

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The study of China's cultural diplomacy in Thailand and Vietnam reveals that China highly values the role of culture in promoting friendly relations with other countries and has employed various tools, including mainly cultural exchanges, language and education promotion, tourism and media exchanges to facilitate the fulfillment of its cultural diplomacy's objectives.

From the context of China's cultural diplomacy from the early 1990s, it can be seen that cultural diplomacy is just part of China's greater diplomatic efforts in Southeast Asia to dispel any concerns that China is or will turn into a threat when its power is rising, and to secure a stable, peaceful regional environment in which China can concentrate its resources on the economic development and national modernization. By using culture as a diplomatic tool, China can capitalize on the long history and uniqueness of its culture and the world's recently increased interests in Chinese culture and language. Furthermore, the PRC's foreign policy makers probably recognize that in terms of hard power, which is economic and military power, China cannot rival the United States both in the world and in the region, while the use of hard power might trigger fears in the region and provide regional countries with reasons to move closer to other great powers, as it has witnessed in a series of incidents related to the South China Sea in the latter half of the 1990s.

In its general diplomacy in Southeast Asia, China aims to build an image of itself as a responsible and benign regional power, working for the common interests and mutual benefits with other regional nations. In order to convey this message to Thailand and Vietnam through cultural diplomacy channel, China has actively showcased its cultural greatness, especially emphasizing the values of peace and harmony in Chinese culture. This is also part of the reasons for China to name its newly-invented but seemingly most

aggressive tool of cultural diplomacy after the Confucius, the country's oldest, influential philosopher. So far Thailand hosts the greatest number of the Confucius Institutes in the world while Vietnam, being cautious as it often is, has accepted the setup of a Confucius Institute in the country.

In addition, since the main focus of cultural diplomacy is to introduce different aspects of China's culture to a wider audience in the world, China also aims to resolve what it calls a "cultural deficit". Zhao Qizheng, former minister for the State Council Information Office, said in May 2006 that China still had "a very bad deficit to resolve. It runs counter to China's fast-growing economy, which has been expanding by an average of 10% since 1979."¹ Obviously China is well aware that much needs to be done when it comes to its cultural industries and cultural marketing in foreign countries if it is to become a truly great power.

It is hard to measure the success of China's cultural diplomacy, because it is always difficult to gauge influence which is supposed to be the result of cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, as Robert G. Sutter observes, China generally does not ask ASEAN governments to do what they don't want to do. In effect, "China had focused on doing 'easy things', emphasizing common ground and working especially with and within ASEAN organizations where decisions become less sensitive in long processes of consultations that lead to often vapid final outcomes"². However, in Thailand and Vietnam, it can be seen that both the leaderships and the public hold positive attitudes toward China in general and its culture in particular, though much of the recent upsurge of interest in Chinese culture and language study is for economic purposes. While the conduct of cultural diplomacy has facilitated China's objective of increasing Chinese influence, much of it remains to be seen in the future, in the two countries, it should be noted that Thailand and Vietnam themselves are not in a passive position. They receive what are offered by China to their own benefits and at the same time maintain good relations with other powers such

¹ Antoaneta Bezlova, "China's New Cultural Revolution".

² Robert G. Sutter, *China's rise in Asia*, pp. 203.

as the United States, Japan, EU, and Russia so as to avoid Chinese dominance. Thus, the Chinese soft power, though increasing, would not “amount to much in a crisis when governments will have to make hard decisions they would otherwise seek to avoid”, as noted by Robert Sutter³.

With regard to the level of acceptance of China’s cultural diplomacy in Thailand and Vietnam, it is difficult to judge whether Thailand is more or less receptive to the Chinese cultural offensive than Vietnam. A comprehensive answer to this question requires another in-depth research, since the perception levels may differ in each of the different areas of cultural diplomacy. However, it is certain that the two countries possess different settings in terms of history, politics, culture and demography in relation to China, which may in turn bring about different degrees of perceptions towards China’s cultural diplomacy in the two countries. On the surface, as has been seen in Chapter III and IV, Thailand appears to be more enthusiastic about Chinese culture and language, arguably because it has maintained good relations with the PRC with no major historical as well as territorial disputes, while the well-integrated ethnic Chinese community has increased its political and economic influences in this country. Meanwhile, Vietnam seemingly looks to China more for a model in political reform and economic development, as the two countries share the same ideology and political system. Yet, repeated cultural and political invasions by China during a period of more than one thousand years of its early history, the bilateral hostility during the 1970s and 1980s, and the territorial disputes, some of which have not been resolved, are the factors that make the Vietnamese cautious about the Chinese cultural offensive at present.

While the cultural diplomacy in Southeast Asia is a component of China’s general diplomacy in the region, it is also a part of Beijing’s overall cultural offensive all over the world. It is evident in that China’s cultural diplomacy tools, such as cultural festivals, artistic performances, Confucius Institutes and cultural centers have appeared in all

³ Rober G. Sutter, “China’s Rise in Asia: Bumps in the Road and Unanswered Questions”, posted on the website of Japanese Institute of Global Communications at http://www.glocom.org/debates/20050318_sutter_china/index.html, March 18, 2005.

continents of the globe, in an effort to enhance the PRC's national image and soft power. As its economic power is increasing, China is apparently trying to win hearts and minds of people in different regions of the world so as to secure resources for its economic development on the one hand and, on the other hand, become a truly regional, if not world power in the future.