

Hard Decisions on Soft Power: Opportunities and Difficulties for Chinese Soft Power



Originally published in the Summer 2009 edition of the *Harvard International Review*, co-authored by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and Wang Jisi, Dean of School of International Studies of Peking University. This article is a shorter version of their chapter in *Power and Restraint* edited by Richard Rosecrance and Gu Guoliang.

Soft power in China is not only in the early stages of its formation, it is also based on very different foundations than in the US or other developed countries. These systemic and values-based considerations mean that Chinese soft power may be unfamiliar or unpalatable to those outside the Chinese system. However, China is a rising power is attractive in the developing world, which makes it a force that cannot be ignored.

Broadly defined, power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants. One can affect other individuals' behavior in three main ways: by threatening coercion ("sticks"), by offering inducements or payments ("carrots"), and by making others want what one wants. A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it. They may display this desire by admiring the country's values, emulating its example, or aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In this sense, it is not only important in world politics to force other countries to change by the threat or use of military or economic weapons, but also to set the agenda and attract others. This "soft power"—getting other countries to want the outcomes that a particular country wants—coopts people rather than coerces them. In the debate about the rise of Chinese power and how it will affect the United States and global stability, one question that has received increasing attention in both countries is precisely that of China's soft power. After more fully exploring soft power itself, this article explores the various aspects of this kind of power when

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Wang Jisi, "Hard Decisions on Soft Power: Opportunities and Difficulties for Chinese Soft Power," *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer 2009), pp. 18–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42763291>

applied to the Chinese context. To conclude, it considers how China can best use its soft power to be beneficial to the international community.

Soft Power

Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. This type of power does not belong to any one country. Nor does soft power belong solely to countries. At the personal level, individuals know the power of attraction and seduction. Political leaders have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate.

While not the same as influence, soft power serves as a source of influence. Influence can also rest on the hard power of threats or payments. And soft power represents more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though this constitutes a crucial part of this kind of power. Soft power also includes the ability to entice and attract. In behavioral terms, it means attractive power. In terms of resources, soft power resources are the assets that produce such attraction. Some resources can produce both hard and soft power. For example, a strong economy can produce important carrots for paying others, as well as a model of success that attracts others. Whether a particular asset is a soft power resource that produces attraction can be measured by asking people through polls or focus groups whether they like a country. That attraction may in turn produce desired policy outcomes. But, the gap between power measured as resources and power judged as the outcomes of behavior is not unique to soft power. A similar disparity occurs with all forms of power. Before the fall of France in 1940, for example, Britain and France had more tanks than Germany, but that advantage in military power resources did not accurately predict the outcome of the battle.

In international politics, the resources that produce soft power arise in large part from the values an organization or country expresses in its culture, in the examples it sets by its internal practices and policies, and in the way it handles its relations with others. Governments sometime find it difficult to control and employ soft power, but that does not diminish its importance. The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when the country lives up to these values at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when other nations see the country as a legitimate and moral authority).

The “Soft Power” Discourse in China

Rather than ignoring these gains, the Chinese display active interest in the idea of “soft power.” Since the early 1990s, dozens, if not more, of soft power-themed essays and scholarly articles have been published in the country. In fact, in late 2006,

a Chinese journal entitled *Soft Power* published its first issue, although the contents of the journal are mostly related to the business world.

“Soft power” has also entered China’s official language. In his keynote, speech to the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on October 15, 2007, Hu Jintao stated that the CCP must “enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people’s basic cultural rights and interests.” He recognized in that speech that “culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength.” And while there does not seem to be any official effort in China to define the term “soft power,” Chinese scholars continue to debate its scope, definition, and application. They do not agree with one another as to how that phrase in English should be better translated into Chinese, since at least three Chinese words—*shili*, *quanli*, and *liliang*—carry meanings similar to “power.” Different translations indicate the nuanced and different interpretations of the term “soft power” within the country.

How the Chinese View Their Soft Power

More evidently indicative of these varying interpretations of soft power are the numerous Chinese publications on China’s own soft power, which voice divergent views. Some stress that only a rapid growth of hard power can provide China with the premises on which to enhance its soft power, implying that priority should be given to the increase in hard power rather than soft power. For example, Yan Xuetong, a renowned international relations scholar, contends that the wielding of political power, reflected by showing China’s determination in strengthening military power and deterring Taiwanese independence by force, is more important than spreading out cultural influences. Most other observers, however, do pay more attention to culture as a necessary ingredient, even a core element, of soft power. Many try to portray China’s soft power today by analyzing both its strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, to many people in the world, China’s performance is strikingly admirable in sustaining a high rate of economic growth over the last three decades, which has helped Chinese people get rid of poverty. The economic and social progress would not have been possible if China’s political institutions were not strong and resilient. Whether its performance has provided a development model (the so-called Beijing Consensus) for other countries to follow is subject to debate, but the accumulated economic power and social capital have certainly boosted China’s confidence, pride, and capacity to project its political power and cultural influences abroad.

Chinese analysts tend to attribute China’s recent achievements to its cultural merits and traits. They also tend to believe that along with China’s increased hard power Chinese culture should be more attractive to other peoples. Some also point to ethnic Chinese outside of China as a great asset that can contribute to its soft power. In addition, China’s foreign policy has been highly successful, with (arguably in the eyes of others) its high moral principles and increasingly adroit diplomatic skills.

Meanwhile, a number of Chinese publications admit the limits and constraints to China's soft power, especially when they compare it with US influence in the world. Some of them subtly point to the lack of transparency in government work and rampant official corruption that damages China's image. Some others refer to the "brain drain" China is still suffering from, which reflects insufficiencies in China's educational (and possibly political) system. Still others suggest that the Chinese government should do better in its public relations work internationally. Thus, while no consensus Chinese view of the country's soft power has emerged, debate has been fierce and impassioned.

Interaction Between China and the United States

Having considered the domestic perception of Chinese soft power, it is imperative to look at how Chinese soft power interacts with the rest of the world and particularly the world's most powerful nation, the United States. Just as the national interests of China and the United States are partly congruent and partly conflicting, their soft powers are reinforcing each other in some issue areas and contradicting each other in others. This is not something unique to soft power. In general, power relationships can be zero or positive sum depending on the objectives of the actors. For example, if two countries both desire stability, a balance of military power in which neither side fears attack by the other can be a positive sum relationship.

Undeniably, the polities of these two countries represent different value systems and ideologies. In the eyes of China's political elites, the United States is attempting to change the whole world in its own image, and China as a socialist country led by the Communist Party is without any doubt a main obstacle to achieving US strategic goals. Chinese officials are always sensitive and alert to US schemes involved in what Condoleezza Rice called "transformational diplomacy" that are aimed at spreading out US influences deeply onto other countries' domestic lives. The Chinese also watched closely and worryingly the "color revolutions" in Central Asia and elsewhere, which were seen as staged or encouraged by Americans to undermine existing governments. To this extent, the expansion and wielding of US soft power as part of a "smart" combination of culture, political values, and foreign policy will not be welcomed by China.

To the US general public and elites alike, China under the Communist Party leadership is a political symbol that they find difficult to accept and understand. In general, Americans are favorably impressed with China's great achievements in the last three decades. However, if they were asked if these achievements have been made "because of" or "despite" the Communist Party leadership in China, they would probably be perplexed. They harbor mixed feelings in seeing China's soft power rise in world affairs. Most of these views assume a zero-sum perspective and cast a more negative rather than positive light on China's soft power growth.

In their respective foreign policy pronouncements, Americans and Chinese often have opposite views and goals. While Americans want to maintain their leading

position in global affairs, Chinese are opposing “hegemonism,” a code word for US ambitions to dominate the world, and are promoting “multipolarity,” signifying an apparent decline in US power. Nonetheless, the seemingly opposite goals and ambivalent feelings described above belie some very fundamental realities, according to which the soft power interaction between the United States and China is far from a zero-sum game.

First, there is little evidence that the increase in China soft power is aimed at counterweighing US soft power, or that the “color revolutions,” regardless of their connection to US strategic objectives, are intended to work against China’s influence in those countries where they occurred. The tainted US image in Europe and the Islamic world has little to do with Chinese diplomacy there, and US unpopularity would not directly result in any boosting of China’s cultural and political influences. Just as Yao Ming is not in the United States at the expense of Michael Jordan, Hollywood movies and TV series like *Desperate Housewives* would do no harm to the quality of Chinese movies. Although some people in China may blame the popularity of American cultural products for reducing the attractiveness of Chinese counterparts, a reverse argument can be made that such competitions are needed and healthy. Similar cases can be found in China-US educational exchanges, in which each side benefits from better students and teachers of the other side.

Second, the perception that the Chinese model of combining market economy with one-party rule (Beijing Consensus) will challenge the Western model (involving open markets, democracy, and rule of law), and values are dubious. More research should be done to find out how many, and to what extent, other developing countries are actually able to learn a great deal from the Chinese model, even if some of them do admire the Chinese performance. For what we know, Americans would be pleased should North Korea or Myanmar now begin to move toward the Chinese market economy.

Third, China is using its soft power in diplomacy in ways that may help the United States protect its interests in certain countries and regions. To be sure, China’s actions are taken first of all to serve its own interests, but its quiet efforts to persuade the North Koreans to terminate their nuclear weapon programs and to embark on economic reform do facilitate US policy objectives on the Korean Peninsula. Likewise, Beijing’s quiet diplomacy to persuade Myanmar’s government to modify its behavior at home may pave the way for stabilizing the situation in that country. What is more, China has successfully convinced Khartoum to accept a UN presence in Sudan, which was originally rejected under Western pressures.

Fourth, Chinese guardedness against US soft power is essentially defensive, especially in China’s domestic affairs. Despite their suspicions of US intentions and their doubts about the relevance of American experiences to China’s own path to modernity, Chinese political elites share the basic values of democracy, human rights, rule of law, as well as market economy. As a US analyst observed a few weeks after the 9/11 tragedy, “we used to emphasize that China and the United States hold different values. But, if we compare the gap between American values and the values held by the Taliban and Al Qaeda, differences between China and the United States are negligible!”.

Finally, in reality, Chinese are borrowing many skills and practices that undergird US soft power. A great number of Chinese government officials, military officers, judges, lawyers, among other professionals, have been trained in the United States, and they have made contributions to US knowledge as well. In the field of foreign policy, many Chinese think tanks have emerged in the last decade or so, and the examples they refer to are their counterparts in the United States, rather than those in Japan, Russia, or Germany. The soft power interaction between the United States and China thus need not be seen as a competition, but rather as a more complex combination of competitive and cooperative forces.

Conclusions

It is not surprising to see Chinese leaders and academics referring explicitly to China's soft power and adopting policies to promote it. In a sense, this reflects a sophisticated realist strategy for a country with rising hard power. To the extent it is able to combine its hard power resources with soft power resources, it is less likely to frighten its neighbors and others and thus less likely to stimulate balancing coalitions directed against it. Successful strategies often involve a combination of hard and soft power that are called "smart power." For example, in nineteenth century, Europe, after defeating Denmark, Austria, and France with Prussian hard military power, Bismarck developed a soft power strategy of making Berlin the most attractive diplomatic capital of Europe. During the Cold War, the United States used both hard and soft power against the Soviet Union. Thus, it is not surprising to see China following a smart power strategy. Whether this will be a problem for other countries or not will depend on the way the power is used. If China seeks to manipulate the politics of Asia and exclude the United States, its strategy could be counterproductive, but to the extent that China adopts the attitude of a rising "responsible stakeholder" in international affairs, its combination of hard and soft power can make a positive contribution. In return, much will depend upon the willingness of the United States to include China as an important player in the web of formal and informal international institutional arrangements.

China is far from the United States' or Europe's equal in soft power at this point, but it would be foolish to ignore the important gains it is making. Fortunately, these gains can be good for China and also good for the rest of the world. Soft power is not a zero-sum game in which one country's gain is necessarily another country's loss. If China and the United States, for example, both become more attractive in each other's eyes, the prospects of damaging conflicts will be reduced. If the rise of China's soft power reduces the chance of conflict, it can be part of a positive sum relationship.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

