

RESEARCH NOTE

“Soft Power” in Chinese International Relations Theory: Some Aspects of the Chinese Debate on “Soft Power”

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Summary

The term “soft power,” coined by American scholar J.S. Nye, not only became well known in China but also stirred a debate among Chinese experts about how to adapt this notion to the Chinese context. This debate embraces a wide spectrum of issues — from a linguistic problem (how to properly translate the expression “soft power” in order to reflect its intended meaning), to the very definition of the term, to sources, tools, and other aspects of it. Due to the fact that the practice of China’s “soft power” has already been painstakingly described and analyzed, this paper focuses on theoretical assumption of Chinese “soft power,” seen from the perspective of Chinese scholars. This discourse contributes to the debate about the PRC’s foreign policy and international relations theory with Chinese characteristics.

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Foreword

Defined for the first time by Joseph S. Nye, the term “soft power” has generated interest and aroused a very heated discussion among not only Western but also Chinese scholars and experts on international relations. This debate could be perceived as an attempt to adapt this term to the Chinese context. The discussion could be recognized as a process of Sinicization,¹ which is not a new trend in Chinese discourse about international relations theory. The process of Sinicizing foreign concepts has been common in Chinese political practice, not only in the PRC, but also during the times of the ancient empire and the early twentieth-century republic. The best example of Sinicization is the process of incorporating Buddhism

¹ Sinicization (*zhongguohua*) can be defined as giving a foreign term or idea a Chinese “spirit” in order to adapt this notion to Chinese conditions and needs. Discussion among Chinese scholars about Nye’s concept, and those scholars who provide their own definitions of “soft power” taking into account Chinese foreign policy, could be perceived as a Sinicization of this notion.