Abstract: China relies on soft power for its economic and political expansion, and this strategy has proven effective in achieving the goals set by the Chinese administration. China-Arab relations have developed greatly in the past ten years, in parallel with the increase in the number of Arab students in China. This article examines the Chinese soft power strategy towards the Arab region through student exchange programs, and the role of students in the development of Sino-Arab relations. China achieves strategic goals through soft power. A survey was conducted on a group of Arab students in China, specifically in Wuhan, to learn more about the orientations of Arab students towards Chinese policies and to get a clearer idea of life and study in China. The article concludes with new concepts about life in China, and about the Chinese environment, which have proved to be attractive to Arab students.

Keywords: education, soft power, China, exchange programs, Arab region

Introduction

China has moved from the closed-door policy to openness and international cooperation due to the political and economic changes made by successive Chinese leaders, specifically the reform and opening up policy established by Deng Xiaoping in December 1978. The Arab region is a long-standing partner to the Chinese; this partnership has developed greatly with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. China pursues a policy of cultural communication and academic exchange with the Arabs, with the aim of peace between peoples and the promotion of Chinese ideas and culture (Sawahel, 2016). Although China possesses significant economic and military power, the Chinese administration focuses on soft power in its relations with international
partners. China hosts international events and invests huge sums in other countries in development projects, infrastructure, and providing aid to the peoples. In China, there is a significant number of international students within the framework of student exchange programs and bilateral agreements, with the aim of international cooperation and improving China’s global image (Shambaugh, 2010). Academic exchange is a viable strategy to spread Mandarin, the official Chinese dialect. In the past ten years, the number of Arabs fluent in Mandarin has increased significantly due to academic exchange programs and the development of the Sino-Arab relationship.

According to international indicators, China ranks high in science and soft power. Soft power has become a useful tool for the Chinese government in achieving its ambitions and strategic goals. For example, in China there were around 2,000 international students in 1978, and this number had increased by 2012 to about 328,330, so China intends to become an international destination for education similar to the United States and Britain (Jiangsu Education, 2013). Statistics show that China has become the third destination for international students, after the United States and Britain. The Chinese Ministry of Education plans to receive more international students in the coming years. This paper examines Chinese soft power in the Arab world through academic exchange. The Chinese government will attract more Arab students due to the increasing Chinese demand for oil and its desire to open up to the Arab market. China offers a new paradigm for Arab countries based on soft power and peaceful communication, unlike some Western countries that have launched military campaigns in the Middle East and have used force repeatedly. So, will China succeed in achieving its interests through academic exchanges with the Arabs?

Chinese soft power has become an attractive topic for researchers and policy makers in the last decade, due to the tremendous successes achieved by the Chinese administration without launching wars. A large part of the doctrine of the Chinese administration derives from Confucian ideas, and therefore the ancient Chinese philosophy is still effective today at the highest levels of Chinese decision-making. For Confucius, a successful ruler is one who wins the minds, hearts, and feelings of his citizens with virtue and love, not by force (Wang, 2006). Chinese official rhetoric focuses on non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs, mutual respect, and win-win situations; these ideas are attractive to the peoples of the “Third World” because they have suffered from wars and colonialism. Some critics indicate that China does not follow soft power in absolute terms, considering that the economy is a tool of hard power.

China claims that its foreign policy is based on the foundations of soft power. China turned into an international partner through its membership in the United
Nations on October 25, 1971, in addition to receiving great Western support, specifically from the United States, to get out of isolation. The visit of Kissinger and Nixon had a great significance for great Chinese openness. In the 1990s, the Chinese strategy focused on good neighborliness. Consequently, China’s relations with neighboring countries improved, which had a large economic impact (Naughton, 2010: 437–460). The modern Chinese strategy is based on the concept of “hiding our capabilities and biding our time while making some achievements.” The Chinese president often stresses in his speeches the concept of “a common destiny.” No traditional power has ever put this concept openly and included it among its strategic goals. During his speech to the United Nations General Assembly, the Chinese president spoke of “Taking joint efforts to forge new partnerships of win-win cooperation and building a community of common destiny.” The Chinese administration has also put forward the concept of “five-in-one”, that is, concerted international efforts with regard to security, environment, economy, politics, and culture, for the sake of the good of mankind (Ladjevac, 2019).

The Chinese administration prefers “Peaceful Development” to “Peaceful Rise”. China still considers itself neither a traditional nor colonial power, and that it aspires to forge friendly relations with everyone. China has the widest diplomatic representation in the world; Chinese diplomacy is an essential component of soft power. The low-profile (taoguang yanghui) approach is also at the heart of China’s soft power. China deals with everyone despite fundamental political or ideological difference with some countries. The United States, for example, has used harsh tools such as sanctions against countries and had organizations placed on its blacklist, while China does not care whether the other country’s regime is communist or socialist or not, or if it has feelings of affection towards the current Chinese regime or always criticizes it. For China, economic gain is the priority and this is an important factor for Chinese success. For example, the trade war waged by former US President Donald Trump has negatively affected both the Chinese and US economies; in order for the US to achieve gains in the future, it must adopt the concept of “competition” rather than “conflict.” The great economic achievements that China has made will not be destroyed by a trade war (Goodman, 2017). China has experienced the wars of the great powers on its soil and suffered from a dark past, as Japan previously controlled Shandong, Manchuria, and Inner Mongolia (Japan was then an economic and military superpower), as well as the opium wars and others; so it seems that China does not wish to treat other people in the same hideous way it was treated in the past.

In the last decade, the Arab region has become strategically important to China due to the increasing need for natural resources, the large Arab market, and the strategic geographic location. Perhaps China’s ultimate goal, “pivot to the West,” is through the Sino-Arab rapprochement in the framework of soft power. The
Arab region was never an obstacle to Chinese openness, nor did hostilities arise in the past. Sino-Arab relations go back to the Silk Road, that is, more than 2,000 years. China aspires to enter the West without hindrance or violence, so soft power is the preferred medium for the Chinese. China relies heavily on soft power towards the Arabs, for example, in the introduction to China’s Arab Policy Paper; the Chinese adopted the expression “friendship between China and Arab States dates back to ancient times. Over two thousand years ago, land and maritime Silk Roads already linked the Chinese and Arab nations.” It is a smart strategy to indicate the depth of the Sino-Arab relationship and the deep-rooted friendship between the two peoples (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2016). The values that China adopts in dealing with states are the tools with which its soft power is built. China is distinguished in its dealings with the Arabs in not presenting the same Western model. It considers the Arabs a long-standing partner, and this partnership, whose importance increases with time, cannot be abandoned. China adopts a flattering language that appeals to the feelings of the Arabs, not their minds. It was stated in the policy paper that the Arab civilization is no less important than the Chinese civilization, and that the Arabs can realize the “dream” of renaissance as happened in the Chinese experience. The policy paper states that China has previously supported the liberation movements in Algeria and Palestine (Almit, 2010). It is an implicit way of indicating that China has never abandoned the Arabs.

In its foreign relations, China follows the foundations of the soft power that Joseph Nye established: “achieving strategic goals through diplomacy and peaceful cooperation” (Nye, 2005: 11). This study indicates the relevance of cultural exchange programs in promoting China-Arab relations. Arab students are future ambassadors of Chinese culture in Arab societies, and this has a positive impact on China’s image. The overwhelming majority of Arab students in China expressed their admiration for the Chinese model of development and thus will promote this model within their societies. In this study, soft power will be touched upon, as well as highlighting academic exchange as part of the soft power strategy. I will explain China’s policy towards the Arab region, by means of academic exchange programs and cooperation between Chinese and Arab educational institutions. I did a survey of some of the Arab students in China (Wuhan) where I study, in order to get an idea about the impressions of Arab youth on Chinese culture and politics. Most of the students had positive thoughts about China, which indicates that the Chinese soft power is effective in achieving the set goals. This paper expresses the thoughts and feelings of Arab students in China, and their aspirations for Sino-Arab relations. Finally, opportunities and challenges for China will be touched upon, and Arab students will be mentioned as a positive contributor to China’s policies.
Soft Power Strategy

For Joseph Nye, soft power is based on culture, political values, and foreign policies; the Chinese administration has become adept at merging these three elements in an attractive way in order to achieve its goals through soft power (Nye, 2005: 11). China welcomes international partners, but it does not impose partnerships. As for the United States and some Western powers, they impose economic sanctions and establish wars in the event of political incompatibility or intellectual and economic contradictions, for example, Cuba and Iran. This does not mean that the United States does not follow soft power. The United States presented a unique model by using soft and hard power to achieve its goals, unlike China, which has not yet used force. The United States is a superpower and has many military bases in most regions. Therefore, it controls international security, unlike China, which has become an international economic power. The United States focused heavily on soft power during the Cold War with the Soviet Union, through student exchange programs that aim to learn more about enemy society, and this case may apply today to the Sino-American model (Li, 2018).

The United States and China have become the focus of international politics. The United States has the largest economy and a powerful military, and China has the second largest economy in addition to a huge population and a strong military. However, China’s soft power strategy may not be completely compatible with the soft power of the United States. The great Chinese influence on the world worries the US administration. China’s reliance on soft power in its openness made it difficult to limit this expansion. The former US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick called on China in 2005 to have a greater role in international relations. This is a direct recognition by the United States of the new political reality imposed by Chinese soft power (Christensen, 2006: 95). China has wide economic relations and most countries have involvements with it. Therefore, the Chinese soft power model has a great influence that cannot be overlooked, unlike the United States, which has some hostilities that prevent the achievement of soft power goals everywhere. Some US actions, such as the war on terror, have weakened the influence of soft power in the Middle East and other regions (Katzenstein and Keohane, 2007: 9-38).

Chinese soft power is a way to curb US hegemony; as China has become, for example, a key actor in Africa and Central Asia, so it has become difficult for the United States to monopolize the whole world. China’s development strategy, such as building advanced infrastructure, serves its soft power strategy. Despite the US claim that China represents a dictatorial regime, many countries have expressed their desire to cooperate with the Chinese regime, regardless of its shape. This approach indicates that the United States has, to some extent, failed to create a
state of international harmony and a system of common destiny. China has learned a lot from the experience of the United States, so it relies a lot on soft power. China’s cooperation with some poor peoples and the growing state of anti-Americanism have reflected positively on the success of Chinese soft power (Katzenstein and Keohane, 2007: 307–311). US soft power is not a failure, but Chinese soft power has proven more successful and able to attract the feelings of peoples and governments, unlike the US, which has not been able to wash its actions away through soft power. During the 17th Party Congress in 2007, former Chinese President Hu Jintao considered that China aims to achieve development through soft power and did not mention the United States: “better safeguard the people’s cultural rights, to enrich the cultural life of the [Chinese] society, and to raise the people’s aspiration for progress” (Jintao, 2015). The pattern followed by the United States in international politics is a positive factor for the success of Chinese soft power, and it indirectly serves Chinese strategic interests. The United States has a hand in the international media and influences many international organizations. Hence, the task of soft power is not easy for China.

Soft power has become an engine of Chinese politics, and many studies indicate that China will not develop and become an international power without making soft power the centerpiece of its foreign relations, because the Chinese model is totally different from the United States. Student exchange programs enhance the soft power of the host country. Most of those who studied in the United States now defend American values such as human rights and freedom of opinion and expression, even if they contradict the values in their homeland. Likewise, most of those studying in China are now in favor of the Chinese economic and political model and demand its implementation in their homeland. It is a natural consequence of being integrated into a different society (Atkinson, 2010: 19). Long studies programs make the student more involved in the host community. Some Arab students have become very involved in Chinese society, and some of them are pursuing their work in China.

From ancient times, the Middle Kingdom or China was a peaceful country and it used soft power in economic and cultural relations with other peoples through the Silk Road. The ancient Chinese built the Great Wall of China to prevent attacks (Yongnian, 2010: 112). The ancient Chinese considered wars useless, so their policy was largely based on soft power. The expeditions of the Chinese Admiral Zheng He aimed at peaceful openness and civilized communication, whilst the Western voyages of Christopher Columbus were accompanied by the persecution of the natives and the exploitation of wealth. The Chinese focus on these two historical cases that demonstrate the peaceful Chinese pattern of dealing with other peoples since ancient times (Callahan and Barabantseva, 2012: 6). Contemporary Chinese experience has proven that soft power is an
ideal strategy for achieving strategic goals and improving the country’s image on a global level (Liu, 2011: 24). In the 1990s, the idea of soft power gained popularity throughout Chinese diplomacy and academia. In 1993, Wang Huning, a member of the Chinese Communist Party, wrote an article on soft power and culture (Lai and Lu, 2012: 11). The Chinese political, cultural, and economic library contains a lot of writings on soft power, which means that this idea is at the core of Chinese politics.

Yu Xintian points out that soft power has become the basis of international relations in the 21st century, and it is not just a theory but has proven useful in international communication (Yu, 2008: 22). Chinese political scientist Yan Xuetong places great emphasis on Chinese soft power and Sino-US relations in light of this Chinese strategy, which may not be in line with the United States (Xuetong and Jin, 2008: 16). In mentioning the elements of Chinese soft power, Yu Keping emphasizes that education and student exchange programs are part of the Chinese strategy for people-to-people communication and strengthening China’s international standing. As for Li Jie, he considers that China mainly focuses on soft power, but that does not mean neglecting hard power. China has a strong army and military deployment in the South China Sea and other areas in the event of any aggression (Li, 2006: 164). The current Chinese policy relies on the Confucian teachings, which are mainly based on the principles of soft power, for example “peace and harmony.” Confucius Institutes located all over the world are considered a tool of Chinese soft power, spreading the official Chinese dialect and culture. Official Chinese reports indicate the growing demand to learn Mandarin, so China opens new institutions annually to accommodate large numbers of learners (Liu, 2011: 130), in addition to having cooperation agreements between Chinese and international universities.

The Belt and Road Initiative: An Example of Systematic Chinese Expansion

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is at the core of China’s grand strategy, may establish a new world order and bring about many radical changes. According to the Chinese vision, by the year 2050, China will be able to extend its influence significantly in all parts of the world. The BRI is a good example of the effectiveness of soft power in achieving the strategic goals of great powers without violence. The BRI is an essential part of China’s grand strategy of expansion and opening-up. China’s new policy in President Xi Jinping’s administration is based on this initiative. The expansion of China through BRI will reshape the Sino-American relationship, and thus the US presence in the Middle East will be unstable, especially in the oil-rich Gulf Cooperation Council countries. In recent times, Chinese-Arab relations have developed significantly at the expense of the Western presence. The Persian Gulf region is vital in Chinese foreign policy. The
Chinese regime is prioritizing Chinese-Arab relations in order to obtain the necessary quantities of oil and reach the Arab market.

This initiative is mainly based on economic expansion through partnerships with economic blocs and cooperation according to the theory of a common destiny promoted by the Chinese president (Xi Jinping, 2015b). The Five Principles of Coexistence developed by China and the theory of a common destiny are at the core of this initiative, and thus the Chinese administration has succeeded in achieving the goals set for this initiative through soft power. Therefore, the BRI is not only a Chinese economic project, but rather a comprehensive Chinese strategy aimed at peaceful and great Chinese progress in all fields (Salamah, 2020). China has achieved political partnerships with many countries in a short period of time. It was able to attract many countries through soft power. Previously, great powers were unable to achieve a large number of partnerships through wars and force.

“Nothing is for free” may be the headline of China’s foreign policy. Indeed, the BRI leads to economic growth in many countries and advanced infrastructure, but the Chinese administration is not a charity. The BRI, which builds on soft power, may be a vehicle for China’s entry into the international market. Many economists indicate that China needs to reap financial profits or benefit from other peoples’ natural resources. This initiative threatens the US economy, therefore the administration of US President Donald Trump sought to stop Chinese economic expansion and exerted pressure through the trade war. However, China did not diminish its ambitions and it became a major partner of European countries through the Belt and Road that reached the European continent. Peaceful Chinese influence increases through cooperation with regional organizations such as RCEP, ASEAN + 3, and BRI economic corridors, as well as financial organizations such as AIIB and Silk Road Fund and other organizations in which China has become a major partner.

Most of the member states aspire to development and financial gain. However, another theory indicates that real growth can only take place through economic and political change, and thus dictatorship is the opposite of development. Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund often place harsh political and economic conditions on other countries to bring about real reform and development. The Chinese policy is based on support, assistance, and partnerships with lenient economic conditions, which may negate the hypothesis of fundamental change in other countries.

The BRI is a huge project as it integrates the economies of countries from different continents through land and sea routes according to a unified strategy. This initiative places China at the heart of the international economy and turns it into an international economic hub. The idea of reviving the Silk Road has always been present in Chinese political thought. In 2013, the BRI was officially announced,
and it is a new phase of Chinese expansion, cooperation, and openness to the world as a whole. China follows a policy of good-neighborliness, people-to-people exchanges, and civilizational communication (Jintao Hu, 2006). This fits the policy of common destiny, soft power, and peaceful cooperation within the framework of the BRI. Among the Belt and Road projects are student exchange programs, which as cultural exchanges enhance China’s status with other societies.

The Chinese administration has introduced many values and humanitarian and cooperative programs to the BRI to ensure the achievement of set goals. However, it has not addressed cultural, social, religious, political, or economic differences. Rather, it focused on “harmony”, which is a Chinese soft power tool. China has become a country that has a high status among people in the Arab region and elsewhere. China could become a great power through cooperation, openness, and humanitarian projects. Thus in the 21st century, soft power appears to be the key to economic exchanges, political communication, and popular openness. Some scholars propose the idea of a new international order led by the East, and thus China, will achieve the dream of the “Middle Kingdom” and restore its past glories as a strong country that possesses a strong economy and political decision (Garner, 2014). The BRI may establish a new system for national economic interests based on international cooperation and security, with peaceful cultural communication between countries while respecting differences (Xi Jinping, 2015a).

Chinese Soft Power and the Arab Region

Chinese academics have paid attention to the term “soft power,” and Chinese diplomacy has embraced this idea and pursued it in foreign relations. Soft power is appropriate for Chinese multicultural and multinational society, and it is clear that the great Chinese openness and economic and cultural expansion has been supported by a soft power strategy (Qingguo, 2010: 30). Although China and the United States follow soft power, the strategy and goals differ radically. In the Arab region, for example, the United States has rarely followed soft power. US-Arab history is full of conflicts and wars. As for China, it has never interfered in Arab internal affairs or imposed any political conditions, unlike the United States, which has made many direct and indirect interventions. For Chinese officials, failure to respect the national and political sovereignty of other countries will only bring failure (Kurlantzick, 2007: 49). The United States establishes strategic partnerships with specific countries with similar political trends and a strong economy, while China establishes partnerships with all countries regardless of their geographical size or population according to mutual respect (Kurlantzick, 2007: 58).

The United States has turned into a symbol of Western democracy, unlike China, which is still accused of following a dictatorial regime and does not allow
freedoms and human rights. However, Chinese officials have indicated more than once that there is no intention to spread the Chinese political ideology in other countries, nor to interfere in their internal affairs, which indicates that China is carrying out the peaceful rise with sharp intelligence. China uses soft power to strengthen its partnerships and improve its image with allies and friends. However, Western media still dominate most regions of the world, for example, social media, Hollywood films, and Western TV stations broadcasting anti-China news. In the Arab region, Western influence remains significant through the media. Media campaigns such as on the issue of Xinjiang lead to negative sentiments among some Arabs towards China (Ma, 2005: 53-58). China has presented a political and economic model to be emulated by Arab countries, and it has been able to advance and develop economically without violence. Most Arab countries want peace and economic progress through soft power, so partnership with China may fulfill the aspirations of the Arabs. Moreover, both the Arabs and the Chinese have suffered for long periods from Western attacks and unjust policies (Alterman, 2009: 72).

The Chinese experience of success through soft power has become an attractive case for Arab regimes and peoples. China is not yet the ideal country, as its system still needs a lot of political and economic reforms, but it has had many great achievements. The general impression of the Arab peoples is that China is an industrialized and peaceful country, while the US possesses a strong army and many military bases. The China-Arab economic partnership promotes bilateral relations and enhances China’s position in the Arab region. Some Arab economists point out that the trend of Arab merchants importing cheap Chinese goods of low quality has hurt China and tarnished its image in the Arab region. The development of relations between China and the Arab region has led to the granting of more Chinese scholarships for Arab students (Rakhmat, 2014). Student exchange programs between China and the Arabs have positive effects, such as the enhancement of Sino-Arab relations and China’s easier access to energy sources and to Arab markets. In 2013, China became the largest importer of oil, which led the Chinese administration to launch the BRI and give more attention to student exchange programs (US Energy Information Administration, 2014).

The United States controls the strategic sea lanes and has military bases in most of the oil regions, including the GCC region. The BRI, based on soft power and Chinese economic expansion, may be effective in the face of US international military power (Downs, 2004: 21-41). Sino-Arab trade is constantly growing despite the unstable political and security conditions in the Arab region, which indicates the strength of the strategic partnership. China is the first trade partner of some Arab countries such as Egypt and Oman. The development of Sino-Arab relations may establish a political partnership that has crystallized in the Arabs’
ignoring propaganda against China in the Xinjiang region, and in return, China will always stand alongside Arab peoples and issues. China supports the Palestinian people and calls for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, the soft Chinese policy in the Arab region has succeeded. Some Arabs point out that China will replace the United States in the region, as so many Arab regimes have moved toward partnership with the Chinese (Ma, 2011: 16). Some reports also indicate that most Arabs prefer to partner with China over other countries.

Sino-Arab Academic Exchange

The Sino-Arab academic exchange is developing rapidly. China is spreading its official tongue through Confucius Institutes, the official institution of Mandarin and Chinese culture. Statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education show that the number of Arab students in China is constantly increasing. In 2012, their number exceeded 10,000, i.e., it increased by 70% from 2010 (Du, 2013). China Scholarship Council (CSC) offers scholarships to Arab students, and some Arab countries fund their students in China, such as Saudi Arabia. Mostly, the application to study in China is either through the Internet or embassies. In some cases, Arab universities or Confucius Institutes send Arab students to China. Many Arab students choose to study in China because of Chinese scholarships and the low cost compared to other countries. Regarding government grants, the Chinese government pays study fees and living expenses (China Scholarship Council, 2020). The number of Arab students who apply to Chinese universities is increasing. In the past, China was not an option for study, but in the past ten years, China has become the ideal choice for Arab students.

A Survey of Arab Students in Wuhan

In this survey conducted with Arab students in China, specifically Wuhan, I analyzed their attitude and feelings towards the Chinese model. Wuhan is an attractive city for international students and has a large number of Arab students. According to the latest census of the Chinese Ministry of Education (2018), there are 21,371 international students in Hubei Province (whose capital is Wuhan). Hubei Province is the eighth most important focus for international students in China (see Table 1).

Chinese official statistics indicate that 63,041 international students (12.81%) have received a scholarship from the Chinese government, and 429,144 (87.19%) were self-funded, thus China has turned into a preferred destination for study. For example, there are 20,996 US students in China. The number of international students in China is on the rise. In a comparison between 2018 and 2017, the number
of students increased by 16,579 or 6.86% and 12.28% for postgraduate-level, of which 25,618 enrolled as doctoral students and 59,444 in master’s degrees (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2019).

It was not difficult to conduct a survey in Wuhan because I live there for research purposes. The questionnaire was in English and the target group was from various Arab countries. The questions focus on studying in China, opinion about Chinese society before and after studying in China, and future aspirations. The study included 45 Arab students in Wuhan, 31 male and 14 female; nationalities are 9 Egyptians, 7 Algerians, 5 Yemenis, 4 Syrians, 2 Palestinians, 2 Iraqis, 4 Jordanians, 2 Saudis, 2 Moroccans, 4 Sudanese, 1 Lebanese, and 3 Tunisians. The survey population is consistent with the population of Arab students in Wuhan (see Table 2). It was not possible to reach students from some other Arab nationalities, such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the Sultanate of Oman. The student population may be zero for some Arab countries in Wuhan. I would like to point out that 96% of Arab students in Wuhan receive scholarships from the Chinese government. All Palestinian students in Wuhan, for example, receive a full scholarship, 93% of Yemeni students in Wuhan receive a full scholarship.

The goal was to find out how Arab students view the study and life in China, and the impact of Chinese soft power on students’ ideas about China through student exchange programs. Similar studies on international students in the Soviet Union, the United States, Germany, Britain, and other countries have shown that most international students tend to praise the host country and even adopt its social, cultural, and political ideas in some cases. Therefore, student exchange programs are a successful means of disseminating ideas and promoting the host country in other societies. International students have become cultural ambassadors of the host country in their homeland. Integration into Chinese society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province/City</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>80,786</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>61,400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jiangsu Province</td>
<td>45,778</td>
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<td>Zhejiang Province</td>
<td>38,190</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liaoning Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tianjin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guangdong Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hubei Province</td>
<td>21,371</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yunnan Province</td>
<td>19,311</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shandong Province</td>
<td>19,078</td>
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</tbody>
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generates feelings of spontaneous affiliation with China. The growing number of Arab students in China is a wise Chinese strategy to improve China’s image in the Arab region and correct understanding of the Xinjiang issue, and thus the Arab community will get to know more about China and integration will be greater.

In this study, the option of time period for students to reside in China was given as one semester, one academic year, two years, three years, four years, five years or more. Most students have spent two years, which is not a short period of time. Most of the students have answered that they wish to continue their studies and work in China, which indicates that the Chinese society is a suitable environment for Arab students. Most of the answers were positive toward the Chinese system and in favor of China’s policy towards their country. Wuhan is a beautiful, modern, and attractive city for international students, and the vast majority of students in this study receive money from the Chinese government, so these factors may also be important in making the Arab student prefer to stay in China after graduation. Most of the students showed their admiration for the peaceful and open Chinese policy and stated that the Chinese model differs greatly from the West. The ideas of Arab students toward China were similar regardless of the time each student spent.

Some Arab students are well off, because the scholarship they receive from the Chinese government is worth a lot in their countries due to the difference in exchange rates. These students were more in tune with Chinese ideas and supporters of China against the West. Some of the Egyptian students, for example, were in favor of the Chinese cultural model, but chose not to express an opinion regarding political issues. However, the vast majority of students considered China a friend of their homeland, and that China is a suitable place to study and live. Most
students preferred China over the United States or any European country, which means that Chinese soft power through student exchange programs has succeeded.

The majority of Arab students in China convey positive news through social media about studying and living in China, which has made many Arab youths think about studying in China. This may have encouraged the intense demand for Mandarin study in Arab societies. In the past, it was the dream of the Arab youth to go to study and live in the United States. Today, China has become the destination for Arab students. About 70% of the students surveyed are fluent in Mandarin. These students gave more positive answers, perhaps because they have experiences with the Chinese people and are more involved in Chinese society. Some of the students had negative thoughts about China but their view changed after they came to China. Some of the questions were answered openly, so students expressed their feelings towards China and the motives behind choosing China as a destination for their study and their future. Answers indicated that China is a good destination to work after completing study; others expressed their love and affection for Chinese culture.

This survey showed that the vast majority of Arab students in Wuhan have positive feelings about the Chinese lifestyle, culture and politics, although some preferred not to answer the politics related question. Student exchange programs have a positive impact. Some of the students were insufficiently aware of the nature of life in China but later their admiration for China increased. Twenty-seven students answered that they wanted to work and live in China after graduating. Thirty-five students fully supported the Chinese system because it brings security and stability and it pursues a wise policy. Thirty-nine students considered China to be a model for their country. Six students did not seem to like the Chinese culture because of some different traditions and great cultural and religious differences. The majority considered the Chinese people to be friendly and a great people. The study showed that Arab students from societies suffering from crises such as Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and Sudan expressed their desire to settle in China after completing their studies.

Nineteen students preferred to study in another country if they had the opportunity, while the vast majority said they preferred to live in China and expressed their admiration for the Chinese lifestyle. Thirty-eight students prefer China to be the world’s superpower, and all students answered that China is a friend of their country. Chinese experience and taking advantage of Chinese government services may make Arab students more receptive to Chinese politics and culture, which may sometimes be contrary to their beliefs. Student exchange programs are part of the Chinese soft power and a means of Arab-Chinese harmony. Adaptation to Chinese society and the good conditions provided by the Chinese government
make Arab students prefer the Chinese model over the Western. The survey indicates that education is not the most important motivation for many students. The new life in China, Chinese government services, and future opportunities are among the most important motives of Arab youth to study in China.

Conclusion

This study aims to highlight Chinese soft power. Student exchanges are emphasized as an essential component of this. Chinese soft power was analyzed in an international context. The researcher pointed out the difference between the US and Chinese soft power. The study indicated that China relies heavily on soft power towards the Arab region, and this strategy has shown success through peaceful Chinese expansion. China has learned a lot from the experiences of the United States and others, so it is pursuing an unconventional strategy in its dealings with international partners. Although the United States has followed soft power to some extent, it cannot be the same as the Chinese strategy; international circumstances have changed a lot from previous decades. This paper has focused on the pattern of Chinese soft power in general, as this model has proven its wide success.

Student exchange programs increase China’s soft power in the Arab region. The study indicates that most Arab students have good feelings for China. Knowledge of the official Chinese tongue may lead to a deeper understanding of Chinese society and culture and to achieving better results at the university, in addition to increasing opportunities for a promising career. The Chinese government strives for Arab students to be ambassadors of Chinese culture to their country. Improving the quality of education in China will turn it into an academic destination for Arabs; this would also enhance China’s soft power in the Arab region. Arab students in China contribute to enhancing Chinese soft power. China will not follow the Western model in its relations with the Arabs; rather it will adopt a different model based on positive communication and soft power, so student exchange programs are at the heart of China’s policy toward Arab countries.

References


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