

[China's Vulnerable Brand](#)



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Josh's book is an excellent resource on a topic that is increasingly important—the role of nontraditional foreign policy tools in this era of globalization. The combination of the growing strength of nonstate actors and the increasingly intolerable cost of state-to-state total warfare gives these tools more weight. I had the privilege of seeing Josh present his book to a packed audience at the Asian Institute of Management in Manila. I agree that China has been exploring soft power for years as armed conflict has become less of an option given that the CCP's domestic legitimacy derives from providing economic growth to its people—something that is mostly inconsistent with all out warfare. But I would like to point out a few areas of possible debate.



First, it might help to define soft power. Looking at his book here on my desk, Joseph Nye writes, "Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others." It is not the same as influence. Most relevant here, Nye names three sources of soft power: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)." It is this last source—moral authority—that seems to be lacking in Josh's analysis. In particular Nye writes, "When a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share, it increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that it creates." The United States benefits from a "universalistic culture," Nye writes.

Josh notes that China's image in Washington is not great. Why? Something I cheekily call China Revisionism. Last week's IHT editorial captures this mood: "...The latest reminders are reports of slave labor in Chinese factories and the discovery that some of the popular Thomas the Tank Engine toys manufactured in China have lead in their paint. Before that, it was the contaminated dog food, the stubborn support of Sudan for its oil, the regular reports of human rights abuses, the huge economic disparities between city and country, the controls on the media." But these issues are not just obsessions among the privileged in the United States. They also matter to prosperous Asians, in Japan and Singapore for example, and to Chinese that have the wherewithal and access to information.

The idea that China is a model for other countries is questionable. To paraphrase a China-watcher friend of mine, a Chinese model of economic growth has appeal mainly with states that are failures—and Josh is right to say that these states are also those that have been alienated by Washington. Russia may be an exception of one that can mix limited

freedoms at home and exert power and prestige abroad. But Russia would never sign off on a China-led region much less international community. Indeed over the past ten years, the Chinese have seen an expansion in their personal freedoms in the areas of speech, mobility, and religion. If anything, while the majority of Chinese remain very poor, China's experience reminds us that prosperity and democratic society are linked.

Will China use its soft power to prod countries to choose China over the United States? We cannot be sure, but I doubt it. As senior Pentagon officials have said to me, the United States will seek to avoid a situation in which a country is forced to choose between China and the United States. It is likely that China has a similar position especially given that China's most important international relationship is that one it has with the United States. China is doing much—including sending FDI to politically strategic U.S. states—to nurture that relationship.

Looking at culture, China does have a great asset on which to draw—its successful Diaspora in many large cities around the world. And as Josh mentions, China is using a soft touch in establishing Confucius Centers that stick to teaching Chinese rather than trying to propagandize. But Chinese cultural influence still has a long way to go to match up to the superlative that often describe American cultural power in movies, books, media, and scholarship. A wonderful book on this subject is "America's Inadvertent Empire" by William Odom and Robert Dujarric. To give a taste, they write on the advantage America enjoys in the university gap, "...American academic publications in the social sciences and humanities enjoy an international following that is second to none." Who is one of the most renowned scholars to critique the "Washington Consensus"? None other than American economist Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University.

How does China's soft power play out on the world stage? For all practical purposes, China's soft power base is vulnerable. Darfur is becoming a case study for how vulnerable China's "brand" is. China would like to be seen as supporting universal values and human rights rather than as a pariah. Finally, as the New York Times magazine pointed out over the weekend in its article "Hard Realities of Soft Power," perceived meddling can produce blowback—as it has for the United States in Iran.