China's Soft Power in Thailand: Media and Public Diplomacy Perspectives

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Abstract

In the context of globalization, soft power has emerged as a crucial component of a nation's comprehensive strength, with external communication serving as a vital conduit for its enhancement. As a strategically important neighbor sharing extensive cultural, economic, and political ties with China, Thailand presents a significant case study for analyzing soft power dynamics. Examining China's soft power projection in Thailand through the lens of external communication holds particular relevance for strengthening bilateral cooperation, expanding regional leadership, and cultivating a constructive international image. However, current efforts to enhance Chinese soft power in the Thai context face multifaceted challenges. This study conducts a systematic analysis of these obstacles while proposing evidence-based strategies, aiming to contribute both theoretical frameworks and actionable recommendations for optimizing China's soft power deployment in Thailand.

Keywords: soft power, China, Thailand

1. Introduction

In today's deeply globalized world, national competition extends beyond traditional hard power, with soft power becoming crucial for measuring comprehensive national strength. A positive national image, significantly shaped by effective foreign communication, is essential for soft power.

Thailand, China's neighbor in Southeast Asia, is an important ASEAN economy and transport hub. It has close ties with China in economy, security, and culture. Examining China's soft-power building in Thailand through the lens of foreign communication can deepen China-Thailand cooperation and is vital for China to tell its story well and present its image in a complex international public opinion environment.

2. Definition and Intrinsic Connection Between External Communication and Soft Power

2.1 The Definition of External Communication

Generally speaking, international communication can be divided into two types: communication from the outside to the inside and communication from the inside to the outside. The former is called "domestic communication," and the latter is called "external communication." Moreover, "external communication" has both a broad sense and a

narrow sense. In a broad sense, external communication includes various international exchange activities. In a narrow sense, external communication mainly refers to the purposeful news reporting behavior of communicators to foreign countries. [1] The "external communication" discussed in this paper refers to the narrow sense external communication, that is, the external communication of news media. At the same time, due to the importance and particularity of the external communication and soft power discussed in this paper, not all news media can effectively play a role in external communication and soft power building. Therefore, the "news media" studied in this paper mainly refers to national media or official media with a government background.

It should be noted that in the international community, external communication is an activity that every country engages in. Serving national interests through external communication is a principle that news media in all countries are fulfilling. Especially in terms of policy stances on international events, whether they are independent media or government-controlled media, they are in tune with their respective governments. [2]

2.2 The Definition of Soft Power

When it comes to soft power, Joseph Nye was the first to put forward this concept. He believed that soft power is "the ability of a country to get what it wants by attracting and persuading other countries to follow its goals." [3] After he put forward the relevant concepts and theories of soft power, the Chinese academic community also set off a wave of research on the issue of soft power.

To this day, scholars at home and abroad have different opinions on the definition, constituent elements and promotion paths of soft power. However, it is a consensus among scholars at home and abroad that soft power is mainly reflected as a kind of attraction and recognition. For example, Joseph Nye once said that soft power is an "assimilative power" and is the ability of "cooperating with people rather than

forcing people to submit to your will." [4] Chinese scholar Huang Jinhui believes that a country's soft power "does not arise from coercion and inducement, but from recognition and aspiration." [5] Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong also pointed out that "a country's soft power is the political mobilization ability both within and outside the country." [6]

Based on the above discussions of scholars at home and abroad, this paper argues that "soft power" refers to the ability to make other international actors take actions expected by a country based on their recognition and aspiration for this country, rather than being forced or lured.

2.3 The Intrinsic Connection Between External Communication and Soft Power

On the one hand, in the international community, external communication is one of the important means of shaping a country's image. Cheng Manli, Dean of the Institute of National Strategic Communication at Peking University, once pointed out that "the process of external communication is the process of shaping a country's image." [7] This points out the important role of external communication in shaping a country's image. On the other hand, the national image is an integral part of a country's soft power. Chinese scholar Li Zhengguo once pointed out that "the national image is an important component of the soft power structure." [8] Wang Gangyi, the deputy director of the China International Publishing Group, mentioned in his speech at the press conference of the Global Report on China's National Image 2014 that the national image is an important indicator of a country's soft power. Effective external communication helps to build a positive national image, and a positive national image will play a positive role in promoting the construction of a country's soft power. Therefore, there is a means to an end

[1] Guo Ke. (2003). *Contemporary External Communication*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2.

[2] Huang Min. (2009). "Cold War" and "Sovereignty": An Analysis of the Media Frames in the China-US Confrontation in the South China Sea. *Journalism & Communication*, 62.

[3] Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (1990). The Changing Nature of World Power. *Political Science Quarterly*, 177.

[4] Nye, Joseph S. (2003). *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford Academic, 9.

[5] Huang Jinhui, Ding Zhonghui. (2010). A Review of the Research on China's National Soft Power. *Social Sciences*, 33.

[6] Yan Xuetong. (2006). China's Soft Power Needs to Be Improved. *China and World Affairs*, 1.

[7] Cheng Manli, Wang Weijia. (2011). *Research on External Communication and Its Effects*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 35.

[8] Li Zhengguo. (2001). *Construction of National Image*. Communication Jinversity of China Press, 26.

relationship between external communication and soft power. That is, countries can enhance their national image through external communication and ultimately achieve the goal of enhancing their national soft power.

In recent years, as China continues to play an increasingly important role in international affairs, Western countries have been persistently promoting the "China threat theory" and the "China collapse theory." This has significantly undermined the effectiveness of China's external communication, damaged China's national image in the international community, and seriously hindered the enhancement of China's soft power and even its overall national strength. Taking Thailand as an example, this paper studies the challenges and countermeasures faced by China in enhancing its soft power in Thailand from the perspective of external communication.

3. The Current Situation of China's Soft Power Construction in Thailand from the Perspective of External Communication

"The public opinion attitude of the people in one country towards the influence of another country is an important indicator for measuring a country's soft power."[1] At present, China has become the world's second largest economy. However, in Thai society where Western social media platforms are the major domestic social platforms, China's national image still leaves much to be desired.

According to the data shown in "THE STATE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA 2024 SURVEY REPORT" released by the ISEAS — Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore on April 2, 2024, 70.6% of the surveyed Thai people believe that China has the most economic influence in Southeast Asia. This percentage has decreased by 3.7% compared to 74.3% in 2023. Among them, 80.3% of the respondents expressed concerns about the growth of China's such influence, which is far higher than the ASEAN average of 67.4%. Additionally, 58.2% of Thai people believe that China has the most political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia, an increase of 12.4% compared to 45.8% in 2023. Among them, as high as 83.8% of the respondents expressed concerns about the growth of this influence, far higher than the ASEAN average of 73.5%. When

asked whether they believe that China is doing "the right thing" in the fields of world peace and security, world prosperity, and global governance, 66.1% of Thai people said they do not believe so. Among them, the top three reasons for "not believing in China" are: China may use its economic and military power to threaten Thailand's interests and sovereignty, China is not a trustworthy major power, and China cannot focus on global issues because it is preoccupied with handling domestic affairs.[2]

Based on the above analysis of the public opinion survey, it can be seen that the enhancement of China's economic and political strength has not improved China's image in the hearts of the Thai people. Instead, it has made the Thai people feel worried and fearful. There are still serious doubts in Thai society about the interpretation of China's role and actions in Thailand and even in Southeast Asia. If not addressed in a timely manner, it will greatly restrict the improvement of China's soft power in Thailand. In conclusion, there are still relatively large misunderstandings and distrust towards China's development and rise in Thai society. In order to eliminate such misunderstandings and distrust, we need to strengthen effective external communication with Thailand. By communicating with Thailand, we can present a real China to Thai society, thereby achieving the enhancement of China's soft power in Thailand.

It should be noted that the construction of soft power in Thailand through external communication is a legitimate need to explain China's development path to Thailand. Its intention is to convey the truth to the Thai people, shatter the rumors spread by the West, minimize the doubts, misunderstandings and concerns of Thai society about China's development and rise, and present a real China to Thai society.

To enhance China's soft power in Thailand through external communication, it is first necessary to understand the behavioral characteristics and preferences of the Thai audience. InfoQuest, a major Thai current affairs news and information service provider and a partner of PR Newswire in Thailand, reported that in 2020, approximately 55 million Thais used smartphones to access the Internet, spending about 9 hours online per day, which is

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[1] Huang Hong. (2018). The Expanding Space for China's Soft Power Construction in Southeast Asian Countries. *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, 2.

[2] Source: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/

higher than the global average. Thais use social media for various purposes, such as following information, entertainment, trade, and expressing political views. In 2021, the number of Thai YouTube users reached 94.2% of the total Thai population. The second most-used social media platform was Facebook, with users accounting for 93.3% of the total Thai population, followed by Line, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, and X. Thais have different usage inclinations for different social media platforms. For example, Thais mainly use Facebook to share lifestyle content such as culture, society, and natural scenery; Instagram users are mainly women, and they mainly post pictures related to fashion, travel, and daily life; X users mainly post political, diplomatic, and lifestyle topics, which are hot political and economic issues.

To enhance China's soft power in Thailand through external communication, secondly, it is necessary to understand the dissemination of Chinese media in Thailand. After the reform and opening-up, Chinese news agencies such as Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and China News Service successively established branches in Thailand. However, their responsibilities mainly focused on collecting local news information, and the reported content mainly consisted of domestic events in Thailand and Chinese-language reports related to China-Thailand cooperation, mainly targeting the Chinese market. In 2016, Xinhuanet, a comprehensive information service portal hosted by Xinhua News Agency, officially announced the launch of the Thai channel. This channel aims to provide Thai media and audiences with the latest Thai-language news on China's politics, economy, culture, society, etc., and showcase the views and perspectives of the Chinese people on major international events. It was not until 2019 that Xinhuanet first released Thai-language news through the Thai-version portal Xinhuathai.com, with an average of about 2,000 posts per month.

It is worth mentioning that "China-ASEAN Report", a central foreign-publicity media targeting the ASEAN region, which is led by the Publicity Department of the Central Committee and supervised by the China International Publishing Group, established a branch in Bangkok, Thailand in 2017. Subsequently, the Thai version of "China-ASEAN Report" opened an account "China Report ASEAN-Thailand" on

Facebook. According to the observation data as of March 2025, its subscription number is 160,000, with about 15 article comments, an average of about 300 likes, and most of the sharing times are concentrated around 30 times. It is a Chinese official media account with relatively high influence on Facebook that mainly reports in Thai. At this time, the official operating account of the BBC Thai channel on Facebook, BBC Thai, has 2.78 million subscribers, and the average number of reposts, comments, and likes of its articles is much higher than that of Chinese media. Generally speaking, the communication power and influence of Chinese official media in Thai society are still at a relatively low level, mainly reflected in the small number of official accounts, small number of fans, and the gap in the number of likes, reposts, and comments of articles compared with Western mainstream media.

In any case, considering the current level of China's soft power in Thailand, the high penetration rate of social media in Thailand, and the relatively low influence of Chinese official media in Thailand, there is still great room for development in the quality of China's communication with Thailand.

4. Challenges Faced by China in Enhancing Soft Power in Thailand from the Perspective of External Communication

4.1 Challenges from the United States: The Influence of the "Two Public Opinion Fields" on the Audience's Attitude Tendency

According to the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report released by the U.S. Department of Defense on May 1, 2019, as an ally of the United States, Thailand is at the center of ASEAN, located in South Asia and Southeast Asia, and plays an important geostrategic role in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States divides its allies into four groups according to their importance in the Indo-Pacific strategy. The first and most important group includes Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Taiwan, which is an important means for the United States to contain China, is only in the second group. It can be seen that Thailand has a very important strategic position in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Western media with government backgrounds such as the BBC and Voice of America opened Thai-language

channels in Thailand for Thai-speaking audiences. In contrast, Chinese media entered Thailand relatively late. On the other hand, as Thais have long been in an environment where Western social media platforms such as Facebook and X are the main domestic social platforms, they have a relatively high degree of trust in Western mainstream media.

During the Cold War (1947-1991), for the purpose of opposing communism, the United States regarded the media as an ideological tool to counter socialist countries and carried out a large number of untrue reports about China globally. After the end of the Cold War, out of fear of China's development and rise, the United States often uses mainstream media for external propaganda globally to maintain its hegemonic position. Especially in the past few years, Western mainstream media such as the BBC and Voice of America have continuously spread false information and attacked China in their reports on political issues such as the Hong Kong issue and the Xinjiang-related topics, as well as in public health events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Thailand, these Western media also take various opportunities to hype up hot issues related to China on multiple social platforms, still mainly focusing on "old issues" such as human rights, pollution, and international obligations. Past negative reports on China have led most Thai people to have negative views on China in terms of political democracy and human rights. This is because people's views on events are shaped by the "maps" drawn for them by the authors, editors, and publishers of the newspapers they read.

The United States' public opinion war against China in Thailand is manifested not only in the "official public opinion field" but also in the "civil public opinion field". Data disclosed on the website of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) of the United States on February 25, 2021, showed that the United States allocated a total of 30 million US dollars to Thailand in 2020 to fund the activities of non-profit non-government organizations (NGOs) such as Thai democracy-promoting institutions and human rights institutions.

The 101 Percent in Thailand is one of the many Thai non-government organizations funded by NED. According to investigations, from 2017 to 2020, NED provided a total of 290,000 US dollars

in funding to this company, aiming to build it into an important Thai news network media platform in the social, economic, and political fields. Under the guise of "spreading knowledge to society", this company has currently set up official accounts on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

With strong support in terms of policies, funds, and human resources, the United States has now established a huge news and publicity network in Thai society. It has launched an all-round offensive against China through the "two public opinion fields", preemptively setting news agendas related to China in various fields such as economy, politics, culture, society, and ecology, seizing the commanding heights of public opinion in Thai society, and influencing the attitude tendencies of Thai audiences. As a result, China is often put in a passive and deadlocked situation. Even if it clarifies and explains afterwards, it is of no avail, which greatly affects and restricts the construction of China's soft power in Thailand.

4.2 Challenges from Thailand Itself: The Influence of the System and Online Public Opinion Environment on the Communication Effect in Thailand

Generally speaking, since external communication requires access to another country, factors such as the local social environment, historical culture, and political system must be taken into account. Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with a different national system from that of China. Thailand adopts a parliamentary democratic political system, and its legal system follows the British legal system. Moreover, the majority of Thai people believe in Buddhism, believe in the cycle of all things, and pursue liberation. In addition, Thais are naturally fond of freedom, dislike being restricted, and especially dislike being forced.

In the new media era, in addition to considering the above-mentioned factors, media engaged in external communication work should also have an overall understanding and grasp of the local news management system and the online public opinion environment. Thai official media are good at internal struggles but not at external communication. Moreover, most of the negative news about China is sourced from Western news agencies, which is very unfavorable to China. In addition, Thailand lacks effective control over social media. There are a large number of Thai

opinion leaders who are friendly to the United States and Japan in the online public opinion environment and have great influence, which restricts to a certain extent the improvement of the intensity of China's communication with Thailand. These are all objective and realistic challenges that China's communication with Thailand must face directly.

Regarding the news gathering and editing management system, Ming Dajun, the chief of the Bangkok Bureau of Xinhua News Agency, once revealed that "Most of the information that Thais have about China comes from second-hand information from Western media."[1] This is due to Thailand's news gathering and editing management system. Due to funding constraints, Thai media rarely have overseas branches. As a result, news about China in Thai media mainly comes from Western news agencies.

According to incomplete statistics, among the Xinjiang-related reports of Thai mainstream media such as Daily News, The Standard, Matichon, and Posttoday, except for Thai Rath, those negative reports with words like "forced labor by the Chinese government", "religious suppression", and "genocide" mostly have notes at the end such as "Source: BBC", "Source: Reuters", "Source: CNN", "Source: The New York Times", etc.

In recent years, with the continuous deepening of media cooperation between China and Thailand, the number of news items in Thai media's China-related reports that quote Western media has decreased. However, these previous negative reports about China have had a huge impact on the perception of China among the Thai people. Objectively, there are still certain obstacles to the improvement of the effectiveness of China's communication with Thailand.

5. Countermeasures for China to Enhance Soft Power in Thailand from the Perspective of External Communication

The influence of external communication on soft power is manifested in many aspects, but the two well-known forms are as follows: one is to guide international public opinion topics to create an atmosphere beneficial to us, and the other is to shape a good national image to

enhance international attractiveness. Therefore, the countermeasures below not only address the challenges mentioned above but also revolve around these two main forms. The aim is to provide useful references for the development of China's communication work with Thailand and the enhancement of China's soft power.

5.1 Proactively Set the Agenda and Precisely Deliver Content

The core idea of the agenda-setting theory is that the mass media can influence what the audience pays attention to by providing information and arranging relevant agendas.[2]

This requires us to have an overall understanding of when, in what form, where and what kind of information to release. When conducting news dissemination work in Thailand, we should also consider the audience's usage preferences and frequencies of social media. For example, when using Facebook to release social news reports, we can combine with short-video forms to attract the attention and interaction of Thai audiences; when using Instagram, a picture-based social application, to release entertainment news, we can mainly adopt a multi-picture format, using pictures with a strong sense of "online style" to attract the attention of Thai audiences; when using X, a social media platform for strangers, to release political and economic news, we can use the form of "poster picture + text", delivering the main information to Thai audiences through posters. As for YouTube, the most-used social application by Thais at present, media can also set up corresponding accounts, add Thai subtitles to a large number of domestic exquisitely-produced programs or videos, and regularly release them on relevant accounts to trigger resonance among Thai audiences. And continuously modify the form and content according to the feedback and comments of Thai people to match the content with the needs of Thai audiences.

Proactively setting the agenda and precisely delivering content aims to understand what kind of information in what form the audience is interested in. Thus, when China encounters public opinion crises in Thailand, the media can provide information and arrange relevant agendas to make positive, effective, objective and correct guidance, effectively suppressing

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[1] Source: https://th.boell.org/en/2019/12/28/china-told-china-beijings-influences-reach-thai-media-and-beyond

[2] Ye Hao. (2012). Public Diplomacy and International Communication. *Modern Communication*, 16.

hostile false information.

5.2 Strengthen Media Cooperation and Spread the Voices of Thai Opinion Leaders

In response to the current unfavorable online public opinion environment in Thailand towards China, it is necessary to strengthen cooperation between Chinese and Thai media. The voices of Thai scholars and experts should be spread through new media channels to improve the public opinion environment in Thailand. Thai experts who study China issues should be encouraged to visit China more often for on-site investigations. At the same time, Chinese experts should also frequently go to Thailand for team cooperation and long-term research, assisting Thai experts in conducting research on China. Seize various opportunities to enhance their in-depth understanding of China. Research results can be disseminated through new media channels, academic seminars, and multimedia means.

Enhancing the level of media cooperation between China and Thailand and strengthening the connection with Thai opinion leaders aims to spread the voices of Thai scholars and experts through new media channels. By introducing the real situation of events to the Thai people, it can guide the Thai people to understand China objectively and correctly, thus improving the online public opinion environment in Thailand.

5.3 Adhere to an Open Concept and Timely Handle Information that Smears China

In response to the existing problems in China's current communication strategies towards Thailand, the media should emancipate their minds and formulate communication strategies that are in line with the national character of the Thai people, so as to comprehensively improve the quality of communication with Thailand. The so-called "emancipating the mind" means conducting news activities with innovative thinking and an open-minded and inclusive attitude. For example, when faced with negative or sensitive issues related to China in Thai society, the media can appropriately use various forms to respond, guide, and reason in a timely manner in the Thai public opinion field. This can reduce, to a certain extent, the misunderstandings of the Thai audience towards China, rather than remaining silent and giving up the right to speak. Carrying out communication work with Thailand while adhering to an open concept requires us to rationally respect and face the situation where the national conditions and culture of Thailand are quite different from those of China. It also requires us to calmly handle the information that smears and slanders China.

6. Conclusion

How to break through the heavy pressures of the old international economic order and the old international information dissemination order, strengthen the construction of China's external communication capabilities, establish international discourse power that matches China's comprehensive national strength and international status, and make the construction of China's soft power commensurate with the development of its hard power are urgent problems and challenges that China needs to address in the current international communication landscape in order to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. This article holds that the enhancement of China's soft power in Thailand is a long-term and systematic process. The construction of the communication system with Thailand must have long-term strategic goals and an overall mindset.

There is no fixed model for the construction of soft power. When studied from different perspectives and targeted at different countries and regions, the countermeasures for constructing soft power also vary. This article studies the enhancement of China's soft power in Thailand from the perspective of external communication. In terms of form and geographical scope of application, it inherently has certain limitations. Moreover, due to the difficulty of conducting cross-border audience surveys and the author's own insufficient academic attainments and other factors, there are many deficiencies in this article. As a beginner, I sincerely hope that this article can arouse the academic community's interest in the research on soft power issues from the perspective of external communication, and I look forward to learning from senior colleagues and peers.

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