

R.I.P. Soft Power

China's Story Meets the Reset Button

Review of *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds*, edited by Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, Routledge, 2019

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This brief note, conceived of as a book review when commissioned, has turned into an elegy, if not a eulogy, in the space of a few months.

I first encountered this fine collection of readable, solidly researched essays on China's experience with soft power at the end of January 2020 at a Hong Kong conference organized by coeditor Ying Zhu of Hong Kong Baptist University and attended by one of the other two coeditors Stanley Rosen of the University of Southern California. Conferees enjoyed a brief and very informal "rollout" of the book, emceed by me about ten minutes after glimpsing the book for the first time. Even the most cursory glance, however, told me that this was going to be a fine contribution to our understanding of a historic, globally significant leap into the world's consciousness by a gigantic and ambitious rising power: the People's Republic of China (PRC).

At the conference in Hong Kong and on the streets of Hong Kong, in those waning days of January, people wore masks. Something serious was afoot in Wuhan. Hints of travel restrictions into and from Hong Kong were drifting about. Streets and malls were deserted in those first days of the epidemic alarm and those first days of the Chinese New Year shutdown.

Within a few weeks, as the world writhed in the grip of a metastasizing pandemic, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* became something that, surely, was not originally what it intended to be: a work of history.¹

1. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, eds., *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

It seems likely, a few months later, that “soft power” has already vanished from the Chinese lexicon, from the lexicon of foreign contemporary China analysts, and very probably from the overall PRC domestic and global policy agenda. Propaganda will of course remain, now somewhat stumblingly renamed “public relations.” And, like any large country with global involvements, China will surely seek to build and sustain positive relations with peoples near and far, even if soft power as concept and mantra fades from view.

Perhaps it was inevitable, this demise of the Chinese soft power discourse. The whole fixation, after all, derived from a term coined by a foreigner. Joseph Nye (who has contributed a very useful introduction to the volume) came up with the phrase more than two decades ago. That sparked, in China, what ultimately became a significant intellectual and political project, first to figure out what Nye was talking about, and then to come up with a PRC version that could compete successfully with ubiquitous and increasingly resented Western instruments of soft power.

Fixation on vocabulary terms tends not to last in any country and certainly not in China. This reviewer cut his teeth on “friendship first, competition second,” the favored formula of a PRC venturing into the global mainstream at the end of the cultural revolution. Mention of that formula today evokes reactions ranging from the “secret smile” observed so long ago by Graham Peck (in his wonderful wartime memoir *Two Kinds of Time*) to outright mirth.² “Peaceful rise” had its day but is defunct. Robert Zoellick’s 2005 call for China to be a “responsible stakeholder” set off a flurry of inquiry there,³ and maybe even a bit of optimistic hope for the future, before it disappeared in a cloud of nationalistic annoyance with the patronizing rhetoric of otherwise well-intentioned US public figures. The slogan “New Type of Great Power Relations” had its moment in the Sunnylands sun, where Xi Jinping and Barack Obama strolled in their shirtsleeves, but the phrase fizzled as the two principals in the new type of relations stumbled into deepening disenchantment.⁴

So, these things come and go. We are left for now with the “China dream,” mainly for domestic consumption in the PRC and, to the wider world, the ideal of a “community of common destiny with mankind.” We will have to see how these play out in the months and years to come, but the chronicle of such formulae does not suggest longevity.

Meanwhile, in the United States—the “established power” that did more than any other nation since World War II to set global terms of reference—there is now nothing

2. Graham Peck, *Two Kinds of Time* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950) and (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

3. Robert Zoellick, “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility,” September 21, 2005, https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf.

4. “President Obama and President Xi Hold Historic Meetings at Sunnylands,” Sunnylands, June 12, 2013, <https://sunnylands.org/article/president-obama-and-president-xi-hold-historic-meetings-at-sunnylands/>.

to hold onto. America's message to the world in recent years has become a nullity, a contradiction in terms. No American clarion call stirs responsive audiences abroad, to say nothing of China. There remains only the heavy breathing of a political class and a growing phalanx of policy intellectuals, convinced that the US and the PRC are destined for conflicts of indeterminate purpose and ill-defined outer limits. "Constructive engagement," once the most widely deployed (but never universally agreed) US formula describing Sino-American relations, is dead and buried, though some pretenders to the invention of its replacement are still stomping on its grave. China's soft power ambitions may turn out to be better served by America's all too visible failings than by anything that PRC manipulators could come up with themselves under the soft power umbrella. In short, R.I.P. "soft power." It had a good if fairly short run, both in the anglophone policy world and in China.

I have a hunch that this book will turn out to be the last serious publication on this topic. I can conjure in my mind's eye earnest graduate students, just choosing their PhD dissertation topics, pushing the reset button on their plans to pursue Chinese soft power research knowing that they have arrived too late and that events have just passed them by.

"Wolf warrior diplomacy"; the accumulating slowdown in China's economic expansion, suddenly magnified by the coronavirus-induced economic stall; the recent muddled and seemingly cynical messaging campaign around China's early handling of the virus crisis in China; the contemporaneous evidence of Chinese deployment of "hard power" in sensitive areas of the world; the hubbub over excessive supply-chain dependence on China in nations whose economies have been sucker-punched by the global pandemic; and the ugly tit-for-tat rhetorical and commercial battles between the United States and China decorating the darkening strategic picture all have come to define the altered global discourse on China today, with nary a hat-tip to soft power. The definitional boundary between soft power and "influence operations" has faded as well, leaving many nations hypersensitized to supposed nefarious Chinese Communist Party plots to infect (formerly "win") the hearts and minds of their own people.⁵

But if soft power has passed its prime, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* is nevertheless a fine and worthy read. As long as readers think of its contents as works of modern history, with implications for the future, rather than as portraits of a current and future reality, there is much to gain here.

The book contains fourteen essays, seven in each of its two parts, respectively dubbed "Debating China's Soft Power Strategy" and "China's Global Soft Power under Xi Jinping." To take the latter half first, seven pieces treat China's soft power efforts

5. "Influence ops" publications abound, but an American classic of the genre would be Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., *Chinese Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2019), https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/diamond-schell_corrected-april2020finalfile.pdf.

and challenges in Europe, the Americas, Africa, Japan and South Korea, Taiwan, and East Asia more generally. In each of these essays, one finds solidly based, well-sourced information and analysis. Taken as a whole, these essays leave the impression that the purposeful pursuit of soft power objectives, initiated by China's ruling Communist Party and carried out by actors bound to party central, has been met with very limited success. Although the vaunted soft power attractions displayed by the United States have encountered their own heavy weather in recent years—especially since the arrival in Washington, DC, of the Trump circus—there is little in these essays to suggest that China's approach to the task of winning hearts and minds through the development of a uniquely Chinese style of soft power has proven effective, either at undermining US soft power impacts or at erecting invincible Chinese alternatives.

The essays in the first part of the book, under the somewhat vague rubric of “Debating China's Soft Power Strategy,” are stimulating and will remain so even as the once-jangling noise surrounding soft power in China fades to a faint background rumble.

That is because the profound meanings of China's rapid advance from global isolation and weakness to global influence and strength remain in flux, certainly in the “outside world” and perhaps among thoughtful people in China as well. What does China “stand for” globally? Does it matter? Must it “stand for” anything? How can China stay strong, and become stronger around the world, if people around the world cannot form a coherent framework—in their own languages and contexts—with which to understand China's aims and foundational definitions? If the soft power interval, which these essays explore in such stimulating and unsentimental ways, turns out now to be over, the ambiguities that gave birth to China's extended flirtation with soft power in the first place remain to be addressed, by China and by the world.

Taken in this light, the essays by Suisheng Zhao, Daniel C. Lynch, Stanley Rosen, Wanning Sun, Ying Zhu, Janet Borgerson, Jonathan Schroeder, Zhiyan Wu (the latter three conjointly), and Falk Hartig more than retain their informative value. Zhao is in his element in his piece on “Projection of China's Soft Power.” Lynch, who has been skeptical for years about the discrepancy, as he sees it, between the soaring rhetoric flowing from China's phrase-making apparatus and the darker realities evident in social and economic statistics, lays out his case that Chinese soft power exegetes have stayed in left field too long. Rosen finds that fundamental differences with regard to the relationship of the individual to the collectivity or nation render Chinese soft power a nearly impossible sell in the developed market-economy nations, but stand less in the way of China's image-building efforts in the developing world. Zhu's engrossing account of the tortuous playing-out of Chinese policies governing motion picture entertainment, where the Hollywood cinema juggernaut was the object of ardent imitation and intense ideological hostility, will ring especially true for Westerners long familiar with the US

film culture she details. Wanning Sun's piece on Chinese soft power efforts aimed at diaspora Chinese, particularly in Australia and Southeast Asia, has perhaps the greatest knock-on significance, as questions of China's connections to—and influence over—other nations' domestic constituencies of Chinese extraction have risen to sometimes white-hot prominence today.

The remaining two essays in part one, dealing respectively with “branding” issues, with special emphasis on the staging of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and with the saga of China's Confucius Institutes (CIs), constitute good case studies. But, intentionally or not, they also exemplify the ways in which the entire soft power endeavor has by now become something of a historical curiosity. The dazzling Olympic extravaganza, coming just as the imploding United States was leading the world into global financial catastrophe, provided China with a joyful, heart-stopping, global annunciation, which turned out over the ensuing ten-plus years to be less transformative than the ecstasies of the moment might have predicted. As for the CIs, it is probably premature to declare that experiment at its end, but even if the mindless paranoia of some politicized critics of the CIs in the United States and Europe is discounted, the world continues to revolve; the great soft power scheme behind the CIs, if indeed there was one at all, now seems quaint rather than globe-stopping.

In sum, this is a fine set of thoughtful essays by a group of lively scholars and writers. Different readers will find different nuggets in its wide-ranging papers. But, if they accept that the entire soft power enterprise has only very recently started to become a historical interlude rather than a current and future policy challenge, the volume will provide much value. Ironically, perhaps the best prospects for China's pretensions to soft power lie not with China itself but with the trembling of US and European political, economic, and even ideological structures from which, it was assumed, soft power had not only originated but would derive its strengths as far into the future as the eye could see.