

1. Introduction

China's primary cultural identity has long been that of a land-oriented, agrarian civilization, despite its lengthy coastline and history of maritime activities. But for the 21st century—the *ocean century* (海洋世纪)—the Chinese central authority has developed a national ocean strategy.¹ This strategy includes not only a vision for China as a global sea power with advanced naval capabilities, but also goals to develop a robust national ocean economy. China's ocean strategy has culminated in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, part of President Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's ocean strategy drives China's active participation in international organizations that govern the ocean, and calls for China to play a key leadership role in those organizations moving forward.

To implement this vision, the Chinese central authority launched an ambitious and idiosyncratic campaign aimed at educating its citizenry about ocean affairs and crafting China's identity as a *maritime great power* (海洋强国). China refers to this work as *promoting ocean soft power* (提升海洋强国软实力), which an endeavour that uses *ocean education* (海洋教育) as a tool to develop *ocean consciousness propaganda* (海洋意识宣传) and *ocean culture* (海洋文化).

Ocean soft power is a key component in achieving China's maritime great power status. *Promoting ocean soft power* is a propaganda strategy that curates aspects of Chinese history and culture in order to advance and safeguard China's ocean agenda. The *ocean soft power* campaign serves five distinct but overlapping goals. First and foremost, *ocean soft power* aims to enhance the domestic political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This objective is reached through second and third supporting goals: a strategic deployment of *ocean soft power* to increase citizen awareness of a shared maritime heritage and the claimed territorial and jurisdictional rights over China's maritime periphery; and forging a vibrant ocean economy that augments the country's overall economic growth. More recently, a fourth goal is to educate the citizenry about marine environmental issues. And fifth, China wishes to pursue maritime interests in the international arena, providing the world with an alternative to 'Western' notions of maritime power, and increasing China's international maritime influence. Even though primarily domestically oriented, this effort has significant international implications. Understanding China's narrative about its ocean identity is important for understanding how China will engage in the global commons, on issues ranging from marine environment and natural resources to polar affairs and maritime security.

We begin with an overview of the theoretical underpinnings, definitions and methods for the research, and then turn to China's major ocean strategy developments and how *ocean soft power*, *ocean culture*, and *ocean consciousness* grew to support this strategy. We then discuss China's *ocean soft power* plans and analyse their implementation, starting with Zheng He and Mazu as examples, chosen because these two cultural figures are central to the Chinese *ocean culture* narrative. As central-level policies trickle down to the local level, the localities tend to emphasize economic aspects of *ocean soft power*—we provide examples of this dynamic. The piece concludes with a summary of the key implications of *ocean soft power* strategy, highlighting the

¹ 'Chinese central authority' denotes both the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government.

potential for a fascinating conversation between China and the world about *ocean consciousness* and *ocean culture* and what these terms might mean in a global context.

2. Theory, Definitions, and Methods

2.1 Theory

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this topic, this article draws on theoretical insights from history, political science, economics, and cultural studies. The research mainly engages with the literature about shaping public opinion through propaganda and soft power. As this section explains, China's version of soft power is fundamentally different from that of the West.

All countries work to influence public opinion about policy issues. The United States calls its own initiatives to improve knowledge about marine issues 'increasing ocean literacy.' A 2004 U.S. government report, documenting evidence of environmental deterioration in U.S. coastal waters, concluded that in order to 'successfully address complex ocean- and coastal-related issues, balance the use and conservation of marine resources, and realize future benefits of the ocean, an interested, engaged public is essential' [1]. Around the same time, another report also stressed the need for 'a new era of ocean literacy that links people to the marine environment' [2]. U.S. popular knowledge about the oceans helps to reach resource management and environmental protection goals because citizens not only directly influence the ocean environment through their activities, they also participate in the policymaking process and hold policymakers accountable [3]. One study showed that citizenry possessing high-level knowledge about ocean and coastal issues correlated with greater support for protective and restorative measures for fisheries [4].

However, as an authoritarian one-party state, China's motivation and methods for shaping popular knowledge and public opinion differs from that of democratic societies, even if China may share some goals such as environmental protection. China's *ocean soft power* work is a propaganda campaign, guided by a well-elaborated and orthodox view of the instrumental place of culture in society. This orthodox view, originally developed by Mao Zedong in his 1940 'Yan'an talks,' has been consistently reaffirmed through to the present, most recently by President Xi Jinping [5]. At its core, China's extensive 'propaganda and thought work' (宣传与思想工作) aims to ensure the legitimacy of the CCP and thus its hold on power [6]. Unlike in democratic societies, CCP legitimacy is not based on accountability to an electorate. The basis for the CCP's legitimacy has evolved from the Mao-era focus on revolution and class struggle to a focus on economic prosperity for the entire Chinese population, but the CCP's role in nationalistic defence of China has become an even more salient aspect of party legitimacy. A hallmark of China's propaganda and thought work is the use of campaigns and mass mobilization to achieve political, economic and social goals [7].

Since the turn of the century, a newly popular component of China's elaborate propaganda system is *soft power*, but China's conception of soft power differs from Joseph Nye's original sense of the term. Coined in an American context, Nye defined *soft power* as the ability of one state to influence others through attraction as opposed to coercion, though this definition has been the subject of ongoing debate [8, 9, 10, 11, 12]. The Chinese central authority discards the

notion that soft power can rely on pure attraction alone, and takes a more active approach to managing soft power [13]. Furthermore, in contrast to the Nye notion of soft power originating organically in one state for consumption by an international audience, China's soft power is largely state led and aimed predominantly at the domestic audience [14]. In explaining the connection between China's conception of propaganda and soft power, Kingsley Edney writes:

...the party-state has incorporated soft power into its plan for domestic 'cultural construction', widening its relevance beyond the realm of foreign affairs and connecting it to the propaganda authorities' role in using the management of the cultural sector to pursue nation-building goals and foster 'social cohesion'. ... [T]he distinctive way in which the Chinese party-state has interpreted soft power conforms to its broader approach to propaganda work at home and abroad, and the propaganda system shapes the way the party-state defines and pursues its soft power goals [15].

But China's version of soft power has international aims as well. While China recognizes that international acceptance of a Chinese identity crafted through soft power is ultimately beyond China's complete control, successful Chinese soft power creates an international environment favourable to China's rise, while also providing the international community alternatives to Western models and ideas [13, 16].

Ocean soft power shares these same purposes. Described as lying at the core of what constitutes a *maritime great power* (海洋软实力是构成海洋强国的内核), *ocean soft power* refers to 'a country's ability to use various resources in non-forceful ways in the context of international and domestic marine affairs in order to achieve the understanding and support of other countries; to attract recognition, emulation and cooperation from other countries; and ultimately to make the national ocean strategy a reality' (海洋软实力, 指的是一国在国际国内海洋事务中通过非强制的方式运用各种资源, 争取他国理解、支持, 吸引他国认同、效仿、合作, 最终实现国家海洋战略的能力) [17].

In order to better understand China's use of these various concepts against this theoretical backdrop, the next subsection will delve into Chinese-language nuances.

2.2 Definitions

Working across languages means semantics matter to the discursive analysis. Most sources—in both Chinese and foreign official statements and media—translate the term 海洋强国 as *maritime great power*. However, the precise literal translation is *ocean-strong country* (as in a country that is strong along ocean-related dimensions) because the word 海洋 is *ocean* or *marine*, even though it is sometimes translated as *maritime*. Yet *maritime* means ship operations, navigation and related activities on the ocean. Chinese uses different words for maritime too: 海事 or 海上. Thus, 海洋强国 is at once broader than only maritime concerns, with *maritime power* in precise translation being 海上权力 [18]. Indeed, China's explanation of the concept is also broader: building a *maritime great power* refers to the country's strategic goal of developing ocean capabilities on military, economic, and science and technology fronts; gaining a reputation as a sea power; and being able to influence global ocean affairs—with the ultimate aim of developing China into a moderately prosperous country through a project of national rejuvenation [19, 20].

Maritime great power encompasses more than the attributes of *sea power*. *Sea power* today is generally understood as Alfred Thayer Mahan's use of the term in his 1890 book—to describe the strategic uses of naval power [21]. Chinese theorists also use Mahan's interpretation when discussing sea power, which is 海权 in classical translation [22, 23, 24].

Examining the Chinese words for *power* helps us better understand the relationship between *soft power*, *sea power* and *maritime great power*. In modern Chinese, the character 权 for *power* forms the compound word 权力, which means *power in the sense of authority and scope*. A different word for power is 实力, which means *power in the sense of actual strength*—two subtypes of this power are 硬实力 *hard power* (in the sense of military force) and 软实力, which is the term most commonly used in Chinese for *soft power*. Yet Chinese also has a version of *soft power* in the sense of authority and scope—软权力. In the eyes of one observer, the term 软实力 (*soft strength*) applies to the domestic context, whereas 软权力 (*soft authority*) applies to the international context and corresponds more closely to the Nye version of soft power [14, 16]. Turning to ocean affairs, one scholar, writing in 2005, explained that 海洋实力 (*ocean power in terms of strength*) is the basic guarantee or safeguard for both 海洋权力 (*ocean power in terms of authority/scope*), as well as a third component of China's *ocean rights and interests* (海洋权益) [25].² In the 2010s China began using *maritime great power* as a *post-Mahan era* (后马汉时代) concept that captures this latter, expanded version of sea power, to mean a more comprehensive 'sea power with Chinese characteristics' [26, 27].³ The takeaway from this use and evolution of terms is that ultimately, *promoting ocean soft power*, beginning at home, is—along with military force—the means to guarantee *maritime great power* more broadly.

Historian Andrew Lambert notes that the original meaning of the ancient Greek *thalassokratia* was also broader than Mahan's version of the term, and included a role for what today the Chinese call *ocean soft power*. Lambert explains that in its initial use, sea power referred to 'a state that chose to emphasise the sea, to secure the economic and strategic advantages of sea control to act as a great power, through a consciously constructed seapower culture and identity' [28]. Western analysts of Chinese sea power have focused on hard power [29, 30]. But examining China's contemporary emphasis on *ocean soft power* shifts our attention back to the overlooked element of culture and identity that was inherent in the ancient conception of *sea power*.⁴

The rise in China's use of the various *ocean soft power* terms has not been simple or linear. In the 2010s, China began using *ocean soft power* as an umbrella term that includes *ocean consciousness propaganda*, *ocean education*, and *ocean culture* as component concepts. However, *ocean soft power* (along with *ocean education*) is a more recent term, coined in 2005

² In the original Chinese: '中国特色的“海权”应该是一个综合概念,是海洋实力(海洋硬实力和软实力)、海洋权益(海洋权益和外围海洋权益)和海洋权力(海洋硬权力和海洋软权力)三要素的有几统一' and “海洋实力”是“海洋权益”和“海洋权力”的基本保障'.

³ The term was first used in 2003.

⁴ While it is beyond the scope of the discussion in this article, Lambert argues that seapower identities are not sought by existing strong continental powers with large navies, but rather by weak and vulnerable states that are dominated by the sea in order to become great powers. Thus China is an interesting case because of its continental history.

[25]. The terms *ocean culture* and *ocean consciousness* both originated in the 1980s. *Ocean culture* was first used by the Chinese academic community in Taiwan, Zhejiang, and Guangdong, with the Ocean University of China subsequently establishing an inaugural *Ocean Culture Research Institute* (海洋文化研究所) in 1997 [31]. *Ocean consciousness* was first used in a military context (as discussed below).

The frequency of the terms *ocean culture* and *ocean consciousness* in articles in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database began increasing around the year 2000, in correlation with the broader political relevance of the marine affairs (see Figure 1) [32].⁵ Other observers have also remarked on this trend, for example one source noting that articles mentioning *ocean consciousness* rose from only 10 in 2003 to 180 in 2014 [33]. The two terms were used in parallel and with similar frequency in China also until about 2000, when the use of *ocean culture* began outpacing that of *ocean consciousness*.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

We translate 海洋 as *ocean* in the terms *ocean soft power*, *ocean consciousness*, *ocean culture*, *ocean education*. *Ocean consciousness* refers to the citizenry's awareness and understanding of ocean affairs, which includes ocean culture. *Ocean culture* refers to the tangible or non-tangible cultural artefacts that are inherited by the people, as well as the cultural products resulting from the act of interpretation or invention of tradition by the state, local governments, or citizens. The distinction between consciousness and culture is one of form versus content: *ocean consciousness* refers to awareness of the ocean and various marine affairs (the form), while *ocean culture* refers to shared thoughts, feelings, ideas and collective identification with it (the content). *Ocean education* is the means to increase *ocean consciousness* among the population. Disseminated through education, *ocean consciousness* propaganda about *ocean culture* (and other aspects of the ocean) provides the soft power resources (such as popular sentiment) the state can use to construct an image of China as a maritime great power and to achieve the state's strategic objectives.

The term *ocean culture* does not have a direct correlate in English. *Maritime culture* is the closest corresponding term in the United States. However, *maritime culture* in the U.S. context takes ships and navigation as the core meaning—commercial, military and recreational—and perhaps occasionally sprinkled with exotica collected through global explorations by sea [34].

We translate 意识 as *consciousness*, which connotes a fuller understanding of a given subject than *awareness*. China's concept of *ocean consciousness* is not equivalent to the term *maritime domain awareness (MDA)*. China translates MDA as 海洋领域意识. MDA is defined as 'the effective understanding of any activity associated with the maritime environment that could impact upon the security, safety, economy or environment,' and the term tends to be used in a tactical sense among the security community [35]. In contrast, China uses the term *ocean consciousness* in a broader strategic sense and aimed at the citizenry.

⁵ CNKI is China's central information database.

2.3 Methods

This article used a qualitative methodology, beginning with a discursive analysis of primary and secondary sources in Chinese from government, academia, and media. To better understand the reasons for China's *ocean soft power* propaganda work, we use an inductive process-tracing approach to first describe the historical elements of China's national ocean strategy and *ocean culture*, and then explain how the *ocean culture* narrative has been recast to serve the country's ocean strategy goals, and how the reinterpreted version of *ocean culture* manifests in the implementation of *ocean consciousness* goals [36].

3. Results: Background, Planning and Implementation

3.1 Background: Developing a National Ocean Strategy and Identity

In late 2012, then President Hu Jintao called for 'raising the ability to extract ocean resources, resolutely protecting national rights and interests, and building China into a maritime great power' at the 18th National Party Congress [37]. A few months later, an article on the CCP news website—referring to Xi's call for the national rejuvenation of China—stated, 'In order to realize the "China Dream," we must first realize the "Ocean Dream"' [38]. But China's ocean aspirations have a long history and are the culmination of years of policy development, and have also been influenced by the evolution of the international law of the sea system (see Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

China's ocean planning began in the late 1970s, at the start of the *opening and reform* period. At a 1978 meeting of the *National Philosophy and Social Science Planning Leading Group*, economics experts Yu Guangyuan and Xu Tiaoxin introduced the idea of studying the ocean economy. In July 1980, China held the first ocean economy meeting, establishing the *China Ocean Economy Research Association*. In 1985, the Shandong Academy of Social Sciences Ocean Economy Research Institute created a task force on the *Comprehensive Investigation on Coastal Society and Economy*, and in 1986 conducted a *Study on China's Ocean Area Economy* in accordance with the seventh five-year plan [39].

At the same time, policymakers were considering ocean strategy more broadly as well. Promoting marine science and technology was a priority identified in the *863 Plan* of March 1986, a plan to develop science and technology across a number of industries [40]. The plan called for developing marine exploration and monitoring technology, marine biotechnology, and marine resources development technology. In 1987, the *Ocean Development Strategy Research Institute* (海洋发展战略研究所) was established at the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), with the official English name China Institute for Marine Affairs (CIMA). In 1991, the State Planning Commission called for 'beginning national ocean development planning work' and the SOA subsequently released a *National Ocean Development Plan*. The first work meeting on this plan brought together 21 central-level ministries and bureaus, 12 leading small groups dealing with ocean matters, and other groups working on ocean issues [41].

As these developments were unfolding, the idea of elevating *ocean consciousness* and *ocean culture* among the entire Chinese population also took shape in the 1980s, both by intellectuals and strategists alike.

Popularly, the development of the *ocean culture* concept initially took place, almost unintentionally, as a rejection of traditional land-based culture. Chinese culture draws its continental identity from the small farming states cradled along the Yellow River basin. But the Yellow River came to be viewed in popular culture as failing to support the advancement of the Chinese civilization, both in terms of its carrying capacity for China's growing population and in terms of the inward-looking mentality that it symbolized. The 1988 television show *River Elegy* (河殇) argued a need for China to look outward towards the mouth of the river, and establish a new *ocean civilization* (海洋文明)—consisting of openness and modernity—in order to right the humiliating defeats of China's past 150 years, and reclaim glory and natural resources in a time of rapid globalization [42, 43]. Because of the timing of the show's release, these ideas were politically controversial. One high-ranking party official claimed that the film 'vilified the Chinese people,' and the creator was accused of causing the Tiananmen protests and exiled [44]. The term *ocean civilization* went into disuse, but the same values of 'openness, outward-lookingness, and innovation' were retained in the concept of *ocean culture* [45].

A more strategic effort to raise awareness of Chinese maritime heritage among the Chinese people arose around the time *River Elegy* was broadcast. The core of this idea was that Chinese *ocean consciousness* was necessary for China to prevail in regional maritime disputes, principally aimed at building support for risky assertive operations in the South China Sea (SCS) [46, 47, 48].⁶ On 3 February 1988, as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) moved to establish its first outposts in the Spratlys, greatly increasing the likelihood of hostilities with Vietnam, the PLA Command's report on the Spratly situation called for 'ocean consciousness propaganda and education towards the entire population' [49]. Reviewing the operation in August of the same year, the *Renmin Ribao* announced a 'learn from the soldiers and officers of the Spratlys initiative' with the aim of 'arousing the patriotism and bitter fighting spirit of the broad masses of soldiers and officers' [50]. Afterwards, military-affiliated authors attempted to push *ocean consciousness* into the emerging 'patriotic education' program, though this effort was not initially successful [51, 46].⁷ In a 1990 outline of the concept that has remained influential to the present, one CCP strategist defined *ocean consciousness* as 'a collective term for a nation's understanding of the oceans belonging to it and to the world, and the degree of overall resource development and exploitation of the oceans, across a given period of time' [52].

Throughout the 1990s, increased global attention was brought to ocean affairs with the entry into force of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1994, and the push to raise popular *ocean consciousness* expanded dramatically after China's accession to UNCLOS in 1996. As the UNCLOS era shifted the focus of the PRC from controlling island territories towards establishing jurisdiction over maritime spaces, the scope of the campaign to increase *ocean consciousness* began to expand outward from the military to the party and government. The day

⁶ One civilian exception, albeit published in a military compendium on the SCS, was by the SOA's then-deputy director, 陈炳新 (Chen Bingxin).

⁷ The character for sea (海) was not mentioned in the programmatic 1994 document.

before China ratified UNCLOS, the *Renmin Ribao* launched a campaign to raise *ocean consciousness*, aimed not merely at defending China's claims to disputed islands, but also to jurisdiction over a vast sea area referred to as *blue territory* (蓝色海域). In 1998, soon after the passage of the *Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and Continental Shelf Law* expanded and hardened China's maritime rights claims, the party held an *Ocean Propaganda Day Convention* (海洋宣傳日大会). At the event, the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee Vice President Wang Guangying gave a key speech on the theme of *loving our blue territory*, saying:

This 'blue territory' formulation has major significance. This is because our country not only has 9.6 million square kilometres of land territory, but also has nearly 3 million square kilometres of waters under our administration. This expanse of precious 'blue territory' is likewise an important space for the survival and development of our nation [53].

No ocean area was more amenable to the process of territorialisation in the public consciousness than the SCS. The nine-dash line, originally drawn by the Nationalist government in 1947 to depict a claim to scattered islands and reefs, now became a visual representation of a claim to several million square kilometres of maritime 'territory.' Wang's speech laid out one of the key premises underpinning the push for *ocean consciousness* among the whole population in the UNCLOS era: 'The competition in maritime affairs is also a competition of ocean consciousness among nations.' In this view, more public attention on a given maritime claim advocated by the party-state represents a competitive advantage to grasp new economic opportunities and meet new challenges. This awareness would not only increase the productive population available to exploit the resources, it would also raise the level of national will to defend disputed claims. On this basis, Wang outlined specific actions for the central authority going forward:

We must, from the heights of strategy, pay great attention to maritime propaganda elevating the whole nation's concept of the oceans. Now, using means such as mass media, professional, middle and primary school education, we must universalize maritime territorial knowledge among society and especially among cadres, making people fully understand the ocean's important position and role, actively participate in maritime affairs, forming a situation in which the whole nation together pays attention to the oceans, and their exploitation and protection [53].

The need for *ocean consciousness* was reaffirmed in separate speeches delivered on the fifth anniversary of China's ratification of UNCLOS by the SOA Director and Deputy Director. Both noted that order to prevail in the intensifying 'international struggle over maritime rights' the state would not only be strengthening its legislation, law enforcement and resource surveys, but also 'powerfully elevating the whole nation's territorial consciousness and maritime-rights-defence consciousness' [54].

The project to raise popular *ocean consciousness* was approved at the party-state's highest levels, demonstrated in a series of national laws and personal leadership instructions. In 2002 the NPC passed a new *Surveying and Mapping Law* requiring all levels of government to tighten control over every stage of map production—from drafting to public display—and to step up publicity and education to raise citizen awareness of maritime territory and its importance [55, 56]. These new rules drove successive waves of crackdowns resulting in the confiscation of millions of 'problem maps' [57, 58]. In 2004 Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan personally instructed the SOA to 'strengthen the whole people's ocean consciousness, and establish oneself in the ancestral land's blue territory' [54].

Greater focus on the UNCLOS-era maritime issues was accompanied by attention to natural resources and environmental sustainability [41]. After attending the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, China authored its own *Agenda 21* on sustainable development, and published an *Ocean Agenda 21* in 1996 that dealt specifically with the marine environment. China's accession to UNCLOS led to reforms in Chinese fisheries laws, and China signed bilateral fishing agreements with Japan (1997), South Korea (1998) and Vietnam (2000) to manage shared stocks.

A focus on resources further spurred the development of China's ocean strategy and consciousness in the first decade of the 21st century, orienting the strategy toward economic growth, and what later became called the *blue economy* (蓝色经济). China saw the ocean as not only a source of resources but also of opportunities to offset a slowing land-based industrial economy. In November 2002, the report of the 16th National Party Congress proposed *implementing ocean development*, which was followed by the issuance of the *Outline of the National Ocean Economic Development Plan* by the State Council in May 2003 [59]. In the latter document, the State Council identified the ocean as a source of rich resources, and set development targets for various marine industries. In a 2006 economic planning meeting, then General Secretary Hu Jintao called for 'strengthening ocean consciousness while properly doing land-based planning.' At the 17th National Party Congress in October 2007, the party report called for *developing marine industry*. This report was followed by the State Council's *Outline of the National Marine Development Plan* in 2008, which called for developing China into a maritime great power over the 2007–2012 period [54]. The focus of the plan was broader than economic development, and addresses marine resource management; maritime rights and interests; and security.

The 2010s brought the accelerated implementation of plans laid down in party documents across the preceding decades. The State Council issued the first *Ocean Economic Development Twelfth Five-Year Plan* in September 2012. Over the course of the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015), the marine economy grew by 65.5 percent; 2.4 million maritime jobs were created for a total of 36 million people employed in 12 ocean sectors: fishing, hydrocarbon, chemical industry, marine pharmaceuticals, shipbuilding, mining, engineering, salt, shipping, electricity, travel and tourism and seawater uses [60]. With a push from policymakers to move growth away from the primary sector (which features raw commodity production like fisheries) and toward the higher value-added secondary and tertiary sectors (industry and services, respectively), marine industry grew by 19 percent over the period, and coastal tourism grew by 15.4 percent. The country increased support for the fields of marine science, technology, and pharmaceutical development; the 12th Five-Year Plan saw the launch of the Jiaolong manned submersible, as well as advances in Antarctic deep ice core drilling, seawater desalination, and the development of tidal and wave energy. The Chinese state also began releasing individual five-year plans on aspects of the ocean with more specific targets, for example on fisheries (2006); polar exploration (2009); ocean area mineral resource exploration and development (2011); marine standards (2012); ocean economic development (2012); and a national marine industry five-year plan (2013). The State Council also issued plans for ocean economic development pilots in Shandong, Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Fujian.

By 2021, the Chinese ocean economy accounted for 8 percent of China's overall GDP, amounting to CNY 9 trillion [61]. But economic growth has been accompanied by a growing concern about the country's degraded environment, and the central authority issued an *ecological civilization building* policy in 2015. The oceans were issued their own *marine ecological civilization building* (海洋生态文明建设) policy, including a guiding framework and plan for implementation [62, 63]. Marine environmental consciousness has likewise been included in plans to elevate *ocean consciousness*.

The broadest goal of China's *ocean consciousness* project is increasing China's global maritime influence, a significant policy initiative being the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (21MSR). Announcing 21MSR in 2013, Xi Jinping said, 'We need to advance caring about the ocean, knowing about the ocean, planning and controlling the ocean, and promote the building of China as a maritime great power that continually reaches new achievements' [64]. 21MSR is promoted by the Chinese state as a peaceful trade route, a way of enhancing port infrastructure, and a 'win-win' form of partnership between China and other maritime nations to cooperate and 'seize opportunities and meet challenges for the benefit of common development and prosperity' [65]. Through 21MSR, China has built or invested in over 80 port projects around the world, including its first overseas naval base with possibly more to come [66].

The goals extend beyond 21MSR's bilateral and multilateral arrangements, bringing up questions about shared global resources. China is participating in the UN negotiations to develop a legally binding instrument on biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), and holds the most exploratory contracts for high-seas seabed mining [67]. China also announced plans for a *Polar Silk Road* (冰上丝绸之路) in the Arctic and has scientific and resource interests in Antarctica, where their participation is crucial for creating a system of marine protected areas [68]. In Xi Jinping's era of new *Silk Roads*, the promotion of *ocean soft power* has acquired a new strategic significance.

3.2 Planning: The Ocean Soft Power Five-year Plan

In February 2016, the SOA; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Culture; the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television; and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage jointly issued a document entitled *Promoting Ocean Soft Power—The 13th Five-year Plan for the People's Ocean Consciousness Propaganda, Education and Cultural Construction* ('the Plan') [69]. The Plan opened by saying:

The country's ocean strategy must be rooted in the people's knowledge of the ocean.... We must comprehensively strengthen ocean consciousness propaganda and education and promote the flourishing development of ocean culture in order to provide shared social knowledge, the public opinion environment, the foundation for thinking, and the spiritual motivation for the purpose of building a maritime great power and the 21MSR.'

The Plan stated that becoming a maritime great power requires not just hard power such as an ocean economy, science and technology, and military defence, but also soft power resources like *ocean consciousness*. The Plan emphasized elevating the knowledge of its own citizens, reflecting the PRC's idiosyncratic version of soft power, which is aimed primarily at a domestic audience. The Plan further explained that strengthening *ocean consciousness* and *ocean culture*

would enhance ocean strategy, shape the spirit of national progress, raise the people’s scientific knowledge, advance socialism, and promote inclusive global development.

3.2.1 *An Index for Measuring Ocean Consciousness*

In support of the Plan, in 2016 the SOA established a task force with Peking University’s Institute of Ocean Research, in order to conduct a comprehensive survey of national *ocean consciousness*. The project first developed a *National Ocean Consciousness Development Index* to measure *ocean consciousness*. The index is broken down into subcategories, which are assigned a weight to indicate their share of importance (see Table 2). The study then assessed levels of *ocean consciousness* against the index through analysis of search-engine queries, social-media posts, news coverage, and questionnaires that polled China’s 31 provinces, regions, and national-level cities (not including Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan). In 2016, the average national score on ocean consciousness was 60.02 (out of the maximum possible score of 100), though coastal provinces scored higher than inland areas [70]. A year later, the average national score on the index had risen slightly, to 63.71 [71].

Examining both the index and knowledge-assessment scores provides insights into how the Chinese central authority prioritizes various facets of ocean affairs, and points to the areas in which China will likely concentrate efforts and resources moving forward.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

3.2.2 *Elevating Ocean Consciousness*

The Plan aimed to establish a comprehensive ocean consciousness propaganda, education and cultural system by 2020. The main features of this system are to: create and develop ocean news propaganda, promote ocean news media integration and development, and build different means of dissemination for the masses; increase education; promote Chinese traditional *ocean culture*; strengthen leadership, build capacity and increase investment; and increase international exchanges.

The Plan set specific goals in each area, aiming for performance measured by the ocean consciousness index to increase by a set amount annually. Ocean news would be carried by all major media outlets. Educational facilities and training programs would increase, with curricula at all levels of education to be revised and expanded to include increased emphasis on ocean knowledge. Public education likewise would be expanded through public service announcements; legal and policy education initiatives; exhibits in museums, libraries, cultural centres, tourist attractions and memorials. The Plan also called for the promotion of certain ocean industries such as marine eco-tourism and investment in research and development. The Plan pledged to build 200 national ocean consciousness education bases, 200 national ocean science education bases, and 100 ocean knowledge education demonstration schools by 2020.

In the cultural realm, the state aimed to increase the production of marine popular science and cultural books by 20 percent annually, reaching an average of 100 different publications and 500,000 copies annually, for a total of 400 different publications and 2 million copies by 2020.

In addition to reading materials, works of film, television, theatre, music, dance, games and photography would be produced annually—along the lines of the state-sponsored eight-episode documentary *Towards the Ocean* [72, 73]. The newest form of medium to shape national ocean identity is a role-playing game entitled *The Legend of the Paladin* (仙劍奇俠傳). This role-playing game, which is produced in Taiwan, has been reimagined and appropriated by Chinese ocean propagandists as a way to allow players to be ‘immersed in a marine culture and marine spirit’ defined by ‘Chinese characteristics,’ despite possibly never having seen the ocean [74].

Public activities include consolidating *World Ocean* and *National Ocean Consciousness Day*; selecting annual public ‘ocean figures;’ and holding events like ocean cultural festivals and national days. These events build upon existing festivals such as *Xiamen International Ocean Week*; *Qingdao International Ocean Festival*; *China Ocean Culture Festival* (in Zhoushan); *China Open Fishing Festival* (in Xiangshan); and the *21MSR International Art Festival* (in Fujian). National days include *China Navigation Day*, *Reducing Disasters Day*; *National Popular Science Day*; and the *PLAN Establishment Commemoration Day*.

The state called for investment in the development of a ‘theory of ocean culture with Chinese characteristics’ and other academic work on developing China’s ocean culture, seeking especially to approach this topic from a multi-disciplinary perspective, and to study China in comparative perspective alongside studies of Western ocean culture. The Plan stressed the influence of academia in laying the theoretical foundation for the building of China into a maritime great power and the construction of the 21MSR.

The Plan also elaborated on the international dimensions of China’s *ocean consciousness* work, aimed primarily at 21MSR countries but also at Western sea powers. The state encouraged partnerships with foreign organizations and experts in order to be exposed to new thinking and methods in international ocean culture. The Plan also called for strengthening the external dissemination of Chinese ideas on the ocean, including telling China’s ocean stories, propagating China’s perspective on the ocean, promoting Chinese ocean cultural goods and services, and disseminating China’s government white papers on marine affairs. China would use the foreign media office of the central government to project a positive image of China as an open, self-confident country that seeks win-win cooperation and active participation in international marine affairs.

In order to *guarantee* (保障) its various aspects, the Plan included a section on *safeguarding measures*. The government would strengthen the monitoring and analysis of public opinion on ocean issues through a system that features an early warning for the detection of negative public opinion. The plan called for ‘firmly grasping the policy direction, strengthening leadership for implementation, using strict discipline to address sensitive issues involving the ocean, and a strict approval system in order to uphold the correct public-opinion direction.’ The state would provide the necessary funding for activities and training.

3.3 *Implementing China’s Ocean Soft Power*

This section considers how the central authority is building *ocean soft power* through the targets set for promoting *ocean consciousness*, and the effects such implementation is having. We focus

on how China is curating narratives about Zheng He and Mazu, two well-known cultural icons, illustrating their use as core symbols of China's *ocean culture*, to fit contemporary purposes. The cases show how, when the central level policies are implemented at the local level, the local levels tend to emphasize economic aspects of *ocean soft power*.

3.3.1 Recasting Zheng He

The well-known Zheng He voyages of the early Ming Dynasty have been used as a narrative about China's maritime heritage and to normalize the idea that certain territories in the SCS belong to China [45, 75, 76, 77]. Admiral Zheng He served as China's imperial envoy to various countries across Asia in the fifteenth century, facilitating trade and diplomatic relations. More recently, Zheng He has been deployed as a symbol of the longevity and competitiveness of Chinese maritime heritage. In 2005, the SOA broadcasted documentaries and hosted high profile events to mark the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's voyages, promoting domestic awareness of China's pre-eminence as a maritime power [78, 79]. In 2008—on July 18, the anniversary of the date that Zheng He set off on his first voyage—the SOA held an *Ocean Propaganda Day* (海洋宣传日; the agency's official translation was *China Ocean Day*), the theme of which was *Love the Motherland*. As one scholar remarked at the time, 'Through the reintroduction of Zheng He, we can call on people to revive China's maritime power' [80].

Re-contextualizing the Zheng He voyages serves to reinforce the idea of China as a leading global maritime power, comparable to the West in maritime exploration:

Zheng He sailed the seas in 1405, 87 years earlier than when Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas, 93 years earlier than when Vasco da Gama crossed the Indian Ocean, and 114 years earlier than when Fernando de Magallanes went on his voyage around the world. Zheng He led a fleet of 200 and an entourage of more than thirty thousand people. He sailed the seas seven times over a total of 28 years. The way China did its maritime explorations leaves all the Europeans in the dust [76].

Zheng He's story also serves to build *ocean soft power* in the Nyean sense, the core message being that in contrast to the European conquests, China has historically been a peaceful nation, and will continue to be peaceful even as Chinese maritime military and economic power expands:

The story of Zheng He, which is a story of spreading Chinese culture and advanced technology to other countries, is beloved by local Chinese people. Zheng He was sympathetic and accepted and adapted to cultures from other countries. Through peaceful means, he established friendly connections with various regions and completed his mission of 'befriending the nine regions in the east and the eight in the south,' 'four seas one family,' and 'peace under the heavens.' Zheng He is the basis of the Maritime Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative [81].

This narrative was reiterated by the Chinese ambassador to Kenya, who said, 'Zheng He's fleet [was] large.... But his voyages were not for looting resources but for friendship... [fostering] understanding, friendship and trade relation[s] between China's Ming Dynasty and foreign countries in southeast Asia, west Asia and east Africa' [82]. The symbolism has been well received among at least some audiences: Singaporean and Javanese officials have constructed a temple honouring Zheng He and have incorporated him into local maritime history [83].

Used as historical evidence for China's presence in the region, Zheng He's voyages also serve to bolster Chinese claims in the SCS. A case study in a journal devoted to Zheng He studies analyses the connection between building national ocean culture and China's geopolitical

expansions in the SCS, arguing that China was a superior state that ‘oversaw a hierarchy of tributary states’ within the nine-dash line and thus had sovereignty over the area. Zheng He’s voyages are cited as evidence for such claims [84].

This maritime identity is repackaged and sometimes historically inaccurate—some scholars have reconstructed Zheng He’s narrative from disputed sources, such as Gavin Menzies’ book *1421* [85].⁸ Nonetheless, this maritime identity firmly plants the idea that China has been a maritime power since ancient times, as well as normalizing the expectation that China will defend this identity in an international setting [86, 87].

3.3.2 *Mazu: China’s Homegrown Ocean Goddess*

China has harnessed another peaceful cultural image, Mazu, to bolster Chinese maritime culture and heritage, particularly across the Taiwan Strait. Mazuism is a coastal folklore that originated in Fujian Province in the Song Dynasty. The myth of Mazu has variations, but most depict her saving her family of fishermen during a typhoon when she was sixteen years old. Because of her act of courage, Mazu was remembered as a symbol for safe passage at sea [88]. Today, Mazuism is practiced along the coasts of China and Taiwan, and in Chinese diaspora communities abroad. The state does not refer to Mazuism as a religion, but as a *culture* [89, 90].

Mazu has become a vehicle for both domestic and international dimensions of China’s soft power. One function of *ocean culture* is to unify Chinese thinking and actions around the ocean values of openness, innovativeness, modernity, and peacefulness. Mazuism has been modified to suit this purpose as a symbol of the Chinese maritime spirit of ‘peace, harmony, and tolerance’ [91]. China also promotes Mazu culture internationally, especially toward nations along the 21MSR [92]. The state uses *ocean culture* to orient people toward identification with China’s ocean values [93]. According to an article on the official CCP news website, ‘the thousands of Mazu temples in more than thirty countries have been quietly broadcasting Chinese culture, telling the Chinese story, and advocating for Chinese values’ [90]. SOA Vice President Shi Qingfeng claimed that Mazu culture is one of the best representations of China’s great maritime culture [92]. China not only wants to create national coherence about Chinese *ocean culture*, but makes a regional and even global appeal for China’s maritime ideology and role as a global maritime power. However, the implementation of *ocean culture* is also subject to differences between central and local priorities.

3.3.3 *Local Implementation of Ocean Culture*

In contrast to the central authority’s geopolitical focus, provincial and local actors see *ocean culture* as a way to advance their own ocean agenda: to boost local economic growth through the ocean economy. This agenda comes to light when local media report on *ocean culture*. While the proportion of scholarly articles that focus on the revenue-generating potential of *ocean culture* is only 22 percent, more than 50 percent of local news articles do so (see Figure 2).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

⁸ Menzies claims that Zheng He reached the Americas prior to Christopher Columbus and circumnavigated the world a century before Ferdinand Magellan.

Zhejiang Province's use of *ocean culture* is an example of the provincial-level priority on commodification of cultural resources to grow the ocean economy. Zhejiang has rich fishing folklore and music traditions. Fisheries opening and closure festivals, during which fishers give thanks to the sea for supplying them food, take place each year. Yet this fishing culture has been increasingly *elitised* (高端化). China's *National 13th Five-Year Plan for Developing Cultural Industries* calls for 'upgrading' traditional culture to make it profitable [94]. In 2011, the *Zhejiang Ocean Economy Experimental Zone Plan* (浙江海洋经济发展示范区规划) called for using existing ocean resources to boost the ocean economy with fisheries-related 'unique' artwork, literature, and crafts to be mass-marketed and commercialized [95]. Zhejiang's own five-year plan to develop cultural industries is transforming fishing traditions into tourist activities to serve as an economic pillar, aiming to 'be nimble and seize the moment at which the *Zhejiang Ocean Economy Experimental Zone Plan* and the national cultural industry plan are at a crossroads, to use cultural resources as the basis for economic products and at the same time use the promise of economic growth to spur the creation of new forms of ocean culture' [95].

For coastal cities, one way to grow local economic profit and political leverage is to become a '21MSR city' that embodies the 21MSR values of openness and trade. City governments create ocean cultural products, generally for tourism purposes, that both reflect state ideologies and have commercial appeal. Haikou, the provincial capital of Hainan, is using 21MSR language to build a local cultural industry from which it can gain political status. The government of Haikou has set a goal to:

build Haikou into a strategic node for the 21MSR.... Excavating the maritime cultural resources of Haikou and endowing such resources with a new context will help Haikou accelerate its integration into the national BRI strategic layout ... providing space for development that will not only highlight the status of Haikou, but also enhance the strategic position of Haikou [96].

Haikou has started building an 'island brand' by promoting arts and cultural projects such as 'packaging natural scenic areas and beautiful fishing villages' that speak to the 'charms of the island' [97]. Scholars have suggested building a Haikou *ocean culture* museum to strengthen awareness of Haikou's marine resources and biodiversity, as well as citizens' ability to 'describe the history and current status of Haikou as a transit stop for the 21MSR' [96]. The provincial government has also made plans to develop 'unique yachting towns' in order to promote *ocean culture* tourism and to develop 'smart ocean towns that combine research, education, training, manufacturing and tourism' [98]. Yet despite the focus on 'beautiful' fishing villages, natural scenic areas, and museums, the government is building infrastructure in ecologically sensitive areas, issuing permits for reclamation without proper environmental assessments, and privatising areas originally planned for more public uses (e.g., ports) to build hotels instead [99].

Ethnic minority cultures have been appropriated as local ocean 'resources,' such as the Jing nationality (京族), which is being used to develop coastal tourism in the provincial-level Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region [100, 101]. The Jing, an ethnic minority that has lived on three islands off the coast of Guangxi since the 16th century, have traditionally engaged in nearshore fisheries, agriculture, and salt farming, with their own culture of unique fishing gear and maritime songs [102]. Jing culture captures an image Chinese ocean culture wants to convey, one that 'relies on the sea for a living ... and is in harmony with the sea' [103]. Jing culture is 'colourful' and 'primitive,' providing contrast to the majority Han culture [100]. The traditional

Jing *Ha* Festival (哈节) has become a platform for Han-Chinese tourists to have an immersive experience of ‘harmonious ocean living,’ and Jing ethnic traditions, foods, song, and dance are to become ‘the soul of the ocean cultural products ... that enrich the “brand” of Beibuwan’ [104, 105]. However, the commodification of ethnic cultures raises questions about Han-Chinese entitlement to ethnic minorities cultures. The idealization and simplification of Jing culture as a primitive exotic ‘other’ divests them of agency to construct their own identity and excludes them from ‘modern’ life [106, 107].

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined how China’s *ocean soft power* is a core component of building China into a *maritime great power*. Through education about maritime heritage, *ocean culture*, and other aspects of the ocean, the party-state promotes *ocean consciousness* to unite Chinese society under a shared ocean identity and garner support for China’s national ocean strategy. Such efforts normalize certain modes of thinking about ocean affairs, for example by depicting disputed maritime territories as Chinese and setting up an ocean narrative with Chinese characteristics as an alternative to Western notions of sea power [108, 109]. Some uncertainty exists in terms of how these policies will be implemented moving forward, given that the SOA’s role was greatly diminished in administrative changes that took place in 2018, and that at the time of writing the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to information limits and halted most international exchanges with China. Yet even though the terms themselves may evolve—for example a 2020 publication called for increasing *blue soft power* (蓝色软实力)—the core strategy is unlikely to disappear [110]. The findings of this article raise new questions and point to avenues for further inquiry.

One set of questions concerns whether *ocean soft power* will cause positive or negative outcomes domestically and regionally. Certain facets of China’s *ocean consciousness* initiative are similar to efforts led by other countries to educate their citizenry on ocean affairs. Work to increase awareness about topics such as marine ecology and the harmful effects of overfishing and pollution could very well result in an improved marine environment, though the party-state leads these efforts with the primary goal of increasing CCP legitimacy, and controls information about the evaluation of such policies [111]. And in the end, national security interests such as SCS maritime disputes will still supersede environmental concerns. Thus, the initiative also has more concerning implications. Establishing a strident narrative among the citizenry about maritime disputes in the SCS and East China Sea, for example, will likely result in increased nationalism. If part of the basis for CCP legitimacy is defending China’s territorial integrity, then China cannot afford to be seen as compromising on this issue.

China’s efforts also raise questions about managing common-pool resources in polar regions and on the high seas. Perhaps the most fundamental question about China’s growing global maritime influence is how China’s worldview and actions will affect global ocean governance. This discussion takes place against the backdrop of a debate about a U.S.-led liberal rules-based international order being challenged by a possibly revisionist China. Some Chinese scholars argue that the term *global commons* itself is a tool to advance U.S. dominance, and are preoccupied by how much global institutions reinforce a U.S. outsized role in the global system [112]. Chinese scholars such as Qin Yaqing have advanced an alternative world system that is

relational, meaning that actors base their interactions with each other on established roles and relationships [113]. While relationships do matter (a point that is underrecognized by Western international relations scholars), a foreign policy motivated by a relational strategy on the part of a Leninist state opens the door to a spheres-of-influence system in which countries may be coerced or silenced by China's economic heft to act in ways that are not conducive to the interests of most of their populations [114]. At the heart of the debate between the United States and China (and other countries) about governance is a difference in views on how to balance the interests of the individual with the interests of the group.

Finally, as the importance of the world's oceans becomes more apparent in the face of issues such as climate change and other human security threats, we should all be asking ourselves what kind of relationship humanity should have with the ocean. Do other countries agree with the weighting that China has assigned to various topics in its *ocean consciousness* index? How would such an index fit with—for example—the ecosystem services framework [115]? Should we consider what a *global ocean consciousness* or identity would entail? Lambert pointed out that an identity based on the ocean is artificial: 'As the cultural boundaries of any political organisation are set by families, tribes, faith, land and possession, a maritime identity is at once unusual and unnatural. It is not a consequence of geography, or circumstance. The creation of seapower identities has been deliberate' [28]. Explorations along these lines have both theoretical (e.g., constructivist) and practical relevance.

Moving forward, the international community needs open and honest dialogue, and reliable information and data—currently lacking in both the United States and China, though each in different ways. Epistemic communities are important arenas for exchanging ideas on our shared global ocean heritage, and China's far-reaching campaign to build *ocean consciousness* and *ocean culture* needs to be considered as part of the conversation.

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