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Solidifying China's soft power in Cambodia: expanding the reach to higher education

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1 China in Cambodia's higher education sphere: an introduction

In December 2023, Cambodian and Chinese officials inaugurated the Cambodia-China University of Technology and Science (CamTech), located in the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh (Xinhua, 2023). Considering the rising demand for human resources development that would contribute to bridging stronger ties with China, the Federation of Khmer Chinese in Cambodia and China's Nanjing Vocational University of Industry Technology embarked on this quest to establish the second Chinese higher education institution in Cambodia (Kongnov, 2023; XSR, 2024). The establishment of CamTech is significant for China's cultural dissemination, as it teaches Mandarin Language and courses that would equip Cambodians with specific skills. These include courses on e-commerce, transportation management, tourism management, automotive engineering, and new energy technology, to name a few (Nguon, 2024; XSR, 2024).

Cambodian Minister of Education, Youth, and Sports, Hang Chuon Naron, expressed how the inauguration of CamTech is a representation of the tightened people-to-people contact between China and Cambodia and how CamTech will have a role in advancing the human resources development of the Cambodian citizens (Xinhua, 2023). China's gesture in the educational sphere adds to the growing relations between Cambodia and China in the past years, which academics have termed as Cambodia's "bandwagoning" with China (Chheang, 2016; Doung et al., 2022; Mit, 2024; Pheakdey, 2012; Po and Primiano, 2020). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) programs in Cambodia since 2013 have brought about significant changes within the nation (Burgos and Ear, 2010; Lim, 2023; Pheakdey, 2015; Xinhua, 2018). However, an emerging critique has been the emerging social and environmental impacts that negatively affect society (Chheang and Pheakdey, 2019; Menon, 2023). Therefore, China's focus on establishing closer ties in alternative areas of cooperation is deemed as Beijing's solution to close the gap in the lack of people-to-people relations between the two nations.

Nevertheless, past studies have not investigated the establishment of CamTech in greater detail. The main discourse explored has delved into the discussion of China's soft power dissemination in Cambodia through the facilitation of scholarships for Cambodians to study in Chinese higher education institutions (Kaiwei and Jun, 2024; Rany, 2024; Rinith, 2019; Xinhua, 2017). Some have also touched on the significance of the Confucius Institutions (CI) in Cambodia, which generated a mixture of responses from the society (Dong and Chapman, 2010; King, 2013; Nanddy, 2020; Yang, 2010). Thus, this qualitative research attempts to decipher the establishment of CamTech under the lens of international relations' soft power diplomacy, arguing that educational soft power in Cambodia is a natural extension of the existing educational partnerships and connecting the discussions

to solidifying bilateral ties between China and Cambodia. The secondary data assessed focuses on China's growing engagement in Cambodia's educational sphere from 2009 until the establishment of CamTech in 2023.

2 China's soft power and the growing prominence of its educational outreach

Soft Power is a term coined by Joseph S. Nye in his 1990 book, "Bound to Lead." In his words, soft power "is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017, p. 1). The argument made is that power in international relations (the ability to affect others to attain preferred outcomes) cannot originate from "hard power" only. It must be supported and reinforced by soft power in order to succeed in world politics (Nye, 2004). The essential elements of soft power defined by Nye continue to be relevant in contemporary studies assessing a nation's power: political values, culture, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004). Thus, when discussions focus on education as a soft power, it falls under the category of "culture" in Nye's descriptions.

In 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed the importance of China investing more in its soft power (Nye, 2017). Since the 2013 rule of Xi Jinping, China's ascent in the Asia Pacific has been a combination of utilizing both hard and soft power assets to exert Chinese influence. On soft power, studies have observed Chinese soft power in disseminating the Mandarin language and its unique cultural heritage, especially to Southeast Asian states (Cho and Jeong, 2008; Hartig, 2015; Huang and Ding, 2006). Having an authoritarian system, the fact that China's ascent has been marked by China's growing economic prowess on the global stage, there have been discussions on the possible soft power of Chinese political values in which the importance of economic pragmatism takes center stage (Barker, 2017; Gill and Huang, 2006; Huang, 2013; Liang, 2012). China's announcement of the BRI in 2013 has also led Southeast Asian states to express interest in the numerous institutions initiated by China concerning its BRI projects (Blanchard and Lu, 2012; Kurlantzick, 2007; Shambaugh, 2015). As seen in the discourse of China's rise in Southeast Asia, many states have perceived that the way China utilizes its hard power assets is close, if not in the level of assertiveness (Anugrah et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2014; Putra, 2020; Putra and Cangara, 2022; Yahuda, 2013). However, Soft power diplomacy, in contrast, exerts a signal of peaceful intentions.

As part of the cultural element of soft power, China's focus on this has accelerated in past years. A dominant discourse is the interpretation of China's internationalization of its higher education programs, attracting talented individuals to study in Chinese higher education institutions and being exposed to Chinese cultural heritage and language within the process (Wu, 2019; Yang, 2007; Zhu and Yang, 2023). As soft power scholars have argued, inviting international students leads to the positive images of the host country and allows for the carrying of (indirectly)

political and cultural values (Hopf, 2013; Nye, 2006; Wojciuk, 2018; Wojciuk et al., 2015).

3 Interpreting the extension of China's soft power to Cambodia's higher education

China has maintained a positive presence within Cambodia's higher education sphere. Perhaps the most dominant form of its presence can be seen with the CIs located within the country. As academics have argued, establishing CIs in Southeast Asia has been a prominent theme in China's public diplomacy (Ju Lan, 2017; Theo and Leung, 2018), signifying its role in China's soft power (Kwan, 2014; Yang, 2010). As Vannarith stated, "Cambodia is more sanguine about China and the CIs" (Vannarith, 2021). There is a perspective within the US that CIs act as a propaganda apparatus for China, leading to the closure of such institutions across the US (BBC, 2020; Edwards, 2021; Lee and Tupuola, 2023). Meanwhile, in Cambodia, the first CI was established in 2009 through the cooperation of the Royal Academy of Cambodia, Jiujiang University, and the CI Headquarters in Hanban (Nanddy, 2020). This is followed by the inauguration of CIs at the National University of Battambang (2019), the Royal University of Agriculture (2020), and the Cambodian University of Technology and Science (2022) (Rany, 2024). There are a total of 128 higher education institutions in Cambodia during the academic year of 2022/2023 (ODC, 2024), with the Cambodian Vice Minister for Education, Wu Yan, stating that prior to CamTech, a total of 19 overseas education institutes and projects have been established with Chinese cooperation in Cambodia (Yimeng, 2023).

For China, the inauguration of the CIs is one of China's most favored soft power tools in education. It allows students to study the language of Mandarin, promote cultural exchanges, and provide the foundations for understanding Chinese cultural customs, traditions, and religions (Rinith, 2019). As a policy manifestation of the people-to-people connection, the CIs also have the capacity to grant scholarships to local Cambodians, which eventually solidifies the traditionally maintained soft power in education, hosting international students to study in China.

In addition to the growing Chinese presence in Cambodia, there is the emerging thought that learning Mandarin would increase the chances of local Cambodians securing higher-paying wages in the future (Kaiwei and Jun, 2024). Ravindran also reported that rather than obliging Cambodian students to learn the language, they are showing their voluntary intentions to seek to learn the language (Ravindran, 2023). Cambodia also intends to embrace the Mandarin Language for its youth. In 2022, China and Cambodia agreed that Mandarin would be introduced in several Cambodian Public High Schools as an elective (Kaiwei and Jun, 2024; Narim, 2022; Ravindran, 2023; Rinith, 2019).

A natural extension of Cambodia and China's intentions to advance cooperation in education is establishing higher education institutions from joint agreements between nations. It has been a common discourse within the bilateral relations that Cambodia and China are seeking to enhance and strengthen the people-to-people understanding, friendship, and promotion (MOFAPRC,

2022; Pang, 2017; Po and Primiano, 2020; Var and Po, 2017; Železný, 2022). Therefore, the establishment of CamTech further solidifies such an intention. For China, CamTech is an extension of Cambodia's existing soft power diplomacy. The success of China's BRI in Cambodia and the demand for stronger communal ties have prompted Beijing to diversify its investments in areas that may be deemed less impactful compared to financial agreements. However, under the lens of soft power diplomacy, such a policy complements the deficiencies in Cambodian–Chinese bilateral relations.

A second interpretation to understanding China's recent soft power diplomacy policy in Cambodia is to secure continued Cambodian trust in China. Cambodia is among the most pro-China states in Southeast Asia (Watanabe and Sovannroeun, 2024). As seen in the current status quo, Southeast Asian states are wary of the negative implications of China's rise and have engaged in policies that would challenge China's unfair claims in the South China Sea (Llewelyn, 2016; Putra, 2022, 2023; Tarriela, 2022; Till, 2022). However, since the BRI project was launched in 2013, Hun Sen and Hun Manet (current Prime Minister of Cambodia) have clarified their alignment decisions to China.

The positive sum game of the bilateral relations can be traced back to 1997 when China diverted support to Hun Sen's regime (Chanda, 2002). Economic relations skyrocketed with the BRI, as major transformations were seen in Cambodia's infrastructure through reconstructed bridges, roads, ports, airports, and special economic zones (Cheunboran, 2021; Chheang, 2023; Chong, 2017; Hutt, 2016; Mit, 2024). A prominent example of the Chinese-funded changes in the country is the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ). The SSEZ now facilitates several of Cambodia's strategic downstream and garment industries, with Chinese investors opening up their factories in the region (Alffram, 2022; Po and Heng, 2019). For Cambodians, however, the construction of world-class resorts, hotels, and gambling centers has transformed the region into a "Mini-Macau" that has lost its "Cambodianess" (Ellis-Petersen, 2018; Ngin, 2022; Vireak, 2019).

Nevertheless, the political elites of the ruling party, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), have ensured that the criticism of Chinese-funded investments will not halt Cambodia's support for China. As seen in the past two decades, Cambodia consistently supports China's national, regional, and global visions. An example often referenced is Cambodia's support for China's "One-China" policy, in which the previous Prime Minister, Hun Sen, continuously expressed how Taiwan and Hong Kong belonged to China (Po and Primiano, 2020). Hun Sen and Xi Jinping have also embraced the same stance vis-à-vis the South China Sea. In the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) Summit of 2012 and 2016, Hun Sen rejected any mention of the South China Sea in ASEAN's joint communique (Minh Vu, 2019; Pich, 2021; Turcsányi and Kříž, 2017). In alignment with China's stance, Hun Sen expressed that the South China Sea is a bilateral issue that must be resolved outside of the regional organization (Minh Vu, 2019; Pich, 2021; VOA, 2015).

What China aims to achieve with its recent educational soft power policy in Cambodia is to secure Cambodia's continued trust. Southeast Asian states tend to be ambivalent concerning China's presence in the region (Goh, 2016; Haacke, 2019; Jones and Jenne, 2022; Kuik, 2008; Roy, 2005), but Cambodia does not fall under this category. The alignment of interests between Cambodia and China and Cambodia's willingness to openly express its support for China's interests and visions on regional and global platforms make Cambodia an irreplicable "friend" in the Southeast Asian region. For an ascending China looking to utilize its hard power and soft power assets to nations close to its proximity, having a trustworthy ally can help accelerate China's regional and global visions. The price to pay in the educational soft power domain is small compared to the reaped benefits of closer people-to-people relations. With the CIs, mandarin language offered, and Chinese higher education institutions in Cambodia, China is able to strengthen its exertion of influence without the need to resort to force.

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