

Wang Jianwei¹²
Wang Qichao¹³
University of Macau

China's Soft Power in Mekong: A Documentary Perspective.
Case Study by "Nourished by the Same River"

Abstract

One of the most dramatic changes in the international arena in the post cold war era counted for China's rising and attractive growth, which led the community described it as a "cause célèbre" and also witnessed the most strategic regional transformation in the history of humanity within only three decades since its opening to the world. China has dramatically increased its global presence, which requested China to take further steps to wield soft power more responsibly. In this paper, I will seek to explain the China's Mekong River diplomacy and how the evolution of China's foreign policy towards the Mekong river sub-region since 2008 from a media perspective.

Keywords: *China, Soft Power. Mekong River, Media*

¹² Wang Jianwei is a full professor and head of department of governance and public administration.

¹³ Wang Qichao is a Ph.D. candidate of department of governance and public administration.

One of the most dramatic changes in the international arena in the post cold war era counted for China's rising and attractive growth, which led the community described it as a "cause célèbre" and also witnessed the most strategic regional transformation in the history of humanity within only a three decades since its opening to the world. China has dramatically increased its global presence, which requested China to take further steps to wield soft power more responsibly, such as taking part in the peacekeeping overseas as well as promoting culture and language across the continents .As China exercises its newfound diplomatic, economic and military power it is also important to understand the country's growing cultural power especially in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴

China shared long borders with dozen of neighboring countries, and it was described as the geographic pivot of history for a long time since westerners came to Asia. Among those neighboring countries, the ones located in the Mekong River (including China itself) displayed a unique feature from the other border-sharing countries. China identified itself a developing country abreast as its about the Mekong river neighbors and China is trying to forge a new image of the great power which was made of an array of factors. One of them was labeled soft power as a potential weapon of Beijing's foreign policy.

In this paper, I will seek to explain the China's Mekong River diplomacy and how the evolution of China's foreign policy towards Mekong river sub-region since 2008 from a media perspective. The case is documentary series filmed by all the six Mekong river countries national television stations (namely China, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam), which was the first time within the regional history where the professionals from these six countries shot such a huge documentary work –"Nourished by the same river". (Tongyin Yijiangshui) .Its premiere was put on the screen of CCTV 1 in the

¹⁴ Sheng Ding and Robert A.Saunders.2006. Talking up China: An analysis of China's rising cultural power and global promotion of Chinese language. East Asia, Summer Volume 23.

early year of 2008 and then repeatedly broadcasted on CCTV 4 (the international Channel of CCTV being able to broadcast widely overseas including the Mekong river countries) and dubbing with English subtitles.

Introduction: China's cultural power and foreign policy

In Joseph Nye's definition of soft power, he excluded contents like formal diplomacy, trade and aid. As he put "Soft power is not merely the same as influence". "After all, influence can also rest on the hard power of threats or payments". He concentrated absolutely on the attractiveness of a nation's brand, of its values, ideas and norms.¹⁵

Cultural power as a salient part of soft power is heavily influenced by the host country's economic development and internal stability. Throughout the history China's cultural power frequently "conquered" neighboring regions through osmosis rather than military victory. As early as in the Han Dynasty period some 2000 years ago China's capital Chang'an was one of the two largest cities in the ancient times. During this period, lasting commercial and cultural contacts were established with Central and Southwestern Asia. China now is using "soft power" remedies to nurture alliances with many developing countries to solidify its position and flex its muscles on the world stage as well as in Asia, where governments and business welcome Chinese investments and cooperation as an alternative to Washington's overwhelming obsession with security and "hard power"-related issues. As an old lodestone in Asia, China's soft power arises from the attractiveness of its culture, political ideas and politics.

¹⁵ Joseph S Nye, Jr. 2004 *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs,

Prior to dredge the documentary itself further, the natural question to ask was why the Mekong River was so unique in China's soft power and how it can be filmed?

As one of the most important components of a country's soft power, culture attractiveness not only influences various aspects of people's lives and play a vital part in social development within a country, but also has a direct impact on the relations between countries and helps a country to achieve important foreign policy goals. Within this process, the factor of "image" plays a crucial role. In international politics, the practices of policy makers are frequently girded by their own national self-images and the images they associate with other nations or cultures.

China's soft power has been overwhelming since 1990s, for example the Thailand former Prime Minister Thaksin publicly announced that China was one of the two "most important" countries to Thailand's diplomacy.¹⁶ Most Southeast Asia countries are willing to treat China as a constructive actor as well as a regional great power (though some of them have territory disputes with China). Moreover, countries alongside the Mekong river were sharing common borders with China and the cross border trade was being for century-long.

It is in Southeast Asia where one can most easily notice the Beijing's new soft power. Beijing first concentrated its charm on the region before broadening its efforts to Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Such a strategy makes sense. China's nearest neighborhood boasts nearly twenty million ethnic Chinese and has long historical, economical and cultural ties to China. Perhaps China could make the region its own—a Chinese Monroe

¹⁶ Melinda Liu.2005. Divide and Conquer. Newsweek, 7 March 2005.

Doctrine for Southeast Asia, would make Beijing the major influence over regional affairs.¹⁷

China has signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Beijing also committed to creating a code of conduct on South China Sea; besides, China also enthusiastically signed cooperative agreement and strategic partnerships with several Asian states at the bilateral level and a range of economic and strategic issues. By engaging with bilateral and multilateral organizations like ASEAN and fostering more interactions between foreign and China officials, China can reduce fears of Beijing's , giving time to itself to gain more influence without troubling other countries about its rise.¹⁸ Moreover, China offered an overwhelming equal treatment to smaller countries (for example when Laos leaders visited Beijing) who received a great deference from Beijing, which naturally deepens the mutual trust with the small Mekong river countries. In his bully's eye monograph *"China's Strategic Engagement With the New ASEAN: An Exploratory Study of China's Post-Cold war Political, Strategic and Economic Relations with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam"*, IDSS Monograph No.2, Singapore, Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, 2002, the famous India scholar S.D.Muni has envisioned China's strategic engagement into the Mekong river by a very insightful analysis. However, he probed into the tools such as political support, economic cooperation with no research nor discussion of how China projected the soft power at that time, he admitted that "ASEAN occupies an important place in China's calculations in the region .The ASEEAN countries are geographically close, historically linked, culturally contiguous and economically vital to China".

China's neighbor countries varied largely in terms of geography, ethnic groups, religions and languages, moreover whether China's cultural power can

¹⁷ Marvin C Ott.2005. China's Strategic Reach into Southeast Asia". Presentation to US-China Economy and Security Review Commission, 22,July.

¹⁸ Susan Shirk.2004.China's Multilateral Diplomacy in the Asia Pacific. Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

be fully implemented. Let's take its northeast neighbors for example. There is also a border river called the Tumen River influencing North Korea, China and Mongolia so much. However, due to the unstable internal situation in North Korea, though China and North Korea belong to the Confucius sphere, they couldn't form an identity of "sharing the common". Similarly, Russian and Central Asia states are also in the same line. (See Table 1 below)

Table 1

Direction	Countries/Regions	Obstacles for China's Cultural Power Project
Northeast	DPRK/ROK/Japan	Disputed Islands, Unstable Korea Peninsular history issues Prestigious feeling of Japan and South Korea
West	Central Asia	Terrorism, Separatism, Culture alienation (?)
Southwest	India	Dragon VS Elephant, Unsettled border Tibet Issue
Southeast	ASEAN	South China Sea Sino-phobia

From the table 1, it seems for all the China's adjacent states that there does not exist any obvious prestige for China to promote its cultural power, not alone put these power on screen and educate the audience. However in my perspective, the Mekong river sub-region owns a unique feature to project China's cultural power. The Mekong river countries like to ride the Chinese wave as far as they can. In their perceptions, Beijing's main objective in Southeast Asia is to preserve regional stability, as this will be conducive to its

domestic economic development. Besides, the development levels of the so-called Mekong river countries were quite different from the old ASEAN countries (except Thailand). In a traditional manner, China was quite generous to these countries and welcomed them into the ASEAN family and due to the common borders (except Cambodia) they earned a special focus on China's foreign policy towards ASEAN. Moreover, China's positive and effective contribution to the Great Mekong River project closely links the economic development in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces/regions with continental Southeast Asia, which has not just boosted sub-regional economic integration and cooperation, but also promoted China's overall relations with ASEAN.¹⁹

Table 2

Country	Main Advantage for China Cultural Power Project	Disadvantage for China Cultural Power Project	Remarks
Vietnam	Land and River Shared, Dynamic commercial by Chinese diaspora The same ideology of the leader party	South China Sea	Seen as the next "China" due to the following pace of reforms and opening policy Visa friendly to Chinese
Laos	Land and River Shared, quiet, the same ideology of the leader party	No obvious	Visa friendly to Chinese
Thailand	Traditional China's support country, China's diaspora dynamics	Unstable internal situation and its influence to Chinese diaspora	Visa friendly to Chinese China's coordinating country to

¹⁹ Zha Daojiong and Hu Weixing. 2006. Building a neighborly community, Post-Cold War China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Manchester University Press.

			ASEAN
Myanmar	Land and river shared, Traditional China's support country, ideology and human rights same-liner	America, EU Japan's investment flow-in and Aung San Suu Kyi's global influence	Visa friendly to Chinese Deep Fraternity with China
Cambodia	Traditional China's supporter	No obvious appearance	Visa friendly to Chinese people King Sihanouk as an icon to both country

From Table 2 above, the soft power scenario changed better to China in the Mekong river sub-region, even though all these five countries are currently the member states of ASEAN.

First, the influence of South China Sea to the Mekong river sub-region, within which only Vietnam claimed as a related country and sometimes strongly behaved an offensive voice against China together with the Philippines. This is seen as an advantage that China can temporarily not mention this headache word in the region. Besides, for most the mainland Southeast Asia, China looms as the primary external force and influence. Geography, culture, poverty, and authoritarian governments in mainland Southeast Asia all play a role in explaining China's influence, and China's most fundamental security interest in Southeast Asia is to have friendly regimes on its southern borders.²⁰

Second, geographically besides land connection (except Cambodia), all the five countries shared the same river and relied on it largely (the word "shared" doesn't certainly refer to the land shared, which also contained river shared, take Cambodia for example, which doesn't geographically land connected with China, but when it comes to Mekong river, Cambodia and China are still in a sense of connection). The Mekong river, thus offered an ideal image for all six countries to forge a "community", which will go to more detail statement in the line with the documentary.

²⁰ Bronson Percival.2007.The Dragon Looks South, China and Southeast Asia in the new century. Braeger International Security.

Third, all the five countries visa policies are quite friendly to Chinese people. The friendly visa regime helped to boom the tourism industry in the Mekong river sub-region. As more and more Chinese tourists visited the region and have already begun to overwhelm the tourist traffic, the service sector response will be tailored to Chinese tastes and customs. This will inevitably result in a revival of Chinese culture and language in local communities once believed to be/have been assimilated.²¹ For the entire Mekong river sub-region countries, the tourism resources are abundant and populated with Chinese tourists at such places as Bangkok, Angkor Wat etc., which meant the communication of person-in-person, are rather active in this region compared to other places in Asia. This kinds of tour-focus dynamics are likely to be the most advantageous during the projection of China's soft power.

Another point is that in recent years, China has expanded the international coverage of its media .It has upgraded the Chinese newswire Xinhua, created new overseas editions of the *People's Daily* newspaper, established a formal press system as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so that foreign journalists can do interviews and raise their questions. China also expanded and professionalized the international broadcasting of CCTV, the Chinese state television. This expansion included hiring western anchors and making CCTV news look more polished. Satellite television subscribers in Asia now can receive a package of Chinese channels.²²

As a twenty episode-long documentary²³, "Nourished by the same river" offered plenty of information from the perspective of anthropology, geography, tourism as well as the implications of the international relations for the media analysis.

The chart of the documentary main topics covered:

²¹ Vatikiotis M.2003.Catching the dragon's tail: China and Southeast Asia in the 21st Century" Contemporary Southeast Asia 25 (1).

²² Vivien Cui, "CCTV Tries to Shed its Mouthpiece Image," South China Morning Post, 6 Apr. 2004; "People's Daily Overseas Edition Issued in ROK," People's Daily, 1 July 2004. See also Aoyama, "Chinese Public Diplomacy." "China Launches Satellite TV Service in Asian egion," Xinhua, 1Feb. 2005. Also, Eanna O'Brogain, "China's Troubled TV Star," South China Morning Post, 15 Mar. 2006.

²³ The 20 episodes are: colorful water; human being and elephant; life on the water; treasure land; rain forest story; fruit pool; harvest of the rice; forever festival; loyalty of the religion; dragon boat; flower kingdom; man-made on the river; smile of Angkor; unraveling charming; maturity hand-in-hand; dynamic market; common history; water transportation; alternation of Golden Triangle; shared family.



China soft power projection at Mekong: content analysis and its connotation

From the name of each episode we can undoubtedly say that the series covers all the aspects (significant) in the region: land and water transportation, water marketing, environment, world heritage, variety of religions and so on. Through those “agencies”, China’s context displayed the most important topics: shared of community and a big family, common experiences and problems in the process of development, cooperation in managing the international and cross-border crime commitment (the alternation of golden triangle).

The following table mainly framed the basic referred elements and topics that China’s cultural projection on the Mekong river. At the very beginning of the first episode, the documentary stated that the “Mekong river and the residents along it were the people who shared the common cultural background, peace-loving, traditional –keeping and pursue the new development and fulfill their common dream.” Such positive words made all the twenty episodes a fundamental stance: harmony of people –to- nature, and harmony of people-to-people.

Table 3

Image/word in the episode	China's connotation behind image/word
Headstream of Mekong river (1 st episode)	China's absolute sovereignty to Tibet China's important position as an upper-stream country
Dragon ²⁴ (1 st and 10 th episode)	Persuasive to the other five neighbors dragon stands for auspicious, thanksgiving, not refer to fearful and evoke of harmful development
Infrastructure Construction (15 th , 17 th and 18 th episode)	Willingly to help other Mekong countries to develop the inner-land infrastructure construction, improve the existence of China's investments in those countries
Market Dynamics (6 th and 7 th episode)	Cross-Border trade, stable and developing province/region like Yunnan and Guangxi
Shared Festival (8 th and 10 th episode)	Remind those countries to keep "We" feeling, Spring festival and dragon boat festival were mentioned several times, the contribution of Chinese diaspora.
Language (18 th episode)	Language discourse and the commence of Chinese to be a "lingua franca" in Mekong river sub-region and the establishment of Confucius Institute as well as Chinese diaspora mentioned again
Religion (1 st , 2 nd and 9 th episode)	Tibetan matters again, to convince the world China's religion policy to Tibet is harmonious and prosperous, Tibet area (Xizang and Yunnan) mentioned several times in the documentary
Maturity hand-in-hand (1 st , 17 th and 20 th episode)	Attempt to make "Mekong river" sub-region a unique sub-framework within ASEAN framework
Alternation in Golden triangle (19 th episode)	Decisive measurement to keep the border stable and safe, economic transit of local residents

²⁴ "Dragon" is mentioned in the documentary very often in several episodes and in the tenth episode, dragon was claimed as both good and bad, which is auspicious versus vicious, thanksgiving versus fear.

From the above table, we can reach a brief conclusion of the images and words with an insight what's behind them. Among these words, "dragon", "language", "maturity hand-in-hand" could be seen as the source of "common of destinies" proposed by President Xi Jinping when he did state-visited to ASEAN and "China-Thailand as one family" proposed by China's prime minister Li Keqiang during a state visit to Thailand.

First, how to explain and comprehend the image of dragon that China encompassed to the whole world. Dragon was a totem of Chinese nationality and overseas Chinese (who were seen as the offspring of the dragon), and the position of the dragon was not a fixed one, it is movable, therefore some historians when describing the Great Wall, they linked it with dragon. For Chinese living in China and the Chinese overseas, dragon was a good sign and totem for the most of the time, and always psychologically connected with certain festivals and rituals, which was the same in the Mekong river countries, the "dragon boat festival", "dragon dance" and even the Mekong river in Vietnam was called the "Nine-Dragon river". Thus a deeper connotation was delivered to the role of the Chinese diaspora being played in the current Mekong river region. Chinese Diaspora have become vital to Beijing's global charm. In recent years, Beijing has re-established relations with ethnic Chinese organizations around the globe - groups ranging from cultural association to clan organizations or business chambers and directly called (by the Chinese diaspora) to help boosting relations between China and the other nations.²⁵

From the above, two points can be indicated. On one hand, dragon -the image itself in each Mekong river countries was all seen as a good promise and totem, like Vietnamese, Laotian, Thais and Chinese. On the other hand ironically, the other five countries often see the dragon in China as a controversial and contradicted symbol: harmful rising, squeeze of natural

²⁵ William A Callahan.2002"Diaspora, Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism. Overseas Chinese and Neo-Nationalism in China and Thailand." City University of Hong Kong Southeast Asia Research Center Working Paper.

resources and cheap commodities pouring. Thus the documentary shouldered a function to persuade the local residents alongside the river that the Chinese dragon was also a good promise for them, and the way it conveyed such a persuasive information was just to use very straightforward words to exhibit the daily life (through the vivid individual cases in each country and everyday common feeling alongside the river).

Second, the image of dragon was used to compare with other countries in the process of regionalization and globalization. Plenty of archives in international relations termed the phenomenon of “China’s peaceful rising or developing” with other countries such as “Dragon VS Elephant “,”When Dragon encountered Bear”,” Dragon and Eagle”, etc. ²⁶ Therefore China employed the image of dragon which shared with all the Mekong river countries to convince these people that China was still as the previous daily life style in the region –peaceful, rely on the river, even though developed fast in the region, China will not be a threat to the Mekong river neighbors.

The documentary presented that in line with the image of dragon, the Chinese language became another salient element that China projected its soft power with . China’s charm is reflected in a symbolic success. Chinese language and culture studies have skyrocketed in popularity in the Mekong river region. As common people realize it might be a key of the success of their business as well as providing a kind of popular cachet. Language and power are twined inextricably, promoting of Chinese culture and Chinese language studies is a major component of China’s soft power. As Hu Youqing, a deputy to the National People’s Congress claimed the promotion of the usage of the Chinese language would contribute to spreading Chinese culture and

²⁶ These metaphors respectively referred to the relations between China and India, China and Russian, and China and the United States.

increasing China's global influence. "It can build up our national strength and should be taken as a way to develop our country's soft power."²⁷

By referring to the Chinese language influence over the Mekong river countries, lingua franca of Chinese was a spectacular case. Lingua franca, which means any language that served as a common medium for communication between speakers of different languages/origins. Throughout human history, various languages have served as media for the transmission of cultural knowledge, assisted in the formation of global-local power structures and functioned as shibboleths for determining friend from foe.²⁸

On the one hand, Chinese mandarin nowadays was spreading as a "lingua franca" very quickly particularly in commercial area. Beijing has opened its market to those overseas ethnic Chinese businessmen and sent them an invitation to invest in mainland China with confidence and continence .As one Canadian newspaper put, "From Jakarta to Vancouver and on to New Delhi and Chicago, surging interest in studying the Chinese language is just one gauge of the greater magnetic pull that China exerts after two decades of galloping economic growth."²⁹ In the episode, language was showed as establishment of the Confucius Institute in Mekong river neighbors and some Chinese overseas companies organized the staff to learn the local language (in the documentary China-Vietnam was filmed learning each other's language). Behind the phenomenon there was the activeness of Chinese commercials and interaction among the countries. The Confucius Institute, a state-owned establishment was not only a Chinese language promotion "machine", while it took great responsibility to strengthen the "understanding, opportunities and

²⁷ Xing Zhigang.2006."NPC Deputy calls for Promoting Chinese." *China Daily*, 10, March 2006.

²⁸ Sheng Ding and Robert A.Saunders.2006. Talking Up China: An Analysis of China's Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language. *East Asia*, Summer Vol.23, No.2.

²⁹ Tim Johnson.2005. "China muscles in: From trade to diplomacy to language, the U.S.is being challenged," *The Gazette (Montreal)*, 30 October.

bonds between individuals, enterprises communities and institutions” in their home country with China and the global Chinese diaspora.³⁰

The Confucius Institute unabashedly served as a global-local keystone for China’s commercial, cultural, and linguistic proselytization, with aims to:

- Form a focal point for China-related activities in the local community;
- Forge strategic alliances with business, industry, government and other institutions with an interest in closer and more productive ties with China and the global Chinese diaspora;
- Work with the academic faculties in encouraging students to develop a sound knowledge of China;
- Promote an awareness of the Chinese language and culture amongst the wider community;
- Offer Chinese language learning courses;
- Provide cross-cultural communication seminars and workshops for the business community and all levers of government;
- Enhance pedagogical skills of Chinese language teachers
- Develop Chinese Studies programs and promote research about China within local universities;
- Host scholars, researchers and language teachers from China.

Such undertakings represented a clear step in developing the “soft architecture” necessary to become a global player. The above-mentioned goals can be easily recognized in the relevant documentary episode. There is one view interested in stating that “despite their neutral scholarly appearance, the new network of the Confucius Institutes does have a political agenda...the institutes will teach Beijing’s preferred version of Chinese, with simplified Chinese characters, rather than the traditional Chinese characters that are used

³⁰ The website of Western Australia’s Confucius Institute located at <http://www.confucius.institute.com.au/>. Accessed on 14/11/2013.

in Taiwan. That would help to advance Beijing's goal of marginalizing Taiwan in the battle for global influence."³¹ However my arguments are as following:

For the language itself, there is no such a version with the political purpose, language has its own evolution process and it is just two kinds of Chinese, simplified and traditional, I admitted that the usage of simplified Chinese was a battle of domestic affair, but it imposed least on international affairs. Besides, the learners target group matters. If their targeted group are Mainland Chinese, then the ideal language they should pick up is simplified Chinese.

Third is that the "use simplified Character to marginalize Taiwan", if it is justified, then China is also doing the same policy to marginalize Hong Kong and Macau and some places in Guangdong province. From the documentary, it also conveyed that the remarkable developing of China was growing as a cultural lodestone in the early 21st century again. (It gained the peak of cultural influence in the Tang Dynasty.) Geographically and demographically, the other five Mekong river countries has no comparison to China, and here in the documentary, Chinese overseas spontaneously learned the local languages., The documentary conveyed another positive information: although China's size was/is destined for being a big country, Chinese also respected other neighbors for their languages and cultures.

On the other hand, Chinese language functioned as a tool of forging and displaying "China's national character" when other Mekong riparian countries learned it. The new migrants flew into the Mekong river neighbors, the growth of Chinese business as well as the language studies in a context of modern Chinese urban culture, were booming in Mekong cities like Mandalay, Bangkok, Vientiane and Hanoi .All the above mentioned displayed China's achievements in soft power projection in the region.

³¹ Beijing uses Confucius to lead charm offensive.2005. The Globe and Mail, 9,September.

As an economic, political and cultural power house, China has been adept at overtaking the U.S. in what American political scientist Joseph Nye has dubbed the soft power approach in influencing foreign societies public opinions and achieve sympathy.³²

In classic realism, “national character” was regarded as an important component of national cultural power and associated with the anthropological concept of “cultural pattern”. Such kind of cultural pattern helped condition a nation toward establishing its perception of self as well as creating a coherent image in the eyes of other nations, as well as unifying its approaches to pursuing certain political goals. Thus culture has broad determinant impacts on the achievements of a nation by playing a seminal role in providing the spiritual, ethical and economic conditions for human life.³³ The Confucius Institute established in Mekong river neighbors undoubtedly played such an important role, as via learning Chinese, these neighbors can further understand Chinese culture and the reason why China behaved in a certain way of its own when making the foreign policy and implementing the diplomacy in the region. Taking Thailand for example, which has asked for support from Beijing to train more Thai Chinese language teachers, send native speakers to work in Thai schools and provide free teaching materials. Whether this has implications for the Thai population’s view of China is difficult to discern, but according to one poll in 2003, 76 percent of Thais said that China was Thailand’s closest friend as opposed to 9 percent who named the United States.³⁴ Some other Southeast Asia countries, private language schools in Malaysia and Indonesia reporting rising enrolment in Chinese classes, also welcome Chinese.³⁵

³² Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt.2008. China’s Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia. The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies.

³³ Sheng Ding and Robert A.Saunders.2006.Talking Up China: An Analysis of China’s Rising Cultural Power and Global Promotion of the Chinese Language. East Asia, Summer Vol.23, No.2, pp.3-33.

³⁴ Vaughn B. 2008. China-Southeast Asia Relations: Trends, Issues, and Implications for the United State, CRS Report for Congress.

³⁵ Montlake,S..2006. In Asia, English is useful but Mandarin is rising. The Christian Science Monitor, 12 Jan.

In short, China will not be a “cultural hegemony” to these countries termed by Gramsci, it would be like a “cultural influence” but not a hegemonic characteristics. As the former President Hu Jintao put, “The Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world. It has flourished not only through mutual emulation and assimilation among its various ethnic groups but also through interactions and mutual learning with the other countries...we stand ready to step up cultural exchanges with the rest of the world in a joint promotion of cultural prosperity.”³⁶

Moreover, as Sheng Ding and Robert A.Saunders put, “throughout Southeast Asia, new Chinese schools are springing up, and once scorned ethnic Chinese communities are celebrated. However the dominance of the Western culture—especially American culture—in the flows of cultural goods means that any effort to expand China’s cultural influence cannot ignore the spread of Americanization whether in its popular forms (Big Macs, Mickey Mouse and Michael Jackson) or in its loftier manifestations (the Anglo-American work ethic, the ethos of rugged individualism, and ideas on gender relations and other social issues). However, Chinese cultural power need not compete directly with Americanization/Westernization .If nothing else, we need to realize that globalization is not a zero-sum game; Chinese values can exist side-by-side with Western norms in today’s world and the same can be said of language as well.³⁷ China’s cultural projection is a public diplomacy which a process of cultivating by governments of public opinion in other nations. Applied as a tool, states can more effectively pursue the national interest as well as reinforcing the conceptualization of China’s peaceful rise or development.

Then it comes to the “maturity hand-in-hand” which was the title of the 15th episode. One of the principal means by which a state perpetuates itself is

³⁶ Hu Jintao gave the speech to a Joint Sitting of the Australian Parliament on 24 October 2003.

³⁷ Ibid.

through its identification with a national cultural tradition that enhances its historical and psychological legitimacy, differentiated “us” from “them,” and anchors loyalties.³⁸

And in the episode, the documentary reached a brief conclusion about the achievements gained by all the six countries. And it tried to forge an identity of “Mekong river residents”, to shrug off the traditional differentiation of “us” and “them “. The documentary attempted to convey that the Mekong river neighbors were seen as the “Common of Community”, in my argument, it can be seen also the best –cased expression of “Shared of Destiny” proposed by President Xi Jinping. Further, the documentary also justified why China’s national television station chose such a big filming plan to make this documentary for the first time in region’s history.

The first reason was under the common identity of developing countries. All the six countries were the developing countries, which was familiar to the people and will not generate a negative image of “harmful dragon”.

Second, the improvement of China’s image in the region is welcomed by other states, which lied in greatly with China’s new concept soft power, as Heginbotham and Twomey put, “Yet, without China’s active engagement of multilateral institutions, its growing bulk might provoke more fear than admiration, much as it did during the early and mid-1990s. Beijing’s multilateral engagement has enabled it to improve its material position and its image simultaneously. The fact that this engagement furthers Chinese interests does not make it any less welcome in the region”.³⁹ Among all the neighbors of China, the Mekong river countries have its own feature, ideologically; Vietnam and Laos were in the same line with China. Economically, all the six countries

³⁸ David Harvey. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge.MA: Blackwell.

³⁹ Heginbotham, E. And C.P. Twomey. 2005 *America Bismarckian Asia Policy*, *Current History* 104, September 2005.

were developing quite fast and promising, and culturally and socially, China's influence was a great presence in Mekong region.

The third reason is that statistics from academia and social functional departments cited frequently that China's development and its foreign policy to eye more on the other Mekong river countries are successful, fruitful and effectively. However, data or numbers are just for the reference of academia or officials, it cannot directly and vividly convey these dramatic achievements gained by the regional states, any analysis of China's present oversea economic expansion and foreign policy interest must also consider Chinese realpolitik and the underlying forces that shape these interest ⁴⁰. However the documentary ,which in a "daily-life" and "all-dimension" filmed the description of the six countries can be a visual method and possess an persuasive emotional message to the other Mekong countries that China's development is not a "threat" or "hegemonic power house" to the neighbors.

Generally speaking, the use of culture as a tool of diplomacy highlights the sense that China skillfully deploys to exaggerate kin, ethnicity and national bonds between the motherland and the diaspora .It also reflects an increased appreciation by the Chinese government of the importance of norms and soft power in diplomacy. Chinese print media, television, music, food and popular culture are spreading around the region as never before.

China's Cultural Power Development Since 2008

After the broadcasting of the documentary, different views of points on the influence of China's soft power projection in the Mekong River and even the whole ASEAN were heard. Among those, some thought the establishment of China's Confucius Institute a Trojan Horse, which means the Institute

⁴⁰ Johannes Dragsbaek Schmidt. 2008.China's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia, The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies.

shouldered the political responsibility more than the cultural one .In my own opinion, after the documentary's broadcasting, the interaction of China and Mekong river region was dramatically enhanced witnessed by the two sharply improvements.

For the first point, more and more Confucius Institutes were established. Interestingly before the screening of the documentary, in the whole Mekong River region, China only signed the agreement with Thailand for the establishment of Confucius Institute. However after the broadcasting, all of the Mekong river countries signed the (same) agreement with China. (See the APPENDIX 1 and 2)

Moreover, analyzed from the APPENDIX 2, it was explicitly witnessed that the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms were booming in the Mekong area since 2008. On the one hand, the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms expanded from university-level to high-school level, which could take in more junior students to the charm of Chinese language and culture, another apparent improvement was that the Classrooms were more than Confucius Institutes in the Mekong river area. Primarily due to the lack of infrastructure and premises, China has to fasten the establishment of Confucius classroom instead of Institutes. Hereby I assumed the documentary with the quick expansion of the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in a high co-related relation.

Coming with the line above-mentioned, in the year of 2008 , the documentary "Nourished by the same river" were put on CCTV screen .As the first documentary related to the Mekong river ,it conveyed the plenty of positive information about the Lancang-Mekong river sub-region. The social and cultural influence imposed on the future relations of Lancang-Mekong river sub-region by the documentary is salient and great guide for the coming forth China's soft power in this region and the entire ASEAN. China attempts to

reassure its neighbors by claiming that its growing regional importance is a win-win situation for all. Cultural events such as the regional famous “Nanning Folk Song Festival” were enlarged greatly after 2008; besides, new types of cooperation and interactions between China and other Mekong river countries are springing up fast and fruitfully. Undoubtedly, the improving of the cultural and social interaction among Mekong river countries can also facilitate the regionalism and enhance the identity of “Mekong river residents”, which would be returned with huge economic cooperation and political mutual trust.

Table 4 Main Cultural Interactions of China and Other Five 2009-2013

Year	Cultural Interaction of China and other Mekong five countries
2009	4 th China-Thailand “As One Family” Concert
2010	Annual Nanning Folk Song Art Festival
2011	1 st Lancang-Mekong River Country Art Festival
2012	2 nd Lancang-Mekong River Country Art Festival
2012	The Decease of Sihanouk in Beijing
2012	1 st China-Thailand Spring Festival Concert in Bangkok
2012	ASEAN Youth Dancer Festival in Yunnan
2012	Chinese Film “Lost in Thailand” premiered
2013	5 th China-Thailand “As One Family” Concert
2013	President Xi Jinping “Community of Common Destiny”
2013	Li Keqiang China -Thailand As One Family and High Speed Train Diplomacy

The above table implied the following points.

First, Thailand was a very active targeted country in the region that China would like to forge a closer tie as the above paragraph mentioned. From the table, like the China-Thailand As One Family Concert and the miracle-like Chinese film “Lost in Thailand”, which profited dramatically for the Director Xu Zheng, brought a plenty amount of Chinese tourists to Thailand. Besides, due to the visa friendly policy to Chinese passport holders, more and more Chinese tourists visited the region and even began to dominate the tourist trade; the service sector response will be to tailor to Chinese taste and custom.

This will inevitably result in a revival of Chinese culture and language in local communities once believed to have (been) assimilated.

Another feature of these events after 2008 is that Mekong river countries are more likely to utilize ASEAN as a stage, which can offer those weaker states transit from bilateralism to multilateralism. This fact was presented by the President Xi and Prime minister Li, in their speech which implied that the “Community of Common Destiny” and “China-Thai As One Family” are just the different display levels of the cultural power that China can generate and navigate currently. Moreover, China’s cultural power to the other Mekong river countries is also served as a systematical and comprehensive foreign policy to the entire ASEAN institution.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, a new series of literature in international relations have explained and developed enormous theories about culture, soft power and the national interest, which can impose cultural values on states or ethnic groups by other bearer of the culture parameter. The most unavoidable one was the “cultural hegemony “ put forward by Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s, which revealed the “super-political veil” of the traditional concept of culture. With the unraveling projects of China’s soft power in the Mekong river sub-region, suspicious words like “cultural imperialism”, “cultural colonialism”. Thus how to eliminate the upset or anxiety generated by the fast economic growth and the “negative image of the dragon” on the Mekong neighbors is an urgent question to be answered. Paid more attention that China’s influence in Mekong river never disappeared or gone since the ancient times. Thus, the documentary was a good try for China to show its “soft power” attitude to the Mekong river countries and the cultural power reversely was proven to be a political and economic turn to China’s foreign policy. Elizabeth Economy notes

the important point that, China's rise to date appears to be less about the inevitable conflict of rising power theory, Chinese thinkers, themselves, have recognized that international community including Mekong neighbors is concerned by the potential implications of China's rise and have taken pains to ensure that it will be perceived as a non-threatening. Li Junru, the former Vice-President of the Central Party School of CCP, also confirmed the similar idea "China's rise will not damage the interests of other Asian countries. That is because as China rises, it provides a huge market for its neighbors. At the same time, the achievements of China's development will allow it to support the progress of others in the region."⁴¹ Moreover, by focusing on soft power, the former intelligence officer Robert Sutter noted in his book *"China's Rise in Asia: Promises and Perils"*: Beijing could avoid directly, confronting the United States, the unrivaled global hard power, while possibly weakening America's soft power in the longer term.⁴² Moreover, Robert Ross elaborated in one of his articles published in 1999, he contended that China was the dominant land power while the United States was the primary maritime power in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴³ The then-predictable words seem accordance with the reality on recent Southeast Asia screen. As a great power, China might even shift influence away from the United States, creating its own sphere of influence for regions like Southeast Asia, where China's power is stronger/the strongest, precisely speaking, China exerted more influence in most of mainland Southeast Asia, than the United States. In the periphery, countries would subordinate to China's and think twice about supporting the United States should there be any conflict in the region.⁴⁴

The policy China employed toward Mekong river has been soft and sophisticated, using a combination of both bilateral and multilateral approaches. The cultural power project would be a long-term task for China under the

⁴¹ Economy Elizabeth, 2005. China's Rise in Southeast Asia: Implications for Japan and the United States. Japan Focus.

⁴² Robert G. Sutter. 2005. China's Rise in Asia: Promises and Perils: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, 12-16.

⁴³ Robert Ross, 1999. The Geography of Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century. International Security,

⁴⁴ Evan. S Medeiros and M Taylor Fravel. 2003. China's New Diplomacy. Foreign Affairs.

umbrella of the good neighbor policy .As one of the senior Chinese diplomatic put, as the “China threat theory” still haunted the region and it was still a questionable stance given by the Mekong river people of China’s future, China’s good neighborliness policy would facilitate a fair and friendlier understanding of what China is doing and what it intends to do .In the same line ,China’s rise can be realized only with the understanding and support of the Asian nations.

APPENDIX 1

Country	Confucius Institute	Established or Agreement Signed on
Thailand	Chulalongkorn Univ	As of September 23,2007
	Kasetsart Univ	
	Khon Kaen Univ	
	Mae Fah Luang Univ	
	Chiang Mai Univ	
	Prince of Songkla Univ	
	Maharakham Univ	
	Bansondejchaopraya Rajabhat	
	Suan Dusit Rajabhat	
	Betong Municipality	
	Burapha Univ	
	Class at Traimit Wittayalai High School	
	Phuket ,Songkla Univ	

Source: The Office of Chinese Language Council International, cited from James F.Paradise, *China and International Harmony: the Role of Confucius Institutes in Bolstering Beijing's Soft Power*, Asian Survey, Vol.XLIX, No,4 July/August 2009. The table showed the establishment of the Confucius Institute before the documentary screening was only in Thailand.

APPENDIX 2

Country	Confucius Institute or Classroom	Established or Agreement Signed on
Myanmar	Fuxing Language Classroom	2008/02/15
	Fuqing Language and Computer School	2008/02/03
Cambodia	Royal Academy of Cambodia	2009/08/12
	Classroom at Angkor High School	2013/03/13
	Classroom at 70 th Bridge	2013/03/13
	Classroom at Police Academy of Cambodia	2013/03/13
Laos	Institute at National University of Laos	2010/03/23
Vietnam	Institute at University of Hanoi	There is no longer the information about the Confucius Institute in details on the official website of the office of the Chinese Language Council International

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