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China’s Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

In November 2000, Jiang Zemin made his first visit to Cambodia. Arriving at the airport in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital, the owlish and normally stiff Chinese leader offered a brief greeting to his Cambodian hosts. He was whisked into a motorcade that rumbled through the streets, avoiding the cavernous ruts that dotted Sihanouk Boulevard.

Most mornings, activity in Phnom Penh all but stops when the morning heat begins to rise. But on that day, the city resembled a festive papal visit to a devoutly Catholic nation. Nearly a hundred thousand Cambodian children lined the streets, many in threadbare school uniforms and waving tiny Cambodian and Chinese flags or small photographs of Jiang’s face. The children cheered and screamed for Jiang as his open car toured through the city, chanting as if he were David Beckham or Bono, rather than an elderly politician with thick glasses and an oily, swept-back hairdo.

Jiang’s route did not take him past one of the city’s major attractions. Only a few blocks from his motorcade, foreign tourists wandered through Tuol Sleng, an old high school that Cambodia’s Maoist Khmer Rouge regime had converted into a killing factory in the 1970s. Tens of thousands of Cambodians were brought to Tuol Sleng between 1975 and 1979. Fewer than 10 made it out alive.

During the Khmer Rouge’s murderous four-year reign, during which they killed as many as 2 million Cambodians, China served as the regime’s major foreign patron. Beijing sent the Khmer Rouge over 15,000 military advisers and provided the bulk of its external aid. Beijing knew what was going on in Cambodia. Before Jiang’s visit, Chinese leaders had actively worked to forestall a special international tribunal for the Khmer Rouge officials still alive.

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But standing alongside Jiang that day, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen did not mention the Khmer Rouge era or the tribunal. Instead, he praised Jiang’s “historic” visit to Phnom Penh and called China’s relations with Cambodia “a precious gift.” A beaming Jiang replied that he was “overwhelmed by friendship and joy” and promised that the relationship would become much closer.

Jiang was right. Within five years, China had become probably the most important foreign influence in Cambodia, and Hun Sen shuttled to and from Beijing constantly. Beijing became Cambodia’s major provider of foreign aid, giving Cambodia one of the largest Chinese aid packages of any nation in the world while also forgiving Cambodia’s entire debt to China. Chinese language programs quickly dominated downtown Phnom Penh: one Chinese-language school alone drew over 10,000 students.

As a result, although older Cambodians who remember the Khmer Rouge remain suspicious of China, their sons and daughters, who once would have headed to Australia, France, or the United States for higher education, now look to universities in Shanghai and Beijing. Chinese newspapers, films, television, and radio have become increasingly popular. Thousands of Chinese businesspeople have moved into Phnom Penh and northern Cambodia, creating entire villages of recent migrants. Chinese tourists descend en masse on the capital. Today, even when the prime minister has concerns about China’s influence, he keeps quiet.

Cambodia is hardly unique. Since the late 1990s, perceptions of China in Southeast Asia have shifted significantly, so much so that elites and publics in a majority of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) now see China as a constructive actor—and, potentially the preeminent regional power.

China’s image transformation has resulted from a range of factors. China has benefited from mis-

steps by the United States and Japan, ranging from the response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis to Washington's post-9-11 focus on counterterrorism in Southeast Asia. But the transformation also stems from a rise in China's "soft power" in Southeast Asia—that is, China's ability to influence Southeast Asian countries by persuasion, rather than coercion. This growing attractiveness is conveyed through various means, including culture, diplomacy, participation in multinational organizations, businesses' actions abroad, and the gravitational pull of China's economic strength.

When Joseph Nye coined the term soft power, he originally used a more limited definition that excluded investment and aid and formal diplomacy—more traditional, harder forms of influence. But in the context of Asia today, both China and its neighbors enunciate a broader idea of soft power, implying all elements outside of the security realm, including investment and aid.

Soft power stems from both governments and nongovernment actors—from businesspeople and pop stars and language teachers. Nongovernment actors do not necessarily operate in concert with the state, and no state can be said to have a completely coherent foreign policy. Still, it is possible to identify broad strategies Beijing has enunciated and policy tools it has used that allow nongovernment actors to more effectively wield soft power. Just as US policies between World War II and the end of the cold war made Washington popular in the region and smoothed the way for American soft power, it is these frameworks that today make it easier for Chinese soft-power actors, from language schools to businesspeople, to have a growing impact on the ground.

SHEDDING OLD INSECURITIES

Until the past decade, China exerted minimal soft power in Southeast Asia. Following Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's advice, an insecure Beijing still pursued a defensive foreign policy and focused on rebuilding China's domestic economy from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese public still lacked confidence that Beijing could become a global actor, let alone a regional power. A poll taken by the research organization Horizon Group in 1995 asked Chinese citizens their views of the "most prominent countries in the world": one-third

ranked the United States most prominent, with only 13 percent choosing China. The Chinese imperial court's treatment of mainland Southeast Asia as vassal states, and the modern history of Maoist China supporting communists in Thailand, Malaysia, and, most disastrously, Cambodia, left a residue of mistrust in the region. China's limited engagement with Southeast Asia foundered on Beijing's continuing claims to the South China Sea, China's suspicion of ASEAN's multilateral forums, and concern among ASEAN nations that China's continuing economic growth would siphon foreign investment from Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, China's policy tools remained weak. It was not a major aid donor, its diplomatic corps remained dominated by older envoys, and its public diplomacy was blunt.

In the late 1990s all this began to change. China's breakneck economic growth fostered greater confidence within the Chinese public. By the end of the 1990s, many Chinese urbanites were too young to remember the Cultural Revolution. They no longer shared an inherent distrust of

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the state's wielding of power and ideology. In 2003, the Horizon Group again polled Chinese citizens. This time, nearly 40 percent picked China as "the most prominent country in the world." America came in a distant second.

China's leadership was also becoming more confident. Until the mid-1990s, the generation that had grown up around Mao still dominated China's inner circle. But this generation passed away in the 1980s, or was forcibly retired to make way for younger officials. After the crackdown at Tiananmen Square, the leadership recognized that China could not rely on the United States, but had to develop better relations with its neighbors and become a greater international player.

China recognized, too, that its hard power was still limited. In the mid-1990s, Beijing tried to signal its rising military strength to the world by aggressive moves like sending ships to unoccupied, disputed reefs in the South China Sea. This approach backfired. Provocative military exercises, including missile tests in the Taiwan Strait, frightened neighboring states and evoked old memories of Chinese military adventurism.

Even as they saw that China's aggressive moves triggered Southeast Asian balancing against Beijing, Chinese leaders could not help but notice another

trend. Wang Jisi, director of American studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, one of China's elite think tanks, noted in Chinese publications that America's weakness might be its soft influence, not its unrivaled hard power.

Wang was right. After the end of the cold war, America had retreated from the world, consumed with its own economic boom, its culture wars, and its political scandals. Significant pluralities of Americans opposed US interventions abroad and called for Washington to slash foreign aid, and the White House listened. Washington cut public diplomacy abroad and merged the United States Information Agency, the main public diplomacy outfit, into the State Department. The Clinton administration sidelined many of the multilateral institutions that America had built after World War II, creating perceptions of the United States as a unilateral actor—a perception that would only increase as the Bush administration eviscerated multilateralism.

THE OFFENSIVE BEGINS

Nineteen ninety-seven provides a convenient date to mark China's soft-power emergence in Southeast Asia. Whether or not Beijing explicitly recognized that the United States and Japan were fumbling their responses to the Asian financial meltdown that began with the Thai baht's collapse and soon spread across the region, China's own reaction proved savvy. Beijing refused to devalue its currency, which would have exacerbated devaluations in Thailand and Indonesia, and portrayed its decision as standing up for other Asian nations. After the crisis, ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino announced, "China is really emerging from this smelling good."

Since then, Beijing has begun to employ several strategies to boost its soft power in Southeast Asia. In statements and speeches, Chinese leaders enunciate a doctrine of "win-win" relations, highlighting that Southeast Asians can benefit from their relationship with China even as China benefits from its relationship with them. China will not interfere or meddle: foreign nations benefit because China will not make demands on other nations' sovereignty, economic models, governance, or political culture. "We don't believe that human rights should stand above sovereignty," the head of Beijing's premier state think tank says. China implicitly contrasts its "win-win" philosophy with that of the United States, a non-Asian actor that Beijing portrays as disrespectful of sovereignty, imposing a web of sanctions on Southeast Asia and demanding economic and political concessions.

The Chinese have backstopped this "win-win" rhetoric with real initiatives. Over the past five years, China has ended nearly all of its old border disputes and has signed Southeast Asia's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, a document that commits the signers to mutual respect for a country's sovereignty and equality. Beijing has committed to creating a code of conduct on the South China Sea. It has enthusiastically signed bilateral cooperative agreements with several Asian states. Beijing seems willing to sign these agreements en masse, leaving details to be hammered out later. (In the lawyerly—and democratic—US political system, this type of sign first, talk later diplomacy would be virtually impossible.)

Beijing also has reversed its previous disdain for multilateral organizations, which older Chinese leaders had seen as constraints on China's power. It has not hurt that, as the United States became less interested in multilateralism between the late 1990s and today, China's participation in multilateral groups has made it look better by comparison. Again, Beijing has backed up its changing strategy with real initiatives. As a dialogue partner with ASEAN, China works closely with the organization, trying to strengthen it and, according to Asian diplomats, initiating far more joint projects than other partners, such as Japan or the United States.

China's strategy also includes focusing on developing nations whose bilateral relationships with the United States or Japan are faltering. After President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo pulled Filipino troops out of Iraq in 2004 as part of a deal to win the freedom of a Philippine hostage, the United States cut assistance to Manila. Shortly after, China invited Macapagal-Arroyo for a state visit, and then aggressively wooed Philippine policy makers, offering greater cooperation and aid.

Another major component of China's appeal to developing nations involves Beijing's portrayal of China as a potential ideal, as a model. China emphasizes top-down control of development and poverty reduction and the sidelining of political reform for economic reform. China's model particularly appeals to rulers in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian nations. With the Chinese model, the regime has time to think of ways to co-opt businesspeople and other elites that it needs to keep on its side to remain in power.

BEIJING'S NEW TOOLBOX

As China's engagement with the world has become more sophisticated, its tools of soft power

have become more sophisticated as well. In the past decade, China has upgraded its public diplomacy, which has focused on selling the idea that China will not be a threat to other nations. China's public diplomacy efforts reinforce the concept of peaceful development. They include museum exhibits in Malaysia and Singapore to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the voyages of Zheng He, a Chinese admiral who sailed across Asia, encountering but never conquering other nations. Part of this new public diplomacy has been increasing cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia. China has begun hosting overseas scholars, the kind of programming the US State Department has long done. Beijing also has created a Chinese version of the Peace Corps, run by the China Association of Youth Volunteers, to send idealistic young Chinese on long-term volunteer service projects to developing nations like Laos and Burma. China has expanded the international reach of its media as well. It has upgraded the Chinese newswire Xinhua and expanded Xinhua's output in languages other than English and Chinese, and it has expanded and professionalized the international broadcasting of CCTV, Chinese state television.

The new Chinese public diplomacy includes setting up networks of informal business and cultural summits in China designed to bring together Asian opinion leaders. These meetings allow China to subtly emphasize its role as a potential partner for investment and trade and its position as a regional leader. The most prominent include the Boao Forum for Asia, which brings together Asian businesspeople for a Davos-style World Economic Forum-like event; and the ASEAN-China Eminent Persons Group, which unites former statesmen.

As China has upgraded its public diplomacy, it also has invested in improving its diplomatic corps. Over the past 15 years, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has begun to retire older, more ideological diplomats, replacing them with a young generation of envoys who speak better English and local languages: one 2005 study suggested that one-half of the country's 4,000 diplomats are under 35. China can keep these diplomats in the region because unlike the United States, which gives its Foreign Service officers leeway to choose where they want to be posted, the Chinese foreign affairs ministry can mandate postings. Top Chinese

diplomats in nations like Cambodia or Thailand now often have done three or even four rotations in those countries before rising to the rank of ambassador, building their language skills and developing extensive contacts in the local business and political communities.

Beijing supports its diplomacy through constant visits by senior Chinese officials to Southeast Asia, a short hop from Beijing in contrast with the 20-hour flight from Washington. According to a recent study of visits by top Chinese and US officials to Thailand and Cambodia in 2004 and 2005, senior Chinese officials made at least twice as many visits to Bangkok and Phnom Penh.

Promotion of Chinese culture and Chinese language studies are major components of this public diplomacy. Beijing now funds at least the first year of what it calls Confucius Institutes, Chinese language and culture schools created at leading local universities. Beijing also has tried to push instruction in Mandarin and in Chinese culture in overseas primary schools, partly by signing agreements with countries like Thailand to

help integrate Chinese into public school curricula, and partly by helping students in poor nations like Cambodia attend private local Chinese-language primary schools.

While promoting Chinese studies in other nations, Beijing has tried to lure more foreign students to China. The ministry of education advertises Chinese universities abroad and has boosted financial aid and loosened visa policies for foreign students. After 9-11, in contrast, the United States tightened its student visa policies, making it far harder for students from Southeast Asia to attend school in America. Even students already in the United States have had a harder time. In 2003, Washington announced that all Indonesian men residing in America would have to register with immigration authorities. Many of them simply left. Between 1999 and 2003, the number of Indonesians studying in the United States fell by over 20 percent.

AID AND TRADE

China's economic tools also have become more sophisticated. China's aid has undergone a serious transformation. According to a study by Henry Yep of the National Defense University in Washington, in 2003, China's aid to the Philippines was roughly four times greater than America's, China's aid to

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Laos was three times greater, its aid to Indonesia was nearly double, and its aid to Cambodia nearly matched US levels.

Beijing has revamped its aid programs to better tie assistance to discrete policy goals, including promoting Chinese companies abroad, cultivating important political actors, and bolstering China's benign regional image. In Thailand, for instance, Chinese aid has been used for the kind of lobbying familiar in Washington: to bring important elected Thai politicians to study trips and conferences in China. Beijing has also used funds to purchase surplus Thai agriculture, mollifying Thai farmers worried about the impact of China's free trade agreement with Southeast Asia.

China's embrace of free trade in the region and its promotion of the idea that it will become a major source of foreign direct investment also bolster its image. In addition to the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement, Beijing is negotiating closer bilateral trade ties and economic partnerships with individual Southeast Asian states. By the end of 2006, Southeast Asia's total trade with China probably will eclipse Southeast Asian trade with the United States or Japan. (China-ASEAN total trade in 2005 was roughly \$130 billion; US-ASEAN total trade in 2005 was about \$150 billion.) By comparison, the United States struggled to complete a bilateral free trade agreement with Thailand.

On visits to the region Chinese leaders set targets for future Chinese investment into Southeast Asia. These targets, usually for five or even ten years in the future, tend to be enormous, and obscure the fact that, at present, Chinese direct investment still lags far behind investment from the United States and other wealthy countries like Japan.

Finally, over the past decade the Chinese government has not only lifted restrictions on migration within China but has also made it vastly easier for Chinese to leave the country for business and tourism. Partly as a result, Chinese migration, often on overstayed short-term visas, is transforming the demographic makeup of northern mainland Southeast Asia, from northern Burma to northern Vietnam. Because of outmigration from Yunnan and other border provinces, ethnic Chinese now dominate entire towns in places like Luang Namtha, in northern Laos. The recent migrants are much more attuned to trends in China than older gen-

erations of ethnic Chinese, and they also have created a kind of renminbi zone in northern mainland Southeast Asia, where the Chinese currency serves as a de facto second currency.

THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS

To gauge the success or failure of China's charm offensive in Southeast Asia, it is important to understand China's goals in the region. One goal is simply to maintain peace on China's periphery. Peace allows China's economy to continue growing, for border provinces like Yunnan to build economic links to Southeast Asia, and for China to gain access to resources. Beijing also wants to reduce Taiwan's influence in Southeast Asia, a strategy first enunciated in 1994. In addition, Beijing wants to change regional perceptions of China, so that it is seen as a positive, benign actor in the region. Finally, and most important, China may want to shift influence away from the United States to create its own sphere of influence, a kind of Chinese Monroe Doctrine for Southeast Asia. In

this sphere, countries would subordinate their interests to China's, and would think twice about supporting the United States should there be any conflict in the region.

Beijing clearly has had success maintaining peace and boosting its image as nonthreatening. As one Southeast Asian diplomat notes, it is almost impossible now to hear any Southeast Asian leaders question China's rise, a sharp contrast from only five years ago. In the past five years, China's trade with the region has grown by 20 to 30 percent annually, and Chinese officials have predicted that trade will reach \$200 billion annually by the end of the decade. Yet Southeast Asian leaders take pains to downplay the possible negative effects of this growth in China-dominated trade.

Chinese businesspeople and policy makers are increasingly given the type of welcome and access in Southeast Asia that once were reserved for American and Japanese elites. Sometimes, they receive grander welcomes. Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao was toasted with frequent ovations during a 2003 visit to Indonesia; when President George W. Bush visited Indonesia the same year, many of the country's cultural and political leaders would not even meet with him for fear they would be tainted in the public's mind by association with the president.

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Southeast Asian publics seem to agree with their leaders' views of China. Polling in the region suggests many Southeast Asians now regard China as a benign presence to be emulated—a sharp contrast with current regional views of the United States. Likewise, whereas a decade ago leading newspapers in Southeast Asia frequently criticized China's economic and security policies, today such coverage is rare and muted. The public sentiment is reflected in Chinese language and cultural studies, which have skyrocketed in popularity in the region. Between 2002 and 2004, the number of Cambodian students in China grew by nearly 20 percent, while the number of Indonesians rose by nearly 50 percent, and the number of Vietnamese by 90 percent. In Indonesia, the demand for Chinese has become so great that the country faces a shortage of some 100,000 Chinese language instructors.

Another way to measure China's growing soft power is by looking at the position of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. Again, as perceptions of China change, the position of ethnic Chinese in the region has been radically transformed. In Thailand, leading politicians now tout their Chinese heritage, advertising their ability to boost ties with Beijing. In Indonesia, where only a decade ago riots targeting ethnic Chinese laid waste to Jakarta, a much wider spectrum of ethnic Chinese now provides close input into government policy making. Indeed, being ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia is increasingly viewed as an asset, not a detriment.

Meanwhile, governments in Southeast Asia are cutting even their informal links to Taiwan. In the 1990s, leaders from nations in the region that officially recognized Beijing would travel to Taipei for informal visits, as Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad did in 1997. They also allowed Taiwan to open informal embassies in their countries, typically known as Taipei Economic and Cultural Offices. In 1998, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen announced that he did not want a Taiwanese informal embassy in Phnom Penh. Other Asian nations have halted informal diplomatic visits.

Countries have proved willing to isolate other perceived enemies of China. At the request of the Chinese government, Cambodia in 2002 barred the Dalai Lama from attending a Buddhism conference. In 2001, the Thai government prodded Falun Gong to cancel an international meeting in Bangkok. Explaining Thailand's actions, Thailand's police minister bluntly told reporters, "We want to keep

good relations with China." In following years the Bangkok government deported or arrested Falun Gong members for protesting in front of the Chinese embassy, Indonesia prohibited marches by Falun Gong supporters and sentenced Falun Gong activists to jail, and Malaysia filed charges against nine Malaysian Falun Gong adherents.

Ultimately, soft power can be used to persuade other nations to take actions they otherwise might not. Measured this way, China's influence in the region clearly has grown. China has persuaded other countries to take China's interests into account almost reflexively. Southeast Asian diplomats say that in the past three years, consensus at ASEAN meetings is often delayed as member nations analyze how Beijing will react to any decision. Although Chinese dams on the upper portion of the Mekong River may be contributing to decreased water flow on the river, China's growing influence, including its aid to nations like Cambodia and Laos, has kept a lid on Mekong region leaders' complaints about China's policies.

THE FUTURE OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER

What will China's charm offensive mean in the long run, for Southeast Asia and for the United States? There are signs that China's rising power, and its engagement with the world, will prompt Beijing to wield its soft influence responsibly. China has begun to mediate other nations' disputes—a task of responsible great powers. After anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh in Cambodia led to a serious break in relations between Cambodia and Thailand in 2003, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Wang Yi called in the Thai and Cambodian representatives in Beijing and helped them lay out their grievances. In private the Chinese minister then warned the neighbors to normalize relations as soon as possible. Chastened, the two sides began to patch up their relationship.

China also has proved influential on nontraditional security issues, working with the Southeast Asian states to address drug trafficking and human trafficking. One regional expert on human trafficking lauds Beijing for taking progressive stances on human trafficking education—stances that have put pressure on governments in Cambodia and Laos to do the same.

Some of China's soft power hardly comes at America's expense. The United States continues to receive strong cooperation on many issues from major nations like the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. The United States and Japan remain the major investors in Southeast Asia. Amer-

ica is still the region's premier hard power. It also stands as the biggest source of foreign films, television, popular music, and books in the region. As Catharin Dalpino of Georgetown University found, even during waves of virulent anti-Americanism in Indonesia, the country remained the world's biggest market for MTV.

Most important, the United States still offers a political and social model that appeals to average people in the region, even if Washington itself does not always live up to American values. China's values—noninterference, respect for other nations' internal affairs, economic gradualism—enjoy appeal as well. But they appeal only to specific groups: elites in authoritarian nations like Vietnam; average people in countries like Indonesia that equate the American model with the financial crisis; publics in some states willing to trade some degree of political freedom if they could obtain Chinese-style growth rates. In surveys of Asian publics taken by the East Asia Barometer and published by the *Journal of Democracy*, majorities in every country say they desire democracy rather than any other type of political system.

Meanwhile, as China's soft power grows, it could begin to encounter blowback—particularly in Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam that historically have had the most troubled relations with China. As China becomes more powerful, other nations will begin to see beyond its benign face to a more complicated reality. They will realize that despite China's promises of noninterference, when it comes to core interests, China, like any great power, will put its priorities ahead of others.

China ultimately could use its soft influence to push nations to make a more explicit choice between it and the United States. This could threaten US alliances and other close bilateral relationships, undermine America's forces, and hurt its standing in international organizations. Across Southeast Asia, as China has become more popular, it has been able to create a web of multilateral groups that put China at the center of the region. These organizations could exclude the United States, like the recent East Asia summit in Malaysia, which eventually could turn into a forum for important security issues.

Indeed, in some respects China is already trying to draw on its charm to push back against American power. When Dennis Blair, commander of US forces in the Pacific, proposed "security communities" in which the United States would increase its defense cooperation with several Asian nations, many coun-

tries rejected the idea, in part because China quietly applied pressure on them to reject it. In early 2004, Blair's successor, Thomas Fargo, suggested that American marines or Special Forces could be stationed in Southeast Asia to patrol the Straits of Malacca, the narrow waterway between Malaysia and Indonesia that serves as a vital shipping channel. China gingerly leaned on other countries in Asia to block the idea. Indonesian and Malaysian leaders spoke out against it, and the idea of posting US Special Forces to the straits collapsed.

In the future, China could prod countries like the Philippines or Thailand to downgrade their close relations with the United States, or push countries like Singapore to stop providing basing rights for America. It could also pressure them not to intervene if the United States and China went to war over Taiwan.

THE AUTHORITARIANS' ALLY

But the most dangerous part of China's rising soft influence—the most dangerous to average people in Southeast Asia and, potentially, to American influence—is China's support for authoritarian regimes in opposition to US support for democratization. Despite its smooth highways and flashy shopping malls and reams of Starbucks, China remains an authoritarian country, with a Leninist regime if no longer a Marxist one.

China's influence can be felt most in Burma, the region's most backward, politically isolated nation. At the most important moments in recent Burmese history, when pressure might be applied on Rangoon, China has protected the leaders of the Burmese junta. In May 2003, thugs dressed as monks attacked the convoy of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi on a rural road, leaving 70 or more people dead. A close associate of Burmese junta leader Than Shwe was suspected of masterminding the massacre. Western governments quickly decried the attack. The State Department's chief spokesman, Richard Boucher, called it a "premeditated ambush," and Washington extended a visa ban on Burmese leaders and tightened economic sanctions.

Just as quickly, China signaled its support for the Burmese junta. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman affirmed that the Rangoon regime can "properly handle its own affairs," and China officials helped dilute resolutions censuring Burma. Soon, Beijing was inviting Burmese leaders to China on state visits. Clearly, China's charm cannot obscure the fact that, as a major power, it will think of its own interests first. ■