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## Hard Truths About China's "Soft Power"

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*Is China's brand of coercive "soft power" a contradiction in terms? A new edited volume helps cut through the morass.*

**W**hen opening *Soft Power With Chinese Characteristics*, a timely new volume that arrives amid a flood of COVID-19-fueled disinformation, it is important to notice the irony embedded in the title. The phrase "with Chinese characteristics" is used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) whenever it borrows a Western idea or practice to utilize for its own purposes. For example, in the early 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping was introducing market forces into China's dead-in-the-water planned economy, the new system was not described as

***Soft Power With Chinese Characteristics: China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds***

edited by Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu

Routledge, 2020; 296 pages; priced from \$155.00 (hardback) to \$22.48 (six-month e-book rental)]

“capitalism”—that term would have conceded far too much ground to the enemies of socialism. Rather it was dubbed “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

This touch of Newspeak did not bother Deng’s free-market champions in the West; they knew what Deng meant, and many a capitalist smiled knowingly at his motto: “It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white; if it catches mice, it’s a good cat.” But the phrase “with Chinese characteristics” is no longer so benign. For Deng, it was a way to camouflage the fact that he was moving the Chinese economy in the direction of capitalism. For today’s Communist rulers, by contrast, it is a way to camouflage policies that are profoundly anti-democratic.

As explained by media scholar Zhan Zhang, one of 20 academic contributors to this volume, the Chinese meanings of “Western political language” (words like “democracy,” “freedom,” “equality,” “justice,” and the “rule of law”) “differ significantly from the meanings as understood in the West.” For example, “the basic European respect for individual rights and freedom is not on the individual level in the Chinese value system, but instead on the social level. This means that freedom is not about one’s individual freedom, but is rather a collective freedom for the group and society.”

It is tempting to ask Zhang if she has ever heard of George Orwell. To be fair, she is explaining the CCP point of view, not defending it. But the ghost of Orwell hangs over this volume, because as many of the contributors make clear, what the CCP means by “soft power with Chinese characteristics” is the exact opposite of what political scientist Joseph Nye meant when he coined the term back in 1990. And it doesn’t help that the term itself tends to get lost in a semantic fog.

Over the years, Nye has repeated the definition of soft power so often, he can doubtless do it in his sleep. Here is an example from an essay he wrote in 2017: “Power is the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one prefers, and . . . soft power is the ability to affect others by *attraction* and *persuasion* rather than just *coercion* and *payment*.” In the words of Georgia Tech researcher Dalton Lin and University of Taiwan political scientist Yun-han Chu, the CCP’s pretense of using “persuasion” to get Taiwan to surrender its independence “turns the soft power logic on its head and blurs the line between attraction and coercion.”

In addition to exposing the Orwellian aura of “soft power with Chinese characteristics,” this volume reveals and critiques the larger information strategy of the CCP. The first chapter, by the distinguished scholar and Hoover Institution fellow Suisheng Zhao, delves into the CCP’s recently stepped-up effort to construct and propagate a “narrative” intended to remind the world of China’s “century of humiliation,” reassure it about China’s peaceful rise, and (most important) ready it for the peaceful *decline* of the West, especially America. With apologies to Zhao, and mindful that “narrative” is one of the great weasel words of our time, I offer here my own synthesis:

*To begin with the moral of the story: The West is solely responsible for China not being the world hegemon it so richly deserves to be. For 5,000 years before the devastation wrought by the British and European colonial powers, the Middle Kingdom and its constellation of loyal vassal states had been an island of perpetual peace, political virtue, and social harmony—in stunning contrast to the rest of the world, in which human life was nasty,*

*brutish, and short.*

*But then, toward the end of the fourth millennium, disaster struck in the form of barbaric Western invaders who, insanely envious of China's shining civilization, laid waste to it in an orgy of violence, lust, and greed. This was by far the worst event in history, because (let's face it) the Chinese people are humanity's finest flower, and as such, they had the farthest to fall.*

*But the Mandate of Heaven cannot be destroyed. So, after the "century of humiliation" had passed, a glorious Leader appeared, and led the Chinese people to redemption in the form of a glorious Revolution, led by a glorious Party which has struggled unceasingly to raise the Chinese people from the ashes of Western-imposed misery. This mighty task has taken many decades, so enormous was the damage. But thanks to the unerring wisdom of the Revolution's Founding Leader and his glorious Successors, especially the Present Leader who has graciously agreed to remain Emperor—er, General Secretary—for life, the Chinese people are now ready to reclaim their inheritance as the greatest and most civilized race on the planet. And because China also commands the planet's greatest and most advanced technology, its new civilization is destined to subsume not just Asia but the entire world.*

Zhao is too serious a scholar to present the CCP narrative in this fanciful way. What he does do is highlight the contrast between the Party's "reconstruction of the benign Chinese world order," blessed with *tianxia* (unity under heaven) and *wangdo* (royal virtue), and its actual behavior, which is that of a sovereign state in a "social Darwinian world" of cutthroat competition among sovereign states. He quotes with approval the verdict of seasoned China scholar June Teufel Dreyer: "Supporters of the revival of *tianxia* as a model for today's world are essentially misrepresenting the past to reconfigure the future, distorting it to advance a political agenda that is at best disingenuous and at worst dangerous."

It may be objected that the narrative of a "benign Chinese world order" cannot work as soft power, because it is not likely to attract or persuade anyone who does not belong to the implied master race of Han Chinese. Nor, I hasten to add, is it likely to appeal to the millions of ethnic Chinese both inside and outside China, who may feel patriotic toward their homeland but who know better than to believe that it ever was, or will be, a paradise on earth. As for the "century of humiliation," the exploitation and brutality of the Western imperial powers have been exhaustively chronicled, not least by Western historians working under conditions of academic freedom that have almost never existed in China.

According to Nye's definition, the two aspects of power that are "hard" are coercion (military force) and payment (economic clout). In 2007 Walter Russell Mead attempted to clarify the concept of hard power by distinguishing between the military aspect, which he called "sharp power," and the economic aspect, which he called "sticky power." The metaphors were apt, but Mead's new terminology never caught on.

In 2017 there was another attempt to elaborate on Nye's concept: a timely report from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) entitled *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, in which Chris Walker and Jessica Ludwig of NED, along with four regional experts, offer detailed analyses of how the

CCP (and the Kremlin) have been using political pressure and economic clout to “pierce, penetrate, and perforate the political and information environments” in four fragile democracies: Argentina, Peru, Poland, and Slovakia. This new definition of “sharp power” is one that deserves to catch on.

Still, the semantic fog surrounding these terms is vexing to most people, which is why the CCP can get away with calling its sharp power “soft.” I have never been a fan of the term “soft power,” because during the 1990s, the inevitable connotations of the word “soft”—weakness, frilliness, and (dare I say it?) unmanliness—contributed to the decline of U.S. government support for a host of activities under the heading of public diplomacy. Yet these activities, which range from cultural programs to educational exchanges, foreign-language news media to assistance with internet access, are not mere frills. If they were, then every authoritarian regime in history would not have copied them as a way to deliver their Big Lies in packages that mimic the more truthful ones coming from the United States.

To readers whose hackles rise at the very thought of a government being truthful, I willingly admit that every government tells lies. But not every government tells lies—or gets away with telling lies—to the same extent. When President Trump claims that hydroxychloroquine, a common treatment for malaria, is “a strong drug” that “we ought to try” against Covid-19, there is an outcry in the press and an immediate correction from the nation’s leading public health official, Dr. Anthony Fauci. When a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry insinuates that the virus was introduced into Wuhan by U.S. Army soldiers visiting in October, the rumor floods through every possible channel of state-controlled media, and any “troublemaker” who dares to object is swiftly and ruthlessly silenced. At the moment, there is a troubling resemblance between the misinformation emanating from the White House and the disinformation being propagated by the CCP. But if the two governments were really the same, then the resemblance would be normal and we would not find it troubling!

This is not to suggest that the U.S. government has never used propaganda. In the lead-up to America’s entry into World War I, both the British and the American governments fabricated reports of hideous atrocities committed by the evil “Hun,” then pressured the fledgling film studios to incorporate these fabrications into movies to help shake the American public out of its isolationism. This may have worked at the time, but by the 1930s, both London and Washington realized how much damage their hate propaganda had done. Not only did it inspire Hitler and Goebbels, it also fostered incredulity toward early reports of Nazi atrocities.

This realization led to a change of heart. There was plenty of lying and spying during World War II and the Cold War, but when it came to communicating with large populations in foreign countries, both Britain and America took the relative high road of refusing to spread blatant falsehoods. Instead, they developed the craft of public diplomacy, defined as any and all efforts to attract and persuade others without resorting to gross deception. Pitted against the aggressive propaganda of the Third Reich and the Soviet Communist Party, this approach was decidedly asymmetrical. But it worked.

**C**an this (relatively) truthful approach succeed in today’s era of digitally enhanced authoritarianism? Since 2008, when the Russian Federation under President Putin began the first of three incursions into neighboring countries,

the Kremlin opened what the RAND corporation calls “a firehose of falsehood.” That firehose has two streams, one directed outward and the other inward. The outward-directed stream seeks to pollute the global information space with disinformation, conspiracy theories, and paranoid fantasies in the hope of sowing division and cynicism among the citizens of liberal democracies. The inward-directed stream pushes a “narrative” in which every tragic occurrence in Russian history is blamed on the West, and only the current Great Leader can restore the nation’s glory.

Clearly, this Russian “narrative” resembles the Chinese one. Both are intended to beat back the “thuggish domination” of Western “discourse hegemony.” This language, quoted in the chapter by Daniel C. Lynch, a professor of Asian and International Studies at Hong Kong University, was taken from a source at Wuhan University’s Institute of Marxism. But it could just as well have been taken from a Russian source, because both authoritarian “narratives” share a common ancestor: Soviet Communism.

As noted by co-editor Ying Zhu in her riveting chapter about the Chinese film industry, the Soviets were teaching propaganda to the Chinese 20 years before Mao’s Revolution. In 1928 the Kuomintang (KMT) enlisted the aid of a Bolshevik expert in mounting an information offensive against its political rivals, one of which was the Communist Party. As Zhu writes, “the KMT’s active political intervention in [China’s] cultural affairs shared similar tenets and pedigree with its archenemy, the CCP; *both were trained by the Soviets.*” (emphasis added).

Authoritarian propaganda is expensive. In a chapter entitled “The Ironies of Soft Power Projection,” co-editor Stanley Rosen, a veteran China expert at the University of Southern California, points to the contrast between the CCP’s huge investment in “sharp power,” over \$10 billion a year, and the U.S. government’s minimal support of public diplomacy. Rosen also observes that, while U.S. investment in soft power has been in decline since the end of the Cold War, that decline has accelerated under the current administration: “What Trump has done is to move from the American government’s benign neglect to active sabotage of soft power.”

Rosen is not unduly worried about this, because American soft power has many sources besides the government. Indeed, foreign attitudes toward America are largely shaped by nonstate actors of every stripe, from corporations to universities, foundations to small businesses, NGOs to QUANGOS (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations). Many of these nonstate actors are connected to the government in some way. But even congressionally funded QUANGOs like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the National Endowment for Democracy do not operate as direct instruments of the state. As for the myriad contractors that partner with government agencies, they often proceed (for good and ill) with minimal oversight.

Because of the major role played by non-state and quasi-state actors, some observers argue that the U.S. government should quit investing in soft power altogether. I disagree, because there are some things only the government can do, such as support responsible foreign-language news reporting in countries where the media are censored or corrupt; convey a fuller picture of American society, culture, and institutions than is conveyed by commercialized popular culture; and (not least) engage in the nearly lost art of explaining, defending, and seeking support for U.S. policies in a way that involves listening as well as

lecturing.

To argue that the U.S. government should support such activities is not to argue that it needs to match the \$10 billion budget of the CCP's sharp power offensive. Washington has never spent that kind of money on public diplomacy. Back in 1981, when President Reagan was gearing up for the final charge against the Soviet Union, the Kremlin was spending \$2.2 billion on overseas propaganda, as opposed to the \$480 million budget of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). Under Reagan the USIA received a major infusion of cash, peaking at \$881 million in 1986. But even that fell short of the billions being spent by the faltering USSR.

Speaking of billions, there is one topic upon which all these authors agree: "Beijing is using the strongest instrument in its soft-power toolbox: money." China scholar David Shambaugh (not a contributor) wrote these words back in 2015, when Xi and other Chinese leaders had been traveling to "more than 50 countries . . . [to] sign huge trade and investment deals, extend generous loans, and dole out hefty aid packages." The reader might ask what is wrong with that, since as Shambaugh continues: "Major powers always try to use their financial assets to buy influence and shape the actions of others; in this regard, China is no different."

But here the semantic fog thickens, because while Nye classifies payment, along with coercion, as hard power, that hardly resolves the matter. Where do we

**Where do we draw the line between a nation using its economic clout to do legitimate business overseas, and the same nation using its clout to bend a resistant population to its will?**

draw the line between a nation using its economic clout to do legitimate business overseas, and the same nation using its clout to bend a resistant population to its will? At present, the only way to draw this line is on a case-by-case basis, as the aforementioned NED report on sharp power does so well.

As it happens, the same case-by-case approach is taken by several of

the authors in *Soft Power With Chinese Characteristics*. Not all use the term "sharp power," and some use "soft power" in a way that suggests either a lack of knowledge or a studied indifference regarding the concept's original meaning. But in most cases, what these authors' careful analyses of the CCP's methods in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and East Asia reveal a consistent pattern of "soft power" being used as camouflage to cover the use of China's massive economic clout in ways that are patently manipulative, deceptive, and coercive. In an era when many China scholars are playing it safe by letting their research chill for several hours in the ideological refrigerator before serving it up to the reader, it is refreshing to find such an impressive array of experts willing to tell it like it is.

These include the aforementioned Daniel C. Lynch, who probes the shaky condition of the Chinese economy and asks whether it portends a shift to unabashed hard power; Australian scholar Wanning Sun, who reveals the CCP's growing control of diasporic Chinese-language media; Latin American expert R. Evan Ellis, who takes a hard look at Chinese sharp power in Latin America; historian Antonio Fiori, who together with Stanley Rosen takes an equally sobering look at the CCP's activities in Africa; Taiwanese experts Dalton Lin

and Yun-han Chu, who mount a scathing critique of how the pretense of soft power is used to camouflage the CCP's coercive tactics in Taiwan; Hong Kong scholar David Zweig, who gives a quietly devastating account of Hong Kong's struggle to retain its autonomy; and finally, a trio of authors: Yun-han Chu and Min-hua Huang (in Taiwan) and Jie Lu (in Beijing), who painstakingly assess the delicate balancing required by East Asian countries torn between China's economic power and America's democratic ideals.

Speaking of democratic ideals, it is hard to plow through this long, complicated, yet invaluable book without asking yourself how the story will end. By "story" I mean not the fabricated "narrative" being propagated by the CCP, but the true history of this extraordinary civilization as it collided with modernity, was engulfed by it, and then sought to engulf it in return. That true history is only partly written, because of all the crimes committed by the CCP, the greatest is its deliberate erasure of the past. That is why I admire writers like Rowena Xiaoqing He, whose 2014 book *Tiananmen Exiles* captures with a fine brush the subjective experiences of three pro-democracy activists who came of age amid that heroic attempt to expand the liberties that blossomed so briefly in the years following Deng's economic reforms. As a member of that generation, she recalls how difficult remembering can be:

Thoughts, feelings, and fragments needed to be understood and woven together. I compare it to the unfolding of a traditional Chinese water-and-ink painting. When you first unfold the picture, you will see only pieces of water and ink here and there. It is hard to tell where the sky is, which part is water, which is cloud, which is stone, and which are the bushes. Not until you unfold the entire picture will you discover the artistic meaning.

The phrase "hearts and minds" is a dreadful cliché, but it is relevant here, because while the truth of recent Chinese history lives on in the hearts of those who witnessed it, they are getting older, and the young are being blindfolded by the regime. All the more vital, then to produce bold, careful, scholarship like this, which is capable of clarifying the mind even when the heart is muddled by lies.

*Appeared in: Volume 15, Number 5 | Published on: March 30, 2020*

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