

# **Improving China's Soft Power: Boosting China-Indonesia Educational and Cultural Cooperation**

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## **A. Introduction**

Indian-Singaporean scholar, Kishore Mahbubani, in his book entitled 'The New Asian Hemisphere, the Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East' (2011: xxi) explains that the world's civilization pendulum is shifting from the West to the East. Mahbubani (2011.:xviii) elaborates further that China is the leading country bringing the progress of Asia's civilization. A thousand years before China and India were superpower countries and in the twenty first century China is emerging as superpower country in term of its economy and military power. Mahbubani (2011:61) describes that in the beginning of the first century, Asia, represented by China, contributed to 76.3 percent of global gross domestic product, at the same time, West Europe was only 10.8%. In 1000 BC, West Europe's contribution towards global GDP was 8.7%. Conversely Asia had a little decline to 77.3%.

Chintamani Mahapatra (2018:182) remarks that unipolar international system, however, has come under renewed challenge by a rapidly rising superpower- People's Republic of China. China's miraculous economic growth and wealth creation has been accompanied by the concomitant loss of American influence in various part of the globe. Concurrently, the swift augmentation of China's influence in various part of the globe has been truly an ashtonising development. China has replaced the US as the number one manufacturer, importer, and exporter of goods in the world. Beijing has become the number one banker to the US by dint of its holding the greatest value of US Treasury Bonds by any single country. China also possesses the largest foreign-exchange reserves in the world. What is striking, nonetheles, is China's ability to replace the US as the largest trading partner of many Asian countries who have for decades maintained the closest of alliance relationship with Washington.

Chintamani Mahapatra (2018:183) explains further that while China has announced creation of new international banks with partner countries, such as the BRICS Bank, Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, the New Silk Road Fund, the US is in no position to come up with the grand economic or financial projects and rather appears preoccupied in safeguarding the international system that it erected in the post-Second World War period. The US has been preoccupied with foreign wars from the very beginning of the twenty first century, whereas China has successfully extended its influence across the globe.

The evidence that China is becoming a superpower country could be seen from its Gross National Product and its annual growth of its economy. In a short period, in only 26 years during 1978-2004, China's GDP increased from 147.3 billion US\$ to 1.6494 trillion US\$ with an annual growth rate of 9.4%. Foreign trade rose from 20.6 billion US\$ to 1,154.8 billion US\$ with an average growth of above 16%. China's foreign exchange reserves rose from 167 billion US\$ in 1978 to 609.9 billion US\$ in 2004 (Kishore Mahbubani, 2011:66). Similar phenomenon also happened to the increase of China military budget. China's military spending has been increasing from \$ 146.67 billion to \$ 175 billion from 2016 to 2018 ([www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com), [www.xinhuanet.com](http://www.xinhuanet.com), accessed on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018)

In education, China is a country with the biggest number of doctors. According to Mahbubani (2011: 76), in 2004 China produced 30,000 doctors or PhDs which increases from 12,000 in 2001, the biggest number in the world. Chinese students received more than 35,300 doctors degrees in science, biology, and physics from American universities from 1983 to 2003 (Kishore Mahbubani, 2011: 78). For the last few years according to Q.S. Ranking, Universities of China have been ranked among the best top 50 universities in the world ([www.qs.com](http://www.qs.com), accessed on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018)

However, the big leap of China's progress have been responded with different reactions by Asian countries and other countries in the world. China's progress is perceived either as hope and threat. Hope, in this sense implies that China's progress could be of great benefit for the neighboring countries and the world. Meanwhile, threat here implies that China's progress in economy and military might pose threat to other

regions either in terms of economy and military. No country in the world could guarantee that China would be a better superpower country than the US.

## **B. The Dynamics in China-Indonesia Relationship**

China-Indonesia relationship had been very good since hundreds or thousands years ago. However, China-Indonesia relation experienced up and down stages. It is well known that Indonesia under Sukarno was on good terms with the PRC especially in the mid-1960s when the two governments attempted to set up the Conference of New Emerging Force (CONEFO) with headquarter in Jakarta (Leo Suryadinata, 1990:682). Under the Suharto regime (1966-1998) which ruled Indonesia for more than three decades, Indonesia-China relations were characterized by mutual hostility and suspicion. Shortly after Suharto's assumption of power, formal diplomatic relations were declared "frozen" in 1967. It took 23 years for Indonesia to resume ties with China. It was only after the fall of Suharto in 1998 one began to see significant improvement in Indonesia-China relation. Post-Suharto governments reversed the country's foreign policy and sought to re-engage with China (Yuki Fukuoka and Kiki Verico, 2016:53).

Despite the above facts, the influence of Chinese culture in Indonesia are evident in Indonesian culinary, music, dance, and fashion. Indonesian culinary is known for its Chinese influence, among others are foods such as bakso, bakmi, capcai, kwietiauw, bakwan, bakpaw, moachi, soy sauce (*kecap*), bihun, tahu, tauco, and hunkwee. In martial arts, there is a creation of the acculturation by Chinese community named as 'kuntaw'. In fashions, Chinese influence could be seen from the existence of Betawi's traditional dress and Chinese batik. Chinese batik is a type of batik made by Chinese or Chinese *peranakan* displaying pattern of Chinese mythical animals such as dragons, phoenix birds, turtles, as well and the God and Goddess of Kong Hu Chu. Chinese batik development area covers both coastal and inland areas with environmental-influenced nuances. Those areas cover areas of Cirebon, Pekalongan, Lasem, Demak, and Kudus.

In music, mixing of Chinese music and Indonesian traditional music could be seen in Gambang Kromong music orchestra and Gambang Semarang. Other influence of Chinese Culture in Indonesia is the presence of Barongsai attraction and Potehi Puppet in the celebration of Cap Go Meh.

Despite harmonious acculturation of Chinese and Indonesian culture, problems in national economy could not be denied. Economic gap between Indonesian of Chinese descents and the native Indonesians is very crucial issue in Indonesia and also the economic domination of national economy by Chinese-Indonesian businessmen. Economic gap between Chinese and native Indonesia and national economic domination by Chinese businessmen are very sensitive issues. These two issues are hot issues exposed in many occasions by politicians for political gains.

Nationally, massive progress of China is also responded with anxiety by many parties in Indonesia as it is considered an emergence of a new imperialist. China's economic hegemony are also perceived as a threat as the country would build its military supremacy to maintain its economic hegemony and domination in the world.

### **C. What Should be Done?**

To deal with the above conditions, it is recommended that China takes more priority on soft-power diplomacy in building and maintaining its power. Joseph S Nye Jr (2009:160) states that power is one's ability to affect the behavior of others to get what one wants. There are three basic ways to do this: coercion, payment, and attraction. The hard power is the use of coercion and payment. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction. Yet in global information age, soft source of power such as culture, political values, and diplomacy are part of what makes a great power. Success depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins (Joseph S. Nye, 2009:163).

The major elements of a country's soft power include its culture (when it is pleasing to others) its values (when they are attractive and consistently practiced) and its policies (when they are seen inclusive and legitimate). Over the past view decade, public opinion polls have shown a serious decline in the United States popularity in Europe, Latin America, and most dramatically, the moslem world (Yoseph S. Nye, 2009:161).

In this respect, China, therefore, can improve its soft power by investing in global public goods such as providing things that people and government in all parts of the world need but they can not obtain on their own. By achieving economic development, securing and improving public education and health, coping with climate change, and

maintaining an open, stable international economic system by combining its military and economic power with greater investment in its soft power, China, accordingly, can develop itself truly as a super power country.

Cultural diplomacy, as an element of soft power, will incite more simphaties from other countries than economic domination and hard power diplomacy. China will be then regarded as “a friendly giant” which can ensure protection for other smaller and weaker countries. In this context, it is much better that China learn from the success and the failure of America as a super power country since its emergence at the end of the World War Two and its declining supremacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is commonly admitted that American pop culture are well-liked by many people around the globe. Coca-Cola, KFC, Mc Donald, Levis, Nike, and Hollywood films are the main feature of world popular culture. However, American foreign policies are not well accepted by many countries in the world. The unilateral measures taken by America in solving the problems associated with American interest are challenged by the world community such as American invasion in Iraq, Afghanistan, and American involvement in Syrian war. American enmity with Iran, American blunt support to Israel in Israel-Palestine conflicts, and also American’s double standard with countries siding with the US and on the other hand countries very critical to America.

In this context, China has to convince the world that it is emerging as a better superpower which will guarantee better prosperity and peace in the world. China’s presence as a superpower country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would then be regarded as blessing for the region and the world than a threat.

#### **D. Programs for the Improvement of China-Indonesia Education and Culture Collaborations**

Soft power as has been explained previously is the ability to obtain preferred outcome. Diplomacy through education and culture are, therefore, strategic approach in improving China’s soft power. In this regard, improving collaboration in education and culture between China and Indonesia are imperatively recommended. The following are strategies that could be adopted to improve the collaborations

1. The Optimization of Confucius Centre in Indonesia

More Confucius Centers should be established in the world as it is in Indonesia. The Centre can be opened throughout Indonesian cities and universities similar to that of Erasmus Huise (Netherland), Goethe Institute (Germany), Indonesian-France Institute (France), or American Corner (America). The existence of Confucius Centres in Indonesian cities and universities will give Indonesian people more exposure to Chinese culture. This efforts are expected to result in Indonesian people's better understanding of Chinese cuture in many different aspects.

2. The Establishment of Indonesian Centre in China

The establishment of Indonesian Centres in cities and universities in China as Confucius Centres are in Indonesia will give Chinese people opportunity to learn Indonesian culture more comprehensively and it is expected moreover to create more mutual understanding and respect between people of the two countries.

3. The Intensification of Indonesian and Mandarin language teaching.

Considering the fact that Mandarin and Indonesian language are spoken by two-third of Asian population, it is very important for Chinese and Indonesian to be able to speak each other languages. For that purposes, more Chinese and Indonesian language departments should be established in universities in China and Indonesia. Chinese and Indonesian languages could also be introduced at schools at Junior High School and Senior High School level.

4. The improvement of culture mutual exhibitions

China and Indonesia are known as countries with their very rich culture. Improving China-Indonesia collaborations in culture could be done by conducting more mutual culture exhibitions either in the forms of music, dance, film, literature, or fine arts. Regular mutual culture exhibitions will stimulate better appreciation and understanding of people from both China and Indonesia.

5. The establishment of CSC (China Scholarship Council) Centre

The establishment of CSC at universities in Indonesia both in public and private universities is expected to gve more access for Indonesian best students to study in China. China is getting more and more popular as the preferred country to visit for study. With its great number of populations, hundred thousands students

from Indonesia could be a good source of students prospective for universities in China.

6. The Incentive of Mandarin Course programs for China Scholarship applicants

Incentive of Mandarin course program will attract more Indonesians to apply for study in China since Chinese language, especially its alphabets, is one of the big barrier preventing Indonesian students from studying in China for language difficulties reasons.

7. Improving China-Indonesia universities to universities collaborations.

Universities to universities collaboration could be conducted in many different programs such as students, lecturer, and staff mobilities, joint research, joint seminar, joint publication, and joint degree, double degree, students and staff internship exchanges programs and many other collaborative academic activities..

## **E. Conclusion**

Twenty First century sees China as a major player in the world affairs. However, China's emergence as a superpower country is responded with different reactions by countries in the world either as hope or threat. To cope with scepticism that China's emergence as a superpower country will bring more benefit to the world, it is recommended that China takes soft power diplomacy than hard power diplomacy. Soft power diplomacy could be carried out through the improvement of education and culture collaborations. Successful improvement of China-Indonesia education and culture will create better understanding and respect between Chinese and Indonesian people. It will also result in better acceptance of China's important position in the world by Indonesian people. China's emergence as a superpower country in the world will be perceived to bring more good than harm.

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