

China's Soft Power in Indonesia: Eliminating the Remnants of Suharto's US-Backed Anti-Communist Propaganda

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Abstract

The paper examines the extent to which China's 'soft power' in Indonesia is effective in reducing negative perceptions of the anti-communist propaganda launched by the United States-backed Suharto regime during the Cold War. Using theoretical framework proposed by Joseph S. Nye and relevant theories from Joshua Kurlantzick, the study finds that China's soft power performance in Indonesia is significant. After years of harboring a negative image due to anti-communist campaigns, a new, friendlier image of China is emerging. There are several dimensions of soft power that I discuss in this paper, ranging from educational diplomacy such as providing scholarships for Indonesian students and religious diplomacy or 'Islamic diplomacy' through Indonesia's two largest religious organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. These components were preceded by, among others, vigorous economic diplomacy by China, particularly during the Joko Widodo presidency (2014-2024), further distancing China from being perceived as a threat.

Keywords: Anti-communist propaganda, China's soft power, Indonesian public perception of China.



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Introduction

This article assesses the extent to which China's soft power in Indonesia operates and impacts the relations between the two countries, particularly in eliminating the remnants of hatred and fear of China, which has long been viewed by Indonesians as a communist patron due to its support for the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI*) in the mid-twentieth century. Chinese soft power is an important and widely studied topic, especially following the country's economic rise, ambitious global infrastructure projects, and significant technological and military transformations, leading to a crucial need to foster positive perceptions among other countries. This is a common behavior for emerging superpowers to spread and expand their sphere of influence worldwide.

China's rise has helped shift the distribution of power within the global structure, inevitably leading to renewed rivalries with established power. China must ultimately compete for influence with the United States (US) due to pressure from structural forces of an anarchic system. Within the logic of anarchy, political realism is typically viewed as the primary path to superpower survival.

Against this backdrop, China needs a more positive global perception to prevail in the ongoing rivalry. Indonesia is a highly strategic country, serving as one of several targets for this tug-of-war of influence. As the largest country in Southeast Asia and the traditional leader of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indonesia's positive perception of and support for global powers is tantamount to preparing loyal bandwagoners to navigate future global geopolitical uncertainty. As a result, Indonesia is a primary target for China's soft power projects in Southeast Asia. Beyond the strategic benefits of being one of the largest countries in the region, there are long-standing historical ties between Indonesia and China. Under the presidency of Sukarno (1945-1967), Indonesia's first president, the Indonesia-China relationship marked the

earliest and most significant engagement for both countries. China served as a guiding light for Sukarno's political, economic, and social approaches,¹ but the relationship was short-lived, deteriorating after Sukarno stepped down as president and was replaced by Suharto. In the Suharto era (1967-1998), relations between Indonesia and China entirely broke off, with Suharto accusing China of supporting the 1965 abortive coup, in which PKI attempted to dismantle the right-wing military power and gain a higher position within Indonesia political power structure.² The Indonesian public's subsequent negative perception of China persists today, alongside fear of PKI itself.

It is in this context that China's Indonesia-directed soft power efforts operate. China has a vested interest in Indonesia given ongoing intense hostility and public sentiment surrounding communism, as this ultimately impacts overall Indonesia-China relations. Therefore, China is using its soft power to at least foster a new understanding in the Indonesian public sphere that today's China is different from the China of the past. It also aims to demonstrate that communism is less frightening than imagined, and that China now prefers to refer itself as a socialist country with its own distinct characteristics, eschewing the term communist.

China's soft power efforts are deliberately created and designed by the state, with origins that can be traced back to Hu Jintao's speech at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2007. For Hu, culture was the source of a country's soft power; he believed that "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture."³ From these remarks, it is clear that China desires to form a positive image of itself throughout the world. In the case of Indonesia, China wishes to shift its identification from an atheist country adhering to communism towards a new perception of China as a

¹ Liu 1997.

² Storey 2000.

³ China Daily 2007.

state tolerant upon religious communities. This effort can be viewed in the close cooperation built between China and Indonesia's two largest Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Indonesian Islamic organizations harbor lingering trauma from their interactions with PKI in the mid-twentieth century, so approaching Islamic groups is an inevitable attempt to reduce the old hatred.

China's contemporary approach to Indonesian Islamic groups can be categorized into three main goals. First, to change the perception that China is hostile towards Uighur Muslims. Second, to reduce the negative perception among Indonesian Muslims that China is an communist-atheist state intolerant to religion. Third, to develop a tolerant Islamic society within the Uighur community by learning moderate values from Indonesian Islamic groups.

This study attempts to answer the main question of whether China's soft power has succeeded in changing Indonesian public's perception of China as a communist-atheist country. It is important to put forward this enquiry because in contemporary Indonesia, public sentiment towards anything related to communism remains negative and located in history. Wijaya Herlambang believes this, alongside the related stigma towards public discussions of communism, occurred due to deliberate US-backed propaganda from the New Order regime, who perpetuated this belief through cultural instruments and the publication of 'official' historical documents. The New Order's efforts to eliminate communism were also assisted by Indonesian cultural groups following a liberal ideology mainstream known as universal humanism, a certain liberal cultural ideology emphasizing the free value of arts.⁴ Bringing all this together, it is appealing to research whether the public's attitude towards PKI and communism consistently influences their perception of China. My hypothesis is that the identification of China as a communist-atheist

⁴ Herlambang 2024, pp. 1-34.

country worth avoiding has been dispelled through China's soft power efforts. This argument is presented with evidence in subsequent sections.

Literature Review

Several existing studies have focused on Chinese soft power in Indonesia. However, in many cases, existing research only describes in general terms how this soft power is practiced, primarily in terms of the benefits gained by the target country and the challenges of its implementation on the ground. This is evident in a 2018 study by Ridha Amalia which explains that China's use of soft power is facilitated by Indonesia's domestic need for investment in various infrastructure projects and the US's increasing withdrawal from the region.⁵ She argues that the benefits of Chinese "economic assistance" to Indonesia are strongly felt and come at the right time. However, it should be noted that although opportunities for effectiveness emerge in the economic dimension, Chinese soft power is still hampered by classic issues such as rumors of PKI's resurgence, influxes of Chinese workers, and discrimination against Uighur Muslims. Amalia's analysis focused on benefits rather than on trying to measure shifts in perception. In another study, Toruan explained how Chinese soft power is applied in Indonesia in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁶ However, his explanation only examined on BRI as an instrument of Chinese soft power aimed at revitalizing its dominance in Southeast Asia, ignoring indicators of effectiveness and measures of success.

Research that attempts to address the turn in the Indonesian public perception can be found in a 2023 paper by Mutia and Archellie. They analyzed Chinese cultural aspects of soft power such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes, forming educational cooperation with Indonesian

⁵ Amalia 2018.

⁶ Toruan 2021.

Muslim communities, and the ‘Sinification’ of the Chinese-Indonesian business community.⁷ They argued that there is a growing awareness among Chinese policymakers that while economic diplomacy plays a significant role in changing China’s image abroad, its effectiveness is limited to the elite. This means that economic instruments can reframe China’s negative image and support attempts to portray China as a benevolent agent, but this change in perception only applies exclusively. The Chinese government therefore needs alternative cultural ways to ensure its soft power effectively reaches the grassroots. Mutia and Archellie found that these efforts have been less than optimal because the approach employed by China is still too deterministic, carried out by government agents through top-down schemes. Cultural approaches should involve neutral agents such as ordinary citizens to be effective. The problem is that when the cultural means are entirely regulated and determined by the government, this mechanism can backfire, for its implementation is not inclusive and instead ignores the process of dialogue between two parties.

The research presented by Mutia and Archellie made a significant contribution to this author’s article in two respects. First, the shift in China’s soft power efforts from economic diplomacy to cultural diplomacy is crucial in analyzing the Chinese government’s attempts to shed the long-held mental links between China and PKI. Second, the cultural focus tends to deal with the people-to-people aspects rather government-to-government (as is the focus in economic diplomacy). I focus more on this second point in examining the Chinese government’s efforts to purge the remnants of Western propaganda about China and communism from the minds of the Indonesian public.

The education sector is also important in studying China’s soft power efforts in Indonesia. A 2023 The Diplomat article by Aziz Anwar Fahcrodin is beneficial in understanding the context of China’s soft power in

⁷ Mutia & Archellie 2023.

targeting Muslim groups in the education sector.⁸ Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat's also addressed this topic in 2019 on the same platform.⁹ In his article, Fahcrodin concluded that Chinese-style educational diplomacy, capitalizing on the famous hadith "seek knowledge even unto China", has succeeded in attracting many Indonesian students and Islamic boarding school students to study in China. He believed this success was not only reflected in the increasing quantity of students, which has surpassed the number of Indonesian students studying in the US, but also in terms of quality, as these students have become important defenders of Chinese policies when confronted with geopolitical issues. Fahcrodin's article is significant in providing a comprehensive picture of how China's soft power has been smoothly implemented in Indonesia. In the same article, he also touched on how NU, one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations, now has a positive view of China. This matter is essential for understanding the shift in public perception, particularly among Muslims, who have historically been fiercely anti-China. Meanwhile, in 2019, Rakhmat noted that the increased and more intensive educational cooperation between Indonesia and China prevailed after BRI agreements were signed by both countries. However, at the time of the article's publication he questioned whether such cooperation would be able to influence public perceptions.

Research on the role of Islamic diplomacy also provides valuable insight. The religious paradigm and anti-communist tendencies of Indonesian Muslims have significantly influenced Indonesia-China relations at the grassroots level. While government elites' suspicion stemmed more from the subversive nature of the communist movement, which they consider dangerous to power, grassroots perceptions tend to associate China with atheism. Atheism remains taboo in Indonesia and is widely considered immoral. Thus, China has an interest in reducing these misunderstandings through religious diplomacy. Researchers such as Abid Rahman and Ridha Amaliyah (2019) have attempted to explain the

⁸ Fahchrodin 2023.

⁹ Rakhmat 2019.

emergence of Islamic diplomacy between the two countries.¹⁰ Rahman and Amaliyah's research broadly illustrates China's need to seek out sources of moderate Islamic teachings, in which Indonesia has an interest to promote a welcoming image of its Islamic identity to the world. These two interests ultimately work in the form of reciprocal diplomacy. However, their research does not examine how China's soft power aims to overturn the lingering perceptions of communism and atheism as unfriendly to religious communities. Instead, it studies the historical aspects of how Islam spread in Indonesia through Chinese envoys and how diplomatic developments between the two parties developed from year to year.

Meanwhile, Leo Suryadinata's article, published on the Think China website and entitled 'China's Islamic diplomacy in Indonesia is seeing results', firmly and optimistically shows that China's 'Islamic diplomacy' has yielded strong results in shifting the preferences of Indonesian Muslims.¹¹ This diplomacy operates primarily in the education sector and, in Indonesia, impacts both Muhammadiyah and NU. Chinese-style Islamic diplomacy is not passive diplomacy; China actively provides scholarships to students at various Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) to continue their education to a higher level in China. Furthermore, China is routinely deploying its teachers to *pesantren* in Indonesia to teach Mandarin. No less importantly, China actively collaborates with Muhammadiyah and NU and invites high-ranking officials from these organizations to visit China in person. These elements, although not mentioned by Suryadinata as part of a structured and systematized Chinese soft power project, are valuable insight into answering a smaller research sub-question: why are Indonesian Muslims gradually leaving the old anti-Communist and anti-China propaganda of Suharto and the US behind?

¹⁰ Rohman & Amaliyah 2019.

¹¹ Suryadinata 2022.

Research Methodology

The study takes a qualitative research approach focusing on China's soft power in Indonesia and combines two techniques: descriptive and explanatory.¹² Descriptively, the study attempts to explain the history of China's soft power agenda, which coincided with its rise as a new pole in the global power structure. The paper chronologically outlines China's soft power efforts as an inseparable part of its inherent needs as a new superpower. Through the explanatory approach, this research attempts to uncover how China's soft power agenda in Indonesia is operationalized, particularly examining its effectiveness in eliminating lingering resentment toward China. The 1965 attempted coup and subsequent anti-PKI violence serves as the basis and starting point for this research. This moment marked a period of drastic transformation in Indonesia's perception upon China: from the idyllic Sukarno-Mao alliance to the abrupt severance of relations between the two countries following the rise of Suharto's New Order.

At least three variables derived from the concept of soft power are utilized to discuss how Indonesian public perceptions of China are transforming. First, China's economic diplomacy; second, China's educational and cultural diplomacy; and third, China's religious diplomacy. For economic diplomacy, these variables are derived from Kurlantzik's revisionist concept of soft power, which differs from that of Nye'.¹³ Nye identifies economic cooperation as hard power, while Kurlantzik, particularly for the Chinese context, considers it part of soft power. The other variables of educational and cultural cooperation and religious diplomacy harness Nye's soft power formulation, using his explanation of cultural and foreign policy elements.

¹² Hecker & Kalpokas, *The Ultimate Guide to Qualitative Research - Part 1: The Basics*

¹³ Kurlantzick 2006; Nye 2004.

Data and information used in this qualitative research relies primarily on texts.¹⁴ Data sources include official government narratives publicly available online, mass media reports, public figures' statements in the media, and survey results from research institutions. The inclusion of secondary survey results is deliberately done to strengthen the existing qualitative analysis. This is crucial to ensure the analysis output presented here is more objective, avoiding subjective bias by synchronizing personal analysis with available statistical data.

Theoretical Framework

Two main theories used to examine the shift in Indonesian public perception from viewing China as a supporter of PKI to a friendly actor. Nye's theory – which describes the new conditions faced by the US after the Cold War – and Kurlantzick's renewed theory – which focuses extensively on the context of China's rise – are both crucial tools in analyzing China's invisible power in influencing Indonesian public perception without resorting to coercive measures.

In his earliest literature on soft power, Nye's 1990 article in *Foreign Policy* described the post-Cold War world.¹⁵ He argued that in the new environment, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the definition of power was no longer the same. Power was not only measured by old methods such as a country's "population, territory, natural resources, economic size, military forces, and political stability", but also encompasses advancements in "technology, education, and economic growth".¹⁶ The US remains the only country possessing all of these superior capabilities in the post-Cold War era, even though, in economic terms, other new challengers, such as Japan, have emerged. It is important to note that, although the world system is not entirely

¹⁴ Crosmann 2020.

¹⁵ Nye 1990, pp. 153-171.

¹⁶ Nye 1990, p. 154.

multipolar in the post-Cold War era, power is now more diffused among many actors, both state and non-state, making managing the post-Cold War order more complex. Power distribution is transformed in this new environment, deviating from the traditional balance of power that emphasizes military strength as the sole measure of a country's strength. In this interdependent world, military capability is no longer the sole factor.

Soft power has proven to be important tool. All actors tries to influence others in this era of interdependence, by no longer using traditional methods like military might and conquest strategies, but rather using newer means through "cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions".¹⁷ The ineffectiveness of hard power is clearly salient in the new era, a period in which actors mutually interdependent and power is now distributed among various transnational actors.

In distinguishing between hard power and soft power, Nye mentioned two things: first, in terms of how the power is exercised (coercive or non-coercive), and second, the form of that power is manifested (tangible or intangible).¹⁸ Nye subsequently differentiated between influence, persuasion, and soft power, where influence can be sourced through "threats or payments",¹⁹ while persuasion arises through the encouragement to influence certain actors.²⁰ Soft power is more than both concepts, emphasizing the attraction that comes along with the willingness to follow. Soft power is a form of power that is not tangible but exists and becomes an effective tool presented in the form of attraction to others. "And attraction..." Nye said, "...often leads to acquiescence."²¹

Simply put, soft power operates without coercion and draws others in voluntarily. It is usually invisible because it emphasizes elements of

¹⁷ Nye 1990, p. 167.

¹⁸ Nye 2004.

¹⁹ Nye 2004, p. 6.

²⁰ Nye 2004.

²¹ Nye 2004, p. 6.

values, morals, and norms. Nye identified three main sources of a country's soft power: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)."²²

Despite his significant role in formulating the concept of soft power, Nye's soft power context is US-centric. Therefore, in this paper, I also use Kurlantzik's concept of soft power as it better reflects the Chinese context.²³ Kurlantzik revised Nye's concept of soft power, as he deemed it to be too narrow and inappropriate for the Chinese case. In his article 'China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia', Kurlantzik explored the effectiveness of China's soft power, which he noted it because it is supported by economic elements such as investment and aid as well as culture, diplomacy, and involvement in multilateral organizations. In Nye's paradigm, investment and aid fall into the category of hard power rather than soft, so this revision adds new color to the discourse of soft power. As Kurlantzik noted, "in the context of Asia today, both China and its neighbors enunciate a broader idea of soft power, implying all elements outside the security realm, including investment and aid."²⁴

For Kurlantzik, there are two main reasons why China's image is now positive in Southeast Asia, especially after 2000.²⁵ First, external factors caused by the hostile policies of the US and Japan in responding to the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, followed by US-led anti-terrorism campaign after 11 September 2001. These two events eroded the positive image of these two main actors, who had previously gained a place in the hearts of Southeast Asian countries. The second factor is due to China's internal transformation. There have been extraordinary changes in China's policies since it abandoned the ideologically-driven revolutionary policies

²² Nye 2004, p. 11.

²³ Kurlantzick 2006.

²⁴ Kurlantzick 2006, p. 271.

²⁵ Kurlantzick 2006.

of the Mao era. China's new era, especially after 1997, has been characterized by its efforts to polish its image in the eyes of the world through means such as improved bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and an active role in multilateral organizations. These efforts have successfully left behind the old traces of China, which was viewed as unfriendly and a threat by its neighbors. China's friendly diplomacy also helps the country to distance itself from its past association with various communist rebel groups in Southeast Asia.

Another aspect of China's soft power stems from its political values. For Kurlantzick, China offers a new political culture distinct from that of the West, as China's political values prioritize a top-down approach and prioritize economic reform over political reform.²⁶ For example, China's success in reducing poverty has impressed others. Meanwhile, in terms of culture, China's soft power extends through cultural collaborations and exhibitions, educational diplomacy, the establishment of Confucius Institutes, and the modernization and expansion of the reach of state-controlled media. Finally, economic diplomacy has become a crucial and primary medium for transforming China's image in Southeast Asia, as the country's exponential growth and generous financial assistance holds significant appeal.²⁷

China's initiative to develop soft power instruments is driven by several objectives.²⁸ First, China seeks to create a peaceful environment around itself and its neighbors. Only through peace can China's economic growth continue. Second, China aims to diminish Taiwan's previous dominant influence. Third, China has an interest in establishing a favorable perception among its neighbors, replacing the old perception of being perceived as threatening and hostile. Fourth, China aims to establish its own sphere of influence in Asia, just as the US formed a sphere

²⁶ Kurlantzick 2006.

²⁷ Kurlantzick 2006.

²⁸ Kurlantzick 2006.

of influence in the Western hemisphere. Control over this sphere of influence is crucial to ensuring that China's neighbors can become loyal allies in supporting China's interests in the future. Of the several objectives Kurlantzik outlined, China's third – efforts to establish a perception of itself as a responsible actor, freed from its painful past as a supporter of communist movements in the region – is a key point of discussion in this paper.

Discussion and Results

This section discusses how the interlocking triangle of communism, PKI (the Indonesian Communist Party), and China shaped public perception of China in Indonesia. The negative image of China in Indonesian public discourse is the result of anti-communist propaganda undertaken by Suharto's New Order regime, supported by the US during the Cold War era. Suharto accused China of behind the abortive coup plot executed by soldiers affiliated with PKI to dominate political control in the country.²⁹ China was accused of providing weapons to help the insurgency. The New Order regime even crystallized the accusation by making and continuously showing the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (*The September 30 Movement/PKI Betrayal*) every year for 13 years on September 30, including at schools.³⁰ The result of propaganda was quite surprising. The charge that PKI was the mastermind behind the 1965 coup attempt and that China was a supporter has become part of the public collective consciousness that has not faded away. However, it must be emphasized that the accusation of China was behind the coup – recorded in various army propaganda instruments under Suharto as well as works by people such as Jon Halliday, Jun Chang, and Victor Fic – is not based on the strong evidence.³¹ As Taomo Zhou said, "... none of the accusations

²⁹ Zhou, *Tiongkok dan G30S*, p. 1-2.

³⁰ Pitaloka & Hantoro 2023; Zhou, *Tiongkok dan G30S*, p. 1-2.

³¹ Zhou, *Tiongkok dan G30S*, p. 1-2.

mentioned above is built upon reliable evidence. Our knowledge has been incomplete due to the inaccessibility of related documents from the PRC [People's Republic of China].”³² In addition, there is no evidence of the oft-mentioned allegation of arms assistance being provided from China to form a people's militia force in Indonesia.³³

In reality, the anti-communist propaganda perpetrated by Suharto was in line with US foreign policy, which aimed to suppress communist movements around the world. Indonesia was key to the communist movement in Southeast Asia, with the third largest number of Communist Party members after the Soviet Union and China.³⁴ US assisted the New Order regime into two ways: through educational and cultural dimensions.³⁵ Those two strategies are explained in detail by Herlambang in his findings, retold by Fathimah Fildzah Izzati in an article published in Indoprogress.³⁶ In an effort to suppress the communist movement in Indonesia, the US government provided scholarships for Indonesian students to study at various US universities funded by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation. Large numbers of scholarships were provided in the 1950s, with these students expected to later hold power and steer the country's economic and political direction in accordance with Western values. The scholarships were expected to spawn Indonesian intellectuals who would campaign for liberalism and anti-communism. Among the Indonesian intellectuals who graduated from the West at that time are Emil Salim, Miriam Budiardjo, and Sumitro Djojohadikusumo.³⁷

In addition to education, Suharto's anti-communist campaign was also supported by the US through cultural means. For example, the Congress for Cultural Freedom was established with the explicit task of

³² Zhou 2014, p. 30.

³³ Zhou 2014.

³⁴ Junaidi 2022.

³⁵ This book review can be seen in the article made by Izzati 2014.

³⁶ Izzati 2014.

³⁷ Izzati 2014.

sharing books to assist the consolidation of anti-communism discourse in Indonesia. These books were distributed to many libraries across the country, as well as to more than one hundred Indonesian intellectuals who became anti-communism mouthpieces, such as Goenawan Mohamad and HB Jassin. In carrying out its mission, the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom also translated anti-communist literary works such as masterpieces from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Albert Camus' works. The translation process was funded by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations with the assistance of the US Central Intelligence Agency.³⁸

In sum, after Suharto took power, its anti-communist campaign slandering China as behind the failed PKI coup attempt in 1965, contributed to Indonesia's bloodiest moments. Between 500,000 and three million Indonesians³⁹ were accused of being members or sympathizers of PKI were brutally murdered by the Indonesian army and Islamic community organization.⁴⁰ Besides being killed, many of them were also banished to remote islands or jailed in detainment centers without fair and transparent legal treatment. For Suharto, communism was the number one scourge, so as long as he was in power, anti-PKI propaganda continued through cultural products such as literary works, films, historical narratives, dioramas, monuments, museums, folklore, religion, ideology, and teaching materials.⁴¹ Indonesian relations with China were also officially severed.

New Order cultural propaganda was incredibly successful in instilling public fear toward communists and communism. The long-held perception that communism is anti-religion and anti-god has made it easier for the government to provoke public anger, and even now, many Indonesians, especially Conservative Muslims, believe that communists

³⁸ Izzati 2014.

³⁹ Junaedi 2021.

⁴⁰ Fealy and McGregor 2010.

⁴¹ Nurcholis 2022.

are atheists and therefore deserves to be destroyed.⁴² It remains taboo today to talk about communism in public, which contributes to why it has been so challenging to overcome the remnants of New Order and US anti-communist propaganda.

If we look to the experiences of other Muslim countries, major differences emerge. In Islamic countries such as Iran, Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, communist parties have flourished.⁴³ The difference is, Sumanto suggests, in the Middle East, communism is not considered taboo because Arab society does not equate communists with atheists, unlike in Indonesia.⁴⁴ The people of the Middle East largely regard "communism solely as an ideology of a rival political-economic movement".⁴⁵ In comparison, the strong anti-religious dimension applied to communism in Indonesia, coupled with negative perception of communism due to New Order propaganda, has had a strong impact on the public's view of China. China, apart from being seen as supporting the abortive coup attempt, is associated with its image as a godless communist state. It boosts China's negative image among Indonesians.

A Brief Overview of the History of Indonesia-China Relations

During the Sukarno and Mao era, Indonesia-China relations were strong and in something of a golden period. There were many personal similarities between Sukarno and Mao Zedong, which enabled them to establish a solid relationship. During Sukarno's 'Old Order' period, the closeness between China and Indonesia was shaped by shared ideas on the struggle against imperialism and colonialism. Both Mao and Sukarno were vocal advocates of the importance of self-determination for third-

⁴² Qurtuby 2021.

⁴³ Qurtuby 2021.

⁴⁴ Qurtuby 2021.

⁴⁵ Qurtuby 2021.

world nations, and intellectually, Sukarno was deeply influenced by Sun Yat Sen's legacy of nationalism.⁴⁶ In short, at the beginning of Indonesia-China relations, both clearly demonstrated a position of friendship.⁴⁷ This can even be seen from Sukarno's efforts to announce the formation of the Jakarta-Pyongyang-Beijing axis, which indirectly signalled to the international community where Indonesia's position was amidst the Cold War tension between the US and the Soviet Union.⁴⁸

However, this cordial relationship collapsed with the fall of Sukarno in 1965 following the attempted coup. Since then, the relationship dynamics between Indonesia and China have fluctuated greatly and were greatly hostile in the early days of Suharto's presidency, as in 1967, Indonesia severed diplomatic relations with China.⁴⁹ A limited reconciliation occurred in the middle of Suharto's reign, but it took until the 1990s for the relationship to really improve.⁵⁰

The differences in attitudes between Sukarno and Suharto, as well as their approaches to China, were motivated by their respective ideological perspectives towards communism as a political movement. Sukarno accepted communism as a political value pondered useful for the realization of a just society and as a solidarity of resistance to escape from the trap of global imperialism and colonialism. Suharto took the opposite belief, viewing communism as a subversive movement, with the presence of PKI in Indonesian politics seen as dangerous for Indonesia's political stability. In the world political constellation at that time, Suharto tended to be more pro-US; for example, 13 Indonesian military personnel who

⁴⁶ Liu 1997.

⁴⁷ China often served as a source of inspiration for socio-political development models not only for Sukarno but also for the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) which felt China's revolutionary model was more suited than to the Soviet one. During the Guided Democracy era, the Sukarno-PKI and China alliance was a golden age for relations between the two countries. See, Indonesia, Tiongkok dan Komunisme, 1949-1965 (Utomo, 2017).

⁴⁸ Koran Sulindo 2024.

⁴⁹ Sukma 2009.

⁵⁰ Sukma 2009.

occupied positions in his government cabinet were among 2,100 graduates from the US-funded Military Assistance Program.⁵¹ McNamara, then-US Secretary of Defense, once said:

“In my judgment, our decisions to invest roughly \$5 million to bring some 2100 Indonesian military personnel to the United States for training, and to continue the program even during the bleak years 1963–65 when Sukarno was carrying on confrontation against Malaysia and working closely with Peking [Beijing], have been very significant factors in determining the favorable orientation of the new Indonesian political elite.”⁵²

Therefore, Suharto's accusation that China supported PKI in the 1965 attempted coup was an indirect consequence of Cold War. The communist threat, and the Chinese threat in particular, became the primary basis of legitimacy supporting Suharto's 32-year rule.⁵³ Suharto and the Indonesian Army's commitment to destroying communism had, in fact, been ongoing long before the 1965 incident. Internal political rivalry between the military and PKI intensified amidst the latter's close relationship with Sukarno, with ideological differences being central to the split: the Indonesian military were more Western-oriented due to their training in Western military schools, while PKI desired to form a 'fifth force', an armed civilian militia. This made the military worried that its power would be stripped away. In addition, some elites within the Indonesian Army, such as Nasution, envisioned a 'corporatist' government in which the military would become the organ and the center of government in a new, post-Sukarno era.⁵⁴ In short, Sukarno's close relationship with PKI and China was a disaster for the military. In the

⁵¹ United States Department of State 1967.

⁵² United States Department of State 1967.

⁵³ Sukma 2009.

⁵⁴ Roosa 2008, pp. 250-284.

military's eyes, PKI posed a threat because it was seen as a potential successor to Sukarno, and China was perceived as a strong future supporter of PKI.

After years of negative public and elite perceptions towards China, the potential for a more positive image finally emerged with the collapse of the New Order in 1998. Indeed, it has so proved, as since then, relations between Indonesia and China have continued to improve. The peak of the two countries' closeness occurred during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration, when the two countries elevated their bilateral cooperation to the highest level, developing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁵⁵

Three Crucial Factors Changing The Perception of Chinas

The new shift in public and elite perceptions of China in Indonesia cannot be separated from three important factors. First, the disappearance of dogma and Cold War mentality that framed China as a representation of the global communist movement. Second, China's emergence as an impressive new economic power, reinforced by its active role in bilateral and multilateral development programs and cooperation initiatives. Third, China's soft power and public diplomacy have successfully disseminated its new image as a responsible actor. China is now considered to have no intention of exporting its political system and ideology to other countries. Rather than engaging in social engineering to support or install a particular regime in a country, China is more involved and focused on economic, cultural, and educational activities. These three components constitute China's soft power strength in Indonesia.

On the first factor, the fading of China's image as a pioneer and supporter of the international communist movement can be traced back to 1979, when China established diplomatic relations with the US. This had

⁵⁵ Natalia 2025.

a significant impact on the eventual re-establishment of Indonesia-China relations in 1990.⁵⁶ The US's decision to establish relationships became Suharto's foundation for addressing past fears of a communist resurgence in Indonesia, although these concerns persisted among the public, particularly among Muslims.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Suharto's openness was reinforced by Deng Xiaoping's leadership in China, which focused more on domestic economic reforms rather than seeking influence and supporting communism abroad, especially in Southeast Asia.⁵⁸

Second, China's emergence as an active player on the international economy scene has been crucial. China has initiated various global infrastructure projects, such as BRI, and is involved in numerous global organizations as well as bilateral and multilateral partnerships. These include China's involvements in organizations that were formed and led by China itself, either as a leading role at the body or founding member with other countries, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Bo'ao Forum, China-Arab State Cooperation Forum, BRICS, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Chiang Mai Initiative, and Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank.⁵⁹ These efforts have earned China considerable credit internationally, a country which can be counted on as a rising power willing to help other countries growing together, including through providing important economic opportunities for developing countries, including Indonesia. Indonesia has joined almost every initiative China has launched, including joining BRI, becoming a shareholder in the AIIB, and most recently, becoming a permanent member of BRICS. China's economic rise has indeed been a magnet to others, as since Deng assumed leadership, China has demonstrated extraordinary economic performance, which stabilized at approximately 9 percent growth per year

⁵⁶ Anwar 2019.

⁵⁷ Anwar 2019.

⁵⁸ Overholt 1996.

⁵⁹ Stephen 2020, pp. 8-10.

in average up to 2020. With this stable growth, in 2010, China surpassed Japan, having previously outstripped France, the United Kingdom, and Germany in 2005 and 2007, respectively. China's economic power is now second only to that of the US.⁶⁰

Given its ever-growing economic power and the increasingly pressing need to expand its market reach, China has no other way forward than to foster, maintain, and enhance its good relations with other countries. The intensive trade relationship between China and Indonesia, which reached a staggering figure of 149.2 billion USD in 2022,⁶¹ is just one of China's growing trade relations. The logic is simple: by establishing good relations with everyone and fostering a friendly perception, China no longer needs to worry about target markets for its exports and imports commodities. This is, thus, the primary reason behind China's expanding role in international organizations and its strengthening of bilateral and multilateral relations.

Third, the shift in Indonesian public perception of China, consciously or unconsciously, has been aided by China's soft power activities in the country. Over time, supported by its substantial economic resources, China has begun to expand into other dimensions of cooperation, including cultural cooperation, education, and religious diplomacy. These three components of soft power are evident in tangible forms such as the proliferation of Confucius Institutes on Indonesian university campuses, the provision of scholarships to Indonesian students, and China's sophisticated approach to NU and Muhammadiyah. When combined with China's economic diplomacy and technological platform diplomacy among young people, this provides a clearer picture of how these forces have succeeded in transforming China's image from a feared actor to a respected agent.

⁶⁰ Teather 2010.

⁶¹ Muslimawati & Riso 2023.

Therefore, in the following section, when discussing the variables of Chinese soft power in Indonesia, I focus on these three main components as the result of combining elements of Nye's and Kurlantzik's concepts of soft power. To ensure the instruments used are appropriate to the Chinese context, first, I explore the economic cooperation; second, I elaborate educational diplomacy and the presence of Confucius Institutes; and third, I examine the Chinese-style religious approach.

China's Generous Economy

By following Kurlantzick's concept of soft power, China has been successful in building partnerships with countries through economic instrument, including with Indonesia. Admittedly, the relationship between two countries is at its best when focusing on economic cooperation, putting aside the political problems experienced in the past. The peak progress in Indonesia-China economic relations can be traced to the Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo era (2014-2024). Under Jokowi's administration, the trade value between Indonesia and China reached USD 48.2 billion⁶² in the early days of Jokowi's presidency in 2015. The number is significant when compared to that of 2005, when trade value reached just USD 8.7 billion.⁶³ Indonesia's intimacy with China was indeed more visible in the Jokowi era, strengthened by projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung high speed rail project, in which China was chosen to be the developing partner rather than Japan, even though the latter first proposed the initiative. Jokowi stated that the reason was because the project required the financing outside the state budget, and China had agreed to provide it.⁶⁴ China also consented to transfer its technology to Indonesia, while Japan refused.⁶⁵ The ultimate choice of China for the high

⁶² CNN Indonesia 2019.

⁶³ CNN Indonesia 2019.

⁶⁴ Prihatin 2015.

⁶⁵ Nurcholis 2022.

speed rail project is just one piece of evidence from many which demonstrates how the pendulum of world order has shifted.

Nevertheless, the high-speed rail project was not the first of China's soft power instruments in Indonesia's economic sector. In the early days of the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, Indonesia was grateful for China's restraint in devaluing its currency. Furthermore, through the International Monetary Fund, China contributed a USD 400 million economic loan package to help Indonesia's shattered economy.⁶⁶ Changing public perceptions of China's past actions were greatly aided by this generosity, as during this period, Southeast Asian countries began to view China as a benevolent actor, sensitive to the plight of its neighbors. In subsequent years, when Indonesia faced major natural disasters, China's helping hand was always present. Following the 2004 Aceh tsunami, for example, China provided USD 60 million in aid to Indonesia and other affected countries, and after the 2006 Java earthquake, China contributed financially and sent relief teams.⁶⁷ All of this assistance successfully presented a new face for China.

The Power of Scholarship and The Presence of Confucius Institute

In addition to skyrocketing economic cooperation, Chinese soft power in Indonesia is commonly found in the form of educational diplomacy.⁶⁸ China is actively providing university scholarships to Indonesian students who wish to continue their studies in China. Based on data from the Education Attaché of the Indonesian Embassy in Beijing in 2019, 820 Indonesian students were awarded scholarships by the Chinese government, while by 2020, this number had increased dramatically to 3,000 students.⁶⁹ Most recently, in 2025, the number of

⁶⁶ Sukma 2009.

⁶⁷ Sukma 2009.

⁶⁸ Suryadinata 2022.

⁶⁹ Ilmie 2020.

both scholarship and non-scholarship students studying in China reached 15,000 students.⁷⁰ According to Stella Christie, Indonesian Deputy Minister of Higher Education, the appeal of Chinese education to students is diverse, including improved and internationally recognized quality, short distances and affordable tuition fees, and growing job opportunities, especially as many Chinese companies are investing in Indonesia.⁷¹

Chinese government scholarships target almost all elements of Indonesian society, including Islamic school students (*santri*), who mostly come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.⁷² In the previous era, international scholarship programs were dominated by students studying in Western countries such as the Netherlands, England, Australia, the US, and Germany.⁷³ Even for *santri*, the idea of continuing their studies in China was limited to the hadith: "Seek knowledge, even to China."⁷⁴ Many *santri* prefer to continue their education in Muslim countries such as those in the Middle East, especially those who graduated from Islamic modern schools; for them, China remains an alien (and Communist) destination. But that is all becoming a distant memory, and slowly but surely, China has crawled up the list of priority educational destinations for many Indonesians.

One interesting example of this is a Telegram group called 'Chinese Government Scholarship'. The group has a large membership, at 2,890 people at the time of writing. The group functions as a discussion and information exchange forum for anyone interested in obtaining a Chinese government scholarship. Indeed, the scholarships on offer are diverse, with the most popular being the Chinese Government Scholarship managed directly by the China Scholarship Council.⁷⁵ This scholarship

⁷⁰ Putra 2025.

⁷¹ Putra 2025.

⁷² Suryadinata 2022.

⁷³ Suryadinata 2022.

⁷⁴ Fahcrodin 2023.

⁷⁵ Deals 2025.

partners with 270 universities across China, offering undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs. The amount of funding provided at each level varies, with undergraduate students receiving 2,500 yuan (USD 353 – conversion rate at time of writing), Masters students 3,000 yuan (USD 424), and Doctoral students 3,500 yuan (USD 495). This amount is just a monthly stipend, excluding health insurance and free dormitory fees.⁷⁶ At first glance, this amount may seem small compared to other scholarships offered by Western programs, but it is largely offset by China's low cost of living, so China remains an attractive destination for many Indonesian students.

Historically, China's intensive educational diplomacy in Indonesia can be traced back to 2015, when Indonesia and China agreed to increase their cooperation in the field of education. The following year, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding regarding collaboration on scholarships and mutual recognition of higher education degrees.⁷⁷ This included a focus on vocational education collaboration, and by 2023, nine Indonesian state polytechnic institutions had established university-to-university (U-to-U) cooperation schemes with vocational education institutions in China.⁷⁸ Also in the field of vocational education, Indonesia and China have a cooperation program called '1 + 10 + 100 + 1000', where one of the program's objectives is to "open a new-energy vehicle technology major".⁷⁹ In general, by 2024, "761 cooperation agreements had been signed between universities in both countries, encompassing lecturer and student exchanges, joint research, curriculum development, and training."⁸⁰ These figures demonstrate the effectiveness of China's soft power in Indonesia's education sector. The

⁷⁶ Deals 2025.

⁷⁷ Ratya 2017.

⁷⁸ Parady & Hartono 2023.

⁷⁹ Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, Sains, dan Teknologi 2025.

⁸⁰ Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, Sains, dan Teknologi 2025.

common belief that China was a communist agent to be wary of has faded as mutual trust in this sector has grown.

Chinese diplomacy has also penetrated the cultural sector. At the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, Hu Jintao directly highlighted these efforts, stating, "Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength."⁸¹ But Chinese cultural diplomacy efforts were launched long before this, recognizing the weightiness of culture as a tool of international diplomacy and a manifestation of a nation's strength. China successfully launched its first overseas cultural diplomacy bodies in 2004 by establishing the Confucius Institute which is tasked with internationalizing Chinese culture and language.⁸² This institution first appeared in South Korea, and in 2005 it expanded to other countries including Belgium and Australia. The process of establishing a Confucius Institute is not based on a one-way initiative but is rather based on the request and voluntary action from institutions in the country concerned. The website states: "Establishment of these Institutes should firstly be applied for voluntarily by the overseas institutions."⁸³ In fact, in their formation, they emphasized the values of "mutual respect, friendly consultation, equality and mutual benefit".⁸⁴

In general, the Confucius Institute is divided into two institutional forms: the Confucius Institute and the Confucius Classroom. In Indonesia, eight Confucius Institutes and one Confucius Classroom are operating.⁸⁵ In 2025, a joint forum was established between Confucius Institute administrators across Indonesia called The Confucius Institute Indonesia Communication Forum, which aims to improve the quality and

⁸¹ China Daily 2007.

⁸² Confucius Institute n.d.

⁸³ Confucius Institute n.d.

⁸⁴ Confucius Institute n.d.

⁸⁵ China.org.cn 2025.

collaboration between existing institutes. Universities in Indonesia which now have Confucius Institutes include Al Azhar University Indonesia, Tanjungpura University, Hasanuddin University, Maranatha Christian University, Sebelas Maret University, Malang State University, Surabaya State University, and Udayana University.⁸⁶

China's successful soft power efforts in the educational and cultural sectors have brought about drastic change, especially among Indonesian Muslims in their attitudes towards China. In the educational sector, evidence of success can be seen in the new graduates of Chinese universities, who now not only have a more open and friendly perspective toward the country but also often defend China's interests in its contest with the US.⁸⁷ More surprisingly, this defense is even fervently carried out by *santri*, who, in Indonesian political history and dynamics, have deeply hated communism. An interesting case is Novi Basuki,⁸⁸ an Islamic school student from Probolinggo, East Java, who received scholarships from the Chinese government from undergraduate to doctoral level. Novi attracted attention because he once wrote an opinion piece in Detik which refuted accusations of genocide by Chinese against Uighur people.⁸⁹ Novi's story should be recounted here because it is a personal reflection of the success of Chinese soft power through scholarships awarded to Islamic school students in Indonesia. Furthermore, Al-Azhar University's initiative to establish a Confucius Institute is another example of how China's soft power operates. It is hard to imagine a Muslim university being so open and willing to collaborate with China in the past. Al-Azhar University's acceptance represents an example of the profound shift that has occurred in Indonesian Muslims' perceptions of both China and communism.

⁸⁶ Dig Mandarin 2024.

⁸⁷ Suryadinata 2022.

⁸⁸ Suryadinata 2022.

⁸⁹ Basuki 2021.

China's Approach to Islamic Groups

Among other aspects of China's soft power efforts in Indonesia, China's Islamic diplomacy with Indonesia's two largest Islamic organizations is the newest. Although some records indicate that religious diplomacy between Indonesia and China was established in 1955, when Indonesia hosted the Asia-Africa Conference, at which the Chinese delegation presented 'Muslims in China', an album detailing the ins and outs of Islam in China and emphasizing their support for the foundations of religious dynamism despite being a communist country.⁹⁰ However, since then, there has been no notable activity in the field of religious diplomacy between the two countries. The need to engage with Muslim groups in Indonesia emerged more recently alongside China's economic rise and the need to polish a new, more positive image in international scene. According to Xue Song,⁹¹ three factors have sequentially driven China's involvement in religious diplomacy in Indonesia: first, as a manifestation of China's Neighborhood Diplomacy policy; second, to bolster the effectiveness of various projects within the BRI framework; and third, as an effort to preserve and strengthen "Faith Diplomacy" between the two countries.

Engaging with Islamic groups like Muhammadiyah and NU is highly strategic given Indonesia's large Muslim population. As Indonesia's dominant religion, engaging with Islam is a key to maintaining a positive image within the Indonesian public in general. Furthermore, the 'moderate' nature of both NU and Muhammadiyah is well-suited to strengthening a form of Islam that aligns with China's domestic needs. Moderation is a crucial value in preserving the cohesiveness of Chinese society, and China even has a regulatory framework called the Code of

⁹⁰ Song 2024.

⁹¹ Song 2024.

Conduct for Islamic Religious Personnel, which encourages moderate religious practices.⁹²

However, there are also accusations that China's involvement in Islamic diplomacy in Indonesia is part of their seeking international support to mitigate negative perceptions as a result of its repressive policies against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.⁹³ China has been undertaking these Islamic diplomatic activities in Indonesia since 2018, with an overarching goal of quelling dissenting voices about 'deradicalization' activities in Xinjiang. In Indonesia, China's efforts cover,⁹⁴ first and foremost, by direct engagement the Chinese embassy with Islamic organizations. In 2018, Chinese Ambassador Xiao Qian visited NU and Muhammadiyah and assured both organizations that China's policies in Xinjiang were related to preventing separatism and terrorism. Second, in 2019, China invited all important high-ranking Indonesian Muslims representatives, including leaders of NU, Muhammadiyah, and the Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI), to visit Xinjiang. Third, China has actively collaborated and cooperated with Muhammadiyah and provided financial and social assistance to NU. Fourth, China has diligently provided special educational scholarships for cadres of both organizations. It seems that these diplomacy efforts have largely succeeded in reducing Indonesian criticism of China's action toward Uighurs.⁹⁵

China considers the Uighurs, a Muslim minority occupying Xinjiang, a region near the central Asia, as requiring 'discipline' to conform to the country's principles and values. The Chinese government fears that the Uighurs could turn into a serious disaster if not managed properly. They claimed the concerns of the region is mainly about separatism, terrorism,

⁹² Song 2024.

⁹³ Rakhmat 2022.

⁹⁴ Rakhmat 2022.

⁹⁵ Rakhmat 2022.

and radicalism.⁹⁶ The tarnished image of Islam following the 11 September 2001 attacks and the rise of terrorism cases involving Islamic fundamentalist groups around the world has made China concerned that the Uighur community's religious practices might be negatively impacted, so the spread of moderate Islamic values is seen as crucial within the country. This is where the need to partner with inclusive and moderate Indonesian Islam emerges for China, as it is impossible for China to successfully polish its image that they support inclusiveness and are tolerant of religious life, including Islam, without involving external parties. Without external support, any Chinese advocacy will be viewed as merely one-sided claims. Therefore, the support of Indonesian Islamic groups is invaluable in improving this image, and the willingness of NU and Muhammadiyah to be involved is a blessing for the Chinese government.

It is important to note that both NU and Muhammadiyah share a deep history of hostility toward PKI in the past. While Muhammadiyah's involvement in the 1965 communist massacre remains unclear,⁹⁷ NU's engagement has long been documented. Fealy and McGregor's account detailed how Indonesia's largest Islamic organization played a fatal role in the eradication of PKI members at the grassroots level after 1965.⁹⁸ Therefore, the improving relationship between China, NU and Muhammadiyah, and the expansion of their scope of cooperation with China, further demonstrates that the fear of communism is fading in Indonesia. A new, fresher perspective is emerging on how communism is defined, similar to that of how many Middle Eastern countries view communism as part of a political-economic school of thought, rather than merely from a purely religious perspective. Whether they realize it or not, NU and Muhammadiyah have now entered China's orbit of influence.

⁹⁶ China Daily 2014; CNBC Indonesia 2019.

⁹⁷ Jusuf & Zen RS 2018.

⁹⁸ Fealy and McGregor 2010.

Overall, it is clear that there has been a remarkable paradigm shift in Indonesia, from a past fear of China to a current perspective of China being a constructive partner. One thing is certain: the image of China as a friendly communist nation is predominantly rooted in the general perception that China no longer imposes its ideological values on other countries as it did during Mao's revolutionary era. Therefore, it is easy for NU and Muhammadiyah to send their cadres to study in China without fear of brainwashing, and both have even established branches in the country. The NU Special Branch in China was founded in 2017, while that of Muhammadiyah was established a year earlier in 2016.⁹⁹ This demonstrates that China has truly succeeded in changing its perception among Indonesian Muslims.

Overall Analysis on China's Soft Power

The context of the relationship and interconnectedness between PKI and China, which had a significant impact on the psychology of Indonesian people, when narrowed down, actually centers around the clarity of China's involvement in 1965 attempted coup. China is often accused of being behind the incident, although the proof pointing to it is unclear and even confusing.¹⁰⁰ In a short article published on the Cornell University Press website, Taomo Zhou even called this the "China Conspiracy Theories", referring to a paradigm in which all economic and political chaos occurring in Indonesia is attributed to China's actions, even today.¹⁰¹ The complexity of whether China was involved or not is colored by global geopolitical tensions between the capitalist bloc led by the US and the communist camp of the Soviet Union. The US had an interest in fortifying Indonesia from communist influence because they believed that once Indonesia fell to the communists, other Southeast Asian countries

⁹⁹ Song 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Zhou 2014.

¹⁰¹ Zhou n.d.

would follow the suit. The US believed in the domino theory,¹⁰² and China became a victim of the never-ending puzzle of coup actors. Its good name was destroyed along with the Sukarno's power.

Now, that view of China is slowly being replaced by a new image. China is increasingly recognized by the Indonesian people, especially religious leaders, as a developed country. China's past image of being associated with the 'anti-god' PKI, although persisting, has gradually diminished, with the exception of some extremist Islamic groups. Meanwhile, moderate Islamic groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah now have different perceptions and regard China as a strategic economic partner of Indonesia. Even Said Aqil Siroj, former chairman of NU's Central Board once said "[China] has a large population, advanced technology, improved economy, extraordinary, and [Chinese people are] friendly, polite, courteous people," and even praised China for never colonizing other countries.¹⁰³ Haedar Nasir, head of Muhammadiyah Central Board, once told Lu Kang, China's former ambassador to Indonesia, in addition to his hope that Muslims in Xinjiang would have freedom of worship, he hoped that China would play a major role in the struggle of the Palestinian people: "We hope that China as a big country will defend the rights of the Palestinian people like any other nation."¹⁰⁴ All of this provides strong evidence of how the remnants of old Cold War-era propaganda are receding in the mindsets of the Indonesian people.

The birth of a new and more positive image of China among Muslim Indonesians stems from China's soft power efforts in the country. In several respects, China is very aggressive in its economic cooperation with Indonesian government, especially following the reopening of bilateral relations in 1990 and the establishment of the 2005 Strategic Partnership and subsequent 2013 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Duignan/The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica 2020.

¹⁰³ Sahal & Cholil 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Suryana & Firmansyah 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Utami & Ratomo 2015.

Infrastructure projects have also been key, including the Jakarta-Bandung high speed rail project, the construction of dams and toll roads,¹⁰⁶ and China's commitment to supporting construction in Indonesia's new capital city, Nusantara.¹⁰⁷

In addition to initiating close government-to-government cooperation, the Chinese government has established good relations with non-state actors in Indonesia, including NU and Muhammadiyah. These two organizations are the largest religious groups in Indonesia: more than 57.33 million Indonesians are members of NU and another 9.39 million are members of Muhammadiyah.¹⁰⁸ Both also foster cooperation in the education sector with China,¹⁰⁹ alongside other sectors. China's decision to establish comprehensive cooperation with these two organizations was highly appropriate and has seen good results.

The other key strength of China's soft power is the provision of scholarships for Indonesian students.¹¹⁰ It must be noted that most Indonesian people have limited information about China, so the large number of Indonesian students studying in China has opened up people's minds.¹¹¹ If so far the only source of reference for information about China was presented with a western bias, now the Indonesian public is presented with alternative information.¹¹² The new face of China is further reinforced by Islamic diplomacy.¹¹³ By inviting the leaders of organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah to visit China, providing scholarships to Islamic boarding school students, and sending Chinese teachers to Indonesia Islamic boarding schools teaching Mandarin have produced more Indonesian students able to provide alternative knowledge in responding

¹⁰⁶ Gunawan 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Reditya 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Ali 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Rochmat & Fathoni 2017; Kurnia 2018.

¹¹⁰ Suryadinata 2022.

¹¹¹ Suryadinata 2022.

¹¹² Suryadinata 2022.

¹¹³ Suryadinata 2022.

to global competition discourse between the US and China. Many of them even defend China.¹¹⁴ From this, it can be concluded that information about China is no longer monopolized by a western-oriented discourse that defends liberal values and vilifies China, which is often promoted by Indonesian scholars who graduated from the US and Europe.

The new image of China in the eyes of Indonesian people is also helped by the growth of online leftist media outlets. These outlets are not controlled by the Chinese government, so they are not a source of official Chinese soft power but are nonetheless helpful in guaranteeing the effectiveness of its efforts. These socialists' media outlets give many new insights to the public, ranging from epistemology, history, and social experiences from socialist countries across the world. The birth of these left-wing media outlets was conditioned by two occurrences: social reform in Indonesia and digital expansion. They now serve as an alternative reading for Indonesian public in post-Suharto era, strengthening understanding of leftist discourse such as what socialism and communism are; the similarities between Islamic values and socialist principles; and what can be extracted from both Islam and socialism to benefit social progress. These discourses, previously taboo, have suddenly sparked and fulfilled public curiosity, thanks to outlets such as Islam Bergerak and Indoprogress.

One other element which appears simple but is highly influential is the number of digital platforms originating from China. These entertainment platforms have grown massively and attracted significant public attention, especially among young people. These platforms include Tiktok, produced by ByteDance,¹¹⁵ and PUBG, a game platform created by Tencent.¹¹⁶ These entertainment platforms have successfully shifted the way young Indonesians view China, defeating the scary image of a

¹¹⁴ Suryadinata 2022.

¹¹⁵ Burhan 2021.

¹¹⁶ Februana 2020.

communist state that would have made youth reluctant to download and operate such platforms.

The changes in Indonesian public perception discussed here are in line with the Pew Research Center reports, which show that positive change continues to occur.¹¹⁷ From 2024 to 2025, the Indonesian public's positive perception of China was recorded at 64 percent and 65 percent, respectively. This shows that in the new era, where China's involvement in Indonesia since BRI has become increasingly close, public trust has also grown. Even more surprising, more Indonesians now have more negative perceptions of the US than China, with negative perception of the US reaching 40 percent compared to China's 19 percent. In addition, the Indonesian public slightly prefers an alliance with China (27 percent) over the US (19 percent) or Russia (16 percent).

Conclusion

Looking at the shift in Indonesia's perception of China, it is clear how China's soft power efforts are effective in eradicating old-fashioned thoughts, which were negatively affected by anti-communist propaganda from the US and Suharto's New Order regime. Communism, an ideology that was described as notorious, atheist, and cruel, alongside accusations of China's support for PKI in the 1965 attempted coup, greatly influenced how the Indonesian public perceived China in the twentieth and early twenty-first century.

So far, Indonesian perceptions toward China are moderate in nature. On the one hand, there has been a striking change of perception compared to previously, with increased friendliness and mutual understanding. China has successfully improved its government-to-government and people-to-people relationships in Indonesia, as well as actively engaging with non-state actors such as NU and Muhammadiyah.

¹¹⁷ Silver et al 2025.

However, this does not mean the relations between two countries are as strong as they were prior to 1965 era. To further disseminate China's good image requires extra endeavors, and China needs to earnestly participate, for example, in joint discussions with more universities and organizations to make it clear what China's intentions are for Indonesia in the future. China must also be careful with its policy steps, especially pertaining to overseas non-expert labor, as this is becoming a tension point in Indonesia, evoking public outrage and influencing perceptions of the country.

Overall, however, Indonesian society, including scholars, continue to hold the assumption that Indonesia must adopt a cautious foreign policy when it comes to China. This is because China's intentions are unclear, especially in key issues such as how China will deal with the South China Sea issue. China's debt trap rumour also gets more sphere in Indonesia news media. Therefore, to manage these concerns and prevent relations from worsening, more intimate engagement should be carried out. The more China ensures its foreign policy toward its neighbors are benign, the more trust China will receive.

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