



Shaun Breslin

## China Engages Asia: The Soft Notion of China's "Soft Power"

A leading scholar argues for a more nuanced understanding of China's emerging geopolitical influence.

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> How things change. Assessing the sources and extent of Chinese soft power has become a major talking point both within China and without. From within, the consensus seems to be that the global dominance of the US might not be challengeable for some time to come, but there is much that can to be done to promote positive

images of China to the world to allay fears over China's role (and objectives) in the international order. From outside, however, some observers seem to think that China is already promoting new modes of governance that will challenge the existing dominant norms of both development and international relations: modes that perhaps look ever more attractive as Europe and the USA continue to struggle with the legacies of overseas military operations and economic crisis. Much of the discussion

over the reach of this soft power relates to China's engagement of South-east Asia in recent years.<sup>2</sup> It is here, 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>3</sup>

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So the nature of Chinese soft power is increasingly being discussed – and being 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 create policy (be it in China or the response to China) in government and academic communities; and in popular publications, op eds and commentaries in newspapers and magazines intended to influence publics and/or policymakers. It is thus not surprising that perceptions of the strength of Chinese soft power vary. But just as diverse is the basic understanding of what "soft power" actually is in the

first place. Indeed, the definition seems largely conditioned by the message that the writer is trying to get across. At the risk of oversimplification, the wider the definition of what is "soft", the more chances there are of finding (multiple) threats to the West. And it seems that (again not surprisingly) those who want to alert (or perhaps 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 – as if military power is "hard", and everything else can be grouped together as "soft" with nothing in between.

The whole point of identifying soft power in the first place was to make distinctions between different potential sources of power other than force, influence and persuasion.<sup>4</sup> As such, combining all non-hard elements together under a single "soft" definition does not allow for nuanced gradation of *different* sources/typologies of power, or allow for the development of a set of responses to these varied potential sources of power (rather than a single response). In fact, the more the term is used, and used with such different interpretations, the more meaningless it becomes.

## VARIETIES OF "NON-HARD" POWER

In trying to unpack soft power into different constituent elements, the first task is to strip out economic bases of power. As we shall see shortly, it is difficult to wholly separate the appeal of China as an economic partner from the *type* of economic partner that China wants to be seen as. But in the first instance at least, there does not seem to be much soft about wanting to develop good relations with China to take advantage of its market, and/or to attract investment, particularly if the possibility of losing such relations remains implicit for those who do not adhere to China's world view (for example, through the non-recognition of Taiwan).

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This then leaves us with, perhaps, four very much inter-related but nevertheless, separate dimensions of China's non-hard power. The first is *soft power* as traditionally understood; 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 perhaps, given all that has been written and said about China's soft power, it is here that China seems to have least power and 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 scholars and officials in China itself who are interested in China's soft power.

But while China might not immediately attract in this way, there is something nonetheless attractive about China — particularly for developing elites in some parts of the world. The record of growth promotion and poverty reduction really is impressive — and doing this whilst not giving in to western pressures to reform and politically liberalise is particularly attractive for those who would like to achieve the same in their own countries. In this respect, perhaps the attraction of the Chinese system and values is less important than China as a metaphor for "doing it your own way" or an example of what can be done. To be sure, it is usually based on a very partial reading and understanding of what the Chinese "model" might be. But all models are based on selective and partial readings of multiple realities, and the key here is that it grants China a form of power

and influence that does not have to be promoted by the Chinese authorities, and instead has its origins in the way that others conceive of China (and act accordingly).

This "passive" nature of soft power defined as attraction makes it somewhat different from the deliberate and active promotion of a national image to serve specific purposes. This seems to be what much of the Chinese soft power discourse is all about. But given that it is a clear attempt by a very powerful state to influence (if not coerce), it falls short of a strict definition of soft power and is instead suggested here to be a second and different form of power based on "*public diplomacy*" or "*international political marketing*".<sup>5</sup> In the domestic realm, this project seems to start from the realisation that the current system is a potential source of weakness, and instead emphasises the promotion of what China once was. Thus a somewhat idealised golden age is established, that which provides the basis for the way China acts today, and will continue to act in the future. Hence the notion of China as a "responsible great power" that will not act like other rising great powers before it, but because of its historical roots, will instead be a force for harmony and peace. Of particular relevance to South-east Asia here is the promotion of the idea that when China

was last in a position of ascendancy and power in the region, that was an era of peace and stability for all.

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In promoting this idea of a China that will be because of a China that was (or might have been), the intention is to allay fear from those who might otherwise see a rising China as upsetting the status quo. 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, when it comes to issues like Tibet or Taiwan. The third source of non-hard power, what we might call "*normative power promotion*", is also built on the official promotion of a vision of China, but a different vision for a different audience. It is the promotion of a China as a "different" type of actor in international relations; one that is not seeking to impose its world view on others, and a power that thinks each country is free to do what it wants within its own sovereign territory. China's preferred world order is one that allows for plurality and democracy built on China's 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 being 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 USA?), 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.

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### SEPARATING THE HARD FROM THE SOFT

This is where economic relations come back into the soft power equation, underlined by hard financial incentives. To put it bluntly, when China comes calling to do business, it does so without

any liberalising strings attached. To be sure, Chinese investors are increasingly seeking the same guarantees for their investments that others have long been searching for, and not recognising 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.


Having brought economics back in, we now have a sizeable problem. For example, are African states prepared to deal with China because of its various forms of non-hard appeal and image promotion, or because of 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 simply to make it easier to be a part of (and benefit from) China's ongoing transformation? Similarly, it is easy to look at South-east Asia, for example, and argue that the region is 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>6</sup> But it is also possible to simply suggest that it makes sense for the region to do what it

can to ensure that it is not damaged by what happens in China, and to benefit where possible.

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 seems to have been taken for granted by many. As a result, there is a tendency to treat China as it is today because of the power that it is expected to have in the future. Thus, in keeping with the understanding of soft power, China has been empowered by the way others think about China, leading to a shift in behaviour. But contra to the soft power idea, what we see is China's *"imagined power"* – the materialistic and harder sources of power that China is assumed to be on the way to developing, influencing the way that others treat it now.

None of this is meant to deny the importance of soft power. But 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 seems like a very blunt instrument. In particular, while there are indeed ideational and normative drivers of the way that others

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treat China, to think that this is a reflection of a growing admiration for (and attraction to) the current Chinese political and social order might be going too far in most cases. Attraction to the Chinese economic record is another matter altogether. The desire to become tied to China's "inevitable" economic future is perhaps even more important. While it is indeed possible to bring these materialist issues under the umbrella of something that is very broadly defined as "soft power", to do so seems to say 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 basis of Chinese power in the international order if everything is captured by soft power debates. The concept was designed to make us think again about what gives states, countries and societies power in the first place – and broad understanding and definitions of what is Chinese soft power simply do not allow us to do so. 

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#### NOTES

1. Gill, B. and Huang Yanzhong, "Sources and Limits of Chinese 'Soft Power'", *Survival* 48 (2006): 17–36.
2. An issue I have explored in detail in Breslin, S. "Understanding China's Regional Rise: Interpretations, Identities and Implications" in *International Affairs*, 85 (2009) 779–813.
3. Windybank, S., "The China Syndrome", *Policy* 21 (2005): 28.
4. The concept was established by Joseph Nye. See Nye, J. *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (Basic Books, 1990) and Nye, J. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

5. See Wang Yiwei "Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 257–273 and Sun, Henry "International political marketing: a case study of its application in China", *Journal of Public Affairs* 7 (2007): 331–340.

6. Kurlantzick, J. "China's Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power", Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief (No 47, June 2006).