

Cultural Soft Power Empowering Grassroots Political Mobilization

Xiaoyu Hu

*The College of International Tourism and Public Administration (CITPA), Hainan University,
Haikou, China
linruoxing666@163.com*

Abstract. This paper aims to explore the dual effects of cultural soft power on empowering grassroots political mobilization. In the context of globalization, culture, as a core political resource, plays an increasingly prominent role in consolidating social consensus and shaping the political ecology. Focusing on the theme of "cultural soft power empowering grassroots political mobilization", this paper integrates and analyzes existing literature, and discusses the ways in which state and non-state actors use cultural soft power to carry out social mobilization. The research results indicate that although cultural soft power has the potential to empower, in practice, forms dominated by external funds or the state tend to make grassroots political participation formalized and lack autonomy, thus losing their community foundation. This not only fails to inspire large-scale public participation but may also turn empowerment into dependence and integration. Therefore, to achieve real grassroots empowerment, it is necessary to guard against power imbalance and agenda dominance in mobilization, and explore a more open, citizen-driven mobilization model that meets local needs.

Keywords: Cultural Soft Power, Grassroots Politics, Political Mobilization, Grassroots Autonomy, Community Foundation.

1. Introduction

In an era where globalization and waves of democratization intersect, international factors have complicated the political transformation of various countries. The "Arab Spring" is a typical example. Although democratic discourse was once widely accepted by local actors, the role of the international community has had an almost entirely negative impact on the democratization process in this region. It not only failed to promote the deepening of democracy but also exacerbated regional unrest [1]. This case profoundly demonstrates the high degree of uncertainty inherent in external actors intervening in local political processes. In this context, "cultural soft power", as a non-coercive force, is widely regarded as an important way to promote social change and grassroots political participation. From government-led cultural diplomacy to transnational initiatives of non-governmental organizations, cultural elements are used to consolidate identity, spread values, and mobilize the public to participate in public affairs. Existing studies mostly focus on the construction of soft power at the national level or the successful experiences of specific social movements, but

there is a lack of in-depth discussion on potential problems in grassroots mobilization driven by cultural soft power, such as the interference of external forces in the direction of actions and the weakening of grassroots autonomy. This has become a notable research gap. Therefore, this paper focuses on the key issue of "cultural soft power empowering grassroots political mobilization", aiming to explore how cultural soft power functions in grassroots political mobilization, identify hidden dangers and difficulties that may turn "empowerment" into "manipulation", and consider how to design a mobilization system that can not only avoid risks but also promote real empowerment. By adopting literature analysis combined with case comparison, this paper integrates academic achievements from different fields to analyze the complex dynamics in grassroots mobilization driven by cultural soft power. This study intends to provide an analytical framework for distinguishing "real empowerment" from "false empowerment" by revealing the internal contradictions and risks, helping policymakers, social activists, and relevant researchers find a path towards a healthy and sustainable grassroots political ecology and address various possible challenges.

2. Overview of cultural soft power

Discussions on cultural soft power and social mobilization involve multiple fields such as international relations, sociology, and development studies. Scholars have analyzed the complex relationships between culture, power, and mobilization from different perspectives and put forward a series of important theoretical insights. Some scholars, based on macro-governance perspectives, have pointed out a "post-politicization" preference in the operation of contemporary soft power. This view holds that many forms of global governance, including regulation based on soft power, focus on promoting agendas through consensus, consultation, and cooperation. This approach seems moderate, but its core is to reduce the possibility of conflict through reaching consensus, thereby exerting a kind of "soft power". Under such "post-political" regulatory forms, unequal power relations are easily concealed, and political confrontation and controversy are often replaced by technicalized and neutralized language [2]. At the national level, cultural soft power is predominantly employed as an instrument for foreign policy implementation and national image construction. Particularly amid crises, countries proactively leverage cultural diplomacy to mitigate the erosion of soft power. For example, during the European economic crisis, the EU and its member states tried to address the shortage of soft power through this method while promoting European integration. In addition, some studies have focused on the complex mobilization ecosystem composed of both state and non-state actors. Turkey's foreign humanitarian and development aid is a typical example. The aid system comprises diverse actors, including governments and religious organizations, while religious and historical identities are harnessed to facilitate the articulation of value-based foreign policies—thereby contributing effectively to national image construction [3]. Moreover, most importantly, existing studies have raised in-depth questions about the effect of external resources on grassroots mobilization. A large amount of evidence shows that many social movements with foreign funding and abundant resources have weaker grassroots mobilization capabilities than some resource-poor movements rooted in local communities. The key problem is that external financial assistance makes the survival of movements no longer dependent on the mobilized objects, thus turning the movements into "consensus-oriented" ones and losing their deep roots in the community [4]. Based on the above, existing literature clearly illustrates an inherent tension in cultural soft power: it is not only a tool for consolidating consensus but may also lead to the "post-politicization" of mobilization and alienation from the masses due to external dominance.

3. Comparison between "Instrumental Mobilization" and "Authentic Mobilization"

By analyzing relevant literature and cases in detail, this study finds that cultural soft power empowering grassroots political mobilization shows two different outcomes in practice: "Instrumental Mobilization" and "Authentic Mobilization". The former is mostly promoted by external forces to achieve specific political agendas, while the latter originates from within the community, focusing on safeguarding its own rights and values. The alienation of mobilization is prominent in state-led forms, where "empowerment" easily turns into "assimilation" and "utilization". The Turkish government's transnational mobilization program for young European diaspora is a typical example. Studies have pointed out that over the past decade, the ruling party of Turkey has actively strengthened contacts with young diaspora, aiming to cultivate a "loyal diaspora group" loyal to the regime to help achieve long-term political goals. By providing resources, opportunities, and a sense of identity, the regime "empowers" specific young diaspora, but this empowerment is essentially "co-optation". These young people are mobilized not only to ensure the long-term influence of the regime among the diaspora but also to make them become assets that speak for the interests of the sovereign state in their host countries [5]. In this form, "cultural identity" becomes a political tool, and the initiative of grassroots youth groups is confined to serving the home country's regime, completely depriving them of autonomy.

To better illustrate the differences between the two forms of mobilization, this paper, based on literature and cases, has created the following comparative analysis table, contrasting "Instrumental Mobilization" (typified by the case of Turkish diaspora youth [6]) with "Authentic Mobilization" (discussed with reference to Canadian Indigenous grassroots civic actions [7]).

In "Instrumental Mobilization", the power flows from top to bottom, culture becomes a controllable resource, and grassroots participation is passive and conditional, resulting in superficial "empowerment" but actual "dependence". In contrast, "Authentic Mobilization" presents a completely different picture. When describing family and community activities, Palmater shows a deep endogenous motivation: activism is not to fulfill political tasks but "as an obligation of the Mi'kmaq people", with strength coming from "the precious beliefs, loyalty, and contributions of grassroots citizens" [8]. This kind of mobilization is rooted in profound cultural traditions, shared historical memories, and collective responsibility, aiming to "rebuild our nation" and "protect our future generations". Culture is not a tool but the focus and direction of mobilization. The results show that the effect of cultural soft power depends on the ownership of the leading power and the essential goals. When the agenda and resources of mobilization are controlled by external actors to pursue objectives unrelated to the community's own interests, the outcomes are invariably suboptimal. In contrast, genuinely sustainable and meaningful empowerment must emanate from the intrinsic needs and cultural identities of grassroots communities, driven by an inside-out approach.

4. Countermeasures and suggestions

Based on the above analysis of the "instrumentalization" risk, to guide cultural soft power towards "authentic empowerment", it is necessary to conduct in-depth reflection and comprehensive reconstruction of the current mobilization forms. The key measure is to transform the mobilization method and promote it towards diversified citizen participation. At present, many state-promoted grassroots mobilization projects, especially in the practice of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in Western countries, often confuse social harmony with anti-terrorism, leading to the "securitization" of diaspora communities and triggering negative consequences. To effectively address the root causes of the problem, it is necessary to reconstruct the existing paradigm, break

away from traditional security thinking, adopt a theoretical framework based on "Smart Power", implement diffused and multi-level strategies, involve grassroots in policy-making, absorb opinions from non-traditional stakeholders such as "former extremists" and "victims", and integrate bottom-up citizen-driven initiatives [9]. In addition, efforts should be made to actively cultivate the foundation of democracy and realize empowerment by promoting grassroots innovation. Real empowerment is not simply providing resources but cultivating the ability of grassroots to solve problems independently and participate in democratic practices. Studies have shown that grassroots innovation activities around the world can benefit democracy in various ways: for example, the activities themselves help cultivate democratic practices, their achievements can directly promote citizens' democratic participation, and they can also create social and technological forms with empowering functions, ultimately helping to cultivate social diversity, which is crucial to the health of democracy [10]. Therefore, policies or funding aimed at achieving real empowerment should focus on changing culture, improving infrastructure, providing training, promoting investment, creating a more open environment, supporting grassroots activities, and rooting democracy and empowerment at the grassroots level.

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically analyzes the complex dynamics and internal contradictions of cultural soft power empowering grassroots political mobilization. Through the analysis of relevant literature, it is shown that cultural mobilization led by the state or external forces is prone to fall into the dilemma of "post-politicization", lose community roots due to resource dependence, and eventually become an "instrumentalized" use of grassroots, weakening political autonomy. In contrast, "Authentic Mobilization" originating from within the community and rooted in local culture and values is the fundamental way to achieve empowerment. This study concludes that the extent to which cultural soft power can genuinely enhance grassroots participation hinges on the ownership of mobilization leadership and the fundamental objectives of mobilization. Based on this, measures to promote the transformation of mobilization methods and encourage grassroots innovation are proposed. However, this study also has certain limitations: it relies more on qualitative analysis and theoretical exploration of existing literature, lacking empirical research to obtain first-hand data, resulting in insufficient empirical basis for the research conclusions. At the same time, the scope of cited literature and cases is relatively narrow, and the breadth and depth of analysis need to be further explored. Future research can proceed from this paper and advance in deeper and broader directions. For example, using empirical methods to verify and improve the theoretical framework of this paper through detailed fieldwork; or adding more cases to carry out cross-national and cross-cultural comparative analyses to explore the common and characteristic factors affecting mobilization effects, helping to improve the refinement and efficiency of grassroots political mobilization forms.

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