

Culture – The Core of Soft Power in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT:- In international relations, the power of a nation is combination of two components: hard power (such as military or economics) and soft power. There are three components of a nation's soft power, in which, culture is the one emphasized because of its great influence on creating national image and attraction. Besides, culture is also the factor that maintains that influence in a long term. In the process of building and developing country in Vietnam nowadays, building soft power is very important to enhance the position, make attractive power and create an favorable international environment to develop our country. To build and promote Vietnam's soft power, Vietnamese culture is one of the most important components, and an ambassador to bring Vietnam's image to the world.

Keywords - Soft power, culture, cultural soft power, national power.

I. INTRODUCTION

Soft power is a newborn concept, presented in the early 90s of the 20th century. Joseph Nye, the birth father of this, has identified three major factors contributing to the soft power of a nation: culture, values and nation policies. Among these, culture is significantly highlighted for its efficiency and enduring impact. In Vietnam, despite being introduced and studied only recently, the soft power of culture has undeniably been used by our ancestors as one of the essentials in forming and protecting the country in relationships with other strongly ambitious neighboring countries throughout history.

II. HEADINGS

1. The ideology of soft power

The definition of soft power has just been introduced recently, but the perception of a non-military and non-economic power and the use of it for the effectual and evolving goal has been acknowledged and attended to by many nations. For instance, it has been emphasized in the hegemony theory of Gramsci that hegemony on a universal level does not necessarily equals domination of material or army force; or British scholar Edward Hallett Carr from the 30-40 decade of the 20th century has stressed that the role of perception power is as crucial as that of military and economy. In 1973, the term "soft power" had been made known by Klaus Knorr in his book "Power and Wealth: The Political Economy of International Power", though the whole official concept had not been introduced yet. It was not until 1990 that Professor Joseph Nye, the former Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, continued to research and develop systematically the aforementioned ideas into the "soft power" doctrine, of which he was regarded as the pioneer.

Joseph Nye first published the definition for the term "soft power" in 1990 in his book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power", in which he affirmed that soft power was the ability of using appeal and attraction, instead of coercion, to get the outcomes you want. This attraction can come from culture, political values or foreign policies.¹ The ideology was later developed into a thesis in 2004 included in the book "Soft power: The means to success in world politics". In his work, Nye made clear of the term "soft power" or "soft strength": "Power is the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants. But there are several ways to affect the behavior of others. You can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with

¹ J.S.Nye: Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power, Basic Books, New York, Reprint edition, 1991, p.154

payment; or you can attract and co – opt them to want what you want.”². All in all, using soft power equals attaining your desired outcomes without using force but affecting others value system, shaping their preference to make them want what you want. In 2006, Nye explained that the means to alter others behaviors rest on three resources: Coercion (the “stick”), Temptation (the “carrot”) and seduction (soft power)³.

Nye specified that for each country, the three pillars of soft power are national culture, national values and national policies. Among the three, culture is one fundamental and pervasive resource, which is a influential channel in broadening one nation impact on others as well. Likewise, political viewpoint of a country also make a significant part in building soft power. According to J. Nye, democracy and human rights are the key to American attraction, in other words, form the nation soft power. A country's foreign policy also makes it appealing to other countries given that it is based on a national value system that is considered reputable and ethical.

Culture is the indispensable source of soft power to all nations as its significance are naturally enticing and irresistible. The cultural differences and uniqueness derive curiosity from foreigners, thereby elicit interest and affection towards said culture. Furthermore, forming cultural attraction are no easy matter, but once created, it can be truly long-lasting. The definition of culture itself, perceived as its core, includes all human values that are created to serve the purpose of human life. That is why culture is listed in the three foundational facet of a country soft power.

Therefore, soft power basically means attraction, persuasion, influence and enticement of one country to another through non-coercive strategy in international relations. Cultural soft power is one important resource that proves a country’s appeal to others using cultural and moral values or ideology through many forms of cultural exchange, cultural foreign affair channels, education, movies, media, to name but a few.

Joseph Nye also presented three features of soft power. First and foremost, soft power is about the matter of interest, not constraint. Hard power are demonstrated through forcing other countries to comply with their will by means of military or economic intervention, whereas soft power are able to convince people to voluntarily follow and do by your will by spreading culture and value system. On that account, the influence soft power brings can hardly be estimated and measured.

The dissimilarity between the two types of power lies in the way actions are conducted (by force of by appeal) and the tangibility of resources. That being said, they both contribute to the same goal, which is the benefit of the country. The balanced combination between soft and hard power makes smart power, which form the synergy of that nation. They can be converted to each other in certain circumstances.

The second feature of soft power reflects the capability to propose and create international institutional system for a country. It is a new form of power, exhibiting the ability to other impact others in the world political system.

Thirdly, soft power is universally accepted. This acceptance can be about value system or institution. Upon being recognized, it would bring the country international legitimacy.

Soft power generally is the inner appeal of each country, which comes from the core values that humanity is aiming towards: because of people and for the sake of people. When the beauty of these values are noticed and outspread, it would establish the country’s standing internationally. Nye emphasized that the implementation of soft power does not mean playing a game with loser and winner; it could be a win-win situation owing to the fact that soft power enhances mutual understanding and interest among countries. In terms of international relations, soft power offer precedes hard power as all nations strive to create a hospitable image and give their counterparts advantages in order to consolidate their positions in front of the people and partnering leaders. As a result, they have more long-term competitive upperhand with less cost. In some small, less populated countries with high level of development in democratic political institution, economy, science and technology, education and training, natural environment, etc., their synergy depends primarily on soft power.

2. Vietnamese culture is the heart of Vietnamese soft power

Culture is man-made, and is formed and developed along the enhancement of human society. However, upon its formation, culture has taken over and dominate the existence and development of a community's identity not only as a human product, but more importantly as one of the major factors of social advancement. Not only is culture the highest goal but also the positive impulse for that development.

In 1982, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has made a general statement about culture: “*in its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value*

² J S. Nye: Soft power: The Means to success in World Politics, Public Affairs, New York, 2004, p. 2

³ Joseph S. Nye (2006). Think Again: Soft Power <https://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power/>

*systems, traditions and beliefs; that it is culture that gives man the ability to reflect upon himself. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings, endowed with a critical judgement and a sense of moral commitment. It is through culture that we discern values and make choices. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks untiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations.*⁴

Substantially speaking, culture could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it is the combination of materialistic and spiritual values in human's life. Secondly, it is the representation of the existential method that only appears in human society. Culture could be in many forms, ranging from the elegant like language, writing, moral, law, science, religion to something more modest such as the way of wearing, eating or accommodation. That being the case, culture can become the strength and motivation stimulating human, the subject of both culture and the society, to better themselves. From this angle, culture plays the role of an crucial component to the development of society, and of each humanbeing to be specific. It is determined that culture is the "the spiritual foundation of society", the endogenous power of a country. In his theory about soft power, J. Nye considered culture as one of the three resources making up the attractiveness of each region, hence contributing to the its development in today's context where international integration is being broaden from day to day.

Vietnam is a country with a wealth of history and cultural traditions that lasted for thousands of years. During the historical development journey, Vietnamese feudal dynasties had soon be aware of forming and taking advantage of the country soft power (of course, this was before the wide use of the term "soft power" and its definition). Vietnam has always been facing and defeating invaders with military and economic potential (hard strength) that are many times greater. That is the embodiment of utilizing cultural soft power coming from Vietnam. It can be said that the origin of Vietnamese soft power is majorly from the cultural traditions of the country; from the spiritual values, ideology, constitution to the quintessence of national culture.

To begin with, Vietnam owns a culture that is a diverse in consistency, which not only forms Vietnamese great appeal to the outside world but also sets the foundation for the driving force to the country improvement in respect of economic development, social connection and national defense strengthening, especially in the curret situation of international integration and globalization.

Geographically, Vietnam is located in the transitional area between East Asia, South Asia and Australian. As a result, the natural diversity here is established vividly. In Vietnam, there are long coasts; there are high mountains and there are deltas; all in one place. All these different natural habitat leads to different living environment for each groups of people in Vietnam.

In terms of society, since the origins with the national name Van Lang - Au Lac, Vietnam has been a multi-ethnic country. Because there is a convergence of indigenous ethnic groups and ethnic groups down from the North, up from the South Islands, Vietnam has diversity in the culture. Moreover, many researchers also pointed out that Vietnamese, influenced of the two cultures of India and China, from the very early days not only knew how to absorb but also transformed cultural values from other cultures to suit the conditions of Vietnam Vietnamese culture, therefore, is a diverse culture from its original roots.

The diversity in the unity of Vietnamese culture not only makes attractive power but also promotes the endogenous development of our country, then help to create the union of ethnic groups in the process of national defense.

Secondly, in history of Vietnam, from very early, people prioritized the use of culture as one of the means to deal with powerful enemies. The Ly, Tran and Le dynasties of Vietnam all had to fight with the northern foreign invaders whose military and economic capabilities were much stronger, but they all maintained the independence of our nation. This result was achieved because these dynasties all recognized and applied the unity strength of the entire people. Not only that, after the victory, with a clear understanding of the national capacity, in order to avoid possible military conflicts, the feudal dynasties of Vietnam still had flexible behaviors in diplomatic activities, as providing food and way for defeated soldiers to return to their home countries. This is not the submission to the big country, but the suitable behavior, expressing the Vietnamese people's thought of humanity and piety. In the fifteenth century, Nguyen Trai – a famous poet of Vietnam, emphasized the thought: "Winning with great cause. Using human spirit instead of violence", only that way can "End the war". It can be said that these behaviors are an appropriate and effective way for our country to maintain sovereignty and independence while are beside a big country. That behavior is deeply rooted in the cultural identity of the Vietnamese people. In other words, it is an expression of Vietnam's cultural soft power.

The vital challenges that Vietnamese have to face in history have created our patriotism and resilience in front of all difficulties and hardships. Vietnamese's history of fighting for independence and freedom and the Vietnamese spirit of patriotism and indomitableness has made a good impression on foreigners. Besides, this history also sends a message that Vietnamese are peace-loving people, ready to close the past, to get rid of

⁴ UNESCO. *Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies. World Conference on Cultural Policies.* Mexico City, 26 July - 6 August 1982. https://culturalrights.net/descargas/drets_culturals401.pdf

hatred, moving towards a good relationships with old enemies. These traditional spiritual values attract foreigners, as Nye remarked in 2007 in an interview with Vietnamese press: Vietnam has the potential for soft power as we have a fascinating history of fighting for independence and an intriguing traditional culture.

Thirdly, Vietnam is one of the countries own many world cultural heritages in Asia. According to statistics, Vietnam currently has 23 tangible and intangible cultural heritages recognized by UNESCO as world cultural heritages. Physical cultural heritages such as: the complex of Hue Monuments, Hoi An ancient town, Thang Long Citadel, Ho Dynasty citadel, My Son Sanctuary. Intangible cultural heritages such as the Royal Refined Music of Hue; the space of Gong culture in Tay Nguyen; Quan Họ, Ca trù, Xoan Ghẹo ... In addition, Vietnam also has a lot of historical and cultural places and scenic spots from province, city to national level. These have contributed to the image of a Vietnam with a diverse, unique culture, and at the same time showed its connection with the world culture in common values. Each heritage is a testament to the image of a creative, unique Vietnam, an expression of integrating, opening and being ready for cultural exchange and acculturation with the world of Vietnam. It can be said that Vietnam's cultural heritages, both tangible and intangible, have played an important role in promoting the image of Vietnam where has a beautiful nature and long-lasting culture to the world. Then it will help to create Vietnam's attraction to the foreigners. The number of international tourists come to Vietnam constantly increasing over the years is a clear testament to that.

Fourthly, besides natural landscapes and unique cultural heritages, the Vietnam's rich and diverse culinary heritage also strongly attracts foreigners. Vietnam has had thousands of years of history, with 54 ethnic groups living together, so we soon had a diverse and rich culinary culture. Moreover, the diverse nature and terrain with hills, plains and long coastlines also create a unique cuisine, with its own flavor and color, beneficial for health of Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnamese cuisine reaches a balance and harmony of yin and yang, the flavors are harmoniously combined while retaining full natural flavor and nutrients. Vietnamese food in any region has a full range of elements in form, color, flavor, aroma, mostly made from vegetables, roots, fruits, seeds, aquatic and seafood, not too much meat, less grease than Chinese dishes, not spicy than Thai dishes.... Therefore, Vietnamese cuisine is close to nature and anyone can enjoy it. In addition to the richness of dishes, Vietnamese people have a very delicate way of enjoying them. This is also the heart, creates a unique feature and a special attraction of Vietnamese culinary culture. It is no exaggeration to say that: Vietnamese cuisine has all the elements, the nature, the goodness and the beauty. Perhaps because it is derived from wet rice agriculture, Vietnamese dishes are botanical, using rich spices and natural origin, thus, it achieve a balance of nutrition as well as a sense of appetite, easy to eat even for people from different cultures around the world. An international chef has affirmed that Vietnam can become the "kitchen" of the whole world when experiencing the unique culinary culture of Vietnam.

In a way, culture is a kind of soft power with no monopoly. Each country, whether strong or weak, has more or less cultural attraction such as cultural heritage, preeminent social and political regime and personality attraction of leaders ... so cultural soft power is not monopoly of a certain culture. The more countries expand their cultures outward, the greater its potential cultural soft power. With a majestic history in the past, fine traditional spiritual values, majestic natural landscapes, famous cultural heritages and unique culinary, Vietnamese culture plays a role in forming Vietnamese soft power. If Vietnam makes good use of these advantages, Vietnam can build its own cultural soft power. As a result, the country's aggregate strength has been enhanced, making an important contribution to the country's development in the current international integration context.

III. CONCLUSION

In the context of international integration, building and promoting the country's soft power is extremely important, not only in order to develop our position on the international stage but also to help economic development. Vietnam has a lot of cultural potential to be able to promote the country's soft power in order to enhance our national power. Based on the diverse and unique culture, rich heritages, both tangible and intangible heritages, Vietnam can devise a specific strategy to increase its strength based on its own culture, in order not only to enhance its image and position in the international arena, but also to cope with the encroachment and influence of foreign cultures that are affecting Vietnamese now.

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