

Battlefield of global ranking: How do power rivalries shape soft power index building?

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Abstract

International competition over soft power has largely transformed from image promotion and cultural diplomacy to benchmark setting. Benchmarks breed discourses and discourses embody power. The article argues that the soft power index building has turned into a battlefield where different values, norms and development models struggle for legitimacy through quasi-scientific validations. By critically examining the methods employed by two soft power indexes, Portland Soft Power 30 Index and China National Image Global Survey, this article unpacks the mechanisms by which institutions from western and emerging (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS)) states embed political values, interests and agendas in the selection of data, indicators and treatments of data. The article finds that while the soft power indexes originating from Western organizations largely normalized liberal values and the current international hierarchy, the Chinese national image survey provides a more self-reflective approach to soft power measurement.

Keywords

Benchmark, Portland Soft Power 30 Index, China National Image Global Survey, Cultural hegemony, Index building, Soft power

Introduction

Introduced by Joseph Nye Jr in 1990, the concept of soft power has gained considerable traction in global academic and policy fields. Intellectuals have in turn considered concepts such as ‘normative power’ (Manners, 2002, 2006) and ‘ideational power’ (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016) to

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engage with the idea that power can be achieved by co-opting and building attraction instead of coercion. While many scholars in the western world hold that ‘universal values’ such as democracy, human rights and freedom of speech are the source of soft power, their counterparts from emerging states tend to rely on culturally specific values and cultural heritage factors. Indeed, Wagner (2010) has praised the non-violent and peaceful conflict mediation model represented by Mahatma Gandhi and often represented in Bollywood movies, as the source of an Indian style defensive soft power. Russia’s endorsement of conservative values (Hudson, 2015), its linguistically based community ‘*Ruskiy Mir*’ (Russian world) is likewise considered as an alternative model of soft power. In terms of the practical application of the concept, however, China is the most committed practitioner (Kurlantzick, 2007). Since the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China has developed a well-funded public diplomacy package which includes holding international mega-events (Cull, 2008), establishing overseas broadcasting media (Li, 2017; Thussu, de Burgh, & Shi, 2017), and funding cross-cultural exchange programmes (Hartig, 2015).

In the past decade, soft power has undergone an ‘evaluative turn’, evolving from academic discussion to policy implementation and benchmark setting. The measurement of soft power is fuelled by a market demand from nations wishing to gauge the potential and reach of their soft power. However, such measurement is bedevilled by the ambiguity of the concept. In other words, the measurement cannot be operationalized without answering the key question: What types of values or cultural products are considered attractive, and by whom?

In the interest of resolving this puzzle, this article considers two soft power evaluation reports. The first, *The Portland Soft Power 30 Report* by Portland Communications (hereafter referred to as ‘Portland 30 Index’), represents an indexing/benchmarking approach that prioritizes western civilizational values and norms. A second case is *The China National Image Global Survey* (hereafter referred to as ‘CNIGS’), which features a distinctly opinion-centred, self-evaluative approach.

The article proceeds as follows: First, we establish the soft power concept as a value-laden discourse, drawing on Foucault’s knowledge/power theory. The key conceptual frame discussed is benchmarking. This is followed with three research questions and a brief discussion of the data collection method. In the ‘Data analysis and findings’ section, we analyze how bias is embodied in soft power evaluations in both Portland 30 Index and CNIGS. We identify three mechanisms by which biases are embodied: the strategic selection of data, indicators and the treatment of data. To conclude, we discuss how a west-centric distribution of sources of data and selection of indicators contribute to maintaining the liberal paradigm and legitimizing the dominant world order.

Theoretical framework

Constructing a regime of truth by benchmarking

Benchmarking, as a form of evaluative knowledge production system, is widely adopted by international actors. It serves to normalize and legitimize political values and ideas. As in most knowledge production processes, benchmarking is not a neutral field of endeavor, but an institutionalized discursive mechanism infused with power relations (Introna, 2003). As Foucault (1971) reminds us, knowledge is not absolute but a product of ‘regime of truth’, where certain facts are selected, organized and redistributed as truth. What benchmarking represents, moreover, is an extreme ‘nostalgia for a quasi-transparent form of knowledge, free from all error and illusion, and behind the concept of repression, the longing for a form of power innocent of all coercion, discipline and normalization’ (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p. 117).

Technically, benchmarking refers to a comparative assessment of the performance of the objects in question against certain principles and standards. It makes use of evaluative techniques such as ‘audits, rankings, indicators, indexes, baselines’ (Broome & Quirk, 2015, p. 820). The social implications of benchmarking, however, go beyond mere calculation. First, benchmarks redistribute authority and status among actors. International organizations, for instance, adopt benchmarking as a tool to assert authority by framing problems in a certain way, fixing the meaning of norms, thereby redefining collective interests (Clegg, 2010; Kramarz & Momani, 2013). Second, dissemination (of benchmarks) shapes the discursive environment of policy issues (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004) and the public perception of governmental performance, both domestically and internationally (Høyland, Moene, & Willumsen, 2012). Because of the ostensibly scientific nature of benchmarking exercises, the resulting rankings, once promulgated, are difficult to dislodge from public discourse (Andreas & Greenhill, 2010). Third, benchmarks enable a type of indefinite discipline over remote actors. Benchmarks function through stimulating the self-regulating behaviour of international actors under the pressure of status seeking (Bruno, 2009; Kelley & Simmons, 2015; Porter, 2015).

The promises that benchmarking cannot deliver

As impressive as benchmarking is, it can hardly deliver its promised neutrality and objectivity. In Broome’s words, benchmarks generate a form of ‘constructed objectivity’ by ‘means of rhetorically appeal(ing) to the ostensibly neutral language of technocratic assessment and numerical comparison’ (Broome & Quirk, 2015, p. 821), whereas actually it is ‘troubled by questionable methodology and data collection biases’, as ‘the use of transnational knowledge ... cannot be separated from political values and policy reform preferences’ (Broome, Homolar, & Kranke, 2018, p. 3). It is, therefore, meaningful to clarify how errors and political bias can be embedded in index building.

The first problem that plagues index building is the pressure of quantifying everything. Quantification ‘requires reliable and comprehensive information’ (Broome & Quirk, 2015, p. 827) which can only be retrieved and stored with abundant financial and personnel resources. Considering the information gap between North and South, and West and East, data-driven benchmarks will inevitably reproduce the international hierarchy between the developed core and peripheral nations. Moreover, a prioritization of quantitative data over qualitative and commensurable data leaves the qualitative dimensions ignored or distorted. For instance, to measure human development, the well-known Human Development Index (HDI) developed by United Nations selected ‘national incomes’, ‘life expectancy’ and ‘schooling’ over ‘self-worth’, ‘dignity’ and ‘creativity’ because of the difficulty of commensuration of the latter three items (Høyland et al., 2012).

The second problem is that the benchmarking process itself risks simplifying reality and assuming national performance as universally ‘evaluatable’, irrespective of historical and structural contexts (Broome & Quirk, 2015). After examining the methodologies adopted by The World Bank’s *Ease of Doing Business Index* (EDB) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Broome et al. (2018) conclude that these benchmarks serve to arbitrarily downplay structural divergence and suggest deregulation of business as a panacea for economic prosperity. The relevant evaluative benchmarks on government transparency, freedom of the press and political corruption, in a similar vein, simply attribute complex and divergent non-western political practices to ‘bad’ performance, as defined by a western-centric understanding of human rights or ‘good governance’ (Kelley & Simmons, 2015).

Finally, benchmarking normalizes values through strategic selections of reference points. Establishing an accepted standard is a prerequisite for benchmarking. However, such selection invariably perpetuates a dichotomy between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practice; contested norms are framed within a normative hierarchy. Neoliberalism, as an illustrative case, was enshrined in a wide range of indexes to guide nations towards economic growth and achieve a favourable international reputation. Nations who deviate from this prescription will be blamed and shamed on a ‘watchlist’ or suffer a decline in the ranking (Broome et al., 2018; Kelley & Simmons, 2015).

Mission impossible? Benchmarking soft power

Given the popularity of soft power, opinions on what aspects are important, and how it should be measured, are surprisingly divergent. The reason can be attributed to both the intangibility of soft power resources and the fuzziness of its working mechanism. First, soft power resources tend to be intangible and the attractiveness of foreign policy is contingent on consistency with self-proclaimed political values. Democracy, for instance, though prevailing as a universal value, and supported by the United States in particular, gained its autonomous status once it was accepted as a global norm: the problem is the United States’ international image is damaged if the United States’ behaviour violates this principle (Lock, 2010). The measurement of culture can also be tricky. Considering the enormous cultural-historical heritage of civilizational states such as Egypt, India and China, one may wonder why their soft power resources are evaluated far below behind a nation (the United States) that has a history of no more than 250 years (Fan, 2008).

Another factor that plagues the resource-centered measurement approach is its challenge in capturing soft power effects. Scholars, including Nye, resort to attitude changes in the poll as a signal of soft power effects (Nye, 2008; Smith, 2007; Treverton & Jones, 2005), while others insist on policy change as a reference for soft power evaluation (Anguelov & Kaschel, 2017; Knack, 2004). However, what makes effect-oriented approaches dubious is the ambiguity of opinion formation and policy-making systems, which resembles a black box that can never be dissected to analyze the actual proportion of the contribution of soft power initiatives (Layne, 2010).

Based on the general problems of benchmarking and the elusiveness of soft power, the following section focuses on the methodologies of two benchmarks: Portland 30 Index (2015–2018) and CNIGS (2013–2017). We argue that the credibility of soft power benchmarking is distorted by arbitrary selection of data, indicators and treatment on data (modelling). The article argues that China’s international image survey serves as a self-evaluative monitor, which offers a model for developing states to obtain information autonomy and escape the status of ‘being represented’. This approach, though contributing to promote the democratization of soft power discourse, fails to provide an applicable framework for other nations to evaluate their soft power.

Methods: research questions and design

The question of how power and values are embedded in the building of soft power benchmarking is operationalized into three questions:

1. How does the selection of data reflect the power structure of the index?
2. How is the hierarchy of values embedded in the selection of indicators?
3. How does the arbitrary treatment of data lead to misleading rankings?

To start with, the selection of data is split into two dimensions: (1) the types of data and (2) the sources of data. The data that benchmarking relies on are generally divided into two types: subjective and objective data. Subjective data are the polling results that are used to measure the effects of soft power in public opinion level. Objective data, on the contrary, refer to quantifiable reports that are used to measure the soft power resources. The point of checking the type of data is to clarify what aspect of soft power the benchmark is measuring. In addition, we examine the geographical distribution of sourcing institutions of the data to investigate how geo-cultural contexts shape the values of index building. This parameter only applies to Portland 30 Index as CNIGS exclusively relies on opinion polls.

Furthermore, our examination of the selection of indicator refers to the concept of ‘content validity’, which evaluates ‘whether the scope of a benchmark provides adequate coverage of the multiple dimensions of an issue area to effectively capture and measure performance, or whether critical dimensions are excluded’ (Broome et al., 2018, p. 6). The authors assume, by including certain indicators in the index and excluding others, indexes de facto serve to prioritize specific values at the expense of others.

The last aspect of soft power measurement is the treatment of the data in the process of index building. For the Portland 30 Index, we examined the weighting applied on objective and subjective data and the regression model used to elicit the new coefficients that are used to weigh the scores of sub-indices in the final model. We consider the reliability of the varying coefficients and the validity of treating favourability as a proxy for the dependent variable – soft power effects, which is supposed to be the predicted value of the index model. As for CNIGS, we discuss the problems of presenting data based on the stage of development: developed and developing countries, and age trichotomies: 18–35, 36–50 and 51–65.

Data collection

Bearing in mind the rationale to compare how institutions from western developed nations and emerging states embed their values, worldviews and policy agendas in soft power benchmarking, we chose two indexes: Portland *Soft Power 30* and CNIGS. The selection was based on their originality, authority/influence and representativeness.

For the Portland 30 Index, our first consideration is its global influence. Since its release in 2015, the annual reports of the Portland 30 Index have been widely cited by media and think tanks. A rise in ranking is interpreted as a rise in international status for countries such as China (Global Times, 2018a), France (Le Figaro, 2017) and Russia (Picreadi, 2016); an exit or a decline of ranking will engender status anxiety and can even be mobilized to discredit certain politicians (Bach, 2018). Second, the sponsoring agencies, Portland, a UK based communication consultancy and its new joint partner (2017–2018), the US-based research institute – University of Southern California’s Center on Public Diplomacy, signify the Western origins of this index. By saying this, we do not imply that the Soft Power 30 Index is an official construct of western governments, but suggest that the Portland 30 Index epitomizes a benchmarking imprinted by Western perspectives about soft power.

Under the authorship of Jonathan McClory, the Portland 30 Index has evolved from a 15-page report with the name of ‘The new persuaders’ (IfG-Monocole Index) in 2010 to a comprehensive map of the global soft power landscape which amounted to 180 pages in 2018. The IfG-Monocole Index laid the foundation for Soft Power 30 Index in terms of main categories and combinations of

subjective and objective data (McClory, 2010). Therefore, we collected seven reports including IfG-Monocole Index reports: The New Persuaders Index I, II, and III (McClory, 2010, 2011, 2012), and Portland 30 Index reports: *The Portland Soft Power 30 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018* for the purpose of tracking the evolution of the Portland 30 Index. What is worth noting is that the final report, The Soft Power 30 2018, will be taken as the main object of discussion.

CNIGS, on the contrary, is selected as the soft power index created by institutions from an emerging power – China. The sponsoring agencies of CNIGS are China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration; Millward Brown, a UK-based communication consultancy; Charhar Institute, a Chinese independent think tank; and Lightspeed GMI, an international digital data collection agency headquartered in the United States. China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, namely, China International Publishing Group (CIPG), is both an external publicity oriented public institution affiliated to the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China and the largest foreign-language publishing organization in China. Although the series of CNIGS received wide recognition from Chinese media ranging from Xinhuanet (Xinhua, 2018a), China Global Television Network (CGTN; 2018) and Global Times (Global Times, 2018b), the ripples it creates in the overseas media are barely visible.

In comparison with the Portland 30 Index, CNIGS does not seek to provide a universal benchmark global soft power performance, but to ‘provide targeted, (temporally) comparable and viable recommendations for boosting the effect of China’s international communication activities’ (Guo, 2018). The research questions are designed to elicit overseas perceptions about China on a broad spectrum of dimensions: overall image, domestic and international political performance, Chinese citizens, economic development/commodities and technology and innovation as well as traditional culture. The systematic nature and comprehensiveness of CNIGS have made it a reliant guidebook for China to conduct self-evaluations of its soft power performance compared to the other years. As with the Portland 30 Index, the four CNIGS reports of 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016–2017 will be included to shed light on the evolution of this index.

Data analysis and findings

The Portland Soft Power 30 Index

Selection of data. To begin with, soft power can be assessed with three dimensions: (1) soft power resources, (2) public opinion changing and (3) political policy changes. The first approach evaluates soft power from a resource-potential angle; the other two are from an outcome angle. The approach to equal soft power with attitude change manifest in opinion poll, though was widely applied with ‘the Pew’s Global Attitudes Project, the BBC World Service’s Country Ratings Poll, or the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brand Index’ (McClory, 2015), failed to shed light on ‘the available resources and an understanding for where they will be effective’ (McClory, 2015). What McClory proposes, instead, is to add objective data – a tangible manifestation of the ‘intangible’ culture assets – to subjective opinion poll result, thus providing a guidebook for monitoring their soft power repository and exploiting their soft power potential into de facto international influence. This rationale in itself is conducive. However, without taking into account the diverse cultural background, political legacy and the development stage of countries, the lessons that the developing countries can draw on will be limited. Given the fact that soft power is developed by Nye to consolidate Pax Americana, what McClory (2018) argued as theoretically sound frameworks actually works to entrench the structurally privileged liberal values in the world system.

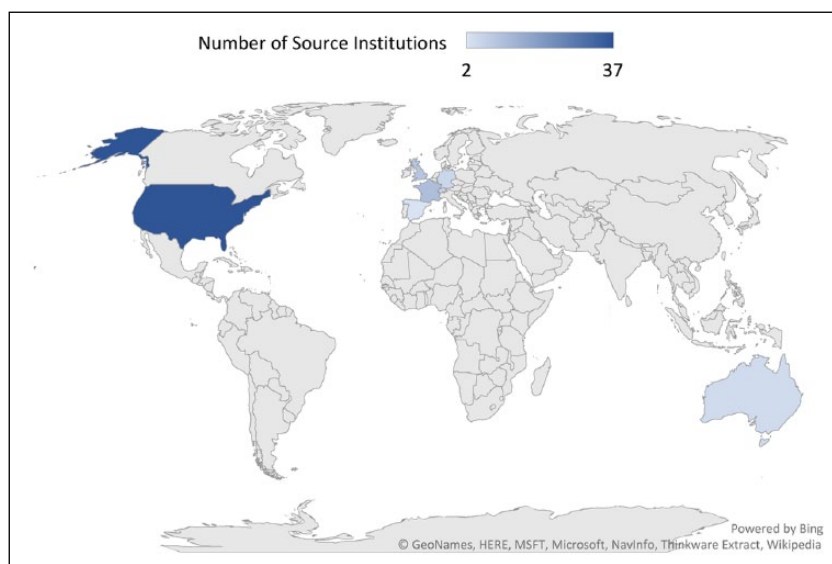


Figure 1. Geographical distribution of source institutions (Portland 30 Index).

Source: McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30–2018*. London: Portland.

In terms of the source of data in the Portland 30 Index, we take the occurrence of the data source as our unit of analysis and code each source according to the geographical location of its institution. For instance, the indicator ‘Foreign direct investment as a percentage of GDP’ is said to be compiled from ‘United Nations Conference on Trade, and Development Statistics/World Bank/Variious’. Therefore, this sub-metric will be divided into three sources: United Nations Conference on Trade, Development Statistics and World Bank. ‘Variious’ means the source is data are left without specification, which will be recorded as null. Then, the sources will be coded for the location where their headquarter is, as illustrated in Appendix 2.

First of all, we found the geographical location of the organizations that serve as data source tends to be concentrated in western-developed countries. We identified overall seven countries that accommodate the sourcing agencies for the Portland 30 Index: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain and Australia, which all belong to the club of western-developed countries. What is worth noting is the predominance of Anglosphere countries. We found that 67% of the sources originated from the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia, and the rest 33% comes from Europe (see Figures 1 and 2). As a result, it is safe to conclude that the geographical distribution of source institution is hugely slanted towards western powers. Without denying the neutrality or the growing cultural diversity of international organizations and companies, we realize that the Portland 30 Index is more susceptible to the ideological and cultural traditions of Anglo-European states than other regions. And this west-slanted geographical distribution could contribute to normalize the worldview of western states and legitimize their leading positions in the international hierarchy.

Within the Western Bloc, there are differences in terms of the data produced. The United States, without any doubt, is home to most of the sourcing institutions in Digital, Education, Enterprise and Government dimensions. In the Cultural dimension, 9 out of 13 sources were dominated by

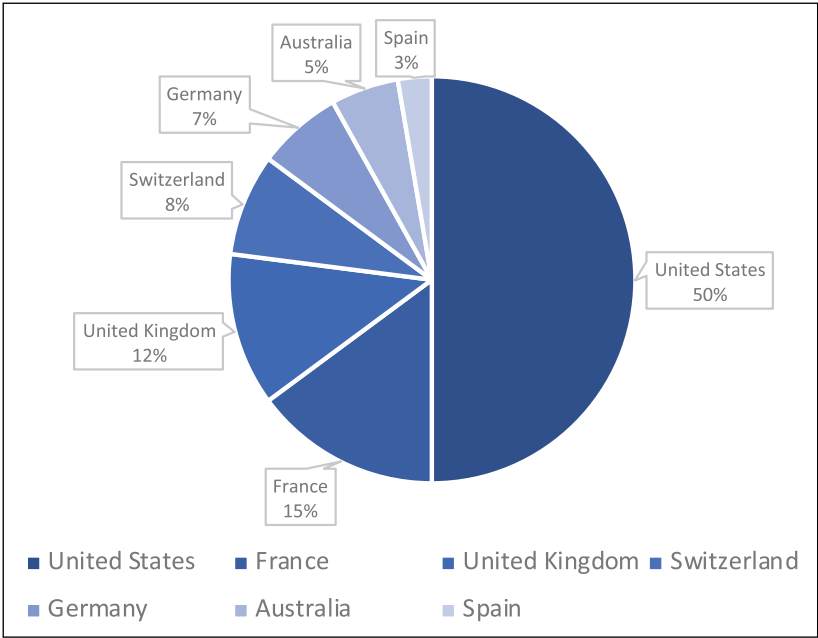


Figure 2. The proportion of data sources by country (Portland 30 Index).
Source: McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30, 2018*. London: Portland.

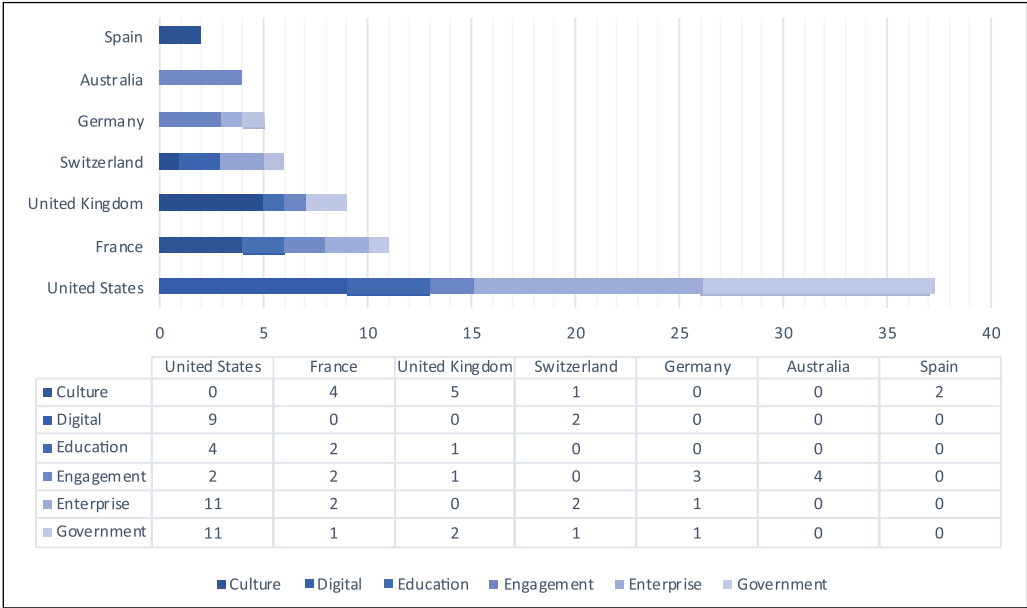


Figure 3. Geographical distribution versus categories of the Portland 30 Index's sources institution.
Source: McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30, 2018*. London: Portland.

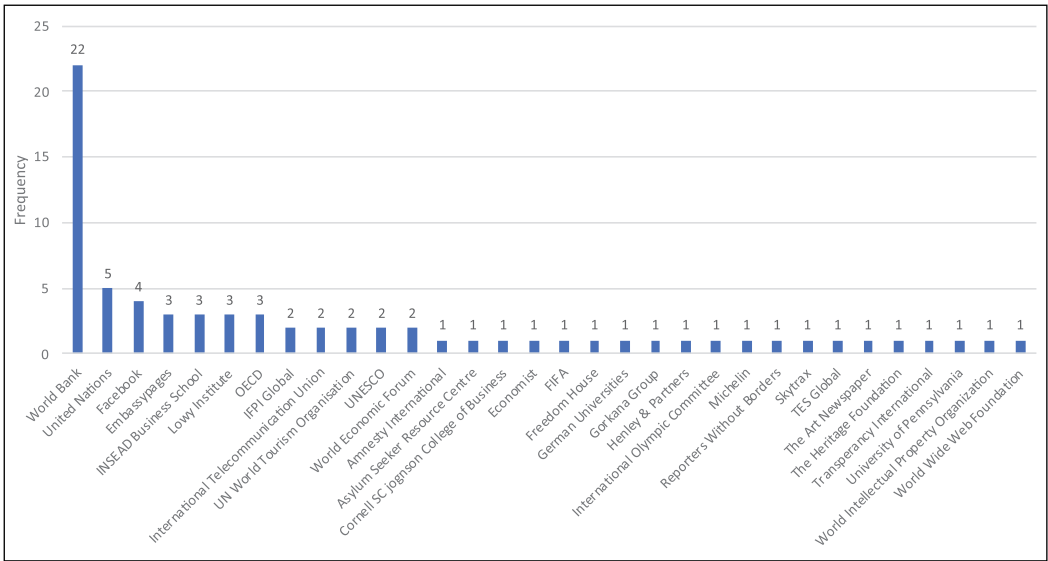


Figure 4. Frequency of institutions adopted as data sources in Portland 30 Index.
 Source: McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30*, 2018. London: Portland.

European states including the United Kingdom. These phenomena are understandable considering the predominance of the United States in politics, business and research and innovation fields. Germany and Australia, on the contrary, are the main force in Engagement metric construction with their information on diplomatic resources, networks and global footprint (see Figure 3). Among all of the sources, the World Bank shows a strong presence as a sourcing institution, contributing 22 out of 78 sources to the overall Portland 30 Index building (see Figure 4). As Kramarz and Momani (2013) illustrated, producing abundant knowledge is a way for the World Bank to obtain recognition. The World Bank has provided data for all the sub-indices except for culture. Not only are business and government-related indices such as ‘Ease of Doing Business’ and ‘Income inequality – Gini coefficient’ created by the World Bank but education and digital sub-metrics also resort to the World Bank for information such as ‘Academic journal article publication’ and ‘Number of Internet users’ (see Figure 5).

Selection of indicators. If the selection of data indicates where the soft power index intends to capture soft power, then the selection of indicators reveals how it captures soft power. The selection of indicators of the Portland 30 Index is constrained by hegemonic western culture, and in turn consolidates western cultural hegemony by legitimizing Anglo-American political values, economic models and even cultural tastes. To measure soft power on quantitative bases, Portland developed a wide-ranging package of indicators to measure the different dimensions of soft power. Overall, 78 sub-indices (see Appendix 1) were selected to materialize the six categories of soft power resources: Culture, Digital, Education, Engagement, Enterprise and Government. Meanwhile, the effects of soft power are measured with seven indicators, namely, the public perception of cuisine, tech products, friendliness, culture, luxury goods, foreign policy and liveability with the aid of polling data.

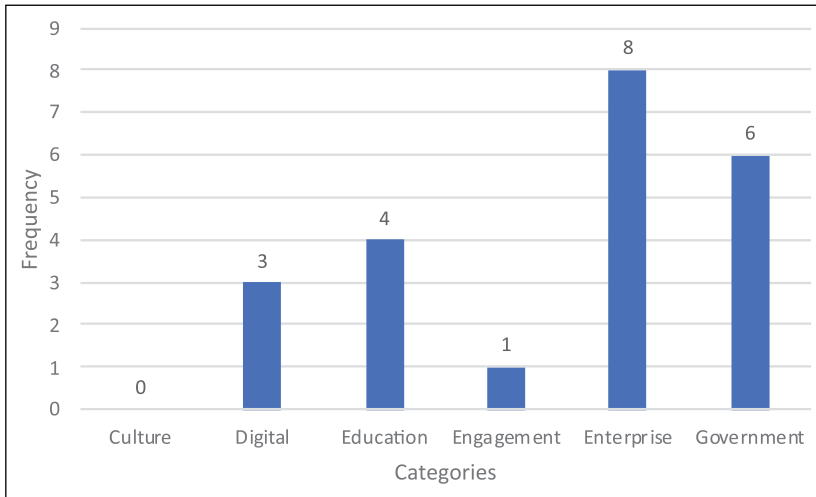


Figure 5. World Bank's contribution to the six categories.

Source: McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30*, 2018. London: Portland.

The embodiment of American democratic values in the index can be detected by examining the government sub-index. The aim of government sub-index is to 'gauge the extent to which a country has an attractive model of governance and whether it can deliver broadly positive outcomes for its citizens' (McClory, 2018, p. 32). However, the indicators that the government sub-index draws on are the *Press Freedom Index*, the *Freedom House Index*, and the *World Bank Good Governance Rule of Law*, all of which are embedded in the three pillars of democracy in the United States, namely, freedom of speech (human rights), electoral democracy and rule of law. As enlightening as these values are, to equate an 'attractive model of governance' with US democracy not only inherits the liberal bias inherent in Nye's conceptualization of soft power but also confirms the US-led liberal order. Freedom House, for instance, has been found to serve as a champion of western democracy and tends to score in favour of the United States and its allies (Giannone, 2010; Steiner, 2016).

Neo-liberalism, in a similar fashion, finds its positioning in the sub-index of Enterprise. As emphasized by Portland's 2018 report, the Enterprise sub-index does not seek to capsule 'economic power or output', but the 'relative attractiveness of a country's economic model in terms of its competitiveness', with 'ease of doing business, corruption levels, and start-up costs for a new business' being the core elements (McClory, 2018). The metrics such as 'World Bank Ease of Doing Business Report' and 'Log of Business Start-up Costs as Percentage of GNI per capita', for instance, serve to entrench neoliberal logic in the Portland 30 Index. The 'Ease of Doing Business Index' champions a deregulated free market with market opening access to foreign investment as an ideal economic model. This bias functions to legitimize the neoliberal paradigm and reproduce the hierarchy of the international system according to a nation's openness to foreign investment – that largely originates from the west (Broome et al., 2018).

The way that westernized modernization is embedded in the Portland 30 Index is illustrated in the Education sub-index. The rationale for including Education in the Portland 30 Index, according to McClory (2018), is based on an expectation that foreign student exchange and excellent scholarship significantly contribute to the overseas perceptions of certain countries (Atkinson, 2010;

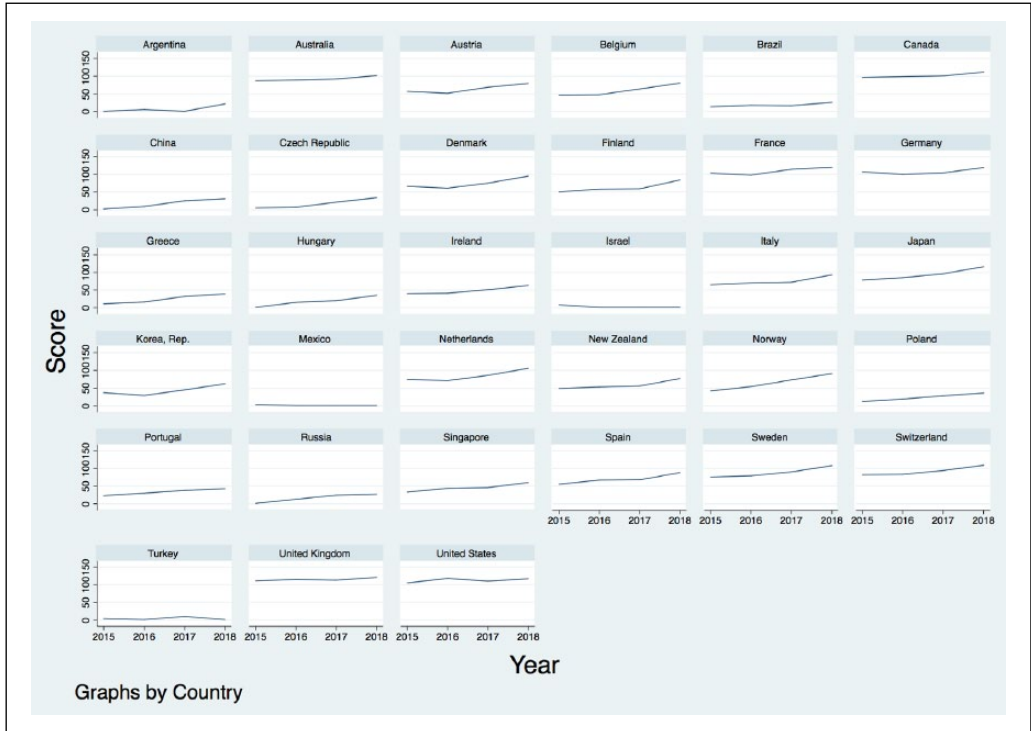


Figure 6. The Portland 30 Index score by country (2015–2018). McClory, J. (2015). *The Soft Power 30*, 2015. London: Portland; McClory, J. (2016). *The Soft Power 30*, 2016. London: Portland; McClory, J. (2017). *The Soft Power 30*, 2017. London: Portland; McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30*, 2018. London: Portland.

Olberding & Olberding, 2010). However, the three indicators that are selected to showcase the quality of scholarship and international attraction are found to ingrain an Anglo-American hegemony in the education domain. For instance, researchers found that the variables employed in international university rankings are slanted towards the educational philosophy and the education model of its initiating country (Kaba, 2012). In the case of *The Times Higher Education* ranking, criteria such as using English language publication as a proxy of research impact ends up privileging Anglo-American academic institutions as the ‘good’ and admirable examples (Altbach, 1987). That is to say, to embed *The Times Higher Education* ranking in the Portland 30 Index is to equate resemblance to the Anglo-American education model as a signal of educational attractiveness (Lo, 2011). The resulting soft power benchmark thus legitimizes the hegemonic knowledge production and distribution system associated with western dominance.

Treatment of data. In examining the Portland 30 Index reports from 2015 to 2018, we found an acute fluctuation of rankings during this period (see Table 1). For example, the United States ranked third in 2015, first in 2016, third in 2017 and fourth in 2018. There are two reasons that can account for this shift of ranking: one is substantial change in the referent, namely, changes in soft power resources or the public perception of the United States; and the other is the optimization of the model of representation – in this case, the change is either on the data or in the model design (see Table 2). When we examined the scores of 35 countries appearing in the ranking, we found a

Table 1. Rankings and scores of countries from the Portland 30 Index reports, 2015–2018.

Country	Rank				Score			
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2015	2016	2017	2018
The United Kingdom	1	2	2	1	75.61	75.97	75.72	80.55
Germany	2	3	4	3	73.89	72.6	73.67	78.87
The United States	3	1	3	4	73.68	77.96	75.02	77.8
France	4	5	1	2	73.64	72.14	75.75	80.14
Canada	5	4	5	6	71.71	72.53	72.9	75.7
Australia	6	6	8	10	68.92	69.29	70.15	72.91
Switzerland	7	8	7	7	67.52	67.65	70.45	74.96
Japan	8	7	6	5	66.86	67.78	71.66	76.22
Sweden	9	9	9	8	66.49	66.97	69.32	74.77
Netherlands	10	10	10	9	65.21	64.14	67.89	73.79
Denmark	11	13	11	11	63.20	62.57	65.48	70.7
Italy	12	11	13	12	63.09	63.79	64.7	70.4
Austria	13	17	14	17	62.00	60.99	63.75	67.23
Spain	14	12	15	14	61.70	63.47	63.57	69.11
Finland	15	14	17	15	60.19	62.13	62.37	67.71
New Zealand	16	16	18	18	60.00	61.51	61.96	66.68
Belgium	17	18	16	16	58.85	59.7	62.8	67.25
Norway	18	15	12	13	57.96	61.64	65.2	69.6
Ireland	19	20	19	19	55.61	57.02	60.62	62.78
Korea, Rep.	20	22	21	20	54.32	51.44	58.4	62.75
Singapore	21	19	20	21	52.50	58.09	58.55	62.44
Portugal	22	21	22	22	48.97	51.79	54.43	57.98
Brazil	23	24	29	29	46.63	47.69	47.41	50.69
Poland	24	23	24	24	46.50	48.07	51.27	54.14
Greece	25	25	23	23	45.73	46.98	52.17	54.63
Israel	26	–	–	–	44.51	–	–	–
Czech Republic	27	29	27	26	43.26	44.43	48.73	52.64
Turkey	28	–	30	–	42.55	–	45.35	–
Mexico	29	–	–	–	42.52	–	–	–
China	30	28	25	27	40.85	45.04	50.5	51.85
Argentina	–	30	–	30	–	44.17	–	48.89
Russia	–	27	26	28	–	46.58	49.6	51.1
Hungary	–	26	28	25	–	46.96	48.16	53.49

Source: McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30*, 2018. London: Portland.

simultaneous rise in the scores of all the countries from 2017 to 2018 (see Figure 6). However, there is little possibility that the soft power of all the countries being evaluated suddenly increased in 2018; therefore, we suspect the volatility of ranking is attributed to the instability of the model, which is manifested in two forms.

Table 2. Changes in index-building of the Portland 30 Index, 2015–2018.

Year	2016	2017	2018
Changes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Updated data with latest sources; 2. Added new metrics; 3. Assigned different weighting to the seven categories of subjective data 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Updated data with latest sources; 2. Added new metrics and drop some metrics; 3. Enhanced the data normalization process in order to mitigate distortions from a small number of metrics; 4. Developed a system for weighting the objective data differently using regression analysis 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Updated data with latest sources; 2. Comprised three alterations to objective data; 3. Updating the weighting for the international polling data

Source: McClory, J. (2016). *The Soft Power 30, 2016*. London: Portland. P32; McClory, J. (2017). *The Soft Power 30, 2017*. London: Portland. P34; McClory, J. (2018). *The Soft Power 30, 2018*. London: Portland. P63.

First of all, we consider that addition, alteration, and reduction of specific indicators in the metric package would contribute to the shifting soft power ranking during the period 2015–2018. This may influence the ranking of a certain country without any substantial change in soft power policy or public perception. To name an illustrative example, the addition of the *Michelin Guide* into the Cultural sub-index co-occurs with the ascendancy of France’s ranking from fifth in 2016 to first in 2017. ‘Culinary culture’ in the 2015 and 2016 reports was assessed purely with polling data. However, in 2017, the Soft Power 30 Index added the number of Michelin starred restaurants by country as an indicator of culinary attractiveness. Despite the prevalence of the *Michelin Guide* and the reputation of French cuisine, adding the *Michelin Guide* as a metric of Cultural attractiveness has the effect of artificially elevating France’s ranking. The *Michelin Guide* or *Red Guide* has been shown to shape ‘global fine dining culture’ with the ideal of French *haute cuisine*. Research has found that the distribution of Michelin recognized restaurant network is considerably Europe-centric, with most of the three-starred restaurants having chefs born in France (Lane, 2011). The *Michelin Guide* can be construed as biased not only because that it assumes the supremacy of French culinary culture (Mennell, 1996) but also because of its lack of authority to appreciate the broader genres of world cuisine. Despite its footprint in Japanese and Hong Kong, the *Michelin Guide* did not enter the Mainland Chinese market until 2016, when it made its debut in Shanghai. In its last report in 2019, the only three-starred restaurant in Shanghai is Ultraviolet, which was launched by the renowned French chef Paul Pairet (Michelin, 2018). From this sense, Michelin Guide can hardly qualify as a neutral cosmopolitan culinary evaluation, but rather is a Euro-centric restaurant recommendation system that by no means reflects the real culinary soft power resources of all countries.

Furthermore, we found that the weighting of each category (sub-index) fluctuates with the favourability polling result (see Table 3). In the three persuader reports, all the indicators within each sub-index were given equal weighting as there is ‘no justification found in the literature for weighting some variables more than others’ (McClory, 2010, 2011, 2012) However, since 2015, Portland decided to change the equal weighting method, and weigh the sub-indexes with the coefficient

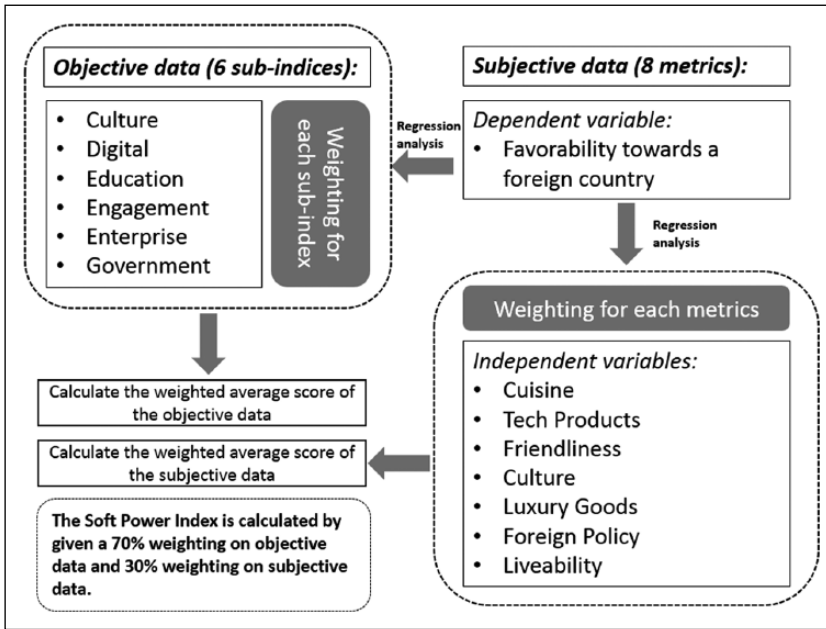


Figure 7. Summary of the Portland 30 Index's index building process.

Source: The Soft Power 30 2018. McClory, J. (2018). The Soft Power 30, 2018. London: Portland.

Table 3. Changes in weighting of the objective sub-indices in the Portland 30 Index, 2015–2018.

		Culture	Digital	Education	Engagement	Enterprise	Government
Portland 30 Index 2015	Equal weighting of each sub-index	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%
Portland 30 Index 2016		16.67%	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%	16.67%
Portland 30 Index 2017	Weighting each category differently	8.90%	9.80%	11.60%	12.60%	12.50%	14.60%
Portland 30 Index 2018	using a regression analysis with polling data of favourability as dependent variable	12.70%	14.00%	16.60%	17.90%	18.00%	20.80%

Source: McClory, J. (2015). The Soft Power 30, 2015. London: Portland; McClory, J. (2016). The Soft Power 30, 2016. London: Portland; McClory, J. (2017). The Soft Power 30, 2017. London: Portland; McClory, J. (2018). The Soft Power 30, 2018. London: Portland.

derived from regression method. Specifically, regression was run with the favourability polling as the dependent variable, and the remaining seven metrics of the subjective data/six sub-indices of the objective data as the independent variables (see Figure 7). The results of the regression analysis give each of the independent variables a 'coefficient', which is used as the 'weighting' to construct the value of the subjective/objective component of the soft power index. This favourability-based

Table 4. Summary of key elements and rationale of CNIGS (2013–2017).

Year	Sample size	Number of countries	List of countries	Rationale
2013	3017	7	Developed countries: the United States, the United Kingdom (2) Developing countries: China, India, Brazil, Russia, South Africa (5)	Geographic regions; Stages of economic development; Including five BRICS countries
2014	4500	9	Developed countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia (4) Developing countries: China, India, Brazil, Russia, South Africa (5)	Geographic regions; Stages of economic development
2015	9500	19	Developed countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, South Korea, Japan, Australia (9) Developed countries: China, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Turkey, Mexico, Russia (10)	G20 member states
2016–2017	11,000	22	Developed countries: the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Spain, Netherlands, Chile (12) Developing countries: China, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Turkey, Mexico, Russia (10)	Geographical regions

BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; CNIGS: China National Image Global Survey.
 Source: China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration. (2013). 2013 China Global National Image Global Survey. China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration; China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration. (2014). 2014 China Global National Image Global Survey. China Foreign languages Publishing Administration; China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration. (2015). 2015 China Global National Image Global Survey. China Foreign languages Publishing Administration; China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration. (2018). 2016-17 China Global National Image Global Survey. China Foreign languages Publishing Administration.

weighting system is neither theoretically nor empirically sound. Theoretically, this method equated soft power with favourability, ignoring the chronicity for public opinion to form and the complicated process for favourability to transfer to policy changing. Empirically, we question the validity of assigning weightings with the regression-derived coefficients to describe the relationship between soft power resources and soft power effects.

In the next section, we will consider the measurement method developed by the largest developing and emerging state, China, and reveal the strategy for China to counter the discursive and cultural hegemony embedded in western soft power benchmarking.

CNIGS

Source of data. Compared to the Portland 30 Index, which incorporates both objective data and subjective data, CNIGS relies exclusively on subjective data generated by opinion polls. What it shares with the Portland 30 Index, however, is the ever-growing size of sampling, which increased from 3017 in the 2013 report to 11,000 in the 2016–2017 report. This speedy expansion of

sampling could be explained by the heavy soft power investment from the Chinese government under the umbrella project of ‘Tell China’s Stories Well’ (Lim & Bergin, 2018). Since 2014, CNIGS settled on a sampling strategy to collect 500 questionnaires from each country. With the number of nations increased from 9 (in 2014) to 22 (in 2017), the sampling size expanded proportionately from 4500 to 11,000 (see Table 4). The expanding collection of nations, however, is not a random process. The authors found three considerations underlying the sampling of nations: (1) representativeness of geographical regions, (2) stages of economic development and (3) membership of emerging intergovernmental organizations.

In regards to geographical distribution, CNIGS includes at least one country for each main continent, Asia, Europe, Oceania, North America, South America, and Africa to ensure global inclusivity. The first report issued in 2014 put the opinion polls generated by Chinese domestic citizens in parallel with overseas poll results to highlight the difference between external evaluation and self-evaluation. The survey conducted on domestic public continues in the following research, though the results stop being disclosed since 2015. However, by examining the 2014 report, we realized that the domestic survey can be utilized to figure out Chinese domestic citizens’ self-identity.

In addition, the rationale of integrating both developed and developing countries is manifest in a relatively even composition of nation-states. The ratio between developed and developing countries has fluctuated around 1:1, with the number of developing countries superseding that of developed states in 2014 (4:5) and 2015 (9:10), while the pattern was reversed in 2017 (12:10) (see Table 4). This ratio matters because the overall scores of ‘overseas average’ rating will be slanted towards over-represented groups – which is either developed or developing countries.

Last but not least, the membership of key emerging international organizations provides a way for corresponding countries to enter the sampling basket of CNIGS (see Table 4). The emerging international organizations refer to BRICS and G20 in this case. First, the five members of BRICS have been included since 2013, which reflects the salience of BRICS cooperation mechanisms in China’s perspective. The emphasis on BRICS can be linked to China’s self-identity as a developing country. As has been reiterated by Chinese government and media, China considers itself as a developing country; China will remain a reliable and sincere friend to developing countries regardless of the changes of international realities (Han, 2018; Xinhua, 2018b). The positive attitude towards BRICS countries not only derives from the influence that these countries exert on regional economies and the international economy (Ding, 2018), but it also recognizes the institutional infrastructure under the BRICS umbrella such as the ‘New Development Bank’ and ‘BRICS+N’, which underpins China’s growing significance in global governance. In this sense, monitoring the public opinion of BRICS countries will inform China’s foreign policy in the management of overseas interest and global leadership building.

Selection of indicator. While it is a comprehensive opinion poll, CNIGS does not include any specific metrics. However, the questions that are listed in the report can be viewed as the potential indicators of China’s soft power measurement. The authors identified 24 questions from the CNIGS 2016–2017 report and coded the questions according to the definition of six sub-indices and matched these with the subjective categories in the Portland 30 Index (see Appendix 3) to distinguish the similarities and differences between the two reports. We found the compositional structure of CNIGS highly resembles that of the Portland 30 Index, with 74.9% of the questions falling into the four objective sub-indices and one subjective question – general favourability. What is worth noting are the two emerging new categories, Communication and Relations, which each

include two questions. The Relation indicator can be defined as the questions that explore people's general attitude towards their country's diplomatic relations with China. As Lock (2010) has emphasized, soft power is a relational concept and thus should not be conflated with structural forms of power. The fact that people from different cultural backgrounds will develop divergent attitudes towards certain cultural resources means that the evaluation of soft power must take into account the intersubjectivity of soft power.

The communication category aims to capture the main channels for overseas citizens to access the soft power of a certain country. The creation of this category, the author argues, fills in the gap of soft power assessment by stretching the object of evaluation from resources, and effects to the projection channel. Although the Portland soft power index has put both resources and effects under examination, it leaves the mechanisms of soft power projection underdeveloped. Nevertheless, how and to what extent soft power can reach the audience is as important as the content of soft power. By posing the question 'What are the main channels for you to learn about China', the survey unveils the main information sources that shape overseas opinions of China. This approach provides a self-evaluation of the effects of China's cultural diplomacy, external communication, and international trade. As the 2018 report indicates, made-in-China products play an important role for overseas citizens to understand China. However, China's new media abroad seems to fail to tell Chinese stories well considering the huge gap between government investment and the low rate of viewership (China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, 2018).

Treatment on data. CNIGS did not normalize the survey results to make the scores for each question comparable, for instance, with the Portland 30 Index. While the interviewees of Portland soft power index were expected to rate their attitude on an 11-point scale, where the positivity increase from 0 to 10, CNIGS employed multiple survey questions and scales of measurement. When it came to the image of China, such as perceptions of China's contribution to global governance and performance in domestic governance, the 11-point scale was also used by CNIGS to test the general impression of China among the overseas population. Nevertheless, the way that CNIGS bridges the gap between soft power resources and soft power effects is by exploring the cognitive frames that mediate foreign citizens' interpretation of China. This type of information can be best captured by multiple choice or open-ended questions. In this case, CNIGS developed a series of multiple-choice questions to map out the specific reasons underlying changes in public opinion. For instance, after collecting the impression of China with a scale of 0–10, CNIGS posed a further question to probe the reasons why people give the scores. It turns out that 'A big oriental country with a rich history and full of charm', 'A contributor to global development' and 'A responsible major country and an active participant in global governance' are the main explanations. However, we do have reasons to suspect some flaws in the comprehensiveness of the options provided. The questions and the options are designed in a way that favors positive over negative perceptions. The third type of questions is designed in a Likert-type scale fashion. Similar to rating-scale questions, Likert-type scales can be used to measure the level of attitude in a more flexible way. By using this method, China's role in BRICS is shown to be demonstrably positive.

Another contribution that CNIGS makes to the soft power measurement is to present the evaluative attitude against the respective age group, which indicates how the same soft power policy works on people of different ages. In CNIGS's report, most of the data were presented in three age categories: 18–35 (young), 36–50 (middle-age) and 51–65 (elderly). The last presidential election in the United States and Brexit has demonstrated that the public evaluation of public policy and foreign entities does not only vary along with cultural backgrounds and economic status, but among age demographics. Monitoring the differences in how people of different ages perceive a certain country will not only

inform an 'age-customized' soft power policy, but can trace the fluctuation of soft power effects in the long term. For instance, among the general overseas citizens, although the perception of Chinese medicine and food is positively correlated with age, the amount of knowledge that people have about China demonstrates the reverse trend. Young people tend to get to know China from sources apart from traditional Chinese culture. Moreover, people's perception of certain countries can be precipitated into stereotypes which are formed and maintained in the long run. Therefore, by checking the difference among age groups, it is possible for the soft power report to trace the soft power effects both in the long term and in a retrospective fashion. In other words, though the survey has been only conducted in the past 6 years, it can actually trace the shift of China's soft power in the past half a century.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the measurement of soft power is far from a neutral scientific process, but rather a symbolic site where ideologies, values and interests are concealed behind tables and graphs. This article argues that the symbolic embodiment of political bias is manifested in three mechanisms: (1) the selection of data, (2) the selection of indicators and (3) the treatment of data. The data that are included in any research should be viewed as a source of a river; if the sampling itself is biased, then it is impossible to lead to scientifically sound results. We found that the type of data, that is, objective and subjective data, determines which aspect of soft power is being measured. While the Portland 30 Index adopted a hybrid approach that synthesizes subjective opinion polls and objective data, CNIGS relied solely on opinion polls. The concentration of Portland's source of data on dominant western institutions reproduces western dominance in international knowledge production hierarchy while CNIGS' reliance on independently collected subjective data serves to erase the dependence of the Global South on the Global North.


The indicators are still the most explicit way for values to be embedded in the measurement of soft power. In the Portland 30 Index, American democratic, neoliberal values and Westernized modernization perspectives are embedded in the selection of indicators. Although sharing the majority of categories of soft power with the Portland 30 Index, CNIGS puts an emphasis on examining the communicational and relational aspects of soft power. Moreover, the indicators of CNIGS feature China's characteristics, making it harder to be applied to measure the soft power performance of other nations. Last but not least, this research finds the trans-annual comparison of Portland index rankings unreliable because of the volatility of the underlying model, while CNIGS's classification of data according to age and development status provides an alternative model to capture soft power effects in different demographic groups. In one word, on the battlefield of soft power benchmarking, the western established countries and emerging powers are competing fiercely to normalize and legitimize the political values and international status that they harbour.

Finally, the authors recognize the limitations on the comparability of the two cases, with one as a comprehensive benchmark/ranking and the other as a national image survey. However, we consider that such differences do not preclude a comparison of the political intent, cultural constraints and value bias via methodological analysis. For further research, the authors recommend further comparisons, such as comparing CNIGS with other nation-specific national image surveys and comparing the Portland 30 Index with other rankings such as Emerging Markets Soft Power Index.

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Appendix I

Summary of metrics in Portland 30 Index.

Metric	Indicator
Culture	Total number of tourist arrivals
	Average spend per tourist (total tourism receipts divided by the number of tourists)
	Number of films appearing in major film festivals
	Number of foreign correspondents in the country
	Number of UNESCO World Heritage sites
	Annual museum attendance of global top 100
	Size of the music market
	Number of top 10 albums in foreign countries
	Olympic medals (Summer 2016/Winter 2018)
	FIFA Ranking (Men's)
	Quality of national air carrier
	Michelin starred restaurants
Digital	Power Language Index (PLI)
	Facebook followers for heads of state (outside of the country)
	Facebook engagement score for heads of state or government (outside of the country)
	Facebook followers for the ministry of foreign affairs (outside of the country)
	Facebook engagement score for the ministry of foreign affairs (outside of the country)
	Number of Internet users per 100 inhabitants
	Secure Internet servers per 1 million people
	Mobile phones per 100 people
	Internet bandwidth (thousands Mbps)
	Government Online Services Index
	E-participation Index
	Fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people
Education	Average of OECD PISA science, maths and reading scores
	Gross tertiary educational enrolment rate
	Number of top global universities
	Number of academic science journal articles published
	Number of international students in the country
Engagement	Spending on education as a percentage of GDP
	Total overseas development aid
	Overseas development aid/GNI
	Number of embassies abroad
	R&D spending as a percentage of GDP
	Number of consulates general abroad
	Number of permanent missions to multilateral organizations
	Membership of international organizations
	Asylum seekers per 1000 people
	Number of diplomatic cultural missions
	Number of countries a citizen can visit visa-free
	Size of weekly audience of the state broadcaster
	Environmental Performance Index (EPI)

Appendix I. (Continued)

Metric	Indicator
Enterprise	Global patents led (percentage of GDP)
	WEF Competitiveness Index
	Foreign direct investment as a percentage of GDP
	Heritage Economic Freedom Index score
	Corruption Perceptions Index score
	R&D spending as a percentage of GDP
	Global Innovation Index score
	Global Talent
	World Bank Ease of Doing Business Report
	Unemployment rate as a percentage of labor force
	Hi-tech exports as a percentage of manufactured exports
Government	Log of business start-up costs as a percentage of GNI per capita
	Human Development Index score
	Freedom House Index score
	Number of think tanks in the country
	Gender Equality Index score
	Economist Democracy Index score
	Size of the shadow economy as a percentage of GDP
	Homicides per capita
	World Bank Voice and Accountability Index score
	Capital punishment carried out in 2016
	Income inequality - Gini coefficient
	World Economic Forum Trust in Government Index score
	Press Freedom Index score
	World Bank Government Effectiveness score
	World Bank Good Governance Regulation Quality score
	World Bank Good Governance Rule of Law score
	Population well-being

Source: The Soft Power 30 2018.McClory, J. (2018). The Soft Power 30, 2018. London: Portland.

Appendix 2

Codebook: Geographical distribution of sources of data in Portland 30 Index.

Location	Definition	Example sources
United States	The headquarter of the organization is located in the United States	World Bank
United Kingdom	The headquarter of the organization is located in the United Kingdom	Skytrax
France	The headquarter of the organization is located in France	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
Switzerland	The headquarter of the organization is located in Switzerland	International Olympic Committee
Australia	The headquarter of the organization is located in Australia	Lowy Institute
Spain	The headquarter of the organization is located in Spain	UN World Tourism Organization

Source: The Soft Power 30 2018.McClory, J. (2018). The Soft Power 30, 2018. London: Portland.

Appendix 3

Codebook: CNIGS survey questions classifications (similarities and differences in categories compared to the Portland 30 Index).

	Categories of CNIGS	Number of questions	Examples questions in CNIGS	Comparison to Portland 30 Index
Categories similar to Portland 30	Culture	6	What is the image of China in your eyes	Similar. In the Portland 30 Index, culture is treated as objective data and defined as: It captures the quality and the international reach and appeal of a country's cultural production.
	Engagement	5	Please evaluate China's contribution to global governance/ performance in domestic governance since 2016.	Similar. In the Portland 30 Index, engagement is treated as objective data and defined as: It captures the ability of states to engage with international audiences, drive collaboration, and ultimately shape global outcomes.
	Enterprise	5	How do you view Chinese enterprises' entry and development in your country?	Similar. In the Portland 30 Index, enterprise is treated as objective data and defined as: It captures the relative attractiveness of a country's economic model in terms of its competitiveness, capacity for innovation, and ability to foster enterprise and commerce.
	Government	2	How do you view China's ruling party?	Similar. In the Portland 30 Index, government is treated as objective data and defined as: It assesses a state's political values, public institutions, and major public policy outcomes
	Favourability	2	What is the image of China in your eyes	Similar. In the Portland 30 Index, culture is treated as subjective data and defined as: Favourability towards foreign countries
CNIGS's unique categories	Communication	2	What are the main channels for you to learn about China?	Different. CNIGS's exclusive indicator: What are the channels for soft power projection or how does the overseas audience access information about a certain country.
	Relation	2	How is your country's relationship with China?	Different. CNIGS's exclusive indicator: It captures people's attitude towards its interaction with China.
	Total number of questions	24		

CNIGS: China National Image Global Survey.