



## THE COLLAPSE OF CHINESE SOFT POWER

BY DENNY ROY

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The Chinese government recently became very interested in the idea of soft power and how it could help China achieve its goals. After a slow start, however, Chinese soft power regressed badly in 2020, yielding to heavier reliance on China's ability to dispense or withhold economic benefits to force business partners to acquiesce to Beijing's wishes on political or strategic issues.

“Soft power,” a term made [famous](#) by Harvard scholar and former US State Department official Joseph Nye, is “the ability to get what you want through attraction” rather than through coercion or payment. A state can be attractive when other people admire it and want to partake of its popular culture, adopt its values, or emulate the success and efficiency of its policies.

Hu Jintao announced in a [speech](#) in 2007 that China required soft power (*ruan shili*) to achieve its potential for global influence. Xi Jinping continued the emphasis, [opining](#) that “We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world.” China [spends](#) about \$10 billion annually on projecting its soft power.

Despite this commitment, even prior to 2020, the success of Beijing's soft power campaign was underwhelming. According to a respected annual [ranking](#) produced by the Portland consultancy and the University of Southern California, China did not rank in the global top 10 in 2019, and reached only number

four in Asia, behind Japan, South Korea, and Singapore.

Rather than being seduced by it, many countries identified Chinese influence as harmful and moved to curtail it by various means, including [calling out](#) Chinese propaganda, [closing](#) Confucius Institutes, and cracking down on China-linked [efforts](#) to corrupt foreign politicians.

Immediately prior to the pandemic, the Pew Research Center [assessed](#) that China had an overall unfavorable image in Asia, Western Europe, North America, and Australia. Moreover, the year-on-year trend was toward unfavorability. China nevertheless enjoyed a generally favorable image in the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and South America. Building large projects in the Third World and offering loans without nagging recipients about good governance practices has bought China a limited amount of global love. Still, even prior to the pandemic, some of China's activity was self-negating. Africans, for example, complained that Chinese-built projects were useless or [ignored](#) the wishes of local residents, that Chinese managers exhibited [racism](#) and [exploited](#) local workers, that competition from Chinese immigrants [destroyed](#) local businesses, and that Chinese loans were creating [debt traps](#) for African countries.

Amid anxiety that China seeks to [export](#) its “model” to other countries, we should recognize that this model is limited to an economic development strategy for industrializing states: essentially huge loans, joint ventures, and Chinese-built infrastructure, as opposed to the Western model of providing financial aid. As for exporting its political ideology, Beijing does have an interest in promoting authoritarianism worldwide because this facilitates the CCP's preferred modus operandi of corrupting a partner country's unelected political elites. But other countries are not seeking to imitate or reproduce the Chinese political system, aside from some authoritarian governments [acquiring](#) Chinese-made surveillance technology. Nor are large numbers of foreigners hankering to live under the Party's tender care. China has the [lowest](#) percentage of migrants in its population of any country in the

world, while over a million Chinese [emigrate](#) per year.

The [failure](#) of China's culture to catch fire abroad is not due to a lack of creativity or talent among the Chinese people, but rather to the CCP leadership's [approach](#): government-led soft power, as opposed to soft power generated by an unfettered and free-thinking society. The Chinese government tends to [visualize](#) soft power as extending China's domestic propaganda, which emphasizes the CCP's virtuous and competent governance, to the outside world. This approach results in products that lack international appeal. An example is the propaganda rap song "[This is China](#)," which features uncool lines such as "We can trust the public security cuz the policemen are kind to citizens."

What power China wields does not rely on the attractiveness of China's culture or governance model. Rather, Beijing's influence over other countries stems from a combination of the other two methods Nye mentioned: coercion and payment. Foreigners want Chinese investment and access to the Chinese market. For foreigners to obtain or maintain the benefits of economic cooperation with China, Beijing often requires them to pay a price, which means aligning themselves with some aspect of Beijing's political agenda. This might involve staying silent on a controversial issue involving China (e.g. the [NBA-Hong Kong](#) kerfuffle), using Beijing-approved wording (e.g. [US airlines and Taiwan](#)), switching official diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing (as the [Solomon Islands](#) did in 2019), or sacrificing a bit of national sovereignty (as Hun Sen's [Cambodia](#) and Rodrigo Duterte's [Philippines](#) have done).

In effect this is "payment," using an economic reward to get foreigners to behave according to Beijing's wishes. Chinese policy also often involves "coercion" in the form of threatening to withhold an expected economic benefit unless the targeted foreign group does what China demands.

China forced the [closure](#) of South Korean-owned Lotte stores in China in 2017 over the THAAD missile defense issue. The PRC dramatically [cut its tourism](#) to Palau in 2018 over the island state's diplomatic

relations with Taiwan. Beijing [threatened](#) in 2019 to ban exports of German cars to China on "safety" grounds if Berlin excluded Chinese firm Huawei from building Germany's 5G communications network.

In the first half of 2020, China's soft power plunged from underperforming to under water. Chinese officials seemed to simply abandon attempts to cultivate soft power. Instead they tried to manufacture the *appearance* of international admiration, going so far as releasing [doctored videos](#) and [pressuring](#) foreign [officials](#) to publicly praise China. Chinese "[Wolf Warrior](#)" [diplomats](#) struck an abrasive tone that deepened international ill-will toward China. These acts suggested Chinese officials were willing to accept damage to China's international reputation—as media inevitably discovered and reported these incidents—in order to pander to the Chinese domestic audience. Chinese society and local officials, spurred by pandemic-related hysteria, contributed to the decline in China's image by [persecuting](#) resident Africans during the spring of 2020, which resulted in a strong [backlash](#) against China in several African countries.

At the same time, China expanded its resort to economic coercion as a means of attempting to influence foreign governments. The Chinese ambassadors to [Australia](#), [Indonesia](#), and the [Philippines](#) threatened trade cutoffs as punishment for embarrassing China. Canberra had demanded a World Health Organization inquiry into the origins of the pandemic, while Indonesia and the Philippines had implemented bans on travelers from China. China also made threats of economic retaliation against [India](#), the [United Kingdom](#), the [United States](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [Canada](#), and [Sweden](#) in 2020 over issues not related to the pandemic.

Should Beijing conclude it is more likely to get what it wants by appealing to foreigners' greed and fear than by seeking their admiration, none of us will be better off.

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