

The Soft Power Exertion of the Roman Empire in the Pax Romana Period: The Cases of the Iberian Peninsula and Southeast Asia

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Abstract. Introduced in the 1980s by Joseph Nye from Harvard University, the concept of soft power refers to one country's ability to influence other nations and gain political dominance through the attraction and persuasion of cultural values, political ideologies, and government policies. As a popular research topic, the soft power exertion of many modern nations, including the US, China, and Russia, has been thoroughly examined by previous papers, but the research subjects are largely limited to modern nations. This paper first explores the means of soft power exertion of one of the most successful ancient empires, the Roman Empire, and then examines the subsequent political and economic consequences of Roman soft power in the Iberian Peninsula and Southeast Asia. The paper finds that soft power exertion can effectively enhance domestic political control of conquered regions and facilitate international trade activities with foreign countries.

Keywords: Soft power, Roman Empire, Iberian Peninsula, Southeast Asia, Pax Romana Period.

1. Introduction

The Pax Romana, a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity from 27 B.C.E. to 180 C.E., marks the golden age of the strengthened Roman Imperialism. The Roman territory achieved its greatest territorial extent, annexing enormous regions in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. The political and economic strategies of the Roman Empire aimed at sustaining strong control over vast territories remain one of the research topics that receive the most attention from the fields of History, Political Science as well as Classics.

Although the Roman army was the strongest and the largest among all contemporary military powers, the rule of the Roman Empire during the Pax Romana, surprisingly, did not depend heavily on military coercion to maintain its control of conquered lands, nor did it use violent means to achieve diplomatic advantages over distant foreign nations. Instead of relying on hard coercive power, the Roman Empire chose to exert and utilize soft power to induce and attract residents within and beyond the Roman territories, enabling it to achieve greater political and economic dominance over the world.

To examine the soft power exertion of the Roman Empire in greater detail, this research paper will analyze archaeological evidence from two individual regions, the Iberian Peninsula and Southeast Asia, revealing the significant Roman influence on their respective cultures and ideologies. The paper will then further explore the significant economic and political consequences of soft power exertion in these two regions.

2. Definition

The soft power of a country, as defined by its originator Joseph Nye, is the way to “obtain the outcomes in world politics because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it.” Nye developed this concept under the framework of present-day world politics. Since this paper discusses the soft power of the Roman Empire, it is necessary to develop a more suitable definition in the case of ancient empires.

Nye's approach to the concept of soft power is based on the assumption that all citizens of one empire are united under a common culture or political ideology. He describes countries as communities, including the “American community,” the “Islamic community,” and the “European community.” Such an assumption is correct if we only examine notable empires in the 21st century

since none of them are territorially expansive and remain culturally united. However, in cases of ancient empires like the Roman Empire, this assumption must be challenged.

Due to their territorially expansive nature, ancient empires often had to rule a large amount of newly conquered land initially owned by people with different cultures and ideologies. In such situations, using soft power to assimilate the conquered territories politically and culturally was crucial for the social stability of ancient empires. As such, in this paper, the definition of soft power must be expanded to include cases where empires maintain political control over conquered foreign territories through inducement and attraction.

3. Case Study: The Iberian Peninsula

The Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula was a two-century gradual process of territorial expansion completed by Augustus, who annexed the whole peninsula to the Roman Empire right after the end of the Roman Republic in the year 19 B.C.E. Niall Ferguson points out that the key of imperial expansion is to “transform countries from a state of misrule into a state of stability.” Such transformation was particularly challenging given that the Iberian Peninsula had a foreign culture. As a result, the Roman empire soon began the reconstruction of the Hispanic provinces.

The exertion of Roman soft power was evident all over the peninsula, especially in the form of architecture. The Roman Empire took advantage of the post-war reconstruction and instilled massive-scale Roman elements into local buildings. The most successful example is the construction of numerous Roman-style theatres across the peninsula. These wonderful works of art displayed the unprecedented prosperity of the Roman Empire during Pax Romana. Ramsay MacMullen considers the purpose of these architectures to be eliciting admiration and inspiring imitations. As the theatres take in “a stream of people from surrounding territories,” the wonders of Roman architecture “shapes the behavior of visitors, making them look about, stare, wonder, admire, and carry home the memory of what they had witnessed, for imitation.” Moreover, the construction of theatres also led to the spread of Roman art. Among the effects of theatre performances, MacMullen claims that “above all, surely it was the music they remembered.”

Besides the construction of theatres, Roman fortresses were also used to exert soft power. During the Pax Romana period, archaeological evidence shows that Roman forts in the Iberian Peninsula had multiple defenseless gates, thin walls, observational (not fighting) towers, and narrow perimeter ditches with narrow berms. Stephen Johnson points out that the gates of Roman forts were “weak points” that required “special protection” and were “inherently vulnerable to surprise attacks.” Clearly, these forts were not built for the purpose of defense. Rather, Edward N. Luttwak argues that “the gates of towns and fortresses were only meant to impress” and show off the superb Roman architectural technologies. Therefore, for the Roman Empire, military fortresses became the means to exert soft power in the Iberian Peninsula.

The soft power exertion in the peninsula was an extremely cost-effective strategy for the Roman Empire. Large-scale conflicts between the new government and locals were reduced to a minimum by the soft strategy. David Edelstein notes that large-scale military occupations often elicit hostile nationalist responses from the occupied populace. Thus, it is logical to station a large amount of military personnel in newly conquered territories to maintain security during reconstruction. In the case of the Roman-occupied Iberian Peninsula, the Roman Empire took a drastically different approach, intentionally avoiding the use of hard power. Roman military presence in Hispania provinces was greatly reduced after the annexation. During the reign of Augustus, the Roman army deployed over seven legions in the peninsula. This number dropped to three by the time of Tiberius’s accession and was further reduced to only one legion under the reign of Galba.

The effective use of soft power yielded significant political benefits—facilitating the peaceful transformation of the local society and stabilizing the newly founded local authorities. Starting from the reign of Augustus to the overthrow of the emperor Nero, Raymond Carr observes that native communities began to “model themselves on the Roman pattern” and “set up public buildings

(including a forum, buildings for local government, temples, and bathhouses).” Some Hispanic natives even “acquired the status of *municipium*,” which allowed them to become Roman citizens officially. The process of romanization sped up during the reign of the Flavian emperors. Soft power exertion allowed the Roman Empire to peacefully assimilate the native inhabitants of the newly conquered Iberian Peninsula without massive-scale military coercion.

No doubt, in a broader sense, the soft strategy in the Iberian Peninsula was applicable to regulating all regions within the border of the Roman Empire. Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel found that the Roman army was “effectively depoliticized” and excluded from central politics. The long-lasting peace of *Pax Romana* meant “the internal pacification of conquered provinces.” As a result, for nearly two centuries, “inhabitants of the Roman Empire never or rarely saw a soldier.” Thus, soft power exertion holds a unique political significance in that it ensured and further strengthened political control of the central government over peripheral regions, given that the territory of the Roman Empire was exceptionally large in area and diverse in cultures.

4. Case Study: Southeast Asia

Aside from nearby regions within the imperial territory, the subjects of Roman soft power exertion also included distant foreign regions like Southeast Asia. While the purpose of the soft strategy in domestic areas is mainly to enhance political control, soft power exertion in foreign countries is used to strengthen trade relations and extract economic benefits.

Due to the insurmountable distance between the Roman Empire and Asia, the usual methods to exert soft power became unworkable. Nevertheless, the Romans cleverly used its currency as the carrier of soft power. The Roman Empire was one of the most important economic powers in the world during the *Pax Romana*. The Roman coins were considered an international currency for most trading worldwide. By the mid-second century C.E., the Roman Empire had over 1.716 billion *denarii* circulating in the whole of the Mediterranean basin and beyond. As a result, the images on the Roman coins became the best tool to deliver political messages and exert soft power in foreign countries.

Roman coins were found in large numbers all over regions in Thailand and Vietnam, which provided strong evidence for intensive trading activity between the Roman Empire and Southeast Asia. Historians regard such findings as strongly related to the flourishing trading between Roman-annexed Egypt and India. Several thousand Roman coins have been found at archeological sites in India. In other words, India was the “stepping stone” for Roman soft power exertion in South and Southeast Asia. Along with Roman coins, historians also discovered numerous gold pendants imitating the design of Roman Imperial coins, highlighting the effect of Roman soft power exertion in the region. Pieces found at Khlong Thom in southern Thailand demonstrate the relationship between Roman Imperial coins and local pendants. Brigitte Borell points out that “In size, it corresponds to a Roman gold coin, but its weight, with only just above 4g, is far below that of a genuine Roman gold coin.” Therefore, the imitations found in Southeast Asia focused mainly on replicating images on the coins instead of the coins themselves.

These imitations are significant for soft power exertion because the images on the Roman Imperial coins often carried strong political and cultural messages. Another piece found at Khlong Thom depicts the Roman emperor riding down a foe, imitating the image on bronze coins of Titus, which commemorated Titus' victory in the First Jewish Revolt, dated from 66 to 73 C. E. Other pieces kept at the Thaksin Folklore Museum of the Institute for Southern Thai Studies are “closely related to the coinage of Septimius Severus minted in the years 198–202 C. E.,” which refers to the Roman victory over the Parthian Empire in 197 C. E. These gold pendants with imitations of the political images on Roman Imperial coins would have a significant impact on the local perception of the Roman Empire, resulting in tremendous economic advantages of trade for the Roman Empire in the region.

Roman soft power plays a vital role in securing trade partnerships with Asian countries. Historical records affirm this conclusion. Claudius Ptolemy, a famous mathematician and geographer during the Pax Romana period, refers to the Malaysian Peninsula as the “Chryse Chersonesos” (i.e., the Golden Peninsula) in his *Geography*, proving the Roman Empire’s awareness of the wealthy Southeastern civilizations. More importantly, Ptolemy places the port of Kattigara to the east of the Golden Peninsula. The port is described as being involved in important trading activity with China and the Roman Empire. Kasper Hanus and Emilia Smagur argue that the port of Kattigara is the Óc Eo in present-day An Giang Province of Vietnam. Therefore, there exists flourishing trade between Southeast Asia and the Roman Empire. Andrew K. Rose found that a one percent net increase in perceived positive influence raises exports by around 0.8 percent. Roman soft power went beyond mere positive influence. Hanus and Smagur note that the economic interaction between the Roman Empire and Southeast Asia fueled cultural changes in the area. As such, soft power exertion in Southeast Asia could potentially bring enormous economic benefits to the Roman Empire.

5. Conclusion

This study closely examines the soft power exertion of the Roman Empire during the Pax Romana period in the cases of the Iberian Peninsula and Southeast Asia. Concluding from clear evidence at archeological sites in Spain and Thailand, the study finds that the Roman Empire intentionally reduced military presence during the Pax Romana and chose the strategy of soft power exertion mainly in the form of architecture to peacefully gain political control over the newly conquered territory. In the case of Southeast Asia, this paper reveals how trading activity and soft power exertion became mutually supporting in Roman diplomatic strategy, helping it to achieve economic dominance over the global trading network. Such a strategy appeared to be extraordinarily cost-efficient since the Roman Empire effectively utilized the attractive nature of its civilized culture and political ideologies to achieve desired political and economic outcomes without increasing spending on reinforcing its hard power, namely, the military.

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