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Climate change politics and the role of China: a window of opportunity to gain soft power?

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Abstract In China today, the idea of "soft power" has become important in various realms of society. We analyze the nexus between climate change and soft power with specific emphasis on China. First, we will discuss the concept of soft power, its role in the Chinese context, and the reasons why China has had difficulties to gain soft power up to now. Second, we lay out how international climate change politics are an important arena in which soft power can be won and how the issue has gained importance in China. In a third step, we discuss how the current political environment, in which the US government has changed its stance on climate change and international climate politics, impacts China. Our thesis is that the current political situation represents a "window of opportunity" for China to expand its soft power substantially both in degree and scope. In line with this thesis, so far, China has reacted swiftly after the election of US president Donald Trump and aims to present itself as the future climate leader.

Keywords China · Soft power · Climate change · International relations · Communication

With regards to climate change politics, the world has turned upside down in the last months. On December 12, 2015, the "Paris Agreement" was formulated at the 21st "Conference of the Parties" (COP21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in which the 195 participating countries agreed on a

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roadmap to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to replace the "Kyoto Protocol" (CarbonBrief 2015). Eighteen months later, however, in June 2017, newly elected president Donald Trump announced the US would pull out of the agreement (The Guardian 2016), drawing criticism from many heads of state, political parties and stakeholders around the globe (World Economic Forum 2017). At around the same time, Trump selected Scott Pruitt—a pronounced climate change denialist with connections to the fossil fuel industry—to lead the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Davenport and Lipton 2016), proposed significant funding cuts for climate change research (Grennfieldboyce 2017) and greenlighted an oil pipeline project previously stopped because of environmental concerns (Holland and Volcovici 2017). With these decisions, the Trump administration reversed course compared to its predecessor, and deviated from a position towards climate protection that had found widespread international consensus at the 2015 Paris summit.

Another international player positioned itself in a notably different way at the same time: China. After China had tried to position itself as an international leader in climate change politics in the run-up to Copenhagen climate change summit in 2009 with limited success (Conrad 2012), it renewed those efforts recently: When Chinese President Xi Jinping has visited other countries recently, environmental issues and climate protection were often on the agenda (e.g. Switzerland; The Federal Council 2017), and according to Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin, the country will continue its fight against climate change "whatever the circumstances" (Shankleman 2016). After Donald Trump's election, Chinese officials even reminded him that global warming is an existing, serious problem that needs to be dealt with in international cooperation (Phillips 2016).

China's more active role in climate change politics, and its increased activity and different approach to international relations in general, is in line with the country's goal to increase its *soft power*. The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye towards the end of the cold war (Nye 1990b), referring to "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye 2008, p. 94). Originally, the US during the cold war was the prime example of a country with soft power. Democratic values and the cultural industry of Hollywood, Japan or South Korea were seen as major resources of soft power with global appeal (Nye 2002; Ryoo 2009; Otmazgin 2007). Authoritarian countries such as China traditionally lacked these resources (Wang 2008). However, in 2005 Nye (2005b) pointed out the substantial gains China had made regarding soft power. Still, in the current debate whether China is successful with its public diplomacy efforts, many doubt that China has successfully gained soft power (e.g., Blanchard and Lu 2012; Heng 2010; Paradise 2009; Creemers 2015).

We analyze the nexus between climate change and soft power with specific emphasis on China. First, we will discuss the concept of soft power, its role in the Chinese context, and the reasons why China has had difficulties to gain soft power up to now. Second, we lay out how international climate change politics are an arena in which soft power can be won and how the issue has gained importance in China. In a third step, we discuss if the current political environment, in which the US government has changed its stance on climate change and international climate politics, provides a window of opportunity for China to assume a new role as a global leader in the fight against climate change and, thus, gain soft power.

Soft power and the case of China

The concept of "soft power"

International politics is the prime example of *Realpolitik*: National governments have strong preferences, and the primary goal of every government's foreign policy is to act according to those interests as long as these are also acceptable domestically. Especially authoritarian countries such as China—where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is the crucial driver of government—have to make their rise palatable to the world and win support for their policies (Hooghe 2010). There is a broad range of options available for a government to reach its goal in international politics. They can be divided into the general categories of hard and soft power, which mark the two ends of a continuous power spectrum (Nye 2005a). With regards to soft power, a country's image and its policies directed to the international arena are important, as we will discuss. However, when we talk about policies, the domestic arena is also always important, especially in the Chinese case, as the main goal of the CCP is the domestic legitimation of its political leadership (Conrad 2012).

The traditional tools of international politics are aptly described as *hard power*: Countries and international organizations often try to coerce other nations or international organizations to behave some way rather than another, either using force or money (Nye 2008). There exist many prominent examples in world history where countries used hard power to achieve their goals in international politics. Spain in the sixteenth century, for instance, mainly relied on mercenary armies and trade to become a leading nation in world politics (Nye 1990b). Nowadays, relying exclusively on hard power is difficult. Ney (1990a) argues that "the direct use of force for economic gain is generally too costly and dangerous for modern great powers. Even short of aggression, the translation of economic into military power resources may be very costly" (p. 157).

Hard power never was, and still is not the only force of international politics: In the early 1990s, political scientist Joseph Nye coined the term *soft power* (Nye 2008, 1990b) to emphasize that countries and, to a lesser degree, international organizations sometimes manage to persuade other international actors not by means of hard power, but by a form of virtue signalling. According to Nye, soft power is the ability "to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (2008, p. 94). Sometimes, countries want to cooperate with and follow another country not because they are forced to, but because some actions, practices, and characteristics of that particular country seem appealing. Nye (1990a) describes this in its ideal form as co-optive power, which "is the ability of a country to structure a situation so that other countries develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with its own" (p. 168).

While the concept received a lot of academic attention, the distinction between "hard" and "soft power" has been discussed at length. Both hard power and soft power "are aspects of the ability to achieve one's purposes by controlling the

behaviour of others" (Nye 1990b, p. 181) and form a continuum of power. Some resources, such as international payments, can be interpreted as "hard" or "soft power", depending on the context (Nye 2005a; e.g., Blanchard and Lu 2012; Heng 2010). Blanchard and Lu (2012), for example, propose to consider "nonconditional payments that involve considerable generosity or sacrifice" (p. 568) as means to gain soft power. Overall, grasping and measuring soft power and its dimensions has proven as challenging.[1] Nye (2008) himself identified three primary resources on which the soft power of a country rests: "its *culture* (in places where it is attractive to others), its *political values* (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its *foreign policies* (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)" (p. 96). Soft power, in contrast to hard power, is intangible. The "attractiveness of … [its] components is partly in the eye of the beholder" (Blanchard and Lu 2012, p. 569) and "there is always danger of bias in evaluating cultural sources of power" (Nye 1990a). While the possible source of "soft power" is often clear, defining the target, a country or international organization, of "soft power" is difficult. With hard power the target is clear because the resources of hard power are tangible and traceable.

The measurements employed to operationalize these dimensions differ. To measure the cultural facet of soft power, for example, scholars have turned towards the number of people in other countries studying the respective country's culture or language (Ding and Saunders 2006), towards the size of international audiences for its media outlets (Blanchard and Lu 2012) or the success of cultural institutions such as the Chinese "Confucius Institutes" in other countries (Gill and Huang 2006). Soft power in terms of political values has been interpreted, for example, as the existence of a market-based economy (Gill and Huang 2006) and, most importantly, as a country's adherence to human rights (cf. Thomas 2001; Ding 2012). And regarding foreign policy, soft power has been evaluated and empirically operationalized by scholars as the membership in international organizations (Gill and Huang 2006), the involvement in international disputes (Gill and Huang 2006) or the participation in international peacekeeping missions (Wu and Taylor 2011). But while the measurements differ, and are partly critically debated in the scholarly literature, the general dimensions of soft power—culture, political values and foreign politics—were taken up by many scholars in the field (for overviews see Blanchard and Lu 2012; Gill and Huang 2006).

Another important facet is that soft power lies "in the eye of the beholder" (Blanchard and Lu 2012, p. 569). Eventually, the soft power of a country can only be judged by its appeal to others. Therefore, it does not suffice to focus on a country's resources. The perceptual effect of these resources has to be taken into account, and only if they lead to attraction, we can speak of soft power. Therefore it

[1] In addition, authoritarian countries such as Russia or China advance their own, potentially politically motivated interpretations of the concept in ways that conform to their foreign and domestic policy interests (Edney 2012).

is important also to analyse how the targets of soft power receive and interpret values and policies, how they try to influence what is seen as 'good' behaviour by others, and whether these resources are appealing to them.

The rising importance of the concept of "soft power" in China

In China today, the idea of "soft power" has become important in various realms of society. First, it arrived in Chinese politics about 10 years ago. In 2007, a Chinese government official mentioned soft power for the first time publicly (Wang 2008). During the plenary session of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, China's President Xi Jinping mentioned the goal to "increase the national cultural soft power" (提高国家文化软实力 tigao guojia wenhua ruan shili) (Xi 2012) a phrase he has used as early as 2008 in some of his speeches long before his presidency (Xi 2008).

Second, the concept of soft power has become popular among Chinese academics (Wang 2008). Chinese scholars started to debate the concept after 2000 (Wang and Lu 2008; Mingjiang 2008). The popularity of the concept can be best illustrated with data from the *China National Knowledge Infrastructure* database (CNKI) (Mingjiang 2008; Wang and Lu 2008).[2] When searching for academic articles in the database mentioning the Chinese translation of soft power that is now most commonly used (软实力 ruan shili), a clear trend is visible. Interest in soft power first emerged in 2001, with the strongest growth between 2007 and 2008 when the concept for the first time entered the political arena in China (Wang 2008). Since 2008, the annual number of Chinese scholarly articles on soft power has almost doubled and reached a plateau of at least 3000 articles per year in 2012 (see Fig. 1).

A similar trend emerges, third, when looking at Chinese mass media. We searched for the term soft power (软实力 ruan shili) in the *China Core Newspapers Full-text Database* and analyzed how many newspaper articles mentioned the keyword each year (see Fig. 2).[3] Similarly to the trend among Chinese academics, the term soft power started to appear in the media in the early 2000s, and the number increased until 2011 before plateauing around 750 articles a year. Soft and hard power have also been included as terms in China's official lexicon in 2009 (Qin and Tatlow 2014). While the concept of soft power still receives a lot of attention from Chinese academia, the public debate about the concept has already reached its peak in 2011. Climate change (气候变化 qihou bianhua) and even pollution (空气污染 kongqi wuran) as a sensitive topic have overall received more media attention in the last few years than soft power (see Fig. 2) being mentioned in over 3000 articles per year.[4]

[2] The CKNI database 9305 journals and other forms of academic publications such as dissertations or proceeding. The data was exported and then analysed and visualized in R. Mingjiang (2008) and Wang and Lu (2008) also analysed in their articles the popularity of the concept with data from the CNKI database. We include an updated version of this analysis in our article.

[3] The database covers more than 630 national and local Chinese newspapers. We used the analytics index tool of the CNKI database. The data was exported and then analysed and visualized in R.

[4] Only articles were counted that fully mentioned the search term.

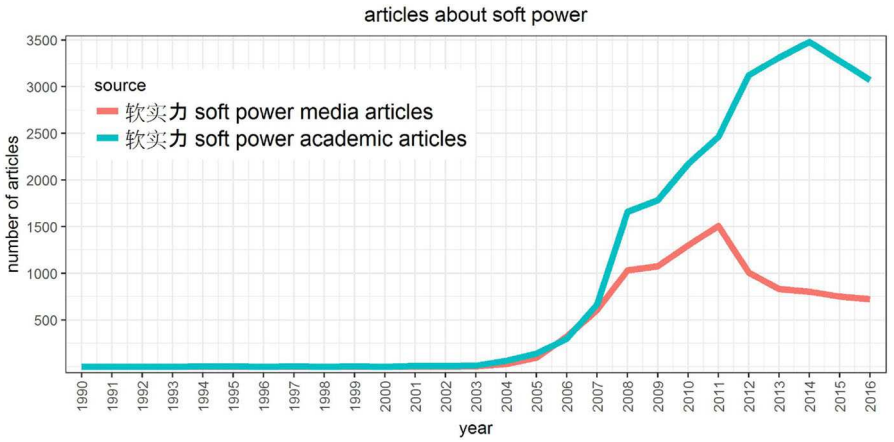

Fig. 1 Number of Chinese articles about soft power. Data from CNKI database covering articles in academic publications and media articles

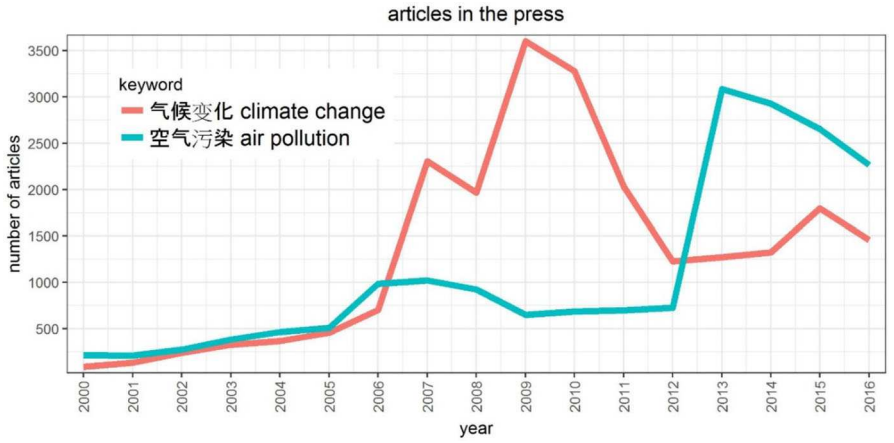

Fig. 2 Number of Chinese articles in the press covering climate change and air pollution. Data from CNKI database

This comparative analysis of politics, academia and media coverage shows: The concept of soft power is not just an intellectual fad in Chinese society that will vanish soon. Furthermore, it is probably one of the few concepts with roots in academia that has a substantial impact on politics and society as these examples illustrate. The stronger academic attention can be explained with the scope of the database that includes also dissertations and any other form of academic communication.

China's difficulties in acquiring soft power

Soft power has become an important and widely discussed concept in China, and Chinese politics has promoted improvements in soft power to a critical political goal. While all countries are interested in soft power, authoritarian countries such as China have often failed to build up soft power, despite significant efforts to do so. In the literature, it is still debated how much soft power China gained exactly, even though academics such as Nye (2005b) acknowledge the country's efforts. Ding (2010), for example, optimistically concludes that China has gained a substantial amount of soft power through foreign aid programs or the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games (see also Hunter 2009). The Confucius Institutes as cultural initiatives are also often mentioned as a successful part of China's soft power strategy (Heng 2010; Hartig 2012; Paradise 2009; Servaes 2015). But even though these examples might help China gain soft power, their effectiveness has been questioned numerous times. In one of the most recent soft power rankings, China still only holds position 25 out of 30, with the US claiming third place and France first place (McClory 2017).[5] We will briefly discuss Chinas ability to generate soft power with the three primary resources described by Ney.

Culture

First, the influence of state-sponsored cultural institutions such as the Chinese "Confucius Institute" has been described as limited (Paradise 2009), because "cultural soft power can be undercut by policies that are seen as illegitimate" (Nye 2008, p. 96). In his analysis of China's cultural programs, Creemers (2015) concluded that they "are rarely successful even in their home markets" (p. 306). This is important because the Chinese discourse of the concept of soft power focuses to a large extent on the domestic context (Mingjiang 2008; Wang and Lu 2008). Especially when the concept was first popularized in China, it was often understood as top-down communication resembling (domestic) public affairs activity and not (international) public diplomacy (Wang 2008) and ignoring the ambiguous nature of soft power resources (Blanchard and Lu 2012). Furthermore, governmental initiatives to gain soft power have often emphasized traditional Chinese culture, whereas Nye has argued that highlighting contemporary popular culture (e.g., Hollywood) is a far more effective basis for soft power (Wang and Lu 2008). The government's focus on traditional culture is in line with the misconception of the Chinese "that historical significance [would] automatically convert into contemporary influence" (Wang 2008, p. 261)—whereas academics such as Wang (2008) even describe Chinese culture as a "considerable obstacle to effective Chinese diplomacy" (p. 262) as "there was [historically] no Chinese Machiavelli to disconnect power and morality" (p. 263).

[5] Such rankings have to be taken with a grain of salt because they reduce soft power as a non-tangible element of international relations to a few measurable indicators. Also the weighting of the indicators (e.g. cultural aspects have a lower weight than social media use of head of states) shows that the creators of the ranking are mostly interested "public relation" parts of soft power.

With regards to contemporary culture, however, China still lacks influence and appeal. Buchholz (2013) for example shows that China only ranks in the global "semi-periphery" when it comes to the worldwide "Distribution of Transnational Art Institutions" (p. 75) as well as "art auction houses" (p. 94), far behind the US, the UK, Germany and other countries. Also in terms of global cultural content production, including content such as movies and copyrights, China was in the past far behind nations such as the US and Japan and on the same level as (far smaller) South Korea (Otmazgin 2007).

Political values

China's hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was seen as a domestic success (Manzenreiter 2010). However, the games "also invited new international scrutiny and demands for openness which the emerging power will have to contend with" (Cornelissen 2010, p. 3017). In the international press, the hosting of the Olympic Games also elicited counter-narratives highlighting China's human rights violations (Manzenreiter 2010).

This is symptomatic: Major events like the Olympic Games can be a double-edged sword for any country, and particularly for authoritarian ones. On the one hand, emerging economies like China have the opportunity to present themselves as modern states with these events. On the contrary, they create an opportunity for marginalized groups such as Tibetans to create public protests that are in some cases widely covered in the press. One such example was in March 2008 before the Olympic Games in Beijing when Tibetan organizations were publicly protesting during the Olympic torch rally in Greece. The Olympic Games facilitated a public debate about human rights issues in China (Brownell 2012). The protests and the Tibetan unrest in April 2008 lead to an increased foreign interest in the human rights situation in China (see Fig. 4 with the relative highest Google search volume for human rights in China in April 2008). There are even indicators that the attitude of US citizens towards China worsened during the games as Gries et al. (2010) showed with survey data. Pundits concluded after the Games that "[t]he world is increasingly doubtful that Beijing will reform politically and become a responsible global actor" (Economy and Segal 2008, p. 56). Thus, the Games might have been a domestic success (Blanchard and Lu 2012), but whether they increased China's soft power is doubtful. In general, mega-events such as the Olympic Games or the world EXPO signal "something different in every context and with every different target" (Nordin 2012, p. 594). While China shows some improvement with the social indicators and, in general, economic development, China still fails "in promoting and defending human rights values, particularly in civil and political rights" (Ding 2012, p. 661).

Policies

China's expansion of national interest, especially in the - as it is called in China - South China Sea,[6] has been critically viewed by neighboring countries and the international community (Yahuda 2013). Still, amongst the many Chinese policies that might have helped to gain soft power, disaster relief, and humanitarian aid have frequently been mentioned as a resource of Chinese soft power (e.g., Blanchard and Lu 2012; Gill and Huang 2006). China started to increase its foreign aid in the South Pacific (Lanteigne 2012). The policy dimension and more specifically foreign aid should not be underestimated as a major resource contributing to soft power (Ding 2012). However, the efforts in recent years might not be enough to build soft power. Even though China has already become the 4th largest contributor in foreign aid help globally, the Chinese commitment can be critically assessed (Hu 2017). China's foreign aid still does not match its economic power and industrial nations such as the US, Germany or Japan provide more foreign aid even though their total GDP is lower than China's (Hu 2017).

Climate change politics and Chinese soft power

As described above, scholarship so far shows that China has had difficulty to gain soft power based on any of the three resources described by Nye. The recent changes in climate change politics are interesting in this regard, however, particularly for the dimension of foreign politics which are fully in state control and which, different from values and culture, can be changed more quickly. In this light, the withdrawal of the US administration from the UNFCCC process and the Paris Agreement can be interpreted as a window of opportunity for China to gain soft power through climate change policies, an issue that more or less concerns all countries on the globe.

Climate change as an international challenge

Climate change is a global problem—potentially the "moral challenge of our generation", as United Nations' General Secretary Ban Ki Moon put it (Aldred 2007)—caused by activities of people from countries around the world (albeit to different degrees). Greenhouse gas emissions produced by human activity contribute to increasing temperatures around the world and corresponding changes in precipitation, wind speeds, droughts, rainy periods, etc. that influence the natural and social world (Dryzek et al. 2011; IPCC 2014). Accordingly, political responses and solutions are also sought on a global level, mainly in the UNFCCC process aiming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to already occurring climate change.

Finding political solutions on the international level, however, is challenging (Keohane and Victor 2011). In the UN process, consensual decisions are needed

[6] The name "South China Sea" is highly contested. Each country in the area has its own name for the sea.

(Brunnengräber 2012), and therefore, decision-making can become more difficult, take more time or are watered down to the smallest common denominators (Gupta 2010). Finding common ground is difficult because climate change poses a global "drama of the commons" (Dietz et al. 2010): "Actors profit individually from greenhouse gas-producing activities, whereas they would gain only a fraction of the benefits from unilateral mitigation efforts causing abatement costs" (Schmidt et al. 2013, p. 1233), and "their sacrifice may be futile if other actors do not exhibit similar restraint" (Harrison and Sundstrom 2007, p. 1).

In the past, industrialized as well as developing countries both were confronted with the trade-off between economic growth and reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. Especially countries like China with strong economic growth and high emission of carbon dioxide put the responsibility to reduce emission on Western countries because their behavior in the past lead to the climate change we are experiencing today (cf. Guo 2010; Xu 2010). In order to convince developing nations to reduce their emission of greenhouse gases in general, industrialized countries had to start with a commitment and take the leadership role. When the US announced to leave the Kyoto treaty in 2001, the European Union decided to ratify the treaty and take the climate change leadership (Schreurs and Tiberghien 2007). The Obama administration later took over the leadership role, together with European leaders from France and Germany, and helped come to an agreement in 2015 at COP21 in Paris. In 2016 after Trump was elected as the new president in the US the Chinese started to verbally take over the leadership role in the fight against climate change (Hilton 2016).

The 2001 and 2007 examples show that countries can take over leadership roles once they are vacated. In the case of the EU in 2001, norms such as social equality is mainly the result of "the actions and commitments of a group of pioneering states and the leadership roles played by the European Parliament (EP) and especially, the European Commission" (Schreurs and Tiberghien 2007, p. 22). Of course, such policies also followed public opinion in the EU where the majority of people sees the protection of the environment as a priority (Schreurs and Tiberghien 2007; Spence et al. 2011)—and it will be interesting to see if China follows suit.

Climate change and climate change politics in China

In some regards, China is already positioned to become a leader in climate change politics. China had tried to position itself as a leader of developing nations in international climate change politics in the run-up of the Copenhagen COP summit in 2009, but these attempts proved largely unsuccessfully as the rise of Chinese greenhouse gas emissions drew criticism from the developing countries themselves and, ultimately, lead to a breakaway of China from the G77 negotiation group of the developing countries (e.g. Conrad 2012). A number of reasons, however, indicate that a repositioning of the country could be successful.

First, climate change has further risen in importance in China (Schmidt et al. 2013). Partly, this is due to the country being affected by climate change impact. Primary effects of climate change such as extreme weather events, rising sea levels, biodiversity loss, or health risks already exist, but are expected to increase from a

rating of "low" (DARA, Climate Vulnerable Forum 2012) in 2010 to a "moderate" rating in 2030. Secondary, socioeconomic effects of climate change mitigation and adaptation—which would involve major changes in energy production and consumption—are estimated as being even higher, i.e. as "severe" in 2010 and expected to be "high" in 2030. Conrad (2012) argues that the increased awareness of the vulnerability has led to new policies as climate change has potentially "direct implications for long-term economic growth and social stability" (p. 438).

As a result, second, climate change has become a major issue for the Chinese government as well as for the Chinese public. In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, a third of Chinese respondents see climate change as a major threat to China (73% see climate change at least as a minor threat) (Pew Research Center 2016a, p. 21). In turn, the degree of climate change scepticism—doubting the existence, human-made causes and/or serious effects of climate change—is much less pronounced in China compared to other, most notably Anglo-Americans countries (e.g., Painter 2011). Additionally, environmental NGOs have sprung up in China dealing with climate change as a core issue (e.g., Segerberg 2017). Also, media attention for climate change has strongly risen in China since 2007, to an above-average amount in global comparison (Schmidt et al. 2013). We extended the analysis of Schmidt et al. (2013) and used data from the *China Core Newspapers Full-text Database* we used also for the soft power above to analyze how many articles were published in Chinese newspapers each year. For the last decade, Fig. 1 shows a significant amount of media coverage with temporary peaks in 2007 and 2009. Both in 2007 in Bali and 2009 in Copenhagen climate summits of the United Nations took place. Both events were amongst the ten most important topics in foreign news in China in the respective year (Xu 2010). The amount of media coverage fell in the following years but again peaked in 2015 with COP21 in Paris that resulted in an agreement where both the US and China joined. (cf. Daly et al. 2017).

Apart from perceiving the issue of climate change as important, the Chinese position towards it also changed over the past years. This is visible in the political positioning as well as in media coverage in China, which shifted from a passive and instrumental towards a proactive, environmental frame when covering climate change. In the mid-2000s, Chinese media coverage of the issue focused strongly on the division between "[t]he rich, the poor and global politics" (Xu 2010, p. 138). China was presented rather positively, in "heroic frame, a 'self-celebratory frame" (Xu 2010, p. 139), and developing countries were interpreted as not needing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This perspective held true until 2009 when the Copenhagen summit took place. During the summit, Chinese TV largely was "situating responsibility outside [Chinese] boundaries" (Liang et al. 2014, p. 267): It claimed that industrialized countries were historically responsible for climate change and, therefore, also in charge of solving the problem. Fittingly, coverage strongly featured rifts between these industrialized nations, e.g., discussions between the US and the European Union about their respective responsibilities (cf. Xu 2010).

Beginning in 2009, however, China was increasingly presented by domestic media as a more active player and even a leader in international climate politics, as a

country which "move[d] together with developing countries" (Xu 2010, p. 139). Accordingly, the previously passive description of divides between the US and the EU gave way to China being described as an adversary of, mostly, the US. The "EU vs. US division" frame was replaced by several divisions including a "China vs. US division", a "China vs. EU division" and a "China, India, Brazil, South Africa vs. others division". (Xu 2010, p. 140; cf. Post et al. 2018). And the "Chinese government accepted this responsibility [as a leader of other developing countries] and sought to negotiate a deal with the developed nations that would not put an unacceptable burden on China and other developing nations" (Liang et al. 2014, p. 167; cf. Xu 2010). Potentially the Chinese engagement in favour of developing countries may have led to a first increase in the countries soft power. It was the first time China presented itself as a potential climate change leader. However, in the international arena "much of the blame for the summit's failure was attributed to China's tenacious stance during the last phase of negotiations, adding up to a sizeable loss of international" (Conrad 2012, p. 453).

Third, Chinese politicians and media did not only interpret their position differently themselves, but the country was also increasingly interpreted as a relevant player in climate change politics to whom a portion of political responsibility was attributed by others (e.g., Schmidt and Schäfer 2015; Konieczny 2014). Largely based on the country's size and its national greenhouse gas emissions, it was seen as legitimately "representing the perspectives of developing nations (e.g., Group of 77, a coalition of developing nations at Copenhagen Summit)" and in doing so, as the natural adversary to the "United States … as the leading developed nation" (Liang et al. 2014, p. 256). However, it has to be noted that this is mainly a (domestic) Chinese interpretation. It could also be argued that China was in Copenhagen not able to represent the interest of G77 as the pursuit of own interests hindered a successful agreement that would have benefited some of the most vulnerable and poorest countries in the world (Conrad 2012). Connected to this position was a "growing voice in the world media and politics, which asked China to take the same responsibility in cutting emissions as the developed countries" (Xu 2010, p. 131; see also Broadbent et al. 2016; Johannessen 2015), a position that was particularly pronounced in the conservative US media and among US politicians (Schmidt and Schäfer 2015). In 2014 with the US–China deal before the COP 21 summit in Paris (Michaelowa and Michaelowa 2015) China could gain some of its international reputation as a climate change leader back. Obama thus gave the Chinese 2014 the platform to present themselves as a global climate change leader.

China's window of opportunity to gain soft power

Our thesis is that the current political situation represents a "window of opportunity" for China to expand its soft power substantially both in degree and scope. As we have shown, furthering the country's soft power in international relations has been a major impetus of Chinese foreign politics in the past decade, and extensive attempts to achieve this were being made. Their effect has been limited, however.

With the changed position of the US towards climate change under the Trump administration, China can re-position itself to take over a stronger leadership role in the international political efforts to mitigate climate change. For a number of reasons, it is conceivable that the Chinese government could seize this opportunity. The issue of climate change has been recognized by Chinese politics (Blas and Shankleman 2017) as well as by the country's public and its media as relevant and important (Pew Research Center 2016a; see also Fig. 2). The Chinese position in international climate change negotiations has changed from being passive and reactive towards being more proactive and constructive (see COP21 in 2015 and the bilateral agreement with the state California in 2017 after US president Donald Trump took over the office). And the external perception of the country has increasingly highlighted the amount of its current greenhouse gas emissions and, as a result, attributed responsibility for climate change politics to China, among other countries (e.g. Liang et al. 2014; Post et al. 2018; Schmidt and Schäfer 2015). However, in the past this positive "internal" perception has also been often challenged, e.g., after the Copenhagen summit (Conrad 2012). Assuming a leadership role in international climate change politics, therefore, gives China the opportunity to expand its soft power, especially towards industrialized nations (e.g., the EU) in which climate change is seen as the major challenge of the twenty-first century (Schreurs and Tiberghien 2007). Still, some obstacles might prevent the Chinese to implement the policies necessary and, as a result, to gain soft power by taking on an international leadership role in climate politics.

First, as the main concern of the Chinese Communist Party is the legitimation of its political leadership (Conrad 2012), the Chinese government has to tend to the most pressing environmental issues domestically before it can expand its efforts in international climate change politics. And for the Chinese population, other environmental issues seem more pressing: This can be illustrated with data from the Chinese search engine *360 Search*. The search volume is a possible proxy for the interest in specific issues.[7] The data from Qihoo's analytics platform shows the relative search volume of words on a specific day. Our analysis shows that the problem of air pollution and water pollution exceeds the interest in climate change (see Fig. 3). In January 2017, interest in water pollution peaked because the government fined a chemical plant for environmental damage (Leng 2017). In contrast to the two domestic pollution problems, interest in climate change is relatively small.

Surveys also show that air pollution and water pollution are more pressing and tangible problems for the Chinese population in contrast to the more abstract climate change (Pew Research Center 2016a, p. 7). Still, Chinese citizens describe climate change as a pressing problem. In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, a third of Chinese respondents see climate change as a major threat to the country (73% see climate change at least as a minor threat) (Pew Research Center 2016a, p. 21).

To fight climate change, China must decrease its carbon dioxide emission—a move that is likely to curb China's economic growth in the short run. However, the abovementioned Pew survey showed that 50% of respondents believe "We should

[7] All three search terms were used together in order to compare the popularity. The absolute search volume is not shown. However, we can compare the volume of the three keywords to each other.

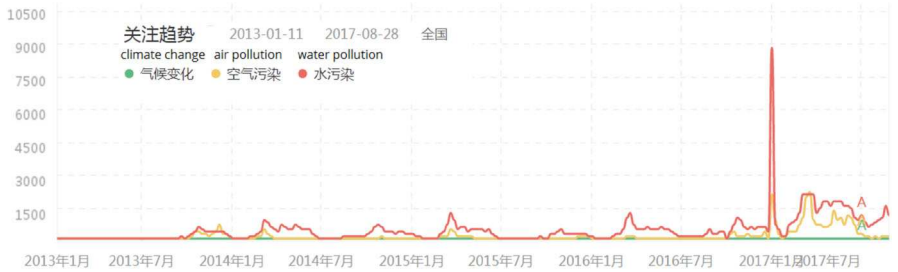

Fig. 3 *360 Search*-trend relative daily search volume between January 2011 and August 2017

reduce air pollution even if it means slower economic growth" in contrast to only 24% of respondents agreeing that "Air pollution is the price we have to pay for continued economic growth" (Pew Research Center 2016a, p. 5).[8] Even from an economic point of view "it is smart planning to set long-term emission-reduction targets … and give … companies, entrepreneurs, and investors certainty so they can invest and manufacture the emission-reducing technologies that we can use domestically and export to the rest of the world" (Obama 2017, p. 3). This is not a quotation from a Chinese official, but those are the words of the outgoing U.S. President Barack Obama in the journal "Science". In that paper, Barack Obama is talking about the economic opportunities for the U.S. that climate change can present if necessary action is taken. His argument: growth and carbon dioxide emissions can be decoupled.

Second, China needs to successfully manage competing issues in order to gain international credibility for climate change politics and, thus, potentially be able to expand the scope of its soft power. Even though air pollution is mainly a domestic problem, China has to solve this issue also with regards to its perception from other countries. Only if the international image of China is congruent with the climate change policies, China gains soft power—and a major challenge for China is its negative image with regards to environmental issues in the Western press. Guo (2010), for example, analyzed the reporting about China and climate change in the New York Times. In 2009 40% of the articles presented China's role in connection with climate change in a negative way. He concludes that China needs to improve its international image and present the country more as "ecological China" (生态中国 shengtai zhongguo). Our analysis of the Google search data shows that air pollution is a major concern internationally and even dwarfs the attention China receives from abroad for its climate change policies (see Fig. 4).[9]

[8] The increased environmental awareness of the Chinese public is perfectly illustrated by the documentary "Under the Dome", produced by former journalist Chai Jing. When she released her documentary in Spring 2015 on the Chinese Internet, the video went viral with over 100 million views in the first 24 h Yang (2015).

[9] All three search terms were used together in order to compare the popularity. Google trends does not indicate the absolute search volume. However, the highest peak in a time series of all search terms together gets the value 100 and all other values are calculated in comparison to this peak. In our case this makes sense as we want to compare different issues. The data was exported and then analysed and visualized in R.

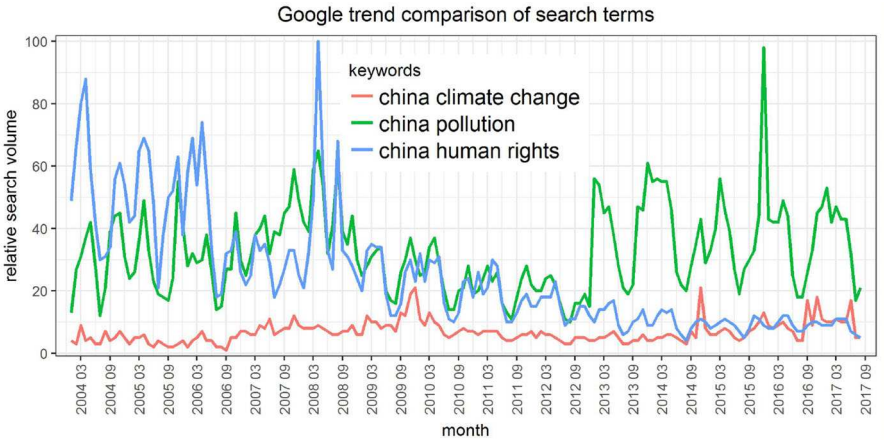

Fig. 4 Google-trends relative (to the highest peak in the sample) monthly search volume of different key words

Even if China solves its domestic air pollution problem and achieves its climate change goals, the perceived violations of human rights in the country might still prevent China from gaining soft power in the form of pure attraction. As long as there is no positive development in the area of human rights, China may not be able to gain enough soft power to influence Western countries meaningfully. Google search data shows that human rights in China still receive a lot of international attention (see Fig. 4). With regards to soft power, Ding (2012) describes human rights as the potential Achilles' Heel of Chinese soft power. For instance, by international standards, China is ranked on one of the last position in the "Freedom in the World" ranking (Freedom House 2017) and has one of the lowest scores in the world in the civil liberty dimension of the Democracy Index (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017). It is not clear how critical perceptions of China's human rights situation and a potentially increasing leadership in climate change politics influence each other. But there are indications that the contentious human rights situation is seen critically in other countries, and that it may outweigh soft power gains in other realms. Survey data shows, for example, that 95% of Germans see the promotion of human rights as an important foreign policy goal (Pew Research Center 2016b). The same holds true for Spain (90%), Netherlands (88%), Sweden (92%), and the UK (84%). Furthermore, 70% of Europeans see "China's emergence as world power" (Pew Research Center 2016b, p. 14) at least as a minor threat. Still, the same survey data shows, that climate change is seen by 66% of Europeans as a major threat and by 17% as a minor threat. As long as people in the EU see human rights as an important issue, it is questionable if climate change policies can translate into soft power as soft power can be "undercut by policies that are seen as illegitimate" (Nye 2008, p. 96).

Third, of course, China needs to realize its own, domestic climate change politics and to adhere to its international obligations for greenhouse gas emissions in order to use climate change politics as a catalyst for its soft power. First indicators are

positive in this respect, with the growth of Chinese emissions slowing (Climate Action Tracker 2017; Ross 2017), but a sustainable change in Chinese energy production and consumption is needed, along with a clear documentation of emissions levels and their developments in accord with the Paris agreement.

The problem of air pollution and climate change are two different problems with different solutions. In some instances, air pollution even mitigates global warming (Fiore et al. 2012). In other words, the air pollution problem can be solved without solving the climate change problem. However, if China reduces its coal consumption, both problems can be tackled at the same time. On the one hand, coal combustion in China is a major contributor to the volume of carbon dioxide emissions and thus a source of global warming (Carrington 2016). On the other hand, "coal combustion contributes … 40% of the total PM2.5 [fine particles] concentration on national average" (Ma et al. 2017, p. 4488). Therefore, if China reduces the coal consumption most likely the local air quality will be improved, and at the same time, China reaches its goal to fight climate change. Currently, China has already achieved one of his four goals toward its 2020 climate goals and achieved up to 97% of "its carbon intensity reduction goal" (Ross 2017). This is a first indicator that China might be willing to fulfil its international obligations. However, it has to be noted that the defined goal is a relative value and the absolute emission would be a better measurement and China persists opposition against independent international measuring, reporting and verification (MRV) (Conrad 2012).

With regards to domestic climate change policies, China is now at a crossroads. It has different options to replace the energy won through coal combustion. On the one hand, China can invest in renewable energy sources and at the same time reduce carbon dioxide emissions. On the other hand, China can replace coal energy with, e. g., synthetic natural gas. This approach solves the pollution problem but does not substantially decrease greenhouse gas emissions. Only the former solution will also potentially increase soft power. China has already become the largest producer and investor in renewable energy globally (Simon-Lewis 2017). The growing domestic industry also produced domestic winners. These are the economic opportunities former president Obama mentioned in his article in Science. All things considered, China has had difficulties to gain and extend its soft power, and it has mainly relied on hard power in international relations in the form of force or money. But as Chinese leaders, as well as the Chinese public, become more aware of global warming and environmental issues in general, this can be helpful in the current situation. During the Obama Presidency, the United States has positioned itself at the forefront of the fight against global warming. Promoting these pro-environment and pro-economic innovation values helped the U.S. to gain soft power. With Trump and climate change deniers like Scott Pruitt in leading positions, this source of U.S. soft power could erode substantially in the near future.

Xi Jinping has not only presented China as climate change leader in the international arena (e.g., at the World Economic Forum 2017), but also domestically. In his speech at the opening session of the 19th Communist Party congress in October 2017, he explicitly acknowledged this new role ("driving seat") and even critically concluded that "any harm we inflict on nature will eventually return to

haunt us" (Huang 2017). The future will show if China will follow up its words with actions. At least for the next few years, China has the incentives and opportunities to do so. It is an economic opportunity, it will strengthen the domestic legitimacy of the CCP, and it will eventually help China to gain soft power. Xi Jinping's successful expansion of his own governing term represents an interesting conundrum with regards to soft power and the different resources it rests on: On the one hand, it may be beneficial for Chinese soft power to have Xi in office, as he is a noted and outspoken proponent of climate protection. On the other hand, changing the mode of governing China to accommodate Xi's rule may be seen elsewhere as an (other) indicator of an undemocratic political system.

We think that more scientific analyses of the role of climate change politics for different countries' soft power, and of the Chinese case in particular, are warranted. Focusing on this nexus, scholars from fields like international relations could further expand the notion of soft power towards the field of environmental politics (e.g., Zeitoun et al. 2011). It would also be worthwhile for interdisciplinary fields like China studies and environmental studies, which could be further integrated (e.g., Yang and Calhoun 2016). Ideally, such studies should tackle the many conceptual and empirical gaps that this article has shown: It would be interesting to analyse, for example, how the different pillars of soft power relate to each other, how they are perceived in other countries and, most importantly, how important they are for the perception of soft power in other countries and in influencing these countries' actions. The Chinese case can be highly instructive in this respect, as the different drivers of soft power—such as human rights situations, environmental concerns and leadership in international climate change politics—seem clearly at odds with one another.

In addition, including studies of media communication in the analysis of soft power would be instructive. After all, a core aspect of soft power is the positive perception of a country, a government or a political actor by others. Such perceptions, however, are often mediated nowadays and crystallize in legacy media, social media communication or search engine requests, among other places. Adding the repertoire of communication scholars to the academic debate about soft power, therefore, seems worthwhile.

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