

# China's Soft Power Policy with Southeast Asian States

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**Abstract:** This thesis analyzes the concept of diplomatic influence and the role of soft power in modern international relations based on the ideas presented in Joshua Kurlantzick's *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*. The research focuses on how powerful states expand their global influence through diplomacy, culture, economy, media, and international cooperation. Special attention is given to China's growing soft power strategy in Southeast Asia, its instruments of influence, and comparative dynamics with American soft power.

**Keywords:** Diplomatic influence, international relations, cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, Chinese diplomacy, political image, investment policy, Confucius Institutes.

**Introduction:** The expansion of states' spheres of influence in international relations is increasingly being carried out not only through military or economic power, but also through soft power tools. In particular, China's activities in the international arena deserve special attention in this regard.

In his work *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, Joshua Kurlantzick analyzes in detail China's process of strengthening its influence in other regions. According to the author, China draws other states closer not through military force or political pressure, but through economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and diplomatic relations. As the ancient dictum holds, "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting" — what matters is not the existence of power, but how it is used.

In modern international politics, the attractiveness of states has become a key determinant. Attractiveness means a state's ability to present its values, culture, and development model as interesting and acceptable to other countries. This study, therefore, examines China's soft power policy in Southeast Asia, comparing it with the United States' approach, and assesses both

the positive and negative implications for regional stability.

The research is structured according to the IMRAD format: following this introduction, the methodology is outlined; thereafter, the findings on China's instruments of soft power are presented; the discussion section situates these findings within broader scholarly debate; and the conclusion summarizes the main contributions.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, document-based research design. The primary source is Joshua Kurlantzick's *Charm Offensive* (Yale University Press, 2007), supplemented by Joseph Nye's foundational theoretical work *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004) and Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy* (1994). Regional scholarly perspectives are drawn from Uzbek scholar Professor Bahodir Eshmatov (2019) and Kazakh political scientist Ruslan Bekturganov (2021).

Data collection relied on systematic content analysis of the primary and secondary sources listed above, as well as review of publicly available survey data — notably a 2005 BBC international poll on perceptions of China

and the United States. Statistical data on Chinese-language learner populations across Southeast Asia, South Korea, Argentina, and other regions were extracted from Kurlantzick's text and used to illustrate behavioral indicators of soft power diffusion.

The analytical framework applied is Joseph Nye's two-dimensional soft power model, which identifies: (1) cultural attractiveness (language, film, education), and (2) political values and foreign policy legitimacy as the main vectors of influence. China's activities were evaluated against both dimensions in the Southeast Asian context. Comparative analysis with U.S. soft power was conducted to provide contrasting benchmarks.

## RESULTS

### 1. Diplomatic Instruments in Southeast Asia

China's soft power policy is clearly manifested in the example of East Timor. After East Timor gained independence, China was among the first states to recognize it diplomatically and provided financial assistance for the construction of the East Timor Ministry of Foreign Affairs building and a new embassy in Beijing. China's diplomatic approach involved dispatching high-ranking diplomats even to small and developing states, demonstrating tangible respect.

Southeast Asian states occupy a particularly important place in China's soft power policy due to geographical proximity and the economic-strategic location of ASEAN within the same region. In recent years, China has significantly expanded trade and economic relations with ASEAN, strengthened cooperation in education, and invested heavily in transportation, energy, and social infrastructure. In Laos and Cambodia, roads, bridges, and various structures are being built with Chinese investment; trade and economic relations are developing rapidly in Malaysia and Indonesia.

### 2. Cultural Diplomacy and Language Diffusion

The diffusion of the Chinese language constitutes a major measurable indicator of soft power effectiveness. Findings from multiple countries demonstrate accelerating uptake:

- By 2005 in Argentina, the number of Chinese-language learners had increased more than threefold; over one thousand students in Buenos Aires alone mastered the language within two years.
- The readership of the largest Chinese-language newspaper grew from 845,000 in 1999 to 1.1 million by 2004, even as global newspaper readership declined.
- In Malaysia and Laos, Chinese-language schools more than doubled over five years.

– In Indonesia, demand for the Chinese language increased so dramatically that a shortage of 100,000 Chinese language teachers emerged.

– In Cambodia, the number of students at a single primary school exceeded 10,000.

– In South Korea — where China has become the country's largest trading partner — 160,000 people are currently learning Chinese, a figure that grew by 60% over five years.

The opening of Confucius Institutes and active promotion of Chinese culture further increased Beijing's prestige in the region. Kazakh researcher Ruslan Bekturganov (2021) characterizes these institutes not merely as cultural tools but as "strategic diplomatic instruments serving to expand Beijing's regional sphere of influence."

### 3. Economic Leverage and Image Transformation

China has managed to transform its image from that of a "closed state" to a "peace-loving and cooperation-ready state" in many countries. According to a 2005 BBC international survey, 48% of respondents assessed China's role in the world positively, compared with only 38% who expressed confidence in the United States' positive influence. This shift reflects the effectiveness of China's strategy of regarding regional states not merely as markets but as equal partners.

Professor Bahodir Eshmatov (2019) notes that China's soft power strategy in Central Asia and Southeast Asia are closely interrelated, and that in both regions economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and educational projects serve as the main instruments. In his assessment, China pursues not only economic interests in regional integration processes, but also long-term geopolitical objectives, making its soft power policy "a strategically complex and multilayered phenomenon."

### 4. Comparison with U.S. Soft Power

The United States retains formidable soft power resources. It is home to 500 of the world's largest companies — five times more than Japan, which ranks second. Sixty-two of the world's most prestigious 1,000 brands are American; eight of the top ten business schools are located in the United States. Additionally, 28% of the 1.6 million students studying abroad study in the U.S., compared with 14% in the United Kingdom, and more than 86,000 foreign scientists worked at American universities in 2002. America leads in film and television exports and book publishing globally.

However, the United States has not pursued an equally active diplomatic policy toward many developing states. Consequently, in some countries the international image of the United States has weakened

while China's attractiveness has grown. The humanitarian assistance provided by the United States following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami illustrates that military capability, when properly applied, can also strengthen soft power — yet such episodic interventions have not offset the structural deficit in sustained diplomatic engagement.

## DISCUSSION

The results confirm that China's soft power strategy in Southeast Asia is both deliberate and multidimensional. Rather than relying on coercion, China has employed what Kurlantzick terms "charm offensive" — a coordinated deployment of economic incentives, cultural exchange, and diplomatic recognition to build long-term partnerships with states that are weaker politically, economically, and financially.

These findings align with Joseph Nye's theoretical framework: China has effectively exploited both the cultural attractiveness vector (language teaching, Confucius Institutes, media) and the political legitimacy vector (non-interference rhetoric, recognition of new states, ASEAN engagement). As Eshmatov (2019) argues, economic and cultural tools are not separate policy domains but mutually reinforcing instruments within a unified geopolitical strategy.

At the same time, this approach carries risks for recipient states. As Bekturganov (2021) cautions, sustained educational and cultural investment may generate long-term attitudinal alignment among younger generations in Southeast Asian countries, deepening structural dependence. Smaller states risk becoming increasingly economically and politically dependent on larger states — a dynamic that soft power literature has sometimes underweighted relative to the benign framing of "attraction."

The comparison with U.S. soft power reveals an important asymmetry: the United States possesses superior hard metrics (business schools, brand prestige, international students), yet has failed to convert these into equivalent diplomatic dividends in many developing regions. This suggests that soft power effectiveness is determined not only by the magnitude of resources but by the consistency and targeting of their deployment. China's tailored, state-directed approach has proven more agile in regions where the United States has reduced diplomatic presence.

A limitation of this study is its reliance on a single primary source (Kurlantzick, 2007) and survey data from 2005, which may not fully reflect current dynamics. Subsequent developments — including regional responses to Chinese debt-financed infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative —

suggest that early positive perceptions of China have in some countries given way to greater skepticism. Future research should incorporate post-2010 empirical data to assess the durability of China's soft power gains.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that China's soft power strategy in Southeast Asia is a strategically complex, multilayered phenomenon combining economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, language promotion, and targeted diplomatic recognition. Measured against Joseph Nye's framework, China has made significant advances on both the cultural attractiveness and political legitimacy dimensions of soft power.

As Niccolò Machiavelli observed, a prince must know how to balance fear and love; today's international environment demands a parallel balance of hard power and soft power. Both the United States and China possess well-developed capacities in both domains, yet their deployment strategies differ substantially. China's sustained, targeted engagement with smaller and developing states has yielded measurable returns in public perception and diplomatic alignment.

The main conclusion of this article is that soft power and hard power are complementary, not substitutive, instruments of foreign policy. In the modern world, diplomacy and cultural tools have become indispensable for strengthening the international standing of states. However, policymakers in recipient countries must remain attentive to the risks of asymmetric dependence that can accompany intensive soft power engagement.

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