

# China's Soft Power in the Information Age: Think Again

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many have argued that China has been largely successful at using soft power to bolster its rise to great power status. This essay suggests that the Chinese government—and other authoritarian states—have fundamentally misread the nature of the relationship between soft power and the globally networked, information-rich environment, thus misunderstanding how soft power is accumulated. Because of this, their efforts at deploying soft power over the long term are not likely to be as effective as conventional wisdom would make them out to be.

China's "charm offensive" has been widely documented: China has embarked on numerous soft power initiatives over the last decade, many of them targeting not only the developing world but also the West. The conventional wisdom now takes for granted China's growing sophistication in the nonmilitary arena, giving China credit for expanding its soft power through strategically deploying cultural, media, and economic resources and amplifying these efforts in the global networked information space. Moreover, China's success in controlling and manipulating information within its borders is well documented, and some believe that its success in shaping and containing attitudes within its own borders will lead to success in wielding soft power in the international sphere.

Yet as recent events demonstrate, this view overlooks key characteristics of international relations in the information age. Soft power is more than the mere sum of a number of short-term tactical gains; its real value as an analytical construct lies perhaps in the interpretation of strategic, long-range outcomes. If we accept that the current information-rich environment can help amplify soft power efforts, we must also accept that it brings, over the long term, added transparency and scrutiny.

The contours of diplomatic engagement are changing rapidly, as are the environments in which diplomacy is crafted, honed, and practiced. New media have changed the pace and content of political awareness and provided new tools for diplomacy.

Every global issue now tests the assumptions and practices of traditional diplomacy. Non-state actors—whether benign or malign, constructive or disruptive—now play increasingly important roles in the conduct of international politics and lead us to think differently about global development, conflict, and reconciliation.

These issues, conditions, and actors are helping to refine, and perhaps redefine, what diplomacy means, how it is conducted, and how we examine the new terrain of diplomacy.

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The very environment that makes soft power effective can also reveal the machinations behind more blatant attempts to “influence and attract,” expose the negative consequences of activities designed to gain favor, highlight the distance between a country’s practices and international norms, and make fully transparent the gap between a country’s ideals and its reality. Democracies such as the United States have been dealing with these issues for a long time. For China, it brings a series of challenges.

## **SOFT POWER AND THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION**

As Joseph Nye originally coined the term, “soft power” refers to the ability to influence through persuasion rather than coercion, excluding the more traditional forms of influence such as investment and formal diplomacy. As the term’s usage broadened, however, it grew to encompass a country’s attractiveness as conveyed through culture, diplomacy, multilateral participation, business and other interests abroad, and economic strength.<sup>1</sup> The United States has traditionally been considered to be a soft power leader, although exact measurements of any country’s soft power are difficult. (While some have put forth potential metrics with which to measure soft power resources, such as through opinion polling and outputs like discrete cultural and/or other activities, there is no broad consensus about the extent to which these resources translate into positive, desired outcomes for the country in question.) Hence, most discussions of soft power (including this one) tend to be somewhat subjective.

That said, it is widely believed that the accumulation of soft power resources has been boosted by the revolution in information and communication technologies that began in the 1990s, which saw the rise of network principles and a move from straight hierarchies to more networked forms of organization. Although not all parts of the world are equally wired, the global environment in which values, norms, and ideas are disseminated has thus become much more information rich, with more emphasis on peer-to-peer connections and bottom-

up communication. This multicentric, global environment in which everyone is both a potential producer and a consumer of information—the information-rich environment—has the potential to greatly amplify discrete soft power efforts, whether by states or nonstate actors.

On a broader scale, it also makes it possible for culture, values, and norms to be more widely and deeply shared across country borders than ever before. While this does not necessarily mean that more power automatically flows toward states—in fact, many have argued just the opposite<sup>2</sup>—a government that is able to fully understand and take advantage of the information-rich environment should be able to more effectively accumulate and use soft power.

Some conflate the intersection of soft power and the information-rich environment with public diplomacy by governments, in which communication (ranging from the Internet to cell phones to television to other means) is employed in the service of public relations. While this can be part of how the information-rich environment is relevant to soft power, it is not the only aspect.

## CHINA'S SOFT POWER ACTIVITIES

For the last few years, China's rise has been examined—both uneasily and admiringly—by those who are interested in the country's power to influence and attract. Chinese officials themselves have mentioned soft power as one of the strategic elements behind China's rise, and many of the country's foreign policies are carried out in order to boost soft power capabilities. Some argue that China's soft power strategy has seemed largely reactive and fairly narrowly targeted to bolster economic resources, shore up strategic regional positioning, and/or counter perceived misperceptions about China. Moreover, some China watchers believe that, rather than being deployed specifically to counter U.S. prestige and influence, China's soft power initiatives are undertaken mainly to strengthen national interests.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, many international observers tend to see China's upping of its soft power capabilities as a zero-sum

game with western powers and with the United States in particular. One analyst believes China's doctrines of "win-win" and respect for state sovereignty intentionally form an implicit contrast with the perceived arrogance and interventionism of the United States; meanwhile, China's soft power strategies include focusing on countries whose bilateral relationships with the United States are shaky.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, China's soft power capabilities have been the subject of much attention in recent years, in both the popular press and academia. In the eyes of many, China's growing soft power prowess is a formidable given.

There is some differentiation between China's soft power aims in the United States, Europe and in developing countries. In regions such as Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, where China has been particularly active, soft power initiatives tend to be tied to key resources, such as energy resources. Soft power initiatives are also aimed at persuading countries to renounce official diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and hew to China's "one China" policy. In the West broadly, China's soft power efforts tend toward subtler and less specifically targeted efforts, such as producing international culture and history exhibits and participating in international events (such as the Olympics) while directly engaging foreign publics through language institutes and media. In these latter initiatives, the goal is generally to shift the narrative on China, countering negative perceptions and burnishing China's image to the rest of the world.

There have certainly been interim signs of success. For instance, according to some reports, the pro-China voting bloc led by African nations has managed to obstruct progress in the World Trade Organization (WTO), while within the United Nations (UN), support for Chinese positions on human rights has grown.<sup>5</sup> Particularly while the U.S.'s image suffered internationally during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, China has grown more sophisticated and more determined.

According to one think tank publication, China's soft power activities can be grouped into five major categories. While some would question the inclusion of straight diplomacy and

investment (these are not included in Nye's original definition of the term), the following major categories tend to sum up the country's major initiatives. These include the following:

- **Investment and foreign aid:** China has invested heavily in key resource areas in developing countries, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. For instance, China has negotiated free-trade agreements with regions such as Southeast Asia as well as bilateral economic partnerships with target countries. Because, unlike many other large multilateral and bilateral donors, China does not tie its aid to other issues, such as environmental regulations or human rights and good governance goals, it is an attractive source of foreign investment to many developing countries. China's foreign investment and its foreign aid can sometimes be indistinguishable; investments, for instance, can be undertaken for political reasons.
- **Peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance:** China sends a substantial number of peacekeepers to the United Nations, and also sends medical units to developing countries that contain key resources.
- **Exchange programs:** This category includes such aspects as language and culture. For instance, to promote Chinese language and culture, China has opened three hundred and twenty-two Confucius Institutes all over the world by the end of 2010.<sup>6</sup> China's universities have also seen an influx of foreign students from various countries, even as the United States has tightened visa requirements over the past decade.
- **Diplomacy:** This includes hosting regional fora, inviting leaders to China for study tours, and minting new batches of savvy diplomats. In addition, Chinese officials make numerous trips to regions in which China has strategic interests, in some cases outstripping corresponding visits by U.S. officials.

- **Multilateral involvement:** In order to bolster its reputation as a responsible international stakeholder, China has grown more active in multilateral fora. It has also created new regional organizations (from which the United States is excluded) to expand its regional influence, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to, and sometimes woven throughout these efforts, are activities in which China is directly utilizing the information-rich environment in an attempt to persuade and influence foreign publics. It does so through a number of means, including expanding and internationally orienting state-owned media entities such as CCTV and Xinhua, preparing other domestic media companies to compete in the international arena, increasing Chinese cultural exports (such as film, music, and so on), and assisting media sectors in other developing countries. The aims of such activities appear to be twofold: to “tell China’s side of the story,” and to proactively present the Chinese model (which highlights noninterference—particularly on such matters as human rights—and respect for state sovereignty) as an alternative to what is portrayed as western norms of expression.

While such activities are not necessarily new—some point out that while China has used the term “public diplomacy” only since 2004, the term “foreign propaganda” was employed for decades beforehand to refer to the same activities—the scope and scale are larger now, with more emphasis on decentralization, privatization, and multichannel communications. CCTV, the state broadcaster, has launched international channels, aggressively promoting itself as “your window on China and the world” to international audiences while presenting its insider view on Asia as a direct counterpoint to western media.<sup>8</sup> CCTV is not the only Chinese media organization to launch an international presence; Xinhua, the state news agency, has launched twenty-four-hour Chinese and English language channels. The state-sanctioned competition between CCTV and Xinhua is intentional, and some news reports estimate

each has received approximately \$1.5 billion to expand abroad.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, investments in culture-related soft power initiatives have grown, according to Chinese officials. At a news conference in August, China's vice-minister of the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV (SARFT) noted that the volume of culture-related exports reached \$86.13 million last year, while the overseas revenue generated by Chinese films exceeded \$400 million, an increase over previous years. Such efforts are a key part of the "Chinese Culture Going International" strategy, which has also seen an increase in the number of film festivals sponsored by SARFT as well as Chinese films participating in international film festivals.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, just as the United States has invested millions in training and equipping journalists and media organizations in other countries, so too China has begun to provide assistance to media outlets and journalists in developing countries. According to a recent report from the Washington, DC, Center for International Media Assistance, such assistance consists of direct aid to state media, provision of content and technology, agreements to share news, and training programs and study tours for developing country journalists. The report notes that China's purpose in doing so is to present China as a reliable partner to developing countries while at the same time reshaping the world's media in its own image, counteracting the model of the media as a watchdog on government and powerful interests. China's assistance frequently results in helping authoritarian governments retain control of local media.<sup>11</sup> While not everyone may agree with this interpretation of China's motives, it is true that China has gone beyond merely amplifying its own voice to attempting to affect how other developing countries use theirs.

#### CHINA'S SOFT POWER EFFORTS AND THE INFORMATION-RICH ENVIRONMENT: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

However, just as the information-rich environment can amplify soft power, it also necessarily brings some measure of scrutiny

and transparency, despite any state's best efforts to the contrary. This byproduct has posed challenges to China's soft power strategy.

China's very visible no-strings approach to foreign aid, for instance, has not merely been scrutinized by the rest of the world, but also increasingly criticized as being out of touch with contemporary development assistance philosophy and norms. Projects are frequently carried out without adequate environmental, human rights, and other impact assessments as well as without the type of stakeholder consultation that has become the norm in current development practice. While China's foreign aid approach has won allegiances among the governments with which it seeks to curry favor, its model—openly critiqued in international development circles—draws negative attention around the world for being so contrary to standard norms of development practice, norms that have evolved over many years with the input of numerous governments and civil society. Hence, by focusing on the short-term soft power gains of resource extraction or currying favor, China's policies in this arena are taking China farther away from being considered a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system, itself an overarching soft power goal.

China is facing a particularly sticky conundrum when directly interacting with the global information-rich environment, as its ability to harness the power of this environment is hamstrung by domestic political considerations. Xinhua's new network is said to be modeled on the Arab world's Al Jazeera, yet unlike Al Jazeera, it has not hired top-notch journalists from respected news outlets, and its staff must self-censor, respecting the boundaries of Chinese political sensitivities. According to observers, the English channel is still mainly a translation of “traditional Xinhua propaganda.”<sup>12</sup>

China thus has an impossible choice here: either continue to apply domestic news sensitivities to international operations, in which case those operations will never truly gain respect and influence; or apply a bifurcated approach that censors news for domestic audiences but not international audiences, in which case exposure of its censorship policies will reveal its “profes-



sional” outward-looking face as something of a sham. The weak link for China here is not one of soft power policy but of the underlying nature of the regime itself.

This leads to another key difference between authoritarian countries and democracies in the information environment. Democracies are used to having their warts exposed: exposing warts is, in fact, a key element of democracy. Authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, make their living by concealing warts, particularly to their domestic populations. But in the information-rich environment of international politics, concealing blemishes is more or less impossible. This is not a problem when the goal is simply to accumulate power through fear, coercion, and strategic maneuvering. But when the goal is attraction or persuasion, warts—and, more importantly, the reactions by regimes to their perceived and real warts—can undermine soft power goals.

A recent example crystallizes some of these points. The awarding of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo was met with furious scorn and official rhetoric by the Chinese government. “The general public in China is wondering why the Nobel Committee adopts double standards when dealing with China . . . the decision also shows that a few Westerners are unable to come to terms with China’s growth, and therefore try to tarnish the image of China by all means.” This official rebuttal, in English, carried by Xinhua and published online in the English version of the official *China Daily*, fails to augment China’s soft power on numerous fronts: its petulant and stilted language makes China seem amateurish and certainly not a responsible global stakeholder, and its invocation of Chinese civil society is an inadvertent reminder that, due to China’s information censorship policies, it is simply not possible to directly interact with the general public in China to ascertain what it genuinely thinks.

This last point is perhaps the final blow to real Chinese soft power capability. Soft power is derived from both state and society. Savvy states are able to harness the creativity and vibrancy of their societies for soft power purposes while understanding that it is civil society’s independence from the

state that contains the real persuasive power. When authoritarian states deny the global public the ability to directly access their domestic civil society, they are potentially depriving themselves of a key soft power asset in the information age. For instance, when U.S. standing took a hit around the world during the launch of the Iraq war, at any given time foreign publics could interact with and examine U.S. public opinion directly—through traditional and online media, through blogs, through various forms of social media, and through person-to-person interaction on the Internet, all without U.S. government involvement. In essence, U.S. soft power was protected partly because of the very transparency of the country's democracy. Debate about the country's direction was and is completely open for anyone around the world to analyze and/or engage in, and many frequently do. This transparency, and the ability of U.S. civil society to engage directly with the world either to defend or decry its own government's policies, is one of the things that lends strength to U.S. soft power capabilities—and those of other democracies—in the information environment. It is also the one thing that China, by the very nature of its regime, simply cannot capitalize upon.

Ironically, the very thing the Chinese state is concerned with tamping down—the voice of its people—is the one thing that can help it truly exercise attractive, persuasive power. Consider, for instance, the blunt demand for media freedom issued by a group of retired Communist Party officials and intellectuals a few days after the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize. News of the document was erased in China after being posted on the Internet, but outside the country, it provided the general public a rare glimpse into the complexity of political thought and debate within the country, a complexity that actually redounds to China's favor in the international arena.

## CONCLUSION: WARTS AND ALL

Have some of China's soft power strategies been successful in gaining strategic advantage for the country over the short term? Certainly. More countries have agreed to stop recogniz-

ing Taiwan, and China has indeed benefited from its friendly overtures to resource-rich countries. Yet, over the long term, the very forces that propel soft power advantage will nettle China's attempts to significantly harness soft power in its rise as a global power.

Soft power is, of course, an agglomeration of many elements of state and society. A state cannot unilaterally decide to accrue soft power; it must depend on its inherent "attractiveness," which is generated by its culture, businesses, and most importantly, its people. Ironically, by its very authoritarian nature, the Chinese state is suppressing a fairly natural source of its soft power that could make it genuinely effective: the free-wheeling, uncensored opinions and debates of its citizens. Because China is unused to the type of scrutiny and transparency that operating in the information-rich environment brings, its tendency is to cover up where in fact opening up could provide it more strength.

In the realm of soft power, there has been much discussion of the shift from monologue to dialogue, in which states no longer simply broadcast messages but also receive them, mainly through fostering open dialogue that ultimately demonstrates the inherent attractiveness of their systems. This key tenet of the information age is one that China has yet to digest. One Chinese academic cites the example of the Olympic torch being dogged by protestors of China's Tibet and human rights policies. That taught Beijing a lesson on the importance of being heard, says the academic.<sup>13</sup> But in order for its soft power efforts to prove successful, Beijing may need to realize that it is more important to listen—both to international publics and its own people.

## NOTES

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