

China's Soft Power Diplomacy in South Asia: Myth or Reality?

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Under the current government of Xi Jinping, China has sought to further deepen its international profile, and as a result has become more accepting of the virtues of soft power in developing its global roles. As the author of this book notes, there is no shortage of recent published works on Beijing's soft power policies, both on a cross-regional and on an international scale. However, recent works on China's relations with its South Asian region neighbours have so far not given significant consideration to "soft power" concepts, and this work seeks to address that gap by not only looking at the predominant cases of China–India and China–Pakistan, but also Beijing's rapidly-developing relations with the small and medium powers in the region.

In defining soft power, the author strays from the baseline definition originally provided by Joseph Nye, that is, the power of attraction via attributes and institutions others would wish to emulate. Instead, economic power, especially in the form of Chinese assistance and investment, is added to the definition. The author notes this by stating that it is an illusion that Chinese soft power in the form of cultural and language promotion can sway the policies of developing countries, and that even Beijing is distrustful of soft power as a means of building foreign policy. One could argue that this type of economic power is "hard" in nature given that it is a form of enticement, (if not coercion), albeit through the use of carrots as opposed to sticks. Nonetheless, the expanded definition of soft power used by the author does provide greater insight into a region usually framed in Chinese foreign policy as being primarily subject to *realpolitik* and a security-dominated approach.

The book is also very timely given that the Xi government has recently expanded its foreign policy interests in South Asia, albeit via different methods depending on the countries involved. The chapters provide short but comprehensive overviews of the recent history between China and the major South Asian players, with the India relationship being summarized as marked by "enormous challenges as well as opportunities" (p. 50). While the author does not hesitate to examine the long list of sources of tension between Beijing and Delhi, including border disputes, Pakistan, nuclear weapons, the Tibet question and the possibility of a great power rivalry in the Indian Ocean, there remains the suggestion that there is still much common ground in the form of economic and institutional ties which should not be too quickly dismissed. In light of the recent Sino-Indian military standoff at Doklam, near Bhutan, in mid-2017, these questions have become more pertinent. Further discussion about China's Belt and Road initiatives might have assumed greater importance. In addition to the problems of border defence, which the author correctly argues is the major source of tension between China and India, New Delhi is also becoming concerned that the various strands of the Belt and Road, especially through Pakistan and the Indian Ocean, may solidify into a *de facto* containment mechanism, bracketing India and its own regional interests.

The chapter on Pakistan also accurately describes the relationship between Beijing and Islamabad, often depicted by politicians (on both sides) using superlatives which mask the underlying concerns about whether this relationship remains one of convenience rather than ideological cooperation. As the book notes, China has invested a great deal of physical and political capital into infrastructural development, namely projects tied to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC, despite the

security instability in Pakistan, especially near the Afghanistan border, and so Beijing cannot afford to be less than pragmatic regarding its developing policies there. Chinese soft power policies in other parts of the region, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, cases which are often left out of other discourses on Beijing's relationships in South Asia, are well covered here.

The inclusion of Seychelles might also have provided additional insight given Chinese interests there and Indian concerns about that situation. Although Myanmar is technically not part of South Asia from a geographic stance, its close links with the Indian Ocean might have also made it a worthy inclusion in the book, given that the stage is seemingly being set for an enhanced China–India competition as Myanmar seeks to emerge from international isolation. The inclusion of Sri Lanka is especially useful given China's recent port diplomacy, in the case of Hambantota, as well as recent “small island” strategic policies by Beijing over the past year.

In short, this work is a beneficial and accessible addition to the growing debate not only regarding China's more confident cross-regional diplomacy in South Asia but also in contributing to the issue of whether soft power is playing a role in Beijing's interests there. The book draws on many regional and as well as international sources to make its case, and those interested in both Chinese and South Asian foreign policy and strategy will find this book a necessary read given current events and ongoing questions about where the Xi government is heading in the increasingly pivotal Indian Ocean region.

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How China Escaped the Poverty Trap

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Two contrasting mistakes plague contemporary China studies as we try to fit China into social science theory. On the one hand, we tend to apply theories derived from the West, fitting China's square peg into theory's round hole. In the process, we miss something important about China, or conclude that China simply doesn't fit. Dissatisfied with this, we sometimes conclude that China is unique, studying it in a theoretical vacuum, or inventing China-specific theories and concepts that are difficult to apply elsewhere. In her comprehensive rethinking of how post-reform China developed, political scientist Yuen Yuen Ang masterfully avoids both these traps. Using her impressive evidence collected via hundreds of interviews throughout China, Ang's monograph, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*, brings insights to bear on theoretical debates in China studies, development studies and even social science methodology. The result is a sweeping account that does not shy away from going back into centuries of Chinese and Western history, into remote corners of the centre kingdom, and even a stopover in colonial America and Nollywood.

Quickly and convincingly dismissing Western theories of institutional development, Ang applies co-evolutionary analysis to make several arguments – only some of which I have space to discuss here. Contrary to the expectations of Weberian institutionalists, Ang effectively argues that institutions that build markets are typically