

China's Soft Power Perception Of Mongolian High School Students With Chinese Language Curriculum

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ABSTRACT:

This research examines Mongolian high school students' views on soft power, specifically the influence of a Chinese language curriculum in promoting Chinese culture. A sample of 235 students from Ulaanbaatar high schools was analyzed using six factors and 30 questions on language and cultural concepts. The Chinese Dream, introduced by President Xi Jinping in late 2012, represents a vision for China's future, encompassing both personal and national ideals. Aligned with China's "Dream" initiative, foreign policy and the Chinese Embassy enhance China's image by fostering educational opportunities for Mongolian youth, positioning education as a key soft power tool. Findings from hypothesis testing, cross-tabulation, and correlation analysis reveal that China's image influences students' educational aspirations, linked to soft power dimensions like culture, digital strategies, engagement, education, entrepreneurship, and governance. The analysis reveals that China's soft power, including digital platforms, education, engagement, and culture, shows strong positive correlations ($r = 0.3-0.5$). Conversely, soft power linked to government, enterprise, and engagement has weaker correlations with Culture ($r = 0.275-0.337$). Notably, digital initiatives, culture, and education exhibit strong positive correlations.

KEYWORDS: *the prospect of education, linguistic and cultural dimensions, cultural exchange and impact, inspiration and motivation, education as a tool of soft power*

INTRODUCTION

On October 22, 2019, at the "Chinese Economic Innovation Forum," President Xi Jinping expressed confidence in China's progress, highlighting that the Chinese Dream is based on national revitalization and the transition from investment to consumption as part of his vision (Gabriel GABORMihai-Marcel, 2020). Integrating culture and education is a highly effective soft power tool, shaping new trends through competing ideals and models that drive domestic and socioeconomic progress (Aidarbek Amirbek, 2014). Make it shorter in an academic tone (Enkhzul.B, 2024). Sustainability lies at the core of knowledge, driving changes in lifestyle, consumption, and interpersonal relations, reflecting a shift in worldview.

Soft power has become increasingly vital for advancing Beijing's international interests. China's ultimate goal is to create a thriving, resilient, democratic, culturally advanced, and modernized society by the mid-21st century (Gabriel GABOR, THE CHINESE DREAM - A DREAM OR REALITY!?, 2020). Thus, China leverages various tools, such as culture, language, arts, aid, trade, and investments, to extend its influence globally. This application of cultural influence is motivated by national objectives, such as ensuring a stable environment for economic development, meeting increasing energy needs, and diminishing the impact of rival powers, particularly the US (Hocking, 2005). Hill noted that the soft power paradigm views people as key targets of foreign policy (Melissen, 2005). As Nye argued, countries that align with prevailing international norms, frame key issues, and have credibility abroad are more attractive in postmodern international relations (Hocking, 2005). "Soft" power is a mental force and a key component of national power, with culture as its central element. Culture, defined by values, encompasses both material and spiritual wealth created throughout history. As a form of soft power, culture interacts with politics, economy, and military strength.

In today's competitive landscape, national power involves economic, scientific, defense, and cultural leverage. A nation's cultural influence and ability to shape global norms and rules are vital resources of its power (Nicolae HANEŞ, 2015). According to Harris, China's cultural influence is not only expanding but also becoming more prominent globally. The outcomes of China's efforts to promote the study of the Chinese language underscore its effectiveness as a pivotal element of its cultural diplomacy. Evidence suggests that fostering the study of the Chinese language has significantly improved China's international image and attracted learners. Statistics indicate that approximately 30-40 million individuals worldwide are currently studying Chinese, with numerous instances of its rising popularity across various countries (People's Daily Online, 10/03/2006; 19/09/2006). In Mongolia, the number of Chinese learners in public schools has steadily increased, with 73% of schools offering it as either a compulsory or elective subject. Of these, 17% of public schools and 83% of private schools require Chinese as a mandatory subject (Guruuchin, 2023). China's efforts have helped establish Chinese as a language of growing prestige, similar to the global influence of English (Gil, 2008).

The research aimed to analyze Mongolian high school students' perceptions of soft power using the analysis of quantitative data. In addition, the data was categorized into six groups: culture, digital, education, engagement, enterprise, and government.

Research Purpose

The research analyzed high school students' perceptions of soft power through quantitative data, focusing on culture, digital, education, engagement, enterprise, and government.

Objectives of Research

The research aimed to analyze quantitative data to explore high school students' perceptions of China's soft power.

The Hypothesis of Research

H1: High school students hold a favorable view of China's influence in the realms of culture, digital media, education, engagement, enterprise, and governance.

H2: The factors influencing students' perceptions of China's soft power correlate.

H3: China's diplomatic influence perception has strengthened through the influence of its language and culture.

H4: Chinese curriculum high school students aspire to pursue higher education in China.

H5: They stay informed about international news in Chinese.

H6: They engage in extended Chinese language learning.

H7: They hold positive perceptions of China.

Research Methodology

The research methodology involves quantitative analysis of a questionnaire measuring soft power factors, including culture, digital, education, engagement, enterprise, and government.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft power strategy influences other nations to achieve goals through language, culture, education, politics, values, and foreign policy (Diplomacy, 2019). It involves factors like international relations, diplomacy, beliefs, and social capital (Enkhzul.B, 2024). Education is increasingly recognized as a tool for advancing national interests. Foreign representatives gain success in science and culture by learning the target language, which enhances their social capital. Global individuals, possessing educational and linguistic proficiency, effectively convey language and culture through personal interactions (Aidarbek Amirbek, 2014). Educational support from one country to another enhances the host country's soft power, proving more effective than military force. Tan Puay-Ching states, "Language is a basic component of culture and vital to ethnic identity... language and education are essential for sustaining culture." China uses language and education to strengthen ties with ASEAN countries and advance its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to establish itself as a regional hegemon (Ramzan, 2020).

Chinese Language Education in Mongolia: Mongolia and China have strengthened cultural and educational exchanges, particularly in Chinese language instruction. Growing political, economic, and cultural ties have fueled the expansion of Chinese language education, with increased employment opportunities motivating more Mongolians to learn Chinese (Guruuchin, 2023).

The number of educational institutions offering Chinese language courses has risen from one to over 60, including primary and secondary schools. As of December 2010, more than 6,000 students are studying Chinese, with 8% in rural areas and 92% in urban centers. Of these, 27% are university students, while 73% are in primary and secondary schools (Guruuchin, 2023).

Over 4,800 students in Mongolia's primary and secondary education system are studying Chinese. While public schools historically offered free education without Chinese courses, private schools were the first to introduce Chinese language instruction. The "Culture Going Global" strategy promotes the Chinese language and organizes global events, media campaigns, and cultural exchanges. Significant investments focus on language education, media, and the film industry to enhance its global reach (Maksim, 2023). Many parents prioritize Chinese language education for their children, leading to numerous schools offering such programs. A key soft power tool, the Confucius Institute promotes Chinese language and culture worldwide through teaching, teacher training, proficiency tests, and cultural exchanges, establishing itself as a global leader in linguistic and cultural outreach (Maksim, 2023). The share of Chinese films has been steadily increasing each year, with TV series and feature films now ranking among the highest-rated productions (Maksim, 2023).

China's core soft power channels were analyzed in greater detail. These include Confucius Institutes, external communication, educational exchanges, and major public diplomacy events. This study does not seek to cover all dimensions of China's efforts in cultivating soft power. Instead, it focuses on tools prominently discussed in both Chinese and global contexts. These instruments are not unique to China but are common components of public diplomacy worldwide (Repnikova).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of soft power, rooted in Chinese philosophy, can be traced back to Mencius and Confucian principles like benevolence, righteousness, and wisdom. Chinese scholars argue that soft power is deeply embedded in Chinese thought, with the idea of achieving goals through attraction present for thousands of years. There are two main views on China's soft power: the mainstream view, supported by sociologists and philosophers, emphasizes culture as its core. Since the 1990s, cultural soft power has been central to China's approach, focusing on national image, cultural safety, and the construction of national identity and spirit (Caruso, 2020). Culture, ideology, and institutions are difficult to measure compared to military and economic resources, making the practical application of soft power challenging. While international rankings like Soft Power 30 have emerged, they have limitations. Evaluating the effectiveness of soft power instruments is crucial, as significant resources do not always translate into strong positions (Caruso, 2020).

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE SOFT POWER THEORY: In the early 1990s, Joseph Nye conceptualized "soft power," emphasizing that a nation's overall strength includes not only "hard power" elements like its economic, scientific, and military capabilities but also the attraction of its language, culture, and ideological values (Xu, 2021). William S. Armour introduced the concept of "soft power pedagogy," linking language learning to a nation's cultural products in shaping soft power. He emphasizes the importance of the broader communicative environment, particularly the role of new communication technologies in language education (Hernández, 2028). Armour and Hill's ideas align with César Villanueva Rivas' view that soft power is generated through language study. Villanueva (2015) argues that linguistic attraction itself constitutes international influence and delineates five distinct levels of cultural leverage manifested through language acquisition.

1. **Empathetic:** Communicating worldview and national distinctiveness.
2. **Sympathetic:** Highlighting linguistic aesthetics, including syntax and literary tradition.
3. **Geopolitical:** Exerting symbolic and ideological influence via cultural industries.

4. **Diplomatic:** Shaping decisions by integrating language in multilateral forums.
5. **Utilitarian:** Facilitating economic transactions and business promotion (Hernández, 2028).

Nye (2011) argues that soft power is closely linked to cultural diplomacy, with foreign policies, political values, and culture as its main sources. Waller (2009) defines "cultural diplomacy" as using cultural elements to foster positive attitudes in a target country's population, outlining three key strategies.

1. **Promoting Positive Perceptions:** Effectively showcase national people, culture, and policies to foster a favorable image among foreign audiences.
2. **Encouraging Collaborative Engagement:** Attract organizations or individuals from the target country to engage in cooperative efforts with an inclusive approach.
3. **Comprehensive Scope of Cultural Diplomacy:** Encompasses arts, education, history, science, religion, commerce, sports, language, and other cultural facets (Zhou, 2022)

Schneider offers a systematic approach to measuring the intangible aspects of cultural practice, identifying key "general characteristics of success."

1. **Two-Way Engagement:** Collaboration through performance, mentoring, teaching, or knowledge exchange.
2. **Contextualization:** Adapting approaches to local contexts and cultural relevance.
3. **Enjoyment:** Recognizing the influence of participant and audience enjoyment.
4. **Adaptability:** Emphasizing flexibility and creativity amid limited resources.

These characteristics are subjective, and it may not be clear whether they represent outputs or outcomes. However, it is possible to develop both qualitative and quantitative measures to contribute to or enhance a narrative of success, with clarity needed from the outset of each project (Gayle McPherson, 2017).

Soft power encompasses various dimensions, making it a multifaceted concept. To address this complexity, we adopt methodologies similar to those used in the Technology Achievement Index (UNDP, 2001; Sen et al., 2003) and the Global Innovation Index (Dutta, 2012). The GSPI is thus developed through six distinct sub-indices (Serhan Cevik, 2024). This methodology identifies the fundamental components of the international influence metric. This framework establishes a mediating structure linking empirical indicators to the broader theoretical construct of international influence. Furthermore, it allows for both individual and collective analysis of each dimension. Soft power assessment encompasses six critical domains: economic activity, cultural influence, digital presence, educational capacity, international outreach, and institutional frameworks.

FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Quantitative Data Analysis

The survey included 235 respondents. It targeted high school students attending private schools with a Chinese curriculum in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city. Most respondents (53.2%) are 15–17 years old, with 10th-grade students mostly female. Additionally, 55.7% attend schools not listed in the survey, likely public schools offering selective Chinese courses or other private institutions.

Table 1. Demographic information

Questions	Answers	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age	17-19 years	86	36.6	36.6
	15-17 years	125	53.2	89.8
	13-15 years	24	10.2	100.0
	Total	235	100	
Gender	Male	85	36.2	36.2
	Female	150	63.8	100.0
	Total	235	100	

Secondary school	Husliin urguu	17	7.2	7.2
	Hishig	3	1.3	8.5
	Ui-Tsai	48	20.4	28.9
	Tolit	18	7.7	36.6
	Sen Lize	1	.4	37.0
	Putonghua	6	2.6	39.6
	Kunz	11	4.7	44.3
	Others	131	55.7	100.0
	Total	243	75.5	
Grade	12	74	31.5	31.5
	11	78	33.2	64.7
	10	83	35.3	100.0
	Total	235	100	

Crosstab analysis (Table 2) shows that 11.9% of students access information in Chinese, possibly due to 49.4% having only 1–3 years of language learning. Students aged 15–17 make up 53.2% of the total, with 60.7% (76) of them engaging with international news in Chinese, indicating their interest in intensive language study.

Table 2. Accessing international news and the age of students

How old are you?					
		Age 17-19	Age 15-17	Age 13-15	Total
In which language do you mainly receive foreign news?	Chinese	10	17	1	28
		35.7%	60.7%	3.6%	100.0%
		11.8%	13.5%	4.2%	11.9%
		4.3%	7.2%	.4%	11.9%
	Mongolian	35	43	8	86
		40.7%	50.0%	9.3%	100.0%
		41.2%	34.1%	33.3%	36.6%
		14.9%	18.3%	3.4%	36.6%
Total	Count	86	125	24	235
	%	36.6%	53.2%	10.2%	100.0%

According to table 3, despite having over 7 years of Chinese learning experience, 45.8% (55) of students prefer accessing information in English. Furthermore, international news accessibility is not influenced by learning Chinese for more than 7 years, as more fluent students often focus on improving their Chinese in China rather than Mongolia.

Table 3. Accessing international news and Chinese learning experience

			How many years have you been studying Chinese?				
In which language do you access international news?			1-3 years	3-5 years	5-7 years	above 7 years	Total
	Mongolian	Count	9	14	5	58	86
		%	10.5%	16.3%	5.8%	67.4%	100.0%
	Chinese	Count	7	8	10	3	28
		%	25.0%	28.6%	35.7%	10.7%	100.0%

Total		Count	45	38	36	116	235
		%	19.1%	16.2%	15.3%	49.4%	100.0%

Table 4 shows that 45.1% (106) of students are interested in continuing their studies in China. Meanwhile, 30% view traditional history and culture as Mongolia's global identity, while 39.6% (93) see China as an economic opportunity and development model.

Table 4. Students' perception of China

Crosstabs		Could you please share your thoughts in China?						
		Economic opportunity	Former partner	Development Model	Imperialistic ideology	Country to be cautious of	Threat	Total
Republic of China	Count	50	2	38	5	10	1	106
	%	47.2%	1.9%	35.8%	4.7%	9.4%	.9%	100.0%
	%	53.8%	28.6%	50.0%	38.5%	23.3%	33.3%	45.1%
Total	Count	93	7	76	13	43	3	235
	%	39.6%	3.0%	32.3%	5.5%	18.3%	1.3%	100.0%
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Furthermore, they regarded China as Mongolia's closest neighbor, ahead of Russia, while also assessing China's role in Mongolia's development.

Factor analysis grouped 32 questions into 7 factors, excluding 5 to improve the model. Table 5 shows a KMO value of 0.888, confirming sufficient sample sufficiency. The study analyzed 32 questions across 6 groups using a five-point rating scale. However, the data reduction technique grouped variables into 7 factors with loadings above 0.5, meeting a representativeness threshold of 0.55 as suggested by prior research. While a factor explanatory power of over 60% is commonly deemed fully adequate.

Table 5. Analysis of Sampling Adequacy

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.888
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3524.462
	df	496
	Sig.	.000

The analysis (Table 6) confirmed the model's validity, and five questions (3.1.2, 3.3.2, 3.3.4, 3.4.5, 3.6.5) were removed to enhance the model's accuracy.

The average scores for all factors exceed 3, indicating a positive attitude among the youth toward China's soft power policy.

- For the Culture1 factor, the average score for interest in Chinese language and culture was 3.566, showing a strong positive attitude.

- The Culture2 factor, reflecting a preference for Chinese restaurants, had an average of 3.52.
 - For the Digital factor, the average for using Chinese e-commerce platforms was 3.42.
 - The Education factor, regarding the competitiveness of Chinese universities, scored 4.31.
 - The Engagement factor, concerning Chinese investment in Mongolia, had an average of 3.42.
 - The Government factor, regarding respect for the law among Chinese citizens, scored 4.
- The survey showed excellent reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.924) and sufficient sampling (KMO = 0.888).

Table 6. General Statistics of Factors

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Culture 1	235	3.5660	.92233
Culture_2	235	3.5220	.83596
Digital	235	3.4213	.86532
Education	235	4.3163	.67845
Engagement	235	3.4223	.83658
Enterprise	235	3.8502	.72703
Government	235	4.0074	.67913
Valid N (listwise)	235		

The 32 questions demonstrate a reliability coefficient of 0.924, surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.7, as presented in Table 7. The findings (Tables 6 and 7) meet the necessary conditions for statistical testing, enabling hypothesis testing and validation through factor and correlation analyses.

Table 7. Reliability Analysis /SPSS21/

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.924	32

Table 8 presents the results of hypothesis testing on high school students' perceptions of Chinese soft power. The findings indicate that most hypotheses were supported, particularly those related to favorable views of China's cultural, educational, and linguistic influence. Students showed interest in higher education in China and long-term language learning. However, the hypothesis regarding following international news in Chinese was not supported, indicating limited engagement in that area.

Table 8. General results of the analysis

No	Hypothesis	Yes	No
H ₁	High school students hold a favorable view of China's soft power in areas such as culture, digital influence, education, engagement, enterprise, and government.	+	
H ₂	The factors influencing students' perceptions of Chinese soft power are correlated.	+	
H ₃	The perception of Chinese soft power has strengthened due to the influence of Chinese language and culture.	+	

H ₄	Chinese curriculum high school students aspire to pursue higher education in China.	+	
H ₅	They stay informed about international news in Chinese.		+
H ₆	They engage in extended Chinese language learning.	+	
H ₇	They hold positive perceptions of China.	+	

The correlation analysis indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship regarding senior high school students' perceptions of soft power policies (Table 9). The analysis presented in Table 9 reveals statistically significant positive relationships (Sig. = 0.00 < 0.05) between senior high school students' perceptions of China's soft power policies, with a significance level of 1%. A moderate positive relationship is observed between government and enterprise policies ($r = .616^{**}$), while weaker correlations are found between enterprise, engagement, and government policies with culture ($r = 0.275, 0.311, 0.337, 0.273$). Furthermore, digital content, culture, and education policies exhibit strong positive correlations ($0.3 < r < 0.5$). The correlation analysis indicates significant positive relationships among all dimensions of Chinese soft power. These findings suggest that students' perceptions across cultural, educational, digital, and governmental factors are closely interconnected, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of soft power influence.

Table 9. Correlation analysis of factors

Correlations							
	Culture_1	Culture_2	Digital	Education	Engagement	Enterprise	Government
Culture_1	1	.445**	.555**	.414**	.426**	.453**	.337**
Culture_2		1	.383**	.314**	.275**	.311**	.273**
Digital			1	.424**	.556**	.468**	.456**
Education				1	.368**	.542**	.488**
Engagement					1	.502**	.431**
Enterprise						1	.616**
Government							1
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Sig. (2-tailed) .000 N - 235 ○ Strong positive correlation ○ Weak positive correlation ○ Moderate positive correlation							

DISCUSSION

The five levels of soft power—empathetic, sympathetic, geopolitical, diplomatic, and utilitarian—are evident in the context of language learning. International influence is evaluated through six key metrics: economic engagement, cultural impact, technological presence, educational capacity, international outreach, and institutional framework. Implementing a Chinese language curriculum in Mongolian high schools plays a crucial role in fostering a positive perception of China. Simultaneously, students are drawn to learning Chinese with aspirations of pursuing higher education in China. These findings confirm that promoting Chinese language education is an effective strategy within China's broader soft power framework.

Sustaining cultural influence through Chinese curricula in private schools is essential for long-term success. This involves creating opportunities for youth to study abroad by facilitating equitable access to scholarships.

Additionally, preserving and promoting national identity is pivotal in enhancing a nation's global recognition and ensuring its cultural distinctiveness remains valued on the international stage.

CONCLUSION

The attraction to learning a language itself represents a significant element of soft power, particularly among Mongolia's younger generation, who display a growing interest in Mandarin. This interest is partly driven by cultural influences introduced through Chinese curricula in private high schools in Ulaanbaatar.

Quantitative data analysis—including hypothesis testing, crosstab analysis, and correlation analysis revealed that a significant proportion of students, especially 10th graders, demonstrate a strong interest in learning Chinese and staying updated on international news in the language. However, accessing international news in Chinese does not necessarily correlate with a prolonged language-learning experience. More fluent learners tend to prioritize pursuing academic studies in China over their home country, highlighting the influence of China's educational appeal. Furthermore, students perceive China positively, viewing it as an economic opportunity and a developmental model for Mongolia. Multiple elements influence China's international influence, encompassing cultural reach, e-commerce, academic standards, business presence, and administrative approaches. Correlation analysis confirmed strong positive associations between digital content, culture, and education policies, with a moderate positive correlation observed between government and enterprise policies. Conversely, culture correlated weakly with enterprise, engagement, and government policies. Students also emphasize the importance of Mongolia's traditional history and culture as the country's global identity. These findings underscore the need to balance cultural preservation with the integration of Chinese language education in Mongolia. Encouraging students to value their unique culture and national identity while engaging with Chinese language learning is critical.

Empirical examination is needed on the sustainability of Chinese language education in Mongolia as a soft power tool for youth influence. Such studies could also examine the long-term implications of these educational and cultural exchanges on bilateral relations and national identity.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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