

Review

Soft power: The new great game for global dominance (a review)

Original work by Robert Winder published by Little, Brown Book Group 2020

Reviewed by Dominique Vouillemin

Dominique Vouillemin International House London dominique.vouillemin@7dnews.com

Received 3.08.2020 | **Revised** 2.09.2020 | **Accepted** 18.09.2020

Recommended citation format: Vouillemin, B. (2020). Soft power: The new great game for global dominance (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 4(3), 79-81. Doi: 10.22363/2521-442X-2020-4-3-79-81



This is an open access article distributed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (CC BY 4.0)

Soft Power: The New Great Game for Global Dominance is a background book for teachers of language, cultural studies, as well as diplomatic studies and politics. Its twenty chapters cover the USA, the UK, Western and Central Europe, Russia, Australasia, South America, India, Africa, China and Japan. Its central thesis is that a country's international reputation depends on cultural customs and practices that have nothing to do with politics. It looks at a country's or a region's arts, sciences, export products, social customs and values to build a picture of what makes outsiders value it – or dismiss it. For teachers of European languages, Arabic, Chinese and Japanese it is a fascinating collection of detailed and in many cases revealing information.

Impeccably researched, its twenty chapters include two on the US, three on the UK, two on France, two on the Gulf, two on China and on Japan, and one each on Germany, Russia, India and Africa. The book's appendices also rate top world countries according to their international reputation as measured by the Portland Soft Power 30 and the Monocle rankings.

In international relations studies, soft power is a term coined by Harvard Professor Joseph Nye as a contrast to hard power. Hard power describes the use of military force to build national influence and soft power describes the use of other means to 'get people to like you' and 'persuade them to want to do what you want.' Many leading countries around the world have built international 'soft power' influence through international broadcasting, cultural activities and cultural institutes, education and scholarships as well as through foreign aid and support in disaster areas worldwide. Examples would be Russia's Russia Today international broadcasting service, the work of Britain's British Council and the BBC World Service, the American university scholarship schemes inviting overseas visitors to spend time in the US and learn to appreciate its culture and values, and even China's recent international offers of free personal protection equipment to help combat the Covid-19 virus.

Ultimately, concludes Winder, a country's international reputation which attracts foreign currency, investment, encourages exports and helps build in-

ternational influence depends less on cultural institutes, scholarships and broadcasting and more on a country's culture – how it represents itself and what others think of it. What he describes as 'likeability' is a key factor.

Soft power impact is affected by history but also by recent events, and Winder is good at describing the impact of Brexit on British national image as well as the influence of the ISIS sponsored massacres in France, the influence of immigration in Southern Europe and the commercial scandals in Germany and Switzerland and the way they are seen to have affected international standing of the countries involved. In this respect the book is not just a historical analysis but is able to bring the story right up to date, even to 2020 with discussion of the effect of Covid-19 on national image.

A particularly good example is China's response to the Corona virus. After the initial breakout of the disease in Wuhan it was the first country to impose complete lockdown measures and the closure of shops and public spaces and then was the first country to offer equipment and other support to Italy and other countries affected by the virus. Its rather authoritarian style of government allowed it to put cities in lockdown whereas many other countries were more reluctant in the early stages of the pandemic although many followed later on.

A key factor in a country or region's soft power influence is its history, often preserved and displayed in other countries' galleries and museums, frequently of the colonial powers such as the UK and France who took them when they occupied and colonised them. In his chapters on the Arabian Gulf Winder is fascinating on researchers into ancient history who discovered how much learning and even some of the stories in the Old Testament of the Christian bible actually originated in ancient civilisations, particularly the kingdom of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia (nowadays spread across Iraq, Kuwait, Syria and south-eastern Turkey). He also discusses how much of what we know nowadays as Western civilisation derived from Greek and Roman philosophy actually emanated from Alexandria and the Middle East.

Robert Winder identifies five key soft power lessons in history. First, as he puts it, the past is hard to kill. The past, admired in ancient monuments, galleries, museums and academic research tells a story that can be revived and resuscitated. The second lesson is that when the past is revived, for example through the Black Lives Matter campaign or awareness of the colonial roots of artefacts admired in Western museums, as Winder says, it doesn't always bring glad tidings. The third lesson is that 'soft power' image is often not an alternative to 'hard power' persecution and military conquest but a consequence of it. Winder points out, as described above, that the largest 'soft-power' reserves in museums are held by nations who subjugated others. The fourth lesson for Winder is that nations who subjugate others by violence often leave the least behind them when they fall and he cites the examples of Germany in the Second World War and the Islamic Caliphate. The fifth lesson is the one that Winder describes as the most troubling. Soft power is not necessarily a force for good. As he says, to the extent that soft power is a weapon it can be used for good and ill. One example he chooses is the damage caused by international terrorism by al-Qaeda and ISIS, which has caused immense damage to the international image of the Middle East despite the efforts of Gulf countries to resist it. Interestingly enough, Winder makes the point that terrorism's most effective ally is information technology. The movement's ability to project itself through social media and the footage of its attacks broadcast internationally on social media have had a major impact on its range of influence and its image.

A final dimension of soft power is, inevitably, politics. As we have seen, soft power can be cultivated through the use of institutional facilities such as international broadcasting, cultural institutes and scholarship programmes. The People's Republic of China is an excellent example. Its Global TV service broadcasts around the world in English. Its Confucius Institutes operate in 140 countries around the world, based in universities and providing native speakers for schools to run conversation classes in Mandarin. In 2019 there were

'Soft power impact is affected by history but also by recent events, and Winder is good at describing the impact of Brexit on British national image as well as the influence of the ISIS sponsored massacres in France, the influence of immigration in Southern Europe and the commercial scandals in Germany and Switzerland and the way they are seen to have affected international standing of the countries involved'

over 500 institutes aimed, as Xi Jinping said, to 'tell the China story well, showcase China's role as a builder of world peace.' As well as official initiatives there is also China's history, its culture and its art and, of course, its cooking. Chinese restaurants are ubiquitous in every country in the West.

In terms of international aid, China's Belt and Road initiative has organised and paid for massive infrastructure development in emerging economies. However, in some cases, the result has been to load many receiving countries with massive national debt in order to pay back Chinese loans.

Unfortunately, China's authoritarian stance over Hong Kong and the Uighur community in Xinjiang and its increasingly forthright, some would say aggressive, approach to foreign affairs, has also negatively impacted its national image. In addition, some Western governments have expressed strong reservations against what they consider cybercrime and breaches of cybersecurity, allegedly originating in China. So soft power can be a tool for development and growth but can be set back, albeit temporarily, by political and economic developments. Robert Winder shows how this can affect soft power images in Europe and the Americas as well as Asia.

In summary, if you are interested in world cultures and the cultural backgrounds of the communities whose language you are teaching or want to know how soft power operates and achieves its effect in establishing and raising international reputation and influence, Robert Winder's book is an informative and interesting read with lots of relevant and useful examples and case studies. It is probably best on the US, the UK and Western and Southern Europe but has interesting points to make about the rest of the world as well, particularly terrorism in the Middle East and China's Belt and Road initiative.