


A Comparative Study of Education as Soft Power: The Cases of China and the United States

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>Education is increasingly used as a diplomatic tool to project soft power globally. This study explores how China and the United States employ education to shape their international image and influence. The study aims to compare educational strategies used by both nations, analyze their effectiveness, and assess international students' perceptions. The target population includes international students currently enrolled in Chinese and U.S. universities. A purposive sample of 20 international students (10 from each country) was selected. Convenience sampling was also used for expert interviews. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, including policy papers and institutional reports. A qualitative comparative case study design was employed, grounded in Nye's soft power theory and constructivist international relations theory. Interviews were transcribed and coded thematically. Cross-case analysis was conducted to identify similarities and contrasts. Both nations use scholarships and cultural promotion, but the U.S. emphasizes prestige, while China focuses on accessibility and regional ties. Recommendations: Both countries should ensure academic freedom and intercultural engagement to enhance the credibility and sustainability of their soft power strategies.</i>
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Introduction

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, education has emerged as a pivotal instrument of soft power, defined by Nye (1990) as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion (Seiwert, 2024). As major powers vie to shape global narratives and influence foreign publics, education diplomacy has become a central component of their strategic toolkits. The United States has historically leveraged programs such as the Fulbright Scholarship to cultivate international ties among future global elites (Metzgar, 2016). More recently, China has adopted a multifaceted educational approach, expanding Confucius Institutes worldwide, creating English-taught graduate programs like Schwarzman Scholars and Yenching Academy, and offering substantial scholarships to attract international students (Lo & Pan 2021) China's educational

diplomacy is frequently cast as "soft power with Chinese characteristics," embedding higher education within a broader nationalist and civilizational narrative promoted by Xi Jinping's regime (Mattis, 2012). These efforts are designed to internationalize China's universities and shape perceptions of China in Southeast Asia, Africa, and beyond. However, the expansion of Confucius Institutes has also prompted debate over academic freedom and potential censorship, illustrating the tension between cultural diplomacy and ideological control (Wen & Hu 2019). In contrast, the United States draws on its historical reputation, institutional prestige, and longstanding exchange frameworks. The Fulbright Program and Education USA initiatives have been instrumental in disseminating democratic values and fostering socio-political networks (Nolan, 2018). The U.S. strategy emphasises institutional excellence, liberal academic traditions, and long-term personal diplomacy. This comparative study investigates how China and the United States deploy educational initiatives as soft power. It examines their strategic priorities, institutional mechanisms, and the perceptions of international students to understand the efficacy of education as a vehicle of influence in global diplomacy.

Background of the Study

The strategic use of education for soft power was first conceptualized by Joseph Nye in 1990, defined as a state's ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion (Petrovna, 2015; Seiwert, 2024). Within this paradigm, education diplomacy, including scholarships, student exchanges, and cultural institutes, emerged as a powerful tool for influencing global perceptions. Nye's premise has been supported across comparative studies, reinforcing that universities serve not only as academic hubs but also as diplomatic channels. The United States, a pioneer in education-based diplomacy, established the Fulbright Program in 1946 to promote international understanding through academic exchange (White, 2022). This initiative and other programs such as Education USA and the Fulbright–Hays Act have targeted emerging political elites and fostered long-term connections across societies (Gauttam et al., 2024).. Studies highlight that US soft power rests on institutional excellence and the diffusion of democratic norms via educational engagement (Bersick, 2006)

Conversely, China has accelerated its education diplomacy in the early 21st century. With initiatives like Confucius Institutes, Schwarzman Scholars, and the Belt and Road Scholarship scheme, China offers language and graduate programs intentionally designed to shape foreign perceptions and strengthen regional ties (Seiwert, 2024). From a high of over 500 Confucius outlets in 2017 to ongoing expansion under Xi's "tell China's story well" doctrine, literature underscores these moves as a deliberate soft power strategy (Seiwert, 2024). Despite its expansion, China's educational diplomacy is not without criticism. Confucius Institutes have been accused of promoting CCP narratives, curbing academic freedom, and engaging in cultural propaganda framed as "culturetainment" (Liu, 2019). Scholars warn of "sharp power" where state-driven soft power techniques may also subtly influence discourse and suppress dissent (Seiwert, 2024). Studies comparing China and the U.S. emerge in varied geopolitical zones. For example, Han (2022) examines education diplomacy in ASEAN as a site of strategic competition, while comparative reports highlight divergent styles: top-down, state-led public diplomacy in China, versus bottom-up, pluralistic exchanges in the U.S. Moreover, geopolitical shifts, such as attacks on U.S. institutions or political interference in Fulbright administration, have prompted concerns that American educational soft power may be eroding.

This background underscores the theoretical foundations, historical trajectories, and criticisms of educational diplomacy in both nations. The existing body of research reveals a gap in in-depth

comparative analysis that juxtaposes mechanisms, institutional structures, and student perceptions across both China and U.S. contexts, a gap this study aims to address.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore and compare how the United States and China utilize education as an instrument of soft power within their broader foreign policy strategies. As both countries compete for global influence in the 21st century, education has become a critical, though under-analyzed, domain for diplomatic engagement, ideological projection, and cultural negotiation. The objectives of the study are outlined as follows:

1. To examine how China and the United States use education as a tool of soft power.
2. To compare international student attraction strategies and educational diplomacy initiatives.
3. To analyze the impact of education on each country's global image and influence.
4. To compare the institutional models and governance structures underpinning educational diplomacy in both countries

Significance of the Study

The present study contributes meaningfully to the growing body of literature on soft power, international education, and global diplomacy by offering a comparative analysis of how China and the United States employ education as a strategic tool of influence. While numerous studies have examined the concept of soft power in isolation or within single-country frameworks, few have rigorously compared the educational strategies of two major global powers that are increasingly seen as ideological and geopolitical rivals. By exploring the mechanisms, institutional frameworks, and student perceptions associated with educational diplomacy, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers, academic institutions, and international relations scholars. This research highlights how education can shape geopolitical influence and international partnerships, and provides policy recommendations for using education as a peaceful diplomatic tool. It sheds light on how education not only facilitates knowledge transfer but also serves as a platform for constructing national identity, exporting cultural values, and shaping international norms. Furthermore, this research is significant in the context of contemporary global challenges, including the declining trust in Western liberalism, the rise of authoritarian alternatives, and the intensifying competition for influence in the Global South. Understanding how education operates as a form of soft power in these settings can inform more ethical, inclusive, and effective international education policies. The study also offers practical recommendations for enhancing soft power engagement through education while preserving academic integrity and mutual respect among nations.

Research Questions

1. How do China and the U.S. promote their educational systems globally?
2. What role do scholarships, exchange programs, and cultural institutes play in projecting soft power?
3. How do international students perceive education in each country?
4. What are the political and diplomatic outcomes of education-based soft power strategies?

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations of Soft Power in Education

According to Joseph Nye's (1990, 2004) concept of soft power, as the capacity to attract rather than coerce, has significantly influenced analyses of educational diplomacy (Gauttam et al., 2024). The interrelation between universities, government, and industry, the "Triple Helix", is increasingly understood as pivotal in projecting national influence via higher education (Ye et al., 2013). Recent reviews affirm that higher education is now considered a crucial resource for soft power in state foreign policy (Gauttam et al., 2024).

United States: Institutional Reputation and Liberal Values

The United States has historically leveraged education through initiatives such as the Fulbright Program and Education USA, embedding democratic norms and elite networks (Song, 2017). Studies underscore that U.S. soft power stems not only from economic or military strength, but also from the universal appeal of its pluralistic culture and academic freedom (Kim, & Knuckey, 2022). However, recent political polarization and isolationist policies have prompted concerns about erosion of American soft power (Kearn, 2023).

China: Strategic Educational Diplomacy

China's assertive soft power strategy employs Confucius Institutes, Schwarzman Scholars, and Belt & Road scholarships to advance national narratives and global outreach (Metzgar, 2016). Lo and Pan (2021) describe this trend as "internationalization of higher education with Chinese characteristics," rooted in a revival of civilizational state discourse. While Confucius Institutes have proliferated globally, scholars note their dual soft and "sharp" power functions, promoting culture while sometimes suppressing academic freedom (Seiwert, 2024). Case studies have documented instances of censorship and self-censorship within host universities (Sebok, 2024).

Comparative Dynamics and Regional Perspectives

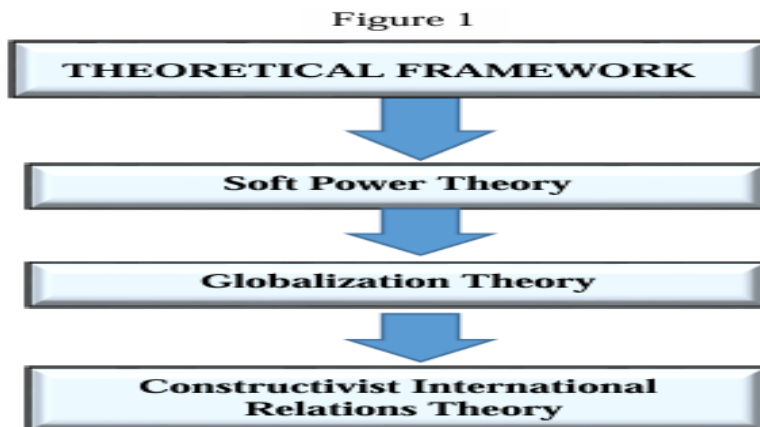
Comparative analyses point to distinct governance models: the U.S. favors decentralized, institutional autonomy, while China utilizes top-down, state-mediated mechanisms. Research comparing both nations' soft power diplomacy in ASEAN reveals divergent emphases on values versus economic appeal (Ma, 2021). Empirical work further suggests that Confucius Institutes can engender warmer attitudes toward China, though not necessarily improve political alignment (Yeh et al., 2021).

Countertrends and Critiques

Despite their scale, China's educational diplomacy initiatives face skepticism over transparency, propaganda risks, and ideological interference. In the U.S., growing political rhetoric and visa challenges have diminished Chinese student enrollment, weakening people-to-people ties. Meanwhile, U.S. soft power credibility is tested by domestic political disunity (Gallarotti, 2023). Current literature establishes that both China and the U.S. leverage education as soft power, yet their approaches diverge sharply in governance, ideals, and geostrategic aim. While the U.S. emphasizes institutional strength and democratic values, China emphasizes cultural diplomacy embedded in national narratives. However, a systematic comparative examination of these paradigms, exploring institutional structures, stakeholder perceptions, and policy outcomes, remains underdeveloped. This study aims to fill this gap by juxtaposing both countries' strategies and assessing their implications for international student perceptions and global influence.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical foundation as illustrated in Figure 1 below:



This study is grounded in the theoretical foundation of soft power theory, primarily developed by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004), who conceptualized soft power as the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. In the context of this research, education serves as one of the key instruments through which states project soft power by promoting values, culture, and ideologies that align with national interests. Soft power theory distinguishes between three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Education intersects all three, acting as a vessel for cultural diplomacy, a mirror of political ideologies, and a tool in public diplomacy. The internationalization of higher education, global scholarship programs, and the expansion of cultural institutes such as the Fulbright Program and Confucius Institutes exemplify how both the United States and China operationalize soft power through educational outreach.

In addition, globalization theory supports the analysis of transnational educational exchanges, positing that the flow of knowledge, people, and cultural values across borders transforms national identities and influences global perceptions (Held & McGrew, 2007). Education, in this regard, becomes both a product and driver of globalization and thus a potent force in shaping global opinion and soft power leverage.

Furthermore, the constructivist approach in international relations provides a nuanced lens to interpret how educational soft power is co-constructed by both the sender and the receiver. Constructivists argue that identities and interests are not fixed but shaped through social interaction and shared understanding (Wendt, 1999). Therefore, the perceptions of international students and their engagement with educational systems in the U.S. and China become critical in understanding the real impact of soft power.

Together, these theories inform the comparative design of the study, framing education not merely as a domestic policy issue but as an international strategy to cultivate influence, build cultural ties, and shape the global order through attraction and legitimacy.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design, allowing an in-depth exploration of how education functions as soft power in the United States and China. The comparative method is

particularly appropriate for analyzing similarities and differences in the strategic use of higher education as a foreign policy instrument (George & Bennett, 2005). A qualitative approach facilitates rich, contextual insights into institutional practices, policy frameworks, and international students' perceptions, elements often not captured through quantitative measures (Tisdell & Merriam 2025). The study is interpretivist in epistemological orientation, as it seeks to understand the meanings constructed by individuals and institutions regarding educational diplomacy and its impact on soft power projection (Creswell, 2016).

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprises:

- a. International students currently enrolled in selected universities in China and the United States.
- b. Policy makers, administrators, or faculty engaged in international education initiatives.
- c. Governmental and non-governmental stakeholders involved in educational diplomacy, such as Fulbright officers or Confucius Institute directors.

This multi-layered population ensures a comprehensive view of both policy intentions and practical outcomes.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The study uses purposive and convenience sampling, appropriate for qualitative research focusing on information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). A total of 20 participants were selected:

- 10 international students (5 each from China and the U.S.).
- 6 administrators or faculty members involved in international programs (3 from each country).
- 4 education diplomacy stakeholders, including officials affiliated with Confucius Institutes or the Fulbright Program.

Purposive sampling ensured participants had direct experience with or knowledge of international education and soft power mechanisms.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using the following instruments:

Semi-structured interviews: These allowed flexibility while ensuring consistency in key themes explored across participants.

Document analysis: Official policy documents, institutional reports, government publications, and promotional materials (e.g., Education USA brochures or Confucius Institute manuals) were analyzed.

Field notes: Used to capture context, tone, and non-verbal cues during interviews.

Interview protocols were guided by literature on soft power and educational diplomacy (Nye, 2004; D'Hooghe, 2015).

Data Collection Techniques

- Interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Each session lasted 30–45 minutes.
- Document analysis involved collecting and coding publicly available documents from university websites, government agencies, and intergovernmental organizations such as UNESCO and OECD.
- Triangulation of sources ensured a robust and holistic understanding of each case.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding followed a six-phase process:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the final report

NVivo 12 software was employed to organize and code data systematically. A comparative matrix was created to identify convergences and divergences between the two cases.

Reliability and Validity of Instruments

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study followed qualitative validation strategies:

Triangulation: Used multiple data sources (interviews, documents, field notes).

Member checking: Selected interview transcripts and interpretations were reviewed by participants to confirm accuracy.

Peer debriefing: Research methods and themes were discussed with colleagues for critical feedback.

Though statistical reliability is less emphasized in qualitative studies, methodological rigor was maintained through these validation measures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the host institution. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained using pseudonyms. Data were stored securely in compliance with data protection policies.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data collected from interviews and document reviews. The objective was to examine how education functions as a tool of soft power

in both the United States and China. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and differences in participants' perceptions and institutional practices across both contexts.

Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

The themes were derived through coding transcriptions of semi-structured interviews with international students and administrators from selected universities in both countries.

Table 1: Thematic Coding Summary – International Students' Perceptions

Theme	US Students (n=5)	China Students (n=5)	Interpretation
Academic Freedom	High appreciation for open discussion, diversity of viewpoints	Limited freedom; curriculum seen as state-influenced	U.S. education system perceived as more open and autonomous
Cultural Exchange	Deep exposure to American values and multiculturalism	Structured exposure to Chinese traditions	U.S. offers organic engagement; China offers structured cultural narrative
Language Support	Institution-dependent support	Structured Mandarin language programs	Language used more strategically in China's education diplomacy
Perceived Political Agenda	Subtle, elective or student-driven	Strong state messaging via Confucius Institutes	China's approach more state-directed than the U.S.
Institutional Prestige	Globally recognized institutions	Growing regional reputation, especially among BRI countries	U.S. holds global brand advantage, but China is gaining ground

Document Analysis: Education-Based Soft Power Mechanisms

An analysis of official documents, policies, and promotional materials was conducted to understand how each country projects soft power through education.

Table 2: Document Analysis – Soft Power Instruments by Country

Category	United States	China	Notes
Government Scholarship	Fulbright Program, Education USA	CSC Scholarships, Belt & Road Program	U.S. emphasizes liberal arts and diversity; China targets regional needs
Cultural Institutes	American Corners, Cultural Centers abroad	Confucius Institutes	U.S. is decentralized; China's institutes are state-managed
University Rankings	Harvard, MIT, Stanford consistently rank globally	Tsinghua, Peking rising rapidly	U.S. still leads; China narrowing the gap regionally
Targeted Regions	Latin America, Middle East, Africa	Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Asia	Both aim to strengthen influence in Global South
Language Promotion	ESL centers worldwide	Mandarin via Confucius Institutes	Language central to China's cultural diplomacy

Comparative Summary of Education-Based Soft Power

A synthesized comparison of soft power strategies employed by both nations.

Table 3: Comparative Summary of Education-Based Soft Power Mechanisms

Variable	United States	China
Soft Power Model	Pluralist, decentralized	Centralized, state-driven
Educational Diplomacy Tools	Fulbright, Education USA, IVLP	Confucius Institutes, CSC Scholarships
Communication Strategy	Emphasis on liberal values, institutional prestige	Emphasis on cultural harmony and national narratives
Outcomes	Favorable public perception, elite networking	Regional influence, mixed global perception
Criticisms	Visa restrictions, perception of decline	Propaganda concerns, lack of academic freedom

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal nuanced distinctions in how the United States and China employ education as a mechanism of soft power. Consistent with Nye's (2004) conceptualization of soft power as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion, the United States relies heavily on the perceived openness, diversity, and institutional prestige of its higher education sector. International students in the U.S. reported a high level of academic freedom, critical inquiry, and multicultural exposure, aligning with previous research by Altbach and Knight (2007), who emphasized the global appeal of the American liberal education model. In contrast, China's approach is more centralized and guided by state-directed educational diplomacy, as observed through the prominence of Confucius Institutes and the Belt and Road scholarships. These instruments aim to project a harmonious image of Chinese culture while deepening strategic ties, particularly with developing nations. This aligns with the work of D'Hooghe (2015), who noted that China's public diplomacy prioritizes long-term influence through cultural and educational engagement.

A notable contrast emerged regarding perceptions of political influence. Participants in China often perceived a strong state agenda embedded within the curriculum and institutional structures. This is consistent with Yang (2010), who highlighted the ideological framing embedded in China's educational exports. Conversely, U.S. soft power is experienced as more implicit, often channeled through student-led activities, liberal pedagogical approaches, and institutional autonomy. This aligns with the findings of Peterson and Helms (2013), who described the U.S. model as decentralized yet influential due to its academic prestige and cultural appeal. Language emerged as a central strategic tool in both contexts. While the U.S. supports English as a global lingua franca through ESL centers and international testing platforms, China has strategically promoted Mandarin via Confucius Institutes. Previous studies (Zhao & Huang, 2010) have pointed to the instrumental use of language education in China's foreign policy, which is corroborated by the present findings.

Despite different models, both countries are effectively leveraging education to enhance their global standing. However, the U.S. appears to retain a soft power advantage due to its legacy of academic excellence, diversity, and relative institutional independence. China, on the other hand, is rapidly gaining traction, particularly in regions aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative, where its

scholarships and cultural outreach resonate strongly. These findings reinforce the idea that education, beyond knowledge transmission, functions as a powerful diplomatic tool that reflects national identity, values, and foreign policy priorities. Future research should explore how geopolitical shifts and global crises (e.g., pandemics, conflicts) may alter these dynamics and reshape the educational soft power landscape.

Conclusion

This comparative study highlights the distinct strategies employed by the United States and China in utilizing education as a tool of soft power. The United States, through its decentralized, diverse, and liberal education system, projects influence by attracting international students with academic freedom and institutional prestige. Conversely, China employs a more centralized and state-driven model that aligns with its broader geopolitical ambitions, particularly targeting developing regions through scholarship programs, Confucius Institutes, and cultural diplomacy. The analysis reveals that both nations are successful in leveraging education for soft power, albeit with different models and outcomes. While the U.S. maintains a dominant global educational brand, China's consistent investments are yielding growing regional influence. Language, institutional collaboration, and student perceptions emerge as critical variables in shaping educational diplomacy. Ultimately, education is shown not just as a channel for knowledge exchange, but as a strategic instrument of international relations. Understanding how educational institutions and policies function as extensions of national soft power provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and global stakeholders. The study underscores the need for continuous evaluation of educational diplomacy, particularly in light of changing global dynamics, competition, and the evolving role of knowledge in global influence.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and comparative analysis of how education serves as a soft power tool in the United States and China, the following recommendations are proposed:

Policy Recommendations

1. The United States should consider streamlining visa processes and enhancing support for international students to sustain its competitive advantage.
2. China should promote greater academic freedom and transparency within its higher education system to improve global perception and trust.

Institutional Strategies

1. Universities in both countries should develop deeper international collaborations and exchange programs that emphasize mutual understanding rather than national promotion.
2. The U.S. can further diversify its student outreach by targeting underrepresented regions, while China should consider expanding its engagement beyond Belt and Road partners to foster broader global inclusion.

Communication and Branding

Both countries should focus on promoting education as a space for shared learning and global citizenship, not solely as national influence campaigns.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. Future studies should incorporate a longitudinal design to assess how perceptions of soft power evolve over time among international students.

2. Research should explore the impact of digital education and online learning platforms as emerging instruments of soft power.
3. Comparative case studies involving other emerging powers (e.g., India, Russia, or the EU) could offer a more comprehensive understanding of global education diplomacy.
4. Further investigation into the role of faculty mobility and transnational research collaborations would expand the scope of soft power analysis in the academic context.

These recommendations aim to inform policymakers, educational institutions, and scholars interested in the intersection of education, diplomacy, and international relations.

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