

State-Driven vs. Market-Led: A Comparative Analysis of Soft Power Projection in the United States and China

Authors: Ananya Kukreja, Isa Mathew , Jay Kalra

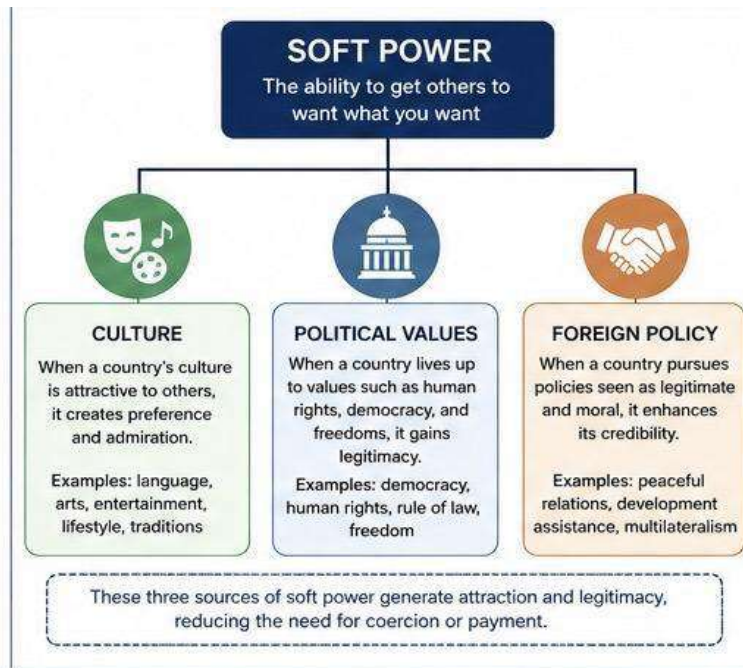
Abstract

This paper examines and compares the soft power strategies of the United States of America and China in the twenty-first century while focusing on the role of digital platforms, algorithms and influencer culture as instruments of soft power projection. Using Joseph Nye's framework of soft power as the primary lens, the study conducts a qualitative comparative analysis of China's state-driven model, characterised by centralised content control and platform governance, and the market-led model in the United States of America, which operates through decentralised private-sector actors and influencer economies. The paper focuses on this comparison prominently within the geopolitical context of the South Asian region, where both nations constantly compete for cultural and political influence.

Keywords: Soft power; United States of America; China; Joseph Nye; TikTok; ByteDance; Influencer marketing; Algorithms; Digital diplomacy; Platform governance

1. Introduction

Since Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of soft power in 1990, it has remained central to understanding twenty-first-century geopolitics. Writing in the aftermath of the Cold War, Nye described soft power — the ability of a nation to attract and co-opt rather than coerce — as a distinctive and increasingly important form of international influence (Nye,1990). The following decades saw the United States emerge as the dominant soft-power actor in world affairs, leveraging its culture, institutions, and ideas to shape global preferences.



Yet today's multipolar order presents a more contested picture. China has emerged as a formidable rival to the United States, deploying structurally varied soft power strategies to extend its influence, particularly across South Asia — a region of considerable strategic importance to both powers. This study applies Joseph Nye's soft power theory as an analytical framework to compare, in a structured and systematic way, the strategies employed by each country and their relative effectiveness.

The paper proceeds as follows: it first reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature and outlines the methodology employed, before conducting a structured comparative analysis of each country's soft power strategies, with particular attention to the digital sphere. Broader conclusions about each model's effectiveness are drawn in the final section. Citations and conclusions will be developed in a subsequent draft.

1.1 Objective and Rationale

The United States–China comparison is especially instructive given the scale of each nation's soft power efforts and the fundamental structural differences between their respective approaches. The United States operates a largely market-led model, in which soft power emerges organically through the activities of private companies, cultural industries, and individual creators. China, by contrast, operates a predominantly state-driven model, in which government agencies directly fund and direct cultural and diplomatic initiatives abroad. Understanding the effectiveness, limitations, and conditions of success for each model yields significant insights for the broader study of international relations and foreign policy.

Despite the considerable body of scholarship on soft power, relatively few studies have systematically compared these two structural approaches in tandem. Most existing analyses adopt

a narrow national or regional lens, without adequately accounting for the institutional and ideological frameworks that shape each country's approach to soft power projection. By placing the state-led and market-led models in direct structural comparison, using South Asia as a primary regional lens, this paper seeks to contribute to a richer understanding of how soft power functions in practice — beyond the level of abstract theory. A secondary aim is to identify the conditions under which each approach tends to succeed or falter.

The rapid rise of digital platforms and social media has introduced a new and consequential dimension to this analysis. Influence is now increasingly mediated through what people watch, share, and engage with online — a fundamentally different dynamic from traditional modes of cultural diplomacy. Private companies and content creators have become significant actors in shaping how foreign publics perceive a nation. Any serious analysis of contemporary soft power must therefore grapple with the digital sphere, where algorithmic amplification, platform governance, and influencer culture have all become geopolitically significant.

1.2 Key Definitions

The following definitions clarify how key terms are used throughout this analysis.

1.2.1 Soft Power

Nye (2004) defined soft power as the ability to get others to want what you want — that is, to influence the preferences of foreign actors through attraction rather than coercion. For the purposes of this study, soft power is defined as a nation's capacity to shape the behaviour of other actors in the international system through the appeal of its culture, political values, and foreign policies.

1.2.2 State-Driven and Market-Led Models

A state-driven model of soft power projection is one in which the state plays a direct role in funding and deploying cultural and diplomatic initiatives abroad, with significant central coordination of messaging and resources. A market-led model, by contrast, is one in which soft power emerges primarily from the activities of non-state actors — private companies, cultural industries, media organisations, and individual creators — with the state playing a facilitative rather than directive role.

These two constructs are treated in this paper as analytical ideal types. In practice, both China and the United States exhibit elements of each model; however, the underlying institutional logic of each country's approach differs substantially, and it is those structural differences that this analysis seeks to examine.

2. Literature Review and Methodology

2.1 Soft Power Theory

Joseph Nye's soft power framework serves as the primary analytical lens for this study. In his foundational work, Nye (1990,2004) identified three principal sources of soft power: a country's culture, its political values, and its foreign policies.

He argues that each of these sources is capable of generating genuine attraction when perceived as legitimate and credible by foreign audiences. The underlying logic of the framework is that nations which succeed in making others want what they want can reduce their dependence on costly hard power instruments such as military force or economic coercion. Crucially, Nye's framework suggests that naturally generated, organic influence is generally more durable and effective than soft power that is deliberately and transparently manufactured.

Nye's framework is not without its critics. Scholars such as Mattern (2005) have questioned whether 'attraction' can be treated as a measurable phenomenon independent of pre-existing power relations that contribute to the legitimacy and credibility of the influence. This paper does not attempt to resolve this conceptual debate; the argument is simply acknowledged as a limitation inherent to any soft-power based analysis

Beyond Nye's framework, Manor (2019) has argued that global digitalisation has fundamentally shifted the focus of soft power away from institutions like embassies and cultural centres and towards digital platforms and algorithmic networks that states cannot fully control. Additionally, Gorwa (2019) introduced the concept of platform governance to describe the ways in which private technology companies, rather than states, exercise more power over the visibility of actors and narratives online. These two contributions suggest that both the Chinese and American models of soft power now operate within an infrastructure that is neither entirely controlled by the state nor by private actors. This dimension is not the primary focus of the paper, but has been introduced here as a relevant limitation to the theoretical framework.

2.2 Existing Scholarship

Existing scholarship on Chinese soft power consistently highlights a significant gap between the scale of Beijing's investment in soft power instruments and the relatively modest returns in terms of genuine international attraction. Kurlantzick (2007) documents China's coordinated cultural strategy — encompassing Confucius Institutes, educational exchange programmes, and state-directed media — as deliberate instruments of foreign policy. Scholars focused on South Asia have noted that China's soft power operates in close alignment with its strategic and economic objectives, making it difficult for recipient nations to disentangle developmental benefit from political obligation. The Belt and Road Initiative is the paradigmatic example: its infrastructure investments generate dependence and compliance, but fall well short of the genuine attraction that Nye's framework requires, thereby limiting the depth of influence China can cultivate.

However, this reading of China's soft power initiatives as underperforming has itself been opposed. Walker and Ludwig's (2017) concept of 'sharp power' implies that applying Nye's framework to Chinese influence activities might be conceptually misleading. The term 'sharp

power’ is used to describe authoritarian influence techniques that, while not openly coercive, are also not dependent on genuine attraction. On this account, China’s strategies are argued to be a categorically different mode of influence that focuses less on attraction and more on censorship of information and shaping narratives.

The literature on American soft power reflects both its historical dominance and growing concerns about its long-term durability. The market-led model has historically derived its persuasive authority from an appearance of authenticity: American cultural influence through Hollywood, leading universities, and Silicon Valley emerged without direct government orchestration, and foreign audiences have generally perceived it as such. This authenticity, however, has been questioned. Historians of Cold War cultural diplomacy like Saunders (1999) have documented covert US government funding of ‘independent’ cultural and intellectual institutions in order to preserve the appearance of authenticity. Alongside, Nye (2004) himself has acknowledged that the gap between America’s stated values and its actual foreign policy conduct — particularly in the context of the Iraq War and its approach to multilateral institutions — has significantly damaged the credibility that effective soft power requires. In South Asia, US engagement has historically been episodic and transactional, driven by strategic necessity rather than sustained bilateral investment, further weakening America’s soft power foundations in the region.

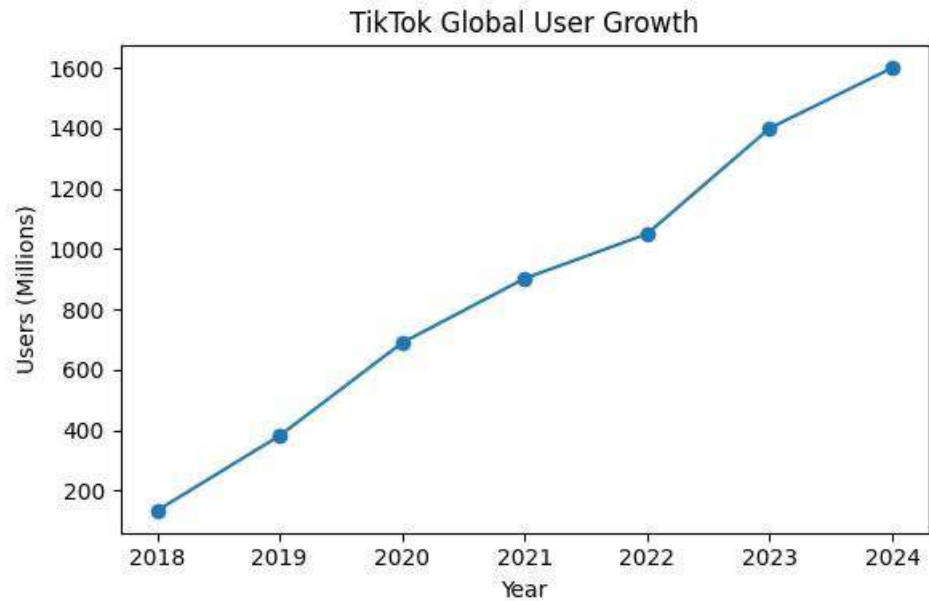
This paper retains Nye’s framework as its primary analytical lens since it allows for direct structural comparison between the US and China models, involving an assumption that China’s soft power strategies do, in fact, belong in a soft power analysis.

2.3 Research Gap and Methodology

Direct structural comparisons between the state-driven and market-led models, applied specifically to the South Asian context, remain limited in the existing literature. Most comparative work in this domain focuses on measurable outputs — survey data on national image, counts of cultural institutions — rather than the institutional logic that produces differential outcomes. This makes it difficult to draw reliable analytical conclusions about why effectiveness varies across contexts and actor types. This paper addresses that gap by placing both models in a structured parallel comparison, with South Asia as the primary regional lens.

The analysis employs a qualitative comparative case study design. Data are drawn from peer-reviewed academic literature, policy reports from think tanks, and official government documents. The conclusions are therefore analytical and interpretive in character, rather than statistically definitive.

3. The Algorithm and the Agenda: China’s Use of TikTok and Influencers as Soft Power Instruments



Thirty years ago, when Nye (2004) coined the term ‘soft power,’ global influence was projected through diplomacy, cinema, international broadcasting, and cultural institutions. Today, the most consequential arena for geopolitical influence is increasingly algorithmic. TikTok — owned by Beijing-based ByteDance and commanding over one billion active users worldwide — has emerged as one of the most sophisticated, and most contested, instruments of soft power in the contemporary international order.

What distinguishes TikTok’s architecture from predecessor social platforms is the radical power of its recommendation engine. A video from an entirely unknown account can reach millions of users within hours, bypassing the follower networks and editorial filters that govern content distribution on older platforms. This structure means that the authority which governs the algorithm effectively determines what entire national populations see, share, and discuss. The implications extend well beyond data privacy: the deeper geopolitical question is whose version of reality receives algorithmic amplification, and whose is quietly deprioritised.

The legal foundation of that concern lies in Article 7 of China’s National Intelligence Law (2017), which compels any organisation incorporated under Chinese law to support, assist in, and cooperate with state intelligence work (National Intelligence Law of the People’s Republic of China, 2017, Art. 7). ByteDance is such an organisation. The company has consistently denied sharing foreign user data with the Chinese government; however, leaked recordings from internal TikTok meetings, reported by Baker-White (2022) for BuzzFeed News, revealed that engineers based in China had routine access to American user data. That disclosure accelerated legislative action in the United States, culminating in the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (2024), which required ByteDance to divest TikTok’s US operations or face a ban.

Yet the data exfiltration debate, for all its political urgency, addresses only the narrower dimension of TikTok's geopolitical significance. The more structurally consequential soft power question concerns what content the platform promotes and what it suppresses. Research by Zhang (2020) at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Stanford Internet Observatory has documented consistent patterns: keywords relating to the Tiananmen Square massacre, Uyghur detention, and Taiwan independence receive reduced algorithmic visibility, while content portraying China's economic development and cultural vitality performs disproportionately well. Adding to this, a study by Network Contagion Research Institute (2024) quantifies the pro-China vs. Anti-China content in TikTok search results (61-93% vs ~5%). TikTok has attributed some of these patterns to moderation errors; critics have observed that the errors are remarkably consistent in their political direction. Beyond algorithmic asymmetry, China has deployed both domestic and foreign influencers as vectors of narrative construction. State-linked content networks — collectively termed 'Spamouflage Dragon' by DiResta et al. (2020) at the Stanford Internet Observatory — produce multilingual content designed to mimic organic, grassroots commentary while seeding pro-CCP talking points. These operations are notable for their aesthetic sophistication: they employ casual phrasing, personal storytelling, and emotionally resonant visuals, deliberately engineered to avoid the appearance of propaganda.

Foreign influencers represent a subtler, and in several respects more effective, dimension of this strategy. Human Rights Watch (2023) documented cases of Western content creators receiving undisclosed payments, complimentary travel, and accommodation from entities linked to the Chinese state, in exchange for producing favourable coverage of contested regions such as Xinjiang — without disclosing these arrangements to their audiences. The resulting videos depicted thriving, culturally vibrant landscapes and accumulated millions of views, while making no reference to the detention facilities documented by United Nations investigators. Chinese state media then amplified these videos as evidence of authentic foreign perspectives.

The existing regulatory frameworks were not designed to address these mechanisms. Foreign agent registration statutes require demonstrable compensation from an identifiable foreign principal. Advertising disclosure rules were designed for conventional brand partnerships, not state-directed influence operations. And neither framework touches what is arguably the most structurally insidious mechanism of all: the creator who receives no payment but learns, through the platform's own incentive architecture, that content favourable to China simply performs better. No handler is required. The market — engineered by the algorithm — does the work.

The implications reach beyond any single platform. TikTok has exposed a structural asymmetry at the heart of the current digital order: China's domestic internet is comprehensively closed to foreign-owned platforms, while Chinese-owned platforms have operated freely in open democratic societies. This asymmetry has generated serious academic and policy arguments for reciprocity as a governing principle of digital trade, though such a position sits uneasily with liberal commitments to free information flows.

What is clear is that soft power has been simultaneously democratised in its delivery and radically concentrated in its control. The user scrolling through a feed of travel vlogs and lifestyle content is, in a meaningful sense, consuming a curated international-relations product — one whose curation is invisible, and whose author is unknown. That combination of scale and opacity is precisely what makes TikTok such a formidable instrument of soft power: not that it is obviously propagandistic, but that it is not obvious at all.

4. American Soft Power: Platform Dominance and Influencer Culture

The United States projects influence not only through formal diplomacy and strategic alliances, but through a dense and largely self-organising network of digital platforms, content creators, and commercial media ecosystems. In the contemporary period, American soft power has been substantially amplified by influencers commanding large global followings, who shape tastes, consumer behaviour, and political perceptions across national borders. What makes this mode of influence particularly effective is its apparent spontaneity: it presents as personal, market-driven, and culturally authentic rather than politically engineered.

4.1 Platform Power and Structural Advantage

A defining feature of American digital soft power is the United States' control of the world's dominant communication infrastructures. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and X provide the technical architecture through which cultural content circulates globally. These platforms do not merely serve as neutral conduits; their algorithmic systems determine visibility, virality, and monetisation, structurally advantaging certain types of content and creators over others. This gives the United States a foundational, if often invisible, structural advantage in soft power projection.

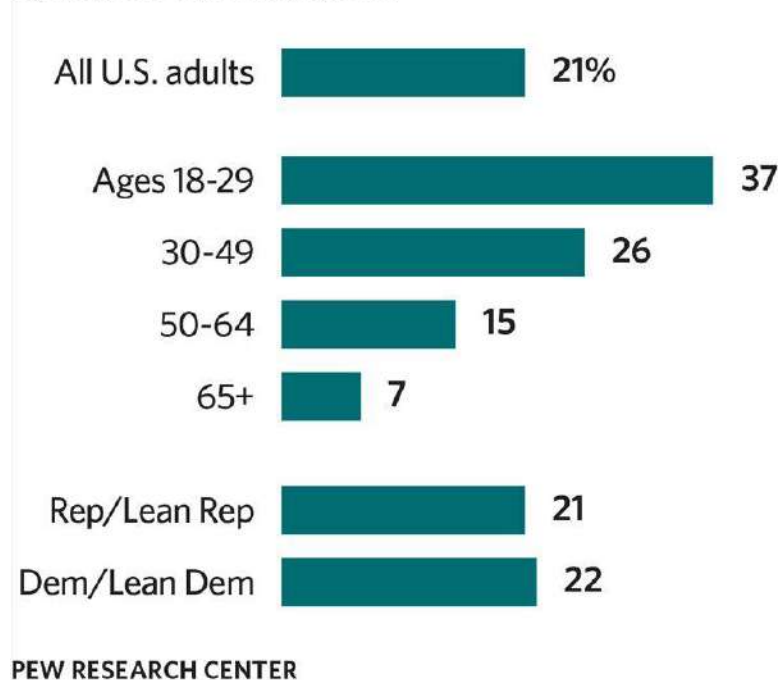
The practical consequence is that American cultural content — produced by celebrities, journalists, micro-influencers, and ordinary users — achieves global circulation through the ordinary mechanics of online behaviour. American references, aesthetics, and political framings become normalised rather than perceived as foreign impositions. This is the essence of soft power operating through market logic: influence that works precisely because it does not announce itself as influence.

4.2 Influencers as Informal Information Gatekeepers

The role of influencers extends well beyond entertainment. American digital creators have become significant informal gatekeepers of news, political opinion, and consumer aspiration. According to the Pew Research Center (2024), approximately 20% of American adults regularly obtain news from social media influencers, with the proportion substantially higher among adults under thirty. The same research found that 70 percent of respondents believed the news they received from influencers differed in meaningful ways from what they encountered in traditional media outlets, with roughly a quarter describing the difference as very significant.

Almost 4 in 10 U.S. adults under 30 get news from news influencers

% of U.S. adults who regularly get news from news influencers on social media



These findings suggest that influencers are not merely entertainers who occasionally touch on current events; they are increasingly functioning as an alternative information ecosystem — one that interprets events, frames political issues, and shapes how audiences understand society and governance. This function operates largely outside the regulatory and editorial frameworks that govern traditional journalism, producing a plural and competitive, but also epistemically fragile, information environment in which the boundary between organic opinion and coordinated influence is frequently blurred.

American digital culture thus operates as a powerful but structurally diffuse soft power instrument. Its reach is vast and its authority rests on perceptions of authenticity; yet precisely because it is decentralised, it is also difficult for the state to direct, and its outputs are not always consistent with official foreign policy objectives.

5. Comparative Analysis: Two Models of Digital Soft Power

Comparative Overview: U.S. (Market-Led) vs. China (State-Driven) Digital Soft Power		
Feature	United States (Market-Led Model)	China (State-Driven Model)
 Main Driver	Market forces, private companies, individual creators	State strategy, government guidance, policy coordination
 Key Platforms / Channels	YouTube, Instagram, Facebook (Meta), X, Netflix, Spotify	TikTok (ByteDance), WeChat, Bilibili, Chinese state media (CGTN, Xinhua)
 Content Creation	Decentralized, user-generated, influencer-driven	Coordinated narratives, state-linked influencers, censorship
 Narrative Control	Limited direct control by the state	High level of control and direction
 Perceived Authenticity	Generally higher (seen as organic and diverse)	Generally lower (seen as state-orchestrated)
 Policy Coordination	Fragmented, reactive	Centralized, strategic, long-term
 Strength	Creativity, openness, global trust in platforms and values	Scale, resources, discipline, ability to mobilize quickly
 Key Limitation	Inconsistency between values and foreign policy; polarization	Lack of trust, censorship concerns, authenticity deficit

Since Nye first conceptualised soft power, the digital transformation of global communication has fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which states project influence. Both the United States and China have adapted their respective models to this evolving information environment, albeit through markedly different institutional structures.

The United States is known for dominating the structural layer of digital soft power through multiple privately owned platforms, while China relies more on state-directed initiatives. American companies like Google, Meta, Netflix, YouTube, and others control the world’s leading social media platforms, streaming services, and digital advertising infrastructure. The United States holds a near-monopoly on the technical architecture through which global audiences consume and share culture. The values embedded in this infrastructure tend to emphasise individualism, democratic norms, and aspirational social mobility, though these values circulate as entertainment and lifestyle content rather than explicit political messaging. In contrast, China projects its government-backed initiatives which include educational exchange programmes and Belt and Road investments, using these programmes to strengthen diplomatic and economic relationships.

This contrast is evident in its cultural sphere. The United States has been benefiting from their global appeal in Hollywood, music, and digital entertainment. China's model is structurally distinct because it deploys platforms such as TikTok to extend their algorithmic reach into foreign information environments. In the cultural sphere, products such as the video game Black Myth: Wukong have demonstrated China’s capacity to project cultural narratives through commercially successful digital media, an important development suggesting that Chinese soft power is beginning to operate through market logics as well as state direction (Han, 2024). At the same time, concerns about data security, censorship, and political manipulation have significantly eroded the trust that effective soft power requires.

The comparison reveals a fundamental structural asymmetry in the digital domain. The United States operates in an open information environment in which foreign platforms are free to compete;

China operates a comprehensively closed domestic internet while its own platforms seek access to open markets abroad. This asymmetry confers a structural advantage on China in the competition for narrative influence, while simultaneously generating the political backlash that has produced TikTok bans and legislative restrictions in numerous democracies.

When comparing the two models, the American approach benefits from the legitimacy that comes with perceived authenticity and decentralisation; its chief liability is the difficulty of aligning a diffuse, market-driven system with consistent strategic objectives. China's approach benefits from central coordination and scale of investment; its chief liability is the credibility deficit that state-direction creates, particularly among audiences aware of the political context in which Chinese soft power operates. Neither model is straightforwardly superior; their relative effectiveness depends heavily on the target audience, the regional context, and the specific objective being pursued.

6. Case Studies

The comparative discussion above demonstrates that American and Chinese soft power strategies differ in both structure and execution. The geopolitical significance of these differences becomes most visible when applied to specific controversies and developments. The following case studies illustrate the growing entanglement of social media, platform governance, and global political influence.

6.1 The TikTok Ban Debate and the Politics of Platform Governance

The geopolitical stakes of TikTok's global reach were made explicit in the sustained legislative debate over its future in the United States. As a product of ByteDance, TikTok raised serious concerns in Congress about national security, data sovereignty, and the potential for foreign influence over the information environment of American citizens (Baker White, 2022). Congressional hearings and proposed legislation centred on the possibility that personal data collected from millions of users could be accessed by the Chinese government under the terms of China's National Intelligence Law.

The TikTok debate crystallised the broader technological competition between the two countries and made explicit the question of digital sovereignty — who controls the platforms that shape public opinion, and to whose benefit. The app's extraordinary popularity among young people worldwide lent the debate additional urgency, highlighting the degree to which cultural perceptions and political attitudes are now formed through algorithmically curated feeds rather than traditional media (Zhang, 2020; DiResta et al., 2020).

6.2 Influencer Content and the Construction of China's Global Image

TikTok and other social platforms have become significant arenas for constructing China's international image through lifestyle, culture, tourism, and infrastructure content. Unlike formal

diplomatic communication, influencer-produced content operates through personal narrative and visual storytelling, achieving a credibility with general audiences that government messaging rarely attains. China has exploited this dynamic strategically, both by cultivating domestic creators who present a favourable portrait of Chinese society and by enlisting foreign influencers — through payments, sponsored travel, and platform amplification — to produce content that reaches international audiences as apparently independent testimony (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

This approach represents a significant evolution in state-sponsored soft power, one that attempts to replicate the authenticity effect of organic, market-led influence through coordinated and often covert means. Its effectiveness has been limited, however, by investigative reporting that has exposed undisclosed commercial relationships, and by the difficulty of sustaining credible narratives in contexts — such as Xinjiang — where extensive independent documentation contradicts the promoted image.

6.3 American Influencer Culture and the Global Projection of Cultural Norms

American cultural dominance in the digital sphere is most clearly visible in the global diffusion of trends originating with US-based content creators: formats, aesthetics, consumer habits, and political framings that emerge on American platforms quickly achieve worldwide circulation. Unlike China's approach, this projection is structurally decentralised, operating through the commercial incentives and audience dynamics of private platforms without central coordination. American soft power in this mode works by normalising American cultural references and values as the default vocabulary of global digital culture.

This model is not without limitations. The homogenising tendencies of American digital culture generate resistance in societies that perceive it as a form of cultural imperialism, and the association of American platforms with corporate data extraction has complicated their reception in some markets. Moreover, the decentralised character of American influencer culture means that its outputs are inconsistent: alongside content projecting values of openness and individual expression, the same platforms circulate misinformation and political extremism that can actively undermine American soft power objectives.

6.4 Algorithmic Governance as a Geopolitical Variable

Perhaps the most structurally significant dimension of contemporary digital soft power is the role of algorithmic recommendation systems in determining what information is seen, by whom, and in what context. Unlike older media forms, where editorial decisions were made by identifiable human actors subject to institutional accountability, modern recommendation algorithms are opaque, proprietary, and operate at a scale that makes meaningful external scrutiny extremely difficult.

TikTok's algorithm has become the most prominent site of this debate, but the underlying issue applies across all major platforms. Algorithms that consistently elevate content favourable to a

particular political perspective, while depressing the visibility of unfavourable content, represent a form of soft power projection that leaves no obvious fingerprints. Whether through deliberate design or the emergent properties of optimisation systems trained on engagement data, the result is the same: the platform's recommendation architecture becomes a mechanism of political influence at global scale. This structural reality has fundamentally altered the terrain on which international influence competitions are fought.

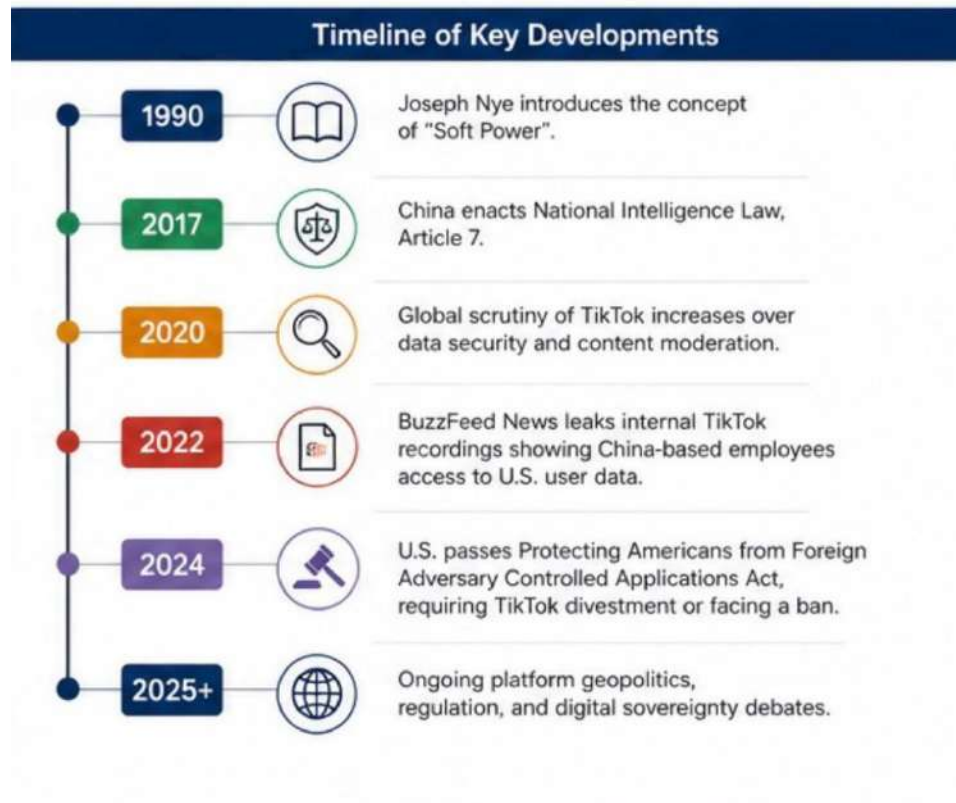
7. Geopolitical Implications

The emergence of digital platforms as the primary arena of soft power competition has transformed the nature of international influence in ways that existing theoretical frameworks are only beginning to capture. Traditional conceptions of soft power assumed a reasonably clear distinction between state and non-state actors, and between deliberate cultural projection and organic cultural appeal. The digital era has blurred both distinctions, creating an environment in which states, corporations, and individual creators all function as influence actors — often simultaneously, and without clear boundaries between their roles.

The TikTok case illustrates this complexity with particular clarity. The platform's geopolitical significance lies not primarily in any single act of data theft or deliberate propaganda, but in the structural asymmetry it has introduced into the global information environment: a closed domestic internet in China coexisting with Chinese-owned platforms operating freely in open societies. This asymmetry means that the competition for narrative influence is not being conducted on equal terms, and that liberal commitments to free information flows create real vulnerabilities that state-directed actors are well positioned to exploit.

At the same time, the reach and sophistication of American digital infrastructure continues to represent an extraordinary soft power asset. The ability to set the terms of global digital culture — the platforms people use, the formats they consume, the values embedded in the algorithmic architectures that govern their information diet — is a form of structural power that no previous theory of international influence adequately anticipated.

Ultimately, what the United States–China comparison reveals is that soft power in the digital age is exercised through architecture as much as through content. The platforms themselves, their governance structures, their algorithmic logics, and their ownership relationships have become geopolitical objects in their own right. Modern influence is not exerted solely through governments: it flows through creators, recommendation engines, and the invisible infrastructures of digital communication — making it at once more pervasive and harder to see.



8. Conclusion

Since Joseph Nye first introduced the concept of soft power (Nye, 1990), its meaning and mechanisms have noticeably transformed — especially in the context of the United States and China's ongoing competition for global influence. Soft power is no longer exercised only through diplomacy, educational exchange, or cultural institutions; it is increasingly mediated through algorithms that determine what information is visible, what content spreads, and whose narratives reach foreign audiences. Digital platforms have become the primary arena for international attraction and persuasion.

China's soft power model is largely state-driven, making it highly coherent and coordinated. Yet this coherence is its biggest limitation: when the involvement of the state is visible, audiences tend to experience its influence as coercive compliance rather than genuine attraction. This is precisely the distinction that Nye's framework draws in such a context. Concerns about censorship, surveillance, and narrative manipulation in digital platforms like TikTok have repeatedly weakened the credibility that successful soft power requires. The United States, by contrast, derives its soft power largely from private-sector actors, and therefore does not face the same limitations. However, its decentralised model creates a different set of obstacles. American soft power frequently diverges from the country's stated values, producing a gap between its foreign policy conduct and the liberal democratic ideals it projects. This disparity has been particularly evident in South Asia, where US engagement has historically been transactional and inconsistent,

weakening the foundations of its soft power in a region of considerable strategic importance to both powers.

The TikTok case study makes this especially clear. Public debate around the platform has been dominated by data privacy concerns; yet the equally significant soft power questions, related to what the algorithm normalises, promotes, and suppresses, have received comparatively little attention. The platform's recommendation system functions as a soft power instrument, shaping perception at scale without the visibility of traditional propaganda. Social media platforms have ceased to be neutral communication tools. They are now strategic infrastructure through which states compete for narrative control, visibility, and cultural authority.

As the world becomes increasingly digital, power is being redefined in new ways. In future, the most significant geopolitical contests may not be fought through hard power or military superiority, but through soft power and the ability to control data, shape algorithms, and influence the flow of information that informs public understanding. The rise of AI-driven recommendation systems may make these influence struggles even more significant in the future.

Both the United States and China have developed distinct and sophisticated approaches to soft power in the digital age, each with its own structural advantages and inherent limitations. What the comparison ultimately demonstrates is that in the twenty-first century, power is increasingly a function of architecture — of who builds the platforms, writes the algorithms, and sets the terms on which the world's information circulates.

References

1. Baker White, E. (2022, June 17). Leaked audio from 80 internal TikTok meetings shows China-based employees can access US data. BuzzFeed News. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emilybakerwhite/tiktok-tapes-us-user-data-china-bytedance-access>
2. DiResta, R., Miller, C., Molter, V., Pomfret, J., & Walden, G. (2020). Telling China's story: The CCP's campaign to shape global narratives. Stanford Internet Observatory. <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/prc-influence-operations>
3. Gorwa, R. (2019). What is platform governance? *Information, Communication & Society*, 22(6), 854–871.
4. Han, X. (2024). Black Myth, digital soft power and counter-national narratives in China [Working paper]. Digital Policy Hub, Centre for International Governance Innovation.
5. Human Rights Watch. (2023, March). China: Influencers enlisted for Xinjiang propaganda. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/23/china-influencers-enlisted-xinjiang-propaganda>

6. Kurlantzick, J. (2007). Charm offensive: How China's soft power is transforming the world. Yale University Press.
7. Manor, I. (2019). The digitalization of public diplomacy. Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Mattern, J. (2005). "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics". *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33(3), 583–612.
9. Network Contagion Research Institute. (2024). The CCP's digital charm offensive. Rutgers University.
10. National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China. (2017). Article 7. National People's Congress.
11. Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, (80), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>
12. Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. PublicAffairs.
13. Pew Research Center. (2024). Who are social media's news influencers? <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/04/16/who-are-social-medias-news-influencers/>
14. Saunders, F. S. (1999). Who paid the piper? The CIA and the cultural Cold War. Granta Books.
15. Walker, C., & Ludwig, J. (2017). The meaning of sharp power: How authoritarian states project influence. *Foreign Affairs*.
16. Zhang, A. (2020). TikTok and WeChat: Curating and controlling information in China's evolving media landscape. Australian Strategic Policy Institute. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/tiktok-and-wechat>

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge Dihyasree Pradhan and Nandita Das for their valuable contributions to this research. Their intellectual input is gratefully recognised.

SEO & Optimization

Keywords:

Primary: USA, China, Soft Power, Joseph Nye, TikTok, Social media, Digital influence

Secondary: Algorithm, Instrument, Attraction, Influence

Meta Description:

A comparison of how the United States and China have used soft power as a tool in the 21st century to influence individuals all over the world.

PermaLink:

/soft-power-us-china-comparative-analysis

Images and Media:



Alt text: This Image shows that the United States and China are in competition with each other to influence generations through using soft power in social media platforms.



Alt text: This Image shows the 8 pillars of soft power which a country uses to attract and persuade without coercion.



Alt text: This Image shows how the United States attracts people like a magnet with the use of soft power.