

This study seems to assume that internal and external soft power considerations were equally important in China's campaigns to promote the rule of law and combat corruption. It is, however, highly unlikely that Xi Jinping and the leadership group of the Communist Party of China were motivated in the slightest by how these campaigns would contribute to national soft power in the region or the world beyond. As Li admits, there were pressing domestic reasons for the campaign and even existential threats to the Party. The soft power effects of the campaigns were merely incidental.

One might also argue that a survey of China's English-language media is not the best indicator of the soft power effect of the campaigns, either internal or external, nor is a survey of mainly opinion pieces in a small selection of Australian daily newspapers, plus interviews with 18 Australian professionals who had some lived experience of China. As Rawnsley has pointed out in "Communicating confidence: China's public diplomacy" (*Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, 2020), the Chinese government has invested heavily in public diplomacy in recent years, including in a new radio channel called The Voice of China designed to compete with the Voice of America, but these official initiatives have not shifted international criticism of heavy-handed domestic policies. It is therefore not surprising that domestic governance campaigns have hardly affected international public opinion.

This book makes a modest contribution to the study of Chinese soft power both internal and external, chiefly through its focus on Australian press coverage of Chinese domestic politics in the Xi Jinping era.

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## Power and Restraint in China's Rise

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In 2010, China's then Minister of Foreign Affairs Yang Jiechi famously chided his Singaporean counterpart on the side-lines of an ASEAN Regional Forum dealing with the South China Sea (SCS) dispute: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact." For realists there could be no greater proof about the dangers that a rising China could materially steamroll Southeast Asia. A replay of heavy-handed Chinese demands occurred in 2016 in an ASEAN gathering in Kunming in the run-up to the historic decision by the International Arbitration Tribunal in the Hague, which ruled against China. With the exception of Laos and Cambodia, ASEAN members banded together to defy Chinese moves then.

In this provocative and well-written book Huang searches for the rationale of China's policy vis-à-vis the SCS: under what circumstances might it be more restrained toward its neighbours? He argues, convincingly for the most part, that when faced with regional consensus against it, China is likely to backpedal on its maritime moves.

However, realists will be hard pressed to buy into this point of view given China's on-off militarization of the SCS (the "salami" tactic). Huang argues in response that brute force is not only

hard to sustain but generates counter-productive outcomes (p. 2). How weaker states do influence the world agenda in the face of hegemonic orders has been studied by John Ikenberry and Daniel Nexon, and Huang carefully builds on this and other scholarship. The takeaway here is that large states often seek legitimation or validation from smaller states through restraint.

Following an apt introduction, chapter two searches for the sources of state power going as far back as Max Weber and his theory of possessive vs. relational power (p. 23). Relying on text analysis, chapter three zooms in on the dispute in the SCS and the way it elicits Chinese measures and ASEAN countermeasures, including by consensus. Relying on incident count for the most part, chapter four surveys the impact of US military engagement in the region. Chapter five observes the internal makings of Chinese foreign policy. And chapter six (conclusions) neatly ties the various strands of the book together.

Huang cogently warns that when ASEAN consensus on the SCS is faltering, China becomes almost by default more belligerent. But when consensus among ASEAN state reigns, China becomes more restrained. Chinese attempts, on the other hand, to engage individually with ASEAN members may sow discord in the organization.

Huang concedes, however, that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a constant hawkish agent in the formulating of Chinese policy vis-à-vis the SCS, often overriding more moderate Party agents irrespective of ASEAN positions (pp. 38–39). There has been a radicalization of Chinese positions since 2012, but an all-out hostile takeover of the SCS did not occur (p. 43). Huang is unfazed by what might look like evidence to the contrary, e.g. the militarization of Woody Island irrespective of ASEAN positions (p. 61).

ASEAN has been inspired by the EU but does not aim at the same level of member cohesion. It was not highly formalized before launching its charter in 2007, and it has since generally eschewed confrontation between member states. Huang measures here the strength of ASEAN consensus against China (pp. 45–46). He concludes that between 2012 and 2018 nearly 40 per cent of ASEAN summit statements reflected strong consensus against China (p. 53). In other words, ASEAN consensus has led to Chinese restraint over this period (p. 68). There were over this period six instances where strong ASEAN consensus yielded Chinese restraint (p. 72). And in the end not even Duterte tried to strike a separate territorial deal with Beijing.

Chapter four is the most provocative, arguing that US military engagement in the region is neither necessary nor sufficient for constraining China in the SCS (p. 77). Huang in this context aptly cites Ambassador Chas W. Freeman: "We have copious literature on coercion but almost no literature on persuasion though it is essential in ordinary life" (p. 81). The most compelling evidence he marshals to that end is that the Scarborough shoal standoff was not deterred by US involvement (p. 85). On the contrary (p. 89), China withdrew a controversial oil rig near Vietnam shores even when there was no US involvement at all. Huang concludes that US freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs) in the region are all but redundant (p. 94).

The next section is devoted to peacekeeping missions, where Huang shows China to have become a preponderant player and one that largely plays by international norms (pp. 125–126). He cites, in particular, pressure exerted by Hu Jintao on Omar al-Bashir to allow humanitarian aid into Darfur due to mounting international criticism of Sudan (p. 126).

But if ASEAN consensus has proven so effective, and appetite for a separate deal with Beijing so low, why has the ASEAN consensus against China not proven more insistent? This quibble aside, the book ought to be read by all students of Chinese foreign policy.