

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد      بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مېباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم      از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

JIANLU BI

08.06.2025

## China's Viral Soft Power and America's Self-Inflicted Wounds

Soft power, the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion, has long been a cornerstone of international influence. For decades, the United States has arguably been the global leader in this domain, its allure stemming from its democratic ideals, economic dynamism, technological innovation, and vibrant cultural exports.

However, as the recent *Economist* article "How China Became Cool" suggests, the landscape of soft power is undergoing a profound transformation. While China finds unexpected success in cultivating a "cool" image through bottom-up cultural phenomena and technological prowess, the United States, exemplified by its recent treatment of institutions like Harvard University, appears to be paradoxically undermining the very foundations of its own enduring appeal.

The rise of China's "cool factor" is a narrative far removed from the "turgid party propaganda" that has historically fallen flat overseas. Instead, its success is being built by forces seemingly independent of overt state control: charismatic Western livestreamers like IShowSpeed, who showcase China's rich history, friendly people, and advanced technology with genuine awe. His "China's different, bro" exclamation, delivered to 38 million followers, carries more weight than any official press release. This organic endorsement, amplified by global platforms like TikTok, taps into a youth demographic less concerned with political narratives and more interested in cultural vibrancy and technological innovation.

Beyond the viral videos, Chinese cultural products are making significant inroads. The global success of video games like Genshin Impact and Black Myth Wukong, steeped in Chinese folklore and appealing to millions outside Mandarin-speaking spheres, demonstrates a

powerful, attractive cultural export that bypasses traditional media gatekeepers. Chinese electric vehicles, consumer drones, and breakthroughs in artificial intelligence like DeepSeek further project an image of a technologically advanced and innovative nation.

This “bottom-up” soft power, arising from cultural exports and technological advancements that resonate directly with global audiences, is arguably far more effective than any government-led campaign. It presents a China that is dynamic, creative, and forward-looking, capable of inspiring genuine interest and admiration, particularly among younger generations who value authenticity and engagement over curated messages.

### **America’s Eroding Appeal**

In stark contrast to China’s evolving approach, recent developments in the United States, particularly concerning esteemed academic institutions like Harvard University, illustrate a worrying trend of self-inflicted damage to its soft power. Historically, American higher education has been an unparalleled magnet for global talent, a symbol of intellectual freedom, rigorous inquiry, and open discourse. Institutions like Harvard embody the promise of meritocracy, innovation, and the free exchange of ideas—core tenets of American exceptionalism that have drawn generations of students and scholars to its shores.

However, in recent times, Harvard, along with other elite universities, has been subjected to intense political scrutiny and intervention. Following highly publicized congressional hearings, where university presidents faced aggressive questioning regarding campus discourse, specifically around issues of free speech, antisemitism, and anti-Zionism, a chilling effect has been observed. The public spectacles, the threats of defunding, and the political pressure exerted on these institutions project an image of a nation struggling with its own foundational values.

When a government appears to dictate the terms of academic discourse, or when political considerations seemingly override principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, the message sent globally is profoundly damaging. It suggests that intellectual inquiry is not as free as purported, that dissent can be suppressed, and that institutions of learning are vulnerable to political whims. For aspiring students and scholars worldwide, who once saw American universities as bastions of unfettered intellectual pursuit, these actions cast a shadow of doubt. Why pursue an education in a country where academic independence seems under threat, when other nations are actively projecting an image of dynamic innovation and openness?

### **A Paradoxical Shift in Global Influence**

This paradox is striking: while China finds new, organic ways to appeal to global youth through culture and technology, the United States risks alienating the very intellectual and cultural elites it has historically attracted. The politicization of education, the perceived curtailment of free speech, and the public shaming of academic leaders undermine the fundamental principles that once made American soft power so compelling. This is not about the specific content of campus debates, but about the *process* and the *implications* of external political intervention into traditionally independent spheres.

The implications for global influence are significant. As Brand Finance and the Alliance of Democracies Foundation polls suggest, global attitudes towards China have warmed, while America's popularity has, in some respects, dipped. This is not solely due to external factors, but also to internal actions that contradict the very values the United States champions abroad. A nation's soft power is strongest when its actions align with its stated ideals. When academic freedom is questioned, when open debate is politicized, and when institutions are used as pawns in domestic political battles, the magnetic pull of American values weakens.

Of course, the "China cool" narrative isn't without its complexities. There are "hard limits" to China's global appeal, stemming from its "authoritarian system" and "human rights" record. Nevertheless, the undeniable effectiveness of these new, bottom-up soft power strategies in shaping international perceptions is a development that simply cannot be overlooked.

The battle for global hearts and minds is fought on ever-evolving terrain. China's newfound "cool" demonstrates that genuine attraction arises from cultural resonance and tangible innovation, often from the ground up. Conversely, the United States, by allowing political interference to erode the autonomy and perceived intellectual freedom of its most esteemed institutions, risks squandering the very soft power assets that have long distinguished it. For soft power to be truly effective, it must stem from a consistent commitment to the values it claims to embody. The actions taken today towards institutions like Harvard will reverberate globally, shaping perceptions of American ideals far more profoundly than any carefully crafted diplomatic message.

JUNE 6, 2025

*This first appeared on [FPIF](#).*

Jianlu Bi is a Beijing-based award-winning journalist and current affairs commentator. His research interests include international politics and communications. He holds a doctoral degree in communication studies and a

master's degree in international studies. He also writes for the SCMP, Foreign Policy In Focus, TRT World, IOL, the Citizen and others.