

## NEW ASIA: PROJECTING SOFT POWER

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### Abstract

For the first time in history, China and India, the two biggest giants of Asia, are on the rise simultaneously and performing extraordinarily well economically. Between them, they account for more than a third of the world's population, and are the 2nd and 4th largest economies and among the biggest markets in the global economy.

The rise of China and India has created anxieties around the world, some of which are rational and some not so. There is little doubt that these two countries have high aspirations on a global level. Their economic might will invariably lead to political and strategic tensions with others on the global stage. In a way they both are now facing the same anxieties that the old guard world powers such as US, USSR, UK and France faced in the post-war period. And, in a way, they have to consider the same methods of winning friends and influencing people as their forerunners did. The path to soft power is one of them.

As heirs to two of the richest and most ancient cultures in the world, they have a unique offering to contribute to the world and it is this cultural offering that is likely to stand them in good stead in the long run. This paper attempts to examine what kind of soft power can China and India project to the rest of the world and how they could win the battle of the minds as well as the battle of the markets.

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## Introduction

Currently, there is only one superpower on this planet – the United States of America. The US is, at once, a military superpower, an economic superpower and a “soft power” superpower. Terms like ‘military power’ and ‘economic power’ are generally well understood but not so the idea of ‘soft power.’ The inventor and populariser of the term, Joseph Nye, characterises it as the ability to persuade others to want what you want, and getting it done without carrots (payments) or sticks (coercion). At the international level, we can see the demonstration of soft power, according to Nye, when a country obtains the outcomes it wants in world politics “because other countries admire its values, emulate its example, aspire to its level of prosperity and openness.”<sup>2</sup>

The US has clearly succeeded in exerting extraordinary soft power, in addition to its military and economic power, over much of the world, though it is not universally admired or welcome. And therein lie some lessons for Asia.

For the first time in history, China and India, the two biggest giants of Asia, are on the rise simultaneously and performing extraordinarily well economically. Between them, they account for more than a third of the world’s population, and are currently ranked by IMF according to their GDP (PPP) as 2nd and 4th, respectively, in the global economy.<sup>3</sup> Both China and India are expected to exceed the size of the US economy by 2035 and 2050 respectively.<sup>4</sup> Even now, Asia is often spoken of as the economic engine of the world. Some commentators have gone on to claim that this century will be the Asian Century. Given that a century takes a hundred years and that we have barely begun, anything could happen in the decades ahead. However, as we see the trajectories of Chinese and Indian economic growth and their political as well as economic impact on the world stage, it is obvious that these two giants will be facing a new set of opportunities as well as threats along their journey to superpowerdom.

## Perceiving China & India

In military terms, both China and India together or even with the next dozen powers cannot begin to match the firepower of the supreme superpower today – the US. Yet they both are nuclear powers, still an exclusive club<sup>5</sup>, and considered formidable in their own theatre of operations. It is also a matter of little comfort that they both have some of the world’s biggest standing armies with more than a million active soldiers each<sup>6</sup>. While both have disavowed any territorial ambitions, they are not implicitly trusted as much as deeply feared in their neighbourhood.

In economic terms, China has often been called the manufacturer of the world and India, the service provider. These are obviously simplistic and misleading characterisations but there is no doubt that their enormous and ever growing capacity to provide goods and services the world needs, far outstrips that of most countries of the world. At the same time, they themselves are becoming two of the most sought after markets in the world as their purchasing power escalates with millions joining the middle class each year. Thus, to buy from or to sell to, China and India are at the forefront of the global market. Cost effective products from China have sent shivers down the spine of many sturdy manufacturing nations around the world and have raised the hackle of protectionism even in some of the most advanced and competitive countries. Likewise, India’s ability to ascend from mere business process outsourcing, otherwise known as sweatshops, to knowledge process outsourcing, dealing in medical, legal and scientific data, has also raised the spectre of job losses among the professional classes of the developed countries.

As a whole, the rise of China and India has created anxieties around the world, some of which are rational and some not so. There is little doubt that these two countries have high aspirations not only within their own borders but also on a global level. Their economic might will invariably lead to political and strategic tensions with other equally – if not more -- ambitious players on the global stage. In a way they both are now facing the same anxieties that the old guard world powers such as US, USSR, UK and France faced in the post-war period. And, in a way, they have to consider the

<sup>2</sup> Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics, by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. NY: Public Affairs, 2004, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_GDP\\_\(PPP\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(PPP))

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/01/24/business/rupee.php>

<sup>5</sup> These include China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, United Kingdom, and United States. (<http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat.asp>)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/060626\\_asia\\_balance.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/060626_asia_balance.pdf)

same methods of winning friends and influencing people as their forerunners did. The path to soft power is one of them.

### **Soft Power Past & Soft Power Future**

The key to soft power is attractiveness. A country becomes attractive when it has values other countries admire and wish to emulate. Though Nye talks about soft power as a national enterprise, it is not something that a state can manufacture on its own. As Nye himself puts it, "much of American soft power has been produced by Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft and Michael Jordan."<sup>7</sup> It is what the American people stand for, what they can produce and what they can share with others that ultimately makes up the US soft power. Thus, the substance of soft power resides in the people, not in the state. Let us now turn to how much soft power China and India have or are willing to create and use.

Though the term soft power is of recent vintage *a la* Joseph Nye, the idea is ancient. It is precisely the attractiveness of the values and achievements of China and India that made them the most influential states in Asia for centuries. The entire Asian continent has deep and indelible marks of the influence of these two great civilisations that have lasted hundreds of years, compared with the soft power manifestations of the US or even the West as a whole in recent times. In fact, the most widespread and lasting influences of the West such as the use of English language, adoption of Western education, judicial and medical systems, to name a few, came through hard power -- colonisation and coercion -- in the first place. It was only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that the US and other European nations became attractive without being coercive. The large scale adoption of pop music, blue jeans and hamburgers in the East were clearly matters of choice and not coercion or even inducement. But till then, it was largely a manifestation of colonialism.

In contrast, the spread of Chinese and Indian religions, philosophies, epics, dance and music, court rituals and scientific practices throughout Asia in the distant past came about largely through self selection and not through foreign imposition. Even where Asian rulers imposed Chinese or Indian customs and rituals on their own people, it was mostly at their own behest and for their own purposes and not to serve foreign interests. Chinese and Indian cultures seeped through local ones and converted millions along the way to their respective cultural discourses and practices.

However, these encounters with China and India seemed to have dwindled to a trickle in the last few centuries when the Europeans entered the arena and the cultural flows tended to be bilateral, mostly directed from the colonial powers to the colonies. It had reached a point, until recently, whereby Asians had lost much of their self confidence and respect for their own cultures and values.

The New Asia, heralded by China and India, and to a lesser extent by Japan and South Korea, is now making inroads into the West as well as the other neglected parts of the world such as Africa and South America. Unfortunately, the old type of soft power would not be sufficient to deal with the new world before them. They will have to recalibrate and reinvent their soft power projections to soften up a more suspicious and sceptical audience. Fortunately, there is much going for Asia in this regard.

### **Chinese Soft Power**

Let us take China first. With the "opening up" of China in the 1980s to foreign investment and reinvention of "Communism with capitalist character" and "Democracy with Chinese characteristics" China has undergone tremendous changes internally and is slowly shedding its image of an isolated, dictatorial and arrogant nation state. Notwithstanding the periodic eruptions of political dissent and disaffection such as the recent Tibetan uprising, China's reputation as a coherent, cohesive and progressive nation state is gaining currency. China's ability to pull hundreds of millions out of poverty and hunger has not been matched by any other nation. China's ability to hold together such a vast and varied geography as a unitary state since 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and with a single official language has no precedence or antecedence in history. China's ability to sustain an unbroken civilisation for more than 5000 years is the envy of every great civilisation. These and other such achievements provide China with the cultural and intellectual credentials to speak to the world and share its values and virtues.

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<sup>7</sup> Nye, P. 17

It is well known that Confucianism is the bedrock of Chinese culture. Its unshakable faith in collectivism and harmony has seen the country through revolutions created by internal as well external forces. And to this day, these values are cherished not only by China's citizens but by the Chinese diaspora spread across the globe. In fact, as Geert Hofstede had pointed out in his comparative study of culture's consequences, the Chinese group orientation, by its very nature, encourages interdependency, a much needed virtue in a world excessive individualism.<sup>8</sup> The extraordinary effort to maintain harmony in all areas of human endeavour also bodes well for conflict avoidance and conflict resolution. The Chinese will see that their philosophy pays handsome dividends in their dealing with the rest of the world. Even for the non-Chinese around the world, as societies become more globalised and therefore more differentiated within each society, the adoption of such group orientation and harmony will prove to extremely beneficial.

The Chinese are also highly regarded for holding good education and strong work ethic as cardinal values of their culture. Again, these are values that will find worldwide resonance as they move out in large numbers to study, work, or do business with the outside world. It is already well known around the world that East Asians, be they Japanese, Koreans or Chinese, (all immersed in the Confucian practices), are high achievers in the school and tenacious workers in the field. An interesting corollary of the Chinese adherence to education and collectivism is that they are better disposed to sharing knowledge with others and to achieving group objectives rather than focusing on individual interests.<sup>9</sup>

The educational context that is often in the news is of Chinese nationals studying abroad. There are reportedly 657,200 Chinese students overseas, with 144,000 students in 2007 alone<sup>9</sup>. From 1978 to 2007, 1.21 million Chinese left home in pursuit of an overseas education<sup>9</sup>. But equally interestingly, China itself is host to numerous foreign students – 195,503 in 2007 from 188 different countries<sup>10</sup>. On both sides of the equation, Chinese culture will have a certain influence on the students interacting with each other. China can take a leaf from the Western experience of how their best universities became the incubators of great thinkers and leaders from the East and how there has been an internalisation of Western values among them through this education and also how a sense of gratitude prevailed despite the host country's domination during colonial times.

Turning to other elements of Chinese soft power, there are indeed a number of practices or traditions that have won millions of adherents all over the world. These range from the religion of Daoism, officially recognised acupuncture, highly respected martial arts and aerobics to feng shui and slimming teas. Add to this the near universal popularity of Bruce Lee as well as world class cinema from China. More than any of the above, that Chinese cuisine is now perhaps the most cherished "foreign" food in most countries is testament to another cultural invasion or conversion, depending on one's point of view, by the Chinese civilisation.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of Chinese soft power is Confucianism itself. Though there are many critics of this philosophy as an instrument serving an authoritarian regime, there is widespread respect for the inherent virtues and values this philosophy nourishes and cherishes. It is probably for this reason that China has recently undertaken to establish the Confucius Institute around the world. It, of course, has very illustrious and effective precedents in Germany's Goethe Institute, the Alliance France, the British Council, the United States Information Service and so on. Each of these institutions, though their purposes varied at times, made a major contribution to the projection of its own country's soft power into the host country.

The Confucius Institute is designated as "a non-profit public institute with a mission of promoting Chinese language and culture and supporting local Chinese teaching," under the Office of Chinese Language Council International or Hanban.<sup>10</sup> Starting in 2004 in Uzbekistan, within four years, 35 countries have the Confucius Institute on their soil, some more than one. The Ministry of Education of China estimates that, by the year 2010, there will be approximately 100 million people worldwide learning Chinese as a foreign language, and it plans to set up more than 100 Confucius Institutes worldwide.<sup>11</sup> Unlike other national cultural institutions, Confucius Institutes tend to be embedded in universities making it more elitist and less accessible. While the initial focus is on language teaching, there is great potential for this institute to spread out into many other aspects of

<sup>8</sup> Hoestede, G. (1980), "Motivation, leadership and organization: do American theories apply abroad," in *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 4-21

<sup>9</sup> Xu, H. (2007), "Chinese Culutre: Its impact on knowledge sharing," in April, K. & Scockly, M. (2007), *Diversity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York

<sup>10</sup> <http://english.hanban.edu.cn/market/HanBanE/412360.htm>

<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucius\\_Institute#List\\_of\\_Institutes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucius_Institute#List_of_Institutes)

Chinese culture as have the other institutions before it with regard to their own cultures. It is a very effective vehicle not only for one way communication of things Chinese but, equally importantly, it is an instrument of two-way communication – to listen to foreigners who have something to feed back, to engage in a dialogue. Soft power projection needs a listening ear and a responsive attitude to be effective in its mission.

### Indian Soft Power

As with China, India has a great and glorious past but modern world needs modern stories. Fortunately, since its Independence from British colonial rule 60 years ago, India has managed to capture the imagination of the world in many ways – even before it attained economic mega power status in the last decade.

Gandhi and his non-violent war of independence is perhaps a unique phenomenon in world history. His invention of civil-disobedience as a powerful but again non-violent tool of political agitation is another uncommon example of his philosophical stance. Gandhi was a product of Indian culture and, in the end, a major contributor to the making of modern Indian culture. Gandhi's brand of Non-violence and civil disobedience have now become political weapons of choice well beyond the borders of India, with Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela as iconic examples of his followers. Though some do consider this approach naive and ineffective, it has gained much respect as high order political behaviour.

Nehru was one of the founding fathers, along with Zhou Enlai of China, of the idea of non-alignment in international relations. India helped shape and spearhead the Non-Alignment Movement and continued to lead the movement even after China fell out. Although assessments vary on the efficacy of non-alignment as a political strategy in the bi-polar world of the past, its cardinal principles are very much alive today and still form the basis of international law and practice. These include mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in domestic affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

Though the idea of democracy was not invented by India, it has become the largest democracy in the world and, among Asian nations, it is at the forefront of defining and defending democracy. To be sure, India has not always been a model democracy and has a tendency to revert to its feudal ways now and then. Yet, there is no question that democracy is at the core of its national ideal and aspiration. Despite its flaws, India has become a working model of democracy for many developing countries around the world.

Almost an obsession with idealism and ideas seems to mark India apart in a region that, for the most part, is bound by a down-to-earth philosophy of materialism and pragmatism. This can be both India's greatest strength and greatest weakness.

As Amartya Sen has amply demonstrated in his book "*The Argumentative Indian*,"<sup>12</sup> India and Indians at large have a great propensity to debate ideas for their own sake and this intellectual ferment has become part of the Indian character. Sen holds that "the simultaneous flourishing of many different convictions and viewpoints in India has drawn substantially on the acceptance... of heterodoxy and dialogue".<sup>13</sup> Thus, the "argumentative Indian" is a product of this heterodoxy that has evolved over thousands of years. Just as harmony seems to define the Chinese character, diversity seems to be the marker of Indian character. But it is useful to remember that both approaches have their own limitations. Indians' capacity for idea generation could be put to good use in a world that is forever seeking new ways of solving new as well as old problems. When employed for the benefit of the larger world, it would help mitigate some of the negative impact of India's economic or military power.

Nye has pointed out that in this age of information, those with the better story to tell often win. Shashi Tharoor, a former UN Under-Secretary-General, himself an Indian national, argues that India is the "land of the better story," in his article on India and its soft power.<sup>14</sup> Citing numerous examples of how Indians and Indian cultural products have captivated audiences across the globe, he says India has an "extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and attractive than its rivals."

<sup>12</sup> Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, history and Identity*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2005

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. ix

<sup>14</sup> Shashi Tharoor, "The Land of the Better Story: India and Soft Power," in *Global Asia*, vol. 2 no. 1, 2007.

Indian literature, especially in English, has claimed rapt attention of the world, not to mention prestigious book prizes. Indian art, music and dance have captured the imagination of the elite around the world. Indian fashion is now making waves on the ramps of international *haute couture* shows. Even Indian cinema has travelled well beyond the diasporic circles to the mainstream West as well as the Middle East and the East. In the world of spiritual well being and non-material life style, no other group of philosophers or preachers have attained the apostolic status as have Indian gurus. And this is not just marketing genius, though there is some of it.

As with China, education is an area where Indian soft power could be channelled most effectively. Amit Gupta, an academic at the US Air Force War College, makes such a case.<sup>15</sup> For example, he points out that though India has approximately 226 universities, 428 engineering colleges and more than 100 medical colleges, the number of foreign students studying in India is small. He cites a newspaper report that stated that in 2003 it was just 8145.<sup>16</sup> There are quite a large number of universities, apart from the most famous Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), that have reputation high enough to attract thousands of foreign students to India. In addition to such visiting students, India could further expand its educational franchise to many parts of the world through virtual class rooms, thanks to the information technology that Indians themselves excel in. Gupta thus argues that India is in an advantageous position to provide high quality education to many other nations that could benefit from Indian scholarship and educational innovation. As mentioned earlier, the provision of good education creates a residual sense of gratitude and affection that form a reservoir of goodwill. India has the potential to build and benefit from such a reservoir.

Another of Gupta's suggestions for soft power projection focuses on what he calls the medical connection.<sup>17</sup> He suggests that India should expand and exploit its capacity to provide medical care as well as to produce vital drugs such as anti-AIDS and anti-bird flu medicines that would be far less costly than the case in much of the developed world. He believes that when a country provides such critical services as education and medical care, few would say no to it.

### **Other Asian Soft Power**

For reasons of space and time, this paper does not deal with the other Asian nations such as Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea that also have made significant soft power impact on the world in their own ways. Japan was indeed the first Asian nation in the post-war era to rise to the pinnacle of economic power to match the West and is still the third largest economy. Once it got the world's attention, Japan's cultural aspects began to travel widely, be it the Kabuki or the karaoke, sushi or sashimi, *manga* cartoons or anime movies. Malaysia, for its part, has become a model of development for the Islamic world and Singapore, a secular economic miracle and model. South Korea is now at the heels of leading counties in IT-based cultural products. All of them have added to the Asian soft power mix.

### **Soft Power Is Not Easy Power**

In defining soft power, Nye also identified what types of countries are likely to excel in soft power:<sup>18</sup> those whose dominant cultures and ideals are closer to prevailing global norms (which now emphasize liberalism, pluralism, autonomy); those with the most access to multiple channels of communication and thus more influence over how issues are framed; and those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance.

It would be obvious from the above criteria that many Asian nations would fail to make the mark. However, this is not a list of rigid rules but a set of guidelines to ponder when countries contemplate the possibility of making use of soft power. Ultimately, all nation states do and must act in their own self interest. They have to make difficult choices among available options. Sometimes, soft power may have little power against hard power both within and outside the state and as a consequence have little utility.

<sup>15</sup> Amit Gupta, "India's Soft Power," in *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, vol. 1 no. 1, 2006

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

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 55

<sup>18</sup> Nye in *The Paradox of American Power*, as quoted by Tharoor, *ibid.* p. 72

In all the enthusiasm for soft power, it is also prudent to remember that soft power alone will be of little impact without the backing of hard power. As history has taught us, nations have to be built not only on ideals and principles but also on the ability to defend themselves from predators who may not share the same values and virtues and would not be deterred by soft power. Soft voices are often listened to only with a big stick behind.

Still, on the whole, Asia is at the threshold of a new century that is full of promise as much as perils and if it is to make this century an Asian century, it has to make the best use of all its assets – soft power as well as military and economic power.

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#### Bio-data

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