

# The Role of Soft Power in China's Struggle for Hegemony

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## Abstract

China's political influence is growing in tandem with its economic and military might. The rise of China triggers significant changes in the regional and global order. As China's material power increases, it poses a serious challenge to the global hegemony of the USA in almost every field. It is unclear whether China's advances in many kinds of power parameters will lead to a change in predominance. Although China has made significant progress in hard power, it has not shown the same success in soft power. This study focuses on the role of China's soft power in the struggle for global hegemony. The study aims to answer the question of how important soft power is in building hegemony. In the research, the effectiveness and limits of China's soft power are analyzed. The study argues that China's achievements in soft power are not enough for it to build a global hegemony. It is concluded that China's shortcomings in soft power are the biggest obstacle to the country's ability to build a regional and global order.

**Keywords:** China, Hegemony, Soft Power, Chinese Soft Power.

## Original Research Article

**Submission Date:** 01.03.2022

**Acceptance Date:** 16.10.2022

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This paper has been derived from the author's Ph.D. dissertation "Analyzing the Rise of China in the World-System in Terms of Hegemonic Cycles", supervised by İlker Aktükün

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Zekeriyya Akdağ, "The Role of Soft Power in China's Struggle for Hegemony," *Üsküdar University Journal of Social Sciences*, issue: 15, (November 2022): 203-223

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32739/uskudarsbd.8.15.111>



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# Çin'in Hegemonya Mücadelesinde Yumuşak Gücün Rolü

Zekeriyya AKDAĞ<sup>(\*)</sup>

## Öz

Çin'in politik etkisi ülkenin ekonomik ve askeri gücündeki yükselişle birlikte artmaktadır. Çin'in yükselişi bölgesel ve küresel düzende önemli değişimleri tetiklemektedir. Çin'in maddi güç alanındaki yükselişi, ABD'nin küresel hegemonyasına hemen her alanda ciddi bir meydan okumaya yol açmaktadır. Çin'in birçok güç parametresinde elde ettiği başarıların bir hegemonya değişimine yol açıp açmayacağı merak edilmektedir. Çin, sert güç alanında önemli ilerlemeler kaydetmesine rağmen, yumuşak güç alanında aynı başarıyı gösterememiştir. Bu çalışma, Çin'in yumuşak gücünün küresel hegemonya mücadelesindeki rolüne odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, yumuşak gücün hegemonya inşa etmede nasıl bir önem arz ettiği sorusuna cevap vermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada Çin'in yumuşak gücünün etkinliği ve sınırları analiz edilmektedir. Çin'in yumuşak güç alanında elde ettiği başarıların küresel bir hegemonya inşa edebilmesi için yeterli olmadığı iddia edilmektedir. Çin'in yumuşak güç alanındaki eksikliklerinin, ülkenin bölgesel ve küresel bir düzen inşa etmesinin önündeki en büyük engel olduğu sonucuna varılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin, Hegemonya, Yumuşak Güç, Çin'in Yumuşak Gücü.

## Özgün Araştırma Makalesi

**Geliş Tarihi:** 01.03.2022

**Kabul Tarihi:** 16.10.2022

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Bu çalışma, yazarın İlker Aktükün danışmanlığında hazırladığı "Analyzing the Rise of China in the World-System in Terms of Hegemonic Cycles" başlıklı doktora tezinden üretilmiştir.

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Zekeriyya Akdağ, "The Role of Soft Power in China's Struggle for Hegemony," *Üsküdar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, sayı: 15, (Kasım 2022): 203-223

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32739/uskudarsbd.8.15.111>



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## Introduction

China's growing economic dominance, military strength, and political influence have been widely recognized around the world. In 2014, China overtook the US as the world's largest economy in real terms. It is expected to surpass the US economy in nominal terms and to be the world's largest economy by the 2020s. China's outstanding rise poses severe challenges to US hegemony in practically every area.

China's rapid rise has frightened some countries around the world, particularly its neighbors. China needs a peaceful international environment to continue its economic rise. Chinese officials realize that they need to invest more in soft power. By attracting other countries, especially its neighbors, China can soften its image. Chinese officials are still firmly committed to portraying their country in a more positive light to the rest of the world.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies on China's soft power. Soft power has gained tremendous popularity in China's official and academic discourses. Guozuo Zhang argues that China's national conditions differ from those of the United States and Europe. In China, the party and the government, rather than NGO influence, are the primary sources of cultural soft power.<sup>1</sup> The goal of China's cultural soft power research is to project a favorable global image, foster a friendly global environment, and contribute to the development of a peaceful, harmonious, and cooperative world.<sup>2</sup> China's cultural soft power is built on the basic communist value system.<sup>3</sup> Its attractiveness or cultural soft power will increase only when socialism with Chinese characteristics is completely recognized by the Chinese people.<sup>4</sup>

Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu in their book titled "Soft Power With Chinese Characteristics" focus on China's soft power under Xi Jinping.<sup>5</sup> The book evaluates the current situation of China's soft power theory and practice in a new term of Chinese assertiveness. The authors conclude that Chinese soft power is "complex, contradictory, and diverse."<sup>6</sup>

William A. Callahan is another important scholar who studies China's soft power. Callahan argues that Chinese soft power is "negative rather than positive." Soft power is used by China as a tool more frequently in internal politics than in global affairs.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of the literature on Chinese soft power focuses on empirical evidence of soft power's appeal in China. This literature deals with the principal methods that China has employed to improve its soft power and enhance its image in the domestic and international arenas as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Guozuo Zhang, *Research Outline for China's Cultural Soft Power* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 97.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>5</sup> Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Edney et al, *Soft Power*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> William A. Callahan, "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream," *Politics* 35, (2015): 216.

This study focuses China's rise, its prospects for challenging the United States and achieving a predominant position in world politics. Rather than a material-power-centered analysis, which would naturally conclude that China is growing by every metric of military power, the article problematizes China's soft power capabilities. The article provides some unique insights because of its broad understanding of hegemony that is not limited to a traditional liberal understanding but one that incorporates ideational, material, and attitudinal factors. The soft power literature generally ignores the similarities between soft power and Gramscian hegemony. This study makes evaluations by focusing on the hegemony approach of critical theory. The most important aspect that distinguishes this study from others is that it draws attention to the similarity between Gramscian understanding of hegemony and Joseph Nye's conceptualization of soft power. The article attempts to combine Gramscian hegemony with soft power. It attempts to provide measurements of soft power, something that is notoriously difficult, through various indices like that provided by the Lowy Institute, Pew and Portland. It aims to contribute literature on China, prospects for its bid for hegemony, and its soft power.

This study aims to analyze the importance of Chinese soft power in the struggle for global hegemony. This article evaluates whether China has enough power of attraction to make a successful bid for hegemony. It seeks to find out how successful China has been in winning the hearts and minds of people outside. It debates whether China's external attraction is sufficient to build a global hegemony. In this context, the relationship between soft power and hegemony will be examined in the first part. In the main part, the growing Chinese soft power and its effectiveness will be analyzed. In the last part, the limits of China's soft power in building regional or global hegemony will be discussed.

## **Soft Power and Hegemony**

Joseph S. Nye is the chief architect who coined the soft power conceptualization in the international relations literature. Nye defines soft power as the ability to get what you want by attracting rather than using force or giving money. Soft power stems from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. Others' viewing a country's policies as legitimate results in an increase in soft power.<sup>8</sup> Soft power is the capacity to persuade people to do something by making them believe that goals are legitimate without resorting to force. There are serious similarities between the Gramscian understanding of hegemony and Joseph S. Nye's understanding of soft power. So much so that the soft power conceptualization can be considered as a re-adaptation of the Gramscian understanding of hegemony to international relations. Therefore, evaluating the soft power of countries also means evaluating their potential to be hegemonic powers in the Gramscian context.

When the values of a country are admired and when that country is taken as an example, that country can easily achieve the desired results without resorting to force. Soft power is getting other actors to want what you want, attracting people instead of forcing them, and setting the agenda in international politics. Soft power is based on the ability to shape the preferences of others through intangible values such as an attractive character, culture, political values,

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power the Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), X.

institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having the moral high ground. Methods such as attracting common values and contributing to the achievement of these values are used in order to ensure cooperation. Soft power is the shaping of decisions by abstract attraction that persuades others to accept their goals without any overt threat or exchange.<sup>9</sup>

Gramsci's concept of hegemony aims to analyze the relations between social forces in a given period. It refers to social class relations in which one class or class group assumes a leadership role by gaining the active consent of other classes or groups. In Gramsci's view, hegemony was not a coercive power relationship, but rather one that prioritized the acquisition of consent through intellectual and moral leadership.<sup>10</sup>

Gramsci defines hegemony as the dominant group presenting its interests as universal interests. Hegemony stems from the capacity of a social class to present its policies as a government that serves not only its own interests but also the interests of others.<sup>11</sup> In order to maintain hegemony, political consent must be regained constantly.<sup>12</sup>

According to Robert W. Cox, one of the leading figures of the Neo-Gramscian theory, hegemony is not always implied by military or economic power alone, or even when they are combined. Cultural and ideological factors play a significant role in the structure of hegemony.<sup>13</sup> Hegemony refers to a cultural and ideological structure as well as military, economic, and political ones. The most important feature that distinguishes the neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony from the others is its emphasis on cultural and ideological factors. Building global hegemony requires global consent gained through moral superiority and cultural attractiveness.

International relations theorist Edward H. Carr mentioned in "The Twenty Years' Crisis" that "Power over opinion is the third form of power." Power over opinion is as important as military and economic power, and it has always been tightly linked to both. The art of persuasion has always been an important aspect of politics.<sup>14</sup> He divided power into three aspects: military, economic, and opinion. Power over opinion is deeply linked with the other forms of power and is as necessary as them.

Immanuel Wallerstein, the leading theorist of the world-system approach, defines hegemony as describing situations in which one actor possesses economic, political, and financial dominance, as well as military and cultural leadership.<sup>15</sup> Cultural leadership is as important as the other tangible elements of power for building hegemony.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5-7.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Gill, *American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 42.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Vol. II.*, trans. J. A. Buttigieg. ed. J. A. Buttigieg. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 179.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Vol. I.*, trans. Joseph. A. Buttigieg. ed. Joseph. A. Buttigieg. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992),155.

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Cox, "Multilateralism and World Order," *Review of International Studies* 18 (1992), 179.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939 an Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, (London: Macmillan & Co. LTD, 1946), 132.

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *Dünya-Sistemleri Analizi*, trans. Ender Abadođlu and Nuri Ersoy, (İstanbul: bgst Yayınları, 2011), 162.

Soft power, which is basically based on intangible capacities such as culture, values, and policies, depends on the ability to impose its preferences.<sup>16</sup> This kind of power requires one to be seen as a pioneer in the moral and cultural field on a global scale. Soft power is the ability to present its interests as the common interest, with the construction of a universal discourse to achieve this. It is based on getting what is wanted through winning hearts and minds rather than coercion or deception. It is the kind of influence that is obtained through attractiveness, persuasion, and consent as a result of legitimate goals.

Soft power is essentially based on a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies.<sup>17</sup> In the global information age, countries that have a dominant culture, ideas shaping global norms, and universal credibility, are likely to be more attractive and obtain more soft power.<sup>18</sup> The central problem in the global information age is that more and more things are happening beyond the control of even the most powerful states. With the diffusion of power, the capacity to use force falls out of the control of the state. In an information-based world, the actor with the best story is more likely to win than the actor with the largest army.<sup>19</sup> Effective communication is essential for a globally successful narrative. Although it is a very simple principle, it is very difficult to follow and implement in foreign affairs.

## China's Soft Power

The rise of China as the dynamo power of the global economy can be evaluated in a context that serves not only its own interests but also the interests of other countries. Its economic growth has positively affected many developing countries, especially East Asia. Although some countries and sectors are negatively affected, China's economic growth triggers the growth of the global economy.

China's growing prosperity has had positive consequences not only for itself but also for the rest of the world. China's ever-increasing raw material needs have been vital to many low-income countries. At the same time, China's knowledge and experience in infrastructure services have helped the other countries to modernise their infrastructures. Thanks to China providing cheaper transportation and communication networks for other countries, it has become much more possible to lay the foundations of a modern economy in less developed countries. In addition, its efficiency in production causes prices of household consumer goods to remain largely low around the world. As a result of China's growing and growing middle class, there is a great increase in demand for goods and services produced both domestically and abroad.<sup>20</sup> China is increasingly becoming the world's largest market in many industries.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter, Volten, "Hard Power Versus Soft Power or a Balance Between the Two?" *All Azimuth* 5, (2016): 93.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Is the American Century Over?*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 52.

<sup>18</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 31-32.

<sup>19</sup> Nye, *American Century*, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur R. Kroeber, Çin Ekonomisi Herkesin Bilmesi Gerekenler, trans. Mehmet Mazı (Ankara: Buzdağı Yayınevi, 2017), 351.

Martin Jacques, author of "When China Rules the World," claims that, as a rising power, China offers a successful economic model to other developing countries.<sup>21</sup> It has shown great economic development with the reforms it has carried out step by step. China's economic miracle and political authoritarianism offer an attractive development model for many poor and undemocratic countries.

Many consider the "Beijing consensus" and the "China model" as an alternative development model to the Western ones based on democracy and the free market.<sup>22</sup> According to Wu Xinbo, the Dean of Fudan University in Shanghai, the United States is losing its role as the sole model for economic prosperity. The Chinese model is also increasing its attractiveness as an alternative route. Despite the inadequacy of the Chinese model in dealing with problems such as income inequalities, environmental pollution, and corruption, the fact that it has successfully survived major financial crises such as the 1997 Asian Crisis and the 2008 global crisis is seen as an important issue that has increased the attractiveness of the Chinese model for others.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the Chinese model, though not perfect, has successfully weathered two financial crises and achieved high growth rates for a period of thirty years is an indication of its strength.

Despite China's strong position in the global economy, it has a structure both inside and outside the capitalist economy. On the one hand, China is inside the capitalist economy as a main actor. On the other hand, because of its insistence on keeping a distance from capitalism, China is outside of the capitalist economy. The constant suspicion of the main capitalist powers towards China is the main indicator of this. China's attitude towards the Global South, or developing countries, is another sign of this as well. The continuation of the call to find an alternative to capitalism, which remains alive despite the integration of the Chinese economy into the capitalist world economy, points to this dual character.<sup>24</sup> China is in a strategically better position than others to assume global leadership, not only because of its important position in the world economy, but also because of its experience in formulating an alternative to the liberal capitalist development model.<sup>25</sup>

Since 1950, China has generally been identified with Asian, African, and Latin American countries on international platforms and acts as their spokesperson. In most cases, China brings their problems to the table and takes sides with them.<sup>26</sup> The third world discourse of China, which had become evident since the mid-1950s, began to take shape with the support it gave

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Jacques, Çin Hükmettiğinde Dünyayı Neler Bekliyor?, trans. Sami Oğuz (Ankara: Akılçelen Kitaplar, 2016), 604.

<sup>22</sup> Yiyi Lu, "Challenges for China's International Communication," in *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, ed. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu (New York: Routledge, 2012), 105.

<sup>23</sup> Xinbo Wu, "Understanding the Geopolitical Implications of the Global Financial Crisis," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, (2010): 159.

<sup>24</sup> Arif Dirlik, "Yeniden Post-Sosyalizm: 'Çinli Karakterli Sosyalizm,' Geçmişi ve Geleceği Üzerine Düşünceler," *Toplum ve Bilim* 119, (2010): 88-89.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>26</sup> Çağdaş Üngör, "Çin ve Üçüncü Dünya," *İ.Ü. Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi* 41, (2009): 28.



to the anti-colonial struggles that were just gaining momentum in this period. China saw the colonial countries struggling for national independence as natural allies of the socialist bloc.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1960s, coverage of Asian, African, and Latin American countries began to increase in the Chinese foreign propaganda machine. During this period, China broadcast in support of guerrilla wars and anti-imperialist national independence struggles in the third world. The Vietnam War was one of the best examples of this. China similarly supported the Palestine Liberation Organization and the rising Arab nationalism in the Middle East. At the same time, China provided financial aid to the regimes it found close to itself. China's prestige was increasing through infrastructure projects carried out in newly independent countries, especially in regions that were least developed countries in terms of technology, such as Africa.<sup>28</sup>

Mao's China saw the Third World as a key player in the struggle against the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> The origins of Third World policy can be partially attributed to China's early attempts to "win friends and influence people" in Asia against the US.<sup>30</sup> China's interaction with Third World countries was related to its attempt to break the domination of the superpowers and its demand for a restructuring of the international political and economic system.<sup>31</sup> The material and moral support that China gave to the anti-colonial independence wars in Asian, African, and Latin American countries during Mao's period enabled China to position itself as an alternative power center to the Western world. In recent decades, Chinese diplomats have frequently emphasized "South-South" cooperation on international platforms.<sup>32</sup> China, which was made semi-colonial in the 19th century, can also refer to a common past with many third world countries. This common past enables China to establish and develop relations more easily with developing countries even today.

China's increasing emphasis on the promotion of its language and traditional culture reinforces its central position in the East Asia. China's economic miracle, gradual reforms, and political authoritarianism appeal to many undemocratic, poor developing countries. At the same time, the country's flexibility in economic diplomacy attracts most developing countries.<sup>33</sup>

The Chinese model, also named the "Beijing Consensus," is a critical component of China's economic soft power, and it poses a significant challenge to Western organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.<sup>34</sup> China's aid, which does not require any preconditions, unlike the conditional aid of Western countries, is more attractive to many poor developing countries.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>29</sup> George T. Yu "China and the Third World", *Asian Survey* 17, no. 11 (1977): 1036.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 1047

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1045

<sup>32</sup> Üngör, "Çin ve Üçüncü Dünya," 35

<sup>33</sup> Randall L. Schweller and Pu Xiaoyu, "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of US Decline," *International Security* 36, (2011): 57.

<sup>34</sup> Antonio Fiori and Stanley Rosen, "The Sino-African Relationship an Intense and Long Embrace," in *Soft Power With Chinese Characteristics*, eds. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 195.



“Chinese Dream” can be seen as another official rhetoric to soften China’s image. As President Xi Jinping declared in 2012, the China dream is about the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>35</sup> Chinese decision makers aim to realize the China dream of making the Chinese nation wealthy and strong.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the American dream, which is more favorable to individual success, the Chinese dream is more about the nation. Individual dreams are supposed to fit within the wider narrative of a collective dream.<sup>37</sup>

China has recently employed official discourse on its foreign policy to create a relatively positive image. China frequently uses official words such as “responsible power,” “peaceful rising,” “peaceful development,” and “harmonious world.” The Chinese government’s emphasis on these chosen positions for China is meant to demonstrate that, as it rises, China will endeavor to avoid armed conflict with its neighbors and will respect the international order. As evidenced by the close ties between China and South-East Asia during the 2000s, this official discourse helps relieve foreign fear of a rising China to some extent.<sup>38</sup>

Multilateralism, economic diplomacy, and good neighbor policy have increasingly characterized China’s foreign policy since the late 1970s. Although China has pursued a low-profile foreign policy for many years, China’s international influence has grown in tandem with its economic growth. China has embraced and deepened its integration into the existing international order. China has steadily accepted multilateralism, joining an expanding number of Western-oriented multilateral organizations, adhering to the rules of the game in these institutions, and becoming a more active player in these organizations.<sup>39</sup> These policies strengthen China’s soft power in the international arena.

Nye states that China’s rapid economic growth increases its soft power as well as its hard power.<sup>40</sup> Its ever-expanding economic power creates the conditions for China to have much greater cultural and ideological influence. Over time, China’s growing economic influence will enable it to impose itself on the world in various forms. The Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai Expo, the increasing number of influential international channels broadcast by CCTV television, the growing number of international film productions, etc. are the tools of China’s cultural “go global” strategy. Confucius Institutes, which have opened in many countries in different parts of the world, play a major role in spreading Chinese culture and language around the world.<sup>41</sup> In 154 countries, 548 Confucius Institutes and 1,193 smaller Confucius Classrooms were opened until 2019.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Zhang, *China’s Cultural Soft Power*, 91

<sup>36</sup> Callahan, “Negative Soft Power,” 221.

<sup>37</sup> Stanley Rosen, “Ironies of Soft Power Projection,” in *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, eds. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 75.

<sup>38</sup> Hongyi Lai, “The soft Power Concept and a Rising China,” in *China’s Soft Power and International Relations*, eds. Hongyi Lai, Yiyi Lu, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 14.

<sup>39</sup> Yongnian Zheng and Chi Zhang, “‘Soft power’ and Chinese soft power,” in *China’s Soft Power and International Relations*, eds. Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 30-31.

<sup>40</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 88.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques, *Çin Hükmettiğinde*, 622.

<sup>42</sup> Falk Harting, “A Decade of Wielding Soft Power Through Confucius Institutes,” in *Soft Power With Chinese*

The concept of soft power has become increasingly popular among Chinese decision-makers since the early 2000s. In 2002, at the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of China, it was stated that culture plays an important role in today's world, along with the economy and politics.<sup>43</sup> China is putting a lot of effort into developing its soft power. It organizes large-scale cultural activities in other countries. China allocates significant financial resources to develop its image.<sup>44</sup> China is estimated to spend 7-10 billion dollars on promotional activities abroad.<sup>45</sup>

China's most important soft power source is its culture. Its performance in the arts, sports, and tourism shows how rich and diverse China's cultural resources are. It is the country with the second-highest number of UNESCO World Heritage Properties. Olympic sports performance has reached a level that can compete with the USA. It is very important for the soft power that it hosts globally successful brands such as Huawei and Alibaba.<sup>46</sup>

According to Zhang Yiwu, a Portland analyst at Peking University, the "go global" cultural campaign launched by the Chinese government in recent years has attracted a lot of attention. With its rapid economic development, the Chinese government has started to take initiatives to build the "Common Destiny for All Humanity" in addition to the Belt and Road Initiative. The country's international standing is growing steadily. The cultural strategy of "going global" plays an important role in increasing China's cultural appeal.<sup>47</sup>

According to Yan Xuetong, Dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, China's soft power is ahead of its military power while lagging behind its economic power. The main problem that China has to solve is the harmonious society that will be created by reforming social institutions rather than underproduction. Soft power is based on strong social institutions and the provision of social justice. Yan argued that China must first reform its social institutions and create a harmonious society in order to increase its soft power. At the same time, China should further expand the friendly relations it has established with other countries around the world in order to improve its national image. The country should strive to create a "harmonious society" at home and a "harmonious world" abroad.<sup>48</sup> Rapid economic growth has increased social inequality in China, limiting the country's international influence. A country that is believed to be achieved social justice will have very high international prestige. Countries that have solved their internal problems have much more international influence. China should not focus solely on its own problems, either. It should also take an active role in reducing international conflicts. China's diplomatic efforts should not be limited to creating a

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*Characteristics*, eds. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu (New York: Routledge, 2020), 132.

<sup>43</sup> Mingjiang Li, "China Debates Soft Power," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, (2008): 289.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>45</sup> David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165.

<sup>46</sup> Portland, *The Soft Power 30 a Global Ranking of Soft Power 2018*, (Washington, DC.: Portland, 2018), 89-90.

<sup>47</sup> Yiwu Zhang, "China Goes Global: Why China's Global Cultural Strategy Needs Flexibility," in *The Soft Power 30*, (Sdney: Portland, 2018): 70

<sup>48</sup> Xuetong Yan, "The Path for China to Increase its 'Soft Power'" 2006, accessed January 12, 2022. <http://www.thinkinchina.asia/wp-content/uploads/3-ThePathforChinatoIncreaseitsSoftPower.pdf>.

peaceful environment for its economic development. It should take initiatives to increase its international prestige and expand its friendly relations.

### China's International Image

According to "The 2019 Asian Power Index," China ranked second after the United States in the ranking of cultural influence in the East Asian region. While the USA ranked first with 86.7 points, China was second with 58.3 points. Japan was third with 50.4 points, India was fourth with 49 points and South Korea was fifth with 33.8 points.<sup>49</sup> The increase in its economic power makes Chinese culture more and more attractive.

China ranked first with 97.5 points in "The Asian Economic Relations Index", which shows its economic soft power. China was followed by the USA with 67.6 points. Japan was the third place with 52.7 points, Singapore was fourth with 29.7 points, and South Korea was fifth with 27.4 points.<sup>50</sup> China's great success in economic relations makes the country a center of attraction in the region. It is highly likely that China will continue its economic development and will also increase its soft power over time. The countries in the region do not want to stay out of the dynamism created by China's rapid economic growth.

In the ranking of diplomatic influence in Asia, China came out on top with 96.2 points. Japan came in second with 90.9 points, followed by the United States with 79.6, South Korea with 69.7 points, Russia with 68.7 points, and India with 68.5 points.<sup>51</sup> China's influence is constantly increasing among East Asian countries, which shows that China's rapid economic development is beneficial for them as well.

According to "The 2018 Soft Power 30 Report", the "America first" doctrine has led to a further erosion of American soft power. The EU was able to consolidate its soft power gains compared to 2017. Asia, on the other hand, has continued to increase its soft power.<sup>52</sup> Coordination problems among the US institutions and conflicting policies towards the region reduce American diplomatic effectiveness. Abandoning multilateral alliances such as Trans-Pacific Partnership raises concerns that the USA is not a reliable partner or ally.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, US former President Trump's isolationist "America first" rhetoric creates a great opportunity for China to shoulder some global responsibilities. President Xi's speech in Davos can be seen as the first example of this. Launching the Belt and Road Initiative and making large investments to further deepen its relations with many countries around the world paves the way for China to build a "golden age".<sup>54</sup> The US's tendency towards trade protectionism raises concerns about the future role of the US in the region. China's defense of free trade, despite

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<sup>49</sup> Lowy Institute, *Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2019*, by Herve Lemahieu and Bonnie Bley. (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2019), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>52</sup> Portland, *The Soft Power 30*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Lowy Institute, *Asia Power Index*, 16.

<sup>54</sup> Portland, *The Soft Power 30*, 89.

the USA, and its efforts to establish good relations with the countries of the region constantly increase China's diplomatic activity. China's stance on open trade shows that it will play a more constructive role in regional and global events.

According to the 2018 Portland Soft Power 30 ranking, England was first, followed by France, Germany, the USA, and Japan, respectively. The majority of the countries included in the ranking were from European Union and North America. Only Japan from Asia took place in the top 10. South Korea ranked 20th, Singapore ranked 21st, and China 27th. China's place in the world soft power ranking is far from being proportional to its economic power. China, the world's second largest economy, fell behind in soft power rankings. Russia, on the other hand, was 28th right after China. India, another major emerging power in Asia, was not included in the ranking.<sup>55</sup>

According to Brand Finance's "Global Soft Power Index 2020", the US was found to be the most influential nation in the world in terms of soft power.<sup>56</sup> Japan was once the highest-ranking nation in Asia. China was unexpectedly in the top ten. China's reputation ranking was considerably lower than its influence ranking. It was ranked second in terms of influence, but 24th in terms of reputation.<sup>57</sup> It has been estimated that China has spent \$100 billion on the Belt and Road Initiative. These kinds of investments boost China's familiarity and influence scores.<sup>58</sup>

According to public opinion polls conducted by the Pew Research Center in 25 countries in 2018, an average of 45% of people have positive thoughts about China, while 43% have negative thoughts. In 12 countries, the majority think positively about China. Positive attitudes towards China are more common in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.<sup>59</sup> It can be said that the world's public opinion generally has complex thoughts about China. The ratio of those who have positive and negative thoughts about China is close to each other. Therefore, it can be concluded that China does not have a clear image in the international community.

According to the PEW survey, a median of 70% of people around the world believe China will play a more important role in world affairs than it has played in the past decade. An average of only 31% regard the US positively. This rate is 42% for Russia, 35% for Germany, 27% for India, 22% for France, and 21% for England.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, the vast majority of world public opinion agrees that China will have a much greater influence in the future than it has ever had.

Even if there is a general belief that China's global role will increase, it cannot be said that China has the same desire for world leadership. The rate of those who think that China is the world's leading economic power was 34% on average. 39% of the general majority consider the

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<sup>55</sup> Portland, *The Soft Power 30*, 42-43.

<sup>56</sup> Brand Finance. "Global Soft Power Index 2020." *Brand Finance*. 2020, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://brandirectory.com/globalsoftpower/download/brand-finance-global-soft-power-index-2020.pdf>. 30.

<sup>57</sup> Brand Finance, "Global Soft Power," 33.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Pew, "5 Chart on Global Views of China," *Pew Research Center*, October 19, 2018, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/19/5-charts-on-global-views-of-china/>.

<sup>60</sup> Pew, "Global View of China."

United States to be the world's leading economic power. While the rate of those who think that the leading economic power in the world is the European Union is 7%, the rate of those who thought that Japan is 7%.<sup>61</sup>

While the average of those who want the USA to be the leading power in the world is 63%, only 19% want China to be the leading power. Four of the five most-majority countries that favor US leadership over China are in the Asia-Pacific region. The proportion of those who prefer US global leadership is 81% in Japan, 77% in the Philippines, 73% in South Korea, and 72% in Australia. These countries are the countries with the highest rate of preference for US leadership.<sup>62</sup> Although the majority of the world's population thinks that China's global role will increase much more, they do not prefer China in terms of global leadership. The majority of people around the world prefer the US as a leading power in the future.

According to opinion polls conducted in 25 countries, the rate of those who think that the Chinese government respects the personal freedom of their people is an average of 19%, while an average of 66% think otherwise.<sup>63</sup> The vast majority of the international community thinks that personal freedom is not guaranteed in China. It is unimaginable that a country that cannot offer a better life to its own people can attract people living abroad.

According to a Pew Research Center 2020 survey, negative views of China have reached their highest points across advanced economies in the past decade. The rise in negative sentiment coincides with widespread criticism of China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Most people think China has done a bad job handling Covid-19, though it is better than the US. China scored relatively well in the survey when it comes to perceptions of economic strength. China is the world's main economic power, according to a majority of people in every country polled.<sup>64</sup>

China's active role in public health diplomacy by 2020 supports China's claim to be a "responsible great power" in the international arena.<sup>65</sup> The first signs of the COVID-19 epidemic were seen in China, which triggered negative thoughts towards the country. However, the fact that China has dealt with the epidemic more successfully than some western countries, especially the USA, has had the opposite effect.

China's creativity and cultural outputs still do not attract enough global attention. The biggest obstacle for the country to become a global soft power is its inability to reach a wider global target group. In order to overcome these challenges, it needs to focus on a medium and long-term vision.<sup>66</sup> In fact, China has the largest market potential in the world in the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Pew, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," *Pew Research Center*, October 6, 2020, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

<sup>65</sup> Ceren Ergenç, "Sonsöz: Xi'nin Çin'i," in *Çin Nasıl Çin Oldu?*, by Jonathan Clements, trans. Cansen Mavituna. (İstanbul: Metropolis Yayıncılık, 2021), 122.

<sup>66</sup> Zhang, "China Goes Global," 70.

cultural field, as well as in other fields. Besides making its culture attractive abroad, China should also dominate its own market. The fast-growing digital economy, combined with rapid urbanization, creates an explosion in domestic demand for cultural products. Chinese large middle class and millennials spend a lot on cultural products. China should first reach out to its domestic audiences and revitalize its local culture to entice them.<sup>67</sup> It faces great competition not only abroad but also within the country to increase its cultural influence. American and South Korean culture, in particular, have had a great influence on Chinese millennials. China, which has become the world's largest cultural market, must first overcome the challenges in its home market to be successful abroad.

### **The Limits of China's Soft Power**

In order to increase its soft power, China must overcome some obstacles. The Western and Chinese neighbors' suspicions of a rising China is the main challenge for China. The fact that China's controversial diplomacy and military expansion have alarmed some of its neighbors is another constraint. Chinese is a challenging language. This caused international communication restrictions and limited Chinese soft power.<sup>68</sup> China's soft power efforts are also hampered by internal restraints. Popular and ethnic discontent, insufficient protection of individual rights, a lack of the rule of law, unfair distribution of income, corruption, and a lack of moral norms and values are only a few of the constraints.<sup>69</sup>

It cannot be said that China has much soft power beyond its near abroad. However, no matter how well-known and enthralling Chinese art, theater, and dance are, the Chinese way of life is still insufficient to arouse a desire for imitation elsewhere.<sup>70</sup> Intellectually and culturally, China has had a minor influence around the world. Even in its own country, China falls short of the cultural influence of the West. The dominant culture of America in the world and the culture of South Korea, which is the most vibrant and important exporter of culture in South Asia, have a significant impact on the Chinese people.<sup>71</sup>

According to Shambaugh, China's diplomacy is not effective enough in many parts of the world or in major international affairs. China is unable to effectively influence global events or solve problems.<sup>72</sup> It cannot be said that China has been very successful in aligning others with its own interests.

China's cultural industry has not yet reached a level that can compete with Hollywood or Bollywood. Although Chinese universities are increasing in importance, they still have a limited presence among the top ones. At the same time, China lacks a large number of non-governmental organizations, which account for the majority of US soft power.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>68</sup> Lai, "Soft Power," 15.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>70</sup> Harry G. Gelber, *MÖ 1100'den Günümüze Çin ve Dünya Ejder ve Yabancı Deccallar*, trans. H. Hülya Kocaoluk. (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010), 402.

<sup>71</sup> Kroeber, *Çin Ekonomisi*, 350.

<sup>72</sup> Shambaugh, *China Goes*, 246.

<sup>73</sup> Nye, *American Century*, 43.



According to Shambaugh, China has partial cultural power.<sup>74</sup> China's soft power and global cultural appeal are rather limited. The authoritarian nature of the country's political system limits China's soft power. Because most countries do not wish to be like China, China does not have the universal appeal of its soft power. It is quite inadequate in the field of public diplomacy. China's public diplomacy is still uncoordinated, argumentative, propagandistic, and relatively inexperienced. It's even possible to argue that China's public diplomacy works against its soft power.<sup>75</sup> No matter how much money is spent, if a message does not have a natural appeal, it is extremely hard to change people's perceptions of it. Soft power cannot be measured by the amount of money spent. Soft power is formed spontaneously rather than by sudden interventions by governments.

The rise of China and the rise of its soft power require a shift from personal rule to the rule of law. For this, it is of great importance to institutionalize in the economic, social, cultural, and political fields. To ensure that China's experiences are universally accepted for developing countries, it needs to become a constitutional state. Major changes are essential for the Chinese model to be more sustainable, open, free, and harmonious. In order for China to further increase its soft power, it needs to further develop values such as peace, development, cooperation, democracy, justice, and human rights. At the same time, China must institutionalize and functionalize its values.<sup>76</sup> All these things actually show us the limits of China's soft power or the areas where it falls behind.

China has systematic problems in the soft power field. Its political system, the lack of a dynamic civil society, and concerns about the militarization of the South China Sea are limiting the growth of China's soft power. These factors will remain the biggest challenges to China's soft power for the foreseeable future.<sup>77</sup> Despite China's enormous economic power, its peculiar post-socialist political system no longer prevents it from gaining more respect from its democratic neighbors.<sup>78</sup> China's heavy dependence on its economic might as a primary diplomatic tool indicates the country's lack of credible normative influence.<sup>79</sup>

China's core foreign discourses are often designed around the mindset of their domestic audience. Most of them are difficult to translate well, linguistically or politically, into foreign cultures. Most of China's overseas messages do not have the expected impact, as they do not resonate with foreign audiences linguistically, culturally, and politically. Much of Chinese culture and propaganda is seen as *sui generis*, and its values are viewed as objectionable to the extent that its political system is seen as out of shape. Many aspects of Chinese society and

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<sup>74</sup> Shambaugh, *China Goes*, 165.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 213-214.

<sup>76</sup> Li, "China Debates Soft Power," 305.

<sup>77</sup> Portland, *The Soft Power* 30, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Yun-han Chu, Min-hua Huang, and Jie Lu, "How East Asians View a Rising China," in *Soft Power With Chinese Characteristics*, eds. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 264.

<sup>79</sup> Suisheng Zhao, "Projection of China's Soft Power in the New Century," in *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, eds. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 39.



Chinese economy are either unappealing or have very limited transferability.<sup>80</sup> Although the Chinese model works well for the country, it is far from being transferable to establishing a global order.<sup>81</sup>

Although China is ultimately a powerful country in many dimensions, it is not a leading country. Although it has made significant technological advances, it is far from being a pioneer. While China's politically bureaucratic and authoritarian system is well adapted to its circumstances, it does not have much appeal to other countries. Middle and high-income countries in the world generally prefer open systems. Although very few countries in Africa seek to imitate the Chinese model, China has made very limited efforts to use this model in other countries.<sup>82</sup> In fact, China's model is specific to its circumstances. There is no country with a huge population and geography the size of China. It is almost impossible to implement the trial-and-error method applied by China on the basis of small nation states. There is no country with a well-educated and cheap labor force the size of China. Thus, in many respects, Chinese model of economic development is *sui generis*.

According to Shambaugh, although China has become a global actor, it does not have a global power. Although China has a global presence, it has not been successful enough in using this presence to influence other nations and events. In some limited areas, China has become a global power. China cannot be said to have a significant impact on global events except in these limited areas.<sup>83</sup> China is not actively involved in solving any major global problems. It does not have a strong enough presence in shaping international diplomacy, directing other countries' policies, and creating global consensus.<sup>84</sup> Although China is active in some areas, it has not yet been successful enough in influencing and shaping actors and events around the world.

Criticisms that China is a "sharp power" rather than a soft power are also becoming more common. "Sharp power" refers to the attempts to coerce and manipulate public opinion in other countries, especially in democratic societies.<sup>85</sup> Sharp power is a conceptualization used to describe the efforts of authoritarian governments to create public opinion in their favor by manipulating the openness of democratic countries.

Even if China does not seek to conquer other countries' lands, some fear that China may seek to conquer the minds of foreigners. Australia is one of the countries that has expressed concerns in this regard. The seriousness of the event was demonstrated when the Australian government proposed a new law in 2017 to block China's efforts to interfere in the country's domestic politics, universities, and media. Afterwards, an Australian senator was forced to resign over accusations that he received money from China, triggering the alarm in England, Canada, and New Zealand. In the late 2017, Germany also accused China of trying to seduce politicians and

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<sup>80</sup> Shambaugh, *China Goes*, 173-174.

<sup>81</sup> Portland, *The Soft Power* 30, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Kroeber, *Çin Ekonomisi*, 350.

<sup>83</sup> Shambaugh, *China Goes*, 6-7.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>85</sup> Rosen, "Ironies of Soft Power Projection," 67.

bureaucrats.<sup>86</sup> The increasing influence of China abroad brings with it the increasing criticism that it is trying to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries indirectly.

China's economic success, economic aid programs, and the hundreds of Confucian institutes that have led to the spread of its culture augment the country's soft power. For China to further increase its soft power, it needs to rein in its claims on its neighbors, be more self-critical, and unleash the full capacity of civil society. Instead, if the restrictions created by authoritarian control continue, its soft power will be limited. China makes the mistake of seeing the government as the main instrument of soft power. According to Nye, what is lacking in today's information world is not information but attention, and attention is based on reliability. Efforts to make Xinhua and China Central Television (CCTV) competitors of CNN and BBC have been insufficient thus far.<sup>87</sup>

Smart public diplomacy requires credibility, self-criticism, and an understanding of the role of civil society in the production of soft power. When public diplomacy degenerates into propaganda, it not only fails to persuade but also undermines soft power.<sup>88</sup> China's international news agencies, which have become the government's direct propaganda tool, are far from reliable.

Although China has fruitful relations with many countries in the international arena, it does not have any allies. Although China made great diplomatic efforts in this regard, it could not get rid of an isolated situation completely. China is trying to get rid of this isolated situation both by taking a more active and constructive role in international institutions and organizations and by establishing its own institutions. The vast majority of their neighbors in Asia are wary of China's strategic intentions, although they have reaped great benefits from increased trade and investment relations with China.<sup>89</sup>

Yan stated that the United States has better relations with the rest of the world than China, both in terms of quality and quantity. While the United States has official military alliances with more than 50 countries, China has essentially no military allies. North Korea and Pakistan can only be seen in the semi-allied category. According to Yan Xuetong, China should be able to establish high-level diplomatic and military relations with more countries than the United States in order to establish a friendly international environment for its rise. It should create more regional security arrangements to protect weak forces.<sup>90</sup> Within the framework of the principle of non-alliance, which is one of the "Five Basic Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," China should review its policy of not forming allies since 1982.<sup>91</sup> In order to prove that China

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<sup>86</sup> The Economist, "What to do about China's "sharp power"?" *The Economist*, December 14, 2017, accessed January 5, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/12/14/what-to-do-about-chinas-sharp-power>.

<sup>87</sup> Nye, *American Century*, 53.

<sup>88</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, (2008), 108.

<sup>89</sup> Kreober, *Çin Ekonomisi*, 350.

<sup>90</sup> Xuetong Yan, "How China can defeat America," *The New York Times*. November 20, 2011, accessed January 12, 2022.

<sup>91</sup> Xuetong Yan, "Yan Xuetong on Chinese realism, the Tsinghua School of International Relations, and

is a reliable actor in the international arena, it should abandon the principle of non-alliance and establish friendly relations with many more countries.

Yan attributed China's lack of soft power to its lack of a clear international identity. The most serious problem China faces in the international arena is its low credibility as a developing country. Countries such as North Korea, Iran, Myanmar, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Venezuela, which are seen as friends of China, have a very bad image in international relations. China has a huge image problem in the world affairs. China doesn't have a "priority identity" or a "main identity" in the world, so it cannot prioritize. China needs to define its own identity more clearly and act accordingly.<sup>92</sup>

In the international arena, there are hardly any countries that want to adopt and follow China's norms, values, and policies. Even the countries with which China is in an alliance prefer to keep a certain distance from China. Even Pakistan and North Korea, which have the best relations with China, evaluate their bilateral relations from a real-political perspective. Russia and Iran's good relations with China stem from anti-US sentiment rather than sharing the same norms and values with China. China has not been successful enough in making friends and allies. China has not been successful enough to draw other countries to its own line.

## Conclusion

Soft power, as a measure of a country's international prestige and legitimacy, forms the basis for that country's action in the international arena. Soft power, which consists of international reputation, moral superiority, diplomatic weight, persuasion ability, cultural attractiveness, and strategic reliability, is a vital element that enables countries to operate in the international environment. China's economic rise, economic aid to developing countries, and Confucius Institutes increase the country's soft power.

Multilateralism, economic diplomacy, and the "good neighbor" policy are the main principles of China's foreign policy and international behaviour. Since the late 1970s, China has pursued a low-profile foreign policy. China has become deeply integrated into Western-oriented international organizations and global order. China's integration into the international community improves the country's soft power.

Chinese officials have recently begun to use terms such as "responsible power," "peaceful rise," "peaceful development," "harmonious world" and "China dream" to create a positive image of China. To some extent, they have been successful in preventing negative images of China. However, these kinds of brilliant rhetoric have not created global attractiveness.

China's economic development has become a key driving force for the global economy. While China's economic model is highly influential within the country, it is far from transferable to establishing a global order. Although China's history and culture contain many soft power elements, the authoritarian rule of the country prevents China's potential from coming to light.

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the Impossibility of Harmony," *Theory Talks*. November 28, 2012, accessed January 12, 2022. <http://www.theory-talks.org/2012/11/theory-talk-51.html>.

<sup>92</sup> As cited in Shambaugh, *China Goes*, 171.

China has limited soft power beyond its immediate environment. Even in its own country, China has fallen short of Western cultural influence. China has had little success in shaping international diplomacy, directing the policies of other countries, and building global consensus. Although China has fruitful relations with many countries in the international arena, there is almost no state with which China has an ally. Even the countries with which China has good relations, prefer to keep a certain distance from China. There are hardly any countries wishing to adopt and follow China's norms, values, and policies in the international arena.

China has reached an unrivaled position economically and militarily in the East Asian region. On a global scale, although not unrivaled, China has risen to a very critical position. The biggest obstacle to China's building of regional and global hegemony is its shortcomings in soft power. China's soft power is not enough to build a global hegemony. Although China has made great progress in all kinds of material power, it has not been able to show the same success in soft power. The power parameter that China lags behind in the struggle for global hegemony is soft power. China has limited soft power in the international arena. There are few countries that want to live in a China-dominated world order.

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