

**IS CHINA WINNING FRIENDS
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?:
VIEWS FROM THE CITIZENS**

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Executive Summary

1. China's rise is arousing anxieties around the world. In recent years, with the US distracted in the Middle East, there has been concern that China is moving in to become the dominant power in Southeast Asia.
2. A major cross-country study, the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), conducted between 2005 and 2007, asked respondents in Southeast Asia to rate their impressions of China, Japan and the US on a 1-10 scale.
3. It was found that Southeast Asians in general view China positively, giving China a slightly better image than that of the US. But they view Japan more positively than China.
4. The people of "Continental Southeast Asia" (Vietnam and Thailand) view China more positively than those of "Maritime Southeast Asia" (Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.).
5. Throughout Southeast Asia, Muslims view China less favourably than people of other faiths. On the other hand, Taoists and Confucianists have more favourable views of China.
6. In Singapore, compared to those who speak Mandarin or other languages at home, people who speak English at home view China less favourably.
7. History still matters. For example, older Singaporeans view China more positively than younger Singaporeans, or those born after 1965, the year in which Singapore became an independent nation.

8. In Vietnam, historically the north is much closer to China. Data show that northern Vietnamese have a better impression of China than their southern counterparts. In particular, northern Vietnamese born after the country's unification (1975) view China most positively.
9. In Singapore, people who travel more widely tend to view China more favourably.
10. People who follow events in other countries more closely also view China more favourably. This is similar to findings of studies on the US' image abroad in that people who are more internationally exposed tend to view a foreign country more positively.
11. China's image in Southeast Asia depends on China's ability to communicate with Muslims who grow up speaking English, and the younger generations there.
12. Domestic media, opinion leaders, and policy makers in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, can also foster a more comprehensive and balanced view of China by presenting China in less-simplistic ways and facilitating people-to-people exchanges and understanding.

IS CHINA WINNING FRIENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?: VIEWS FROM THE CITIZENS

WANG Zhengxu*

Southeast Asians' View of a Rising China

- 1.1 With the US increasingly distracted in the Middle East, many are concerned that China has deepened its roots in Southeast Asia through extended engagement and economic diplomacy. China appears to be actively promoting regional integration vehicles such as the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, and Southeast Asian countries seem to welcome an economically vibrant China.
- 1.2 But China-ASEAN relationships are much more complicated than that. In the early years, Southeast Asian countries viewed China as a potential threat because of its support of communist movements in the region. Since the late 1970s, Southeast Asia's acceptance of China has been on the rise. After the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, Beijing has more actively sought an improved relationship with Southeast Asia as it faced the diplomatic blockade of the West.¹
- 1.3 Into the late 1990s, as China's economic weight increased rapidly, China-ASEAN regionalism also picked up momentum, especially after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The 10+1 Dialogue, ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement, and China's signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN, and the Greater Mekong Regional Cooperation projects all seemed to contribute to China-ASEAN cooperation.

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¹ Diplomatic relations between China and several countries were normalized during this period, including Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

- 1.4 Nevertheless, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the “China Threat” alarm have raised suspicion among Southeast Asian countries about China’s strategic intentions.² The issue of overseas Chinese also complicates China’s relationship with Southeast Asian countries.³ In terms of regional economic integration, the fear of a China-dominated East Asia has provoked measures to hedge against China, such as the East Asia Summit that brought in India, Australia, and New Zealand.⁴
- 1.5 Furthermore, there seems to be a broad maritime-continental divide splitting Southeast Asian attitudes towards China, with Continental Southeast Asia having regional strategic outlooks that are dominated by the role of China, and Maritime Southeast Asia enjoying more room for maneuver because of geographical distance and the strategic attraction of the US.⁵
- 1.6 In the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), a cross-national survey of citizens’ attitudes, Southeast Asians were asked to rate their impressions of China, Japan, and the US on a 1-10 scale. The survey was conducted in six Southeast Asian countries between 2006 and 2007.
- 1.7 These data show that Southeast Asians generally view China in a positive way. But nonetheless, in terms of the citizens’ impression of China, it is *not* much better than that of the US or Japan. In fact, on average, Southeast Asian citizens have a better impression of Japan than of China. Citizens of Continental ASEAN countries—Thailand and Vietnam—seem to view China

² At the time of writing this paper, China and Vietnam were involved in disputes regarding the right to explore the seabed of oil resources in certain areas. See “China-Vietnam Dispute Revives Regional Fears”, *International Herald Tribune*, 14 April, 1997, and “China warns Exxon over Vietnam deal-newspaper”, *Reuters*, 20 Jul, 2008.

³ See Garth Alexander, *The Invisible China: The Overseas Chinese and the Politics of Southeast Asia*, (New York, Macmillan, 1974). Leo Suryadinata, *Understanding the Ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia Studies, 2007).

⁴ For the East Asian Summit, see Mohan Malik, “The East Asia Summit: More Discord than Accord”, *YaleGlobal*, 20 December 2005.

⁵ Evelyn Goh, “Southeast Asian Perspectives on the China Challenge”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.30, No. 4-5 (August-October 2007), pp.823-824 and Jing-dong Yuan, “China-ASEAN Relations: Perspective, Prospects and Implications for U.S. Interests”, U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2006, p.42.

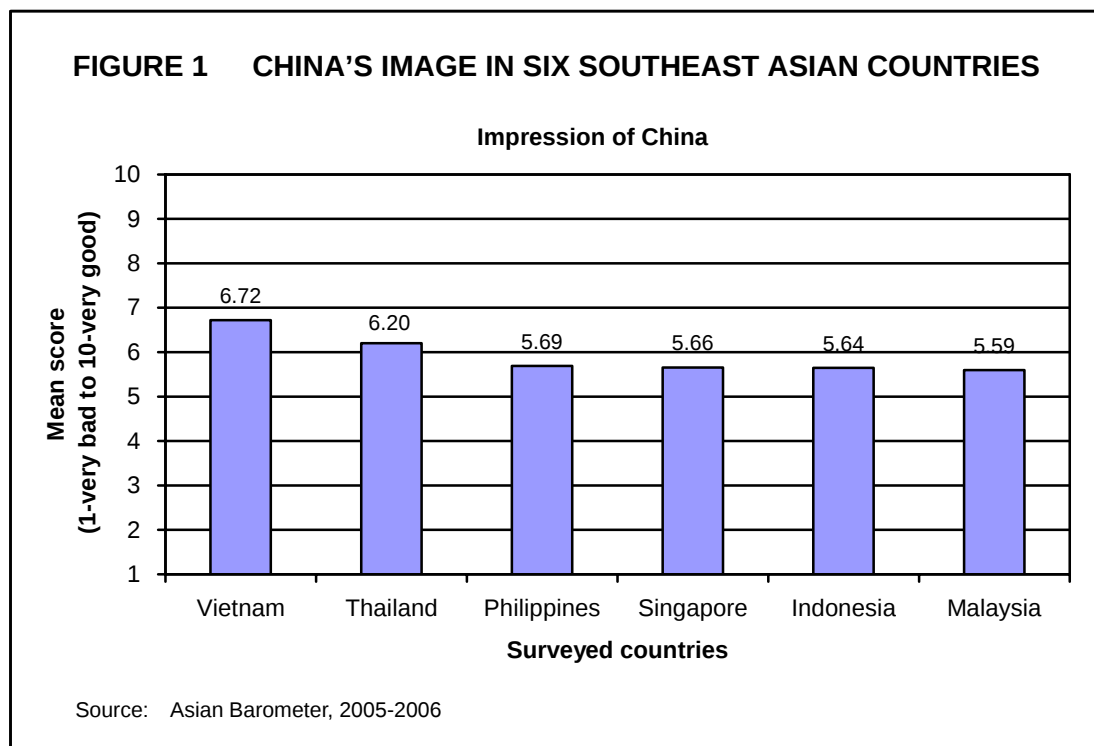
more positively than citizens of Maritime ASEAN nations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

- 1.8 Those who are more travelled and those who follow international news more closely tend to view China more favorably. This is similar to patterns around the world—people with more international experiences or knowledge tend to see another country more positively. In other words, the better travelled and more internationally exposed view the US or Japan more positively as well.
- 1.9 Muslims in Southeast Asia see China much less favorably than people of other faiths, while followers of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism are likely to view China more positively. Overseas Chinese living in Southeast Asia view China more positively than people of other ethnic groups. Among the ethnic Chinese, however, those who grew up speaking English at home view China less positively than those who still speak Chinese at home.
- 1.10 History still matters in many ways. In Vietnam, due to the much closer historical links between North Vietnam and China, northern Vietnamese view China much more favorably than southern Vietnamese. In Singapore, older Singaporeans, who are more likely to view themselves as Chinese instead of Singaporeans, view China more favorably than the younger generation, who gradually assumed a new identity after the country's independence in 1965.
- 1.11 These findings suggest that China is still trudging an up-hill road in projecting soft power in Southeast Asia. Specifically, China needs to do much more, and in effective ways, to communicate a good image to the Muslim population in Southeast Asia, the younger generations, and those who speak English and are English-educated.
- 1.12 Domestic media, opinion leaders, and policy makers in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, can also foster a more comprehensive and balanced view of China by presenting China in less-simplistic ways and facilitating people-to-people exchanges and understanding. People who are more exposed to the social complexities of another society tend to view that society more rationally, and

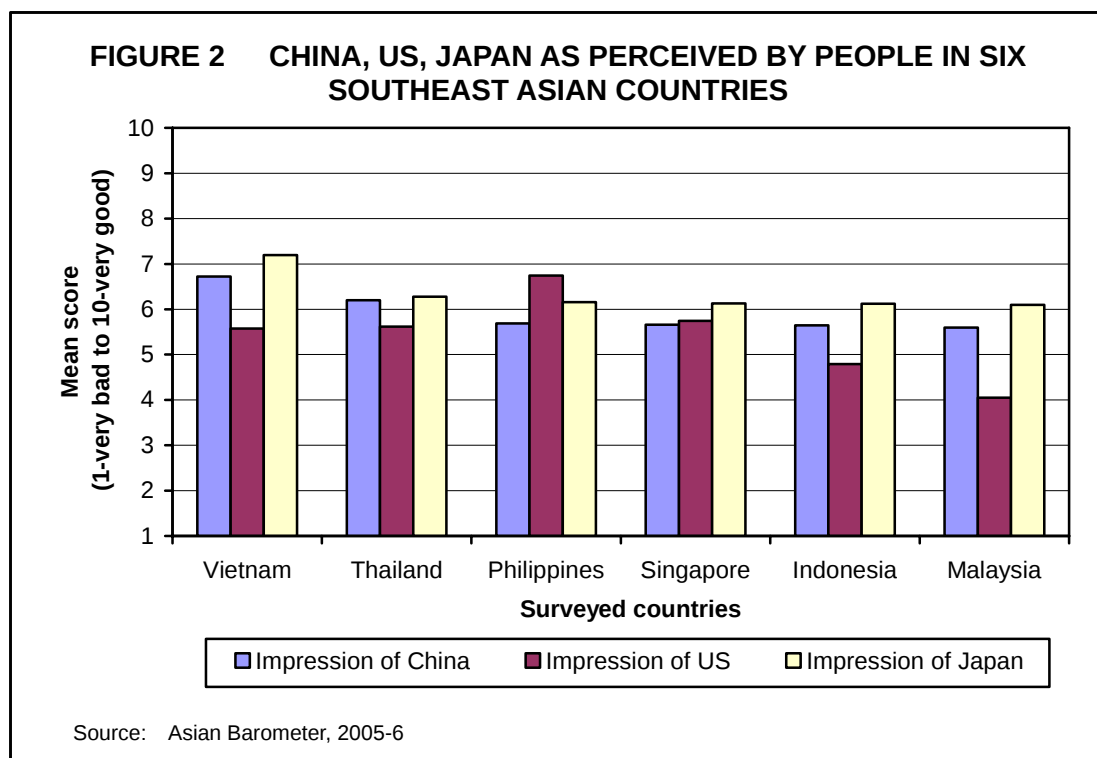
have stronger ability to appreciate other people's perspectives. Such people-to-people understanding will greatly enhance international trust and cooperation.

China, Japan, and the US, as Viewed by Southeast Asians

- 2.1 Figure 1 shows how Southeast Asians rate their impressions of China, Japan and the US. Vietnamese seem to view China most positively, while Malaysians least so. As the mean score is above 5.5, the middle point of the scale, one can say that China's image is overall positive among all six countries. In other words, on average, none of these countries has a very negative impression of China.



- 2.2 In comparison, Southeast Asian citizens seem to view Japan more favourably than China. The image of the US is better than China in the Philippines and Singapore, but not so in the other four countries (Figure 2).



2.3 Figure 2a presents another angle of looking at the data. Japan's image shows a similar pattern to China's image in that Vietnamese gave the highest score, followed by the Thais, while people in the other four countries gave similar scores. The image of the US is more complicated, with the highest score coming from the Philippines (6.7) and the lowest score from Malaysia (4.1).

2.4 Hence, the US enjoys some very divergent perceptions in Southeast Asia. The gap between the highest and lowest score is 2.7 for the US, but only 1.1 for China and Japan, indicating that the image of the US in the region bears a rather large degree of variation. It may be worth noting that there are only two scores below 5.5, both of which go to the US. Indonesia's and Malaysia's impressions of the US (4.8 and 4.1, respectively), point to the negative image of the US in the two Muslim countries.

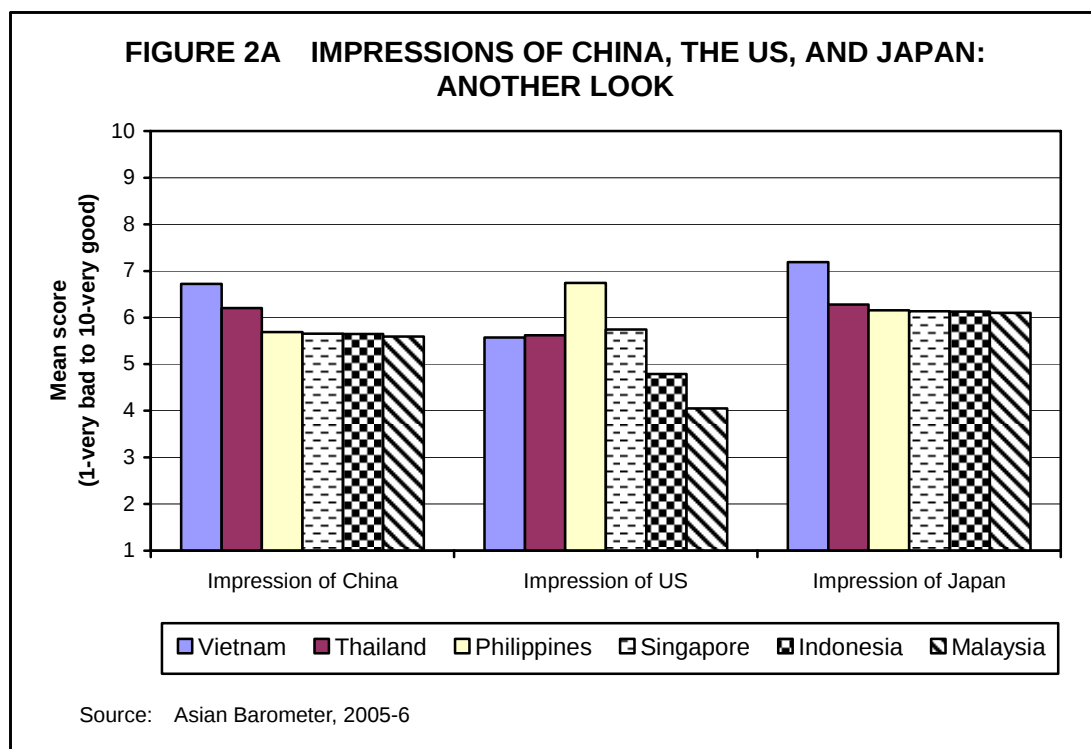
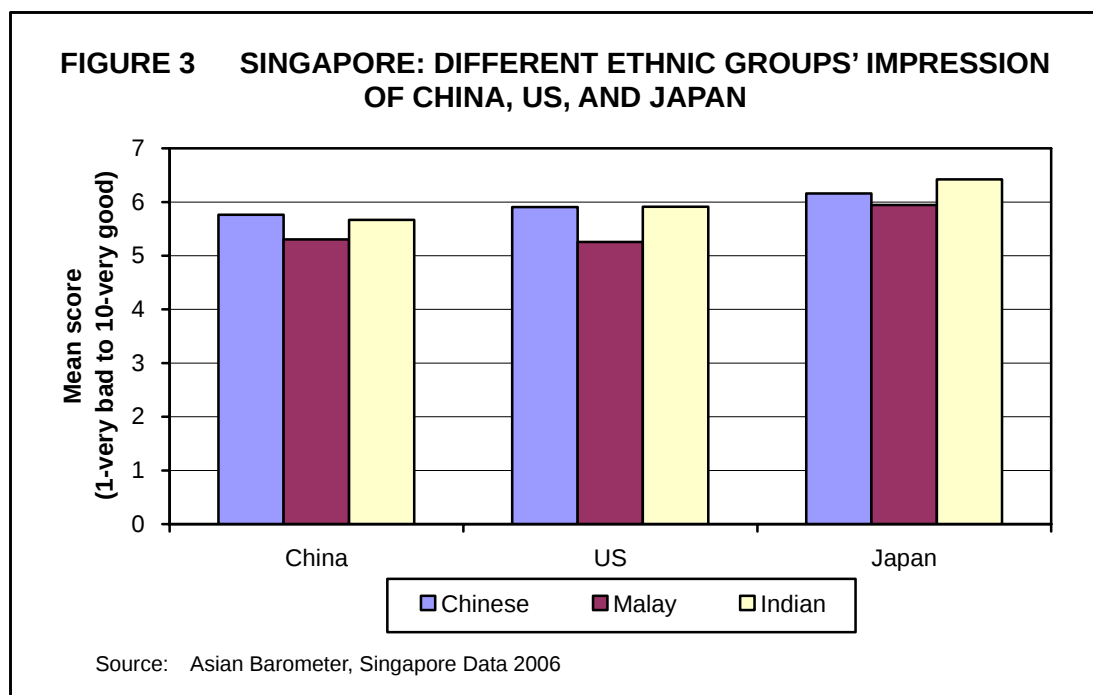


Image of China: Within-Country Differences

Ethnicity

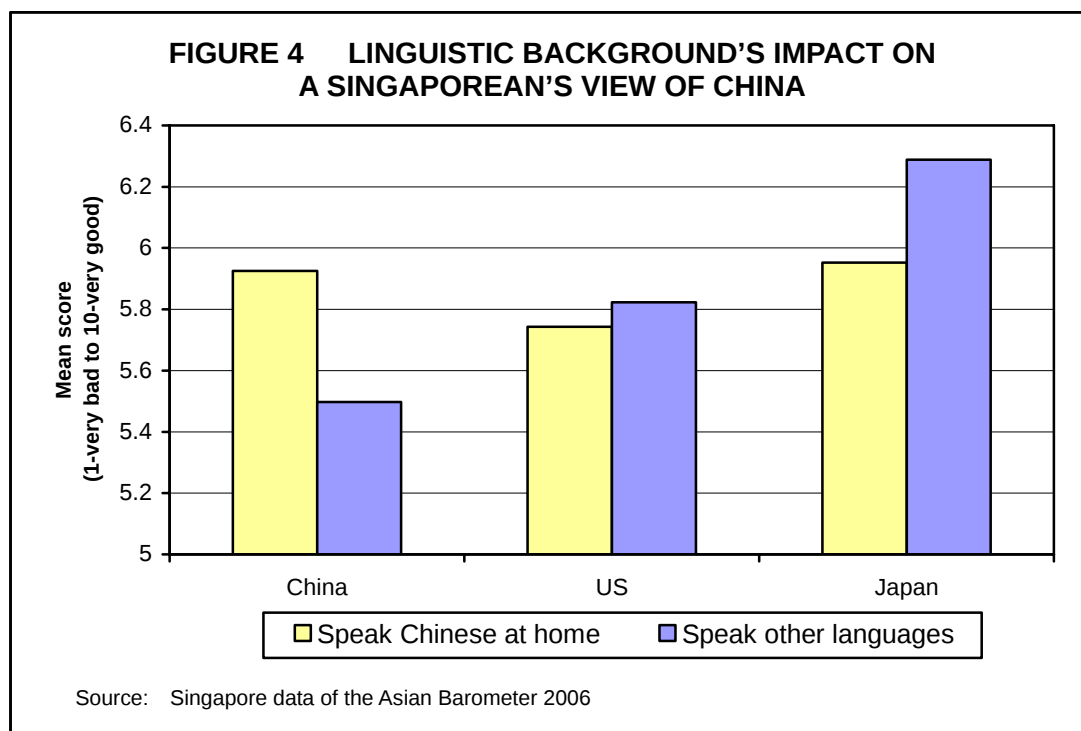
3.1 All six are multi-ethnic countries, with some home to sizeable overseas Chinese populations. Figure 3 shows the image of China among the different ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and “Others”.⁶ Between the two main ethnic groups in Singapore, the Chinese have a better impression of China than the Malays. Regression results show these differences are statistically significant. Singaporean Chinese, however, seem to have a slightly better impression of the US, and an even better impression of Japan.

⁶ As of 2007, the ethnic make-up of the Singaporean population was as follows: Chinese, 75%; Malay, 13.7%; Indian, 8.7%; and Others, 2.6%; calculated by the author using data from *Yearbook of Statistics Singapore 2008*. In the sample, the proportion of each ethnic group is as follows: Chinese, 72.8%; Malay, 17.4%; Indian, 9.2%; and Others, 0.6%.



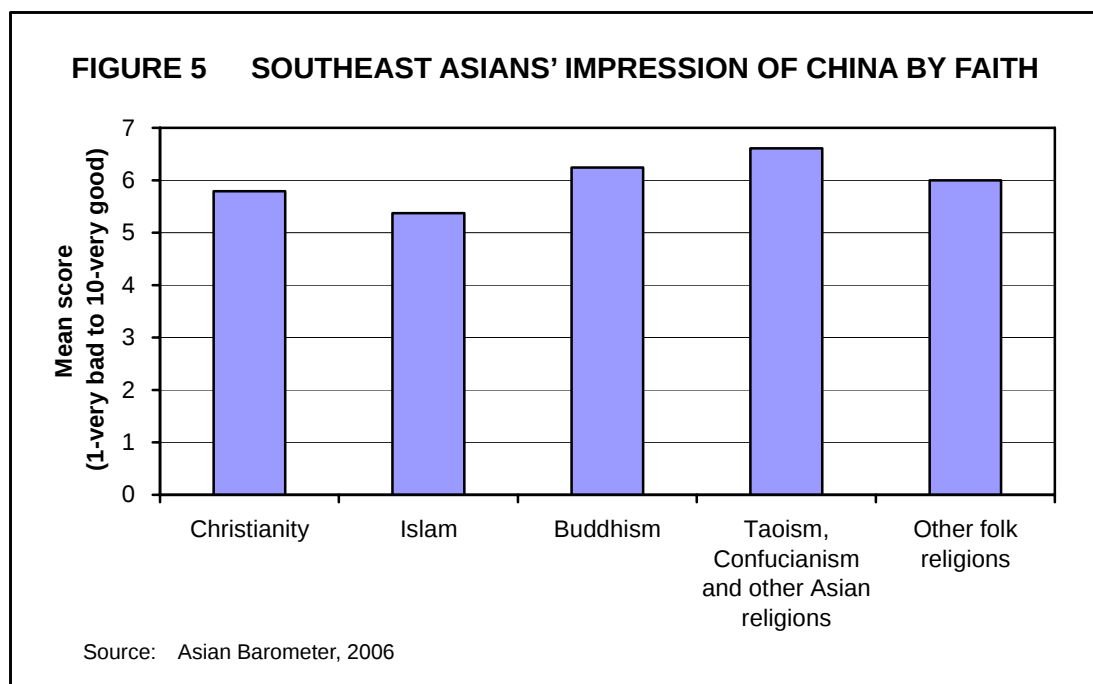
3.2 A slightly different angle examines whether the language one speaks at home affects one's impression of China. The corporate world and the government in Singapore adopt English as a working language, but most people speak their own ethnic languages at home. Some ethnic Chinese families, however, have also adopted English as their daily spoken language at home. Hence it is interesting to see whether speaking Chinese at home affects a person's impression of China.

3.3 Figure 4 shows clearly that Singaporeans who speak Chinese (Mandarin or Chinese dialects) at home have a much better impression of China, compared to Singaporeans speaking other languages at home (English, Malay, Tamil, and others). The pattern is reversed for the impression of Japan: Singaporeans speaking Chinese at home have a less favourable impression of Japan. The figure shows a small difference in their impression of the US, but that difference is insignificant in statistical terms.



Religion

3.4 Huge religious diversity exists within Southeast Asia. Besides Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, the survey records more than twenty other religions, including many folk religions. To some extent, religion parallels ethnicity. In Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, followers of Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism can more or less be separated along ethnic lines. Figure 5 looks at the differences in people's perceptions of China according to their faiths.

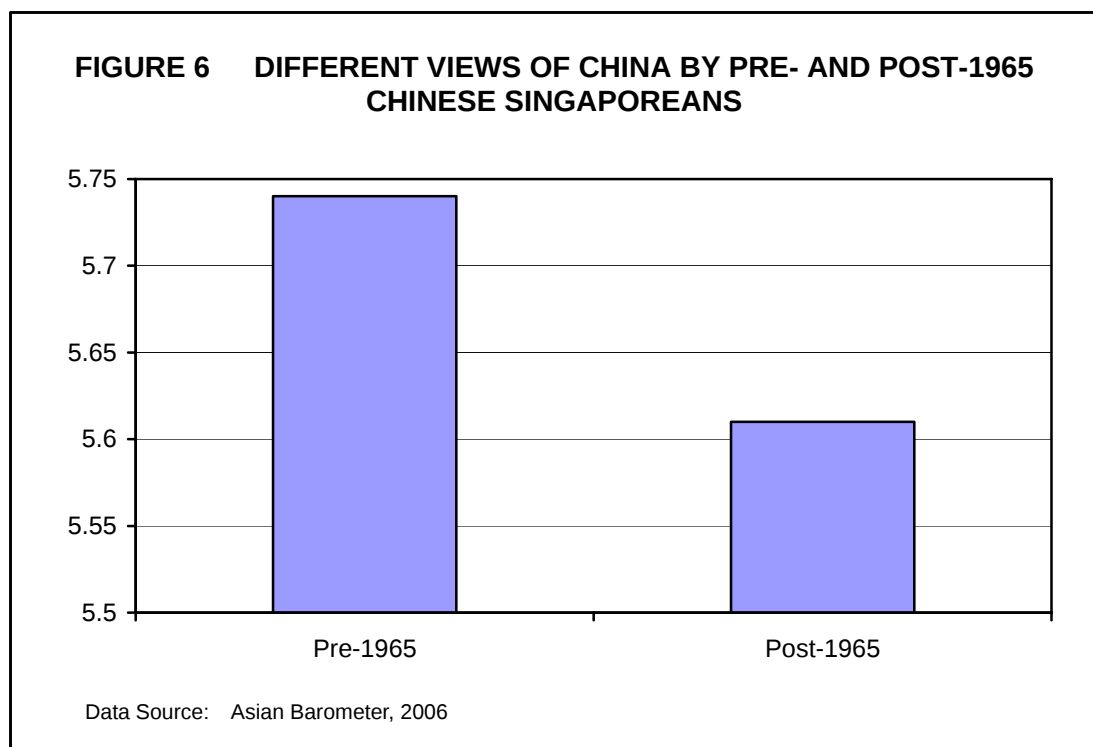


3.5 Across Southeast Asia, respondents who are Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists or believers of other Asian religions have the most positive impression of China. China is viewed least favorably among the Muslims, while Christians' view of China appears to be in the middle. This pattern holds within each country.

Countries' Histories Matter

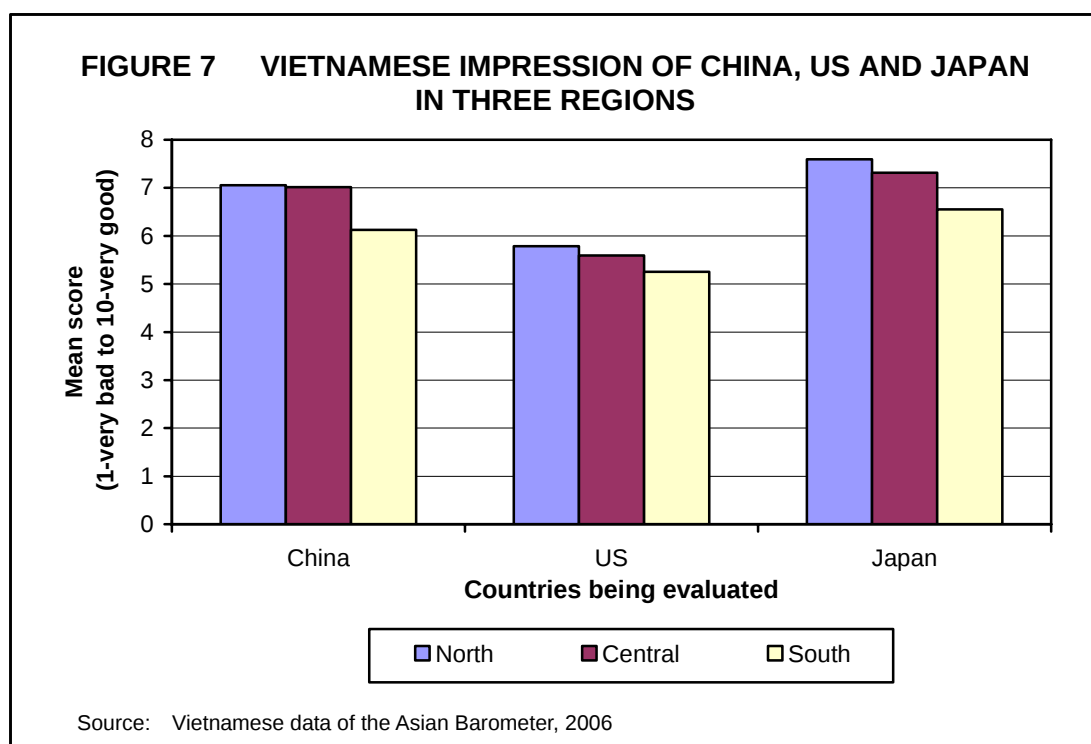
3.6 In Singapore, older respondents have a better impression of China, while younger respondents have a better impression of the US and Japan. This is related to Singapore's nation-building history, in that older generations of Singaporeans (mostly ethnic Chinese) in their younger years tended to identify with China, while younger generations have acquired an increasingly Singaporean identity.

3.7 In fact Singaporean Chinese born before 1965 (the year in which Singapore became an independent nation) have a much more positive view of China than the post-1965 generations (Figure 6). By contrast, the US and Japan enjoy a more positive image among the post-independence generation.



3.8 In Vietnam, until its unification in 1975, the northern and southern parts of the country were ruled under different political systems. Furthermore, northern Vietnam was historically much closer to China, both geographically, culturally, and politically. During the North's war against the US occupying forces in the South, Communist China provided significant economic, military, and political support to the North.

3.9 Data show that people living in the northern and central parts of Vietnam have better impressions of China than those living in the south (Figure 7). Vietnamese in the north seem to have a better image of the US and Japan as well.



3.10 When regions and generations are cross-tabulated, it became clear that the pre-unification generations in the South have the least favorable impression of China, while post-unification Vietnamese in the North have the most favorable (Table).

TABLE VIETNAMESE IMPRESSION OF CHINA IN DIFFERENT REGIONS AND GENERATIONS

	North	Central	South
Pre-unification generations (born before 1975)	7.00	7.11	5.95
Post-unification generations (born after 1975)	7.21	6.63	6.42

Source: Vietnamese data in the Asian Barometer, 2006.

Individual-Level Factors

- 4.1 No differences are found in Southeast Asians' view of China in terms of gender. That is, on average, males and females have similar views of China. In terms of a person's socioeconomic status, in Thailand, richer people view China much more positively. This is probably because firstly, richer people in Thailand are disproportionally Chinese, and secondly, richer people in Thailand see China as an economic opportunity.
- 4.2 By contrast, in Singapore, rich people have a slightly less favorable impression of China. This is probably because richer people in Singapore are more likely to have received an English-based education and to have studied in the US or the UK. In fact, lower-income Singaporeans are much more likely to opt for the Chinese-language media in their daily life.
- 4.3 Another indicator of a person's socioeconomic status--*education*--has little impact; education slightly changes a person's perception of China only in Thailand.
- 4.4 Singaporeans who travel abroad more frequently have better impressions of China, but this effect is not found in other countries. If a person follows events in other countries more closely, he or she is much more likely to perceive China more favorably. The effect is found in five of the six countries, and is statistically significant in three of them: Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. This is in fact similar to patterns found in other countries: more internationally exposed individuals are likely to view foreign countries (such as the US) more positively.
- 4.5 Muslims have less favorable views of China, while Taoism, Confucianism, and other Asian religions have a positive impact on a person's perception of China. This was found in several countries and was significant in the all-country analysis. Buddhists and Christians seem to be neutral, except in Singapore where Christians view China less favorably, and in Thailand where Buddhists view China more positively.

Policy Implications

- 5.1 Overall, China's soft power is far from dominating Southeast Asia. China's image in Southeast Asia is probably better than that of the US, but not as good as that of Japan. Continental Southeast Asia seems to view China more favorably than Maritime Southeast Asia. The people of Vietnam and Thailand view China more favorably than those in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.
- 5.2 Southeast Asians who follow events in other countries view China more positively, so do those who have more international travel experiences. Hence it can be concluded that international exposure does facilitate mutual understanding between nations, reducing self-centred nationalism and xenophobia.
- 5.3 In Singapore, older Chinese Singaporeans view China more positively than other ethnic groups, and this is likely to be true in other Southeast Asian countries as well. Chinese Singaporeans who received English-language schooling from a young age however view China less favorably than those who learn Chinese from a young age and use it at home. Muslims in Southeast Asia view China less favorably than people of other faiths.
- 5.4 China's image in Southeast Asia, and probably in other parts of the world as well, is more of a creation of recent events. The past can have an effect, as seen in Vietnam and Singapore where certain historical factors still shape the way different groups view China. But image by definition is short-lived and is constantly being made and remade. People in the 1980s may perceive China differently from those in the 1970s, and people today may view China differently from people in the 1990s.
- 5.5 Hence, China's soft power is more likely to depend on China's own approaches to international affairs, and probably to a lesser degree on its own ability to project a favorable image abroad. In Southeast Asia, China needs to improve on its communication with Muslims and those who mainly receive English-language information.

- 5.6 Domestic media, opinion leaders, and policy makers in Southeast Asia, meanwhile, can also foster a more comprehensive and balanced view of China by presenting China in less-simplistic ways and facilitating people-to-people exchanges and understanding. It is argued that people who understand the social complexities of another society tend to view that society more rationally, and have stronger ability to appreciate another people's perspectives. Such people-to-people understanding will greatly enhance international trust and cooperation.