

The New Motivation and Dilemma of China's Internal Soft Power in the Age of Noopolitik

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“Bad China” has become a general theme of journalistic and academic commentary on contemporary China. This book adopts framing analysis of English-language media in China and Australia and transcription of interviews with “intermediate elites” in Australia to evaluate to what extent there is congruence between domestic and overseas accounts of Chinese governance, and, drawing on these results, critiques the degree of success of this type of soft power activity. The concept and practice of “soft power” is rarely subjected to rigorous study. This in-depth research of a particular topic is therefore welcome.

Zheng Li, who lectures in the School of Journalism and Communication at Henan University, China, obtained his doctoral degree from the Department of International Studies at Macquarie University, Australia. The guiding influence of Naren Chitty, the founding director of the Soft Power Analysis and Resource Centre at that university, is evident in Li's research, particularly Chitty's distinction between internal and external soft power categories. Li's book makes copious references to Chitty's work and to other soft power scholars, including Gary Rawnsley. It has an impressive reference section and extensive discussion of his research methodology that, together with the index, provides an invaluable resource for communication scholars who are interested to extend their work into studies of contemporary China or Australia or both.

The book comprises seven chapters, with the opening chapter being devoted to a description of social issues in China and the priorities of the Xi Jinping government, as well as an argument for the importance of Zheng's research. Chapter two covers Chinese and foreign (“Western”) views on the rule of law and good governance and China's image in the West. Chapter three discusses the difference between soft and sharp power. Chapter four describes the methodology of Zheng's research. Chapters five and six respectively deal with Xi Jinping's “China Dream” and the anti-corruption campaign, their interpretation in some Australian newspapers and comments on them by the “intermediate elites” interviewed by the author. The last chapter offers some discussion and conclusion, together with suggestions for the direction of future research.

Overall, however, this book exhibits the all-too-common symptoms of being a thesis that has been only sketchily converted into a book. It is structured entirely like a thesis, with preliminaries and wrap-ups that should have been discarded. Non-specialist readers want to know from the beginning what the real subject matter is and what the main conclusions are, and they have to dig patiently in this pudding before they can extract some plums.

On the other hand, those same non-specialist readers would benefit from some background explanation of terms, issues and events that are specific to the period of recent Chinese political history that is under review. Just to give one example, Li refers to a statement at a conference of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission by Xi Jinping that “power should be exercised within the cage of regulations,” which he describes as “one of the most famous slogans of the anti-corruption campaign,” but he fails to supply the date and context (it was January 2013). Indeed, nowhere does he set out the starting and ending dates for his survey of Chinese and Australian media or the basis for his selection of the newspapers included in his study.

This study seems to assume that internal and external soft power considerations were equally important in China's campaigns to promote the rule of law and combat corruption. It is, however, highly unlikely that Xi Jinping and the leadership group of the Communist Party of China were motivated in the slightest by how these campaigns would contribute to national soft power in the region or the world beyond. As Li admits, there were pressing domestic reasons for the campaign and even existential threats to the Party. The soft power effects of the campaigns were merely incidental.

One might also argue that a survey of China's English-language media is not the best indicator of the soft power effect of the campaigns, either internal or external, nor is a survey of mainly opinion pieces in a small selection of Australian daily newspapers, plus interviews with 18 Australian professionals who had some lived experience of China. As Rawnsley has pointed out in "Communicating confidence: China's public diplomacy" (*Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, 2020), the Chinese government has invested heavily in public diplomacy in recent years, including in a new radio channel called The Voice of China designed to compete with the Voice of America, but these official initiatives have not shifted international criticism of heavy-handed domestic policies. It is therefore not surprising that domestic governance campaigns have hardly affected international public opinion.

This book makes a modest contribution to the study of Chinese soft power both internal and external, chiefly through its focus on Australian press coverage of Chinese domestic politics in the Xi Jinping era.

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Power and Restraint in China's Rise

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In 2010, China's then Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi famously chided his Singaporean counterpart on the side-lines of an ASEAN Regional Forum dealing with the South China Sea (SCS) dispute: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact." For realists there could be no greater proof about the dangers that a rising China could materially steamroll Southeast Asia. A replay of heavy-handed Chinese demands occurred in 2016 in an ASEAN gathering in Kunming in the run-up to the historic decision by the International Arbitration Tribunal in the Hague, which ruled against China. With the exception of Laos and Cambodia, ASEAN members banded together to defy Chinese moves then.

In this provocative and well-written book Huang searches for the rationale of China's policy vis-à-vis the SCS: under what circumstances might it be more restrained toward its neighbours? He argues, convincingly for the most part, that when faced with regional consensus against it, China is likely to backpedal on its maritime moves.

However, realists will be hard pressed to buy into this point of view given China's on-off militarization of the SCS (the "salami" tactic). Huang argues in response that brute force is not only