

CONCLUDING REMARKS—CATCHING THE WAVE: Connecting East Asia Through Soft Power

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This conference brought together scholars whose approach to this topic has reflected wide differences in nationality, disciplinary background, and methodological predispositions. Presentations were made from the epistemologies of social science, the humanities, and from various mixtures of both. My fear in assembling such a mixture was that like the proverbial three blind men feeling and describing an elephant the result would be a series of completely different and mutually incompatible descriptions of the same reality. In fact, I think we have instead been pleasantly surprised to find numerous very compatible spot lights being directed on the same topic, giving all of us an increasingly rich appreciation of the depth and complexity of the problems each of us has sought to address. With this perspective in mind, I wish to highlight four points that strike me as threads running through the conference.

To begin with, we have circled around at least three important concepts: soft power, cultural interaction and civil society. Unlike any predisposition some of us may have had about the benign nature of soft power, a number of presentations have shown how closely linked are soft and hard power, particularly when soft power is used by governments to advance their deeper diplomatic and policy agendas. As one participant noted, it used to be the case that only the U.S. had a strong enough culture to allow it engage in cultural export as a mechanism of soft power. But more recently, and particularly within Asia, numerous other national cultures are being self-consciously projected, quite often as an instrument of governmental power. And yet, such projection is even more complicated by the fact that not all big ‘cultures’ are capable of projecting soft power, as the experience of Indonesia demonstrates.

In contrast to Indonesia, however, the Japan Foundation and the Korea Foundation, despite efforts to provide filters between grants and governments are unmistakable soft power agents of their governments, and form an important element in public diplomacy. Numerous NGOs were shown to have a face of independence, but there are few important Asian NGOs that are truly regional or global in character; most instead are rooted in national civil societies and often dependent on governments for legitimacy and funding. A clear example is Taiwan’s Foundation for Democracy. Such close and dependent ties to governments can often turn NGOs into effective government agents but doing so may compromise the nominal independence of the groups.

Both Taiwan and the PRC have also adopted a range of soft power devices as explicit instruments servicing broader foreign policy goals. Clearly, the objects of soft power who receive educational scholarships, technical training, or visits of cultural troops are far less injured than those who are strong armed by gunboats or tied aid. But there is little question but that soft power involves more than blind benevolence.

Interestingly too, soft power is often a tool for domestic influence not just an instrument of diplomacy by other means. Thus, Beijing has used the 2008 Olympics as much to foster a sense of national pride among its citizens as it has to project a positive image of the PRC to the rest of the world. South Korean efforts to forge closer ties to the North through soft power are also infused with a domestic political and cultural agenda.

Several participants also noted how the use of soft power has within it the potential to make governments more vulnerable rather than more powerful. NGOs for example may well gain legitimacy through ties to their governments, only to use that legitimacy as a check unwanted governmental actions. Efforts to control the internet in China have thus unleashed counter-pressures from Chinese and global bloggers in an escalating tech war about firewalls and the ways around them. Moreover, China and Japan have long used soft power to shape events in Burma but now find themselves subject to pressures from Western governments and citizens' groups to use the influence gained by that soft power as a way to check military repression.

Somewhat distinct from soft power are the entire sweep of cultural interactions in the form of film, tourism, internet links, rap music and the like. These, it has been shown, might at times be mobilized by governments as instruments of soft power. Witness the various efforts to use manga or anime as positive images of Japan in an effort to soften the country's image, particularly among Asian youth. Or alternatively consider the far less self-conscious projection of Korean soap operas and other cultural facets into Taiwan; the result has been a significant improvement in Korea's overall image there. But typically cultural interchanges are vastly less unidirectional and more complex. Feedbacks, counter governmental messages, and simply uncontrollable influences in multiple directions are far more characteristic of cultural interchanges. Thus, the Chinese government is often reluctant to send abroad some of China's most prominent or creative artists for fear that their message would be uncontrollable beyond the Chinese border.

Finally, looking toward civil society, it became clear that governments may use soft (as well as hard) power in an effort to shape both their own and other civil societies. Democratization has expanded across much of Asia, thereby enriching and empowering civil societies bringing with them a host of new organizations and activities. But democratization is hardly a region wide phenomenon and often civil societies in neighboring countries find themselves in pursuit of quite contradictory goals.

Within Asia, NGOs are one rather recent phenomena linked to democratization. Furthermore, culture often bleeds across national borders to create vastly more multicultural civil societies in various parts of Asia not only through traditional cultural fare such as soap operas or music, but more directly though legal and illegal movements of individuals anxious to find new educational changes, jobs, or refuge.

A second point that came out of the presentations concerns the cultural images that governments may seek to project. Clearly many governments, but particularly Japan and China have sought quite directly to use cultural exchange and other forms of soft power to blunt otherwise rather harsh images associated with Japan's military history or China's

rapid economic growth. In addition, we saw interesting examples of Japan's use during the colonial period of "multi-ethnic" baseball as a device to blunt Taiwanese opposition to the Japanese presence. Japan also sought to use its hosting of the World Cup to project a positive image of Japan as cooperative in Asia as well as making a generic effort to ride the wave of "gross national cool," generated by the popularity of various aspects of Japanese pop culture. China has used sports in similar ways; it has created its own version of a 'peace corps;' it has encouraged tourism from Southeast Asia by ethnic Chinese as a way to "discover your roots;" and it has sought to promote the study of Chinese language, particularly in Southeast Asia. Taiwan has attempted to utilize cultural diplomacy and soft power less to supplement its hard power and more as an alternative to its constantly dwindling supply of the latter. And interestingly, the Asia Cultural Cooperation Forum in Hong Kong has sought to project an image of that city state that is highly rooted in Chinese culture but that seeks to be seen as vastly more cosmopolitan than the PRC as a whole and thereby to be even more appealing to Asia as a whole. Hong Kong, through the Forum, endeavors to enhance Asian cultural links but quite explicitly with Hong Kong as the core. Not at all dissimilar are ROK efforts to make that country the key element in Northeast Asian regional links.

The images that countries project however are not always under government control as a variety of speakers made clear. The content on pirated films and music videos presents only one such example. Similarly, Japanese pop culture projects not only a positive image of Japan but is also suffused with a youth culture that is increasingly alienated and often marked by what many would see as socially negative behaviors. Efforts to use cultural attributes to control civil society at home can also project exceptionally negative images abroad. And Japanese anime and manga may well represent Japanese gross national cool, but many of them have content that is highly critical of the government that is attempting to use them as image softeners. Nor, as the easiness with which films, music and videos are downloaded from the net makes clear, are most governments able to control the cultural flows that into a country from abroad.

Finally, explicitly anti-government messages are often a subterranean component of a country's projected national culture. Japanese pop and rap music, Chinese internet chat rooms, the left-right division in South Korean NGOs dealing with North Korea are all examples of such competing positive and negative images.

Still a third theme in the conference concerned the highly commercialized nature of much culture and cultural projection. Culture is highly capitalized across Asia, as it is elsewhere. Domestic markets are important to allow certain cultural products to be developed and eventually commercialized, as for example in films, soap operas, and toys from Hello, Kitty to pokémon to Sailor Moon. As these products move out from the domestic market, they can help to soften national images particularly among the youth to whom most of these products appeal. At the same time, many youth in the originating country are associated with highly negative images that make the projection of "positive" images particular difficult. Furthermore, because commercial activities are typically the primary drivers of many cultural projections, governments often find themselves playing catch-up to commercial ventures rather than controlling either their movement or their

message. Korean soap operas in Thailand, for example, have a large following but this does not necessarily redound to the benefit of Thai-Korean political relations (or even to the legal purchase of Korean commercial products).

Somewhat ironically, however, as Asians begin to share increasingly common commercial experiences, they may in fact be moving toward a greater commonality. This leads to the fourth and final point that I would like to underscore. The conference began with at least the common question of whether East Asia was being connected through soft power and other cultural activities. Without question, most presenters noted ways in which Asian experiences were becoming more common and in which transnational ties are strongest below the level of national governmental links. Yet a strong subsidiary question was whether such connections were creating a more peaceful Asia, an “Asian identity” or—at an ideal extreme—an Asian security community. The answers to such questions were hardly simple.

One important message from many presentations was that even though connections may be increasing, the broad mix of cultural projections across Asia contained a ring of difference linked to anti-globalization. Asian culture is stressed as discreet from global trends and emphasis on that feature aims to strengthen intra-Asian ties while simultaneously providing an ideational bulwark against unwanted Western (and American) interjections, what one participant identified as the possibility for “multiple modernities.”

In a similar way, many of the connections being formed across Asia remain functionally specific: thus, women’s groups, labor leaders, or peace groups now meet with their counterparts across the region but the resulting networks are most often quite pointed in their goals. They seek less to create a common “Asian identity” and more to foster highly specific agendas. The result is perhaps more connection but not necessarily any common Asian identity.

Moreover, some of the cultural interactions, most notably sports or commercial products carry with them at least as much potential for xenophobia as for Asian-ness. Witness only the red shifts worn by Korean football fans and the blue shirts worn by their Japanese co-hosts in the 2002 World Cup. Though the two countries were co-hosts their political relations saw only a short-lived improvement. Regional integration is by no means the automatic byproduct of increased interactions and flows.

And finally on the point of regional connectedness it is important to address the question of whether they are creating an Asian security community. Without a doubt actual intra-regional shooting conflicts have declined in number. At the same time, much of the evidence suggested that Asian countries have still not reached the point where such shooting wars are unimaginable with certain neighbors and where there is a dependable expectation of peaceful change across the entire region.

At the same time, it is also clear that closer contact leads to improved images of hitherto unknown (and easily objectified) neighbors. Moreover, commercialization and economic

growth across the region are contributing to the rise of a region wide middle class. If the consequence is still far from a comprehensive security community, it may well be the case that intra-Asian diversity is becoming both less extreme and more accepted within a broader Asian framework. It may be that the ties being fostered lead less to a single Asian identity and more to a pluralist tolerance of Asian diversities.