IS CHINA’S SOFT POWER DOMINATING SOUTHEAST ASIA?

VIEWS FROM THE CITIZENS

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The China Policy Institute, part of the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies at The University of Nottingham, was set up to analyse critical policy challenges faced by China in its rapid development. Its goals are to help expand the knowledge and understanding of contemporary China in Britain, Europe and worldwide, to help build a more informed dialogue between China and the UK and Europe, and to contribute to government and business strategies.
Executive Summary

1. China’s rise is arousing anxieties around the world. In recent years, with the US distracted in the Middle East, there has been concern that China is moving in to become the dominant power in Southeast Asia.

2. By looking at how citizens of Southeast Asian countries view a rising China, it was found that China’s soft power is far from dominating the region. Southeast Asians in general view China positively, giving China a slightly better image than that of the US, but they view Japan more positively than China.

3. The publics of "Continental Southeast Asia" (Vietnam and Thailand) view China more positively than those of "Maritime Southeast Asia" (Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc.).

4. In Singapore, people who speak English at home view China less favourably, compared to those who speak Chinese or other languages at home.

5. Muslims largely view China less favourably than people of other faiths. On the other hand, people of Taoism or Confucianism have more favourable views of China.

6. Older Singaporeans view China more positively than younger Singaporeans, or those born after 1965, the year in which Singapore became an independent nation.

7. Northern Vietnamese have a better impression of China than their southern counterparts. In particular, northern Vietnamese born after the country’s unification (1975) view China most positively.
8. In Singapore, people with more experience of international travel tend to view China more favourably.

9. People who follow events in other countries more closely also view China more favourably. This is similar to findings of studies on the US’s image abroad in that people who are more internationally exposed tend to view a foreign country more positively.

10. China’s image in Southeast Asia will depend on China’s ability to communicate to Muslims, people who grow up speaking English, and to the younger generations there.

11. Domestic media, opinion leaders, and policy makers in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, can also foster a more comprehensive and balanced view of China by presenting China in less-simplistic ways and facilitating people-to-people exchanges and understanding.
Is China’s Soft Power Dominating Southeast Asia?
Views from the Citizens

Zhengxu Wang and Ying Yang*

1.1 With the US increasingly distracted in the Middle East, many are concerned that China has deepened its roots in Southeast Asia through extended engagement and economic diplomacy. China appears to be actively promoting regional integration vehicles such as the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and Southeast Asian countries seem to welcome an economically vibrant China.

1.2 But China-ASEAN relationships are much more complicated than that. In the early years, Southeast Asian countries viewed China as a potential threat because of its support for communist movements in the region. Since the late 1970s, Southeast Asia’s acceptance of China has been on the rise. After the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, Beijing more actively sought an improved relationship with Southeast Asia as it faced the diplomatic blockade of the West.¹

1.3 Into the late 1990s, as China’s economic weight increased rapidly, China-ASEAN regionalism also picked up momentum, especially after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The 10+1 Dialogue, ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement, and China’s signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN, and the Greater Mekong Regional Cooperation projects all seemed to contribute to China-ASEAN cooperation.

1.4 Nevertheless, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the “China Threat” alarm have raised suspicion among Southeast Asian countries about China’s strategic intentions.² The issue of overseas Chinese also complicates China’s relationship with Southeast Asian countries.³ In terms of regional

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¹ Diplomatic relations between China and several countries were normalized during this period, including Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam.
² At the time of writing this paper, China and Vietnam were involved in disputes regarding the right to explore seabed oil resources in certain areas. See “China-Vietnam Dispute Revives Regional Fears”, International Herald Tribune, 14 April, 1997, and “China warns Exxon over Vietnam deal-newspaper”, Reuters, 20 Jul, 2008.
economic integration, the fear of a China-dominated East Asia has provoked measures to hedge against China, such as the East Asia Summit that brought in India, Russia, and Australia.4

1.5 Furthermore, there seems to be a broad maritime-continental divide splitting Southeast Asian attitudes towards China, with Continental Southeast Asia having regional strategic outlooks that are dominated by the role of China, and Maritime Southeast Asia enjoying more room for maneuver because of geographical distance and the strategic attraction of the US.56

1.6 Our survey of six Southeast Asian countries revealed that, China’s soft power in Southeast Asia is far from dominating. In terms of the citizens’ impression of China, it is not much better than that of the US or Japan. In fact, on average, Southeast Asian citizens have a better impression of Japan than of China. Citizens of Continental ASEAN countries—Thailand and Vietnam—seem to view China more positively than citizens of Maritime ASEAN nations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

1.7 Those who are more travelled and those who follow international news more closely tend to view China more favorably. This is a similar pattern around the world—people with more international experiences or knowledge tend to see another country more positively. In other words, the better travelled and more internationally exposed view the US or Japan more positively as well.

1.8 Muslims in Southeast Asia see China much less favorably than people of other faiths, while followers of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism are likely to view China more positively. Overseas Chinese living in Southeast Asia view China more positively than people of other ethnic groups. Among the ethnic Chinese, however, those who grew up speaking English at home view China less positively than those who still speak Chinese at home.

1.9 History still matters in many ways. In Vietnam, due to the much closer historical links between North Vietnam and China, northern Vietnamese view China much more favorably than Southern Vietnamese. In Singapore, older


4 For the East Asian Summit, see Mohan Malik, “The East Asia Summit: More Discord than Accord”, YaleGlobal, 20 December 2005.


6 Yuan, p.42.
Singaporeans, who used to be more likely to view themselves as Chinese instead of Singaporeans, view China more favorably compared to the younger generation, which gradually obtained a new identity after the country’s independence in 1965.

1.10 As a result of these findings, it appears China is still trudging an up-hill road in projecting soft power in Southeast Asia. Specifically, China needs to do much more, and in effective ways, to communicate a good image to the Muslim population in Southeast Asia, the younger generations, and those who speak English and receive their educations in English.

1.11 Domestic media, opinion leaders, and policy makers in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, can also foster a more comprehensive and balanced view of China by presenting China in less-simplistic ways and facilitating people-to-people exchanges and understandings. It is argued that people who are more exposed to the social complexities of another society tend to view that society more rationally, and have a stronger ability to appreciate other peoples’ perspectives. Such people-to-people understanding will greatly enhance international trust and cooperation.

**China, Japan, and the US, as Viewed by Southeast Asians**

2.1 Researchers have been conducting the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), a cross-national survey of citizens’ attitudes, since 2001. Between 2005 and 2007, a second wave of the survey was conducted, and all the major Southeast Asian societies were included. Southeast Asians were asked to rate their impressions of China, Japan, and the US on a 1-10 scale, and their responses are shown in Figure 1.

2.2 Vietnamese seem to view China most positively, while Malaysians least so. As the people in every country gave a mean score of their impression of China above 5.5, the middle point of the scale, one can say that China’s image is overall positive among all six countries. In other words, on average, none of these countries has a very negative impression of China.
Figure 1 China’s image in six Southeast Asian countries

Source: Asian Barometer, 2005-2006

2.3 In comparison, Southeast Asian citizens seem to view Japan more favourably than China. The image of the US is better than China in the Philippines and Singapore, but not so in the other four countries (Figure 2).
2.4 Figure 2a presents another angle of looking at the data. Japan’s image shows a similar pattern to China’s image in that Vietnamese gave the highest score, followed by Thais, while people in the other four countries gave similar scores. The image of the US is more complicated, with the highest score coming from the Philippines (6.7) and the lowest score from Malaysia (4.1).

2.5 Hence, the US enjoys some very divergent perceptions in Southeast Asia. The gap between the highest and lowest score is 2.7 for the US, but only 1.1 for China and Japan, indicating that the image of the US in the region bears a rather large degree of variation. It may be worth noting that there are only two scores below 5.5, both of which go to the US. Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s impressions of the US (4.8 and 4.1, respectively), point to the negative image of the US in the two Muslim countries.

Source: Asian Barometer, 2005-6
Impression of China, the US, and Japan: Another look.

![Bar chart showing impressions of China, the US, and Japan](chart.png)

Source: Asian Barometer, 2005-6

**Image of China: Within-Country Differences**

**Ethnicity**

3.1 All six are multi-ethnic countries, with some home to sizeable overseas Chinese populations. Figure 3 shows the image of China among the different ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and “Other”. Between the two main ethnic groups in Singapore, the Chinese have a better impression of China than the Malays. Regression results show these differences are statistically significant. Singaporean Chinese, however, seem to have a slightly better impression of the US, and an even better impression of Japan.

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6 As of 2007, the ethnic make-up of the Singaporean population was as follows: Chinese, 75.0%; Malay, 13.7%; Indian, 8.7%; and Other, 2.6%; calculated by the authors using data from Yearbook of Statistics Singapore 2008. In our sample, the proportion of each ethnic group is as follows: Chinese, 72.8%; Malay, 17.4%; Indian, 9.2%; and Other, 0.6%.
3.2 A slightly different angle is regarding whether the language one speaks at home affects Singaporeans’ impressions of China. The corporate world and the government in Singapore adopt English as a working language, but most people speak their own ethnic languages at home. Some ethnic Chinese families, however, have also adopted English as their daily spoken language at home. Hence it is interesting to see whether speaking Chinese at home affects a person’s impression of China.

3.3 Figure 4 shows clearly that Singaporeans who speak Chinese (Mandarin or Chinese dialects) at home have a much better impression of China, compared to Singaporeans speaking other languages at home (English, Malay, Tamil, and others). The pattern is reversed for the impression of Japan: Singaporeans speaking Chinese at home have a less favourable impression of Japan. The figure shows a small difference in their impression of the US, but that difference is insignificant in statistical terms.
Religions

3.4 Huge religious diversity exists within Southeast Asia. Besides Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, the survey records more than twenty other religions, including many folk religions. To some extent, religion parallels ethnicity. In Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, followers of Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism can more or less be separated along ethnic lines. In Figure 5 we look at the differences in people’s perceptions of China according to their faiths.
3.5 Across Southeast Asia, respondents believing in Buddhism and those believing in Taoism, Confucianism and other Asian religions have the most positive impression of China. China is viewed least favorably among the Muslims, while Christians’ view of China appears to be in the middle. This pattern holds within each country.

**Countries’ Histories Matter**

3.6 In Singapore, older respondents have a better impression of China, while younger respondents have a better impression of the US and Japan. This is related to Singapore’s nation-building history, in that older generations of Singaporeans (mostly ethnic Chinese) who lived in Singapore in their younger years identify with China, while younger generations acquire an increasingly Singaporean identity.

3.7 In fact Singaporean Chinese born before 1965 (the year in which Singapore became an independent nation) have a much more positive view of China than
the post-1965 generations (Figure 6). By contrast, the US and Japan enjoy a more positive image among the post-independence generation.

**Figure 6: Different Views of China by Pre- and Post-1965 Chinese Singaporeans**

![Bar Chart](chart.png)

Data Source: Asian Barometer, 2006

3.8 In Vietnam, until unification in 1975, the northern and southern parts of the country were ruled under different political systems. Furthermore, Northern Vietnam was historically much closer to China, both geographically, culturally, and politically. During the North’s war against the US occupying forces in the South, Communist China provided significant economic, military, and political support to the North.

3.9 Our data show that people living in the northern and central parts of Vietnam have better impressions of China than those living in the south (Figure 7). Vietnamese in the North seem to have a better image of the US and Japan as well.


Figure 7 Vietnamese Impression of China, US and Japan in three Regions

![Bar Chart: Vietnamese impression of China, US, Japan in three regions]


3.10 When we cross-tabulated region and generation, it became clear that the pre-unification generations in the South have the least favorable impression of China, while post-unification Vietnamese in the North have the most favorable (Table).

**Table: Vietnamese impression of China in different regions and generations**

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| Pre-unification generations  
(born before 1975)     | 7.00  | 7.11    | 5.95  |
| Post-unification generations  
(born after 1975)       | 7.21  | 6.63    | 6.42  |

Individual-Level Factors

4.1 No differences are found in Southeast Asians’ view of China in terms of gender. That is, on average, males and females view China more or less the same. Regarding a person’s socioeconomic status, in Thailand we found that richer people view China much more positively. This is probably because firstly, richer people in Thailand are disproportionately Chinese, and secondly, richer people in Thailand see China as an economic opportunity.

4.2 By contrast, in Singapore, rich people hold a slightly less favorable impression of China. This is probably because richer people in Singapore are more likely to have received an English-based education and to have studied in the US or the UK. In fact, lower-income Singaporeans are much more likely to consume only Chinese-language information in their daily life.

4.3 Another indicator of a person’s socioeconomic status---education---has little impact; only in Thailand did we find that education slightly changes a person’s perception of China.

4.4 Singaporeans who travel abroad more frequently have better impressions of China, but this effect is not found in other countries. If a person follows events in other countries more closely, he or she is much more likely to perceive China more favorably. The effect is found in five of the six countries, and is statistically significant in three of them: Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. This is in fact similar to patterns found in other countries: more internationally exposed individuals are likely to view foreign countries (such as the US) more positively.

4.5 Muslims have less favourable views of China, while Taoism, Confucianism, and other Asian religions have a positive impact on a person’s perception of China. This was found in several countries and was significant in the all-country analysis. Buddhists and Christians seem to be neutral, except in Singapore where Christians view China less favorably, and in Thailand where Buddhists view China more positively.
Conclusions and Policy Implications

5.1 Overall, China’s soft power is far from dominating Southeast Asia: China’s image in Southeast Asia is probably better than that of the US, but not as good as that of Japan. Continental Southeast Asia seems to view China more favorably than Maritime Southeast Asia. Our analysis found that the publics of Vietnam and Thailand view China more favorably than those in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

5.2 Southeast Asians who follow events in other countries view China more positively, so do those who have more international travel experiences. Hence it can be concluded that international exposure does facilitate mutual understanding between nations, reducing self-centred nationalism and xenophobia.

5.3 In Singapore, overseas Chinese view China more positively than other ethnic groups, and this is likely to be true in other Southeast Asian countries as well. Overseas Chinese who received English-language schooling from a young age however view China less favorably than those who learn Chinese from a young age and use it at home. Muslims in Southeast Asia view China less favorably than people of other faiths.

5.4 China’s image in Southeast Asia, and probably in other parts of the world as well, is more a creation of recent events. The past can have an effect, as seen in Vietnam and Singapore where certain historical factors still shape the way different groups view China. But image by definition is short-lived and is constantly being made and remade. People in the 1980s may perceive China differently than in the 1970s, and people today may view China differently than people in the 1990s.

5.5 Hence, China’s soft power is more likely to depend on China’s own approaches to international affairs, and probably to a lesser degree on its own ability to project a favorable image abroad. In Southeast Asia, this means China needs to improve its ability to communicate to Muslims and those who mainly consume English-language information.

5.6 Domestic media, opinion leaders, and policy makers in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, can also foster a more comprehensive and balanced view of China.
by presenting China in less-simplistic ways and facilitating people-to-people exchanges and understandings. It is argued that people who understand the social complexities of another society tend to view that society more rationally, and have stronger ability to appreciate another people’s perspectives. Such people-to-people understanding will greatly enhance international trust and cooperation.