ABSTRACT

China reentered the international community in 1971 when it joined the United Nations, but it remained a closed country under Mao’s watch. Deng Xiaoping succeeded Mao in 1976 and he opened China’s door in 1979 to a global environment where existing rules, institutions, and values had been largely shaped by western countries. In two decades the latecomer has become the economic powerhouse in Asia and has had other states watching its rapid rise in the global community. Two rival views have since emerged as to China’s role in the international order and how to deal with its rising power.

The first deems China as a threat to be contained. The second projects China as an opportunity that can be employed through engagement. The “China threat” argument reached its height after the crackdown on student protest at the Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. The aftermath of international isolation seriously alerted the Chinese government to the effect of severe damage to its reputation and image internationally. As the Chinese Communist Party’s power legitimacy increasingly relies on delivering economic success, the Chinese government became ever more eager to create a friendly international environment where its economic development may be furthered. The Chinese government has since launched a sweeping reform of its global image to smooth away the perception of China as a threat.

Chinese leaders have since touted its “peaceful rise” and turned to its traditional culture for soft power resources to better support its public diplomacy on all possible fronts. Examining China’s soft power resources and its efforts in staging high-level official visits, actively participating in international forums, and hosting the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai World Exposition, this thesis finds that China’s global image promotion has reaped various degree of success in different regions.