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Smartphones, Wechat and Paid Content: Journalists and Sources in a Chinese Newspaper

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*In Focus : Building on BRICS: Belt and Road Initiative and
A New Global Communication Order?*

China's soft power from the BRICS to the BRI

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Abstract

This article considers the opportunities and difficulties in extending China's cultural influence, usually termed 'soft power', among those of its close neighbours through which it is envisaged the construction of the 'New Silk Road' will pass. The article considers three variables that can be argued to have an effect on the degree of cultural influence a nation can wield: the degree of media independence from the state, the overall size of the economy and the relative prosperity of the individual members of a society. It argues that in those countries that are near neighbours to China, it does have some resources that can promote its cultural influence but that it also faces local and global competitors who can deploy alternative resources.

Keywords

Belt and Road, China, economy, media, soft power

From the BRICS to the BRI

The international grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, usually known as the 'BRICS', and the Belt and Road Initiative, often called the BRI, are rather different. While they have different functions, the latter is clearly now by far the more important of the two. Despite their differences, however, they are not incompatible. On the contrary, they represent distinct but complementary strategies, which can be seen as constituents in a much broader vision of the future, which we may summarise as Chinese-led globalisation. As I have argued elsewhere, the BRICS strategy is to gather together in a relatively loose organisation a number of very different countries, without obvious political or economic similarities (Sparks, 2014). The aim is to provide a collective challenge to the US dominance of the international order, which was, and remains, a matter of some importance to all of the participants. Although China has always been by far the strongest of the grouping, economically and politically, the fact that this alliance is conducted primarily at the diplomatic level means that the

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relationships between the different countries are conducted according to the 'Westphalian' protocol that all nation states should be accorded the same formal status.

The BRI strategy is significantly different. Although very recently China has offered to help the United States rebuild its crumbling infrastructure, the main impact of the BRI strategy is likely to be felt elsewhere. Overall, it is entering into a set of bilateral relationships, primarily economic in nature, with a wide range of countries which, however diverse they might be, have in common that they are very much weaker than China in just about every way. The fact that the driving force of the initiative is economic means that, although no doubt China will sustain its formal (and very Westphalian) position of non-interference in the internal political affairs of other countries, it will nevertheless have a direct role in shaping central aspects of their internal development. This article will leave aside issues of economic and political development, to focus on the fact that the development of the BRI will also mean that China will be active in a range of activities involving the media that are commonly thought to promote a country's 'soft power'. This effect will be present to a degree that the BRICS initiative has never involved.

China's 'near abroad'

BRI has a very broad remit, to which it is impossible to do justice in such a short paper. Here, the focus is upon the countries that are inevitably involved in the overland dimension of the strategy. The nascent overland routes all pass through at least 17 countries that we can, to borrow a phrase from the Russians, describe as China's 'near abroad'. Long before the New Silk Road reaches the borders of the European Union, it will have to establish ongoing relations with countries that are geographically much closer to China and through which the predicted flow of trade and associated benefits will flow. Indeed, as the case of Pakistan clearly indicates, Chinese investment as part of the BRI is actually a condition for the physical construction of the road along which trade will travel.

The relationships that China establishes with each of the states as BRI develops will have their unique features, but they share in common the inevitable starting point that these states will all be much weaker in economic terms. As Figure 1 shows, China dwarfs all of these states economically (The World Bank, 2017b). The only state that is even remotely comparable is India, and its economy is less than half the size of China's. Even allowing for the fact that China's rate of economic growth is likely to slow over the next few years, and that India is currently developing very quickly, it remains the case that China will continue to dominate the flows of trade and investment for the foreseeable future.

Historically, economic dominance has inevitably led to a degree of culture dominance, and it is an open question as to how far such a phenomenon will emerge in this region. Looking at the enormous imbalances between China and its near neighbours, the historical parallel that springs to mind is that of the United States relative to Latin America over the bulk of the 20th century. As was exhaustively documented long ago by writers like Schiller, Mattelart and Dorfman, the economic dominance of the United States over its southern neighbours was, and to considerable extent still is, accompanied by very strong cultural influences (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1975; Mattelart, 1979; Schiller, 1971). Those scholars described the domination as amounting to cultural and media imperialism. While the Chinese authorities would roundly reject any suggestion that their behaviour might be considered as an example of 'imperialism' comparable to that of the United States, they are equally unequivocally committed to extending Chinese cultural and media influence in order to establish their 'soft power' (Sparks, 2015).

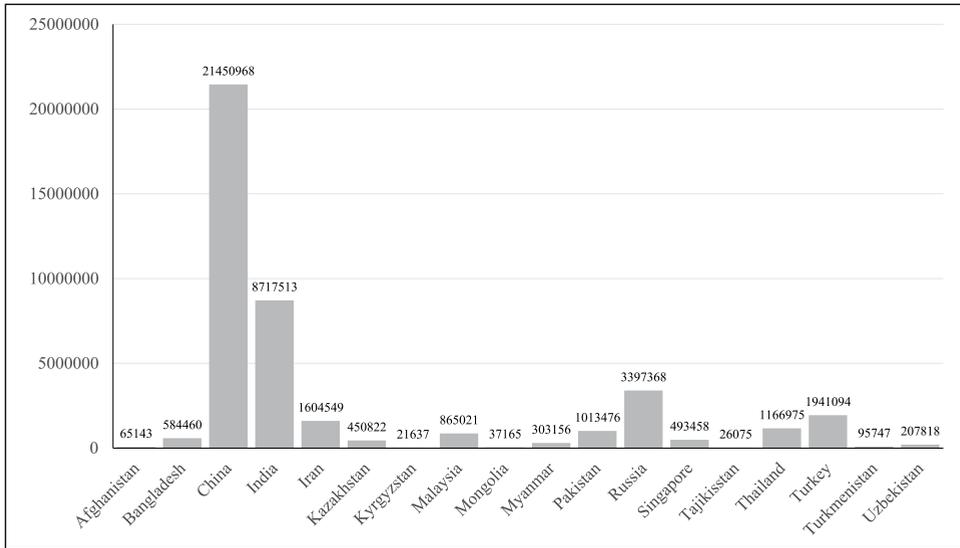


Figure 1. 2016 GDP in PPPs for 18 Belt and Road Initiative countries (current international \$m).
Source: World Bank.

An objection usually levelled against the prospect of China enjoying the same kind of success as that of the United States in spreading its cultural and media influence is that, in contrast with the latter, there is a very strong state involvement and direction in these fields and that this is inimical, or at least an impediment, to the development of soft power (Nye, 2012, 2018). Whatever limitations these factors might impose upon China Global Television Network acting as a global alternative to CNN or the BBC, there are grounds for thinking that, in the region in question, China's undoubted state control of the media will not be considered a serious limitation to its attractions as it might in, say, the Nordic countries that regularly top international tables of media freedom. Figure 2 records two measures of 'media freedom' in the countries in question (Freedom House, 2017; Reporters without Borders, 2017). The horizontal lines mark the fact that Freedom House considers countries that score less than 30 points on their scale to be 'free' while those that score between 31 and 60 are 'partly free'. Those scoring over 60 are held to be 'not free'.

Such measures are inevitably contested, and it would be impossible to claim that either constitute even approximately social scientific measurements of the real situation. Both are based in the West, in Paris for Reporters Without Frontiers (technically, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF)) and New York for Freedom House. The latter is often considered an arms-length proxy for the US State Department and has been accused of tailoring its results to suit the current needs of US foreign policy (Herman & Chomsky, 2008, pp. 26-27). The French-dominated RSF is, perhaps, a less tainted source, although it, too, receives support from governments: in this case, those of France, Sweden and, indirectly, the United States. It is true that both understate the limitations on media freedom imposed by economic factors and that what they mean by 'press freedom' is, in the end, the freedom of whoever happens to own a newspaper or broadcaster. Still, however biased, their efforts remain the closest approximation we yet have to measure of the relative freedom of citizens to access public information and freely discuss it with their fellows. There is no obvious alternative scale that does not have similar limitations and, while these two differ in details, they tend to

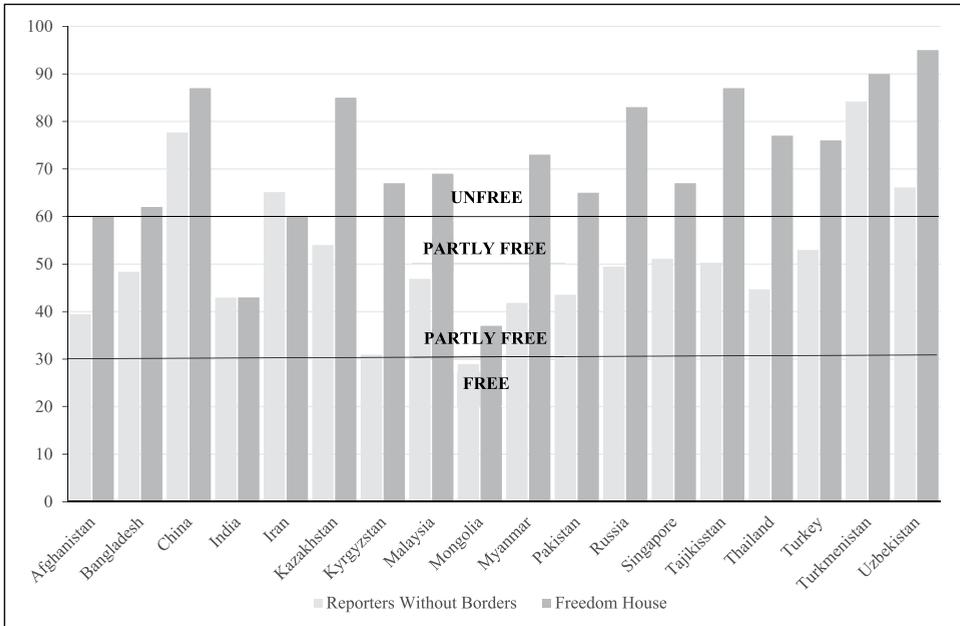


Figure 2. Estimates of media freedom in 2017.
 Source: Reporters without Borders, Freedom House.

present a similar overall picture, as do the other, less well-known, attempts to measure these issues (Becker, Vlad, & Nusser, 2007; Burgess, 2010; Price, Abbott, & Morgan, 2011).

What these scores indicate, even allowing for the above limitations, is that none of the countries in question embody any high degree of free and independent media. None have scores below the ‘partially free’ line for their media set by Freedom House, with only Mongolia, India, Afghanistan and Iran qualifying for this status. For RSF, the freest countries are Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Myanmar and India. In such circumstances, it is unlikely that the level of state involvement in the Chinese media will be a significant obstacle to Chinese cultural influence, at least at the official level.

The attractions of wealth

There is, however, a much more significant obstacle to China winning cultural influence in these countries. The United States has been, for more than a century, the largest economy in the world and it has also had a *per capita* Gross Domestic Product (GDP) higher than that of any other major country (Steckel, 2002). Of course, this high average income disguised the dramatic differences in individual incomes that are characteristic of capitalist societies, but the vast majority of the population enjoyed *relative* affluence, with the notable exception of African Americans. One of the major reasons for the popular success of US soft power, from at least 1945 up until very recently, was that the cultural artefacts that embodied it represented a relatively high level of material comfort for a large proportion of the population. A quick glance at Hollywood movies from the 1940s onwards conclusively demonstrates that the image that the United States presented of itself was one of considerable prosperity. Commodities like cars, refrigerators and television sets were represented as

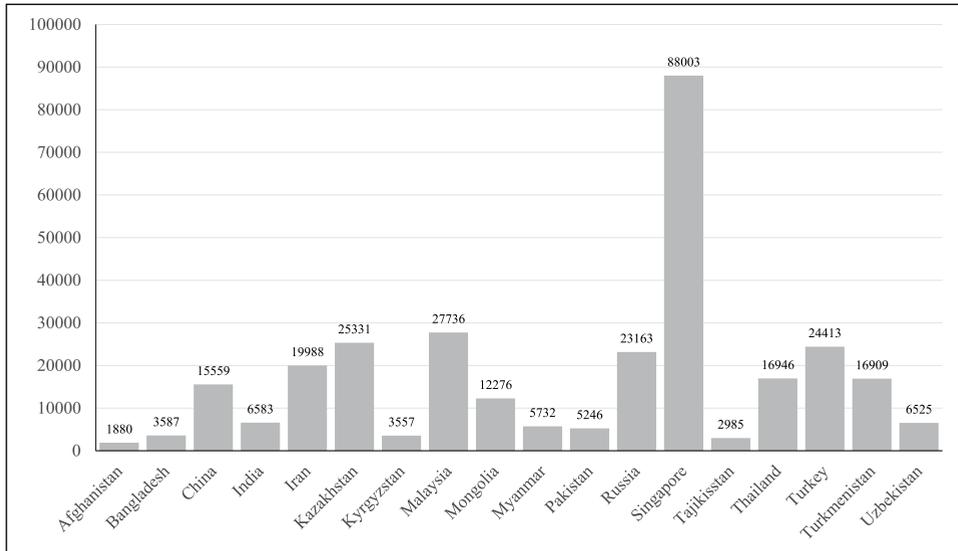


Figure 3. 2016 GDP per capita in PPPs for 18 Belt and Road Initiative countries (current international \$). Source: World Bank.

commonplace items of US life at a time when they were unimaginable luxuries to the bulk of the population even of other advanced countries. The American Dream was not just the myth of infinite social mobility but the material reality of living standards an order of magnitude higher than elsewhere, even for those who never enjoyed very much of the promised personal advancement.

The Chinese dream does not, at least for the time being, rest upon a similar bedrock of personal material success. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the enormous scale of the Chinese economy is, on a *per capita* basis, offset by the enormous scale of the Chinese population. Individual incomes in China are very far from being the highest of the 18 countries which we are discussing (The World Bank, 2017a). Eight of the countries in question have higher *per capita* GDPs than China and any realistic assessment suggests that transforming this situation is a relatively long-term task. Xi Jinping spoke in 2017 of the aim of China becoming a ‘moderately prosperous society’ by 2020 and set the goal of a ‘prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful’ China sometime in the years 2035 to 2050 (An, 2017). Neither today nor in the next few years will China be able to enjoy the advantage of presenting itself as the world’s most materially successful model for organising social life.

Certainly, the figures demonstrate that China can present to the population of many much poorer countries, including nine in this grouping, a model of social organization that has achieved the unprecedented success of lifting more than 800 million people out of absolute poverty, and today has the imminent prospect of effectively eliminating these conditions of human misery (The World Bank, 2017c). This immense achievement is a very positive factor in the balance of soft power. As Joseph Nye put it,

You can also get soft power from your performance. I think China gets a lot of soft power from its astonishing record economically, raising hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. A lot of people admire that. That produces soft power. (China Power, 2017)

To the extent that it is effective, however, it operates either as an abstract set of statistics or as obvious, and probably ineffective, propaganda. Its influence is more likely to be upon the political and intellectual elite rather than the mass of the population. It is difficult to see how this real achievement can be casually, unconsciously, realistically, embedded in popular cultural artefacts in the way that the United States was able to portray itself as a land of unprecedented general prosperity for more than half a century.

Competing for power

Overall, then, China has a hand, albeit not a strong hand, to play in the struggle for soft power in its 'near abroad'. It is important to recognise, however, that the countries in question are not, to paraphrase Mao on the peasantry, blank sheets upon which China may draw beautiful characters. There are other forces exerting strong pulls over the cultural life of the populations of Central and South Asia. The world's hegemon is still very much the most vigorous player in the contest for soft power. There are also several other, smaller, actors who can deploy cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious resources on their own behalf. Turkey, India, Iran and Russia all retain strong independent interests in this arena and all have distinctive characteristics which they can deploy to sustain and develop their ability to influence the hearts and minds of the mass of the population.

In Nye's formulation, soft power is only one aspect of state power. The other two he identifies are military and economic hard power. In the terms of these dimensions of hard power, there is no doubt that, today and tomorrow, China will play the dominant role in this arena. The realities of population size mean that, in the medium to long term, India is the only serious contender for the role of counterweight, but that is, for now, only a potential alternative.

In terms of cultural influence on the way that the mass of the population thinks about the world and the alternatives facing them, however, the situation is much more open. China cannot, for the time being at least, hope to portray a picture of social life that is unquestionably superior to any alternative, in either ideological or material terms. If we accept that this ability to present one's national mode of social organisation as attractive to the populations of other countries is the substance of soft power, then China will continue to face many competitors even in those places where its economic and political weight give it very substantial influence.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is time to reconsider the term 'soft power' and its close cognate 'public diplomacy'. Used more or less interchangeably, their boundaries remain ill-defined. If we were to reserve the term 'soft power' for the ways in which popular cultural artefacts can represent a society in attractive terms to large groups of people in other countries, and restrict 'public diplomacy' to the more formal efforts of state actors to influence the policy decisions of foreign elites, we might be in a better position to discuss the prospects of Chinese cultural influence in the 'near abroad'. For elite groups in the kinds of political systems that dominate many of these countries, the successes of Chinese economic development almost certainly outweigh any limitations on freedom of expression. The latter may, indeed, actually be quite attractive to the more authoritarian among them. Chinese scholars, experts and policy advisors have much to contribute to elite discourse in terms

of economic expertise in development and related topics. That is to say, the prospects for Chinese public diplomacy, in the terms defined above, are reasonably good. The prospects for China's soft power, however, are much less positive and it will find it a hard struggle to match its economic and political influence in this field.

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