

The Future of Chinese Soft Power in a Changing Global Order

Why China has failed to establish a US-style soft power dominance and how this may change in the future

Executive Summary

Soft power has become a cornerstone of modern diplomacy, often rivaling hard power in effectiveness by shaping global perceptions through culture, media, and consumer products. The US exemplifies the stunning efficiency of these policies, having managed to dominate global youth culture for several generations.

However, more recent soft power nations such as Japan and South Korea provide an interesting case study on how smaller nations can achieve a similar level of influence. Japan's soft power emerged organically through high-quality consumer goods and popular animation shows, while South Korea deliberately engineered its soft power boom by investing heavily in entertainment industries such as K-pop.

Despite its cultural heritage and substantial investments, Chinese soft power still struggles to replicate this success in the West. Its soft power faces resistance due to perceived authoritarianism and value conflicts with democratic societies. Nonetheless, shifting global dynamics—such as US isolationism and China's recent visa-free policies—may offer new opportunities for Beijing to narrow the soft power gap, positioning itself as a pragmatic, reliable partner in an evolving international order.

Why soft power is essential in modern diplomacy

Modern governments have an extensive range of tools at their disposal when conducting foreign policy. One of these is soft power, which is far subtler than traditional military power but can often be equally effective. The concept is best understood in contrast to hard power—military action, unilateral trade barriers, and economic sanctions—that relies on direct coercion to shape behavior. By contrast, this approach seeks to influence other countries indirectly through means such as

culture, food, or language. This can be especially effective in democracies, where public opinion can constrain or empower leaders. If citizens in Country A admire Country B's culture, their government will find it easier to cooperate with B—and harder to adopt policies that oppose it.¹

Explained like this, soft power can be hard to understand, as its methods are rather vague compared to those of hard power. Still, the influence and extent of soft power cannot be underestimated, and over large spans of time it can even be more effective at shaping global politics than hard power. In this light, innocent-seeming cultural products can suddenly appear very different. The success of K-pop and other Korean cultural exports is a clear example of this. From an external perspective, it may appear to be simply another pop-culture trend. However, when the Korean government's substantial investment in the industry is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that it also functions as a deliberate foreign policy tool.

This article analyses the dynamics of soft power by reviewing and comparing the cases of the US, Japan, and South Korea, in order to reflect on the future of Chinese soft power.

Disney, McDonald's and Marvel: how American soft power conquered the world

The US has arguably had one of the greatest soft power successes in history, with American youth culture now often being considered as shared international youth culture.² Particularly entertainment such as films and music, and brands such as Starbucks and McDonald's, has managed to become instantly recognizable in all corners of the globe. But how did the US manage to establish its dominance on the global cultural stage, and how come no one has been able to reproduce this success?

Soft power benefits from synergies between different mediums in a way that other types of power cannot, and the influence of soft power tends to increase in an exponential way. American movies show their characters drinking Starbucks, using iPhones and generally referencing other elements of American culture. This second-hand exposure means that even someone who has never been to a Starbucks likely knows that it is a coffee chain with a green logo. If, for example, a Luckin Coffee

¹ What is soft power ? (16 May 2023). CFR Education From The Council On Foreign Relations: <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/what-soft-power>

² Nye, J. S., Jr. (2009). *Soft power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. PublicAffairs.

were to open in a European city today, it would have to be accompanied by a serious marketing effort, as the name is completely unrecognizable to European customers, despite being one of China's largest coffee chains, with a number of stores that even surpasses Starbucks. One of the reasons for this is the globally negative image of China among Western audiences,³ and the low penetration rate of Chinese media in the West.

A major American brand, on the other hand, would have no issue establishing itself in most urban environments, and would have to spend significantly less resources on marketing, as they would benefit from the recognition that can be gained through brand exposure in blockbuster movies.⁴

This illustrates how soft power reinforces itself, as American food, cultural codes, traditions, music and language become almost more familiar to young people than their own culture. Customers tend to associate familiarity with reliability, and local brands thus find themselves struggling to impress even the youth in their own country, to say nothing of an international audience.

However, to better grasp the impact of contemporary US soft power, it is important to also understand its origins.

The rise of American soft power has largely been shaped by history. The Second World War left Europe devastated and in dire need of funds for the reconstruction effort, and the US was left mostly intact and with the economic capacity to sponsor the European post-war reconstruction through the Marshall plan.⁵ It was thus imperative for European powers to ensure a positive trans-Atlantic partnership, putting the US in a favorable position to export its culture. In addition, several deals were made between the US and European nations in order to receive loans in exchange for opening up their markets to American goods. A great example of such a deal is the Blum-Byrnes agreement of 1946 between France and the US, a deal that managed to erase some of France's US debt in exchange for reducing protectionist measures, specifically removing quotas on US films in

³ Silver, L., & Beshay. (8 August 2025). *More people view the U.S. positively than China across 35 surveyed countries*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/09/more-people-view-the-us-positively-than-china-across-35-surveyed-countries/>

⁴ Zhang, J. (2024). Blockbuster Branding--Exploring the Impact of Product Placement on Consumer Behavior in American Cinema. *Advances In Economics Management And Political Sciences*, 92(1), 104-113.: <https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/92/20231116>

⁵ D-Day.Center. (14 December 2025). *The Impact of WWII on European Post-War Reconstruction : Causes, Challenges, and Legacies*. D-Day Center. <https://www.dday.center/the-impact-of-wwii-on-european-post-war-reconstruction/>

France.⁶ As the US had a backlog of films that were banned in France during the occupation years, the Americans were able to flood French cinemas with US movies, quickly going from being an irregularity to the norm. Once Western audiences had developed the habit of watching American films, other US media could more easily integrate themselves into European youth culture.

Strong American soft power can generally be linked to the post-war and Cold War periods, where the US dominated the Western bloc in terms of culture, politics, and economy. The same dynamic can be seen in Asia, where American culture was equally brought to Japan through the post-war US dependence. In Japan, American educational foundations invested heavily in introducing American studies to Japanese intellectuals in universities in order to increase cultural understanding through top-down exposure. The post-war period also brought American food culture, like the widespread consumption of bread and the establishment of baseball as the national sport in post-war Japan.⁷

But if soft power requires a position of dominance, how did Japan and Korea—neither global hegemon—achieve such influence?

Japan and Korea: the regional soft superpowers

The success of American soft power suggests that soft power initiatives are successful when initially imposed from a position of power, thus making it inaccessible for countries that did not just win a major war or have previously held global influence. However if that were true, Japan would be one of the least likely soft power exporters, as the post-war Japan was in a similar position to Europe in that it was economically and politically dependent on the Americans.

Japan's soft power strategy can essentially be understood as an inverted version of the US strategy, using consumer products as its initial vector to then later introduce pop culture. Japanese brands such as Toyota, Yamaha, Sony, Canon, and others all established themselves as leaders in their sector, with a strong focus on quality and reliability. This significantly aided in creating a positive image of Japan as reliable and trustworthy among Western audiences. This focus on quality was seen in animations too, and from the 1960s Japanese animations started becoming popular in the US due

⁶Margairaz, M. (1982). Autour des accords Blum-Byrnes. Jean Monnet entre le consensus national et le consensus atlantique. *Histoire Économie et Société*, 1(3), 439-470. <https://doi.org/10.3406/hes.1982.1302>

⁷L, A. (3 November 2023). *Soft Power: The U.S. Cultural Offensive and Japanese Intellectuals*. Asia-Pacific Journal : Japan Focus. <https://apjjf.org/takeshi-matsuda/2671/article>

to their high quality.⁸ French TV channels also notably started airing Japanese animations as their licenses were generally cheaper⁹, and from the popularity of anime came much the same result as with Hollywood. Western audiences became familiar with Japanese food, history, culture and language through the life depicted in anime, and the Western audiences who grew up watching anime mostly have a very positive view of the country as a whole.

While the Japanese soft power boom seemingly started as a spontaneous movement that has later been integrated into Japan's official diplomatic strategy (now called cool Japan), South Korea has proven that soft power booms can be reproduced intentionally by deliberate government investment. Since the 2010s, the Korean government has intentionally and purposefully invested in the exportation of Korean culture as a deliberate part of its strategic diplomatic efforts. Korea has masterfully reproduced the Japanese and American soft power initiatives by first focusing on entertainment (music being the major vector in this case) and then later using this goodwill to expand into other areas such as cosmetics, gaming and food. The deliberate nature of Korean soft power was clearly demonstrated when the K-pop group BTS delivered a speech at the UN in 2021.¹⁰

By analyzing US, Japanese and Korean soft power it can be seen that not only can soft power initiatives be successful even when initiated by middle powers, but it can also be intentionally reproduced through state-sponsored initiatives. This leads us to a major question, why has China had no soft power boom?

Chinese soft power, advances, methods and problems

The concept of Chinese soft power presents a compelling paradox. China possesses not only one of the world's most historically rich and diverse cultural heritages but also substantial financial resources to support its global influence.

⁸ *Japanese Animations' effects on the Japanese economy and their cultural influence on foreign countries - 1828 Words | Research Paper Example.* (20 December 2023). IvyPanda.

<https://ivy panda.com/essays/japanese-animations-effects-on-the-japanese-economy-and-their-cultural-influence-on-foreign-countries/>

⁹ *Japonisme : Why is Japanese Culture so Popular in France ?* (s. d.). Creatives Unite.

<https://creativesunite.eu/article/japonisme-why-is-japanese-culture-so-popular-in-france->

¹⁰ Alves de Oliveira, C. V. (2025). *The Hallyu Wave as a strategic soft power tool : South Korea's cultural diplomacy in the 21st century.* Dans *SCIELO Preprints*. <https://preprints.scielo.org/index.php/scielo/preprint/view/12388/22757>

And yet, Chinese soft power is very much lagging behind, and while it has undoubtedly made enormous strides in the past decades, it has still largely failed to implant a positive image of China in Western audiences, even though American, Japanese and Korean soft power have been reasonably successful in China.

Compared to the strong attachment to local culture, food, and language that other soft power giants have achieved, the results of Chinese soft power are weak at best. Chinese soft power has seen some success in South-East Asia and developing countries, but Western audiences will still often link China to censorship and the authoritarian political system rather than to the country's rich history and traditions. Beijing has made several attempts to use the country's rich culture for soft power diplomacy, but the reception has been mixed. A clear example of this are the Confucius institutes, government-sponsored educational institutions that offer courses in Chinese language and culture. While these institutes are often integrated into European universities, their teachings have received mixed receptions, often being accused of limiting discussions on sensitive topics such as Taiwan or Tibet, and in recent years several Confucius institutes have been closed in Denmark and Finland precisely due to these reasons.¹¹

One of the reasons for the resistance towards Chinese soft power is that the country has long been opposed to the US on the global stage, and the strong attachment to American culture and values has likely made it more difficult for Western audiences to accept Chinese soft power. South Korea, Japan, and America all seemingly share common values of democracy, civil liberties, and free market capitalism, which in turn makes them more receptive to soft power initiatives from like-minded partners. However, as China is generally seen as conflicting with these values, its soft power initiatives are easily perceived as deliberate propaganda, even if they employ the same tactics as other powers in the region.

This is not to suggest that Chinese soft power efforts are futile; indeed, Beijing remains deeply committed to this endeavor, and currently invests around 10 billion USD in soft power initiatives every year.

While Chinese soft power still has a way to go, it has seen tremendous improvement over the past few years, partially thanks to external factors like the sharp change in US foreign policy. As the

¹¹Myklebust, J. P. (23 June 2022). *Another Confucius centre axed due to mistrust of China*. University World News. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20220623082301227>

Trump administration is turning the US into an isolationist state that relies exclusively on hard power – unilateral economic and military coercion – Beijing has a unique opportunity to fill the power vacuum left by the Americans. As the US is no longer seen as a reliable and stable ally, Western audiences may be more open to alternatives. Chinese apps such as TikTok have enchanted young people globally, and the country recently opened up with a unilateral visa-free policy for over 40 countries, making it seem more open and friendly. In addition, the recent brutalization of international relations forces nations to adopt a more pragmatic and less value-oriented global strategy, which will likely benefit China, which can position itself as a reliable partner that defends the old rule-based international system.

Even though China will likely never be able to reproduce the soft power successes of the US and Japan, it will likely close the gap among Western audiences as American soft power declines. If the Chinese are able to take advantage of the reconfiguration of global alliances, they will likely be able to position themselves firmly as a competitive cultural exporter to the West alongside other major soft power nations.

Conclusion

The position of soft power as a tool of diplomacy has seen profound changes in recent years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Trump administration's frequent use of unilateral economic or military coercion would suggest that soft power is becoming secondary at best to hard power. It appears that global leaders are growing tired of patiently influencing public opinion through soft power, and would rather achieve their foreign policy goals by force.

However, soft power is far from dead. As the US is rapidly moving out of their traditional role of "leader of the free world" other nations will have to be more pragmatic when choosing partners, and will have to diversify their partnerships in order to avoid over-reliance on one single nation. This, combined with the recent numerous political disagreements between Washington and their European allies, is actively undermining the American soft power hegemony in the West. As the image of the US rapidly erodes in the West, China will have an opportunity to implant their soft power influence in order to partially fill the gap.

How Beijing chooses to act in global conflicts will likely be a deciding factor in how successful Chinese soft power will be. If they can appear as a reliable and reasonable partner for Western audiences, especially when the US no longer appears as so, Chinese soft power may find greater acceptance than they have achieved so far. It remains to see if Beijing has the patience needed for successful soft power initiatives, or if they will be unable to resist the temptation to follow in the footsteps of other global powers by relying on hard power to achieve their foreign policy objectives.

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