Party-Press Parallelism: Reception and Representation of China’s Soft Power in Post-Communist Hungary

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Abstract

The dissertation seeks to explore how Chinese soft power is received by the local policy makers and the national media in non-Western, transitional contexts where parties with authoritarian leaning are in dominant position as well as the political actors and the press are seriously intertwined in a heavily partisan media market. I focus on the case Hungary, a post-communist country with high level of party-press parallelism, where the twist of the democratic transition and the enlargement of China’s local soft power campaign coincided in the late 2000s.

The work identifies both geopolitically relevant and theoretically significant trends. First, based on collected evidence, the dissertation provides the first detailed analysis on how China’s soft power is transmitted and received in Central and Eastern Europe in general, and in Hungary in particular. I show that as in other transitional regions, China fascinates and lures in Central and Eastern Europe with its financial investments, foreign policy ideal of ‘non-interference’ with other countries’ affairs, its market authoritarian politico-economic model, as well as a wide range of cultural activities. A crucial question is how the local political actors relate to all these components. In Hungary the more a political actor opposes the United States and the European Union (and the liberalism and neoliberalism they globally advocate), the greater admiration for China will he or she show.

Second, through comparing and contrasting how Chinese soft power has been received by the different political actors in the Hungarian case, the dissertation also offers a conceptual framework for the analysis of the reception of Chinese soft power in other transitional contexts. I differentiate between pragmatic vs. ideological appropriators of Chinese soft power. Pragmatic recipients of Chinese soft power are lured exclusively by the economic capital of the PRC. In contrast, ideological recipients of Chinese soft power attracted by the authoritarian character of the Chinese regime and its foreign policy of non-interference as well. The dissertation introduces the new conceptual term of appropriated soft power to indicate that the latter group participates in the transmission of Chinese soft power actively, legitimizing this way its own domestic agenda. In the Hungarian case ideological appropriators of Chinese soft power were keen not only to obtain but also to deliver Chinese soft power. For this purpose these political actors even invented a local, added source of soft power, the Asian origin of the ancient Hun Hungarians.

Third, the dissertation highlights the particular role that the national media play in the transmission of Chinese soft power in semi-democracies which feature high level of political parallelism. I critically explore the portrayal of China by five, in terms of status and/or political leaning distinct Hungarian media outlets between 2008 and 2012. The quantitative content analysis provides descriptive data for 4402 articles. The critical discourse analysis of 353 opinion pieces and feature articles identifies the key references, argumentation schemes, metaphors and frames that emerged in the Hungarian media texts in the context of China. The work claims that in case the elites pursue conflicting agendas on foreign entities and events, political parallelism between the national parties and the media will contribute to the dichotomization of the press discourse on the same entities and events.

Tied to the organizational links between the parties and the media, domestic outlets may take the role either of projectors or jammers/blockers of soft power, pursuing or resisting the delivery of Chinese soft power from the parties to the public. This way domestic media influence the actual implications of intentional soft power activities of foreign states – in our case China – in a fundamental way.