campus. For most of the students, if they hadn't any experience of Chinese culture, it is unlikely they would have enrolled at the IBC. Therefore, we propose that instead of projecting soft power or helping to disseminate soft power in South East Asian countries, these IBCs are in fact leveraging the existing soft power of China in these regions to support the operation of the branch campuses and student recruitment.

Most of the interviewees mentioned that the Chinese cultural heritage and tradition, which has been passed down from one generation to another in the host countries, is the index that has the greatest influence on the IBCs. Another very important factor is the economic power of China, albeit a type of hard power. It is China's rapid economic development that is driving students' desire to take courses delivered in Chinese, and to learn the Chinese language at these branch campuses. Based on the above analysis, we propose a framework for the interaction between China's soft power and IBCs (see Figure 1).

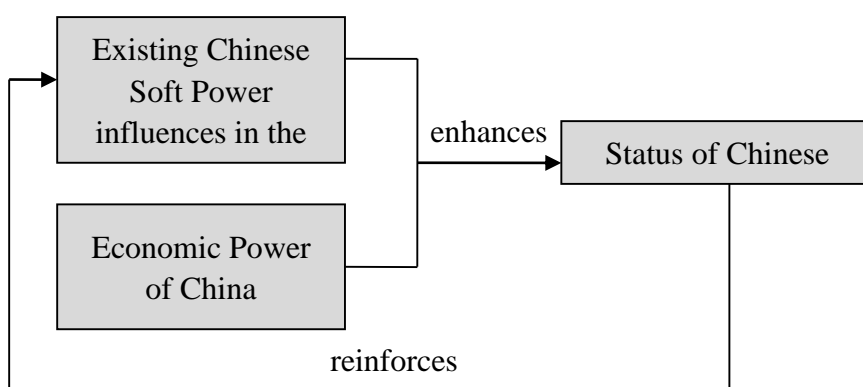


Figure 1. Framework for analysing the interaction between China's soft power and the Chinese IBCs in South East Asia.

We found that the existing Chinese soft power influence in the host countries of the Chinese IBCs has greatly enhanced the status of these branch campuses and helped with their student recruitment. The IBCs in these countries also, in turn, reinforce China's soft power in these

countries. However, for the country that has less recognition of China's soft power (Laos), it is very difficult for the Chinese IBC to project China's soft power. In addition, the index of China's education-related soft power which has the greatest influence on the Chinese IBCs is the necessity of the Chinese language, as well as Chinese cultural history and heritage. There is another factor which also has a strong influence on the IBCs: China's economic power, which must be taken into account when analyzing the influence of China's soft power.

Conclusion

The interaction and dynamics between Chinese IBCs and China's soft power is complex. To properly analyse the relationship between Chinese IBCs and China's soft power, we need to have a good understanding of the current status of China's soft power in South East Asian countries by both tracing back to the historic ties between China and these countries and looking into the present-day connections. In both historical and modern times, China has had great influence in the South East Asian countries, particularly where there is ethnic Chinese living. This implies that China's soft power has been in existence in this area for thousands of years. Unlike many other studies on how China is 'exerting' its influence in South East Asia, this study argues that China's soft power is returning to this region, and China is leveraging this existing soft power to assist or promote its education export. Although the work of the three IBCs in this study all contributed to disseminating China's soft power to a certain extent, their effort is still quite limited. There are also practical incentives behind the motives of the Chinese universities to open the IBCs and for the students to study at these campuses.

In addition, the economic power of China is a very important factor behind the students' decision to study at the IBCs. Its relative importance even exceeds that of all the indices of soft power.

As Mattern (2005) argued in her analysis of soft power, the attraction to a country's ideology or political stance could be enforced through representational force, i.e., a form of power that operates through the structure of a speaker's narrative representation of 'reality', or 'threat'. Thus, soft power is in fact not so 'soft' and is rooted in hard power. Although Mattern's analysis mainly focused on the relationship between soft power and military power, the same relationship also exists between soft power and economic power. For example, it is very difficult for any less-developed country to project significant soft power on other countries. In fact, most of the countries which successfully project or wield their soft power are economic powers in the first place. Therefore, when discussing the influence of soft power on IBCs, we probably should not treat soft power as an isolated factor, but must take into consideration the interaction between economic power and soft power. As with the inward transnational education into China, the IBCs in this study were established more in response to market demands than to spread soft power (cf. Ding, 2017).

This research provides a first-hand, in-depth inquiry into the interplay between China's education related soft power and the IBCs established by Chinese universities in South East Asian countries. The study's findings have implications for policy makers, educators and researchers with an interest in IBCs. In this article, we also proposed a framework for analyzing the dynamics between them. However, due to the limited number of IBCs opened by Chinese universities, we only used three cases for this research. In addition, as the three IBCs have only employed a relatively small number of faculty and staff locally, we relied on only 16 interviewees that were available and willing to participate in the study. Further research of a similar theme may need to include more participants, especially local stakeholders, as well as Chinese IBCs in other regions of the world, in order to achieve more generalizable and more objective results. Therefore, this study should be accepted as a piece of exploratory and non-definitive research. Evidently, establishing IBCs will be an increasingly popular trend in the next few years, with more universities in emerging economies likely entering the transnational/cross-border education market.

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