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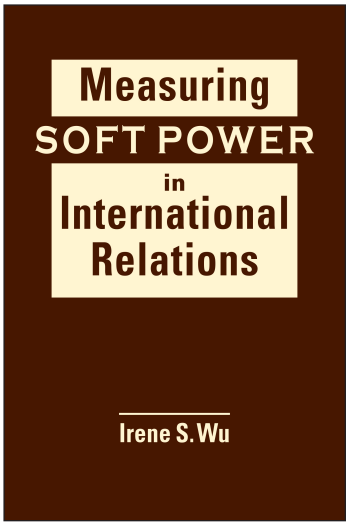
Measuring Soft Power in International Relations



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1

The Soft Power Rubric: Measuring Cultural Influence in International Relations

WHEN THE BERLIN WALL FELL IN 1989 AND THE COLD WAR began to end, people walked westward, not eastward. One reason was the allure of popular culture, especially American, including movies, television, and particularly the music (Zhuk 2011). "From a rock concert to a student demonstration, from refusing to vote in the farcical elections to making an open speech at some official congress, or even a hunger strike," all these were ways for people to live within their truth, said Václav Havel in 1978; he was later elected president of Czechoslovakia (Havel 1985). In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev lifted decades of active suppression of rock and roll; he and his wife both professed their love of the Beatles (Ryback 1990). Gorbachev later became president of the Soviet Union. In 1988 Bruce Springsteen sang Bob Dylan's "Chimes of Freedom" in East Berlin, a turning point in the end of communist rule, says András Simonyi, former Hungarian ambassador to NATO and the United States and himself a rock and roll guitarist (Kounalakis and Simonyi 2011). In the midst of Cold War politics, precisely because American rock and roll was not state sponsored, it was even more influential. Simonyi calls it the pull of the market overwhelming the push of propaganda.

Playing rock and roll equaled cultural and political resistance, says critic Peter Wicke (Mitchell 1992). Its American attitude of youth rebellion and independence was transplanted to Eastern Europe and grew in its own directions. Havel writes in 1968, "On the one hand, there was the sterile puritanism of the post-totalitarian establishment and, on the other hand, unknown young people who wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth, to play the music they enjoyed, to sing songs that were relevant to their lives, and to live freely in dignity and partnership" (Havel 1985).

Rock and roll, this style of music so closely identified with American culture, became deeply and fully integrated in the East European cultural scene.

Soft power, not just guns and money, closed the Cold War chapter in the twentieth century, yet there is no recognized method for measuring it. The Soft Power Rubric is one way forward. This book renews our understanding of soft power in a way that makes quantifying it possible, opening up the possibility of comparisons across countries and analyses across time.

The Intuition Behind the Soft Power Rubric

Suppose we think of soft power as generated not only by nation-states but also by ordinary people expressing their interest in foreign countries. Suppose further that our country has soft power when foreigners think of us as "we" rather than as "they." In effect, soft power relationships exist when others include us as part of their community; we become friends of their nation. People express interest in foreign countries by engaging in activities like watching foreign movies and traveling, studying, and migrating abroad. The Soft Power Rubric brings together relevant, observable, and measurable activity that captures a country's potential scope for soft power influence—the number of cross-border interactions its people have with foreign countries. While this parsimonious approach cannot capture the quality of the interaction, any more than gross domestic product (GDP) can capture the quality of production, it does outline the outer bounds of potential soft power and has the added benefit of measurability over time and across countries.

Reconceptualizing soft power in this way opens new vistas for future investigations. It offers the possibility of empirical measurement across countries and across time. It connects the lived experience of individuals to the collective understandings of communities, which in turn informs the behavior of states. These vistas combine to make culture and values as tangible as money and firepower in the study of international relations.

The Soft Power Rubric can track changes in the volume and direction of interactions that people have with foreigners. Three elements are direct people-to-people interactions: emigrating, studying abroad, and traveling abroad. The fourth element is a mediated interaction: watching foreign movies. Emigration reflects a person's ultimate integration in a foreign society, permanently moving family and home to another country. Studying abroad reflects a person's serious interest and commitment to understanding another society by spending substantial financial resources and formative time in a foreign country. Visiting a foreign country reflects a short-term interest in a foreign society. Watching a movie expresses an interest or curiosity about another country. For each of these series, government inter-

national institutions collect and publish quantitative data for many countries. Research on each of the four elements of the Rubric has central questions and themes that overlap with the others. For example, all four of these literatures discuss the dynamics that push people abroad and pull foreigners into a country. Also, each discusses the effect of transnational social interaction on shaping personal identity. Finally, each discusses the systemic structure within which these interactions take place; there are always some countries at the core, while others are at the periphery.

The Soft Power Rubric measures soft power resources, the potential for a country to have a soft power relationship with another. GDP, a measure of economic power resources, sums the financial value of goods and services produced by an economy. The numbers of military bases, aircraft carriers, or personnel are measures of military power resources (Global Firepower 2023). More resources likely mean more success, but there is no guarantee. A bigger GDP does not guarantee the upper hand in a trade negotiation. More military bases do not ensure victory in war. However, more resources make success more likely, and the depletion of resources heightens the risk of failure. Similarly, the Rubric reveals the volume and intensity of people-to-people interactions that form the basis of many individuals' views of foreign countries and the foundation of a country's soft power resources. More soft power resources no more predict greater political cooperation than more military resources predict victory in war. However, it is reasonable to expect that the presence of major soft power resources itself alters perception and behavior.

Figure 1.1 shows that these indicators range from short-term attraction, such as buying a ticket to see a movie from another country, to long-term attraction, such as emigrating to a foreign country. What matters is not how many movies a country produces but rather how many foreigners choose to watch them. Data for over 200 countries from around 1960–2015 are available from public sources.[1]

The quantitative data in the Soft Power Rubric reflects the extent one country is integrated with others. The change in the number of immigrants, combined with changes in the other indicators within the Soft Power Rubric, is the change in soft power relationship between countries. This measure of soft power makes it possible to discuss the United States' soft

Figure 1.1 The Soft Power Rubric: Indicators of Social Integration Across Borders

Short-term attraction	**Watch a movie**	**Visit a country**	**Study abroad**	**Emigrate**	***Long-term attraction***

power relationship with Canada as distinct from its soft power relationship with China, or with countries in Europe.

This book opens in Part 1 with recent conceptual developments on soft power. Soft power influence is a form of attraction that includes admiration for virtue and virtuosity and prompts endearment and emulation. Recent research unpacks how the effect of soft power can be documented, such as by public opinion, and its benefits measured, whether by trade or support or by agreeing on United Nations resolutions. Also, research shows that soft power influence flows both ways; interaction between and among countries influences all that participate. This interaction is at the crux of the Soft Power Rubric, which sums social interactions between nations as an indicator of how closely these societies can work together. There are some parallels here between how the Soft Power Rubric works and the development of gross national product as a measurement of national economies. Finally, Part 1 explores the implications of seeing soft power as measured by social interaction and how ideas from related fields of migration, education, tourism, and communications can expand the range of tools to study soft power.

Part 2 applies the Soft Power Rubric to a range of cases. Two chapters focus on specific Soft Power Rubric elements—movies, among the most widely discussed soft power resources, and popular culture; and international education, perhaps the most powerful of the four elements of the Rubric. The United States is still the center of the global movie industry and the international education sector, but especially in education, other countries are growing quickly. Three chapters compare one, two, and a group of countries' soft power influence. For India, the size of its emigrant community and even larger diaspora are perhaps the country's greatest soft power resource. Comparing Russia and China shows major divergences in their Soft Power Rubric indicators. The discussion of Southeast Asia shows how the Soft Power Rubric can be used to analyze regional changes over time, to show both how the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) interact with countries like the United States and China, and the relationships of individual ASEAN countries with the world. Finally, Part 2 concludes with a global ranking of soft power countries, from 1960 to 2020. The recent rankings place the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany in the lead—much like other soft power rankings based on public opinion surveys or other indicators—but the Soft Power Rubric can show changes over a range of several decades, demonstrating its unique power as an analytical tool.

The usefulness of the Soft Power Rubric relies on two strands of work. The first is the quantitative work discussed in Chapter 3. The popular opinion survey research by Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2009, 2012) shows a link between foreigners' views of America and cooperation with the United States in foreign policy, especially for issues that are high profile in public

discussions. When those kinds of public opinion surveys are not available, Datta (2014) and Atkinson (2006, 2014) show that trends in international education and international travel can work as substitutes. Also, inside the fields of international education and migration, there is growing evidence that these international experiences influence values in the countries of both destination and origin.

The second line of work that validates the Soft Power Rubric is in Chapter 11 on global rankings. Using the Soft Power Rubric, the global rankings for 2020 are roughly similar to the Soft Power 30 Index, which is the most widely used soft power measurement at the moment. This comparison indicates that the Soft Power Rubric travels in the same direction as other measurements that rely on opinion surveys. The difference is, however, that while the Soft Power 30 is available for only a handful of recent years for a restricted set of countries, the datasets backing the Soft Power Rubric easily reach back to 1990 and for some countries as far back as 1960.

Openness to Foreigners May Be the Key to Soft Power

The Soft Power Rubric measures foreigners' attraction by their interest in engaging with a country, an engagement that can happen only if societies are open. Singh and MacDonald (2017) argue that the openness of a society directly affects its ability to influence other societies. Based on data collection of various international indicators, they empirically demonstrate that democratic pluralism, economic prosperity, and strong cultural institutions attract international students, foreign tourists, foreign direct investment, and influence voting in the UN General Assembly. This work highlights the challenges that authoritarian states face in building their soft power resources.

In parallel, some in the movie industry argue that American movies perform well in the global market because their home market is a diverse audience (Straubhaar 1991). Karl Deutsch in *Nerves of Government* (1966b) argues that for a society to adapt successfully to new challenges, it requires open and good information about itself, the past, and the outside world, and further, that communications transactions are evidence of whether a society is open or closed. Deutsch's work suggests that openness and communication are mechanisms for change. Governments are more effective steering societies that are open to good and accurate information; a feedback loop is necessary. Taking Deutsch's example of national adaptability and extending it to the international level, those countries more open to foreigners are likely to have better information on how the international community works and greater ability to influence it.

During the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023, those countries most open to foreigners were the ones initially hit hardest. As a result, all

face-to-face interactions across national borders paused—migration, education, and travel—while mediated interactions grew. The weak US domestic response to the pandemic tarnished the country's image of competence and at a practical level reduced the number of foreign visitors, students, and new immigrants to the country. When the pandemic subsides, the country-to-country relationships may or may not resume where they left off.

Soft Power: When Foreigners Think of Us as "We" Rather Than as "They"

Joseph Nye has won the argument that military, economic, and natural resources alone do not fully explain a nation's influence abroad. How attractive foreigners find its society and values also plays an important role in its soft power influence. However, the scholarly literature still lacks consensus on how to measure soft power, a gap that weakens soft power policies as an option in a realpolitik world. If it cannot be measured, how can we be sure it exists? Reconceiving soft power as when foreigners think of us as "we" rather than as "they," the ultimate empathetic posture, makes it possible to draw on several theoretical insights and empirical resources to connect quantitatively a country's domestic appeal to its international status.

First, understanding soft power means understanding those countries and peoples who are influenced by soft power, not focusing on the country "projecting" soft power. Second, the volume and direction of interactions between people across national borders over time are indicators of how integrated these societies are—a clue to how much they are "we." Third, culture is not an external and fixed factor but created by people through innumerable performances a day. Fourth, the trust necessary for cooperation is not necessarily an act of faith but can be a rational attitude based on a history of reciprocal action among people. Finally, if we accept that soft power resources are created through people's interaction with foreigners, a major implication of this work is that the more open societies are to foreigners, the more likely they will have soft power influence.

Based on these insights, the Soft Power Rubric is a framework that brings together four elements that represent different kinds of social interactions among people across national borders: migration, study abroad, travel, and watching foreign movies. Each of these brings to the soft power debate a literature that explores why people engage in these activities and a set of indicators published by international organizations, opening vistas for both qualitative and quantitative research.

On the quantitative side, the Soft Power Rubric takes people's transnational interactions as the main indicator of interest in foreign countries, much as GDP takes the financial value of goods and services as the main

indicator of economic activity. For all four elements of the Soft Power Rubric, publicly available data for nearly every country in the world are available in time series from 1960 forward. It is possible to create maps illustrating the direction and volume of interactions. Also, these indicators point to changes over the decades and make possible nuanced comparisons among countries.

Beyond the four elements of the Soft Power Rubric, when large, multicountry datasets with long time horizons are not available, there may be other data with a small number or a pair of countries that reflect other types of transnational social interactions that build trust and willingness to cooperate. For example, sport and religion are cultural activities that bring together people and produce communities with strong identities. Members of sport and religious communities develop a sense of "we," a trust community forged from having many opportunities to interact, to work together, to depend on each other, and to act as a collective (Wu 2015). Cultural institutions, which are important actors in creating meaning and cultivating community identity by building relationships both at the professional level and through popular culture, are another field where soft power develops (Singh, Kaptanoglu, and Li 2023). While large datasets with long time horizons on these interactions may not exist, harnessing the available quantitative data and documenting the narratives of people's experience in these activities are one way forward in applying the Soft Power Rubric.

On the qualitative side, the specialist research around each of the four Rubric elements provides insight on how soft power processes work. Study abroad research shows the importance of investigating why people leave a country and move to another. At the level of the individual, migration studies investigate the development of transnational identities—when people's ordinary lives geographically take place in more than one nation. At the level of communities, travel and tourism studies highlight the synergy and tensions between the traveler's image of the destination and the host's identity of their own place. At the level of systems, movie and media studies still debate whether the US domination of the movie industry is simply a reflection of the technological and business cycle, with others rising up, or the capture of global cinema by American culture.

For policymakers, highlighting the importance of the four elements to soft power brings to the forefront arenas that are not usually the main focus of public diplomacy. While international education has long been an important long-run tool for building alliances and common worldviews, travel and tourism are usually treated as a commercial activity, not a central concern of foreign policy. Visiting is an intermediate step between forming an image of a foreign country based on movies and media, and making a bigger commitment like enrolling in a foreign university or migrating. Similarly, migration more frequently figures in foreign policy as a problem—a brain drain

for some countries or a crisis for countries on the receiving end of many migrants. From the Soft Power Rubric perspective, both immigration and emigration are also opportunities to build transnational social relationships that have long-term consequences for how all countries involved view each other. Finally, movies do figure highly in soft power discussions, but mostly in how they are made, less in how they are distributed, and even less in audience reaction to them. Newer technologies like on-demand video platforms and social media are making it easier to shift focus to audience reaction, demand, and even participation in transnational media production.

The Soft Power Rubric's new approach, a combination of quantitative measures and qualitative investigation, is one step toward reinvigorating our inquiries to unpack the influence of culture and values and to demonstrate the impact of relationships, not just force, in the world. It also underscores how we are all involved in creating soft power relationships. How we welcome foreign visitors, students, and immigrants, and the decisions we make whether to go abroad, where to go, and for how long, all have implications for soft power relationships and the standing of the communities in which we belong.

Note

1. All the data used in the Soft Power Rubric are collected and published by international organizations and available for free (online for recent data and in yearbooks at public libraries for earlier data).

- Migration data: The UN Population Division publishes immigrant stock information in five-year increments for over 200 countries. The most recent publication is available at un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock.
- Study abroad: UNESCO publishes online the number of foreign students enrolled in a country's universities, including the students' country of origin at data.uis.unesco.org. The specific series is "International Student Mobility in Tertiary Education—Inbound Internationally Mobile Students by Country of Origin." These data are for over 200 countries from 1999 onward. Earlier data are available in UNESCO Statistical Yearbooks from 1960 to 1999.
- International travel: The UN World Tourism Organization publishes visitor and tourism data at www.e-unwto.org/toc/unwtotfb/current?expanded=undefined. Country-specific data on outbound tourism are available from around 1999 onward. Earlier data from 1960 forward are published in the United Nations World Tourism Organization yearbooks and in summary form in UN Statistical Yearbooks, available online at unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/Publications/StatisticalYearbookPastIssue.
- Movies: UNESCO publishes online the top ten movies by admissions as reported by several dozen countries from 2005 to 2017 at data.uis.unesco.org. Prior years' data on the importation for foreign films are published in the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook from 1970 to 1999; however, these are data on production, not on audiences.