



Culture, Media, and Soft Power: China & the United States

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The dawn of the information age has opened up unparalleled opportunities and vulnerabilities. New tools such as viruses like Stuxnet can be used to attack military or civilian targets, while social media is used by terrorist groups for recruitment and by nations to propagate disinformation. As the nature of power shifts in the international system as a result of this proliferation of globalized digital networks, the consequences it has for national power, and any comprehensive grand strategy, deserve examination.

Soft Power and the Media

To understand the role played by the internet, we must first refer to [Nye's](#) concept of *soft power*, and particularly the role that non-coercive “attractive” power has in shaping the preferences of international actors. As Nye argues, the currency of soft power lies in *culture, ideology/values, and policies*. Just as propaganda through the World Wars was used to mobilize domestic populations and undermine enemy morale, media plays a decisive shaping role in socio-cultural construction and in ideology. Utilizing [Adorno's](#) concept of a culture industry, the production of popular cultural goods, from movies to art, carry with them overt or subliminal messaging that construct the social subject, thus influencing cultural and ideological attraction.

This use of media as a tool of statecraft isn't new. US Cold War public diplomacy efforts, from educational exchanges such as the Fulbright Program to the radio broadcasts of Voice of America, were part of a broader American containment grand strategy against the Soviet Union. What has changed, however, is the ease with which once national cultural icons are exported abroad in the new globalized, digital era. Be it Hollywood blockbusters or Japanese anime, there are few barriers to the export of cultural and media products.

China and Cultural Soft Power

Nye's conception of *soft power*, particularly of the ideological and cultural variety, has found fertile ground in China. Official party documents first mentioned the need for “cultural soft power” in the 2007 17th National Congress, and have since become a staple of party rhetoric and academic discussions of national power. [Chinese scholars](#) argue that the 21st century has seen to a third wave of global “western” liberal expansion based now on the cultural realm, while [Luo Yuting](#) estimates that in 2011, the US, EU, Japan, and South Korea accounted for 92% of the world's cultural market, with China at 4%. This disadvantage versus Western dominance in the cultural/ideological spheres drives [calls](#) for the rapid development of China's culture



industries and institutions, to counteract the danger posed by liberal cultural hegemony to Chinese sovereignty.

Since 2012 and Xi Jinping's ascension to paramount leader, such development has begun in earnest, facilitated by Xi's own ties to Chinese media/propaganda networks. In conjunction with more active Chinese diplomacy on the political and economic fronts, cultural diplomacy and a new era of "United Front" work has begun in earnest. Given the state-controlled and regulated nature of media within China itself, the expansion of Confucius Institutes, [rising capacity of educational exchange with Africa](#), [increasing Chinese media presence in South-East Europe](#), and [the encroachment of digital Chinese media outlets in Latin America](#) point towards a coordinated cultural and media strategy in an effort to win soft power abroad. As Chinese outward economic investment expands, investments into Chinese cultural and media power can also be predicted to burgeon.

Implications for US Policymakers

The growth of Chinese influence in these public spheres is a rising challenge to liberal dominance of such programs and industries, particularly for the US. With cultural goods accounting for [a trade surplus of 45 billion USD in 2012](#), the US is the largest exporter of culture, which has outsize benefits for its economy and soft power. From the export of blockbuster movie franchises to the popularization of American fashions, the US is the intellectual and cultural heart of the liberal world order, which has facilitated the spread of American values and influence, as even [jokes and memes](#) serve as vehicles for Americanization on an English-dominated internet.

To respond to this challenge, there is a clear need to integrate media and cultural considerations into future American grand strategy. Accounting for the neoliberal nature of American culture industries, policymakers must develop coordinating institutions with the private sector. Moreover, US public diplomacy programs must be elevated in response to China's own *United Front* work. While China is facing [a PR crisis due to COVID-19](#), this is potentially temporary, and must not be used to dismiss this new front of Sino-American competition.