

In Focus

# Battle for Influence: Perceptions in Asia of China and the US

In Focus

The essays in this section are based on findings of the latest edition of the Asian Barometer Survey, an applied research program that aims to gauge public opinion on issues such as political values, democracy, and governance across Asia.

The program's regional survey network encompasses research teams from 13 East Asian states and five South Asian countries. Together, it covers virtually all major political systems in the region. Find out more at [www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org)

104

**Yun-han Chu & Yu-tzung Chang**

Policy-makers take note: the latest Asian Barometer Survey shows tectonic shifts in the perceptions of Asians toward the United States and a rising China.

112

**Kai-Ping Huang & Bridget Welsh**

The battle for soft-power supremacy among Great Powers in East Asia holds surprises with regards to the relative influences of China and the US.

118

**Min-Hua Huang & Mark Weatherall**

Ideology, culture and domestic politics all play a role in how people in Asian countries view the super-powers' influence. China may be gaining an edge.

# Trends in Soft Power in East Asia: Distance, Diversity and Drivers

## By Kai-Ping Huang & Bridget Welsh

In Focus: Huang & Welsh

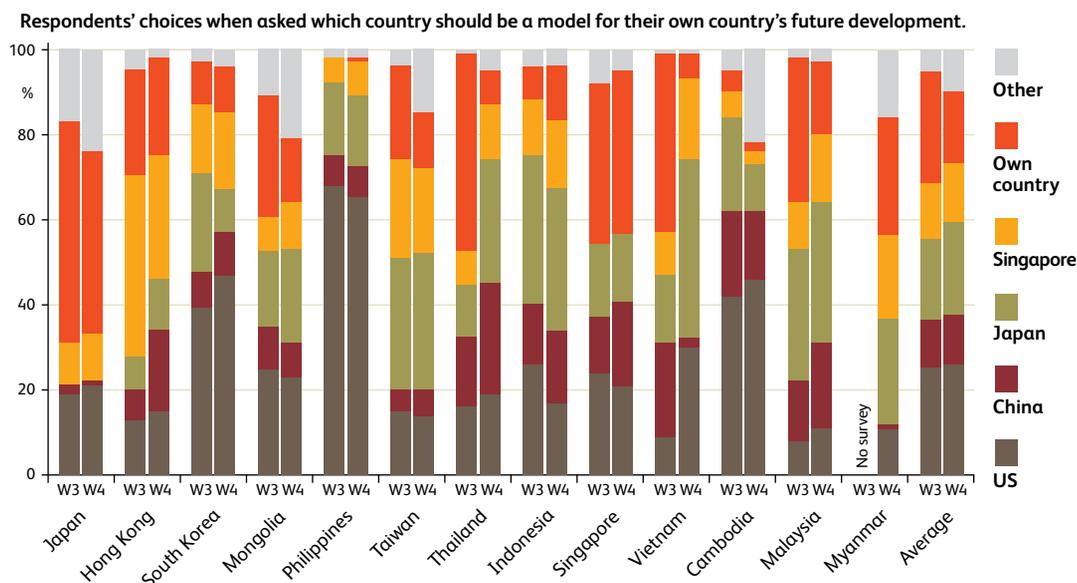
The battle for soft-power supremacy among Great Powers in East Asia holds some surprises as China's influence is not gaining in ways commensurate with its rising power and the US just holds steady despite its greater engagement in the region. These are among the findings in the last two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), which asked respondents to name a "model" country to emulate, write Kai-Ping Huang and Bridget Welsh. Among the winners are Japan and Singapore, while domestic governments in the region lose favor with their citizens.

MEDIA ACCOUNTS often portray East Asia as locked in a struggle for power between the United States and China. Differences extend from trade to tensions in the South China Sea. The Great Powers themselves have often set in place foreign policies to offset the other. The administration of US President Barack Obama introduced the "Pivot to Asia" (later, the "Rebalancing") in 2012. President Xi Jinping took office the same year and began a more assertive engagement that has included a military build-up in the South China Sea, a deepening of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These measures are all indicative of increasing Great-Power rivalry. More recently, the new administration of US President Donald Trump has ratcheted up the rhetoric on China and made the region's Great-Power dynamic even more confrontational and uncertain.

Survey research suggests that ordinary East Asians are not caught up in this zero-sum competition and, in fact, neither China nor the US has made significant overall gains in soft power across the region. While a handful of countries may have shifted their public affinities, East Asians on the whole opt for multi-polarity. If there is a decisive shift in recent years, increasingly citizens are looking outside of their own country for models to follow. This outward orientation largely reflects shortcomings in domestic governance. The Great Powers are not necessarily on the receiving end of this trend, however, further suggesting that the contest for power in East Asia is not gaining traction among ordinary citizens.

FIGURE 1 CHOICE OF MODEL COMPARED BETWEEN WAVE 3 AND WAVE 4 ACROSS EAST ASIA

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3 (2010-12) and Wave 4 (2014-16).



This analysis details the main findings regarding soft power in East Asia. It draws from the last two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) conducted in 14 countries in East Asia: Wave 3 from 2010 to 2012, and Wave 4 from 2014 to 2016. We base the analysis on the answers to the question "Which country should be a model for our own country's future development?" The options that respondents were given included China, the United States, Japan, India, Singapore, their own country and an "other" option. This question is used to measure soft power, because it indicates which country is seen to attract respondents for their country's future.

### GREAT-POWER LOSERS AND WINNERS

Consistent across the two waves of surveys is that the US remains the dominant choice, with China a distant option after Japan and Singapore. In Wave 3, an average of 26 percent of respondents chose the US as a preferred model, while only 11 percent opted for China. Japan attracted 20 percent and Singapore 11 percent. In Wave 4, the US increased by 3 percent while China remained the

same. Japan and Singapore were slightly up at 23 percent and 13 percent. In other words, despite East Asians recognizing China's rising power and growing engagement with the region, this has not translated into significant increases in soft power. At the same time, Obama's rebalance has not significantly changed perceptions of the US either. Collectively, Japan and Singapore made more gains in Wave 4 than the US.

As shown in Figure 1, there is significant variation across East Asia. The closer a country is to China, the less likely it is to see China as a model. The only exception to this is Hong Kong, where 19 percent chose China in Wave 4, an increase from 7 percent in Wave 3. Neighbors such as Japan, Taiwan, Mongolia, South Korea, Myanmar and Vietnam clearly did not view China as favorably as more distant Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia or Singapore. Alliance relationships also do not necessarily translate into greater soft power. While the US maintains considerable soft power in the Philippines and South Korea, this is not the case in Thailand or Taiwan. China's soft power in Cam-

bodia is strikingly low compared to that of the US despite the close relationship between Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Chinese Communist Party leadership.

#### HOLDING STEADY

There have been important individual shifts over the two waves, mostly in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, China made a 9 percent gain, in Singapore 7 percent, in Malaysia 6 percent and in Indonesia 3 percent. In Northeast Asia, gains for China were marginal, with 2 percent increases in South Korea and Taiwan. China, however, lost its appeal among Cambodians and Vietnamese, 4 percent and 20 percent, respectively. The only place where the US lost its appeal is Indonesia, with a 9 percent decline. Interestingly, Indonesia was touted as having a special relationship to the US under the Obama administration, and the period witnessed the formation of a strategic partnership that was heralded as a historic high point in the bilateral relationship. The partnership did not result in soft-power gains for the US. Support for the US remained consistent elsewhere. Overall, China made some progress in several countries, but the US did not lose ground either.

The trends indicate that changes in soft power for the Great Powers did not come at the expense of the other, with the exception of Vietnam and to a lesser extent Cambodia. Of all the countries in East Asia, Vietnam is the one most caught up in the Great-Power competition. Vietnam has significantly improved relations with the US in the last decade, sharing common ground over China's encroachment in the South China Sea and closer trade ties. Vietnam's foreign and trade policies openly aim for distance from China. The government has also allowed anti-China protests over territorial disputes, thus further shaping public opinion. In Cambodia, the public trend toward the US is in contrast to the close relationship of

the country's leadership with China. Here, government policy has not been echoed in public.

In East Asia as a whole, however, the efforts by China and the US to broaden their appeal are gleaned some public support in the form of increased soft power, but in many countries, the public keeps a distance from the alliance relationships of their governments. This is the case in Taiwan and Thailand, both with long-standing alliances with the US, and in more recent policy shifts such as the US and Indonesia and China and Cambodia. East Asians clearly view soft power through different lenses than that of regional winners and losers.

#### LOOKING WITHIN AND ABROAD

To understand the ABS soft-power results in East Asia, it is necessary to look at the range of options chosen by respondents. Two important patterns stand out. First is the relatively high choice of alternative East Asian models. About a third of East Asians see either Japan or Singapore as a model, reinforcing the view that East Asians are not looking for a zero-sum Great-Power dynamic, but rather opt for multiple powers in the region. Both Japan and Singapore are seen as models largely on the basis of economic prosperity. Respondents that placed a premium on economic development (over democracy) opted for East Asian models.

Japan in particular wields considerable influence, particularly in Taiwan and Indonesia. Japan is also the preferred model for large numbers of people in Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand. Over the two waves, Japan's soft power has been consistent and in some countries such as Vietnam and Thailand gained traction. It is worth noting that while Japan's role in East Asia is sometimes dismissed because it is overshadowed by Great-Power competition, the ABS results show there is consider-

able appreciation of Japan and recognition of its soft power among the East Asian public. Japan's influence extends broadly throughout the region, and remains more than double that of China. For East Asians, Japan is an important and appreciated regional power.

Singapore is also influential. While not reaching Japan's levels, Singapore is on par with China as a preferred model. Singapore is particularly influential in Hong Kong (43 percent in Wave 3 and 29 percent in Wave 4) and Taiwan (23 percent and 20 percent, respectively), countries that also have Chinese ethnic majorities, impressive economic growth and island geography. Significant shares of Singapore's neighbors in Southeast Asia also chose the city-state as a model, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The Philippines and Cambodia are exceptions, with the former completely rejecting Singapore as a model. There has been a history of widely publicized incidents between the Philippines and Singapore involving poor treatment of Filipino citizens in Singapore that may have contributed to this rejection. Nevertheless, the ABS results suggest that Singapore does have soft power among ordinary Southeast Asians. This is despite the view that Singapore is often seen as "arrogant" in its interaction with its neighbors. In recent years, Singapore also has become more attractive as a model in Thailand. Over the two waves of surveys, as Japan and Singapore have held steady and in some places gained traction, East Asians reaffirmed a preference for multiple powers in the region.

#### REJECTING THE HOME TEAM

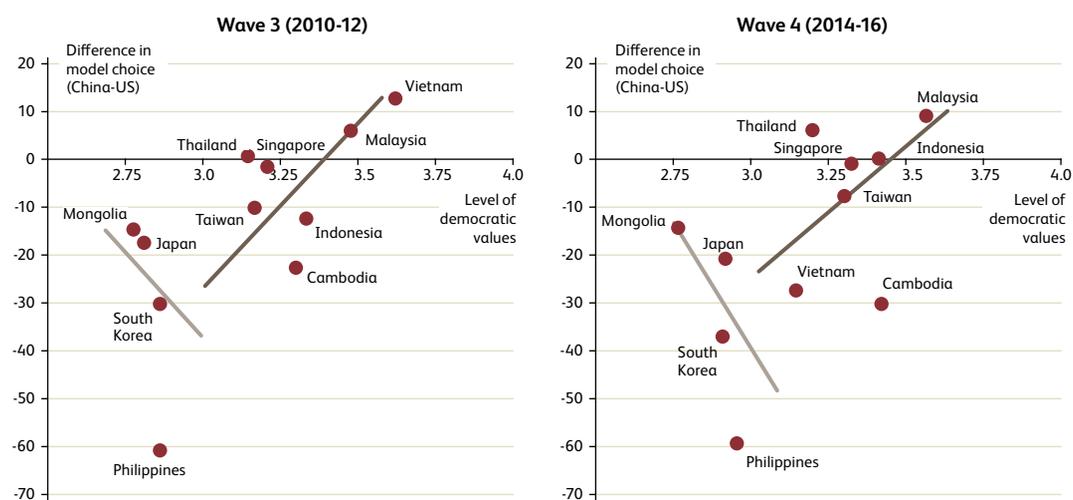
The second pattern is a decline in citizens opting for their own country as a model. Figure 1 shows that while a significant percentage of East Asians opt to follow their own country — an indicator of patriotism and deep-rooted nationalism — this is

only an average of 26 percent and 17 percent in the last two waves, respectively. This shows that East Asians largely look to outside models rather than to home. Japanese and Singaporeans, however, are more inclined to choose their own country, while the Philippines and Cambodia are on the other end of the spectrum. Among Japanese, 52 percent opted for their own country in Wave 3, declining to 43 percent in Wave 4. In Singapore, the home choice remained steady at 38 percent and 39 percent, respectively. Countries that have performed well economically tend to have greater shares of their population choosing their country as a model. It is noteworthy that only 13 percent of Chinese chose their own country as a model to follow in 2016, even as its power in the region has increased.

This outward orientation is deepening. The largest shift in public assessments across the two waves involved declines in the choice of the home-country model, with an average of 11 percent. Sharp declines were evident in Japan (9 percent), Mongolia (14 percent), Taiwan (10 percent), Thailand (38 percent), Vietnam (35 percent) and Malaysia (17 percent) — all countries that experienced lackluster economic growth in recent years. Political polarization in Taiwan, Thailand and Malaysia, often involving political scandals, has also turned large shares of citizens away from their own country as a model. The large shift in Thailand stands out, as this is the period in which the country experienced paralyzing political protests and returned to military rule. Vietnam's decline is also interesting. The pace of globalization has increased in Vietnam in recent years, which has been coupled with an embrace of the US. In general, as citizens turn away from their own country as a model, this points to frustrations with governance at home. It also highlights that East Asians are embracing a diverse range of options for their future.

FIGURE 2 DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND MODEL CHOICE

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3 (2010-12) and Wave 4 (2014-16).



In Focus: Huang & Welsh

**LOOKING FOR PROSPERITY**

As is to be expected, the factors that explain changes in soft power across East Asia are diverse and complex. When we analyzed responses in the survey, we found common threads that are important drivers of the different choices, but these still vary across individual countries and within Northeast and Southeast Asia.

Prosperity attracts East Asians. Soft power is being shaped to a greater extent by assessments of economic performance rather than security concerns and Great-Power competition. This is especially the case for those who choose the US, Japan and Singapore. This dynamic is also the case for China, helping us understand why the choice of China is comparatively low. China's economic rise has not yet translated into perceptions of China as an economic success story among East Asians. China's per capita income has not yet matched its key immediate neighbors. The anomaly of Hong Kong's higher choice of China can be understood, in part, by its close proximity to Shenzhen, the vibrant Silicon Valley of China.

Democratic values also matter, but this is the case in some countries more than others. Citi-

zens in Northeast Asian countries with more democratic values were more likely to choose the US over China. This was not the case, however, in Southeast Asia, with the exception of the Philippines. Southeast Asians do not connect the US with democracy to the same extent as in Northeast Asia, which is likely a product of conflicting views of the US among many Muslims (and non-Muslims) in the region. These findings are detailed in Figure 2.

Views of governance also matter. The main governance grievance across East Asia is corruption. East Asians are likely to turn away from their own country if they perceive high levels of corruption. This was notably the case in the two waves in Malaysia, Mongolia and Vietnam, all countries riddled with corruption scandals. At the same time, positive assessments of low corruption in Singapore contribute to its high attractiveness among East Asians.

Beyond values and perceptions, there are other trends at play. For example, East Asians under 30 are more inclined than older citizens to look outside the homeland for models. This can be tied to globalization and the wide use of the

internet, but it also shows greater dissatisfaction with domestic governance among younger people. This is especially the case in China, Malaysia and Taiwan. It is interesting to note that in opting between the US and China, more younger East Asians preferred the US. China is disproportionately not gaining soft power among younger East Asians. The only exception is in the Philippines, where China is more preferred as a model by the young compared to their older cohorts. Even so, China only got support from a mere 10 percent.

As expected, the views that citizens have of regional powers are shaped by legacies of war and alliances. But education and income levels, international exposure connected to urbanization levels and internet use also shape views. We find, for example, that more educated East Asians are inclined to choose either the US or Japan rather than China. Generally, the survey analysis suggests that experiences within countries are more important in shaping outlooks than developments abroad. Views of trade, for example, had little impact on model preference.

As East Asia continues to undergo rapid socio-economic change and the Great Power struggle intensifies, views of soft power are likely to change as well. The ABS findings suggest that East Asians are distancing themselves from Great-Power competition and are attracted by multiple powers in the region. Japan, in particular, retains considerable soft power. East Asians are looking to a range of models and being influenced by conditions at home rather than events abroad. Individual values and priorities, especially on the economy, are likely to continue to influence soft-power perceptions.

**FUTURE TRAJECTORIES**

What, then, do these varied drivers mean for regional trajectories of soft power? The ABS findings suggest that China faces an uphill challenge

in increasing its influence with East Asian publics. With less support from young people and the educated, and considerable suspicion from neighbors, China has not yet seen a rise in soft power associated with its higher regional status. For the US, its soft power has largely not changed in recent years in East Asia despite greater engagement. Shifts in its economic performance and contractions in democratic values, however, are likely to contribute to a decline in its public standing. There are already deep concerns about the Trump administration's abandonment of democratic practices and principles in areas such as the travel ban against some Muslim countries. Possible movement away from the US, however, will not necessarily be to China's gain, as alternative regional powers have remained influential models. Publics in the region support multiple powers and largely do not see their future in terms of zero-sum choices. Japan's soft power among East Asians remains high.

Perhaps the ABS's most significant finding with regard to soft power is a wake-up call to regional leaders themselves. Increasingly, East Asians are showing less faith in their own countries as a model to follow. This is a serious indictment of domestic governance by East Asians themselves. Corruption, political polarization and lackluster economic performance have pushed publics outward and unless these issues are addressed, this decline in confidence is likely to continue and further undercut governments.

**Kai-Ping Huang is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at National Taiwan University. Bridget Welsh is Visiting Professor of Political Science at John Cabot University, a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Democratic Studies in National Taiwan University and University Fellow at Charles Darwin University.**