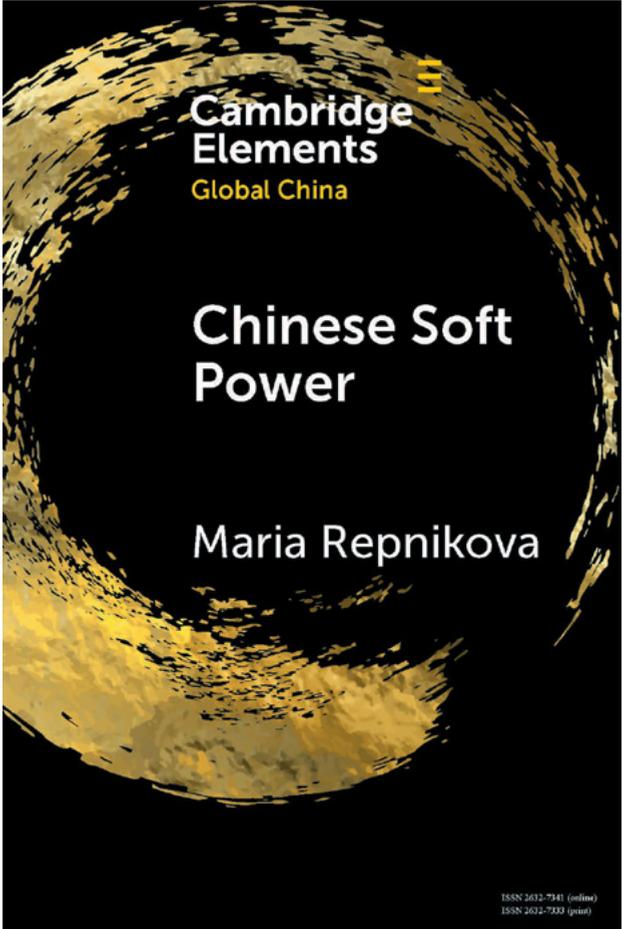


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# Chinese Soft Power

Maria Repnikova

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# Chinese Soft Power: A Conversation with Maria Repnikova

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**M**aria Repnikova's new book, *Chinese Soft Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), examines China's visions and practices of soft power. Repnikova starts by analysing Chinese academic writing and official speeches about soft power to grasp whether and how this concept has been transformed in the Chinese context. She then examines its practical implementation by focusing on key channels of China's public diplomacy, including Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, global media expansion, education and training, and public diplomacy spectacles. In engaging with each of these soft-power mechanisms, Repnikova traces the official motivations behind them, as well as how they operate across global contexts. In particular, she argues that soft power carries different meanings in China, and further suggests that its application should not be seen through a binary lens of success or failure. Instead, we should treat Chinese initiatives as at once ambitious in scale and adaptive to local contexts, but also as contested or perceived with mixed credibility by global audiences.

**Nicholas Loubere:** Let's start with the basics. What is soft power, where did it come from, and what is it about this arguably US-centric concept that has proven so attractive—or at least intriguing—to Chinese scholars and policymakers?

**Maria Repnikova:** Soft power is a concept originally coined by Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor and political scientist. He came up with it at the tail end of the Cold War as a way of reimagining the United States' power in the international system. Unlike some scholars who argued at the time that the United States' dominance in the international system was depleted during the Cold War, Nye called attention to what he saw as an untapped facet of American power—that of attractiveness rather than of military coercion or economic prowess. The resources of this 'attractiveness' that Nye articulated in his later work include foreign policy, values, and culture.

While the idea of soft power has gone through its ups and downs in the Washington establishment, it became associated with persisting US hegemony by its competitors, including Russia, Turkey, Iran, and of course, China. Most of these countries have also incorporated some version of soft power into their foreign policy strategy. China, I would argue, has been one of the most enthusiastic adopters. Over the past two decades, over

7,000 articles have been published on this topic in Chinese academic and policy journals, and the concept—along with its many Chinese variations like ‘discourse power’ (话语权), ‘big power image’ (大国形象), and ‘cultural soft power’ (文化软实力)—is frequently invoked by the top Chinese leadership, including President Xi Jinping himself. This idea has been intriguing to Chinese scholars and policymakers for several reasons. First, soft power is associated with great-power status. A number of Chinese writings I have analysed for this book emphasise that, without soft power, China cannot fully realise its rise as a great power. Other than seeing it as intrinsic to reaching its global status and competing with the United States, soft power is seen as conducive to expanding China’s economic power—by softening the edge of its economic expansion or making it more palatable to global publics.

**NL: How have Chinese thinkers adapted soft power for their own context and purposes? Can you give an example or two of how soft power has been operationalised in Chinese foreign policy?**

**MR:** Chinese thinkers adapted or reinvented the concept of soft power in terms of the motivations or target audiences and the sources deployed in improving China’s image. First, unlike Nye’s original concept that primarily focuses on repairing and bolstering the United States’ image globally, and especially in specific regions where it has been hampered by US-led wars and military operations, in the Chinese context, soft power is aimed at both external and domestic audiences. Other than shaping a more favourable image of China, soft power is meant to facilitate cultural cohesiveness and pride within the country. Some Chinese writings invoke Xi Jinping’s term ‘cultural security’ (文化安全) in arguing that the Chinese public needs more protection or immunity from Western cultural influences. By witnessing China attain respect and admiration internationally, it is thought that the Chinese public will rally around Chinese culture and values, and thereby also inadvertently support the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The second important distinction in how soft power is interpreted in China versus the West concerns the understanding of resources or the process of soft-power implementation. In Nye’s conceptual framing, as noted earlier, soft power is strictly distinguished from hard power or economic and military resources. Chinese thinkers, in contrast, critique the notion of strict boundaries between hard and soft power, and generally tend to see soft power as encompassing a wider range of instruments, including China’s traditional culture, values, and ideology, but also China’s governance model, political capacity, technological innovation, and more. Though the cultural soft-power school is dominant in Chinese academic literature, even the concept of culture is quite fluid, implicitly invoking politics or China’s political system.

**NL:** Through the lens of soft power, how do you think high-level Chinese policymakers perceive the inherently bottom-up and chaotic nature—or at least outside direct state control—of so much of China’s engagements with the world? For instance, irregular migration to Africa for resource extraction or entrepreneurialism that sometimes creates clashes with local populations.

**MR:** Ironically, Chinese scholars and officials often blame these irregular movements and actors for inhibiting China’s soft-power potential or for hurting China’s image. When asked why Chinese soft power faces pushback in certain countries in Africa and more broadly in the Global South, the responsibility is often attributed to nonstate actors who are behaving in an opportunistic manner and who are difficult to control. How Chinese embassies engage with nonstate actors and activities on the ground is a fertile area for future research. In my experience, I found that there was a sentiment of mutual suspicion between them whereby private companies (and individuals) would also distance themselves from the embassy, shying away from what they see as unnecessary and at times unhelpful attention from Chinese officials.

**NL:** How do we understand Chinese soft-power efforts that are seemingly ineffective or even counterproductive—such as the Confucius Institutes that have been involved in numerous scandals? What is the internal logic of these kinds of initiatives and who are the main targets of their attempt to garner soft power?

**MR:** With regard to Confucius Institute scandals, part of the problem is less to do with China ... and more to do with pre-existing deep-seated suspicions of China and CCP-sponsored education initiatives in the West. Hubbert (2019) writes about this convincingly in her book: the fact that even apolitical narratives in Confucius Institutes in America would be seen as political or as forms of self-censorship by American students, or as China attempting to hide something. We see more China-inflicted soft-power scandals in the domain of assertive digital diplomacy—now commonly referred to as ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy. Chinese diplomats, including spokespeople for the Foreign Ministry, increasingly make brazen remarks about the West, at times spreading disinformation, as in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Chinese officials like Zhao Lijian, for instance, spread Russia-invoked theories about American biolabs in Ukraine and cast doubt on the widely documented massacre carried out by Russian forces in Bucha. When it comes to these offensive statements, they appear to target primarily domestic audiences: the leaders within the bureaucratic system, but also the larger public that often gets access to these statements through translated posts disseminated on Weibo (often via state media outlets like the *Global Times*). Offensive digital diplomacy, in my view, best encapsulates the friction between the dual audiences



### Learning with Confucius

Calligraphy exercises at the Confucius Institute, University of Iowa.  
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of Chinese soft power: as the Chinese officials appear to speak to domestic audiences via global communication platforms, they are also alienating international publics, especially in Western countries.

**NL: You highlight the way that ‘the spectacle’ of high-profile events plays a key role in China’s attempts to construct its national image. How is spectacle conceived of in the Chinese context and what can we learn from the most recent spectacle of the Winter Olympics?**

**MR:** The spectacle in the Chinese context in some ways is conceived of as a grand, state-orchestrated, and meticulously implemented event that is meant to boost the image of China and the CCP internationally and domestically. In observing large-scale events like the Olympics, but also smaller-scale trade fairs and Global South forums, it is notable how these spectacles tend to blur China’s cultural and material power. They at once showcase China’s traditional culture and ancient civilisation, while also highlighting China’s modernity, as well as economic and technological prowess. The audiences of these spectacles are as much global as local. It was fascinating to visit the China–Africa Trade Forum in Hunan Province in 2019—the first forum of this kind to take place in China and an event that was widely advertised by Hunan officials during their visit to Ethiopia in spring 2019. The event was promoted to Africans as an opportunity to explore China’s market and as China’s attempt at equalising trade flows between China and Africa. In attending the trade forum, I found African national booths placed alongside China’s provincial booths largely frequented by Changsha residents. The provincial booths advertised China’s economic development projects, as well as provincial cultural heritage. In the context of the Winter Olympics, the biggest audience was also that of Chinese nationals, even though the event was broadcast around the world.

Though these major spectacles, especially on the scale of the Olympics, require major investments from the Chinese Government, their implications for China’s international image are ambiguous. After the 2008 Olympics, for instance, the favourability of China in major industrialised democracies has declined. I don’t expect major spikes in China’s popularity after these recent Games. If anything, the Olympics now feel far away in the context of Russia’s brutal war in Ukraine—a war in which China is criticised for being on the ‘wrong side of history’. ●