

**Taiwan Cinema as Soft Power: Authorship,  
Transnationality, Historiography, by Song Hwee Lim,  
Oxford University Press, 2022, 225pp, \$135.00,  
ISBN:9780197503379 (hb), ISBN: 9780197503386  
(pb).**

Gary D. Rawnsley\*

Head of the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lincoln (UK)

Soft power is a contested term and practice, and we have yet to settle on an accepted definition that accommodates all agendas, interests, and local contexts. Not only has soft power been embraced by governments from across the political spectrum – from the most authoritarian to the most liberal of democracies – but it is also encountered in a wide range of academic disciplines beyond its natural home, politics and international relations. Given that many approaches foreground culture as a soft power asset, it is not surprising that communications and cinema studies in particular have added new but often questionable analyses.

Song Hwee Lim has written extensively on transnational cinema, focusing on China and Taiwan. His latest book, *Taiwan Cinema as Soft Power*, is a departure from his usual work, but it locates his understanding of soft power within frameworks that will be more familiar to readers in cultural and cinema studies. Although his interdisciplinary approach is both valuable and welcome, this volume may be difficult terrain for readers who, like me, come to soft power along a very different disciplinary route.

As a fully functioning democracy Taiwan has tremendous soft power capacity but remains in a challenging position because of its contested status. Few countries have

---

\*Corresponding author: GRawnsley@lincoln.ac.uk

experienced the collision of culture and politics as Taiwan, forced to be called Chinese Taipei, or Taiwan, province of China, in international cultural events. Lee reminds readers that at the Venice film festival in 2011, Taiwan's Government Information Office filed an official complaint after the organisers referred to 'China *and* Taiwan'. This indicates, he says, how 'soft power arenas' are 'contested sites where the hard reality of the island's political standoff with the People's Republic of China (PRC) is never far away' (p. 115).

Therefore, it is essential that Taiwan leverage all the instruments at its disposal to communicate compelling soft power narratives and attract the attention of global audiences. Cinema is a tool of communication: it both projects and reflects Taiwan's soft power, but on its own has little capacity to build support for Taiwan and change global opinion about its sovereignty. Hence, while Lim describes at length the success Taiwan cinema is enjoying at international film festivals, we need to be careful in assuming that this is an indicator of soft power but acknowledge how such recognition reflects a broader understanding of soft power that Lim addresses in this volume. So instead of looking to the flow and consumption of the cultural products themselves as soft power markers, we should look at the underlying social and political arrangements that nurture, indeed tolerate and encourage autonomous cultural industries that may challenge the established order. We need to determine the levels of freedom in the flows of ideas, dialogue, discussion; and consider the political culture's capacity to build networks for collaboration, especially with and within civil society. Lim agrees and observes how Midi Z, a Burmese director working in Taiwan was presented with the Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker of the Year award at the 2016 Golden Horse Awards. In his acceptance speech, Midi thanked 'Taiwan's freedom, diversity, and democracy' for encouraging him to be a filmmaker (p.146). In other words, Taiwan provides what we label an 'enabling environment', one that is characterised by a set of empowering social, cultural, educational, and political structures and values. It is an environment that encourages diversity and creativity associated with civil; and that respects, supports, and invests in the arts and culture.

Lim's contribution to the subject is his approach and its intersectionality; and this is where readers from beyond cinema or cultural studies may find *Taiwan Cinema as Soft Power* a challenging read. However, it repays investment, for despite coming to the subject from a cinema and cultural studies perspective, Lim addresses the complications with soft power that few others choose to consider. For example, I agree with his 'critique' of some research on soft power, namely that 'it does not trace the soft power flow of any single cultural product, political value, institution, or policy from start to finish'. It is all very well that we – including myself – insist that we must evaluate better the impact of soft power programmes, but that is easier said than done, especially because soft power works mainly in the long-term, and culture/cinema is highly subjective.

However, this is far from conceding that soft power neither works nor exists at all. Rather, we must pay far more attention to methodologies than we have to date. Lim chooses

‘affect’ as an ‘alternative method of appreciating the operation of soft power’ (p.20). Thus, affect examines the ‘mediating environment’, ie. ‘how and why people are moved by certain objects’. Thus, in the case of cinema, ‘it is not a film’s message but rather the environment ... in which the message is carried’ that is most significant (p.20). This is indeed an important and innovative approach to soft power which prompts scholars to move beyond attempts to evaluate the impact of the cultural product alone.

Readers expecting explicit discussions of public or even cultural diplomacy will be disappointed, but it is worth noting that Lim provides new frameworks through which we can discuss how soft power capacity is communicated. We have long been told that culture is a most prominent soft power asset and perhaps for Taiwan, existing in a unique and challenging international environment, culture is an essential method of gaining global attention, if not sympathy. The success of cinema in helping move Taiwan into the spotlight should be celebrated, but as Lim’s excellent discussion highlights, we should not expect too much too soon. Taiwan cinema is still on the periphery rather than the mainstream and there is still a lot of work to do if we expect the movie industry to play a pivotal role in Taiwan’s global engagement.

### ■ Gary D. Rawnsley

Gary Rawnsley is Head of the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln, UK, and Professor of Public Diplomacy working at the intersection of international communications and international relations/politics.

He is the author and editor of over a dozen books, most recently *The Edward Elgar Research Handbook on Political Propaganda* (2021), two editions of the *Routledge Handbook of Soft Power* (2016/2023), and two editions of the *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media* (2015/2025).