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IMPACTS OF SOFT POWER ON STATE SOVEREIGNTY¹

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Abstract

Soft power has been used widely as a foreign policy tool, and the instruments used have gradually changed and adapted over time to reflect the evolving priorities of nation-states and their populations, as well as increasing global interconnectivity and use of technology. This paper examines the impacts of the use of soft power on state sovereignty, specifically in the Asian region, using Thailand and Indonesia as case studies. Various instruments of soft power and their use are examined, including ‘mask diplomacy’ during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the international spread of foreign-sponsored education programs. Although soft power is an effective means for international engagement and relationship development, this paper finds that an over-welcome of soft power invites foreign influence that can pose a risk state sovereignty in the areas of authority and governance legitimacy, recognising the personal and political impacts of sovereignty in a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, education programs and institutes have been criticised in academic literature as a potential means for countries to advance political agendas overseas and exert influence on diasporas and local populations. Materials informing this paper include social media content, official state publications and traditional media articles. Social media content is a focus of analysis for this paper as it provides real-time feedback on local engagement with and opinions of soft power initiatives, indicating the corresponding effectiveness of these initiatives.

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Key words

Soft power; sovereignty; China; US.

Resumen

El soft power se ha utilizado ampliamente como herramienta de política exterior, y los instrumentos utilizados han cambiado y se han adaptado gradualmente a lo largo del tiempo para reflejar la evolución de las prioridades de los Estados-nación y sus poblaciones, así como la creciente interconectividad global y el uso de la tecnología. Este documento examina las repercusiones del uso del soft power en la soberanía de los Estados, concretamente en la región asiática, utilizando Tailandia e Indonesia como casos de estudio. Se examinan varios instrumentos de soft power su uso, como la “diplomacia de la máscara” durante la pandemia del COVID-19 y la difusión internacional de programas educativos patrocinados por el extranjero. Aunque el soft power es un medio eficaz para el compromiso internacional y el desarrollo de relaciones, este documento considera que un exceso de soft power invita a la influencia extranjera que puede suponer un riesgo para la soberanía del Estado en los ámbitos de la autoridad y la legitimidad de la gobernanza, reconociendo los impactos personales y políticos de la soberanía en un momento de crisis como la pandemia del COVID-19. Por ejemplo, los programas e institutos de educación han sido criticados en la literatura académica como un medio potencial para que los países promuevan agendas políticas en el extranjero y ejerzan influencia sobre las diásporas y las poblaciones locales. Los materiales que han servido de base a este documento incluyen el contenido de los medios sociales, las publicaciones oficiales del Estado y los artículos de los medios de comunicación tradicionales. El contenido de los medios sociales es un punto de análisis para este documento, ya que proporciona información en tiempo real sobre la participación local y las opiniones sobre las iniciativas de soft power, lo que indica la eficacia correspondiente de estas iniciativas.

Palabras clave

Soft power; soberanía; China; EE.UU.

Introduction

Soft power efforts by the US and China in the Asian region are compared as examples of differing approaches, particularly in light of the competitive US-China relationship, which has showed interest in expanding presence and influence in the Asian region. US-China competition extends across geostrategic, economic, military, cultural, scientific, and technological domains (Shambaugh, 2018). Both countries seek strategic gains and influence overseas and have similarly used education and medical programs as means to achieve this. For the purposes of this article, soft power is defined as an ability for states to influence outcomes through “attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Rothman, 2011). Aspects of sovereignty considered for this paper include authority and governance legitimacy (Warren, 2014). Thailand and Indonesia are used as examples in this paper because both are Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, and both have been recipients of Chinese and US soft power. Thailand is increasingly politically and economically aligned with China (Han, 2018), while Indonesia’s relationship with China has been more fraught, particularly due to conflicts in Indonesia’s Natuna Sea. China’s soft power efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, have gone some way to strengthening bilateral relations with Indonesia. Recent soft power efforts pose a security risk and threat to the sovereignty of receiving countries as these efforts serve to influence perceptions of China and the US in the minds of both the local populations and political leaders, enabling states to use soft power as a political tool to strengthen their bilateral positions and gain influence politically and economically. Analysis of social media users from Thailand and Indonesia will be used to provide insight into how health and education soft power efforts of China and the US are being perceived, the corresponding likely increase or decrease in foreign influence and the associated potential for negative impacts on state sovereignty in areas of perceived legitimacy of authority and governance.

Methodology

Analysis of social media engagement, traditional media, official state publications and academic articles have informed this article. Commentary on social media was used to understand and demonstrate local public perception of foreign soft power initiatives in Thailand and Indonesia. Research and analysis on social media were primarily

undertaken in Thai and Bahasa Indonesia in order to give confidence that the commentary was in fact generated by local users. All translations were done by machine. Research methodology primarily comprised first finding the names of Confucius Institutes and US-curriculum schools located in Thailand and Indonesia in the local language, such as *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin (PBM) Universitas Kristen Maranatha*, the Confucius Institute at Indonesia's Maranatha Christian University (Pemberitaan, 2017) and สถาบันขงจื้อแห่งจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย, the Confucius Institute of Thailand's Chulalongkorn University (Chulalongkorn University, 2018). The Institute and school names were then entered as key search terms into social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, noting that Facebook is the more popular social media platform of the two in both Thailand and Indonesia. Once found, the pages were manually analysed for level of engagement, comments on posts and reviews of the Institutes and schools left by local users between 2020 and 2021.

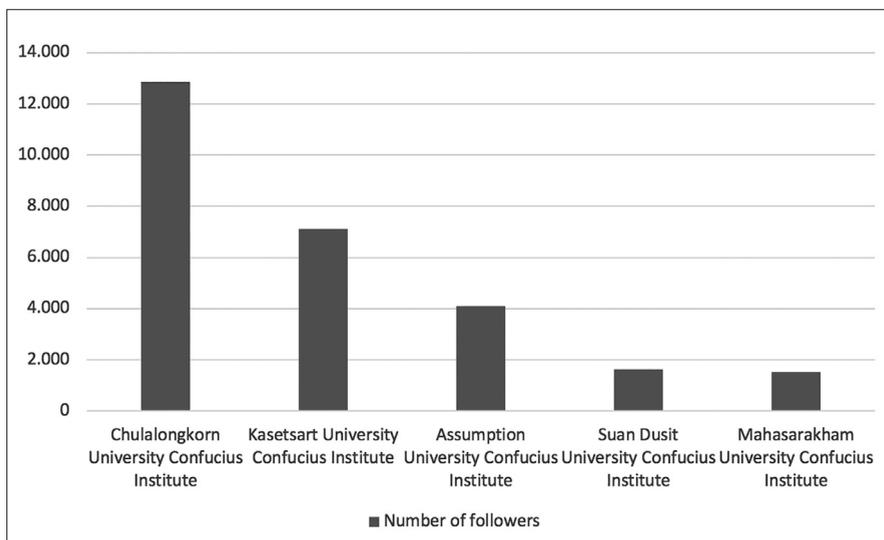
Reviews are made by users on Facebook with posts of ratings between one and five, where five is the highest and most positive. Where the nationality of the user was unclear, further analysis was taken of the user's profile, key indicators of nationality being the language in which they post on the platform, content of posts, and any self-identified location. Similarly, the Twitter pages of popular Thai and Indonesian traditional media outlets were found and key words such as "vaccine", "China" and "America" were used as search terms in both Thai and Bahasa Indonesia language searches. Comments by local users on Tweets regarding Chinese or US medical soft power efforts such as donations were analysed for positive, neutral and negative sentiment using machine translation.

Chinese education programs in Thailand

Education is a commonly used instrument of soft power. For example, France has made extensive use of this instrument via its Alliance Française institutions for teaching French language and culture, and the US implements overseas education programs of the government organisation USAID. Significantly, however, China's Confucius Institutes have been the subject of criticism for perceptions that the Institutes have been used by the Chinese government as a means to pursue influence overseas via disinformation campaigns and advancing Chinese Communist Party political agendas (Wang, 2019).

China's Confucius Institutes are state-run programs that are affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education and its "leaders are largely composed of Communist Party officials" (Ju Lan, 2017). The Institutes have spread across the world since 2004, promoting Chinese language and culture overseas by providing teaching resources and services (Hanban, 2014). University and government partnerships with Confucius Institutes also frequently extend to student exchange programs and promotion of Chinese culture via language competitions and training in Chinese medicine, as well as Chinese cultural practices such as opera, acrobatics, calligraphy, and Chinese dancing (Wang, 2019). The Institutes also expand beyond the university campus to provide language training throughout recipient countries, such as language education with major local television stations, for customs officials, at police headquarters and for airlines (Ju Lan, 2017). Confucius Institutes and Classrooms have proliferated in the Asian region, for example with 35 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in Thailand (Wang, 2019) and eight Institutes and Classrooms in Indonesia (Theo and Leung, 2018).

Social media users from Thailand provide an insight into how the local population views China's Confucius Institutes. Facebook is a particularly popular platform among Thai users (Norcross, 2017). Positive commentary was evidenced on the social media pages of all the Thai Confucius Institutes analysed. For example, at the time of collection, Chulalongkorn University Confucius Institute (Confucious.chula, 2021) had 12,881 followers and received an approximate average of 50 'likes' and 'hearts' on each of its posts between 2020 and 2021, which along with the Chiang Mai Confucius Institute (Confucius Institute, Chiang Mai University, 2021), was the highest amount of engagement of the Thai Institutes analysed. Kasetsart University Confucius Institute (ConfuciusKU, 2021) had 7,111 followers on its Facebook page and similarly received 'likes' and 'hearts' on its posts. Suan Dusit University Confucius Institute (Kongzisuphan, 2021) had 1,645 followers on its official Facebook page. Assumption University Confucius Institute (Confucius Institute, Mahasarakham University, 2021) had 4,104 followers. Mahasarakham University Confucius Institute (Confucius Institute, Mahasarakham University, 2021) had 1,535 followers on its Facebook page, though the page appears to be inactive, and has not published posts since 2019.

Figure 1***Facebook engagement with Thailand Confucius Institutes***

Notably, searches for Thai Confucius Institutes on Twitter did not return results similar to Facebook searches. Searches in Thai for Confucius Institutes at each of the above universities returned minimal results, consisting of few and sporadic posts from Twitter profiles of universities referring to Confucius Institutes or members of the public posting about Confucius Institute events, rather than Twitter profiles unique to each Institute, as they were on Facebook. Although the few tweets made about the Institutes on Twitter were of positive or neutral sentiment, announcing events or encouraging attendance, there was an overall lack of data available on Twitter.

Chinese language and cultural practices remain common in Thailand, where ethnic Chinese comprise 14% of the population (Draper and Selway, 2019). However, Draper and Selway (2019) note that Chinese ethnicity is omitted from the Thai census. This is possibly due to Thailand's aim for cultural homogeneity, expecting migrants to assimilate into the local culture, although a large proportion of ethnic Chinese in Thailand maintain Chinese customs and language. Cultural events such as the Spring and Mid-Autumn festivals are widely participated in by both Chinese-Thai and the Thai population more broadly (Wang, 2019). Six Chinese-language publications such as *Sing Sian Yer Pao Daily News* are currently circulated across Thailand (Siripanyathiti, Chirachosakol and Chatwechsiri, 2021), as well as radio and television stations and programs such as

China Radio International and *Thai Central Chinese Television*. Pro-Chinese and anti-US social media posts are also circulated in Thailand, including posts and videos that reach viewers in both Mandarin and Thai (Tang, 2021).

However, Wang (2019) notes that Thailand's young generation generally does not find Chinese contemporary or traditional culture as appealing as did their parents' and grandparents' generations. Although Chinese cultural practices continue in Thai-Chinese families, community events are reportedly increasingly poorly attended. There is possibly a disconnect between the teachers at Confucius Institutes and the local Thai and Thai-Chinese populations, as Institute teachers are often inexperienced educators and commonly arrive in Thailand directly from mainland China for one to three year periods, fostering a discontinuity and lack of familiarity with local culture (Wang, 2019, p. 108). However, the ongoing popularity of Chinese language studies and affiliation with Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in Thailand appears to have overcome these challenges, and the value of Chinese language education remains high across Thailand. Chinese state-controlled social media messaging via social media, Confucius Institutes and mass media also have enormous potential to influence the young generation of Thais and reach the Chinese diaspora in Thailand, which could gain political, social and economic capital for China in Thailand, negatively impact the sovereignty of Thailand, the perceived legitimacy and monopoly of national governance. Social media users clearly engage with the Institutes online, indicated by comments on and reactions to posts. The Confucius Institute Facebook pages have thousands of followers, showing that those controlling the Institutes and their social media are able to reach a wide audience, and have expanding potential for influence across their readership.

Countries such as Thailand and Indonesia which have multiple Confucius Institutes associated with local universities must not become complacent about security risks such as disinformation campaigns, advancing political agendas and risks to data security that are posed by the hosting of foreign education institutions (Tuttle, 2019, p. 7). China's aim to gain power and influence in the international order has been made clear by Chinese state-level publications, policy and academic analysis. The country has made concerted efforts in the soft power sphere to achieve overseas influence and, ultimately, acquiescence (Ju Lan, 2017). Countries with local Confucius Institutes would do well to scrutinise the activities of these Institutes, examining their online presence for disinformation campaigns and being vigilant for marked upswings in participation with the Institutes and their community activities.

Chinese education programs in Indonesia

Overall, the local perception in Indonesia toward Chinese soft power efforts in education is more muted across social media. While largely positive and neutral sentiment was found on social media by Indonesian users during period researched, commentary and engagement was generally in far smaller numbers, and extremely low on Twitter. Facebook is a particularly popular platform among Indonesian internet users (Jakarta Post, 2018), and engagement by Indonesian users on the platform was largely limited to ‘reactions’ on posts rather than comments or reviews. The Surabaya State University Confucius Institute Facebook page had 1,022 followers, but similarly to the Maranatha Christian University Confucius Institute page (ConfuciusInstituteUnesa, 2021) (known locally as Mardarin Language Centre, *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin*), users largely engaged via ‘likes’ rather than leaving reviews or comments that revealed more detailed sentiment and perceptions of the Institutes. The Pendidikan Confucius Institute (Pendidikan Bahasa Mandarin, 2021) had 1,559 followers on its Facebook page and received an average rating of five out of five, although the page had very low levels of engagement with its posts, engagement was positive, including “like” reactions to posts on the page. Overall, far fewer official Facebook pages were found for Indonesian Confucius Institutes than those based in Thailand. However, two large *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin* community groups were found on Facebook, with 12,200 (Belajar Bahasa Mandarin Pemula, 2021) and 8,000 (Belajar Bahasa Mandarin, 2021) members, respectively. Posts on these groups expressed strong positive sentiment regarding Mandarin classes of the Institutes, with comments such as “learning Mandarin is important!” and promoted Mandarin classes as well as job opportunities for Mandarin teachers and scholarship opportunities for locals to study in China.

Searches on Twitter for key words such as *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin* and *institut konfusius* during the period researched did not return dedicated pages for any of the above Institutes at Indonesian universities, and very few tweets have been made by the universities regarding Confucius Institutes (ukm_official, 2020). The sentiment of relevant tweets was positive or neutral, predominately extending only to announcing local events. Broad and encompassing searches for these key words revealed very few tweets, and most were made by Chinese state media (Institut Konfusius Indonesia, 2021), showing that at the time of research, there is a low level of engagement by the Indonesian population with Chinese education programs on Twitter. This indicates that Chinese education soft power efforts have not been as effective at gaining influence at

a local level, posing less of a risk to state sovereignty in the areas of governance and authority than the prevalence and higher levels of online engagement seen with Confucius Institutes in Thailand.

An analysis of Indonesian traditional media articles regarding Confucius Institutes in Indonesia reveals that generally the Institutes have little impact in the wider community. Articles published during the research period regarding the Institutes were predominately associated with local universities promoting language schools and multiculturalism. Searches were undertaken in Bahasa Indonesia for *Pusat Bahasa Mandarin*, which returned few results, which coupled with the low social media engagement, indicates that the Institutes have not had widespread impact in Indonesia. This view is further supported in English language media and academia, such as Theo and Leung (2018), who claim that despite best efforts of the local Confucius Institutes with community programs and scholarships, they have not overcome the long-standing social and political tensions between China and Indonesia.

Throughout academic and popular debate, Confucius Institutes have received negative attention over the period of their expansion across the world, being viewed as “a deliberate attempt to use Chinese language and culture to win the hearts and minds of other countries” (Theo R, Leung M.W.H, 2018). Confucius Institutes and similar education programs pose a threat to states’ sovereignty as soft power instruments in that they are a means for foreign powers to promote disinformation and propaganda and gain influence over local populations, politics and universities, for example, by requiring self-censorship by host universities in order to maintain relations and funding (Theo R, Leung M.W.H, 2018). China has attempted to use Confucius Institutes as a soft power instrument not only to promote Chinese interests abroad and as a form of cultural engagement and public diplomacy, but also as a means to undermine the existing international order, challenging sovereignty and habits of cooperation while seeking to gain a foothold in the competition with the US for influence in the region.

US education programs in Thailand

US education programs in Thailand include local schools that follow the US curriculum, US student exchange and scholarship programs, bilateral university partnerships, local events promoting US education and local English language training programs. Western, US-dominant culture is widely accepted and promoted in

Thailand via soft power initiatives, particularly in the education sector, an acceptance that is acknowledged by both Thai scholars and the US embassy in Thailand (US Embassy, 2018). The US curriculum schools in Thailand promote US culture such as Valentine's Day and events to watch the US elections. However, only six US curriculum schools operate in Thailand, compared to the 35 Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the country (Good Schools Guide, 2021). Students from US curriculum schools often go on to study at university in the US, showing that the US's educational soft power efforts have been effective and US education is positively regarded by locals, enough to pursue it through to university, with all of the associated hardships and expense of studying internationally. Notably, US curriculum schools in Thailand are not solely focused on the promotion of US culture and language, compared to reports about content of Confucius Institute curriculums (Hanban, 2014). US schools' acceptance and teaching of multicultural traditional practices such as the Songkran Festival and Chinese New Year likely means that the schools pose less of a security risk to receiving countries than do Confucius Institutes. While US education programs are a form of soft power and are being used to promote national interests, the insistence of Confucius Institute programs to focus exclusively on adherence to and promotion of Chinese culture and language is a contrasting approach that could likely have a negative impact on state authority and perceived legitimacy of governance because of intention and potential to influence local populations, local culture, local education institutions such as universities, and politics toward conforming with or supporting Chinese national interests.

Social media users from Thailand provide an insight into how the local population views US educational soft power instruments such as schools and "American Corners" at local libraries and universities. The average review on the official Berkeley International School Facebook page (Berkeley Bangkok, 2021) was five out of five, along with comments such as "lovely teachers and students" and "it is an excellent school". The American School of Bangkok Green Valley received an average rating of five out of five from 12 reviewers on its Facebook page (2021). Comments on the school's page included "I'm glad and proud to study here" and "it's a great school". Mahidol University International Demonstration School had 13,205 "likes" on its Facebook page (Berkeley Bangkok, 2021), and while it did not have any recent reviews, posts on the page received almost exclusively positive reactions such as "likes" and "hearts", along with comments such as "MUIDS rocks". Chiang Mai Montessori International School received an average of five out of five on its official Facebook page (ChinaMaiMontessori, 2021) and

comments such as “it is a lovely school” and “in terms of school atmosphere, it is all perfect”. Comments and reactions on the Mahasarakham University American Corner Facebook page (Mahasarakham University American Corner, 2021) were generally positive, and the page had 6,564 followers. The Chiang Mai University American Corner Facebook page (AmericanCornerCMU, 2021), however, had markedly less followers at 765 and lower levels of engagement with its posts.

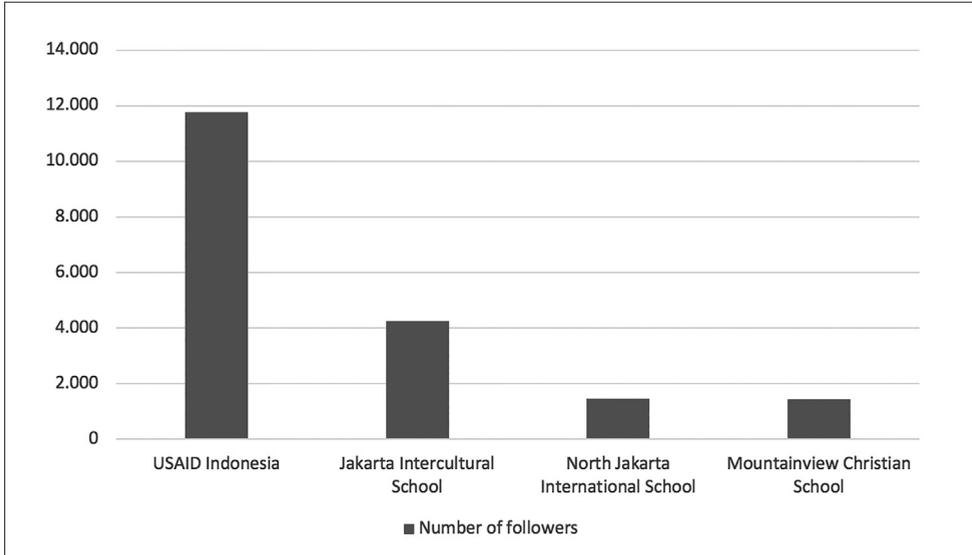
The widely positive perceptions of US education programs demonstrates that the US has effectively used soft power to foster relationships with Thailand, as well as influence over the education of its population. As the US is presented as a country with strong education and training opportunities, it pursues economic interests such as international students along with the fees and workforce they produce, as well as their possible assimilation into US culture, taking it back to Thailand or remaining in the US, working and contributing to the US economy. These aspects of US influence pose a risk to Thai state sovereignty as individuals are assimilated into US culture and economy, which at large scale could cause an impact upon the state’s governance and economic structures. Lack of engagement and use of Twitter by China for promoting soft power instruments such as Confucius Institutes is in marked contrast to the US’ use of social media for its Thailand education programs. US education programs also have overall higher levels of engagement by locals on Twitter, in both Thai and English (Eduplus13, 2021). The US has made robust use of social media platforms Twitter and Facebook to promote education as a soft power instrument and reach via social media cannot be underestimated as a means for countries to influence foreign populations and governance.

Additionally, although China has not made extensive use of Twitter to promote its educational soft power programs, the country’s official media channels, such as *China Daily* and overseas ambassadors have made concerted efforts to use social media platform Twitter to promote its medical soft power initiatives, such as PPE and vaccine donations. Social media has been used by numerous foreign governments, for example, Martin, Shapiro, and Nedashkovskaya (2019) point to 53 separate instances of foreign influence targeting 24 countries between 2013 to 2018. The vast majority of foreign influence efforts in their study were conducted by China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The authors further note that social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, can be used by state-operated accounts as well as private sector actors to influence politics, promote propaganda and spread disinformation, aiming to sway public opinion in the target country via support for various politicians or political movements and promotion of national interests (Martin, Shapiro, & Nedashkovskaya, 2019).

US education programs in Indonesia

There are eight US curriculum schools operating in Indonesia, on par with the number of Confucius Institutes (Education Destination Asia, 2021). There are also eight EducationUSA centres in Indonesia with advisers providing services to equip Indonesian to study in the US (US Embassy, 2018). US education soft power instruments are similar in Indonesia as with Thailand, including English language training, the US-Indonesia Partnership Program, and US government funding for higher education in Indonesia via the Fulbright program and USAID. Social media users from Indonesia provide an insight into how the local population views US educational soft power instruments such as US-curriculum schools. For example, the US-curriculum North Jakarta International School (NJISJakarta, 2021) was rated an average of five out of five on its Facebook page and had 1,467 followers at the time of research. The Mountainview Christian School (MountainviewCS, 2021) was consistently rated as five out of five and had 1,438 followers on its Facebook page. Engagement with the page primarily comprised 'likes' and 'heart' reactions. The Jakarta Intercultural School (JakartaInterculturalSchool, 2021) received numerous positive comments on its Facebook page, including for example, "The warmest, most welcoming community ever!" and "Great school, excellent teachers", and had 4,254 followers.

On Twitter, the USAID Indonesia page (usaidindonesia, 2021) had 11,785 followers, and although public engagement with the page is extremely low, often with zero or one "likes", a high number of followers indicates the messages of the page are being widely disseminated. Twitter results for EducationUSA Indonesia revealed overall positive sentiment from Indonesian and international Twitter users, with commentary such as "perks of being a @FulbrightID Alumnae", as well as "likes" on tweets made on the Education USA Indonesia Twitter page (EdUSAIndonesia, 2021). The Jakarta Intercultural School received broadly positive commentary from both Indonesian and international Twitter users (Twitter, 2021b). Overall, commentary from Indonesian users on social media platforms Facebook and Twitter regarding US education programs in Indonesia was positive during the research period. Most social media pages of US-curriculum schools had robust numbers of followers, ensuring that the messaging on the pages reaches a wide audience. Generally, there was little commentary from the public on the pages of US-curriculum schools and education programs, but engagement with posts and tweets by the pages showed positive sentiment regarding the quality of education and extra-curricular activities offered by the US.

Figure 2*Indonesian Facebook and Twitter engagement*

Notably, US education programs on social media attracted commentary and engagement from users originating from varied countries and was not limited to Indonesians. Engagement with Chinese education programs analysed for this paper tended to be more limited to Indonesian users. Online engagement with US education programs by Indonesian social media users was generally much higher than the levels of engagement with Chinese Confucius Institutes on the same social media platforms, indicating that US education soft power efforts on social media have reached a wide audience. However, analysis of social media posts and content on official websites of US-curriculum schools in Indonesia and Thailand showed that it was unlikely the schools, and the US soft power efforts associated with these programs, posed a high threat to the sovereignty of receiving countries. Commentary in traditional media and academia has not associated US overseas education programs with restrictions on academic freedom, influence on local politics, nor disinformation campaigns that have in contrast, been widely associated with Confucius Institutes.

Mask diplomacy – China and the US

Ample opportunities for the use of soft power have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries have used various donations as instruments of soft power during this time, such as personal protective equipment (PPE) including masks and gloves, test kits, medical training, medical equipment such as ventilators, and vaccines. While China has actively engaged with PPE and vaccine soft power during the pandemic, using the situation to secure greater influence abroad, the US has donated PPE and vaccines, but overall has been more internally-focussed on caring for and vaccinating its own population rather than building bilateral relationships.

Early in the pandemic, China donated PPE to countries around the world, including North America, Europe, Africa and, notably for this paper, in many developing Asian countries. The donations were highlighted across Chinese state media and social media (Chen, 2020). Consistently, officials of receiving countries made public expressions of gratitude for China's donations via embassy websites and social media. In 2021, China also embraced vaccine diplomacy as an instrument of soft power. Taking Thailand and Indonesia as examples again, China donated 500 000 vaccine doses to Thailand in May 2021 as well as 4.5 million doses of Sinovac in February (China International Development Cooperation Agency, 2021). Indonesia was the first country besides China to approve Sinovac for emergency use, and Indonesia's President Joko Widodo was the first Indonesian and first non-Chinese leader to receive a Sinovac vaccination in January 2021. Sinovac also cooperates with Indonesia's state-owned PT Bio Farma for the production of vaccines. Indonesian leadership has commenced diversifying its vaccine suppliers to Pfizer, AstraZeneca, GAVI-COVAX and Novavax and is undertaking development of a homegrown vaccine, likely a response to recognising the risks associated with over-reliance on the Chinese vaccine (Yeremia & Raditio, 2021).

Noting that academia and traditional media has revealed that the Thai population distrusted the quality and effectiveness of the Sinovac and negatively regarded the Thai government's perceived over-reliance on it (Wong, 2021), social media commentary from Thai and Indonesian users were analysed to indicate how well China's medical soft power efforts are being received. To analyse perspectives of local populations, comments from Thai and Indonesian social media users were manually collected from posts made by the Twitter pages of major Thai and Indonesian media outlets. Comments on posts of the following local outlets were analysed: *Thai Rath* and *Thai News Agency Online* (สำนักข่าวไทย) for Thailand, and *Kompas* and *Antara News* for Indonesia.

Comments on tweets by media outlet *Thai Rath* (Thairath_News, 2021) revealed mixed positive and negative commentary regarding Chinese vaccines, purchases and donations, with comments such as “Dear Chinese Ambassador...the vaccine is very good” to comments expressing doubt as to the quality and effectiveness of the Chinese vaccines. Comments on tweets by *Thai News Agency Online* (TNAMCOT, 2021) revealed similarly mixed positive and negative sentiment from Thai users, with comments such as “Thank you very much China. We are waiting for injection” and “The bad vaccine that you don’t want to use is sent to Thailand.” Comments on Tweets by Indonesian media outlet *Kompas* (2021) similarly revealed mixed positive and negative sentiment from local users. Negative commentary particularly regarded reliance on Chinese-produced vaccines rather than establishing local production, while other users voiced preference for access to vaccines, regardless of their origin. Comments on Tweets by *Antara News* from local users (Antaranews, 2021) trended more negatively, generally regarding China negatively for its actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than commentary specifically focussed on Chinese soft power efforts such as vaccine and PPE sales and donations.

China’s sales and donations of PPE and vaccines have been a concerted effort to change the narrative from negative views associating China with the origin of the COVID-19 virus, to perceptions of China as a strong bilateral partner and scientific powerhouse (Baldwin & Evenett, 2020, p. 42). China’s donations almost certainly also come with strings attached. The donations are not only a means to gain influence overseas and enhance bilateral relationships, but China is also likely donating vaccinations and PPE in exchange for concessions from receiving countries on contentious issues such as reducing international support for an independent probe into the origins of the virus or conflicts in the South China Sea. Medical aid as an instrument of soft power could also be to garner local support for China infrastructure projects (Chen, 2020), such as the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway Project, that have previously received negative commentary for environmental damage and biased hiring practices that contribute to ongoing local unemployment.

Notably, China’s vaccines and PPE equipment have received widespread criticism for being faulty or of poor quality. China responded by imposing quality checks on PPE such as masks, goggles and gloves. However, using medical donations as a soft power instrument is less effective when the donations are faulty because it causes the donations and the donator to be perceived negatively, damaging China’s international reputation rather than enhancing it (Baldwin & Evenett, 2020, p. 42). Further, in the second half

of 2021, countries that previously relied heavily on China's vaccines when they could not secure doses from Western producers began to introduce Western vaccines into their rollouts, claiming that the Chinese vaccines are less effective and likely seeking not to be entirely reliant on a single source of vaccines. A move away from reliance on China's sales and donations by countries in Asia opens opportunities for Western nations with supplies of vaccines such as Moderna, Pfizer and AstraZeneca to commence a concentrated soft power initiative with vaccine sales and donations (Wee & Myers, 2021). Additionally, countries in the Asian region would do well to focus on sovereign and domestic capabilities, wherein they are equipped to produce their own supply of vaccines and maintain supplies of health equipment, not risking relying on overseas vaccines, and avoiding risks associated with global supply chains that have proven to be fallible during the pandemic as countries look inward to protect their own populations and production and transport has been disrupted with lockdowns and associated effects on workforces.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has "invested more than USD\$65 million globally to support efforts to reduce COVID-19 transmission" such as improving testing and treatment, including access to ventilators. The US has "shared" 8 million vaccine doses with Indonesia. Additionally, the US has donated \$8.5 million USD in "COVID-related assistance" to Thailand, such as ventilators, respirators, surgical masks, goggles, and other protective equipment and COVID-19 research assistance. The United States has also "shared" 1.5 million, vaccine doses with Thailand (US Department of State, 2021).

Comments on Twitter pages for Thai and Indonesia media outlets *Thai Rath* (2021) and *Thai News Agency Online* (TNAMCOT, 2021) for Thailand, and *Kompas* (2021) and *Antara News* for Indonesia were analysed to provide data indicating population perceptions of US soft power efforts. Overall, comments regarding US medical soft power efforts were mixed positive and negative, similarly to mixed sentiment in comments regarding China's efforts during the pandemic, although generally engagement with tweets about US donations was very low, often with one or zero comments. Notably, negative commentary on tweets by Thai media outlets regarding US vaccines and donations appeared to be primarily directed at the Thai government, expressing displeasure at the government's vaccine rollout and handling of the pandemic, rather than voicing disapproval of the US or the quality of its vaccines. Analysis for this paper was also conducted across Thai and Indonesian online traditional media online articles using machine translations for key words and phrases in both Thai and Bahasa Indonesia.

Analysis revealed opinions that Chinese vaccines were of inferior quality and its faulty PPE donations were widespread across Thai and Indonesian traditional media, while the quality of vaccines produced in or donated by the US was not similarly contested.

Unlike China, the US has not focussed on “changing the narrative” of the pandemic, as it was not subject to scrutiny for the outbreak of the virus. Perhaps this is why the US’s soft power efforts in the pandemic have not extended as widely as have China’s, although the US made large-scale pledges of vaccine donations in the second half of 2021. While the US would recognise the potential benefits to be gained from bilateral support during the pandemic, it appeared to overall be less motivated to actively pursue soft power methods during the pandemic, particularly throughout 2020, not needing to repair any fraught relationships or a damaged international reputation (Baldwin & Evenett, 2020, p. 42). Moreover, the “America First” policy initiated by former President Donald Trump and continued in part by President Joe Biden, has reinforced a nationalist and somewhat isolationist approach by the US toward production and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines (Knudsen, 2021). Notably, however, under President Biden the US is now part of COVAX, the international initiative aimed at equalizing vaccine distribution around the world and has pledged 290 million doses to COVAX for 2021-2022 (GAVI, 2021).

Conclusion

This paper examines various types of soft power instruments wielded by China and the US in the Asian region, focussing on Thailand and Indonesia as case studies. It uses social media commentary to provide data showing the perceptions and opinions of populations in Thailand and Indonesia regarding foreign soft power initiatives, and found that engagement with US and Chinese education programs varied across Facebook and Twitter, and overall, US educational institutions have made greater use of social media to engage with local populations. Local commentary from both Thai and Indonesian social media users was predominately positive regarding education initiatives of both China and the US. Commentary from local users on both Facebook and Twitter was mixed positive and negative regarding medical soft power initiatives from China and the US, although claims about faulty PPE and less-effective vaccines were limited to commentary regarding China. Negative commentary on posts about US medical soft power such as vaccine donations notably appeared to focus on complaints about the

Thai government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and distribution of vaccines, rather than negative sentiment regarding the US specifically.

The paper also found that acceptance of soft power such as vaccine and PPE donations poses a risk to state sovereignty in the areas of foreign influence, governance legitimacy, economics and authority because of obligations tied to the donations, such as expectations of increased economic cooperation or support for previously disputed foreign investments and partnerships. As described in this paper, both the US and China have made extensive use of soft power, notably in the education and medical fields, seeking to enhance their international image and gain influence overseas. However, academic, news and social media commentary have all pointed to the higher security risk posed by China's soft power, notably with regard to vaccine efficacy, limits on academic freedom, advancement of Chinese political agendas and spread of disinformation. While furthering education and access to PPE and vaccines are valuable contributions, foreign influence is a sought-after commodity in the context of China-US competition in the Asian region, and receiving countries ought to remain vigilant about implicit and explicit expectations associated with such contributions, regardless of the source.

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