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Soft Power’s Rise and Fall in East Asia

JING SUN

Is soft power still relevant in East Asian international relations today? Just a few years ago, even to ask such a question would have seemed unthinkable. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, “soft power” did not just matter—it represented the future. It signified the rise of a new and more aspirational pattern of international relations, in which countries compete to win the hearts and minds of foreign audiences through listening, persuading, and cooperating—in other words, through wooing.

Soft Power Revisited

First in a series

Soft power was especially popular in East Asia—with Beijing promoting its “peaceful rise,” Tokyo selling a “cool Japan,” and Seoul touting the “Korean Wave” that swept across Asian markets. Media coverage of these countries included frequent references to soft power. Online searches would produce myriad entries related to soft power. Think tanks launched entire projects on the subject. Publishers issued books for both academic and general readers on nations’ “charm offensives.” Soft power was soaring, and the study of it was booming.

What a difference a couple of years can make. Today, even a casual observer of the international scene cannot help but notice the hardening of relations among East Asian countries, and most discussions of power in the region now focus on the hard rather than the soft variety. In the eyes of China’s neighbors, Beijing has become markedly blunt in asserting its national interest. There is little charm to speak of in a fire-breathing dragon.

The Chinese government’s moves in support of its territorial claims have been particularly dis-

turbing. Chinese marine surveillance ships now regularly foray into waters surrounding the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea to challenge Japan’s control of them. Thus far confrontations have primarily taken the forms of ship-to-ship communications of territorial claims and warnings, plus occasional chases. Yet the risk of a violent accident or armed conflict is real.

Tension is rapidly ascending in the South China Sea, too. In April 2012, after the Philippine navy failed to apprehend eight Chinese fishing vessels in the disputed Scarborough Shoal (the Chinese name is “Huang Yan Island”), Chinese marine surveillance ships blocked Filipino craft from entering the shoal. In March 2013, three Chinese ships, including one navy frigate, converged near the Second Thomas Shoal, where the Philippines stationed a dozen marines in abject conditions abroad the rusting wreck of a navy transport ship. In May, China announced its “actual control” of the area.

Disputes over land borders pose dangers as well. In April 2013, Chinese troops pitched tents 12 miles into the India-controlled Ladakh area of the western Himalayas. New Delhi responded by moving troops into the area. Both sides subsequently withdrew to positions held before the incident, reducing strains that could have roiled Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang’s maiden visit to India days later.

Such episodes have not gone unnoticed in Washington. In late 2011, the Barack Obama administration announced a “pivot to Asia” policy, proclaiming that the United States would reinforce its trade and military links with allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region. Although the pivot policy intentionally avoids naming the Chinese threat, both Beijing and America’s allies in the region share the view that the rise of China was a major triggering factor for the strategy.

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Beijing's aggressiveness has captured considerable attention, but China is not the only source of friction in East Asia. After Japan's Shinzo Abe returned to the office of prime minister in December 2012, China and South Korea voiced concerns about his administration, in which politicians who are defiantly unapologetic for Japan's past wrongs occupy key positions. Tensions have risen on the Korean Peninsula as well. In the first half of 2013, North Korea, under the young leader Kim Jong-un, issued one war threat after another against South Korea and the United States. The North's continuing brinkmanship makes clear that South Koreans' newly celebrated charm could hardly reach their brothers and sisters to the north of the 38th parallel, much less melt the hearts of leaders and officers in Pyongyang.

Confronted with this recent evidence, it is natural to wonder whether soft power still has a future in East Asia. Is the region headed back to a dark, Thucydides-like future of "He who has the sword makes the rule?"

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The hardening of diplomacy in the region is real. But it would be hasty to dismiss soft power's relevance as a result of it. In the past decade, popular attention to soft power was chasing a constantly moving target—the fast-changing realities of East Asian international relations. In other words, scholars' and media professionals' understanding of soft power has mirrored the concept's practical trajectory: They have gone from noting soft power's awakening potential to emphasizing and over-emphasizing its importance, and most recently to dismissing, if not trashing, the concept altogether as hard power seems to be regaining primacy in the region.

Soft power deserves a fairer treatment. It is neither the inevitable future nor a one-time vogue. A more balanced understanding of soft power starts with a nuanced grasp of the concept and, subsequently, a more realistic expectation of what soft power can and cannot do.

Scholars of international relations have long pointed out the importance of fascination and attraction. But Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor (and *Current History* contributing editor), was first to formulate the concept of soft power in 1990. According to Nye, soft power is neither force, nor money, but rather shared values. Soft power is the power over opinion and the power to inspire dreams and desires. A country exercising soft

power will achieve its goals through persuasion and by setting itself up as an example that others aspire to follow.

The rapid adoption of the term "soft power" attests to its attraction: simple, vivid, and aspirational. However, it should be noted that Nye's conceptual treatment of the term is more subtle and complex than what popular discourse would suggest. Nye contends that there are three sources of soft power: namely, political values, legitimacy of foreign policy, and culture. One can take a step further by arguing that a country's charm, or lack thereof, is the result of how these three sources either reinforce each other or cancel one another out.

Unfortunately, popular readings of soft power often miss such a compositional analysis. Journalists found soft power an intriguing angle for covering diplomacy, but media coverage did not necessarily help clarify the matter. Often, it further distorted our understanding. For media professionals who seek to boost ratings or readership, diplomacy is often a boring field. But, thanks to soft power, all of a sudden Big Mac, Coca-Cola, Hello Kitty, and pandas became meaningful actors in international relations.

In other words, Nye's three sources notwithstanding, popular attention tipped toward the least political (and hence softest) part of soft power—popular culture. In retrospect, the emphasis on culture and fun planted the seed for soft power's current dismissal. Soft power's critics are right: These elements' impact on foreign affairs is questionable. Soft power based only on a cultural/commercial perspective is doomed to lose relevance.

CHINA'S CHARM OFFENSIVE

Yet it took a decade for followers of soft power to realize the limit of such an overly cultural interpretation of a political concept. The best case in point is China's experience with soft power. In the spring of 2003, the fourth so-called generation of leadership led by President Hu Jintao, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao officially commenced. These new leaders, confronted with rising social inequality at home and fear of a Chinese threat abroad, vowed to construct a "harmonious society" domestically and to achieve a "peaceful rise" on the international stage. Fearing that the word "rise" might still carry a negative connotation of power politics, Beijing later replaced it with the more benign term "development." Both

China's explicit emphasis on soft power and media coverage of this initiative (domestic and international) increased markedly after the genesis of the twin slogans.

China's attention to the importance of charm and reputation, however, had started earlier, in the mid-1990s. Two lessons, one negative and the other positive, served as wakeup calls. In 1996, following Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the United States, China responded by launching missile tests and other military exercises. Beijing hoped such a show of force would intimidate Taiwanese voters into abandoning Lee in the island's first democratic election. But the effort not only failed—it failed in a most humiliating way. The Americans responded by sending an aircraft carrier to the Taiwan Strait, and Lee won by a landslide. Beijing's hard power policy ended up a slap to its own face.

One year later, a major financial crisis hit Southeast Asia, a region with which China has vast human and material connections. Chinese scholars later touted the crisis as an opportunity in disguise, and Beijing's response to it as the first time that China took its reputation seriously. From Prime Minister Zhu Rongji down to party-controlled media outlets, official rhetoric at all levels framed the government's decision not to devalue China's currency as a “self-sacrificing” move to serve a broader public good—the economic stability of the region—and argued that the move was evidence of China's living up to the status of a responsible power.

Many economists would point out that Beijing's decision was not really altruistic. A devalued renminbi would likely have triggered a new round of devaluation of local currencies in Southeast Asia, leaving everyone, including China, at the same starting point with even dimmer economic prospects. But insofar as image is concerned, a policy's perception can be more important than its intent. Although Japan made a bigger financial contribution to stabilize the chaos, China received louder applause both from countries in the region and from the United States.

These two lessons and the new leadership's “peaceful development” agenda served as catalysts for Beijing's interest in soft power. Yet, despite the vigor of China's charm offensive, obstacles soon rendered it unpersuasive. To make a country's

charm convincing requires values-based bonding, which in turn demands authenticity. The audience needs to be convinced that the values the wooing country preaches are the same values it faithfully practices: hence the power of example. Beijing's problem was that its charm looked increasingly like propaganda—the evil cousin of soft power, prone to the tactics of cheating, fabricating, and coercing.

NATIONALIST RENAISSANCE

A number of issues exposed the feeble basis of China's soft power campaign. One was the tension between soft power and nationalism. Starting in the 1990s, the CCP sought to repackage itself as a nationalist rather than a revolutionary party. In other words, the CCP shifted to emphasize the “Chinese” and de-emphasize the “Communist” parts of its formal title. This is understandable: The Soviet Union died in 1991; the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement had met its gory end two years earlier; communism as an ideology lost appeal rapidly and globally. China's governing political organization would need an alternative ideology to justify its monopoly of power.

It found nationalism. One key argument was this: The CCP, as proved by history, was the sole qualified guardian of the Chinese interest. To make this argument convincing, the existence of foreign evils would be essential. Beginning in the 1990s, the government set up hundreds of “sites of patriotic education” to present a narrative of the Chinese people heroically (and often tragically) fighting Western and Japanese invaders. Needless to say, many of these sites glorified the role of the CCP in leading the nation to its eventual victory—the founding of the People's Republic—after which the Chinese people have been able to live with pride and security.

China's swift ascendancy since the 1970s added some contemporary elements to the tale of a CCP-led “great national renaissance.” However, the nationalist campaign was a hybrid of two opposing themes: superiority since time immemorial, and the recent “century of humiliation” starting with China's 1842 defeat in the first Opium War. The collision of these two thoughts produced a Chinese nationalism rich in bitterness and desire for revenge—the very opposite of the images of a

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charming, patient, and humble giant that Beijing's soft power campaign sought to construct.

Another problem in Beijing's soft power campaign was its imbalanced nature from day one. Of the three sources of soft power, China chose to highlight the cultural one. Three signature events—the global expansion of the Confucius Institute (which promotes Chinese language instruction internationally), the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo—were all advertised as grand cultural projects.

The global allure of Chinese culture, as embedded in its history, art, and cuisine, among other features, is indisputable. Yet the cultural construction of Beijing's soft power campaign could hardly bridge the gulf of political values with the West. Culture turned out to be the only Chinese soft power export with a global appeal. But the sole emphasis on culture neglected the simple reality that people can harbor conflicting attitudes. Unless one believes that someone with a "Free Tibet" bumper sticker would never patronize a Chinese restaurant, one has to acknowledge that love of a culture does not equate to an endorsement of that culture's country of origin or its government. Chinese art and cuisine may have a global army of followers. But it would demand a leap of faith to view such cultural capital as readily convertible into political capital.

Indeed, culture is not only the softest element of soft power; it is most likely the weakest—even irrelevant—without the support of the other two elements, namely political values and foreign policy legitimacy. For Beijing, this lesson finally registered with messy and humiliating Olympic torch relay stops in London, Paris, and San Francisco, which drew massive protests against China's policies in Tibet. Chinese popular responses ranged from setting up "anti-CNN.com" websites; to producing an amateur video clip proclaiming that "Tibet was, is, and will always be a part of China," which attracted millions of hits on YouTube; to passionate and occasionally mob-style protection of the "holy flame" of the Olympic torch (there were reports that Chinese embassies hired buses to transport Chinese protesters to the sites).

All of these activities inadvertently corroborated foreign fears of China as a threat. Once the beast of ultranationalism was let out of the cage,

the thinking went, it would be hard to put it back in. A stronger China, instead of becoming reassuring and confident, was growing increasingly insecure and paranoid. To borrow the phrase of China specialist Susan Shirk, China became a "fragile superpower"—hardly a victory of soft power.

Thus do domestic and diplomatic agendas collide. And the political values exhibited by an insecure party-state fail to resonate with global audiences. These structural problems have haunted China's soft power campaign from its genesis.

DEFENSIVE MEASURES

Recent challenges have emerged to further dim the effort. China's top policy makers and scholars have developed apprehensions akin to conspiracy theories about other nations in the region. They feel that whatever China does, its neighbors will choose to fear it. Sensing that China's rise is inevitable, and that a stronger China will certainly demand more, its neighbors will seek to create a sort of irreversible status quo before China gets too strong. Actions in recent years that the neighbors regard as Chinese bullying are, from Beijing's perspective, simply defensive measures against foreign efforts to cage China with lasting physical or legal constraints.

Wearied by listening to Southeast Asian nations' complaints about Beijing's aggressiveness, Yang Jiechi, then foreign minister, said at a 2010 conference, "China is a big country, and other countries are small countries, and that is just a fact." In 2012, Dai Bingguo, a politician and diplomat who was widely believed to be a key figure in Chinese foreign policy making during the Hu Jintao era, described the maritime dispute with the Philippines as another example of "a small country bullying a big country." As odd as these remarks may sound, they reflect the sense of frustration inside the Chinese government. They add nothing, however, to China's charm.

President Xi Jinping, the new "core" of China's fifth generation of leadership, has shown a more colorful personality than that of his dull predecessor, Hu. Xi's princeling background—he is the son of a former vice prime minister—could empower him to be bolder and blunter. In February 2009, then-Vice President Xi stirred up some fuss during a trip to Mexico, where he suggested that "some well-fed foreigners . . . have nothing better to do

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than pointing fingers at [China].” In Beijing, “well fed with nothing better to do” is a well-known expression commonly associated with the image of a hooligan. Xi’s hard-line punch, delivered in such a colloquial manner, energized hawks but troubled moderates among Chinese netizens. All seemed to agree it was hardly imaginable that the timid and wooden President Hu would ever say something like this. In fact, Hu seldom demonstrated any emotion in the public realm, domestic or foreign.

But a livelier personality does not necessarily help boost Chinese soft power. Every generation of Chinese leadership tries to promote a pet slogan. For Xi, it is the “China Dream.” Thus far he has offered few details of what his dream is about, except making connections to patriotism and the great renaissance of the Chinese nation. Given China’s irredentist territorial claims and ballooning defense expenditure, the “China Dream” may seem like a nightmare to its neighbors. Soft power has no place in a nightmare.

JAPAN’S RIGHT TURN

Although China’s assertiveness has been a major factor in the latest hardening of relations in East Asia, Beijing’s retreat from soft power has not necessarily benefited those who are viewing the rise of China most anxiously. Soft power is suffering a decline of importance in other countries as well. Japan’s fervency for soft power until recently was as intense as China’s. However, soft power looked useful to these two giants for different reasons. China’s leaders tried to use it to alleviate foreign concerns about their country’s rise. For Japan, soft power is among the last resorts for continuing to prove its international relevance. Douglas McGray, an American freelancer, became an instant celebrity in Japan after he wrote a 2002 article for *Foreign Policy*, “Japan’s Gross National Cool,” in which he provided a long list of achievements that have made Japan attractive, such as technological sophistication, state-of-the-art industrial design, and globally acknowledged achievements in film and literature. Even the country’s enduring economic malaise, McGray contended, had done little to tarnish Japan’s image.

But a good image does not necessarily mean soft power. BBC’s global attitude survey data show that the international audience consistently ranks Japan positively. Yet it remains unclear how much of this goodwill has translated into diplomatic capital for Japan. Moreover, according to the survey data, the more distant a country is from Japan, the

better Japan’s reputation. Taiwan is the rare exception: In the eyes of China and South Korea, Japan’s two immediate, powerful neighbors, Tokyo has little charm to speak of.

It is easy to blame nationalism in both China and South Korea as the culprit for Japan’s dire reputation. But Tokyo is no mere scapegoat. The current Abe administration is filled with politicians whose views veer far to the right. Hakubun Shimomura, the minister of education, has been a vocal supporter of revising “masochistic” history textbooks, which in his view dwell too much on Japan’s past wrongs. In May 2013, Toru Hashimoto, the young mayor of Osaka, stirred controversy by claiming that “comfort women,” a euphemism for those coerced into serving as military prostitutes during World War II (including many Korean and Chinese women, among others), were a “necessary evil” so Japanese soldiers could enjoy some relief from fighting. This time, protests came from near and far. The fact that Hashimoto is a rising political star and the co-founder of the Japan Restoration Society, the third biggest party currently represented in the National Diet, seemed to add credibility to Chinese and Korean concerns that Japan is making a turn toward chauvinistic nationalism.

Another problem with Japanese soft power, similar to that of China’s, is its one-dimensional nature. Even during the heyday of the Japanese economic miracle, Japan’s allure as a model lay primarily in the nonpolitical realm. In 2008, a survey sponsored by the Japanese foreign ministry showed that people in Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand were most interested in Japan’s “science and technology,” “economy,” and “high living standard.” Interest in Japanese politics and Japan’s foreign policy ranked ninth among the eleven categories, and only a meager 6 percent of the Southeast Asian respondents wanted to see Japan enhance its military presence even in the name of peacekeeping, making the latter the last area in which the region would like to see a stronger Japan.

Will China’s rising assertiveness toward Southeast Asia enhance Japan’s charm? In fact, China’s most vocal critics in the region, namely the Philippines and Vietnam, tended to choose Japan over China as their most important partner even before the recent escalation of tensions. In the same 2008 poll results cited above, Japan’s foreign ministry acknowledged a schism among the six key Southeast Asian countries surveyed: Vietnam,

the Philippines, and Indonesia were “pro-Japan,” whereas Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia were “pro-China.” So the real issue now is not whether the Philippines and Vietnam drew closer to Japan because of China’s menacing behavior. They had already done so.

What about public attitudes in the “pro-China” countries? It is possible that Beijing’s aggressiveness has prompted a cooling. But if this change in sentiment has in fact occurred, has it gone so deep as to make people choose Japan over China as their countries’ most important future partner? Not likely. Thus far we have no data to support such a claim.

The core dilemma for Japan’s charm offensive is that Tokyo did not intensify its efforts to propagate soft power until the country’s hard power was in relative decline. Seen from this perspective, Japan’s soft power offensive was driven by its dwindling grandeur and a lack of other viable policies. As Japan’s economic malaise continued and its politicians looked incompetent and revisionist, Tokyo found it hard to justify its relevance as a model to any international audience.

Thus, while China’s growing assertiveness on the South China Sea might suggest that Beijing is abandoning its charm offensive, Japan’s ability to seize this opportunity is limited by its uncertain economic outlook and the divide in attitudes toward China within Southeast Asia, as well as by neighbors’ rising uneasiness over Japanese nationalism.

THE KOREAN RIPPLE

Measured by hard power indicators of economic and military strength, South Korea is the weakest among East Asia’s “Big Three.” But journalists and scholars have applauded the country as a master of using soft power to maximize its influence. They point to the “Korean Wave”—the penetration of South Korean drama, music, fashion, cuisine, and other attractions in major Asian markets, including China, Japan, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. In December 2012, the Korean rapper Psy’s “Gangnam Style” video became the first on YouTube to surpass a billion views, and today it remains the most watched. The immense popularity of the song suggests the global scale of South Korea’s cultural influence.

However, do “Gangnam Style” and *Winter Sonata*, a television drama wildly popular throughout

Asia, constitute soft power? Certainly, the Korean Wave puts a culturally vibrant South Korea into stark contrast with North Korea, its pariah brother to the north. But have South Korea’s cultural inroads enhanced its diplomatic weight? The world once hailed the co-hosting of the 2002 World Cup by South Korea and Japan as a landmark event in the two countries’ reconciliation process. Yet Japan today remains the country that the South Korean public most despises—even surpassing North Korea in most public attitude surveys over the years.

Every democratically elected president from Kim Young-sam to Lee Myung-bak demonstrated a strikingly similar pattern of reaching out to Japan at the beginning, then hardening his position due to Korean nationalism, Japanese insensitivity to historical grievances, or both. In China, sensational media coverage of acrimonious disputes with South Korea has given rise to a new form of online entertainment—ridiculing South Korea and Koreans as an ethnic group. The game started with finding and publicizing claims that the Korean nation was the creator or inventor of certain

technologies or products later adopted elsewhere (the magnetic compass, the game of Go, paper-making, and so forth). Chinese participants soon began to fabricate similar Korean claims, apparently to deride the perceived Korean obsession

with national pride. In fact, signs indicate that South Korea may have surpassed Japan as the most popular target for the ridicule of Chinese internet users.

The hostility and condescension are mutual. President Roh Moo-hyun said to US President George W. Bush in 2005 that China had “invaded us hundreds of times, and how could we forget these bone-aching pains?” Meanwhile, a South Korean television drama with contemporary Shanghai as a background depicts dark alleys, greedy officials, and a protagonist who whines about “too many thieves in China.” These episodes have not gone unnoticed among China’s numerous netizens.

AMERICA’S INROADS

All this points to a rather dispiriting perspective on soft power’s actual influence in East Asian international relations. My purpose, however, is not to dismiss soft power—only to show why the concept as it is currently practiced by nations in the region cannot go very far in shaping diplomacy.

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The region's big three powers, as they promote soft power, tend to emphasize the cultural component. A country's popular image based on cultural and commercial products may be the most fun component of soft power, but it is the least relevant to achieving foreign policy goals.

Soft power, in order to qualify as a type of power, depends first and foremost on a country's state image based on political values, and on its diplomatic image based on the legitimacy of its foreign policy. When it comes to both of these components, East Asia's two giants, China and Japan, display a host of problems. Some, like the gap in political values between China and the West, are insurmountable at least for now. It is also doubtful that the Korean Wave has elevated Seoul's status above a minor league player in global affairs.

Judged by the three sources of soft power identified by Nye, as well as by hard power, the country that has the most comprehensive reservoir of such capabilities is the one across the Pacific from Asia: the United States. America has become increasingly skilled at using soft power.

The current US ambassador to China, Gary Locke, launched a personal charm offensive after his arrival in Beijing in 2011. Reports of Locke's carrying his own backpack and purchasing his own coffee at an airport, kneeling down to speak to a young girl in Shanghai about American animation, and traveling in the economy cabin on

domestic flights, were eye-opening to the Chinese public. Many were shocked to discover that such an important diplomat, who looks like a Chinese, could behave in ways drastically different from China's arrogant officials. A daily pollution index measuring Beijing's air quality, published by the American embassy on the internet, also puts a lynching Chinese government in the spotlight.

These measures were all soft—but they were also immensely powerful at offering the Chinese people a convincing value alternative. The *Global Times*, a conservative affiliate of the *People's Daily*, warned Locke to stop his “showmanship of clean governance” and “mind his own role as ambassador, not a celebrity, to China.” Its angry tone, in fact, suggests that Locke's and America's charm offensive are winning numerous Chinese hearts and minds. This is soft power at work.

Soft power is not all about roses. It is also the power of being reassuring to friends and allies. The receptive attitude of China's neighbors toward the Obama administration's “pivot to Asia” policy should serve as a warning to Beijing and an endorsement to Washington. The world's No. 1 and No. 2 may soon change positions on a crucial hard power indicator: gross domestic product. But with America remaining attractive even to the Chinese and reassuring to its allies, China has a long march ahead in catching up with America's soft power. ■