

# Projecting What We're Not: Sustaining the Cult of Whiteness and Forfeiting Cultural Power in Indonesia

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Soft and hard power. If hard power is about military and economic power, soft power is about cultural influence. Soft power is ultimately as the attractiveness of a society's *people* to people in other societies. Our cultures are the artifacts we produce and the social practices we engage in that express who we are as people, and ultimately, it is the attractiveness of who we are as people that determines our soft power, or the extent of our cultural influence in the world.

Soft power is very important. First, it has immediate economic repercussions. The salability of images, projected in films, TV, advertising, and sport has a large effect on demand for its products and services abroad. Second, soft power has an immediate, though I would say probably nonmeasurable, effect on a society's morale. The ability to defend one's country's security or to lord it over neighbors in military terms, and to play a major part in the world economy, which are facets of hard power, may also affect a society's collective morale, but I think its morale may be even more deeply affected by how one's own *people* and its artifacts are received abroad. The national self-confidence and patriotism of Americans may rest to a very great extent on the knowledge that even when the world despises us for our hard power and its misuse, as the world most certain does now, continues to admire who we are as people, as producers of images, music, literature, and knowledge.

I'm not sure how soft power affects foreign policies and expressions of nationalism. America's formidable arsenal of soft power traditionally does not seem to have made Americans less bombastic nationalists, though one might argue that we would be even worse—perhaps much worse—than if we didn't have the confidence induced by our soft power to assuage us. The same thing may be said of the French. In Italy, by contrast, I country I lived in for a time in the 1980s, soft power seems to provide an almost perfect substitute for hard power. Italians' enormous and justifiable confidence in their society's soft power seems to promote among them a confidence that virtually renders hard power, at least in the security realm, irrelevant as a source of national identification. One sees this in the low level of national bombast and resistance to international cooperation, as evinced by Italy's permanently constructive role in the EU and the striking lack of gravity that characterizes the way Italians treat national symbols, such as the national anthem and the flag. One certainly could hypothesize that, all else being equal, soft power may sometimes function as a substitute for hard power in shaping the morale and self-confidence of a nation's people, and therefore may reduce belligerence of popular nationalism and render national elites more confident and more open to cooperation with

their counterparts in other countries. As such, a rise in a country's soft power may increase its flexibility in foreign policy and therefore enhance the probability that its people will prefer nonviolent solutions to international dispute, and may also positively affect that country's contribution to opening the arteries of interstate commerce and flow of information. Soft power is, in a nutshell, a potentially important determinant of national self-confidence, at both the elite and mass levels, and while the effects of self-confidence may cut in multiple directions, one may hypothesize that soft power can make a contribution to reducing the malign effects that competition over the acquisition and exercise of hard power may wreak in the international system.

One thing that strikes me about soft power, though, is that a society can project only what it has; and if it projects something that it's not, it is likely neither to acquire a robust soft power in any appreciable measure. The only country that I've lived in long enough to pretend to have any expertise on, at least in terms of its culture and its soft power capability, is Russia. Russia is indeed an interesting case, since its soft power has grown rapidly since the fall of the Soviet Union. Russians now are an enormous presence in world fashion and sport; indeed, so large is their presence that Russians may actually be reshaping international consciousness and archetypes of beauty and athletic prowess in a Russian image. Russian tennis stars and fashion models alone have already had an enormous impact on the global aesthetic, and the Russian people know it. What's interesting here is that Russians are projecting what they *are*. Anna Kournikova and Maria Sharapova are, of course, unusually beautiful and unusually talented by Russian or any other standards. But they are entirely recognizable to Russians as Russians; they are not, in a racial or ethnic or other sense, entirely atypical.

In Indonesia, I've found a different situation. I spent five months there this year, between March and July. We can begin with the observation that Indonesia, at least in my eyes as an outsider to Asian studies and as comparative political scientist, is short on soft power. Most other countries that are anywhere near the size of Indonesia possess more soft power than Indonesia does. In addition to the United States, Brazil, Russia, Mexico, Japan, of course India and China, boast a far larger presence in global cultural consciousness than Indonesia does. Indonesia's small presence on the global cultural stage might even reduce its appeal a subject of study for social scientists. In political science, there are 20 Russianists and 10 Brazilianists for every one Indonesianist; there is no major country in the world that receives less attention than Indonesia. There was a golden age in the study of Indonesia in the United States in the 1950s-1970s, but almost all of the leading lights are now retired and many are deceased. Many social scientists are drawn to studying a particular country early in their career because they know something of its people, of its culture, and the cultural pull of Brazil or India for that matter Thailand or Mexico or Japan helps explain why a substantial number of people in the United States and Europe go on to establish expertise in these countries. Among social scientists in the West, Indonesia is well-studied only by anthropologists, who for the most part have focused on exotic subcultures in the archipelago rather than on the country as a whole or its major, nationally-prominent communities. Since Indonesia's politics and history have long been so intrinsically fascinating, and since Indonesian language is actually quite learnable and accessible, this state of affairs poses a truly vexing puzzle. It also poses a

set of practical problems, including the fact that outside the Netherlands and Australia, the Western world knows precious little about a country that is as large and variegated as the entire Arab world or for that matter all of Spanish-speaking South America. An obvious problem that arises is that the outside world's comprehension of even of non-Indonesia-specific matters that are of supreme importance to the world, such as Islam, is cramped by the virtual non-inclusion of Indonesia on our cognitive maps.

Now, assuming that Indonesia's dearth of soft power has at least something to do with its relative anonymity in social science and in the global public consciousness, the question arises: Why is Indonesia's soft power so limited? I certainly have no definitive answers, but just would like to share a few outsider's observations based on my time in Indonesia.

One of the things that strikes the outsider, or at least me, most strongly about Indonesia is the almost complete absence of fit between what most Indonesians look like and the images of Indonesians that appear in the media. The basis for the most obvious disparity is skin color. Here is a country inhabited by largely dark-skinned people, including many who are manifestly attractive to any outsider, whose images are simply never seen in any public media. From watching advertisements, among prominent TV shows, and the television news, one could be forgiven for surmising that the average Indonesian is slightly lighter-skinned than the average Japanese. To be sure, darker-skinned Indonesians sometimes appear in the advertisements and among television journalists and popular-cultural icons, but often they do so as humorous figures. What is more, most of them are men; dark-skinned women tend to be even more starkly absent than men among cultural icons and the subjects of commercial advertising and new provision. This situation differs from, say, that of the US before the 1970s. Prior to the 1970s, to be sure, African and Asian-Americans were normally excluded from the world of public-media images and mainstream film. Some celebrated athletes did not even receive commercial contracts to endorse products merely because they were not white. But in the US, the excluded people formed a minority; in Indonesia, they form an overwhelming majority. What is more, it is possible that the standard of lightness is higher in Indonesia than it was, in relative terms, in the US. Let's take the US news anchors as an example. In Indonesia, television news anchors—especially women—almost invariably are exceptionally light-skinned. While measuring such a thing is impossible, I would venture to guess that they would consistently rank in the 98+ percentile in terms of “whiteness.” The proper analogue for what one sees in present-day Indonesia would not be that one would see no anchors, or at least no female anchors, who are darker than, say, Dan Rather. In Indonesia, TV anchors must be *so* much lighter than the average Indonesian, that, in an imaginary American analogue, not only Connie Chung and Christine Amanpour be excluded, but so too would Soledad O'Brien, since she is not many, many shades lighter than the average white American. Indeed, were the Indonesian standard applied in the United States, controlling for the physiognomy of the ethnically dominant groups, one would never see a national newscaster who was darker than Diane Sawyer, Paula Zahn, or Ted Koppel.

The standards for whiteness in advertising and film are also high. When one controls for the fact that many of the lightest-skinned Indonesians are ethnic Chinese, and that ethnic

Chinese are not often featured in TV news and television shows, the percentage of Indonesians, particularly women, who actually “qualify” for public appearance, who visage is considered worthy of projection, is actually miniscule—I would say no more than one or two percent.

Unsurprisingly, there is a mass mania for skin-whitening, especially among women. Virtually every skin-cream for sale in Indonesia, including of course the foreign-made brands that predominate, claims skin-lightening properties. Despite the complete uselessness of these products and the bogusness of the claims they make, many women use them, with the intention of lightening their skin; this is true for ethnic Chinese as well as ethnic Malay (*pribumi*) women. At first I thought this was a largely urban phenomenon (I lived in Surabaya), but quickly found in my travels in rural Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Sumatra that it is not limited to urban areas. Poor women cannot afford the creams, of course, but they can afford a kind of rice paste that they make themselves and spread over their faces. Many stated that they used this paste for its whitening qualities.

No society that lacks a self-confident visual culture, no society that excludes from its standard of beauty the overwhelming majority of its people based on an *ascriptive* characteristic can possibly have enough internal aesthetic capital effectively to project its culture abroad. I want to emphasize here the difference between skin color, which is entirely ascriptive, and a trait like weight, which is not (or at least it is not fully ascriptive). The American mania for thinness (or for voluptuousness or muscularity, depending on the time period in question) therefore is a different phenomenon than the color line that I am discussing here, and that is such a large issue in aesthetics in many societies. In terms of generating soft power, you can't share what you don't have. American soft power is predicated upon a domestic market for culture that develops and hones and packages cultural artifacts before they are projected abroad and exert their influence globally. Americans had to acknowledge Michael Jordan's and Tiger Woods's athletic prowess, and for that matter, their physical beauty, not to mention Halle Berry's or Kevin Costner's appeal as actors and as embodiments of beauty before they could be projected abroad and thereby become sources of American soft power. Visual images, moreover, due not only to TV but to the internet and the videoization of music, are now reign supreme in global popular culture. So standards of human beauty and the congruence of those standards with what we actually are or can reasonably strive to be may be important determinants of the capacity for generating soft power. Despite the highly inclusive, transethnic character of its nationalism, its well-deserved reputation for interethnic tolerance, and its profoundly nonxenophobic culture, Indonesia has yet to generate anything like an set of archetypes or even a single archetype of Indonesian beauty that is consistent with what Indonesians actually are. The irony here is that so much of the world would regard the modal Indonesian, with her or his dark brown skin, as attractive; any venture capitalist working in the entertainment industry would find in Indonesia a trove of would-be actors, athletes, fashion models, and music video stars, just as emerged dramatically from the Slavic world in the 1990s. But since Indonesian themselves do not project their own images, even at home, since they so often filter out varieties of human beauty that take forms that are darker than a small portion of the

overall population, this reality is obscured, at least at the present time. The implications for Indonesian soft power, in this age of the supremacy of the human visual image, are very likely negative, and may be far-reaching.