Stretching the 'Soft Power' Concept from Washington to Beijing

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Abstract

When Joseph Nye coined the term 'soft power' in the waning days of the Cold War, the issue of United States power was a first-order concern. The preface of *Bound to Lead* actually began with the sentence "Americans are worried about national decline." The next few years would push all thoughts of decline to the side, as the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War rendered the United States the world's sole remaining superpower. Two decades later, with the rise of China and other global challengers, soft power has widely come to be associated with *challengers* to US hegemony. We argue that soft power, originally conceptualized as a benign mechanism for maintaining its hegemony, is now widely viewed as a tool by which other powers can undermine and overtaken US hegemony. Tracing the evolution of this concept is a useful exercise in thinking about how power is concentrated and diffused in the contemporary world order.

Introduction

Nearly three decades ago, Joseph Nye argued that the US could maintain its global leadership through its deep reservoir of cultural attractiveness even as other states began to "catch up" with American economic power. He argued that a state's soft power—the global appeal of its culture, values and foreign policy institutions—creates a natural conduit by which it can align other states' policy preferences with those of its own. Through its soft power, the US need not use coercive measures to maintain global influence, but can rely to a considerable extent on soft power or the "power of attraction" it enjoys with the rest of the world to get other countries on its side. In the preface to his foundational book, *Bound to Lead*, Nye argued that for this reason, concerns about U.S. decline were "the wrong question." The *real* question was how power has changed in modern international politics.[1] Nye's argument was at its core an appeal for sustained American global leadership, with the understanding that no global hegemon can maintain its status without tapping a reservoir of good will derived from the hegemon's broader cultural attractiveness. Global hegemony requires broad-based international legitimacy or, in other words, soft power.

Over the intervening decades, the conceptual boundaries of soft power shifted to include elements of coercion or inducements used by governments to achieve international legitimacy. Soft power has come to encompass any method shy of overt military force by which governments set about influencing other states. We argue that it is no accident that conceptions of soft power have broadened in this way after the end of the Cold War. Since aspirant great powers have increasingly sought to challenge US hegemony over this period, their challenge has extended into the cultural sphere through policies such as foreign aid conditionality, FDI and covert subversion. Such policies are increasingly examined through the lens of soft power, for example efforts by Beijing to broaden the global appeal of its economic principles, otherwise known as the "Beijing consensus." In Southeast Asia and Africa, in particular,

[1] Nye, *Bound to lead*, p. ix.

scholars have used the concept of soft power to describe Chinese use of FDI and trade to leverage Beijing's influence.[2] Chinese scholars have focused in particular on how Beijing can take a more proactive role in global fora without triggering fears in the west. Western scholars, by contrast, focus not only on China's aspirations, but also on the controversial means by which Beijing attempts to achieve its foreign policy preferences. Labeling their techniques coercive, deceptive, or otherwise harmful, western scholars in particularly tend to be skeptics of China's rise as well as its efforts to improve its image in the eyes of foreign audiences.

We show in this paper that the soft power concept has evolved considerably over the past several decades, and that these changes map onto the perceived status of US hegemony in the world order. To make this argument, we review the context of the original formulation of soft power, tracing changes in the conceptual boundaries of soft power as it increasingly came to be used not to describe ways in which the US retains hegemony, but the methods used by aspirant powers to undermine (and at least partially overtake) the US position. Debates over Chinese soft power first emerged in connection to the ways in which the so-called "Beijing Consensus," began to gain traction with foreign societies—providing an alternative development model to the prevailing "Washington Consensus." If a poor or distressed country is unconvinced by the austerity measures and deep economic concessions demanded by poorer countries that object to neoliberal elements of the Western model. The emerging alternative developmental model may have helped undermine the Washington Consensus, while setting the stage for future challenges to US leadership.

Soft Power and the End of the Cold War

In Nye's original formulation, soft power is amassed not by the government, but by civil society. While there is no clear-cut distinction between values and culture, scholars agree that these are among the two most important components of soft power. I general, scholars use *values* to refer on the more general ideas that a nation can export or project (and that others might find appealing). Meanwhile, *culture* refers country's cultural products exported to the outside world. In assessing a country's relative cultural attractiveness, the focus falls on concrete books, media and music, educational institutions, and so on.

It cannot really be manipulated by the government as a tool of foreign policy. Under this classical definition, it does not really make sense to speak of a government-directed "soft power strategy," a view that many still share. Noted China scholar, David Shambaugh, said that soft power cannot be built in the same way as China constructs railroads and highways, it rather has to be earned.[3] This divide brings attention to the multi-faceted nature of soft power. Despite efforts to quantify a country's soft power "resources," including its relative number of Nobel Laureates, general appeal of its cuisine and the relative numbers of foreign tourists, a country's soft power will vary considerably from one country to the next. For this reason, efforts to quantify a given country's soft power resources runs up against the problem that a country's soft power is not universally fungible. A country may enjoy soft power in

[2] Kurlantzick 2007; Ramo 2004.
[3] Shambaugh 2012

one country but not in another, due to a conflict in values, norms or expectations between the former and the latter.

Nye himself fudged this distinction. In *Bound to Lead*, Nye continuously referred to "soft power resources" as intangible features of a nation such as culture, ideology, and institutions."[4] In the same book, he defines "co-optive power" as "the ability of a nation to structure a situation so that other nations develop preferences or define their interests in ways consistent with one's own nation," or more simply, "getting others to want what you want."[5] Nye explained that a nation's co-optive power depends on both its soft power and that the association between co-optive behavioral power and soft power resources is not perfect, it "is strong enough" to permit the use these terms.[6]

MORE ON NYE'S ARGUMENTS ABOUT HOW PASSIVE SOFT POWER HELPS MAINTAIN US HEGEMONY (INCLUDING DEFINITION OF HEGEMONY IN A FOOTNOTE]

US Soft Power after 9/11

In the 2000s, Nye addressed American soft power from a different angle. With the US the sole remaining superpower, the context was no longer US declinism, but rather the diminishing legitimacy of US hegemony following multiple unilateral interventions in the Middle East. In his 2002 book, *Paradox of Power,* Nye warned against American declinism *as well as* triumphalism. Nye also underscored the importance of using soft rather than hard power as a way of "getting others to want what you want," cautioning against American hubris.[7]

In his new treatment, Nye redirected attention to the foreign policy component of soft power. He warned that a country's soft power can be undermined by other policies, drawing attention to the fact that support for certain American products or popularity of American culture does not automatically translate into support for its economic or security policies, which must be consistent with the values and ideas of the target country.[8] Finally, Nye reminds us of the key role played by civil society in soft power, noting that this quality "does not belong to the government in the same degree that hard power does," but depends on participation of nongovernmental organizations, private firms, and ultimately, on individual people – this part of Nye's message is often lost when different countries discuss how they can increase their soft power.

Nye further elaborated on the importance of reconciling a state's culture and values with its foreign policy in *Soft Power*, which he published in 2004. It was the height of the Second Iraq War, which had attracted significant international condemnation, leading to a new rise of anti-Americanism. Nye cautioned that no matter how attractive the country's culture is to foreign societies, it is unlikely to

[4] Ibid, p. 32.
[5] Ibid, p. 191; p. 31.
[6] Ibid, p. 267, n. 11; Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 176, n. 31. Nye also introduces "soft power" in a 1990 article to *Foreign Policy*, basically as a synonym to "co-optive power," here again soft power mostly refers to the resources of co-optive power, though interestingly, it is also used as the title for the article. Joseph S. Nye Jr. "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy,* No. 80 (Autumn 1990), pp. 153-171.
[7] Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*, pp. 8-9.
[8] In Nye's words, government policies can both "enhance and curtail" soft power. Ibid, p. 73.

enjoy soft power when its foreign policy runs contrary to that its values. US military engagement in the Middle East, for instance, threatened to undermine any other goodwill the United States enjoyed in these countries due to its cultural attractiveness or values. US military actions have also redefined the face of the world's sole superpower, souring foreign perceptions of the United States. He concluded that US engagement in Iraq threatened to undermine broader US interests in the long run.[9]

Nye provided a list of America's soft power resources clustered under three categories: (1) culture, (2) domestic values and policies, and (3), foreign policy substance and style. While there is no clear-cut distinction between values and culture, scholars agree that these are among the two most important components of soft power. I general, scholars use *values* to refer on the more general ideas that a nation can export or project (and that others might find appealing). Meanwhile, *culture* refers country's cultural products exported to the outside world. In assessing a country's relative cultural attractiveness, the focus falls on concrete books, media and music, educational institutions, and so on.

While the government is a clear player in amassing soft power resources in all categories, its role may be less important than assumed. During the Cold War, for instance, rock-and-roll music or even apolitical American movies contributed significantly to US soft power in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.[10] In his retelling of soft power, Nye refined his original argument. Now, instead of presenting a unidimensional spectrum between command and co-optive behavior, he presented a tripartite division between military, economic, and soft power, each characterized by specific types of behaviors. While coercion can appear both at the military and economic dimensions, the military dimension is distinguished by using threats and force as its main currencies, while economic power (which also rests on inducements) operates by using payments and sanctions.

Soft power, by contrast, is fundamentally cooperative: it is based on attraction and agenda-setting, and it is manifested in values, culture, policies and institutions.[11] Nye also introduced the concept of *smart power* to the discussion. This he defined as a combination of soft and hard power resources utilized by state governments to induce a policy outcome in another country.[12] His framework now distinguishes between a country's command and co-optive behavior and between its soft and hard power.

Soft Power and its Critics

Nye's conceptualization has attracted a wide range of criticisms over the years. There are at least three important arguments by authors who take issue with how Nye conceptualized soft power. The context of these criticisms was rising international opposition to US foreign policy. Since the mid-2000s, world public opinion on American leadership had turned increasingly negative as the US came to be seen as an

[9] Ibid, pp. 128-134.
[10] Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 48.
[11] Ibid, p. 31. This is also similar – though not the same – to the notion that power is distributed along a "three-dimensional chess game," introduced by Nye in *The Paradox of American Power,* according to which, military, economic, and "transnational relations" represent different boards of power contestation. While in the military dimension, American power was largely unipolar, the middle board is multipolar, while on the bottom one, it is more widely dispersed. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*, p. 39.
[12] Ibid, pp. 32, 147. See also: Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), p. xiii.

important contributor to violence and chaos in the region of the Middle East and North Africa. American soft power was beginning to seem very soft indeed. We outline these critiques below.

First, Nye was criticized for his lack of clarity on the mechanisms by which soft power was supposed to work. This point was made by Christopher Layne in a 2010 edited volume on soft power. Layne scorned "the unbearable lightness of soft power" and criticized Nye from a methodological point of view. He argued that although Nye did not present soft power as a theory, he maintained that he had identified a mechanism for how it was supposed to work. Unfortunately, "Nye's own illustrations of how soft power (purportedly) works demonstrates how poorly specified are its causal mechanisms."[13] Specifically, it is not clear if soft power was an independent variable or merely a proxy for other variables. It is also unclear how soft power related to democratic theory, norm diffusion, or institutionalism; or whether propositions about soft power are falsifiable at all.

Nye responded to this critique by asserting that soft power was an analytical concept rather than a full-fledged theory and therefore "fits with realist, liberal or constructivist perspectives."[14] Still, he acknowledged that measuring soft power can be difficult, complicating the task of testing general hypotheses about soft power.[15] At the same time, he recognized that its causal mechanism needed further elaboration. To remedy this, Nye's 2011 *The Future of Power* contains a lengthy discussion on the question of how soft power works. He presented a model with both direct and indirect mechanisms. In it, soft power resources influence government elites directly, or they function indirectly through public opinion contra Layne's contention that public opinion had minimal impact on foreign policy—as seen in the decoupling between US public opinion and the war in Iraq in the 2000s.[16]

Other critics have taken issue with Nye's disproportionate focus on the instigator or *agent* of soft power policies, rather than their subject or target country. In the same edited volume, Edward Lock argues that Nye's concept is "unstrategic" because it ignores the subject of power. Although Nye explicitly warns against the so-called "vehicle fallacy" of conflating soft power resources and policy, Lock believes that "[Nye's] determination to describe an agent-centered concept of power repeatedly leads him back in this direction."[17] Lock instead suggests incorporating a Foucauldian approach, which could help elucidate how soft power functions "by changing how subjects understand the world in which they live"[18]). In a similar vein, Steven Lukes proposes a Foucauldian subject-centric understanding that focuses on the productive nature of power. Lukes, whose theory on the "three faces of power" clearly influenced Nye's conceptualization, claims that soft power can be both "empowering" and "disempowering," concluding that Nye's (strategic) understanding of soft power is a "blunt instrument."[19] Nye responded to this set of criticisms by acknowledging the merits of a subject-centric

[13] Layne 2010: 55.
[14] Nye 2010: 219.
[15] Usually public opinion surveys (Pew Global, Gallup, Chicago Council Report) are used for measurement (possibly combined with statistics on the reach of certain cultural products); however, given Layne's criticism of the 2-step model (when soft power influences behavior through public opinion), and Nye's increasing focus on the 1-step model (when elites are directly affected) the real effect of the sentiments reflected in these surveys is questionable. On measurement, see also: Holyk 2011, Hall and Smith 2013. For a study on testing whether the strategical use of soft power by the US was successful in specific cases, see: Kroenig et al. 2010.
[16] Layne 2010: 56-57, Nye 2010: 218, Nye 2011: 95.
[17] Lock 2010: 36.
[18] Lock 2010: 41.
[19] Lukes 2007: 83-97.

approach, while defending an agential approach, because "agents can control agendas and structure subjects' preferences so that some things appear attractive that might otherwise not be so."[20]

Finally, critical theorists have taken Nye to task for overlooking the coercive elements of the "power of attraction." These theorists have focused on the question if soft power is indeed as "soft" and benign as one can assume from Nye's theory. Based on Lyotard's ideas on the sociolinguistic construct of reality, Janice Bially Mattern argues that soft power is in fact rooted in hard power, and it is just as likely to be used for coercion as the supposedly harder behaviors. The only difference is that coercion is sociolinguistic rather than physical. In the end, she takes issue with the premise that soft power operates through persuasion, and she focuses on the "verbal fighting" over the meaning of "reality" through representational force. For example, the US increased its ideological influence in the post-9/11 world by persuading foreign populations to accept the notion that terrorism was "a risk too high to bear" that required significant increases in the discrertionary exercise of state power.[21]

Geraldo Zahran and Leonardo Ramos likewise noted similarities between Nye's soft power and the Gramscian theory of hegemony. In Gramscian thought, consent and coercion cannot easily be distinguished due to the interrelated functions of power and hegemony. They argued that scholars should therefore focus on how "hegemony, as soft power, works through consent on a set of general principles that secures the supremacy of a group and, and at the same time, provides some degree of satisfaction to the other remaining groups."[22] While acknowledging this point, Nye defended his proposition that "soft power is [not] always rooted in hard power," noting that policies selected through free choice were widespread and distinguishable from those borne of indoctrination. He further contended that one can observe the functioning of soft power "partly through narratives of reasoned persuasion and partly through…coercive verbal wars."[23]

Many of these criticisms center on the contention that Nye overestimates the causal importance of persuasion and cultural attractiveness in the exercise of US influence, a point seemingly borne out by surging anti-Americanism in the 2000s in the background of ever-growing popularity of US cultural products. Nye countered that he neither assumed that the American way of life was automatically attractive to foreign societies, nor that the popularity of certain American products automatically translated into support for US military or economic policies.[24]

There are three important takeaways from this debate: (1) the success of soft power depends as much on the *subject* as the agent of soft power policies, and (2), soft power is most likely to function indirectly through civil society rather than from the top down, and that in any case (3) soft power is unlikely to succeed in the background of otherwise hostile foreign policy. What matters is whether the particular policy is consistent with the values that the country projects about itself rather than its specific content. What this suggests is that policy-makers should be skeptical of "specific recipes" for soft power projection, focus more on the subject, and provide space for horizontal cultural outreach through

[20] Nye 2007: 163.
[21] Bially-Mattern 2007: 99-100, 115.
[22] Zahran and Ramos 2010: 14.
[23] Nye 2010: 217, Nye: 2007: 163.
[24] As criticized by Lebow 2007: 120. Nye 2007: 163.

transnational civil society. We return to these themes below in reviewing the literature on China's exercise of soft power.

The Soft Power Debate Goes Global

In recent years, the work on soft power has turned to the efforts of other countries to compete with the US in the cultural sphere. Among great power contenders, Chinese and Russian governments stand out as active promoters of their particularly brands of illiberal governance.

Even before the 2008-09 global financial crisis called into question the future viability of the neoliberal form of governance, many had already begun to loudly criticize the US-led path—widely known as the 'Washington Consensus'—a term used to refer to the widely-held belief in free market economic policies . The financial crisis merely highlighted the dangers and failures of fee market liberalism, leading many to argue in favor of more illiberal economic and political models. In light of the relative economic stagnation of the west against simultaneous rapid growth and development of the Chinese economy, policy-makers in the developing world increasingly looked to Beijing as an alternative to the strict policy prescriptions of macroeconomic stabilization and liberalization comprising the "Washington Consensus." The Washington Consensus had long informed the advice and assistance given by multilateral agencies like the IMF and the World Bank to economically distressed countries. In return for financial assistance, global institutions often mandated that the recipient country implement a range of free market reforms, such as opening their markets to foreign competitors, which tended to crowd out or crush local businesses. These policies have long been criticized by development specialists for imposing crippling costs on vulnerable states and societies [CITE?]. STIGLITZ QUOTE?

Fifteen years after Economist John Williamson coined the term "Washington Consensus," former Newsweek Journalist Joshua Cooper Ramo dubbed an alternative vision of state-directed capitalism favored by China called the "Beijing Consensus." He argues that this was increasingly seen as an attractive model by distressed countries. According to Joshua Kurlantzick, Beijing presents itself as a development success story to poorer nations: "Chinese officials suggest that China has developed a model for social and economic success," and they increasingly sell as their model to developing-world audiences.[25] In Ramo's 2004 formulation, three core elements distinguish the "Beijing consensus": a willingness to innovate, a commitment to equitable growth and sustainable development, and a strong belief in national self-determination and respect for state sovereignty. These principles, together with the absence of aid conditionality (requiring changes in respect for human or minority rights or movement toward democracy) make the Chinese model more appealing to those who regard western conditionality as too intrusive in their domestic affairs. Ramo averred that what was "happening in China … [was] not only a model for China, but has begun to remake the whole landscape of international development, economics, society, and by extension, politics."[26]

According to Kurlantzick, a watershed moment for the Beijing Consensus – at least for the countries of Southeast Asia – came with the Asian financial crisis of 1997. While "the United States flubbed its initial crisis response, China made a symbolic move, publicly refusing to devalue its currency," a gesture that

[25] Kurlantzick 2007: 56.
[26] Ramo 2004: 3. Also quoted at: Huang 2011: 4.

elevated China's standing in the region.[27] In subsequent years, Chinese officials did not "shy away from advertising the benefits of China's socioeconomic model." Government-led think tanks and Chinese publications actually *embraced* the term Beijing Consensus. Kurlantzick concluded that "[w]hether or not one calls it a Beijing Consensus, China clearly promotes its socioeconomic model through speeches overseas, a model of top-down control of development and poverty reduction in which political reform is sidelined for economic reform."[28] In this view, a clear alternative to economic and political liberalism had emerged. Chinese leaders, meanwhile, had consciously forged ties with developing countries over the previous two decades. These can be seen as a striking example of the successful exercise of soft power: China had succeeded in convincing others to emulate its path, winning numerous allies around the world; this is exactly how Nye understands soft power.

However, there is no consensus on the relationship between the Beijing Consensus and soft power in the literature. According to Thomas Ambrosio, it is not entirely clear what either the "China model" or the Beijing Consensus means: instead of specific policy prescriptions, it usually refers to cases of "capitalism with Chinese characteristics – a market economy with political control maintained by the regime,"[29] an idea that might be attractive to other authoritarian leaders. Moreover, Scott Kennedy argued that the Beijing Consensus was "relatively incoherent and largely inaccurate" as a piece of analysis, pointing out that Chinese elites themselves prefer to use the "China model" of "Beijing Consensus" concept as an alternative. Although it can mean different things, "originally [it] was used to distinguish China's gradualist reform strategy from the 'shock therapy' approach adopted by post-Communist states of Central Europe." Consequently, it was used as a justification for reform in internal political conflicts. and later in the wake of the global economic crisis. Today, however, it "has been re-deployed to refer to China's export-oriented growth strategy."[30] In this view, the Beijing Consensus is less a set of values or clear ideology preached by China than a policy mash-up. Even within China, observers note that the "China model" favors extensive government experimentation through trial and error to identify the appropriate set of economic policies that will work for that society. This flies in the face of the notion that China has a well-articulated, ideologically consistent alternative to the western liberal model. It also goes against the notion that China has a clear set of values or noms about how economies should be run. The Washington Consensus, by contrast, represents a pre-constructed stand-alone model of economic governance.[31]

Second, it is not entirely clear to what extent this 'Beijing consensus' – even it has internal ideological content – would appeal to other countries. Kennedy points out that Ramo's original formulation is based on several myths, such as the idea that technological innovation was the source of China's rapid economic growth, or the Chinese approach would be especially unique.[32] Stephan Ortmann sees the Beijing consensus as either a general reference to "China's success in opposition to the economic problems of the West," or "a warning of China's growing influence" connected to its principles of non-conditionality and non-interference in its developmental assistance policies, though in neither case he is convinced that authoritarianism and one-party rule is perceived as a necessarily more successful model.

[27] Kurlantzick 2007: 35.
[28] Ibid: 56-57.
[29] Ambrosio 2012: 384.
[30] Kennedy 2010: 467, 474-475.
[31] Keith et al. 2014
[32] Kennedy 2010: 469-470.

He cites widespread beliefs that China is a "dysfunctional," "paradoxical," or even "weak" example of an East Asian developmental state.[33] Similarly, Yasheng Huang asserts that "China has performed the best when it pursued liberalizing, market-oriented economic reforms, as well as conducted modest political reform, and moved away from statist policies."[34] In support of this thesis, Ambrosio conducted a content analysis of international media, showing that although term 'Beijing consensus' attracted international approbation for a brief period, more critical assessments of the model soon began to proliferate. He concludes that the "China model" or "Beijing consensus" was unlikely to have been a major force behind the recent "reverse wave" of de-democratization, though he admits that it might have contributed to the resistance of authoritarian regimes.[35]

Even if the Beijing Consensus *does* contain a set of features that characterize the Chinese model of development, and assuming that this model has enjoyed appeal in other nations, its significance may be decreasing. This was the point of Yao Yang, a Chinese economist from Peking University, who claimed in a 2010 online article to *Foreign Affairs*, that "the end of the Beijing consensus" (defined as "a combination of mixed ownership, basic property rights, and heavy government intervention") may be drawing to a close, because the Chinese economy "has moved unmistakably toward the market doctrines of neoclassical economies," resulting in rising income disparities within China. As China gets closer to the "middle-income gap"—a certain level of GDP per capita where previous sources of economic growth are no longer viable–it may find itself in a "precarious situation." Yao correctly anticipated some of the issues that only came into surface over the past few years, ultimately concluding that "there is no alternative to greater democratization if the CCP wishes to encourage economic growth and maintain social stability."[36] Still, the idea that there is a uniquely China model is widespread in the China-based scholarship. Pan Wei is a proponent of the idea that China's social organization, economic development, government structure and unique outlook on the world can serve as a model to other nations.[37] However, Suisheng Zhao notes that although China's success taken together with its "value-free diplomacy" and the possibility that rising anti-Western sentiment increases the appeal of such a model, its attractiveness is limited by China's limited moral appeal, its ineffectiveness in many dimensions of human development, and uncertainties related to its long-term path.[38] Ramo himself eventually acknowledged the limits of China's appeal in his later book *Brand China*.[39]

While talk of the 'China model' has not completely disappeared—and has now been partly folded into Xi Jinping's 'China Dream'—this case highlights important analytical problems that inhere to the concept of soft power. For one thing, it cannot be straightforwardly demonstrated. One cannot definitely say whether other nations copied the 'China model' because they found it attractive or because they sought closer economic ties with one the two largest economies in the world? If indeed China used selective inducements to spread its developmental model, this stretches the concept of soft power very far—in fact, inducements were excluded under Nye's initial formulation.

[33] Ortmann 2012: 342.
[34] Huang 2012: 2.
[35] Ambrosio 2012: 395.
[36] Yao 2010
[37] Pan 2007
[38] Zhao 2010
[39] Ramo 2007

Assuming the Beijing Consensus resonated with foreign audiences, it is still unclear what this means for Chinese soft power. As argued by Blanchard and Lu, establishing such a causal link requires that the form, target and context of soft power be mapped and measured more precisely.[40] In the present case, the identity of the targeted audience remains unclear. Leaders of developing countries seeking to modernize their economies with preserving its authoritarian regime? Some would certainly find such a model attractive, but is the appeal about the attractiveness of China itself or about naked self-interest of such elites? Ambrosio analyzed newspapers (both from the US and from all over the world except China) to answer this question, but failed to distinguish between possible targets of the model (developing countries) from Western sources.

Chinese Soft Power: Values, Culture, Foreign Policy

Scholars and observers documenting the rise of China again have turned their attention to China's soft power resources. Notwithstanding the formidable measurement issues noted above, scholars began to make efforts to assess these capabilities. Meanwhile, within China itself, the question of how to increase China's soft power became a vital topic for discussion. In 2007, a conference was held in Singapore focusing on "The rise of China and Its Soft Power," the contributions were published in a volume edited by Mingjiang Li. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu, two China scholars also collected papers from the annual International Forum for Contemporary Chinese Studies at the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies of the University of Nottingham to a volume published by Routledge in 2012 under the title, "China's Soft Power and International Relations." These volumes contain contributions by Chinese and non-Chinese scholars alike. While some of them also explore theoretical questions related to soft power, most of the papers are focused on China's resources in particular. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on how the authors of these volumes conceived soft power in terms of the sources Nye suggested to examine: values, culture and foreign policy.

But how do we assess the extent of Chinese soft power? Hongyi Lai argues that China's soft power "can rise moderately at best" because the appeal of its values and culture is so limited. Hence, China "has been constrained by controversies over its poor record of respecting political and social rights; over a lack of political transparency, rule of law, and independence of the media and the artists; and over moral decay."[41] Thus, values here refer to the universal values that possibly has widespread appeal, and China's deficiencies – not to speak of the divergence between its rhetoric and actual policies – are believed to undermine the successful cultivation of soft power resources.

Other observers focus on those Chinese values that are attractive at least to some countries in the region, even if they have limited appeal in the west. This is partly why Chinese officials chose Confucianism as a brand by which Beijing sought to extend its influence in the region through a network of institutes, centers and classrooms. The Confucian doctrine "implies balanced relationships in the universe,"[42] which would present China as a benign power to its neighbors just as the previously mentioned concept of Tienxia. Jianfeng Chen observed that the traditional Chinese doctrine of the "Mean" was seen as another possible source of soft power. As Callahan argued, however, this still might

[40] Blanchard and Lu 2012: 566.
[41] Lai 2012: 100.
[42] Chen 2009: 84.

be perceived as an attempt to wield power for (cultural) hegemony, which may not be completely non-coercive.

What about the growing appeal of China in the realm of culture [CITE]? Scholars have argued that the dramatic increase in the number of foreign students, the export of Chinese cultural products, and the establishment of hundreds of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms around the world have together contributed to China's rising international influence. However, a closer look paints a more nuanced picture. Xiaohe Cheng, for instance, finds mixed results for Chinese soft power. He notes that despite an exponential increase of foreign students coming to China, talented Chinese students still leave the country for the West in large numbers (here, he talks about China's "brain drain"), while China's appeal in education remains limited to a few different fields. Cheng also notes that the recent spike in the number of students has actually led to slippage in the quality of education at these universities, as their facilities strain to accommodate an increasing proportion of foreign students.[43] Also, as Blanchard and Lu note, conclusions about China's rising cultural attractiveness need to be put in context. The Chinese state is rightly proud of the increasing interest in their international network of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, which has led to a record number of people learning the Chinese language, "this fact may not be important if an even greater percentage increase has taken place in the number of individuals studying Arabic, French, or Spanish."[44] In connection with China's cultural appeal, Xiaogang Deng and Lening Zhang find a "superiority-inferiority complex." Based on customs records, they observe that although the amount of China's cultural export indeed increased significantly in recent years, it still remains imbalanced compared to its import, and the language barrier still remains a serious obstacle to propagate Chinese products.[45] Therefore, despite the significant achievements within the field of culture, China is still at least as much at the receiving end of soft power as the agent of exerts power.

But what of foreign policy, Nye's third pillar of soft power? In Chinese official discourse, soft power is closely intertwined with foreign policy. Mingjiang Li observes that China approaches soft power as a *tool* of foreign policy. In fact, this "soft use" of power is "one of the most important aspects of China's foreign strategy."[46] China's practices goes against Nye's original formulation, under which foreign policy feeds in Chinese soft power rather than the other way around. This shines a light on a still underspecified element of soft power—that is, it is not entirely clear whether foreign policy serves as a tool for the end of a soft power strategy, or the other way around—underscoring the conceptual confusion in the debates. China has chosen a more proactive interpretation of soft power. According to Li, soft power is a "soft shield for self-defence," which can create a strategic opportunity, and it can serve as a counterbalance of Western influence by showing China as a capable rival.[47]

Does China's foreign policy contribute to the country's soft power capabilities in any way? The contributors in the two edited volumes find mixed results again. Yongjin Zhang evaluates the international discourse on China's soft power, concluding that China remains a follower rather than an agenda-setter, and it is often "at the receiving end of the co-optive power of international society."[48] At the same time, Yong Deng argues that China in fact has soft power success, but it has to be interpreted

[43] Cheng 2009
[44] Blanchard and Lu: 570. See also: Ding and Saunders 2006
[45] Deng and Zhang 2009: 144.
[46] Li 2009: 22.
[47] Li 2009: 28.
[48] Zhang 2009: 55.

differently in its case: "it means the ability to influence others in world politics with the goal of achieving great power status without sparking fully fledged traditional power politics of hostile balancing or war."[49] With this, we are essentially back with the "anything short of war" understanding of soft power, which would make the distinction between coercion and co-option more problematic. There are also studies on the soft power relevance of certain foreign policy issue areas such as foreign assistance,[50] climate policy,[51] and how China's soft power affects particular regions.[52] However, as Suisheng Zhao concludes, "it is not yet clear how effective and how far the transformation [in the mobilization of soft power resources] can go because of the flaws in China's soft power resources."[53] We expand on this point in the section below.

China's Fusion of Soft Power and Foreign Policy

In his book *Charm Offensive*, Kulantzick remarks on the limits of Chinese soft power, noting that "China's values appeal only to specific groups." These specific groups include, most importantly, "elites in authoritarian nations." Kulantzick hence acknowledges that China's cultural appeal is limited, so long cannot create an internal political system largely consistent with the widely-accepted notions of freedom and democracy.[54]

China is well-aware of these constraints and is committed to undertaking a range of policies meant to enhance its influence. In reviewing these strategies, Kulantzick expands Nye's original definition of soft power to include economic influences like aid and investment arguing that, for the Chinese, soft power "means anything outside the military and security realm." In Kulantzick's words, "Beijing sometimes uses its soft power to assist in harder goals."[55] This conceptualization effectively blurs line between between coercive- and consent-based influence. Besides China's cultural expansion and increased activity in public diplomacy, Kulantzick's book covers China's use of sticks and carrots (for example, through the activities of ethnic Chinese abroad), and the tools of business that indeed changes Beijing's international position. Kulantzick also regards free trade deals and trade concessions as an "economic tool for soft power," an area where an authoritarian regime can move more freely and unencumbered by those domestic constraints that arise in a democratic state.[56] In his treatment, Kulantzick effectively reproduces the internal Chinese foreign policy debates, but in doing so, he has stretched the boundaries of the soft power concept far beyond its original meaning.

We might pause here to consider how far the soft power debate has traveled in the two decades since Nye formulated the concept on the basis of cultural attraction. A definition for soft power that "anything but military power" might better characterize China's strategy in Southeast Asia, but it is a far cry from Nye's original focus on cultural appeal. One might argue that Kurlantzick's treatment offers insights into how governments can leverage soft power resources, arguing that Beijing could act to

[49] Deng 2009: 64.
[50] Varrall 2012
[51] Chen 2009
[52] See for example: Zhu 2009; Wibowo 2009
[53] Zhao 2009: 262.
[54] Ibid: 229.
[55] Ibid: 6.
[56] Ibid: 95-97.

better instrumentalize its resources to further its interests. Nye himself held that foreign policies was a key component of a state's soft power; however, he strongly argued against the notion that soft power could be generated from the top.

China's strategies began to attract significant scholarly and media attention in the latter half of the 2000s. Even before Kurlantzick's book was published, Jean Garrison analyzed in a short article China's "good neighbor" policies, and identified its economic lure and development as two main sources of its increasing soft power. She argued that "China's calculation to enhance its image as a responsible power making a peaceful rise has brought the country great benefits." In her view, the US should accommodate to the "irreversible reality" of China's rise, and suggested "forging a sustainable and cooperative relationship."[57]

In sum, China's soft power resides in its culture (the richness of China's history, the proliferation of Confucius Institutes, and the increase of foreign student enrolment and cultural promotion abroad), its values (such as the "Beijing Consensus" and the appeal of its developmental model), and its evolving foreign policy (its increased activity in international organizations, its new role as aid donor, and its 'good neighbor' policies). While China's effective use of soft power is undermined by an imbalance in soft-power resources, legitimacy problems and foreign-policy incoherence, there is some indication that China has gained a growing acceptance of its rising power on the side of nearby countries, including India which "appears to be reassured that China will rise peacefully."[58]

International Reaction to China's Soft Power Campaign

Despite some successes in the immediate neighborhood, others focus on a growing "China threat." Many western scholars and journalists in particular have pointed to what they perceive as deceptive, misleading or coercive elements of China's charm offensive. China countered by attempting cultivate an image of a responsible great power, seeing its Charm Offensive as a means of gaining international acceptance for an emerging Chinese hegemon.

Under the leadership of Hu Jintao. Chinese officials evoked images of cooperation and harmony in their foreign communications, stressing that it aimed for a "peaceful rise" and cooperation with other powers. Later renamed "peaceful development" (as "rise" was believed to elicit fears), Beijing's aim was to reassure the world that China's re-emergence within the international system would not trigger military confrontation.[59] Symbolic events as the monumental organization of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games is an example of China's efforts to reassure the world that it was a civilized power; in fact, this event is cited as a prime example of what we now widely refer to as *soft power strategies*. As William Callahan explains, the opening ceremony of the Olympics was part of a conscious identity construction as it reflected a particular self-image. According to him, this event once again highlighted that China has remained a "pessoptimist nation" that combines glowing optimism about its future with insecurities and nightmares following its "century of humiliation."

[57] Garrison 2005: 27, 30.
[58] Gill and Huang 2006: 24.
[59] On the concept of "peaceful rise," see: Glaser and Medeiros 2007

Callahan's principal aim was to understand how this type of domestic contestation serve to construct China's self-identity. In this context, he understands soft power mostly from the point of view of China's own identity construction. Among other things, he observes that for China, soft power is not only about exporting existing values, but "also involves the production of values both at home and abroad."[60] Elsewhere he argues that for China, soft power goes beyond values and cultural products that can be attractive to foreign publics. It refers expansively to a normative vision on global order, which for him, serves as good example to show how "soft power takes shape as the romanticization of a particular national culture into 'universally desirable values.'"[61]

In 2008, Mark Leonard explored the question *What Does China Think?* Based on several interviews with scholars and policy-makers, he concludes that China is the "most self-aware rising power in history."[62] Leonard observed that instead of a clear separation between hard and soft power tools, China scholars combined soft and harder power under umbrella terms such as "comprehensive national power," which for him meant that the Chinese state should "recapture the 'moral high-ground' of international relations."[63] Leonard claimed that China studied the US to emulate its techniques, and besides programs to spread Chinese culture with innovations such as Confucius Institutes, they also emphasize the role of promoting a particular message – via an expanded and modernized Xinhua news agency and by setting up a international television station – centered on ideas like the "China dream" and "cultural rejuvenation."[64]

Callahan, together with Elena Barabantseva, selected a group of writings by Chinese authors in an edited volume titled *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy* to shed light on the internal discourse. In one of the chapters, a Chinese scholar, Qin Yaqing writes about a possible "Chinese school" of International Relations, while Yan Xuetong develops the concept of "comprehensive national power" as a combination of military, political, economic, and cultural power.[65] Zhao Tingyang outlines a theory centered on the ancient Chinese notion of *Tienxia* ("All under Heaven") which highlights a peculiar Sinocentric understanding of world order.[66] Although these notions are viewed from China as examples for cultural resources that can make a Chinese vision of global order more attractive to others, Callahan criticizes it as just another way to reassert hegemony, in a way that is less likely to threaten foreign populations.[67] In addition, though Barabantseva claims that China's state-endorsed narratives that appear in movies and promotion videos for Confucius Institutes "can be seen as expressions of the Chinese state's soft power," she also concludes that the images "highlight the struggles and constant negotiations over the meaning of the world and China's place in it that take place in China in different levels."[68]

[60] Callahan 2010: 4.
[61] Callahan 2011: 7.
[62] Leonard 2008: 84.
[63] Ibid: 92.
[64] Ibid: 95.
[65] Qin 2011, Yan 2011: 81. For a critical review on how traditional concepts are applied to contemporary developments in the contributions of Chinese scholars to IR theory, see also: Horesh and Kavalski 2014
[66] Zhao 2011
[67] Callahan 2011, See also: Callahan 2008: 751-753.
[68] Barabantseva 2011: 198, 209.

The Chinese discourse on soft power can be problematic not just because it is not clear where is the line between co-optation and coercion, but because soft power has been coopted by Chinese officials as well as international scholars seeking to understanding China's evolving relationship vis-à-vis the rest of the world. In the meantime, this application may be altering the meaning of soft power. Susan Shirk, a former Clinton administration official, sees China as a "fragile superpower" that seeks to promote foreign acceptance of China's emerging status, at the same time managing domestic contestation over Chinese policies while maintain ensuring social stability. Shirk sees that a state-induced nationalism can be a liability for soft power by compromising China's reputation and its policy for "peaceful rise," while its international image is not always in sync with domestic propaganda.[69] Similarly, David Shambaugh describes China as a "partial power" which despite its truly increased capabilities, still remains weakened by its own insecurities and vulnerabilities. Shambaugh presents an overview of the Chinese soft power discourse, and lists the conscious efforts of the Chinese government to boost its international attractiveness. However, he remarks that China seems to forget that soft power "is not something that can be bought with money or built with investment. … [T]he Chinese government is approaching soft power and public diplomacy as it constructs high-speed rail or long-distance highways: by investing money, and expecting to see development. Soft power is not built this way. It is *earned*."[70] Shambaugh argues that China's attempts to strengthen its international reputation can even undermine its soft power – in cases when its public diplomacy remains too overtly propagandistic, or when they constrain the access of foreign journalists.

In a chapter to an edited volume on soft power, Shogo Suzuki also contrasted the "myth and reality" of China's soft power. After presenting an overview of the Chinese discourse, he argues that its influence is exaggerated both at home and abroad. While China has indeed elevated the term to official state discussions to alleviate fears connected to its rise and potential hegemony, he explains that this "benevolent" image is part of a politically motivated discourse, whereas from the outside, China's soft power "threat" is often overstated with ignoring the complexities of the issue and the lack of consensus within China.[71] This rising discourse on a possible "China threat" motivated Michael Barr's investigation of the challenge of Chinese soft power. Starting from an observation of an "imagined fear" of China, his book explores how China poses challenge in several fields – art and media communication, language, history, international political theory, race – to "Western ideas of identity, modernity and security." His book highlights how the Chinese soft power discourse differs from the Western one because of the significance of these tools in connection with the handling of the domestic situation, though his most important contribution comes by turning into its head how we should look at the exertion of soft power.

Barr instead questions the reasons behind the Western obsession with the rise of China. "Perhaps one reason that China is feared is that its soft campaign draws unwelcome attention to the West's own inadequacy in answering the most pressing questions of modernity," he claims, citing an article by *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman who argues that China's achievements can raise doubts on the effectiveness of America's own system.[72] The Western – and especially, American – soft power debate on China, then, partly goes back to Nye's original reason to coin the term. Nye was confronted with the obsession with US decline, and to counter those arguments, he highlighted American strength

[69] Shirk 2007: 107.
[70] Shambaugh 2013: 267. (Emphasis in the original.)
[71] Suzuki 2010: 199-214.
[72] Barr 2011: 8, 134.

in soft power. However, with China's rise and with its explicit emphasis on soft power, the fear of decline was now connected to an area where the US was supposed to perform the best compared to its rivals.

It may be that China's efforts to leverage its soft power—to meet the regime's needs for domestic legitimacy as well as international acceptance for China's rise—is merely serving to reinforce fears of China in foreign societies. It is clear from the above that there are clear deficiencies in China's capability to wield soft power in all of its areas. We now review the conceptual, practical and theoretical lessons that can be learned from the Chinese soft power debate.

Conceptual Stretching or Conceptual Adaptation?

In our final section, we lay out some preliminary conclusions from our review of the evolution of soft power since the end of the Cold War. First, as our theoretical overview emphasized, Nye's simultaneous objectives to create an analytically useful category that is also comprehensible to policymakers rendered soft power a problematic concept from the outset. Although soft power principally works through indirect means, and mostly outside the governmental sphere, Nye allowed room for instrumentalization of soft power in his subsequent treatments. This has created lasting conceptual ambiguity for those seeking to understand the role of the government in soft power.

A second important lesson is that the effectiveness of soft power depends on the target or audience. If a nation tries too hard to sell its culture or values, these efforts can easily backfire, as demonstrated by the case of China, and the variable effectiveness of Chinese soft power across target countries. Debates over Chinese soft power have also led to a progressive blurring of the line between cooperative and coercive engagement. Just because military power is not used by China in its bilateral or multilateral[73] engagements, this does not mean that China's influence on other countries is based purely on persuasion or that it has no coercive elements. China is influential not because it is simply more skilled at getting other countries to *want* exactly what China wants, but because it has more tools at its disposal to bend others to its will.

Further model specification of soft power is challenged by the considerable conceptual extension of the concept. When every policy short of military force is shoehorned into *soft* policy, this renders soft power even more mysterious. Even if Nye is right that soft power is a concept, not a theory, it still has to be connected to theory if we want to use it to explain ongoing policy processes. In an effort to break this down, we need to answer foundational question about how how soft power functions—at the elite or mass-level, or both? Is it based on a single causal mechanism? Or are there multiple distinct ones? Can different forms of power (hard, soft and smart) be integrated into a state's foreign policy framework? The current state of the soft power literature raises questions about the analytical usefulness of the concept insofar as it is stretched to cover such a range of policy phenomena.

In the most recent debates, soft power has been used to refer to a range of proactive influence-peddling on the part of China and other states, but this discourse diverges significantly from the theoretical work on the topic. Some have even noted that soft power can be turned inward; in the example of China, scholars have argued that China uses soft power for the purpose of domestic legitimation. Through

[73] Gallarotti 2016

public diplomacy and other foreign policies, China thus deters social movements that could upset or the fragile domestic peace. Zheng Wang argues, for example, that the "China Dream" narrative embraced by Xi Jinping after 2012 was a response to the so-called "three belief crises" at the end of the Cold War--a "crisis of faith in socialism, a crisis of belief in Marxism, and a crisis of trust in the Party."[74] With eroding popular support for Marxist ideology , China's leaders are casting about for newly relevant symbols that can be used to to legitimize one-party rule. The promotion of a "national rejuvenation" discourse as well as a calculated embrace of traditional Chinese values and Confucian philosophy are moves in this direction. High-profile events such as the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games also target domestic as well as international audiences. By showing that it can organize such an event with worldwide interest, the CCP demonstrates its effective leadership of the country.

in the US as well as China, soft power has been shown to support foreign policy—although perhaps not as much as soft power advocates claim. However, in both cases, we see that foreign policy does not always serve soft power, as these are two different functions that are not necessarily mutually reinforcing. In some aspects, they can even undermine each other. Examples include US efforts under the Second Bush administration to promote a positive US image in countries of the Middle East, while at the same time prosecuting two wars and numerous drone campaigns in the same countries. Similarly, China has sought to export culture and language through its Confucian Institutes and Classrooms, but has attracted considerable approbation in the west due to reports that Beijing was using these centers to spy on Chinese nations and propagandize foreign publics.

Externally, the most important function of soft power is to alleviate fears of a rising China. However, its ability to appeal to western populations remains dicey due to the vast cultural gulf between China and western liberal societies. Wang notes that "there is an unavoidable understanding gap between the Chinese and the outside world"[75] Partly this is due to the fact that they operate in a totally different ontological universes, and partly it is due to natural fear responses to China's efforts to reclaim its earlier status as a hegemonic power: it is only natural that this will provoke fear and anxiety within the liberal hegemonic bloc. States can perceive as aggressive behavior what China sees as the legitimate bid for its rightful international status.

We now return to Nye's original question, which is how changes in the form of power from hard to soft is changing international politics. In *Bound to Lead*, as well as in later works, he argued that soft power becomes relatively more important as coercion – especially in the form of military power – gets costlier, and power is more likely to disperse among emerging new actors (both below and above the level of the traditional nation-state). The IT revolution and various other developments certainly confirmed the second observation.

However, this does not mean that coercion is on longer relevant in the exercise of international influence. We can see from Ukraine to countries in Southeast Asia that power competition and coercion is experienced a resurgence; tools that might otherwise be considered as part of public diplomacy have been weaponized as tools of international competition and conquest. The growing importance of cybersecurity is just one example that new technologies and new ways of influences are not necessarily

[74] Wang 2014: 5.
[75] Ibid: 8.

reflect benign intentions. With these developments, once again we are back to the concerns whether the distinction between coercion and co-optive behavior is blurred in international relations.

In the contemporary era, debates over soft power are really debates over international leadership. Soft power was originally conceptualized to counter American declinism, a much-discussed theme in the US international relations field in the 1980s. While initially the domain of the western liberal bloc, soft power is now used in connection with other states', most especially China's, campaigns to increase its international status. To be sure, the discourse on China's soft power rise – as Barr argued – is also connected to the uncertainties facing the Western countries, and especially to the anxieties over the future leadership of the United States. As the world order moved in a more multipolar direction, China and other rising powers launched influence campaigns under a broadened conceptualization of soft power. Contestation in the cultural field is seen not only as a key component to global leadership, but also the most legitimate means of making a bid for that role.

Perhaps it is not necessary to conceive the rise of one's soft power as the simultaneous loss of another's. In an article written jointly by Nye and Chinese scholar Wang Jisi, they claim that "there is little evidence that the increase in China's soft power is aimed at counterweighing US soft power."[76] According to them, soft power should not be seen in zero-sum terms. However, soft power is nearly always analyzed in such terms—with some nations having more and others having less. This shows indeed that soft power may serve as the newest metric for measuring global leadership.

[76] Nye and Wang 2009: 21.