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# The Soft Notion of China's 'Soft Power'

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## SUMMARY

- Although debates over Chinese soft power have increased in recent years, there is no shared definition of what 'soft power' actually means. The definition seems to change depending on what the observer wants to argue.
- External analyses of soft power often include a focus on economic relations and other material (hard) sources of power and influence.
- Many Chinese analyses of soft power focus on the promotion of a preferred (positive) understanding of China's interests and identities overseas.
- Unpacking broad and inclusive definitions of soft power allows for the identification of different types and sources of power including national image promotion, normative power promotion and 'imagined power'.
- China's emergence as an alternative economic partner seems to be the major source of attraction for other developing states, though it remains difficult to separate hard material factors from softer attraction to values and world-views.

## INTRODUCTION

In an article in *Survival* in 2006, Bates Gill and Huang Yanzhong expressed surprise that China's soft power was not the subject of more attention.<sup>1</sup> In the following years, assessing the sources and extent of Chinese soft power has become a major talking point both within and outside China. It has even become part of official Chinese discourse and policy through the active promotion of positive images and ideas of what China 'is' and what it stands for. It is a topic that is discussed from different perspectives in different places for different reasons: inside and outside China; from those who write about Chinese policy and those who actually make policy (whether in China or in response to China); in government and academic communities; and in popular publications, editorials and commentaries in newspapers and magazines intended to influence publics and/or policy-makers.

Given this diversity, it is not surprising that perceptions of the strength of Chinese soft power vary considerably. Analyses cover the whole spectrum of thinking, from warnings that China is challenging the dominance of liberal norms of domestic and global governance by creating a new 'model' or 'consensus', to arguments that China's normative and ideational appeal is negative and repels rather than attracts. Equally divergent is the basic understanding of what 'soft power' actually is in the first place. Indeed, understanding of whether China has significant global soft power or not seems largely to depend on how soft power is being defined. Or perhaps it is the other way round: the message that the author is trying to get across conditions the definition of what soft power is. Indeed, the more the term is used with such different interpretations, the more meaningless it becomes.

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<sup>1</sup> Gill, B. and Huang Yanzhong (2006), 'Sources and Limits of Chinese "Soft Power"', *Survival*, 48(2): 17–36.

At the risk of oversimplification, the wider the definition of 'soft' power the more chances there are of finding (multiple) threats to the West. And it seems that those who want to alert (maybe alarm) their audience are the most likely to use broad definitions including elements of finance, economics and diplomacy that would normally fall within considerations of 'harder' sources of power. Such broad definitions render the concept of 'soft power' all but useless as a means of distinguishing between different dimensions of power. Material scientists use Moh's scale to distinguish between ten different degrees of hardness in minerals. Some approaches to Chinese power seem to have only two degrees, with military power conceived of as 'hard' and everything else grouped together as 'soft'.

The whole point about identifying soft power in the first place was to make distinctions; to identify different potential sources of power other than force, influence and persuasion.<sup>2</sup> But simply combining numerous non-military elements together under a single 'soft' definition does not allow for nuanced understandings of different typologies and sources of power, nor does it allow policy-makers to develop a range of responses (rather than a single response) to different sources of power.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept was established by Joseph Nye in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990) and further developed in *'Soft Power': The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

## UNPACKING CHINESE SOFT POWER

### The emergence of soft-power discourse(s)

Before the turn of the millennium, sightings of Chinese soft power were extremely rare.<sup>3</sup> But as China began to expand its commercial and diplomatic contacts with other developing states, analysts began to shift their attention away from traditional 'hard' sources of power and influence. Even though many have been critical of the basic ideas put forward by Joshua Cooper Ramo in *Beijing Consensus*, its publication in 2004 did much to focus attention on the idea of a Chinese alternative to the Western liberal order (including within China itself). The following year, a hearing of the US House of Representatives Sub-Committee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations on 'China's Influence in Africa' included considerations of soft power.<sup>4</sup> Although the sub-committee concluded that China did not pose a particularly large threat to US interests, it expressed a concern that China's willingness to deal with anybody irrespective of their political system might 'undo' the progress towards democracy that the United States had been promoting in Africa.

However, much of the early interest in the extent and expansion of soft power focused on Asia after the development of a more conciliatory Chinese policy towards its Southeast Asian neighbours in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> This included an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* by the originator of the concept, Joseph Nye, which inspired considerable debate (particularly in the United States) on the potential Chinese soft-power challenge to the existing East Asian regional

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<sup>3</sup> An important exception was Rosemary Foot's 1997 analysis of Sino-US relations, which considered different dimensions of Chinese power including soft power attraction since 1949. Foot, R. (1997), *The Practice of Power: US Relations with China Since 1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>4</sup> See [http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa22658.000/hfa22658\\_of.htm](http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa22658.000/hfa22658_of.htm). The hearing included a submission by Drew Thompson, written in 2004, that explicitly used soft power to refer to China's growing influence on the continent. Thompson, D. (2004), 'Economic Growth and "Soft Power": China's Africa Strategy', Jamestown Foundation China Brief 4 (24).

<sup>5</sup> For an early example, see Garrison, J. (2005), 'China's Prudent Cultivation of "Soft" Power and Implications for U.S. Policy in East Asia', *Asian Affairs* 32 (1): 25-30.

order.<sup>6</sup> There was the evidence, according to one of the earliest proponents of China's soft power, that 'Beijing is laying the foundations for a new regional order with China as the natural leader and the United States as the outsider'.<sup>7</sup> As with Joshua Kurlantzick's book *Charm Offensive*, published in 2007, these studies tended to deploy broad definitions of soft power that included diplomacy and the use of economic relations as a means of achieving objectives of power politics.<sup>8</sup>

Within China itself, interest in soft power really began to emerge at about the same time. It has become a common issue in official Chinese policy, a popular source of discussion on internet sites, and one of the hot topics of Chinese academia.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, according to Wang Yiwei, a Chinese scholar who has also worked within the Chinese Mission to the EU, 'few Western international relations phrases have penetrated as deeply or broadly into the Chinese vocabulary in recent years'.<sup>10</sup> Perspectives and conclusions vary quite considerably. What China's leaders say on the subject clearly influences how others define and discuss the issue, but this is not a homogeneous discourse with everybody falling in line behind official policy. In particular, there are widely varying evaluations of the extent to which China has such power; and if it lacks it, how it should go about getting it.

But while accepting that trying to generalize about such a range of words and writings is not only very difficult, but in some ways misrepresents the diversity of thinking in China, there does seem to be a relatively widely shared understanding of what 'soft power' means. It is seen largely as a project to internationalize the voice of China so that it penetrates into popular

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<sup>6</sup> Nye, J. (2005), 'The Rise of China's Soft Power', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 December.

<sup>7</sup> Windybank, S. (2005), 'The China Syndrome', *Policy*, 21(2): 28.

<sup>8</sup> Kurlantzick, J. (2007), *Charm Offensive: How China's 'Soft Power' Is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

<sup>9</sup> There are a number of good analyses of the development of debates in China. See Li Mingjiang (2008) 'China Debates "Soft Power"', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2(2): 287–308; Huang Yanzhong and Sheng Ding (2006), 'Dragon's Underbelly: An Analysis of China's "Soft Power"', *East Asia: An International Journal* 23(4): 22–44.; Cho, Young Nam and Jeong, Jong Ho (2008), 'China's "Soft Power"', *Asia Survey* 48(3): 453–72, and Sheng Ding (2008), *The Dragon's Hidden Wings: How China Rises with its 'Soft Power'* (Lexington: Lanham).

consciousness and influences policy communities debating the consequences of China's rise. It is an attempt to promote a preferred Chinese idea of what China is and what it stands for, including an emphasis on the historical roots of current thinking, identity-formation and policy designed to correct misconceptions among overseas audience about Chinese motivations and intentions. By bringing more people across the world into contact with Chinese understandings and preferences, and by explaining their source, the hope is that people will become more accepting of them – ultimately, perhaps, they might even share and support them, but the aim at least in the short run is for them not to be found worrying and/or offensive.

This understanding tends to see soft power as something that needs to be actively promoted, rather than something that states and/or societies simply have. This places an emphasis on the projection of soft power as a state project: something in which individuals can play a role, but essentially a project that is actively promoted (and funded) by the state. This occurs through the (partial) funding of the study of Chinese language and culture in 88 different countries, through the internationalization of Chinese media organizations such as China Radio International, CCTV and foreign-language editions of the *People's Daily*, and through high-profile events that put China in the global spotlight (like the Beijing Olympics). A great example is the video produced by the State Council Information Office showing the preferred official version of a happy, multicultural, inclusive and globally responsible China.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, both Chinese and external discussions about soft power consider other elements and issues as well. But at the very least, this brief outline of the emergence of soft power debates shows that people are thinking about Chinese power using the same term but meaning very different things by it;

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<sup>10</sup> Wang Yiwei (2008), 'Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese 'Soft Power'', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616(1): 258.

<sup>11</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/sciovid>.



hence the need to exercise great care when venturing into these debates. So how can we best try to unpack soft power into its different constituent elements?

The first step is to strip out economic bases of power. As we shall see shortly, it is hard to wholly separate the appeal of China as an economic partner from the specific type of economic partner that China wants to be seen as. But in the first instance at least, there does not seem to be anything 'soft' about wanting to develop good relations with China: to take advantage of its market, to attract Chinese investment and to build trade relations. This then leaves four interrelated but nevertheless separate varieties of what we might call China's 'non-hard' power:

- 'soft power', understood as the latent power of attraction;
- proactive 'national image promotion';
- 'normative power promotion'; and
- 'imagined power'.

### Soft power

Here soft power is conceived as the idea that others will align themselves to you and your policy preferences because they are attracted to your political and social system, values and policies. Ironically given all that has been written and said about China's soft power, it is here that most assessments of broadly defined 'soft power' appear to agree that China seems to have least purchase *vis-à-vis* other states and systems. Indeed, there is a strong case for saying that China's system repels rather than attracts (an understanding that is not lost on Chinese scholars and officials).

But while China might not immediately attract in this way, there is something nonetheless attractive about the country, particularly for elites in developing

states in some parts of the world. Its record of economic growth and poverty-reduction is impressive, and the fact that this has been achieved without giving in to Western pressures to reform and politically liberalize is particularly attractive to those who would like to achieve the same in their own countries. It should be noted that admiration and the desire to emulate China's successes do not necessarily equate with the desire to emulate the Chinese political and social model as well as the economic model (or more correctly, their successful parts). While there are clear lessons that can be learnt from the way in which China engaged the global economy, the attraction of the Chinese system and values may be less important than the idea of China as a metaphor for 'doing it your own way' or an example of what can be done.

Under this definition, soft power can be conceived of as being 'passive' – it is simply there. Or put another way, soft power is in the eye of the beholder; it emerges from how outsiders perceive a country's values and systems from rather than being promoted from the inside. And this suggests that we should conceive of passive, externally given soft power defined as attraction as somewhat different from state-led projects deliberately constructed to promote a preferred national image overseas.

### **National image promotion**

As already noted, in Chinese debates over soft power the emphasis is often on how to ensure that Chinese voices are heard more clearly overseas in an attempt to impose a preferred national image on debates over China's global role and future projection of power. Of course, this is not a unique Chinese project. Many countries use state funding and state agencies to promote an image and idea of that country overseas, and some have been doing it for much longer than China. The point here is not to criticize China, but to point out that the concerted effort by a powerful state to create a national image to influence others is not the same as soft power defined as passive, inherent attraction. So in keeping with the idea of unpacking different dimensions of

non-hard power, it is considered here to be a second and different dimension of power.

Indeed, it is not just that this state project is different from the passive attraction of soft power, but that it was in part at least inspired by China's lack of soft-power attraction. It was built on a realization that the current system and Chinese values (as understood overseas at least) were a potential source of weakness that might turn others away from China and/or lead them to fear its intentions and the consequences of its rise. Convincing everybody that China's rise should be supported might not be possible, but assuaging concerns, reducing opposition and winning over new friends was a realistic ambition. If China's values and system were not to attract, then at least perhaps they might not repel.

This project has entailed looking backwards to what China once was and the creation of a somewhat idealized historical Golden Age. This is most visibly associated with Confucius, through the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms overseas, and with the unveiling of a nearly 10-metre-high statue of the Great Teacher in Beijing in January 2011. In reality, the virtues and values that are at the heart of this Golden Age have a much wider base, incorporating elements of Daoism and Sun Zi's 'The Art of War'. But as 'Confucianism' itself owes at least as much to the later interpretations of Confucius by Mencius and other scholars as it does to the verifiable writings of Confucius himself, it is appropriate that he has become a symbol for a diverse body of thinking.

So the past is being constructed to serve the present. This seems to be partly because it builds on existing interests in Chinese history and traditions in many parts of the world; it plays to the attraction of China as what it was rather than what it is. But it is also because it can be used to build a basis for understanding the way China is today: why it acts in the way that it does and how it will act in the future. It is a means of explaining 'difference' – a different

understanding of the relationship between the individual and the state, a different understanding of how society is ordered and functions, and a different understanding of the nature and purpose of government – different from the dominant Anglo-European model of individualism and liberalism.

### **Normative power promotion**

National image promotion, then, is a deliberate state-led project designed to promote a preferred idea of China's underlying values, cultures and principles by creating an idealized historical starting point. It is this idea of China that those charged with promoting China's image overseas hope will attract others (or at least not repel them) rather than the contemporary political order. It is also informed by the idea that the more people know about China, the more they will accept why it acts in the way it does – for example, over issues such as Tibet or Taiwan.

This focus on history also helps explain China's 'different' behaviour as an international actor. While this project shares the goal of increasing the attraction of Chinese values, it also attempts to appeal to others through the promotion of an alternative view of how the global order should be constructed and how international relations should be conducted. Put another way, if China is given the chance to create an international order to its liking, then it will be an international order which concretely and materially benefits other states (particularly non-Western and developing states). Thus, though it shares elements of national image promotion, it goes further than this and is considered here to constitute a separate (though clearly linked) third 'Normative Power Promotion' element of Chinese non-hard power.

For international relations theorists such as John Mearsheimer, the key to understanding the implications of China's rise was to look backwards to how other rising great powers (including the United States) have acted. For

Mearsheimer, the result of this historical analysis is that if China continues to rise, then the consequences *cannot* be peaceful:

*Why should we expect China to act any differently than the United States did? Are they more principled than we are? More ethical? Less nationalistic? Less concerned about their survival? They are none of these things, of course, which is why China is likely to imitate the United States and attempt to become a regional hegemon.<sup>12</sup>*

The Chinese response is that China will act differently precisely because it is different. Western theories have been developed by studying Western experiences and are based on Western liberal traditions. Because of its unique historical roots, culture(s) and philosophies, China will not act/ behave like the United States or Germany or Britain or other previous Great Powers. Rather, it will be a 'responsible great power' based on a cultural predilection for peace and harmony – just as it was when China was last in a position of ascendancy and power in Asia before the arrival of the West.

So China is a 'different' type of actor in international relations; one that is not seeking to impose its world-view on others, and a power that believes each country is free to do what it wants within its own sovereign territory. Its preferred world order is one that allows for plurality and democracy built on its historical cultural predilection for harmony, virtue and society. Of course, to be different, you have to be different *from* something – and the 'other' in this case is a constructed image of the current world order as dominated by an interventionist unilateralist West that has imposed itself across the world – by force if necessary – in pursuit of materialistic (individualistic) goals. By saying that China does not have a normative position, and defining this against the dominant normative position of the West (or is it really just the United States?), then this 'non-normative ideology' ironically becomes a normative

position in itself. In this respect, it is not so much what China *is* that is important as what it *is not*. Thus the attraction of China and China's preferred view of international relations is predicated on the prior decline of the legitimacy of the 'Western' liberal global order – particularly in those states that had been subject to 'conditional' relations with either powerful Western states or international financial institutions (or both) and even more particularly after the invasion of Iraq.

### **On (not) separating the hard from the soft**

Having argued earlier for the need to take economic relations out of the soft-power equation, we now need to bring them back in again, because the importance of this normative power is enhanced when it is combined with harder financial incentives. To put it bluntly, when China comes calling to do business, it does so without any liberalizing strings attached. To be sure, Chinese investors are increasingly looking for the same guarantees for their investments that others have long been seeking. And not recognizing Taiwan remains a bottom line for continued relations of any sort. But there is certainly no demand to put in place a neoliberal economic order and a liberal democratic political system in order to have commercial relations with China. Here once again we see the importance of China defined as what it *is not*.

This linkage between economic and normative power makes it all but impossible to determine the major source of Chinese power. Are African states prepared to deal with China because of its various forms of non-hard appeal and image promotion, or for more material reasons? Is the increased number of people studying Chinese a reflection of their admiration of what China is today, to learn more about what it was before, or to make it easier to be part of (and benefit from) China's ongoing transformation? Similarly, it is easy to look at Southeast Asia, for example, and argue that the region is

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<sup>12</sup> Online paper available at <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0034b.pdf>.

engaging China because of the success of China's international political marketing, or the appeal of its normative position, or both. It is even possible to argue, as Kurlantzick did, that 'the appeal of China as an economic model' provided the basis for the creation of the ASEAN–China free trade agreement.<sup>13</sup> But it is equally possible (at least) to suggest that if China's rise is inevitable, then it makes sense for the region to do what it can to make the most of the new regional order for pragmatic material and/or national interests.

### **Imagined power**

This brings us to the final form of China's non-hard power. Even after three decades of reform, it is still not so much what China has become that is the focus of attention, as what it will become in the future. The word 'will' is deliberately used instead of 'might', as China's future rise has been taken for granted by many. As a result, there has long been a tendency to develop policies towards China today based on the power that it is expected to have in the future. Thus China has been empowered by the way in which others think about it; perceptions have altered realities. But these external perceptions of China are not based on the supposed soft-power attraction of culture and values. Rather, China's imagined power is typically built on assessments of growing material power and clout – particularly China's future economic power.

It is this imagined power that has played an important role in shaping how many in Southeast Asia responded to China's initiatives towards the region. Developing policies based on an understanding of China's future power also seems to have influenced European policies towards China. And predicting China's future abilities in an attempt to influence policy has been a major priority of much policy-related research in the US for many years. This is not

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<sup>13</sup> Kurlantzick, J. (2006), 'China's Charm: Implications of Chinese "Soft Power"', Carnegie

necessarily a negative phenomenon – having foresight and planning for the future is a good thing. Perhaps it becomes a problem when considerations of what China might become and a range of possible scenarios are replaced by a single version of the future which becomes accepted as the truth and other possibilities are discounted. But even if they are proved right in the long term, China has been externally (prematurely) imbued with power for reasons other than attraction to values and system – and in terms of relations with China's Asian neighbours in particular, it seems that this imagined power has at times been interpreted as soft power.

## Conclusions

Of the four different dimensions, 'imagined power' is becoming increasingly irrelevant through the narrowing of the gap between imagining what China's future power might be and the actual real hard and material sources of power that China already possesses. For the other three, the promotion of an idea of what China is and what it stands for will be filtered by actual experiences of how China acts. There is something of an emerging consensus that there has been a more 'assertive' tone in official discourses since the global crisis, which has reignited existing concerns about China's long-term ambitions; concerns that the focus on national image promotion were designed to allay in the first place. And the 'China' that acts is not just the Chinese state. As the number of Chinese traders, workers, managers (and maybe even tourists) overseas increases, then how they interact with local communities will play an ever more important role in shaping perceptions of China (whether they are representatives of state companies or not).

But the main intention of this paper was not to evaluate the extent of Chinese soft power, but to question the efficacy of deploying ill-thought-out and catch-all definitions. Quite simply, if we want to understand the potential sources of



why other countries act in relation to China, making a simple division between 'hard' and 'soft' power is a very blunt instrument. In particular, while there are indeed ideational and normative drivers for the way in which others treat China, to think that this is a reflection of a growing admiration of (and attraction to) the current Chinese political and social order might be going too far in many cases. Attraction to the Chinese economic record (and a desire to emulate the positive elements of it) is another matter altogether. And the desire to become tied to China's 'inevitable' economic future is even more important. In short, it is easy to infer soft power, as a number of studies and policy analyses seem to have done, when harder material sources of influence have arguably been more important.

While it is indeed possible to consider economic issues under the umbrella of something that is very broadly defined as 'soft power', to do so says little about what is actually driving different policies towards China. And in the process it actually makes it harder to say anything useful about the real and varied bases of Chinese power in the international order. The concept was designed to make us think again about what gives states/countries/societies power in the first place – and broad understandings and definitions of Chinese soft power do not allow us to do so.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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