Towards a New Framework for Soft Power:
An Observation of China's Confucius Institute

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Abstract

There are many controversial and differing opinions concerning Nye's concept of soft power which have lead to some confusion in our understanding of what soft power actually is. By analyzing a given governmental agency, i.e. China's Confucius Institute, I will show the problem inherent in Nye's term soft power. I will analyze the concept of soft power as a combination of two meanings: 'soft' and 'power'. I believe this research could offer a new perspective on the concept of soft power and could provide a theoretical scale for measuring different countries' foreign policies labeled as soft power.

Keywords: culture, soft power, foreign language policy, Confucius Institute

要旨

ジョセフ・ナイの概念ソフト・パワーに対しては、提案された時から概念の曖昧さへの疑問が絶えず指摘されてきた。本稿では、中国のソフト・パワー増進を公式目標と掲げている、「孔子学院」という特定のソフト・パワー増進機関を事例とし、ソフト・パワーが孕んでいる概念としての曖昧さやそこから起因する問題を明らかにする。そして、その問題に対する独自の解決策として「ソフト」と「パワー」の概念分離を主張する。

キーワード：文化、ソフト・パワー、対外言語政策、孔子学院

Introduction

There are many controversial and differing opinions concerning Nye's concept of soft power. This diversity of opinion has led to some confusion in our understanding of what soft power actually is. In this paper, I will analyze Nye's concept of soft power and suggest dividing the concept of soft power into two distinct parts. To explain this different way of understanding the idea of soft power, I will discuss a specific government agency, that of China's Confucius Institute, which clearly enunciates its goal as soft power.

The Chinese government has repeatedly stated that the Confucius Institute was established for the purpose of furthering China's soft power. But experts who study Chinese foreign policy, such as Ingrid d'Hooghe (2007) & YiWei Wang (2008), criticize that it is not soft power but purely and simply propaganda. From these different points of view, I would like to look at what soft power is and discuss its underlying meanings.

What is *soft power*?

The term soft power was first put forward in 1990 by the neo-liberalist Joseph S. Nye, a researcher of interdependency in international relations (Robert Jackson, Georg Sørensen 2003: 49). In his study, Nye emphasized the importance of soft power used in contrast to the concept of hard power, which includes a country's economic and military power usually cited in traditional power politics. Nye defined soft power as a country's power promoted by a country's political values and cultural attraction. He pointed out that soft power was more important than hard power in the present post cold-war era. In this manner, he proposed three elements as sources of soft power which he considered sources of new diplomacy in this century, that is, a country's culture, political values and its foreign policies (Nye 2004: 11). Among these three sources, the most fascinating one is a country's culture. This source has not previously been considered as a serious factor in international relations. In Nye's definition there are at least two salient points. The first is that he treats soft power within the usual power concept. The other is that he illuminates culture as a new source of power.

Even though Nye (2004: 18-21) explained soft power as a power, his understanding of the concept is quite different from that usually taken in the traditional understanding of the term. His concepts of power and soft power go beyond what people usually describe as power, and he emphasized the importance of such an extended area of power; such as power through a country's culture and power through a country's reputation. From this point of view, the concept

of power moves towards an abstruse area of culture and it becomes more important to define what culture is. Briefly, Nye's soft power is not only a concept based on traditional power but also a new concept including a country's interest obtained by the performance of cultural exchange. Nye also agreed to this point of view in his recent book, *The Powers to Lead* (2008: 63-84). Admitting the ability of authoritarian power to lead, Nye stresses other means as well, for instance the power obtained by a country's reputation, its admiration by others, and so on.

Conceptual ambiguity in soft power

Ever since the concept of soft power was first introduced it has generated much controversy. Similarly to the idea of 'the clash of civilizations' by Samuel P. Huntington (1996) which was criticized in its essential concept of culture, many researchers have pointed out Nye's problematic understanding of culture and culture for a country's own interest.

Concerning the basic concept of culture, Janice B. Mattern (2005), for example, made the problem regarding soft power quite clear with the phrase that a country's attraction and a country's culture are not natural but constructed. Yasushi Watanabe (2008: 184-192) also doubted what Nye supposed a country's original culture was. Questions arose as to the relation between culture and soft power because Nye's concept of soft power is closely related to the concept of culture. Needless to say, this is because Nye himself proposed culture as a source of power (2004: 44-55).

In order to understand the relation between culture and soft power, I will refer to the concise concepts of culture as determined by Julie Reeves. In her work, Reeves (2004: 1-4) analyzed the concept of culture in international relations as comprising two separate parts; these are the 'humanist idea of culture' and the 'anthropological idea of culture'. To summarize her ideas, the 'humanist idea of culture' is the concept of a humanist who thinks human beings have a manifest consciousness and acknowledge their own culture. This concept is related to the colonialist concept of culture which emphasizes 'nation' and 'national identity' (Reeves 2004: 20-22). The 'anthropological idea of culture' on the other hand, is understood as comprising a certain space where people and customs are mixed and can mingle. No one can recognize his or her clear consciousness or his or her own culture (Reeves 2004: 19)[1]. These two concepts of culture show why the concept of culture is so important in an exact understanding of soft power.

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[1] This anthropological idea of culture is related to the concept of hegemony defined by A. Gramsci. The point is that hegemony is the ruling value system existing in people's practice and their own experiences. Briefly, hegemony exists not only in small spaces of political areas, but also in larger spaces anywhere people live. In hegemonic space, people cannot simply maintain what is true or false because hegemony is too changeable in every situation. For further information, refer to the articles of Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci.* London: Lawrence and Wishart.

When soft power follows a 'humanist idea of culture', it could be interpreted as culture for a given country. Soft power does admit an 'anthropological idea of culture'; however, it is difficult to define the origin of a given country's culture. Based on Reeves' different concepts of culture, it is easy to understand why Mattern and Watanabe doubted the concept of culture that Nye used in his definition of the concept of soft power.

Concerning a country's interest as a goal of soft power, Ferguson Niall (2003) criticized that soft power is 'too soft' to obtain a country's interest. Takeshi Matsuda (2007: 5-7) further tried to find soft power in bilateral cultural exchange and not in unilateral cultural imperialism. Niall estimated soft power was not more effective than hard power, whereas Matsuda cautioned against strong coercion by cultural means when it is used as a representation of a country. These two different opinions arise from the way in which researchers believe culture can or cannot be effective. Furthermore, this difference of opinion underscores the differing views of policy-makers as to what soft power must be.

Even though the concept of culture itself has such different meanings and though there are various opinions on how to comprehend the power of culture, the most problematic point is that such a concept of culture has started to go hand in hand with the concept of soft power. That is to say, some overly hasty researchers have started to accept the idea of soft power as another vital ruling strategy by means of cultural elements. For instance, the Chairman of the Advisory Group to the U.S. Congress, Edward P. Djerejian (2003) advised that the new U.S. diplomacy needs to spend more government budget on cultural programs, such as English teaching and exchange programs, to promote the national interest. However, Jan Melissen (2007), a professor of Antwerp University, criticized that U.S. recent cultural diplomacy was nothing more than propaganda for its own national interest[2]. The conceptual ambiguity of soft power accounts for the difference in estimation regarding U.S. diplomatic policies. In another instance, for example, Douglas McGray suggested the concept of 'cool' and proposed measuring the amount of national 'cool'. 'Cool' refers to how much people of other countries feel attracted towards a given country[3]. Just as GNP (Gross National Product) is commonly recognized, McGray proposed an imitation which would become acknowledged as his brainchild, the concept of GNC (Gross National Cool). His work is very impressive and what is most interesting is that his new idea has a deep connection with GNP. Namely, his concept of GNC can be understood as a numerical index of cultural contents business, which is the subordinate sector in a country's whole economic activity, described by Nye as hard power. But even in this case Watanabe & McConnell (2008) advocated Nye's concept of soft power. They believe that the concept of soft

[2] Melissen described U.S. recent public diplomacy as 'old wine in new bottles' compared to the old strategy, i.e. propaganda (2007: 3).
[3] For further information see <www.douglasmcgray.com/grossnationalcool.pdf>

power was not introduced to be used merely for a given country's interests and that it does not ignore the idea of structured culture at all. They stated positively that these understandings come from the researchers themselves misconstruing Nye's concept of soft power and try to adhere to Nye's original concept of soft power. In the same context, another researcher, Koichi Iwabuchi (2007: 77) insisted that the concept of soft power has also been greatly changed from Nye's original idea. He continues by affirming that the changed concept of soft power focuses only on a given country's interests, and that culture is consumed for a given country's interests. From the same viewpoint, Shigemitsu Konno (2008: 1-3) also agreed that the concept of soft power has been used by taking certain points out of context and thereby changing the meaning as a whole.

However, the aim of my research is not to demonstrate if there are misunderstandings or not among researchers, nor is it to examine whether the concept of soft power is good or not. I intend to show that there is an inherent ambiguity in Nye's definition of soft power. As I mentioned above, in one aspect Nye himself limited the usage of culture only for a country's interest, nevertheless in another he strongly remarked on the importance of non-state actors (Joseph Nye 2004: 90-92). To illustrate this, I will take the example of Japan's soft power as commented by Nye.

Nye emphasized the potential of Japanese soft power through Japanese high and popular culture, on the other hand he treated the Japanese language lightly for its lesser practical use, though language might be thought of as the ground from which 'Japanese' high and popular culture springs. Briefly, Nye's concept of soft power is flexible and allows for too much emphasis on cultural business which has a direct bearing on a country's financial interests. These problematic parts of Nye's soft power have led others to misunderstand his concept. In other words, Nye's concept of soft power is not clearly separated from the concept of hard power. His epochal attempt to build a new power framework sealed itself by a desire to compromise with an obsolete concept of power. Such base defects led to an imprecise understanding of soft power, sometimes as an overly-soft strategy, sometimes as propaganda. Figure 1 shows that Nye's original concept of soft power is divided into two parts. The part shown by a different color describes the gray area caused by different understandings of culture and misunderstandings regarding soft power.

In particular, the gray area makes soft power difficult to identify in respect of the following two points: on which concept of culture it is based; and what is its goal. This gray area is interpreted differently according to the bias of each researcher.

Fig.1: Changed concept of power caused by different understandings of soft power
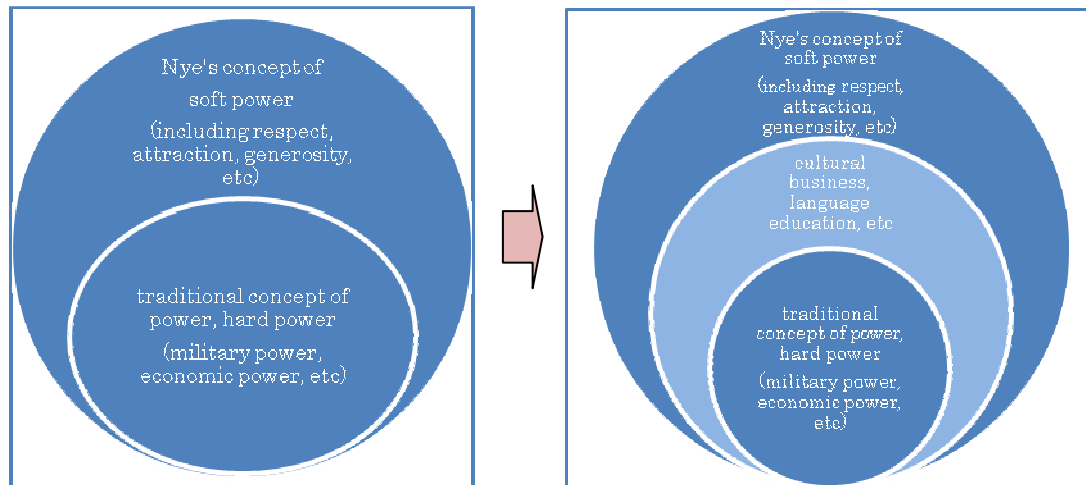
The Confucius Institute as a case of ambiguity in soft power

To explain this ambiguity in Nye's concept of soft power, I will take the example of a certain agency which enunciates its role as its country's tool of soft power. The case is China's Confucius Institute which was established in 2004, supposedly in order to popularize the Chinese language worldwide. An American journalist, Joshua Kurlantzick (2007: 81-94), who analyzed China's soft power pointed out that the Chinese government works hard to promote its cultural influence in the world. He also described China's Confucius Institute as a tool for promoting China's soft power. Above all, the Chinese government has declared that its cultural work, such as through the Confucius Institute, is to promote China's soft power (Multilateral Forum for Cultural Relations 2006[4]; Yugang Chen 2007: 193-204). Though I take China's Confucius Institute as an example here, similar case studies analyzed by other researchers can also be referred to. For instance, the British Council analyzed by James M. Mitchell (1990), the Goethe Institute by Ulrich Ammon (1991), the American Center by Yasushi Watanabe (2008), and so forth. Each research study had its own methodological approach; however, all the studies had the same aim: to establish the goal of each institute examined. Regardless of official announcements that the Confucius Institute works for mutual understanding[5], I also needed to establish its fundamental goals and aims, and in the results of my research I could identify two characteristic features, as described below.

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[4] *'Multilateral forum for cultural relations 2006'* (2006.8.31), held in Beijing, sponsored by The Foreign Ministry of China.

[5] Foreign Chinese Language Education Promotion Team

Confucius Institute for political effect

I could establish that the implantation of Confucius Institutes is deeply related to those geographical regions considered important by the Chinese government from a political point of view. For example, a number of Confucius Institutes are found in the regional area near China, such as Japan, Thailand, and South Korea. Others are found in larger polities, such as the EU and the US. Over 60% of the 165 Confucius Institutes are concentrated in these three areas. The implantation near China especially is not so strange when understood as the Chinese Civilization group, which Samuel P. Huntington (1996: 254-258, 346-349) had precisely anticipated in his book. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Confucius Institutes in the world

Region	East Asia	Central Asia	Europe	North America	South America	Africa	Oceania	Total
Number of C.I.	49	17	55	28	1	11	4	165
Number of countries	9	13	22	3	1	7	2	57
Over 5 institutes in a country	Japan (14) Thailand (13) South Korea(12)		Russia (10) Germany (8) U.K. (8) France (6)	US (18) Mexico (5)				94/165 9/57

It is particularly worth paying attention to the rapid implantation in Africa. After the Beijing Summit of China-Africa Cooperation in 2006, Confucius Institutes in Africa dramatically increased from zero to ten in only six months[6]. The main goal of 'The Beijing Summit of China-Africa Cooperation' was to exploit the natural resources of Africa by Chinese

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[6] The Beijing Summit of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation adopted a declaration in the Chinese capital proclaiming establishment of 'a new type of strategic partnership' between China and Africa. The partnership features 'political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation and cultural exchanges' according to the declaration, which was adopted by leaders of China and 48 African countries at the end of the two-day gathering. The Chinese government proposed that China and Africa should fully tap cooperation potential and strive to bring their trade volume to 100 billion U.S. dollars by 2010. The figure will be more than double the 2005 level, about 39.7 billion U.S. dollars. For further information see:
<english.focacsummit.org/2006-11/05/content_5166.htm>

government finance under the name of ODA (Official Development Assistance) (Shinichi Mizuta 2008). Concerning this foreign strategy of China, Jean-Christophe Servant (2005) criticized it as 'new colonialism'. By this, Servant meant that such China-Africa networks do not work for mutual economic benefit but rather for the strongest country in the trading system. While the African countries supply the natural resources, China utilizes them to manufacture industrial products and sells the manufactured products back to the African countries. This circle relationship causes another 'North-South Divide', another cycle which Servant defines as 'new colonialism'. Moreover, the NHK broadcasting company also remarked on the fact that the goal of China's cultural and economic investment in Africa is for China's national interest. NHK paid particular attention to the construction of African infrastructures by China. It suspected the aim of such construction was to create new markets for selling Chinese products.

Confucius Institute for economic effect

According to a Chinese news article, the goals of the Confucius Institute are described as methods for increasing the demand of Chinese language and for developing Chinese cultural contents business. From some materials on the Confucius Institute, I could determine that the plan to establish Confucius Institutes was deeply associated with the development of the HSK Chinese proficiency test (Yuzhen Cheng 2005: 79-89). Language proficiency tests are generally accepted as a necessary tool for learning a language, regardless of the huge revenue they generate. But needless to say the American ETS[7] language proficiency test is generally accepted as a big education business. Certain comments were made concerning the language business during the 'Multilateral Forum for Cultural Relations 2006'. A foreign ministry ex-officer, participating in the forum, remarked on the improvement in the 'cultural deficit' indicating that China did have quite some deficit in its cultural business. To correct this cultural deficit, the official insisted on the importance of developing cultural contents worthy of sale towards the outside world. One of these items is the Chinese language (Minglang Zhou 2004: 12-16). At the '2007 Confucius Institute Symposium', the participants, including a government officer, frankly remarked that the English education business was the Institute's business rival.

Aside from comments concerning the language education business, it was also remarked that the Confucius Institute is used as a branch office for selling China's cultural contents[8]. China's cultural contents business particularly has a great advantage in promoting China's soft power, which the Chinese government believes is even more than that of the U.S. This is due to its

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[7] Educational Testing Service (ETS) founded in 1974, American NPO. It developed the English test TOEFL, GRE etc., its revenues are estimated at $600 million a year.
[8] Resources from interviews with officers of Confucius Institutes.

incomparably huge population and market. Relying on these enormous domestic and overseas growing markets, China's newborn business could stand on its own feet much faster than anyone expected. China did not need to waste its time and efforts in cultivating the market. The most effective task of the Chinese government in selling its cultural contents is to promote China's national identity and to remind its people that China has its own honorable historical culture unique to China.

To summarize the role of the Confucius Institute, it tends to use culture as an economic tool for raising income, and language as a political tool and symbol of China's international relations. Although the Confucius institute labels its goal with the term soft power, it has great possibilities of working for China's national interest based on the idea of its national identity and national culture.

China's understanding of soft power

A senior researcher at the Clingendael in the Netherlands, Ingrid d'Hooghe (2007: 94-103), noted that the Chinese government itself officially stresses its national identity and the influence over other neighboring countries through the power of its own culture. Also YiWei Wang (2008: 259-268) who studies Chinese foreign policy criticized this policy as propaganda. According to research by Quansheng Zhao (2007: 295-299), the goals of China's foreign policy can be categorized as: 'modernization', 'nationalism', and 'regionalism'. Zhao insists that the Chinese government needs to develop its economy in order to gain enough power to protect its own sovereignty, especially in its regional multilateralism, which entails multiple countries working together on a given agenda and which needs to organize group committees for resolving the given agendas. Gilbert Rozman also pointed out that China's 'regionalism' is deeply connected to its multilateralism (Rozman 2007: 134-137). Particularly urgent regional issues, such as North Korea's brinkmanship diplomacy in threatening to possess nuclear weapons, allow China to be the principal member of this regional group committee under so called multilateralism.

China prefers multilateral situations in which it has the chance to be a top player in the region to unilateral situations which inevitably end in confrontation accompanied by military conflict. Such drastic turnabout in Chinese foreign policy is usually mentioned as dating from the 1979 CCP (Chinese Communist Party) conference (Guoli Liu 2007: 5-7). In the late 1970s, Chinese leaders were afraid of China's international isolation. They declared an 'open-door policy' and economic reform. At the same time they implemented a new diplomatic strategy, instead of wielding military force, towards its neighboring countries. In the same manner a Japanese

researcher, Toshiaki Arai (2002: 29-47), also draws attention to the three ideas on which China put great importance from 1979 onwards, using the terms 'country's power', 'sovereignty', and 'unity'. Moreover, he also uses these three keywords to describe China's foreign policy.

From the same viewpoint as Arai, Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2008: 109-112) explicitly states that in the idea of multilateralism the most important element that China would like to promote is economic power. According to him, in regional multilateralism, economic power is the only power which China needs to promote in order to grasp regional leadership, because the wielding of military force, on which China depended for a long time, is likely to break down China's recent remarkable economic achievement (Cheng-Chwee Kuik 2008: 129-133). When it comes to China's multilateralism from the viewpoint of China's concept of power, it could be recognized that China has its own characteristic classification of power which falls into two categories. One is military power, which China adhered to for a long time, and the other is non-military power, which is praised as China's diplomatic turnabout or China's new diplomacy.

As we can see, in the practical case of the Confucius Institute, China's understanding of culture and language are closely connected to its concept of power. To put it simply, the Chinese government imagines soft power is auxiliary and is a substitute power-concept for traditional power based on the nation-state. In a recent ceremony for the 60th anniversary of China's communist revolution, the Chinese government again emphasized its national identity and clearly announced that they support soft power. Figure 2 shows this viewpoint of China's power and soft power.

Fig. 2: China's category of power and soft power as its sub-concept
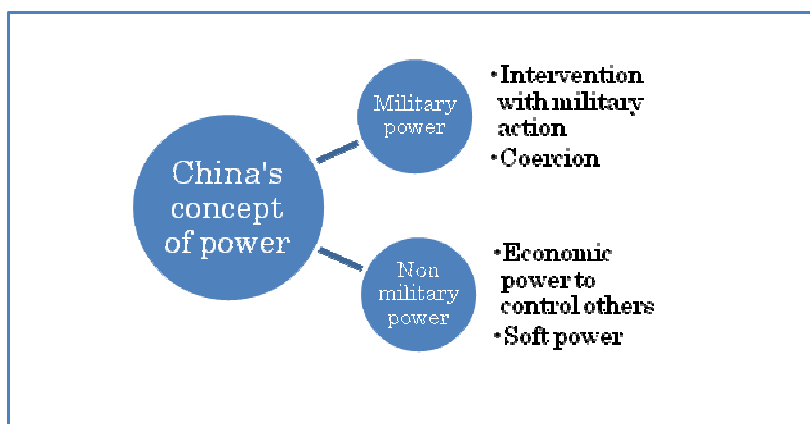
Following this logic, apart from wielding military force, all other means are acceptable as peaceful acts. Prohibiting military force is worth praising. But military force is not all violent. Figure 1 can also be explained by this logic. The middle-sized circle on the right side of Figure 1, showing 'cultural business, language education, etc. is what China understands as soft power. Perhaps some researchers are willing to argue that the reason for managing cultural business is its income. Of course, cultural business is important, even simply for the sake of maintaining cultural exchange, because the revenue from such business gives it the ability to sustain its work. But the most important point is to determine the main goals of such business. It is the propaganda aspect that most fear when culture is used only for a given country's interest. Brook Larmer (2005) for instance, is concerned that China's leaders have a strong tendency to regard even sports and sports players as tools to promote the country's refined image. It is generally accepted that, to a certain degree, sports can represent a nation-state. However, this is not the only function that sports can be given.

New suggestion

Even if the Confucius Institute has these main goals of political and economic effect for the benefit of China, it covers these goals with the obscure mantle of soft power. Such ambiguity in soft power makes it difficult to perceive what these main goals are. Moreover, this ambiguity also provides a way to escape accountability (such as the Confucius Institute works only for its country) because Nye's concept of soft power itself admits the function of soft power for a country's interest. Though critics could not find any real harm here they do warn against inappropriate usage of the concept of soft power.

With ambiguity existing within the term soft power itself, ambiguity is further increased by China's own categorization of power: military power and other 'peaceful' powers. Moreover, Nye suggested fusing the two meanings; traditional power and a new concept of power based on a country's attraction promoted by cultural exchange. However, I believe Nye's concept of soft power just gives a broader working space for hard power. As we can see in the example of the Confucius Institute, the combination of ambiguity in the concept of soft power and a country's own interpretation of the concept of power could give a definite direction to the understanding of soft power.

Therefore I would like to suggest a new framework for understanding soft power along the lines of a similar proposition put forward by Nancy Snow (2009: 3-10) with regards to 'public diplomacy'. Nancy Snow grasped the point of separation between 'public' and 'diplomacy'. She pointed out the conflict between 'public' and 'diplomacy' in the term 'public diplomacy' which is described as foreign policy which promotes soft power. I would like to adopt her suggestion in order to explain the term soft power properly. Firstly, when 'soft' is emphasized in the term soft power, i.e. SOFT power, it can be considered an effective tool for the realization of mutual understanding through activities such as intellectual exchange and cultural relations. Secondly, when 'power' is emphasized in the term, i.e. soft POWER, it is usually used only for a country's interests. In this case, soft POWER can also imply a grasping political leadership over certain areas of activity, including the business of cultural contents such as movies, animations and so forth which contribute to the enhancement of a country's financial ability and its refined image, and which is used as propaganda.

Fig. 3: Separated concept of soft power
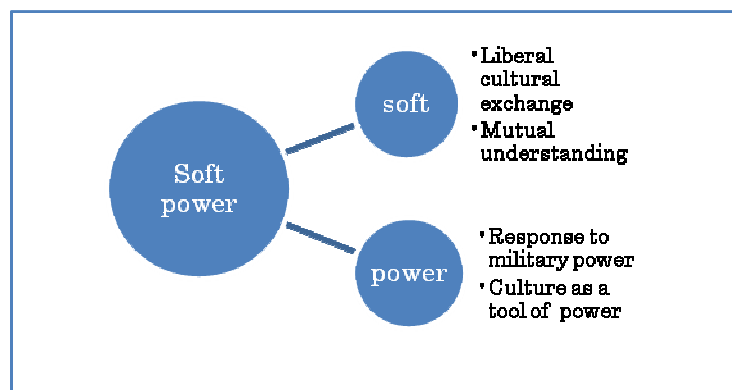
Concluding comments

In the beginning of this paper I discussed the different understandings of the term soft power. Then, I took an example of China's Confucius Institute to explain these different understandings of soft power. It appeared that the Confucius Institute, while declaring its goal as soft power, mainly works for its own country, China. I analyzed this conceptual gap in soft power resulting from different understandings of culture. Compounding this conceptual ambiguity contained in soft power with a country's own interpretation of the concept of power, the understanding of soft power is also affected. Even if a given country declares its goal simply as soft power, it is necessary to determine which concept of culture and power the country's policy is based on. Finally, in order to settle this problematic situation, I have suggested a new framework which

shows a division of the concept of soft power: SOFT power and soft POWER. Using this framework we can judge the intentions of a given country's foreign policies simply labeled as soft power. Especially when 'power' is emphasized, as in the term soft POWER, we can see that such policies are not really aimed at mutual understanding. I believe this research could provide a theoretical scale with which to measure the cultural consistency of any given country's leadership.

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