

Further into the Field: An In-depth Analysis of Current Transnational Soft Power Measurement Tools

Prepared by: Jiayi Zhang
Overseen by: Carla Dirlikov Canales

Abstract:

*Ever since Joseph Nye proposed the term soft power in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead*, there has been a wealth of literature on countries' visions and practices of soft power. Yet given the diffusive nature of soft power and its conceptual emphasis on intangible resources, there has been little consensus as to how soft power could be properly measured. This research paper mainly focuses on six extant measurement tools generated by scholars and global think tanks: Joseph Nye (2004), Yanzhong Huang and Sheng Ding (2006), *The Soft Power 30*, the *Asia Power Index (API)*, the *Soft Power Rubric*, as well as Maria Repnikova's works on soft power based on extensive field research (2022). By comparing and contrasting the six soft power measurement tools, this research article aims to review the strengths and pitfalls of extant measurement schemes and lay groundwork for future methodological innovations.*

Jiayi is Advanced Research Fellow at the Cultural Diplomacy Initiative at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy of Tufts University.

Introduction

In his 1990 book *Bound to Lead*, Joseph Nye differentiated soft power from hard power and defined the former as “the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes you want.” While a country’s power status traditionally rests upon its military and strategic aspects of power such as economic clout and military might, Dr. Nye argues that soft power hinges more on the country’s culture, political values, and foreign policies¹. In his 2011 book *The Future of Power*, Dr. Nye proposed that soft power converts into countries’ desired outcome following the pathway of “resources—objectives—conversion—target response—outcome.”²

The measurement of soft power is of critical importance to policymakers as well as non-governmental actors because it influences both international politics as well as the economy of industries. Yet as can be inferred from its definition, on top of the long-term and diffusive nature of soft power and its conceptual emphasis on intangible resources³, the hardship of identifying and quantifying the internal causal mechanisms made measuring soft power a tricky enterprise. Following a chronological order, this article looks at the strengths and

¹ Nye, Joseph S. (2003). *The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Nye, J. (2011). *The future of power*. New York: PublicAffairs.

³ Treverton, G. and Jones, S. (2005) *Measuring National Power*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. Available from: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/2005/RAND_CF215.pdf

pitfalls of six soft power measurement schemes from 2004 to 2022, with the aim of unraveling the concept's theoretical and analytical development as well as identifying existing research gaps in the field of political and diplomatic studies.

JOSEPH NYE: OPINION POLLS AND FOCUS GROUPS (2004)

In recognition of the difficulties in measuring culture, ideology, and institutions that constitute soft power, Dr. Nye suggests that whether a particular asset is a soft-power resource that produces attraction can be measured by asking people through polls or focus groups.⁴

Strengths:

According to Dr. Nye, “*Polls are a good first approximation of both how attractive a country appears and the costs that are incurred by unpopular policies.*”⁵ Compared to data extraction and analysis from official reports or pre-existing databases, fielding surveys and organizing focus groups allow researchers to narrow down and look into people's perceptions of soft power in a specific country or region within a specific period of time. In particular, organizing focus groups, similar to other qualitative research methods, helps researchers to gain a more in-depth contextual background of participants' understanding of soft power and how she or he reached the final conclusion. Yet these measures also come with a cost as will be delineated in the following:

Pitfalls:

- ***Subjectivity and Confounding Factors.*** One common drawback of survey research in political studies is the confounding effect caused by research participants' subjective perceptions. In the case of measuring countries' soft power through polls and focus groups, countries' efforts and investments in developing soft power should be differentiated from on-the-ground outcomes achieved in receiving countries. In other words, there are more contributing factors that influence the attractiveness and persuasiveness of a country's culture abroad other than the government's strategic promotion efforts. For instance, to different degrees, factors like countries' hard power (e.g., economic influence and military prowess and threat), the ever-changing geopolitical context (e.g., exigencies such as war), and domestic politics (e.g., election propaganda and nationalist sentiments) all contribute to the favourability of a certain country. Yet in the process of real-world measurement, it is very hard to tease out their separate influence only to distill a country's soft power capability in its “purest” form.
- ***The Issue of Efficiency.*** Compared to retrieving and analyzing data from extant resources, such as official (inter-) governmental reports and preexisting research

⁴ Nye, J. (2004). *Soft power : The means to success in world politics*. New York.

⁵ Ibid.

databases, the random selection of state-wide or even nationwide research samples for organizing focus groups can be both costly and time-consuming. With the advent of online survey applications, surveys can be distributed to target demographics relatively easily. Yet this approach also has its limitations such as inaccuracy brought by computer-generated responses or unfinished questionnaires, which are commonly encountered in online survey research.

Resources:

Nye, J. (1990). *Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power*. New York.

Nye, J. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York.

YANZHONG HUANG AND SHENG DING: CAUSAL MECHANISM (2006)

In line with Nye’s conceptualization of soft power, in their 2006 paper, Chinese scholars Yanzhong Huang and Sheng Ding measures soft power by using structured and focused surveys (polls that measure China’s popularity in the world). The scheme is innovative because it supplements polls with a wider variety of indicators, such as the size of international students and the inbound of foreign tourists. The measurement also differentiated “power measured as resources” and “power judged as the desired outcomes”. To answer the question of “how do we know that a change in country B's foreign policy behavior is the result of country A's exercise of soft power and not something else”, Huang and Ding constructed a model to connect soft power resources and policy outcomes. In this model, each of the four steps requires careful quantitative and qualitative measurement. Yet it warrants attention that the emphasis of this paper is not on the measurements per se, the merits brought by process-tracing deserve more scholarly attention⁶.

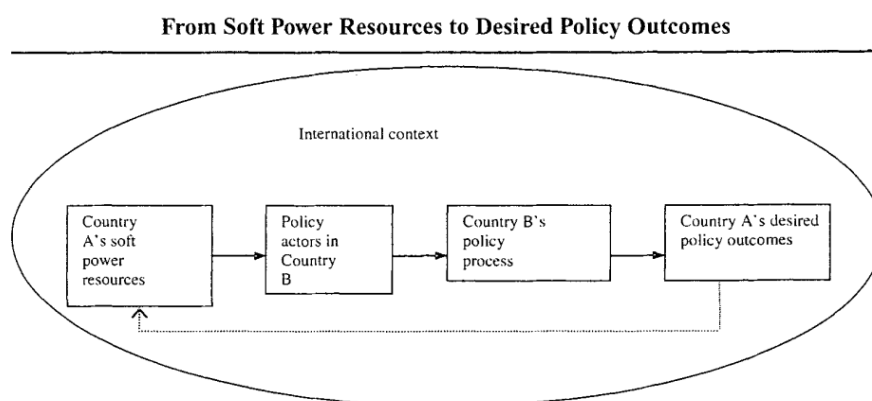


Figure 1. (Huang and Ding, 2006)

⁶ Huang, Y., Ding, S. Dragon's underbelly: An analysis of China's soft power. *East Asia* 23, 22–44 (2006).

Strengths:

- **Causal Mechanism:** Few pre-existing research has focused on the connection between countries' soft power resources and desired policy outcomes. Yet as is exemplified in the previous question on policy behavior and policy outcome, the preliminary causal mechanism (without robustness test notwithstanding) detailed in Huang and Dings' measurement scheme constitutes a theoretical breakthrough at the time
- **Differences Across Regions and Regimes:** The case study in Huang and Ding's measurement scheme is about China's ascension to the global stage. By analyzing perceptions of China's rise in different geopolitical areas ranging from its neighboring countries to the developing world, and lastly, to advanced industrial democracies in the West, this scheme broadened the theoretical outreach of Nye's initial conceptualization.

Pitfalls:

- **Difficulties Encountered in Quantifying the Processes.** As is shown in **Figure 1.**, this measurement proposes a causal mechanism for how countries utilize their soft power resources to affect desired policy outcomes in international politics. However, little ink has been spilled on questions such as how we should trace and quantify specific processes such as "policy actor/political elites' reception of another country's soft power (which is different from the views of the general public acquired from polls)"

Resources:

Huang, Yanzhong, & Ding, Sheng. (2006). Dragon's underbelly: An analysis of China's soft power. *East Asia (Piscataway, N.J.)*, 23(4), 22-44.

Zhu, K., Yang, R. (2022) Emerging Resources of China's Soft Power: A Case Study of Cambodian Participants from Chinese Higher Education Programs. *High Educ Policy*.

USC CENTER ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: THE SOFT POWER 30⁷ (2015-19)

The Soft Power 30 index assesses the resources of countries by combining both objective and subjective data. Using objective data divided into 6 categories (Culture, Education, Engagement, Enterprise, Digital, Government) drawn from a range of respected and commonly cited third-party sources, along with subjective data generated from specially commissioned polling across countries, Soft Power 30 assesses countries' soft power resources using both factual and perceptual data.

⁷ USC Center on Public Diplomacy, The Soft Power 30, <https://softpower30.com/>

Strengths:

- ***Combining Objective and Subjective Data:*** The Soft Power 30 index made a significant contribution to the measurement of soft power for it organically combines objective and subjective data. The wide-ranging objective data retrieved from a broad array of respected and commonly cited third-party sources were categorized into seven sub-indices which is very helpful for both independent and comprehensive data analysis and cross-case comparison. On the other hand, subjective data drawn from specially commissioned polling worldwide allows researchers to understand people's real-time perception of the country/region's cultural attractiveness and power of persuasion.

Pitfalls:

- ***Shortage of Contextual Data:*** In the initial soft power measurement framework, Dr. Nye proposed the usage of opinion polls in tandem with focus groups, as the latter provides researchers with a more in-depth understanding of the contextual background behind participants' responses. The benefit of fieldwork and other qualitative research methods such as focus groups or (semi-)structured interviews is that they help researchers to generate "thick knowledge" grounded in the lived experiences of research participants, which cannot be revealed by numbers and statistical regression analysis in survey research. The power of using contextual data in measuring soft power is best exemplified by Dr. Maria Repnikova's research and fieldwork on the influence of China's soft power in Africa, which will be introduced in the last section of this paper.

Resources:

1. USC Center on Public Diplomacy Introduction Page
<https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/users/softpower30>
2. Official Website of the Soft Power 30
<https://softpower30.com/>
3. The 2019 Soft Power 30 Report
<https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf>

LOWY INSTITUTE: ASIA POWER INDEX (2018-present)

Lowy Institute, an independent think tank based in Australia, defines power as "the capacity of a state or territory to direct or influence the behavior of other states, non-state actors, and the course of international events"⁸. The Asia Power Index is by far the most comprehensive soft power measurement tool which quantifies resources and influence to rank countries' relative power in Asia—to be more specific, their ability to shape and respond to the external

⁸ 2021 Asia Power Index Key Findings Report <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-2021-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>

environment. API uses eight thematic measures which weigh differently, as is shown in **Figure 2**.

	Measures	%
Resources (55%)	Economic resources	17.5
	Military capability	17.5
	Resilience	10
	Future resources	10
Influence (45%)	Diplomatic influence	10
	Economic relationships	15
	Defence networks	10
	Cultural influence	10

Figure 2. Weightings of Measurement (API, 2019)

Strengths

- **Data Comprehensiveness.** The eight thematic measures of power cover the resources that countries possess as well as how they convert to concrete power influence in international politics. Compared to previous schemes, components weighting and cross-sectional comparison have not been paid much attention to.

Pitfalls

- **The Issue of Geographical Balance.** The index has an obvious regional focus on Asia, which only measures and ranks 26 countries' comprehensive power status in the Indo-Pacific.
- **Limitations Brought By the Usage of Second-Hand Data.** Similar to most extant measurement schemes, API mainly focuses on national-level analysis and inter-state interactions. Yet when it comes to the influence of soft power on individuals, and how the latter perceives and comes to such an understanding, much more can be explored by on-the-ground fieldwork, in addition to the limited number of structured interviews included in API.

Resources:

1. Official Website of Asia Power Index

<https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>

2. Lowy Institute Asia Power Index Key Findings 2021

<https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-2021-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>

IRENE WU: SOFT POWER RUBRIC (2018)

As a communication specialist, Dr. Irene Wu mainly approaches the measurement of soft power from the perspective of social interactions. Dr. Wu found that due to the all-

encompassing nature of “soft power” in Nye’s initial conceptualization—basically everything else apart from military power, economic power, and diplomatic skills—the wealth of extant literature all focuses on the visions and activities of countries that project the power, with little ink spilled over characteristics of countries that are subject to soft power influence⁹. As she puts it, “what matters for soft power is less how many of its students study abroad and more how many foreigners come to study¹⁰.” When it comes to the specific rubric of measurement, Soft Power Rubric divides countries’ cultural and value attractiveness into short-term and long-term, followed by respective assessments, as is shown in **Figure 3**.

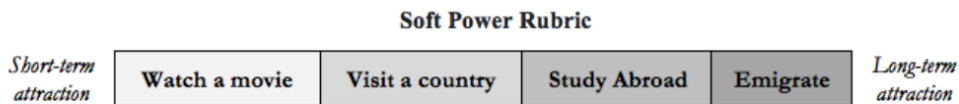


Figure 3. Soft Power Rubric (Wu, 2018)

The rubric was developed based on a dataset on migration, study abroad, and travel for over 200 countries from 1960 to 2017, and a dataset on foreign movie audiences for about 50 countries from 1970 forward¹¹. In this framework, the potential scale and intensity of countries’ soft power relationships were measured by calculating the number of person-to-person social interactions between people of different countries¹².

Strengths:

- ***Combining The Study of Soft Power with Political Communication.*** Different from the aforementioned measurement rubrics which zeroed in on macro-level indicators such as diplomatic initiatives and foreign policy strategies, Soft Power Rubric assesses countries’ soft power relationships through a more quotidian yet effective prism that turns to the development of tourism and filming industry, educational exchange, as well as immigration. This trailblazing linkage between soft power measurement and political communication invigorates the measurement toolkit by organically introducing elements of social interactions to a term that essentially describes processes of political and cultural socialization.
- ***Merits of Differentiating the Short-term from the Long-term.*** Performance variation at different periods of time is another underresearched field in pre-existing studies. Since different cultural programs may exert different influences on targeted countries within different periods of time, such differentiation can be helpful for the assessment of time-specific performances.

⁹ Wu I. “Measuring Soft Power with Conventional and Unconventional Data” https://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse_179613.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "India and the Soft Power Rubric: The Relevance of Migrants, Students, Visitors and Movies." *India Review* Vol 20, 2021 - Issue 4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2021.1958581>

¹² Ibid.

Pitfalls:

- ***Impact of Incidents and Missing Data.*** Largely because the very first version of this measurement scheme was published before the pandemic, it did not take into account the influence of external factors as such on the scale and intensity of international social interactions. To address this issue, a probable solution would be to factor in digital social interactions since the inception of the global pandemic in early 2020.
- ***The Hardship of Identifying Conscious Efforts.*** Since some variables included in Soft Power Rubric do not speak volumes for nation-states' coordinated efforts in deploying and developing their soft power resources, it may be conducive for future researchers to come up with metrics to tackle the issue of countries' conscious and unintended practices of soft power.

Resources:

1. Wilson Center Briefing Paper, "Soft power amidst great power competition."
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/soft-power-amidst-great-power-competition>
2. Wilson Center video overview, "Can soft power be measured."
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/can-soft-power-be-measured>
3. "India and the Soft Power Rubric: The Relevance of Migrants, Students, Visitors and Movies." *India Review* Vol 20, 2021 - Issue 4.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2021.1958581>

MARIA REPNIKOVA: POWERFUL VOICES FROM THE FIELD (2022)

Dr. Maria Repnikova is an Associate Professor in Global Communication at Georgia State University. Her book *Chinese Soft Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) mainly explores China's visions and practices of soft power. Unlike the soft power measurement tools introduced above, Dr. Repnikova analyzes China's appeals and advantages in developing countries drawing from her fieldwork in Ethiopia. By talking to local Mandarin speakers who work at transnational Chinese corporates, she found that there is a general appreciation for Chinese soft-power tools among African elites. In her article *The Balance of Soft Power* published in *Foreign Affairs*, Dr. Repnikova argued that there have been positive sentiments toward China's economic and political influence among African countries, which further supplements findings from opinion polling.

Dr. Repnikova's work offers a crucial vantage point for the study of soft power. In line with the theoretical framework "Global China", her research looks at China's resource extraction and infrastructure lending in Africa foregrounding the voices and initiatives of developing countries. As Dr. Repnikova puts it "What Washington and Beijing see as zero-sum, much of the world often sees as win-win." Contrasting most extant literature which analyzes China's deployment of soft power from the perspective of US-China relations, Dr. Repnikova critically looks at stakeholders whose roles and agency are often ignored both in world politics and in academic discourse around soft power.

In terms of research methodology, Dr. Repnikova assesses China's soft power performance by qualitatively analyzing the perceptions of its global recipients on China's educational and media outreach and the underlying mechanisms of how they come to such an understanding. Measuring the effect of countries' practices of soft power using evidence from on-the-ground field research offers new insights into the theorization of soft power, in particular, aspects that can only be captured by immersive anthropological research approaches. For instance, in her 2022 book, Dr. Repnikova argues that compared to Joseph Nye's initial conceptualization, she found that "soft power" is a very fluid concept in the Chinese context compared to the rest of the world. Such theoretical innovation could not be obtained by hypothesis testing using regression analysis, as new discoveries rooted in a deep knowledge of the local setting can only be obtained through fieldwork and close observation.

Strengths

- ***Diversity of Research Subjects.*** The research process is very attentive to the diversity of research subjects. By expanding the scope of analysis beyond hegemonic powers, this approach presents a diversified understanding of how soft power is concretely received and perceived by stakeholders around the world.
- ***The Power of First-hand Contextual Knowledge.*** Different from regression analysis drawn from objective and subjective second-hand data, ethnographic fieldwork offers first-hand data about people's reception of countries' deployment of soft power strategies and, more importantly, how they come to such an understanding. Compared to quantitative analysis, qualitative research methods applied in measuring soft power performance offers critical insights into the operation logic behind each individual.

Pitfalls

- ***The Issue of Representativeness.*** Given the inherent time-consuming nature of qualitative case studies, researchers could not gather a significant number of samples. The issue with sample size and representativeness can be compensated when mixed-method research is carried out in a balanced manner.
- ***The Issue of Selection Bias.*** Although selection bias is often discussed in quantitative studies, it warrants attention that qualitative case studies may face similar problems. During the process of interviews, researchers often rely on snowball sampling to connect with potential research subjects through established ties. Yet it is possible that this approach would lead them to people with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, or people who hold similar opinions in general. In this case, it is worthwhile noticing the potential selection issue at hand and crafting workable resolutions to improve credibility.
- ***The Issue of Subjectivity.*** Unlike studies that contain quantitative analysis where statistic modeling can be repeated with a fixed outcome, conclusions reached in qualitative research is highly contingent upon the subjectivity and positionality of both researchers and the research subjects. However, it is exactly the ample room for interpretation in qualitative studies that enables us to critically reflect upon the

underlying power relations behind knowledge production and to reflexively engage with our own roles within this process.

Resources:

1. Repnikova, M. (2022). *Chinese soft power* (Elements in global China). Cambridge.
2. The Balance of Soft Power, Foreign Affairs
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/soft-power-balance-america-china>
3. “China in Africa: A New Approach to Media Development?” (with Iginio Gagliardone and Nicole Stremleau) Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Oxford University (August 2010).
<http://global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/chinainafrika.pdf>

Conclusion

The concluding section of this research paper identifies new trends in extant soft power measurement schemes, as well as room for future academic research and policy innovations.

Methodological Diversity

The six measurement schemes analyzed in this research article approach soft power from different disciplinary perspectives. While Huang and Ding’s measurement scheme, together with The Soft Power 30 emphasize the usage of quantitative methods in analyzing objective data such as pre-existing databases and public opinion polls, Nye and Repnikova’s frameworks introduce qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, and other immersive ethnographic approaches. Whereas quantitative studies often measure in great detail the effect of countries’ deployment and development of soft power resources, literature within the interpretivist line of thinking focuses more on uncovering how macro strategies are received on the ground by ordinary people.

As analyzed in previous sections, both quantitative and qualitative measurements of soft power have their strengths and pitfalls. Nevertheless, it is not always ideal to combine the two when measuring soft power. For one, different sets of research questions aims and the regional variation in historical backgrounds require researchers to put emphasis on different aspects when accounting for data availability and situational factors such as research audience and expected outcome.

Application of Interdisciplinary Research Approaches

In recent decades, soft power has been widely studied not only within the field of diplomatic studies, international relations, or political studies in general. As is exemplified in the preceding sections, insights from communication studies and anthropology also contributed heavily to fostering our understanding of how countries’ performance of soft power is received and how people make sense of such an influence on their social reality. The active

roles played by experts from different fields both expanded the theoretical perspectives as well as research methods of soft power measurement. This is a very welcoming trend and future research from other fields can aid further enrichment of the current repertoire.

Recommendations for Future Research and Policy-Making

With regard to the room for future academic research, as is evidenced in this paper, most soft power measurement tools combine pre-existing objective and subjective data in conducting quantitative analysis. Granted, subjective ordinal data which measures perceptions and rankings are useful additions to pure objective data such as countries' economic heft and military prowess. Yet the nuances that are lost in mechanical categorization are also sources that should be valued in the research process. An example, in this case, would be, in certain cases, when people are filling out questionnaires, they do not tend to share their most genuine feelings toward government policies or that of neighboring countries for a variety of reasons; or, people may not have fully comprehended the survey question correctly in the first place. In both cases, how people come to their current understanding of soft power performance and the way they describe how their lived experiences have been shaped should not be overlooked or simply reduced to a number on a measurement scale. Since qualitative research methods can compensate for drawbacks of large-N data analysis and offer new variables or theoretical discoveries, future research is recommended to delve deeper into measuring soft power through fieldwork or to organically combine both methods given the historical and practical realities of the localities of interest.

By the same token, when assessing the implementation outcome of national-level cultural diplomacy initiatives, policymakers are advised to go further into the field instead of focusing only on numbers and predicted trends. Although the emphasis of this paper is on measuring soft power performances instead of policy recommendations for countries' cultural diplomacy initiatives, given the disproportionate amount of research on the balance of soft power among global (hegemonic) powers, it is worthwhile arguing that policymakers on every executive level should pay an equal amount of attention and dedication to connecting with larger parts of the world, not only those with economic and discourse power. Furthermore, the pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated digitization and people's habits of receiving and processing information. Hence, policymakers should also update previous soft power strategies and adjust accordingly by opening up new channels of developing and sharing soft power resources.