



# Soft Power Amidst Great Power Competition

May 2018

Irene S. Wu, Ph.D.



## What is soft power?

Soft power is a country's ability to persuade other countries to follow it. Soft power is about a country's culture, values, and outlook attracting and influencing other countries. It contrasts with military or economic power. Harvard University's Joseph Nye coined the term in the 1990's in part to explain the end of the Cold War. Maybe burgers and rock and roll, not just missiles and money, contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup>

## Why does soft power matter?

Research shows that for big issues like war and peace, public opinion in foreign countries has an effect on whether they join the United States in military action. Foreign public opinion matters less on smaller issues like voting in the United Nations.<sup>2</sup>

Non-U.S.-citizens can love American culture but disagree with U.S. government policies. However, there is a difference between criticisms from countries with close ties compared to those with few ties.<sup>3</sup> The meaning of feedback from friends is different from that of strangers.

## Why is it useful to measure soft power?

Until now, there were two approaches to soft power—relying entirely on stories or ranking countries on a list. Relying entirely on stories is useful and essential, but makes it hard to compare countries with each other or across time. Ranking countries on a single list makes it seem there is only one kind of soft power and that a country's soft power relationship with every

other country is the same.<sup>4</sup> A framework which takes advantage of the available quantitative data that also integrates well with the stories, narratives, and other qualitative analysis is necessary to understand fully soft power. The Soft Power Rubric uses relevant quantitative data in a way that opens new vistas for qualitative and other analysis.

## How is the Soft Power Rubric different?

A country's soft power can be defined as the degree to which a foreign country looks at us as "we" rather than as "they." When foreigners think of us as "we," that means they have really committed to our point of view. From this perspective, it makes little sense to say that one country has soft power over another. Instead, it is more accurate to say that certain countries have soft power relationships with each other. It is possible to identify which countries have soft power relationships just by observing the level of interaction they have with each other. This is the basis of the rubric.

## What kind of quantitative data are included in the Soft Power Rubric?

The Soft Power Rubric includes indicators that show transnational people-to-people interactions: migration, study abroad, travel abroad, and watching foreign movies.

- Emigration reflects a person's ultimate integration in a foreign society, permanently moving family and home to another country.
- Study 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 foreign movie. Somewhat different from the other three, this reflects a person's interest in a foreign country, but is a small commitment of time and money.

Figure 1 shows these indicators range from short-term attraction—such as buying a ticket to see a movie from another country, to long-term attraction—emigrating to a foreign country. What matters for soft power is less how many movies it produces and more how many foreigners choose to watch them. The figure shows how these several elements can be considered on a spectrum of short-term to long-term attraction.

**Figure 1: Soft Power Rubric: indicators of social integration across borders**

|                              |                      |                        |                     |                 |                             |
|------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Short-term attraction</i> | <b>Watch a movie</b> | <b>Visit a country</b> | <b>Study abroad</b> | <b>Emigrate</b> | <i>Long-term attraction</i> |
|------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|

For all four indicators, international organizations publish data for all countries online. Anyone can pull the data and make the comparisons themselves. There is no proprietary algorithm to transform these data into a ranking. Data on all four indicators from 1960-2015 for over 200 countries have been collected from public sources.

In the next sections, the soft power rubric is applied to four cases: the rise of South Africa's soft power, comparing China and India, comparing Japan and Korea, and the United States in the global movie industry.

Applying the soft power rubric

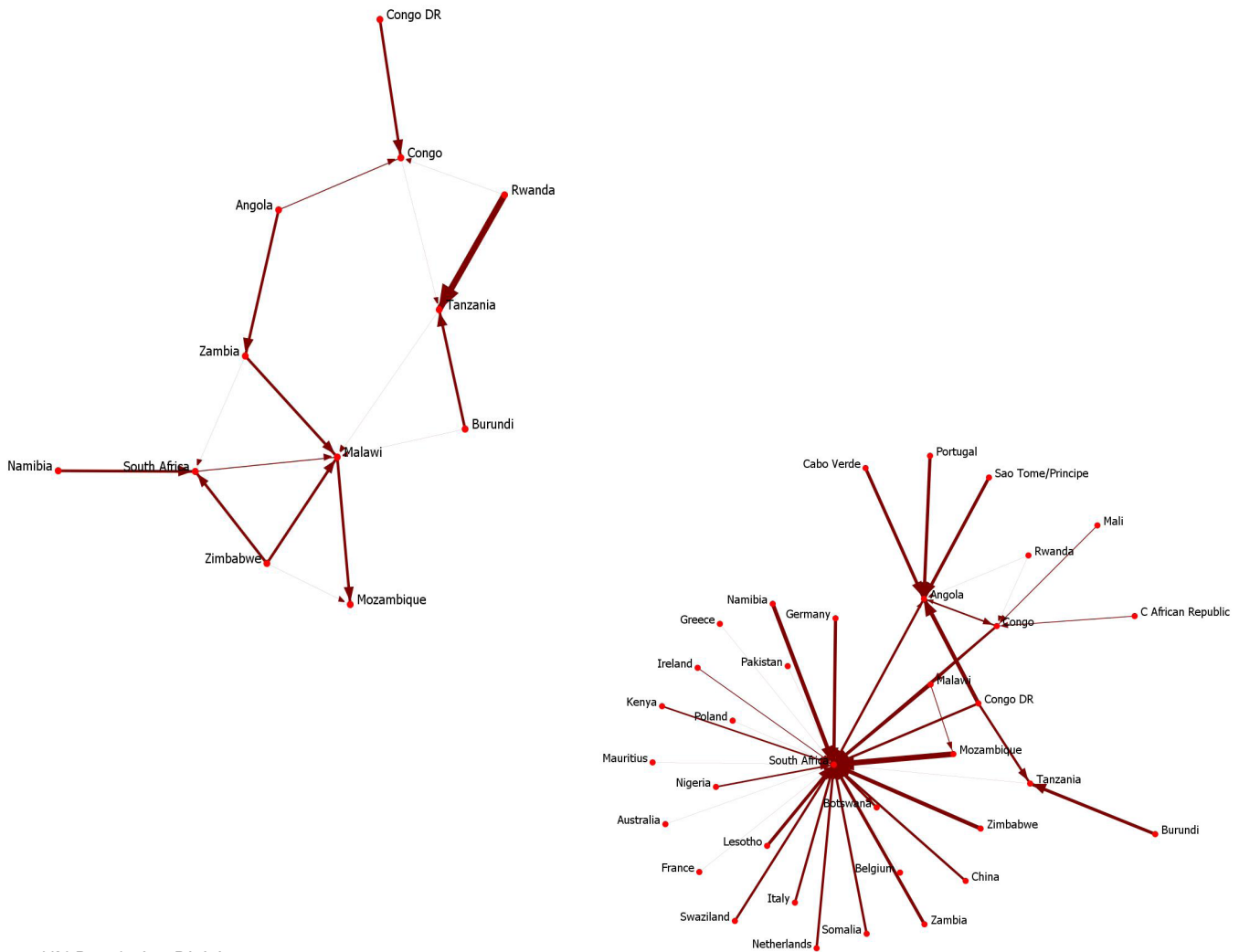
CASE 1: SOUTH AFRICA’S RISE

Apartheid ended in South Africa in 1994. Before, international sanctions against South Africa isolated it politically and economically. When apartheid ended and the South African people installed a democratically elected government under Nelson Mandela, South Africa went from pariah to paragon. New immigrants flooded into South Africa. Figures 2 and 3 show the change in size of the immigrant community among SADC countries in 1990-1995 and again later in 2010-2015.<sup>5</sup>

The diagrams show how central South Africa is now. In the first diagram, just three countries sent more than 5000 immigrants to South Africa between 1990 and 1995. In the second, from 2010-2015, around two dozen countries in Africa, Europe, and Asia, sent more than 5000 immigrants to South Africa.

In this period, the number of immigrants in South Africa quadrupled. In recent years there has been conflict between citizens and foreigners, which remains a challenge for South Africa today.<sup>6</sup> However, in the longer view of history, in these twenty years, South Africa’s has moved from the periphery to the core of the international system.

Figures 2 and 3: Immigrants to South Africa during apartheid, 1990-1995, and post-apartheid, 2010-2015.



Source: UN Population Division

## CASE 2: CHINA AND INDIA

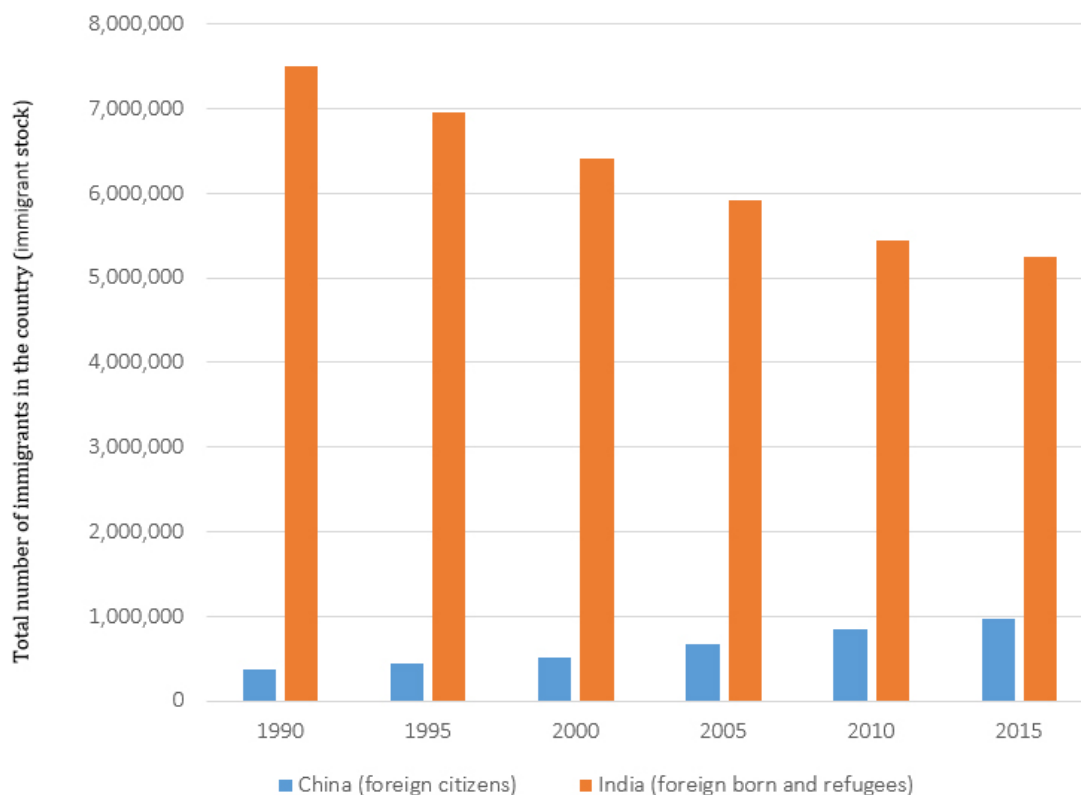
Can the soft power rubric enrich our understanding of China and India’s relative soft power? Two indicators can be particularly insightful: migration and foreign students. Figure 4 shows the number of immigrants residing in China and India between 1990 and 2015.

In terms of immigrants, India is far more open than China. The total number of foreign-born people in India is falling because those born in Bangladesh and India at the time of the Partition in 1947 are now passing away.<sup>7</sup> In India, the largest immigrant communities are from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The number of immigrants in China is at a very low level, but rising gradually over time. The largest communities are from Hong Kong and South Korea.

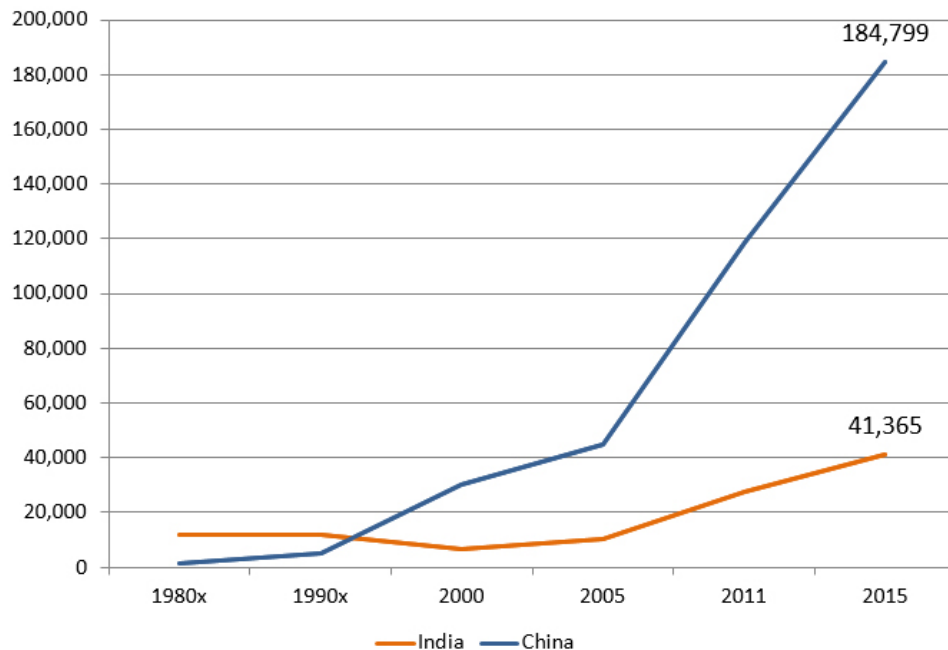
Figure 5 shows the number of foreign students in India and China. Prior to the 1990’s, there were more foreign students at India’s universities than in China. However, since 2005 foreign students have flocked to China. The China data do not include students from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, India is a far more open society than China’s, as the immigration data shows. However, on a temporary basis, many foreigners are studying in China, a major shift in just the last 25 years. These students come from a broader range of countries, not just nearby neighbors. It is up to China whether to welcome these foreigners as immigrants, essentially converting the expressed interest of foreigners into more permanent relationships.

**Figure 4: China and India: immigrant stock 1990-2015**



Source: UN Population Division

**Figure 5: Students to India and China, 1980-2015**

Source: UNESCO, CAFSA, MOE

### CASE 3: NEIGHBORS JAPAN AND REPUBLIC OF KOREA

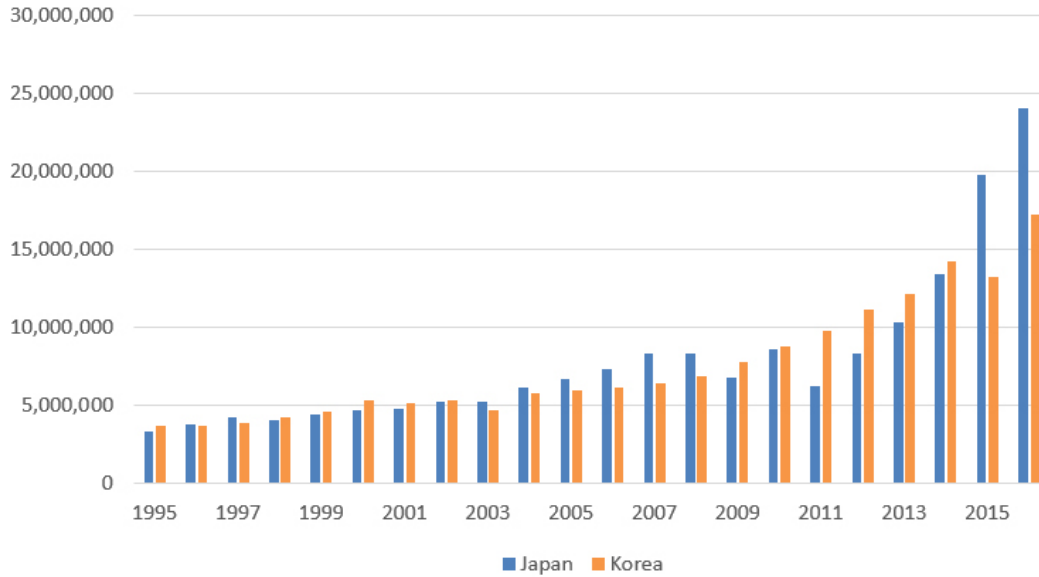
Using the soft power rubric, Japan and South Korea are similarly open to the outside world. While Japan has about twice the number of immigrants and foreign students as Korea, Japan's population is also about double Korea's. On a per capita basis the immigrant and foreign student communities are roughly equivalent in Korea and Japan.

In terms of foreign visitors, however, Korea is more open than Japan. Figure 6 shows that visitors to Korea and Japan were roughly equal from 1995–2014, despite the fact that Korea's population is half. In 2014, the Japanese government relaxed visa restrictions for tourists from other parts of Asia with a goal of attracting 20 million tourists by 2020. They reached the goal five years early.<sup>9</sup> However, for Japan to reach Korea's level of foreign visitors per capita, Japan would need about 35 million visitors a year.

Another aspect of Japan and South Korea's soft power relationships with other countries is in the large number of students they send abroad. Figure 7 shows the total number each country sent abroad from 1970 to 2015.

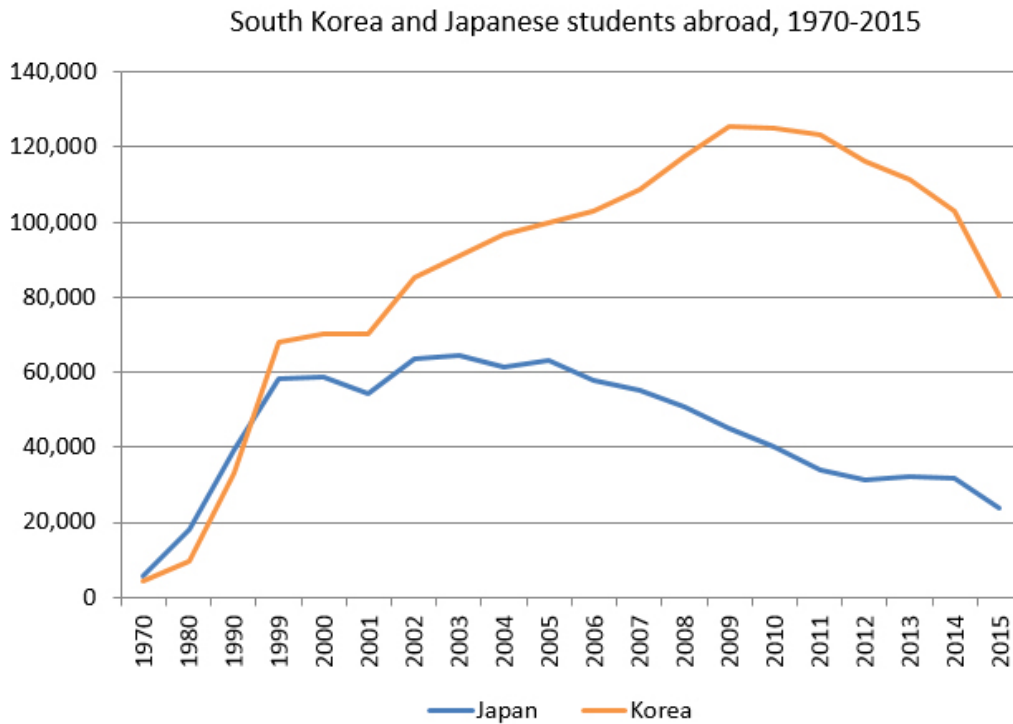
In 2005, Japanese students abroad peaked; for Korean students, in 2009. Many of the Korean students returned home to join university faculties; Korean students today find the quality of domestic universities competitive with foreign universities.<sup>10</sup> However, for Japan, the news reporting suggests Japanese students are concerned about difficulties reintegrating into the job market if they study abroad.<sup>11</sup> The declining number of students from Japan and Korea concerns U.S. experts as a negative change in the bilateral relationships, but actually, broader trends not specific to the U.S. relationship may cause the decline. However, while problems in the soft power relationship may not be the cause of the decline, the decline itself may lead to future change in the richness of the soft power relationship.

**Figure 6: Foreign visitors to Japan and Korea**



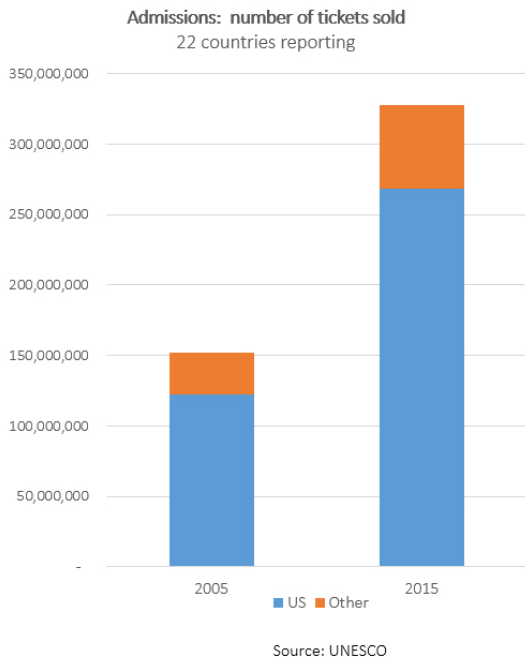
Source: UN World Tourism Organization

**Figure 7: Japanese and Korean students abroad, 1970-2015**



Source: UNESCO

**Figure 8: Movie production countries, 2005 and 2015**



**CASE 4: THE MOVIE INDUSTRY**

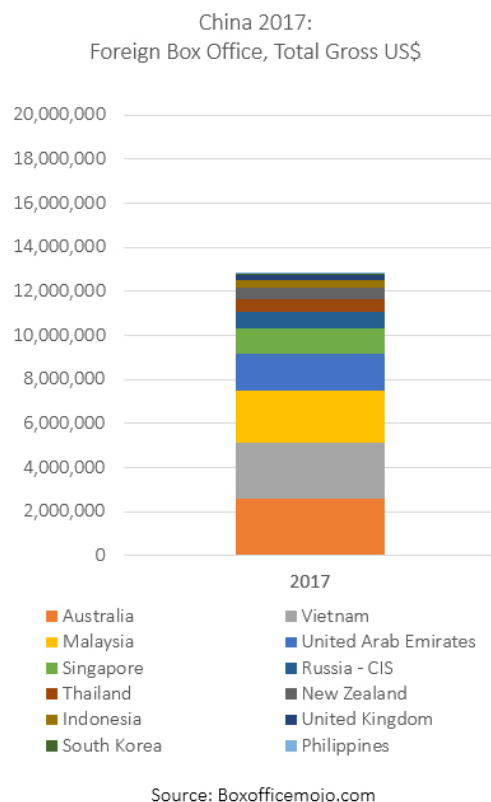
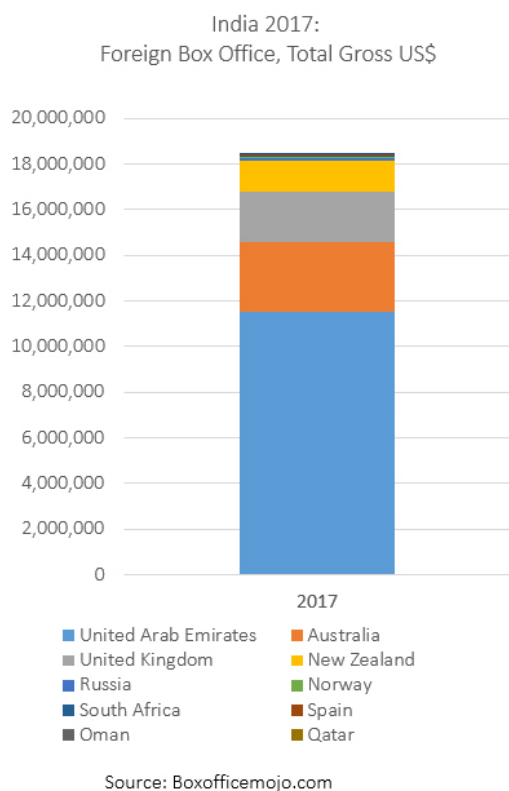
Since 2005, UNESCO publishes the top 10 movies by tickets sold in several dozen countries around the world. The dataset also includes which countries produced these movies—in other words, the origin country of the company that invested in the movie.

Co-productions, movies that have investors from more than one country, have increased since 2005. However, by splitting the ticket sales of co-productions evenly among the producing countries, the data still show that U.S. companies dominate the global blockbuster movie market.<sup>12</sup> The non-U.S. producers reflected in Figure 8 include companies from Japan, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and China.

For China and India, for example, Figure 9 illustrates a different analysis of foreign movie audiences. Using box office gross revenues from foreign markets for Indian-language and Chinese-language movies shows which audiences these movies reach.

Using gross receipts instead of number tickets sold does not enable us to identify how many people the movie touched, but this analysis unpacks more meaningfully which markets have a relationship with the Chinese and Indian movie industries.

**Figure 9: Foreign box office revenues for Indian and Chinese movies, 2017**



Foreign policy analysts often refer to the success of American, or Indian or Nigerian movies as markers of these countries' soft power. The soft power rubric establishes that how many foreigners watch these movies is relevant, not how many movies a country produces. From the global blockbuster perspective, the United States is still dominant. This may be because historically the United States has had considerable influence at every level of movie production and distribution. Some think the United States is locked in a self-benefiting cycle, while others think the U.S. advantage is bound to be competed away in time by other countries.<sup>13</sup> The alternate analysis focusing on the movie's language does provide richer insight into Chinese and Indian movies' foreign audiences. Clearly, there is room for more investigation.

### Concluding questions

*Does a stronger soft power relationship mean foreign countries will agree with us?*

As defined by the soft power rubric, a soft power relationship reflects the level of integration between countries at a people-to-people level. The greater the integration, the greater the understanding among these countries. Understanding does not necessarily mean policy agreement, however, any more than a bigger military means victory in battle or a bigger economy means success in trade wars. The depth of the soft power relationship is a good foundation for cooperation, but many other dynamics influence whether there is policy agreement.

Furthermore, the soft power rubric identifies the relationships with the most depth and complexity. Policy criticisms from friends have a different quality and meaning than policy criticisms from relative strangers. In the case of the United States, there is a difference between critiques from friends holding the United States to a high standard, than criticisms from others. The soft power rubric can help sort through these complexities.

*Are other indicators candidates for the soft power rubric?*

The soft power rubric includes migration, study abroad, travel and movies because they reflect transnational, people-to-people interaction and these indicators are widely available. However, there are important areas where there are lots of relevant interaction, but no comprehensive, international indicators. Religion and language are good examples. In the area of culture and media, sports, cultural festivals, and social media communities are also good examples. There is more room for future research.

*Where's the data? Technical remarks*

All the data used in the soft power rubric are collected by international organizations and published free, online, for recent data and available 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 at <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.shtml>. Different, but also valuable migration data is available from the Global Bilateral Migration Database from 1960-1990, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=global-bilateral-migration>

**Study abroad.** UNESCO publishes online the number of foreign students enrolled in a country's universities, including the students' country of origin at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. This data is for over 200 countries from 1999-2016. Earlier data is available in UNESCO Statistical Yearbooks from 1960–1999.

**International travel.** The UN World Tourism Organization publishes visitor and tourism data at <http://statistics.unwto.org/>. On request, they provided detailed statistics on visitor arrivals for over 165 countries, including the visitors' country of origin, from 1999-2015. 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 <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publications/statistical-yearbook/past-issues/>



**Movies.** UNESCO publishes online the top 10 movies by admissions as reported by several dozen countries from 2005-2015 at <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. Prior years data on the importation for foreign films is published in the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook from 1970–1999.

In each case, there is information, not only on the total number of foreign viewers, visitors, students, and migrants, but also on their countries of origin. In other words, in this data not only do we know the total number of immigrants to Canada over time, but also their countries' of origin, which provides insight into Canada's relationship to regions around the world.

### Endnotes

- 1 See Joseph Nye. 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- 2 Benjamin E. Goldsmith and Yusaku Horiuchi. July 2012. "In search of soft power: does foreign public opinion matter for US foreign policy?" *World Politics*. 64:3, 555-85.
- 3 this insight is from Wilson Center Japan Scholar, Dr. Watanabe Yasushi, author of *Soft Power Super Powers*, ME Sharpe, 2008.
- 4 McClory, Jonathan. 2016. Soft Power 30 Report. Portland Communications. <http://softpower30.portland-communications.com/> Portland.
- 5 I am grateful to Dr. Monde Muyangwa, Director of the Wilson Center's Africa program, for leading me to this insight.
- 6 For more information see Ufuoma Patience Ejoke and Kelechi Johnmary Ani, 2017. "A historical and theoretical analysis of xenophobia in South Africa," in *Journal of Gender, Information, and Development in Africa*. 6(1 and 2): 163-185, and the *Evaluating South African Immigration Policy After Apartheid*, a special issue edited by Jonathan Crush and David McDonald. 43(3) 2001. *Africa Today*.
- 7 Thanks to Wilson Center analyst Nishta Sharma for sharing this information. See "'Despite drop, India no. 9 in number of immigrants," *Times of India*. March 2, 2012, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Despite-drop-India-No-9-in-number-of-immigrants/articleshow/12105590.cms>.
- 8 The data on inbound foreign students to China is from China's Ministry of Education, and CAFSA (China Association for International Education).
- 9 AFP. "Japan breaks tourism record as it gears up for 2020 Olympics." January 12, 2018. *The Straits Times*. <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-breaks-tourism-record-as-it-gears-up-for-2020-olympics>
- 10 Kim, Dongbin and Jin-young Roh. "International doctoral graduates from China and South Korea: a trend analysis of the association between the selectivity of undergraduate and that of US doctoral institutions." *Higher Education*. (2017) 73:615-635
- 11 Harner, Stephen. "Fewer Japanese students studying abroad." *Forbes*. December 23, 2010. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephenharner/2010/12/23/fewer-japanese-students-studying-abroad/#664b57b07e0c>
- 12 Wilson Center analyst Leaynet Yilma created the producer-oriented dataset that makes this comparison possible.
- 13 A good account of this tension is in Joseph Straubhaar's 1991 article "Beyond media imperialism: asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. 8:39-59.

---

Irene S. Wu, Ph.D., is a fellow in the Asia Program and Kissinger Institute on China and the U.S. at the Wilson Center. She is also a senior analyst in the international bureau of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission. In addition, Wu teaches at Georgetown University in the Communications, Culture and Technology Program. Her most recent book is *Forging Trust Communities: How Technology Changes Politics* (Johns Hopkins, 2015). The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any agency of the U.S. government.

---