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Institute for a Community
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Chinese Soft Power: Culture, Development, and the Making of a Multipolar World



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In the decades since Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power," the concept has largely been read through a Western lens — the pull of Hollywood, the appeal of liberal institutions, the magnetism of a certain idea of freedom. China's rise has forced a reconsideration of that framework, not because Beijing has abandoned the pursuit of attraction and influence, but because it has built that pursuit on a different foundation altogether. Having spent years observing China's engagement with developing countries, and Pakistan's own experience



within that engagement, I have come to see Chinese soft power less as an imitation of Western cultural diplomacy and more as a distinct model — one that fuses cultural appeal with tangible developmental delivery. This is not a minor variation. It is a different theory of what makes a country attractive in the twenty-first century, and it carries real implications for how a multipolar world takes shape.

A Different Understanding of Attraction

China's approach to soft power rests on a premise that is easy to state but consequential in practice: attraction is not only cultivated through values and narratives, but through visible, shared benefit. Where classical soft-power theory emphasizes the pull of ideas, institutions, and popular culture, China's variant adds a fourth pillar — material capability translated into partnership. Roads, ports, power plants, digital infrastructure, and agricultural technology are not treated as separate from the cultural and diplomatic project; they are woven into it. A power plant built on time, a scholarship granted to a student from a rural province, a Confucius Institute teaching Mandarin in a provincial university — these are presented not as isolated gestures but as expressions of a single narrative: China as a reliable, non-lecturing partner in development.

This blending serves two audiences simultaneously, and understanding both is essential to reading Chinese soft power correctly. Domestically, it reinforces a narrative of national rejuvenation — the idea that China's civilizational depth and modern achievements together justify its return to global centrality, a message aimed as much at Chinese citizens as at foreign publics.



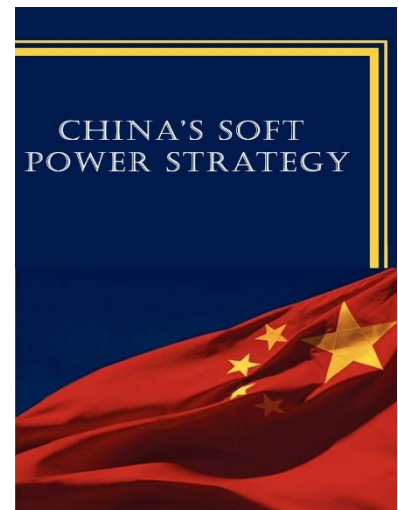
Internationally, it offers the Global South an alternative story about development: that modernization need not be preceded by adopting a particular political system, and that respect for sovereignty and non-interference can coexist with deep economic engagement. Whether one finds this framing persuasive or not, its coherence — linking domestic legitimacy to external image — is what gives Chinese soft power its distinctive shape.

The Instruments of Projection

China projects this blended appeal through a recognizable set of instruments, each calibrated to reach different audiences and to reinforce the others.

Language and cultural institutes, principally the network of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, have introduced Mandarin instruction and Chinese cultural programming into universities and schools across dozens of countries. Their reach has narrowed in some Western states amid scrutiny over academic influence, but in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America they continue to function as accessible entry points into Chinese language and culture for students who see practical value in the connection.

Global media outreach extends this presence into everyday information consumption. Outlets such as CGTN, Xinhua, and China Daily, alongside partnerships with local broadcasters and content-sharing agreements, aim to present Chinese perspectives on regional and global affairs, and to offer developing-world audiences a narrative frame that does not always mirror that of Western wire services. The effectiveness of this outreach varies considerably by market and by the credibility of local intermediaries who carry the content.



Education and training exchanges have expanded rapidly, with tens of thousands of scholarships, short courses, and technical training programs offered annually to students and officials from partner countries, spanning engineering, agriculture, public administration, and security cooperation. These programs build durable professional and personal networks — alumni who



return home with both technical skills and a lived familiarity with China, often becoming informal ambassadors for the relationship in their own institutions.

Public diplomacy events — from the Belt and Road Forum to cultural years, film festivals, and high-profile state visits — provide the choreography that ties these instruments together, generating media moments and elite-level engagement that keep the relationship visible and give it periodic renewal.

Reception in the Global South: Strengths and Limits

The reception of this model in the Global South is genuinely mixed, and an honest analysis has to hold both halves of that picture at once. Its strengths are tied directly to delivery. In countries where infrastructure gaps have long constrained growth, Chinese-financed and Chinese-built projects have offered a visible, comparatively fast alternative to Western-led development finance, which is often bound to political conditionality or delayed by lengthy institutional processes. For many policymakers and citizens in South Asia, Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia, this practical dimension of Chinese engagement carries more weight than any cultural program, because it is measured in electricity supplied, highways completed, and jobs created.



The limitations are equally real. Debt sustainability concerns, uneven labor and environmental practices on some projects, and a perception — fair or not — that Chinese soft power is instrumentally tied to commercial and strategic interests have all generated friction. Cultural diplomacy efforts sometimes struggle against a deficit of familiarity: Chinese language and cultural institutions are still relatively new in many societies compared to decades or centuries of Western educational and missionary presence, and this asymmetry in cultural depth is not something infrastructure spending alone can close. There is also a structural challenge in the media instrument specifically — global audiences remain more accustomed to consuming international news through English-language, Western-owned platforms, and shifting that habit is a generational project rather than a quick one.



From where I sit in Pakistan, the picture is instructive precisely because it contains both dynamics at once. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has delivered power generation and transport infrastructure that materially eased chronic bottlenecks, and educational exchange has produced a growing cohort of Pakistani professionals fluent in Mandarin and familiar with Chinese institutions. At the same time, debates over project terms, repayment schedules, and local employment have been part of the public conversation, and taking them seriously — rather than treating the relationship as beyond scrutiny — is what makes an analysis credible rather than promotional.

Implications for Multipolarity and a Shared Future

Chinese soft power's real significance lies less in any single project or program than in what it signals about the structure of global influence. A world in which soft power is exercised exclusively through the cultural and institutional channels pioneered by the West was, in practice, a world with a narrower range of legitimate models for how a country could develop and how it could relate to others. China's approach — however imperfectly realized in practice — has widened that range. It has given smaller and developing states additional partners, additional financing sources, and additional reference points for what a modernization pathway can look like, which is itself a form of leverage that did not previously exist for many of them.

This is the practical substance behind the phrase "Community of Shared Future for Mankind," a vision that, stripped of its slogan-like packaging, essentially argues that interdependence and mutual development can be organized on terms that are not hierarchical in the way twentieth-century patron-client relationships often were. Whether that vision is fully realized in practice will depend less on rhetoric than on how China and its partners manage the genuine tensions already visible — debt terms, transparency, labor standards, and the balance between commercial interest and genuine partnership. For countries like Pakistan, situated at the intersection of these currents, the task is not to choose uncritically between competing soft-power models but to engage each on terms that serve national development, while contributing, as informed partners rather than passive recipients, to shaping what a more balanced and multipolar order can actually deliver.