

# CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN EAST ASIA

*A Quest for Status and Influence?*

By Chin-Hao Huang



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1414 NE 42nd Street, Suite 300  
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206-632-7370 Phone  
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# China's Soft Power in East Asia: A Quest for Status and Influence?

*Chin-Hao Huang*

**CHIN-HAO HUANG** is a doctoral candidate in political science and international relations at the University of Southern California. He can be reached at <chinhao.huang@usc.edu>.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines China's use of soft power as a foreign policy tool and analyzes the strategic, economic, and political implications for U.S. policy in East Asia.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

The practice of soft power has become an attractive policy option for China to help demonstrate its commitment to a "peaceful rise." This has resulted in Beijing's attempt to use an increasing array of foreign policy tools beyond material hard power in its interactions in East Asia, including development assistance, trade, and cultural exchanges. However, China's massive push to project soft power has not directly translated into more supportive views of its quest for status and legitimacy. This limited appeal derives from (1) Beijing's decision to demonstrate its resolve on regional territorial disputes with military coercion and (2) the lack of serious political reform in China. With respect to the latter, it will be increasingly difficult for the government to prevent its domestic record on political and civil freedoms from affecting China's international credibility. As the new leadership charts its foreign policy priorities, it will have much to contemplate about why it remains so difficult to generate and sustain soft power commensurate with China's remarkable economic might.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Chinese soft power can be a positive force multiplier that contributes to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific and thus provides Beijing an opportunity to reset the direction of its foreign policy more generally. If Beijing decides to do so, Washington should strengthen existing security and economic architectures to discourage China's more bellicose tendencies and ensure that it embraces multilateralism.
- At the same time, Washington should be cognizant of the frustrations that are bound to occur in bilateral relations if Beijing continues to define national interest in narrow, self-interested terms. The U.S. should engage more deeply with regional partners to persuade and incentivize China to take on a responsible great-power role commensurate with regional expectations.
- The U.S. pivot to the region could be further complemented with an increase in soft-power promotion, including increasing the level of support for Fulbright and other educational exchanges that forge closer professional and interpersonal ties between the U.S. and the Asia-Pacific. Washington should also encourage philanthropy, development assistance, and intellectual engagement by think tanks and civil society organizations that address issues such as public health and facilitate capacity-building projects.



China's rising economic, political, and military power is the most geopolitically significant development of this century. Yet while the breadth of China's growing power is widely understood, a fulsome understanding of the dynamics of this rise requires a more systematic assessment of the depth of China's power. Specifically, the strategic, economic, and political implications of China's soft-power efforts in the region require in-depth analysis.

The concept of "soft power" was originally developed by Harvard University professor Joseph Nye to describe the ability of a state to attract and co-opt rather than to coerce, use force, or give money as a means of persuasion.<sup>1</sup> The term is now widely used by analysts and statesmen. As originally defined by Nye, soft power involves the ability of an actor to set agendas and attract support on the basis of its values, culture, policies, and institutions. In this sense, he considers soft power to often be beyond the control of the state, and generally includes nonmilitary tools of national power—such as diplomacy and state-led economic development programs—as examples of hard power.

Partially due to the obvious pull of China's economic might, several analysts have broadened Nye's original definition of soft power to include, as Joshua Kurlantzick observes, "anything outside the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations."<sup>2</sup> This broader definition of soft power has been exhaustively discussed in China as an element of a nation's "comprehensive national power" (*zonghe guoli*), and some Chinese commentators argue that it is an area where the People's Republic of China (PRC) may enjoy some advantages vis-à-vis the United States. These strategists advocate spreading appreciation of Chinese culture and values through educational and exchange programs such as the Confucius Institutes. This approach would draw on the attractiveness of China's developmental model and assistance programs (including economic aid and investment) in order to assuage neighboring countries' concerns about China's growing hard power.<sup>3</sup>

China's soft-power efforts in East Asia—enabled by its active use of coercive economic and social levers such as aid, investment, and public diplomacy—have already accrued numerous benefits for the PRC. Some view the failure of the United States to provide immediate assistance to East and Southeast Asian states during the 1997 Asian financial crisis and China's widely publicized refusal to devalue its currency at the time (which would have forced other Asian states to follow suit) as a turning point, causing some in Asia to question which great power was more reliable.<sup>4</sup> China also uses economic aid, and the withdrawal thereof, as a tool of national power, as seen in China's considerable aid efforts in Southeast Asia, as well as in its suspension of \$200 million in aid to Vietnam in 2006 after Hanoi invited Taiwan to attend that year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase was coined by Joseph Nye in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* and was further developed in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. See Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Li Mingjiang, "China Debates Soft Power," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 2 (2008): 287–308; James Reilly, "Soft Power in Chinese Foreign Policy: Concepts, Policies, and Effectiveness," in *Chinese Foreign Policy*, ed. Emilian Kavalski (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); and Joel Wuthnow, "The Concept of Soft Power in China's Strategic Discourse," *Issues & Studies* 44, no. 2 (2008): 1–28.

<sup>4</sup> Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, 35–36; and Alice D. Ba, "The Politics and Economics of 'East Asia' in China-ASEAN Relations," in *China and Southeast Asia: Global Changes and Regional Challenges*, ed. Ho Khai Leong and Samuel C.Y. Ku (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 172–75.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Cain, "Chinese Aid Wins Hearts, Twists Arms in Southeast Asia," *World Politics Review*, October 28, 2008; and Thomas Lum, Wayne M. Morrison, and Bruce Vaughn, "China's 'Soft Power' in Southeast Asia," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, RL34310, January 4, 2008.

Despite these efforts, however, it is unclear how much real strategic benefit China has truly gained from its soft-power efforts. Its assertive behavior in the South China Sea and a range of multilateral forums has inflamed significant suspicion and resentment throughout East Asia and driven many states to expand their engagement with the United States, which they view as a potential balancer against China.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, China's economic engagement with developing countries in East Asia causes significant resentment among local populations due to the insularity of the Chinese entrepreneurs and laborers and the perceived lack of local economic benefit from such engagement. More broadly, it is unclear how China's soft-power endeavors complement its hard-power efforts, and how these efforts compare (in substance and in success) with those of its primary regional competitors—Japan, South Korea, and Australia—as well as globally with those of the United States.

This study on soft power in China's foreign policy toward East Asia will first situate and anchor the concept of soft power within the greater theoretical and empirical debates and discussions on international relations in East Asia, particularly regarding China's rising influence in international politics. This analysis employs a broader definition of soft power that includes nonmilitary tools, such as public diplomacy, cultural and educational exchanges, and economic inducements, which are accepted by Chinese policymakers and scholars. Second, the essay will examine how Chinese policy elites understand and conceive of soft power as a foreign policy tool. A survey of the government's official role in promoting China's soft power, as well as an assessment of critiques from Chinese policy elites and commentators, will be provided. Third, the essay will synthesize regional perceptions and reactions to China's soft power, measuring affinity for China's cultural attractiveness through poll data and cross-national surveys. Finally, the study will conclude with an assessment of the policy implications for the United States.

## Conceptualizing Soft Power as a Foreign Policy Tool

The rise of China poses immediate uncertainties to the international system and to the regional and global balance of power. Fueled by the rapid growth and maturation of its economy, China is poised to challenge, and potentially overtake, the United States as the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific. This transition will engender a period of great strategic ambiguity about the region's future course, with an increasing likelihood for instability as neighboring countries make adjustments to accommodate or more directly balance against a new, potentially dominant power.<sup>7</sup>

While the prospects for instability are high, not all analysts agree that this power transition will result in an all-out war. Challengers in the international system rarely overtake the established global power for a number of reasons. Moreover, the passing of the baton from the United Kingdom to the United States indicates that transitions can be peaceful and nondisruptive to the global order.<sup>8</sup> Of vital importance for ensuring that China's peaceful rise can avoid the dislocations caused by previous rising powers will be the degree to which Beijing is satisfied with the current international system. Scholars of international relations observe that China has indeed been a beneficiary of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ian Storey, "Rising Tensions in the South China Sea," National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), interview by Tim Cook, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=151>; Abraham M. Denmark, "China's Navy Gets Its Act Together, and Gets Aggressive," *Wired*, Danger Room web log, April 26, 2010; Carlyle A. Thayer, "The United States and Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Security Challenges* 6, no. 2 (2010), 69–84; and Patrick Cronin, "China's Dangerous Arrogance," *Diplomat*, July 23, 2010, <http://the-diplomat.com/2010/07/23/china%E2%80%99s-dangerous-arrogance/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald L. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (London: Chatham House, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2011): 56–68.

rules of the game and the international institutions that are currently in place. The PRC thus has a vested interest in nurturing and even sustaining the global system to which it has contributed and from which it has gained so many benefits.

To be sure, however, there are stark disagreements between the West and China over such notions as state sovereignty and other normative values, including human rights and humanitarian intervention. China has also been seen as abetting rogue regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang. Furthermore, its reluctance to take on greater responsibilities commensurate with its increasing regional and global influence and capabilities indicates a preference for defining security in narrow, self-interested terms and free-riding off the United States and others in the West. This reluctance to shoulder additional duties, however, is not predetermined and can be overcome. The desire for enhanced status and recognition and concerns over legitimacy and authority are powerful rationales for shifts in foreign policy preferences from encouraging geopolitical rivalry and confrontation to assuming the role of a responsible great power.

The concept of “legitimate great powers” refers to states that are recognized by their peers as having certain privileges, rights, and obligations that play a determining role in affecting the peace and security of the international system.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, in exchange for being provided with these special rights, great powers are expected to uphold the core norms of international society and play an active part in reinforcing them. Great powers are expected to be status-quo powers that do not attempt to radically change the balance of power or overturn the established norms and institutions at the expense of other members.

The practice of soft power then becomes an attractive policy option for a rising power like China to help demonstrate its commitment to a “peaceful rise,” to highlight its distinctive strengths in and contributions to global governance, and to quell external fears about potential revisionist ambitions. In recent years, the Chinese government has attempted to use an increasing array of foreign policy tools beyond material hard power in its interactions in East Asia. These nonmilitary approaches are quite extensive and include foreign development assistance, business activities, trade, and cultural, diplomatic, and economic exchanges, all of which fall under the broad notion of soft power. In other words, the legitimacy that Beijing so eagerly seeks will increasingly derive from such soft-power practices and not solely from its military or economic strength.

According to Nye, the essence of soft power is an actor’s persuasiveness and attraction. In other words, power and influence go beyond the simple aggregation of a state’s population, its tangible military prowess, and its economic assets. States, and even nonstate actors, pursue soft power to burnish their image and to shape the policy preferences and outlooks of other states through persuasion and attraction rather than coercion, so that they are more in line with or have a favorable view of the rising power. This quest for legitimacy, leadership, and authority is what drives states to pursue power politics through nonmilitary inducements and approaches.

Soft power has become more important in recent years, especially in the East Asian context, as some observers and pundits speculate about the likelihood of a power transition taking place in the region. Consider Nye’s prognosis of the growing relevance and importance of soft power as a foreign policy tool:

If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will

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<sup>9</sup> Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2001): 63–95.

more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change. If it can support institutions that make other states wish to channel or limit their activities in ways that the dominant state prefers, it may be spared the costly exercise of coercive or hard power.<sup>10</sup>

Situated in the larger context of power transition in East Asia, the theoretical concept of soft power seems to be an intuitive notion, especially when applied to status-seeking rising powers.

It should be noted, however, that there are some conceptual problems with soft power. The relationship between hard and soft power remains difficult to disentangle. As originally defined by Nye, economic and military capabilities underpin the basis for a country's soft power. This complicates analysts' attempts to pinpoint, demarcate, and measure exactly what constitutes such power. How does one gauge with precision the extent to which the policy preferences of China's neighbors have been realigned to mirror those espoused by Beijing?

To help circumvent and manage some of these theoretical concerns, this essay will treat soft power as an intervening variable that contributes to China's comprehensive national power. Likewise, the measurement of China's soft power will be simplified. This essay will assess the effectiveness of such power based on the available survey time-series data and cross-national polls in the region on the attractiveness of Chinese culture and values. Additionally, this essay will rely on regional experts' qualitative assessments of China's soft power in East and Southeast Asia. These points help address and mitigate the problems associated with the theoretical concept of soft power, although, as suggested by some specialists, "soft power is better understood as a political term deployed for practical purposes rather than as an analytical concept used for scholarly assessment."<sup>11</sup>

Following a broad survey of the current debates and discussions on the international relations of East Asia and the theoretical value of soft power as a foreign policy tool, what then can be said about the actual content of China's soft power? How is the concept operationalized in practice? The next section surveys Western and Chinese critiques and assessments of China's soft power and Beijing's attempts to extend its influence abroad.

## Chinese Soft Power: Theory and Practice

Chinese leaders and policy elites seem to recognize that China's global image and influence can be enhanced by adopting and actively promoting soft power as a foreign policy strategy. In an influential article entitled "Cultural Expansion and Cultural Sovereignty," Wang Huning, a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee Secretariat and political adviser to former Chinese president Jiang Zemin, argued that Beijing should more deeply embed and infuse Chinese culture—i.e., traditional Chinese and Confucian values—into its foreign policy as a defense mechanism against U.S. hegemony in the region.<sup>12</sup> Written in 1993, the article is widely seen as the earliest signal of Beijing's interest in the concept of soft power. Wary of excessive U.S. influence, Chinese scholars and policy elites examined soft power in order to better understand how the United States has been able to sustain its role as the global superpower. They point to Washington's soft

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 160.

<sup>11</sup> Todd Hall, "An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 2 (2010): 189–211.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Huning, "Ruan quanli: Zuowei guojia shili de wenhua" [Cultural Expansion and Cultural Sovereignty], *Fudan Daxue xuebao* 3 (1994): 9–15.



power as a critical element in extending U.S. national power in Asia, and therefore seek to emulate U.S. foreign policy approaches in order to deflect concerns about China's rising power and emphasize the positive message of its "peaceful development." In 2002, for example, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsored a conference on this very topic, seeking input from conference participants about the nature and purpose of soft power in sustaining U.S. global leadership. Some of the early conclusions from the conference indicated that Beijing needed to catch up to the United States with regard to employing soft power to help burnish its global image. In essence, Chinese policy elites seem to conceptualize soft power as a valuable intervening variable or factor that can help enhance the PRC's relative standing and comprehensive national power.<sup>13</sup>

Understanding both the theory and praxis of soft power has thus become a priority in Chinese scholarship, particularly among policy elites. According to data collected by David Shambaugh, references to soft power in influential academic journals in China increased dramatically during 2003–9, peaking at nearly 600 references in 2008.<sup>14</sup> This is in stark contrast with earlier periods: soft power was only discussed in 11 articles from 1994 to 2000 and in 58 from 2001 to 2004. The proliferation of writings on soft power strongly suggests that more Chinese scholars are thinking about the utility and concept of soft power as a foreign policy tool.<sup>15</sup> One scholar, for instance, puts forward the argument that soft power comes from the government's ability to (1) expand its outreach and capacity through proposing, building, and persuading others to join a new set of international institutions and regimes, (2) influence smaller, neighboring states to defer to and recognize China's leadership and authority as the dominant actor and accept the hierarchical relationship, and (3) attract neighboring states to assimilate and adapt to its cultural values, ideology, and political system.<sup>16</sup> Others have emphasized the idea that authority, status, and legitimacy come from the persuasive power and influence of the state's political institutions. In addition to the cultural element, soft power has also been conceptualized in Chinese writings as a question of whether the international community accepts a nation's policies and strategic choices, and to what extent these choices accord with other nations' interests.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, Chinese experts see this official push on soft power as an important policy for both foreign affairs and domestic audiences.<sup>18</sup> Soft power has become a key tool for Beijing to rally popular support for the CCP and promote a sense of national pride.

At the same time, a debate has emerged within China about its soft-power strategy. Some policy elites have called for the senior leadership to more forcefully put forward China's economic success story as a viable alternative to the West's liberal democracy. This has prompted the Chinese leadership to discourage such premature and nationalistic calls for China to confront and compete with the

<sup>13</sup> Yan Xuetong, "The Rise of China and Its Power Status," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1, no. 1 (2006): 5–33.

<sup>14</sup> David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Ji Ling and Chen Shiping, "Guoji zhengzhi de bianqian yu ruan quanli lilun" [Changes in International Politics and Soft Power Theory], *Waijiao pinglun*, no. 96 (2007): 97–105; and Su Changhe, "Zhongguo de ruan quanli: Yi guoji zhidu yu Zhongguo de guanxi wei li" [China's Soft Power: An Example in the Relationship between China and International Institutions], *Guoji guanqian*, no. 2 (2007): 27–35.

<sup>16</sup> Gong Tieying, "Lun ruan quanli de weidu" [On the Dimensions of Soft Power], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* 9 (2007): 16.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Zhu Feng, "Zhongguo ying duo cezhong ruan shili jueqi" [China Should Give Priority to Soft Power Rise], *Huanqiu shibao*, April 30, 2007; and Yan Xuetong, "Ruan shili de hexin shi zhengzhi shili" [The Core of Soft Power Is Political Power], *Huanqiu shibao*, May 22, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and Its Policy Implications: A Comparative Study of China and Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (2008): 425–47.

United States and embrace the so-called Beijing consensus.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the official line has been to promote China's "independent" foreign policy approach and respect for the principle of state sovereignty, as well as to emphasize the notion of peaceful development to assuage anxieties about China's rapid rise to global power and help bolster its soft power.

Over the last decade, China's senior leadership has embraced the notion of soft power as a legitimate and effective tool of foreign policy. A political report released in 2002 at the 16th Congress of the CCP stated that "in today's world, culture intertwines with economics and politics, demonstrating a more prominent position and role in the competition for comprehensive national power."<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, in January 2006, Chinese president Hu Jintao told the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group that the increase in China's international reputation and status "will have to be demonstrated in hard power such as the economy, science and technology, and defense, as well as in soft power such as culture."<sup>21</sup> A state-centric approach has thus been formulated to implement Hu's call for China to focus on and expand its soft power abroad. Beijing has essentially relied on two important strategies of public diplomacy: cultural promotion and media engagement.

Li Changchun, a member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee responsible for propaganda affairs, has taken a leading role in promoting China's cultural image and influence abroad. The various Confucius Institutes, first established in 2004, reflect Beijing's effort to promote Chinese culture and language and are modeled after British, French, and German cultural and language centers. According to some analysts, on average a new Confucius Institute was established every four days between the years 2004 and 2007. As of 2010, there were 322 Confucius Institutes in 94 countries, teaching Chinese to an estimated 100 million people overseas, and the Chinese Ministry of Education has announced its intention to expand to 1,000 Confucius Institutes by 2020.

In order to enhance China's standing and reputation globally, Beijing has also launched an aggressive media campaign. In July 2010, the Xinhua News Agency, a state-owned and state-operated news source, launched CNC World, China's first 24-hour English-language global news channel. That same year, Xinhua also moved its headquarters in New York to Times Square to signal its ambition to become a competitive and leading global news source. The purpose of the internationalization of China's media is to broaden its vision and to project and capture Chinese perspectives. As Li states, "We [China] must go 'global' by strengthening our foreign language channels, expanding our partnership with foreign television organizations, [and] vigorously pushing for the international transmission of our television programs, so that our images and voice can reach thousands of homes in all parts of the world."<sup>22</sup>

Chinese policy elites and scholars seem to have placed a high premium on improving and expanding the state's media-projection capability and the effectiveness of its mass communications. The motivation for doing so comes from continued Chinese skepticism toward the Western media, which is viewed as being inherently biased and hostile. A Chinese study found that the Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters, and Agence France-Presse produce 80% of the daily news stories worldwide. Moreover, the study found that "the 50 top Western transnational media

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<sup>19</sup> Feng Jian and Qian Haihong, "Gonggong guanxi shiye xia de Zhongguo ruan shili jiangou" [China's Soft Power Construction in the Perspective of Public Relations], *Xinwen Daxue* 2 (2007): 76.

<sup>20</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Political Report to the 16th Chinese Communist Party Congress," November 8, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Li Mingjiang, "Domestic Sources of China's Soft Power Approach," *China Security* 5, no. 2 (2009): 34–49; and Ma Lisi, "Guanyu woguo jiaqiang ruan shili jianshe de chubu sikao" [Preliminary Thoughts on Accelerating China's Soft Power Building], *Dang de wenxian* 7, 35–38.

<sup>22</sup> Li Changchun, "Zai jinian Zhongguo dianshi shiye dansheng ji Zhongyang Dianshitai jian tai 50 zhounian dahui shang de jianghua" [Speech on the Commemoration of the Television Industry in China and the 50th Anniversary of the Creation of China Central Television], *Yangguang ribao*, December 20, 2008, [http://news.china.com/zh\\_cn/news/100/11038989/20081223/15248144.html](http://news.china.com/zh_cn/news/100/11038989/20081223/15248144.html).

corporations hold 90 percent of the world communication market. The United States alone controls 75 percent of the TV programs in the world. In many developing nations, 60 to 80 percent of the content in TV programs comes from the U.S.”<sup>23</sup> The Western dominance of media and mass communications has resulted in what the study characterizes as “cultural hegemony” and “media imperialism.” This finding becomes all the more troubling to the Chinese state when reports, such as those on the 2008 and 2009 riots and subsequent government crackdown in Tibet and Xinjiang, tarnish Beijing’s reputation and image.<sup>24</sup> Investing in global news and media outlets is thus part of a strategy to disseminate and propagate the central government’s worldview to foreign audiences.

It remains to be seen whether Beijing’s soft-power strategy, focusing on cultural promotion and mass media, will be effective. Internally, however, Chinese policy elites seem to be less than sanguine about the current state of Chinese soft power. While they publicly acknowledge that there is great potential in the use of soft power, the consensus seems to be that China’s soft power still pales in comparison to that of the United States and other regional powers.<sup>25</sup> There is also a sense of frustration: in spite of the PRC’s rapid economic development and status as the second-largest economy in the world, its soft power lags significantly behind its material hard power. Chinese policy elites concede that China’s domestic political institutions, the lack of innovative research and development, and an antiquated educational system all contribute to a weak, struggling, and less than ideal or appealing national image.<sup>26</sup>

More notably, in an article published in an internally circulated foreign affairs journal, a specialist opined that the “appreciation of Chinese culture and interest in learning Chinese language would not automatically increase...support for or understanding of China’s policy. It is impossible to ascertain to what degree we can achieve our political objectives by projecting our cultural soft power.”<sup>27</sup> This negative outlook mirrors the views of Chinese policy elites and officials in a recent forum on soft power and China’s public relations convened at Fudan University. In his keynote address to the forum participants, Wang Guoqing, deputy director of the State Council Information Office, admitted that China’s soft power lags behind its hard power. He indicated that China should focus on extending and building up its mass communications and media outreach abroad and expand the export of Chinese cultural products. Wang also suggested that China push the political and economic model of the Beijing consensus as a counterweight to Washington’s liberal democracy.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most problematic hurdle for China’s projection of soft power abroad is its record on political reform, particularly on human rights. Some Chinese scholars have attributed the state of domestic political institutions as a limiting factor for China’s soft power, but this explanation has not been thoroughly expounded in Chinese academic or policy circles.

The limited political reform on the domestic front has stifled the development of civil society in China, especially regarding political and religious liberties and the freedom of speech and the press. This remains problematic for the United States, as well as for much of the world, including the developing South. In Southeast Asia and Africa, political leaders and civil society organizations have, on their own initiative and without Western coercion, enshrined the universality of human

<sup>23</sup> Yao Xu, “Gonggong guanxi de chuanbo shouduan yu Zhongguo ruan shili jiangou” [Communication Methods of Public Relations and China’s Soft Power Building], *Xinwen qianshao* 7 (2007): 93–94.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Zhan Yijia, “Zhongguo shi ruan shili daguo ma?” [Is China a Nation with Strong Soft Power?], *Shijie zhishi* 20 (2006): 5.

<sup>26</sup> Huang Renwei, “Ruan shili yu guojia anquan” [Soft Power and National Security], *Xuexi yuekan* 1 (2003): 23–28.

<sup>27</sup> Gao Yifei, “Zhongguo de ruan shili zai Ouzhou de shijiao” [Chinese Soft Power in European Perspective], *Gaige neican* 32 (2010): 38–40.

<sup>28</sup> Feng and Qian, “Gonggong guanxi shiye xia de Zhongguo ruan shili jiangou.”

freedoms into the charters of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union, respectively, and vowed to commit to these principles. The Chinese government's behavior at home and abroad on human rights issues likewise seems to be at odds with emerging trends in the Asia-Pacific. As such, it will be increasingly difficult for China to be accepted as a regional or global power. As long as Beijing maintains a state-centric approach to soft power (and inevitably projects these restricted views on political and civil freedoms), it will be difficult for outside observers in the region to be persuaded that the PRC's appalling domestic policies are not reflected in its actions abroad.

## Measuring Chinese Soft Power: Regional Reactions and Perceptions

Having discussed how Chinese policy elites view, conceptualize, and promote soft power in the previous section, it is important to also gauge regional reactions to China's "charm offensive." How effective is China's quest for status through soft-power approaches? Nye identifies survey data as one of the most useful ways to measure and assess cultural attractiveness. In addition to poll results, this section will examine the reactions, commentaries, and responses by regional specialists in order to assess China's soft power and overall image in East and Southeast Asia in recent years.

In the past, the United States has been called a soft-power superpower in East Asia and beyond, but many wonder whether the United States is losing this title to China, at least in East Asia, because of declining U.S. attention to the region and resentment of recent U.S. foreign policies. There is much recent literature indicating a causal relationship between a simultaneous and supposed decline of U.S. soft power and the rise of Chinese soft power. China's soft power has been called "the most potent weapon in Beijing's foreign policy arsenal,"<sup>29</sup> but there remain key questions surrounding it, such as how potent this weapon has been and how well Beijing has utilized soft power since adopting its "reform and opening" policy in 1978. It is clear that China has effectively established itself as a global economic superpower, but can the same be said in regard to soft power?

These questions can be addressed through examining the existing body of literature and information about China's soft power in East Asian nations. Although much of the literature claims that the United States has completely lost its position to China as a regional soft-power superpower, a more recent, thorough, and methodical study by Gregory G. Holyk indicates that this is not the case.<sup>30</sup> To date, Holyk's study stands out as one of the most comprehensive and methodologically rigorous assessments of China's soft power. This essay will report the findings of his research and qualify the regression analysis with additional and more in-depth regional commentaries. Holyk breaks down soft power into five components (economic, human capital, cultural, political, and diplomatic) and measures each component by conducting cross-national surveys in Japan, South Korea, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the United States. He ultimately shows that, when analyzed into its constituent parts with proper survey questions, Chinese soft power in East Asia appears to be on the rise but is still relatively weak.

According to Holyk and other Western observers, the rise of China's soft power is correlated to the country's growing hard power. Chinese military and economic influence in East Asia has grown at an astoundingly rapid pace since the 1980s, but at the same time the influence of Chinese

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<sup>29</sup> Benjamin I. Page and Tao Xie, *Living with the Dragon: How the American Public Views the Rise of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Gregory G. Holyk, "Paper Tiger? Chinese Soft Power in East Asia," *Political Science Quarterly* 126, no. 2 (2011): 223–54.



soft power has grown as well. Beijing has implemented a diplomatic charm offensive in an attempt to increase its influence in the region and change its image “from threat to opportunity; from danger to benefactor.”<sup>31</sup> As part of this strategy, China has begun to portray itself as a nation seeking positive and progressive ties with other countries by increasing its diplomatic efforts in East Asia, especially with South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. It has pursued nonthreatening diplomacy and policy approaches, increased regional trade, become an active member in regional organizations such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit, and heavily increased its unconditional foreign aid, all of which have special appeal to the citizens of developing nations.

However, the issue with Holyk’s study, as with most other studies of China’s soft power, is that it was conducted before many recent major events: China’s passing Germany and Japan to become the world’s second-largest economy, China’s stubbornness and assertiveness over territorial disputes in the South China Sea and beyond, the intensified conflict between North and South Korea, the peak of the U.S. financial crisis, Barack Obama’s re-election, and the U.S. pivot or rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. The regional balance of soft power will also be affected by the recent leadership shifts in both China and the United States. Thus, even if one were able to measure the balance of soft power in East Asia at this very moment, it would be almost impossible to say if the balance will remain the same in a few months’ time. For this reason, although aspects of this study provide an opportunity to better understand regional reactions to China’s soft power, it should be noted that there remains a time lag with the research and understanding of evolving political, military, economic, and soft-power approaches. As such, the inclusion of qualitative analysis of recent territorial conflicts, as well as commentaries on China’s soft power from regional and area-studies experts, will help extend the initial findings based on Holyk’s study and other cross-national surveys and public opinion polls.

### *Perceptions of China’s Soft Power in East Asia*

Holyk’s study seems to be corroborated by recent surveys of international public opinion. The results of attitudinal studies of China’s soft power in Australia, Japan, and South Korea all indicate a decline in affinity for China, despite its expanding business, trade, and economic ties with these countries.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, in 2008 the Chicago Council on Global Affairs led a pioneering study on regional attitudes, comparing the effects of the soft power of China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States in Asia. This cross-national survey finds that China ranked the lowest. More interestingly, the regional affinity for China has seen a steady decline since 2004. Jung-Nam Lee, a regional specialist, observes the following:

China’s soft power in the region remains at a low level compared to its hard power. In fact, China’s soft power level in the region is not only lower than that of the United States and Japan, but even that of South Korea. Accordingly, China’s hard power rise in the region has been viewed by neighboring nations as uncomfortable and even intimidating.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Alan Shearer, “Sweet and Sour: Australian Public Attitudes Towards China,” Lowy Institute, Analysis, August 11, 2010; Jung-Nam Lee, “The Rise of China and Soft Power: China’s Soft Power Influence in Korea,” *China Review* 8, no. 1 (2008): 127–54; and Mindy Kotler, Naotaka Sugawara, and Tetsuya Yamada, “Chinese and Japanese Public Opinion: Searching for Moral Security,” *Asian Perspective* 31, no. 1 (2007): 93–125.

<sup>33</sup> Lee, “The Rise of China and Soft Power.”

It is worth noting that this commentary was made before the flare-up of territorial conflict around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as well as in the South China Sea.

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs data also indicates that a substantial majority of those surveyed in Japan and South Korea (89% and 77%, respectively) harbor serious concerns about China's rise as a regional and global power, having responded that they are either "somewhat" or "very" uncomfortable with this prospect. Likewise, Holyk's study finds that the Japanese general public has consistently rated China's overall soft power in Asia behind that of both South Korea and the United States. In terms of economic soft power in East Asia, Japan rates the United States significantly higher than China or South Korea, with China trailing only slightly behind South Korea. Japanese respondents also rate China's human capital soft power well behind that of the United States, due to the high regard the Japanese public has for the U.S. university system, as well as for research and development in the science and technology sectors. China generally ranks behind Japan when measuring human capital soft power in Asia. According to the Japanese, China ranks behind the United States but ahead of South Korea in terms of cultural soft power. China's authoritarian political system and perceived disrespect for human rights harm its political soft power in the eyes of Japan and other established regional democracies (such as the United States and South Korea), and it is consequently rated much lower in this category by the Japanese than either the United States or South Korea.

In South Korea, the general public tends to rate China's overall soft power more positively than do the people of Japan. Yet Koreans still rate the United States and Japan higher in Holyk's study. South Koreans believe that the United States has the greatest economic soft power, followed closely by Japan, with China trailing both countries by a significant margin. In terms of human capital soft power, Koreans rate China lower than the United States and Japan but generally on par with or above South Korea. They also rate the United States and Japan ahead of China in terms of cultural soft power, while the PRC's authoritarian political system and questionable human rights record land China much further behind the United States and Japan in terms of political soft power.

Some observers posit that Seoul's proximity to Beijing and geostrategic considerations regarding North Korea may help explain why South Koreans make less of a distinction between China's soft and hard power. According to Scott Snyder, "about two-thirds of South Koreans held negative views toward China at the end of 2011. Another poll taken last month showed that 75% of South Koreans were concerned about China's power and influence." He notes that, as a result, "we are seeing unprecedented support for the U.S.-Korean alliance. But at the same time, it is very clear that South Koreans do not want to choose between the United States and China. That is actually the 'sweet spot' for Korea, to avoid making a choice."<sup>34</sup>

Taiwan's public opinion about Chinese soft power is perhaps more mixed and unique than that of China's other East Asian neighbors. Given the population's close ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties to China, and in light of the current administration in Taipei's policy preference of rapprochement and engagement with Beijing in recent years, public perception of China appears to be wary but less pessimistic than it had been. A good indicator of this recent trend has been the preference of Taiwan's public and policy elite for maintaining the status quo in cross-strait relations. According to one observer, those coming into positions of power now are "less emotional and ideological" and

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<sup>34</sup> Transcript notes from an NBR workshop entitled "China's Soft Power in East Asia," held on October 26, 2012, in Washington, D.C. For further discussion, see Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, and Security* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2009).

“more comfortable with the status quo.”<sup>35</sup> This generational shift can be traced to the absence, among younger cohorts, of the collective memory that had driven Kuomintang (KMT) policy for decades. Current leaders and an increasing number of their supporters did not live through the traumatic events in mainland China that caused the KMT to establish its outpost on Taiwan over 60 years ago. Thus, the degree of pragmatism evident in Taiwanese views of China continues to rise with time.

Attitudes among the general public toward Taiwan’s future also reflect this pragmatic and moderate trend. Official polls conducted in August 2012 by Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council found that nearly 58% of the respondents favored maintaining the status quo either indefinitely or with some sort of decision deferred indefinitely. Those who favored an immediate declaration of independence or immediate unification with China were in the minority, receiving only 7% and 0.9% of support, respectively. Another 2012 study measuring changes and trends in the political attitudes of Taiwanese voters, conducted by the Election Study Center at the National Chengchi University, found that the percentage of the population supporting the status quo indefinitely has seen a threefold increase, from roughly 10% in 1994 to 30% in 2012. Irrespective of party affiliation or national identity, attitudes of Taiwanese voters in recent years seem to be characterized by moderation and pragmatism.

A few casual observations illustrate the idea that more normal relations across the Taiwan Strait are the new *de facto* reality. Students attend university back and forth across the strait, while business, trade, and economic links continue to expand. Previously unthinkable connections, such as the use of China Central Television (CCTV) footage by a Pan-Green-oriented television station, are likewise becoming more common. The signs of change toward a status quo that eschews both unification and independence are clear. Moreover, it is difficult to find evidence of movement away from this moderate position toward either of those extremes. For many in Taiwan, the situation at hand seems better than the salient alternatives of immediate unification or independence. One U.S. scholar argues that “even if the Taiwanese are reluctant, for practical reasons, to support *de jure* independence, they have a strong preference for the *de facto* independence Taiwan currently enjoys, so unification will not be accomplished easily.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the staying power of the status quo will likely be a significant factor in shaping cross-strait relations.

Even though the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which in the past has tended to favor policies that enhance Taiwan’s *de facto* independence from the mainland, did not win the presidency in the early 2012 elections, there is a new pragmatism within the party. The DPP, having learned its lesson the hard way with two successive losses in presidential elections, is reportedly considering a more flexible policy toward Beijing, one that would encourage party leaders to engage in exchanges and interface with PRC officials and policy elites. Under the new party chairperson, Su Tseng-chang, the DPP made the first move in this direction by reopening its mainland affairs office to carry out future policy research and cross-strait engagement. More recently, in October 2012 a DPP party elder, former premier Frank Hsieh, made a landmark visit to Xiamen and Beijing in part to signal the future prospects for change and flexibility in the DPP’s platform, as well as to cultivate greater mutual understanding and reconciliation across the Taiwan Strait.

Yet despite such emerging pragmatism in Taiwan, there is still some wariness about the scope and pace of rapprochement with China. Perhaps most troubling to Taiwanese voters is the nature of

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<sup>35</sup> Shelley Rigger, “Rising Rationalists: The Next Generation of Leadership in Taiwan,” in “Emerging Leaders in East Asia: The Next Generation of Political Leadership in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan,” NBR, Project Report, September 2008, 135.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

the regime in Beijing and its unbridled and excessive nationalism, giving them pause and increasing skepticism about the underlying motives behind China's projection of soft power abroad. As one scholar observes, Taiwan policy elites see several limitations behind China's continued struggle to win the "hearts and mind" of people in Taiwan and beyond, including

temptations to pride and assertiveness that come from China's volatile mix of resentment over historic harms and slights (dating to the nineteenth century as well as the post-Tiananmen crisis ostracism); the emotional popular nationalism that the Chinese leadership has cultivated, in substitution for Communist ideology, as a source of legitimacy but that has proved difficult for the regime to control; the divisions within China's famously fragmented Party-State over the content; and a foreign policy culture that retains a significant realist strain skeptical of soft power or believing that soft power (including international respect for and deference to Chinese aims and interests) flows relatively directly and completely from the hard power of national strength (whether strategic or economic).<sup>37</sup>

Others compare and contrast Taiwan's and China's approaches to soft power and find that Taiwan's practice of soft power is deeply embedded in the island's story of successful transformation from an authoritarian regime to a liberal democracy.<sup>38</sup> Some Taiwanese observers also point to Taiwan's more vibrant civil society and argue that traditional Chinese culture has been better preserved because it did not experience the Cultural Revolution—a social-political movement that Mao Zedong carried out from 1966 to 1976 during which historical, artistic, religious, and other cultural elements in Chinese society were purged, destroyed, and dismantled.

As a result, public sentiment in Taiwan about relations with China and Beijing's soft power remains lukewarm at best. The Taiwanese electorate now seems to be less antagonistic toward China, given the close ethnic and linguistic practices and ties, and has welcomed more frequent cultural, educational, and people-to-people exchanges in recent years. Neither friend nor enemy, Beijing represents a reality acknowledged by Taipei. The result is an increasingly stable situation marked by neither mounting confrontation nor positive integration.

### *Perceptions of China's Soft Power in Southeast Asia*

China's massive, state-centric effort to promote its soft power has also drawn mixed results in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, cross-national data from the Pew Global Survey and the 2010 BBC World Service poll shows that views in Southeast Asia toward China tend to be more positive than in East Asia.<sup>39</sup> The survey results indicate two interesting trends. First, the wealthier and developed countries of East Asia, particularly Japan and South Korea as discussed earlier, as well as those in Europe and North America, have more negative views and perceptions of China. On the other hand, the developing countries in Southeast Asia have a lukewarm or less pessimistic outlook. Second, this view is reflected in the public sentiment about China's economy, which is intrinsically linked to China's soft-power projection (e.g., cultural and language promotion and the mass media). These trends indicate that China's continued public diplomacy and image-building exercises in recent years are yielding some positive benefits.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques deLisle, "Soft Power in a Hard Place: China, Taiwan, Cross-Strait Relations and U.S. Policy," *Orbis* 54, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>38</sup> Wang and Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and Its Policy Implications."

<sup>39</sup> "Global Views of United States Improve While Other Countries Decline," BBC World Service, April 18, 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/160410bbcwpoll.pdf>.



According to Holyk's findings on Indonesia, the largest economy in Southeast Asia, Indonesians view the United States and Japan as nearly equal in terms of overall soft power.<sup>40</sup> The two countries are ranked the highest in the survey, with China behind them by a negligible amount. South Korea is ranked significantly lower than these three countries in terms of overall soft power. China's economic soft power is rated highly and seen as comparable to that of both the United States and Japan, with South Korea ranking last among the regional powers. In terms of human capital soft power, Indonesians rank China behind the United States and Japan, respectively, but significantly ahead of South Korea. China ranks highest in terms of cultural soft power, followed by Japan, South Korea, and the United States. Interestingly enough, Indonesians rank Beijing's political power on par with Washington and Tokyo and ahead of Seoul, indicating that they believe China's respect for human rights and its political system are on par with the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

These figures seem to corroborate regional experts' assessments of the latest developments in China's relations with Indonesia. According to Ernest Bower, China consistently ranks high in overall favorability. In a July 2011 poll, nearly 70% of Indonesian respondents held a highly favorable view of China overall, 62% held a highly favorable view of China as an economic power, and 44% held a highly favorable view of China as a military power. Bower explains that this is because "Indonesians have not seen China as a direct military threat—although, if you ask them now, twenty years out, Indonesians see China as a more likely strategic competitor or foe." This sense of pragmatism is also reflected in how Indonesians view China's rise. As Bower puts it, Indonesians "do want China to succeed economically. They are in the middle of a great democratic process themselves, but they don't want to take on Chinese economic models, culture, and history as their own at all. To the extent that foreign, popular culture is effective, it is American or Korean, not Chinese."<sup>41</sup>

China's economic attraction is perhaps most acute in the less-developed economies of Southeast Asia, namely Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. As one observer puts it, many countries in the region have been looking for a developmental model that works for them.<sup>42</sup> The regional reactions to the 1997 financial crisis show that some degree of state intervention and Keynesian economics is preferred, following the success of hybrid developmental models in Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. The Chinese model is also increasingly attractive because of the heavy and important role the government plays in managing the economy.

China's soft-power strategy in Southeast Asia tends to focus on the positive, win-win aspects of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. Derek Mitchell and Brian Harding explain:

Its [China's] short-term goal is to reassure the region of its peaceful intent, prevent the development of anti-China coalitions, and build ties that facilitate regional stability and China's internal development....China's strategy in Southeast Asia has been extremely successful, transforming its image from that of an ideological provocateur into that of a welcome and pragmatic partner for peace and prosperity. This has been achieved through consistent and strategic high-level attention, adept day-to-day management of relations, and bold policy initiatives.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Holyk, "Paper Tiger? Chinese Soft Power in East Asia," 240–45.

<sup>41</sup> Transcript notes from an NBR workshop entitled "China's Soft Power in East Asia," held on October 26, 2012, in Washington, D.C.

<sup>42</sup> Ignatius Wibowo, "China's Soft Power and Neo-Liberal Agenda in Southeast Asia," in *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics*, ed. Li Mingjiang (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 207–23.

<sup>43</sup> Derek J. Mitchell and Brian Harding, "China and Southeast Asia," in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in the Developing World*, ed. Carola McGiffert (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009).

In Vietnam, another key member of ASEAN that has gained newfound geostrategic importance in light of the U.S. pivot to the region, the Holyk study finds that general public opinion sees China on par with the United States and Japan in terms of overall soft power. South Korea is rated last in terms of its overall soft-power influence, while Japan is rated the highest, followed by the United States and then China. The latter's economic soft power is again rated highly and seen as comparable to that of both the United States and Japan, with South Korea again ranking last of the regional powers. China ranks behind Japan, the United States, and South Korea, respectively, in terms of human capital soft power. In terms of cultural soft power, however, China ranks first, followed by South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

Holyk's study, however, predates the recent controversy and increased tension in the South China Sea. As L. Gordon Flake sees it, the perception among policy elites in Vietnam has turned more negative and critical toward China: "No matter what the issue, China always comes up in discussions [with Vietnamese counterparts]. In Northeast Asia, the Japanese and Koreans seem to be more discreet about this, but the Vietnamese are quite direct in expressing their concerns about China."<sup>44</sup>

China's recent posturing and confrontation with other claimant states such as Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea have caused great discomfort among Southeast Asians, tarnishing Beijing's reputation and undermining its soft-power projection. A recent analysis of China–Southeast Asia relations finds that the situation has complicated China's outreach and public diplomacy in the region.<sup>45</sup> The optimism among some Asian and Western commentators that China had retreated from its assertive actions in the South China Sea during 2009–11 and would focus on reassuring its neighbors crumbled during the height of the South China Sea crisis in 2012.

Chinese authorities have taken extraordinary measures and used impressive demonstrations of hard and soft power, including security, economic, and diplomatic leverage, to get their way in the South China Sea. For the first time, China employed its large and growing force of maritime and fishing security ships, applied targeted economic sanctions, and issued repeated diplomatic warnings to intimidate and coerce Philippine officials, security forces, and fishermen into respecting Chinese claims to the disputed Scarborough Shoal. It has also showed stronger resolve to more fully exploit contested fishing resources in the South China Sea. Beijing deployed one of the world's largest fish-processing ships (32,000 tons) to the area and dispatched a fleet of 30 fishing boats, supported by a supply ship, to fish in disputed waters. At the same time, China created a multifaceted administrative structure, backed by a new military garrison, that covers wide swaths of disputed areas in the South China Sea. The coverage is reportedly in line with the broad historical claims depicted in Chinese maps with a nine-dashed line encompassing most of the South China Sea. Foreign experts see these large claims as providing justification for a state-controlled Chinese oil company to offer nine new blocks in the South China Sea for development by foreign oil companies. These blocks are far from China but remarkably close to Vietnam, with some of the areas already being developed by Vietnamese companies. Amid these events, the more moderate assertion by a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson on February 29, 2012—that China did not claim the "entire South China Sea" but only its islands and adjacent waters—has been all but absent.

In terms of multilateral diplomacy, China advanced cooperative relations with the 2012 ASEAN chair, Cambodia, thereby insuring that South China Sea disputes did not receive prominent treatment

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<sup>44</sup> Transcript notes from an NBR workshop entitled "China's Soft Power in East Asia," held on October 26, 2012, in Washington, D.C.

<sup>45</sup> The following discussion of recent development in the South China Sea draws on Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang, "China–Southeast Asia Relations: China Muscles Opponents on South China Sea," *Comparative Connections* 14, no. 2 (2012): 61–72.

at this year's ASEAN ministerial meeting. As a result, there was sharp division at the meeting on how to deal with China that resulted in a remarkable display of ASEAN disunity. For the first time in the 45-year history of the organization, the ASEAN ministers failed to agree on a communiqué.

Chinese officials and the state-run media have endeavored to contain and compartmentalize the South China Sea disputes. Their public emphasis has remained heavily on China's continued pursuit of peaceful development and cooperation during meetings with Southeast Asian representatives and other concerned powers, including the United States. Thus, what has emerged is a Chinese approach with at least two general paths. On the one hand, Beijing is adopting a more forceful posture vis-à-vis the Philippines, Vietnam, and other countries in Southeast Asia. This stance signals how powerful China has become in disputed South China Sea areas; how China's security, economic, administrative, and diplomatic power is likely to grow in the near future; and how Chinese authorities could use that power in intimidating and coercive ways, short of the overt use of military force, in order to counter foreign intrusions or public disagreements regarding Chinese claims.

On the other hand, Beijing has also attempted to forge closer cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries. These efforts have focused on further developing trade and economic relations and have treated the South China Sea and other disputes in ways that avoid provoking public controversy and challenging or otherwise complicating the extensive Chinese claims in the area. In this regard, China has emphasized the importance of all concerned countries implementing the 2002 Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Beijing has also duly acknowledged recent efforts supported by ASEAN to reach the eventual formulation of a code of conduct in the South China Sea, implying that the process of achieving the latter may take some time.

These recent and ongoing tensions shed considerable light on the limitations of Chinese soft power by most measures. Regional commentaries reflect a growing concern about China's shift from embracing multilateral diplomacy and soft power to a foreign policy that is increasingly defined in narrow, self-interested terms. Some scholars have argued that China is making a mistake and risks losing twenty years of painstakingly accumulated goodwill in Southeast Asia. The regional alarm caused by China's seizure of Mischief Reef in 1995 led Beijing to adopt a more cooperative regional leadership role. The subsequent steps taken by China to enhance its status and image through soft-power approaches were warmly embraced by Southeast Asians in general. However, all that progress has been undermined by Beijing's confrontational actions of late.

## Conclusion

In reviewing and assessing how effective China's soft-power promotion has been in recent years, it is useful to think about the following overarching question that captures the study's findings: in coming years, will China look more like the rest of East Asia or will the region look more like China? In spite of Beijing's decision to invest significant resources to promote its soft power abroad, this report finds that the survey data and regional commentaries reveal serious shortcomings in China's attempts to improve its image. For one, the wealthier and more developed countries of East Asia, particularly Japan and South Korea, have more negative views and perceptions of China. Taiwan has a mixed view, in light of Taipei's push for rapprochement with Beijing in recent years and the increase of cultural, educational, and people-to-people exchanges across the Taiwan Strait. On the other hand, the developing countries in the region, with some notable exceptions, have concerns but hold a less pessimistic view of China. Yet although many in Southeast Asia have a positive attitude

toward China's burgeoning economy and some degree of affinity with its culture and traditions, these factors do not necessarily equate with an overall positive image of China's rise. The cross-national survey data indicates that China's continued public diplomacy and image-building are generating some positive benefits, but that these benefits are limited and confined to certain areas in the region.

In other words, China's massive push at the official level to project soft power has yielded limited payoffs. The emphasis on cultural and media outreach to regional partners has not directly translated into more lasting and benign views of China's comprehensive national power. If anything, China's territorial disputes with its neighbors over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the South China Sea have complicated, overturned, and undermined Beijing's efforts to project a positive and constructive image abroad. Its appeal may even be decreasing, with commentaries by regional experts highlighting their renewed anxiety over expanding Chinese military and economic power.

Because Chinese soft power is heavily state-centric, any attempt by China to project its image abroad inevitably draws attention to its political system, sense of exceptionalism, and highly unpredictable foreign policy behavior of late. This is perhaps the greatest limitation on China's appeal in the region. Consider Robert Sutter's assessment of China's ephemeral and flawed approach to soft power:

The result is a unique sense of Chinese self-righteous exceptionalism in foreign affairs that is widely supported by Chinese elite and public opinion. This exceptionalism exceeds even that of the United States. One reason for this belief is the continuing need for the Chinese Communist Party-led system to sustain its legitimacy partly through an image of correct behavior in foreign affairs that is consistent with Chinese-supported principles. Another reason is that while there have been recent debates on foreign policy in Chinese media, they fail to deal well with the country's legacy of egregious coercion, intimidation, violence, and other malfeasance.<sup>46</sup>

As long as political and civil freedoms are severely restricted in China, the country will not be accepted as a responsible regional and global power. The limitations on freedom of speech, the press, and religion continue to deeply trouble many in the region. Given that these norms are increasingly accepted as universal rights, not just as U.S. or Western values, it will be increasingly difficult for the Chinese government to prevent its domestic behavior from affecting the country's international credibility and status.

China's authoritarian regime is thus the biggest obstacle to its efforts to construct and project soft power. At the same time, if the government decides to take a different tack—a more constructive approach that embraces multilateralism—Chinese soft power could be a positive force multiplier that contributes to peace and stability in the region. A widely read and cited article published in *Liaowang*, a leading CCP publication on foreign affairs, reveals that there are prospects for China being socialized into a less disruptive power that complies with regional and global norms:

Compared with past practices, China's diplomacy has indeed displayed a new face. If China's diplomacy before the 1980s stressed safeguarding of national security, and its emphasis from the 1980s to early this century is on the creation of an excellent environment for economic development, then the focus at present is to take a more active part in international affairs and play the role

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Sutter, "China's Charm Offensive—Frustrations and Implications," *Asia Policy*, no. 15 (2013): 138–41.



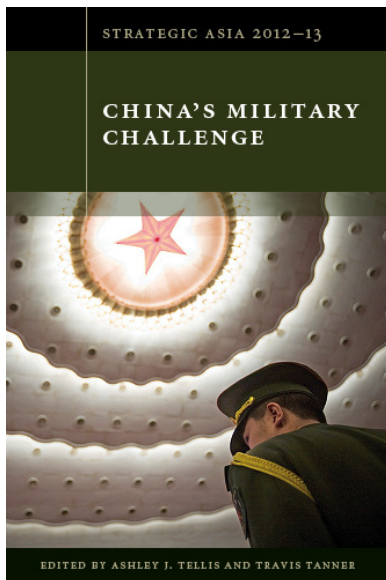
that a responsible power should on the basis of satisfying the security and development interests.<sup>47</sup>

The newly minted leadership in Beijing provides China with an opportunity to reset its soft-power approach and the direction of its foreign policy more generally. If the new leadership pursues a different course, Washington should seize on this opportunity to craft an effective response to better manage U.S.-China relations and provide for greater stability in the Asia-Pacific region. For example, strengthening regional alliances and existing security and economic architectures could help restrain China's more bellicose tendencies.

On the other hand, the new leadership in China could continue to play the game of prestige politics and assert its narrow, self-interested national priorities with the goal of reducing the influence of the United States in the region. If so, the U.S. pivot could be further complemented with an increasing emphasis on promoting soft power. Such steps could include increasing the level of support for Fulbright and other two-way educational and cultural exchanges that help forge closer professional and interpersonal ties between the United States and the Asia-Pacific. The United States could also encourage philanthropy, development assistance, and intellectual engagement by nongovernmental, think tank, and civil society organizations that address issues such as public health and participate in capacity-building projects. Regardless of which direction or trajectory Chinese foreign policy will take under a new and hitherto untested leadership, Beijing will clearly have much to contemplate about why it remains so difficult for the PRC to generate and sustain soft power commensurate with its remarkable economic strength.

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<sup>47</sup> "PRC's 'New Diplomacy' Stress on 'More Active' International Role," *Liaowang*, July 11, 2005, trans. in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, CPP20050719000118.



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