

UC Berkeley

Charlene Conrad Liebau Library Prize for Undergraduate Research

Title

“This Is How I Fight”:Reimagining Softness Across Scales in Everything Everywhere All at Once

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/43w2006h>

Author

Wu, Chi Chen

Publication Date

2026-04-01

Undergraduate

Chi Chen Wu

Professor David Walter

COLWRIT R4B

13 December 2025

“This Is How I Fight”:

Reimagining Softness Across Scales in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Abstract

This paper argues that *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) presents softness as a meaningful form of power. It examines how the film constructs it as a dynamic and effective force capable of transforming relationships, identities, and social systems.

Through close reading of film, interdisciplinary theory research, and cultural and media studies, this paper identifies three interconnected modes of softness: relational, resilient, and ethical. Drawing on Michel Foucault, relational softness reconceptualizes power as emerging through connection rather than coercion. Through Hannah Arendt and Daoist philosophy, resilient softness is understood as adaptive endurance that outlasts violence and rigidity. Ethical softness, shaped by Judith Butler and Brené Brown, reframes vulnerability as a deliberate and transformative moral practice.

Adopting a multi-scalar framework, the paper traces how softness operates simultaneously across multiple domains, from family dynamics to gendered norms and global politics. Ultimately, the film proposes a new framework for rethinking softness and power in contemporary life. In the 21st century, an age of chaos and fragmentation, true strength is not the ability to dominate but the capacity to understand, connect, adapt, and rebuild.

Introduction

Everything Everywhere All at Once (2022) begins in a universe collapsing under its own chaos, failing businesses, and strained relationships. At its center is protagonist Evelyn Wang, who finds herself overwhelmed by work, marriage, an aging father, and a drifting daughter. The film's multiverse isn't just a visual spectacle, it reflects the fragmentation of twenty-first-century life, where identities fracture and responsibilities multiply. Within this disordered world, the film asks an important question: What kind of power allows us to survive disorder?



Evelyn's first multiverse experience

At first, Evelyn embodies a rigid model of power based on efficiency, control, and force. She meets every challenge with escalating discipline. Yet this hardness isolates her and accelerates collapse. She complains, “Every day I fight, I fight. I fight for all of us. Every day is a battle here” (Kwan and Scheinert 00:07:44-00:07:50). Through this portrayal, the film exposes the limits of coercive power, showing how it exhausts, narrows, and ultimately fails.

The narrative shifts when the IRS office's ordinary scene suddenly spirals into a multiverse crisis. Only then does Evelyn discover that Jobu Tupaki, the universe-destroying threat, is her daughter, Joy. Joy's despair, which comes from feeling unseen and disconnected, evolves into nihilism. Confronting this forces Evelyn to reconsider what she once dismissed in her husband, Waymond: his gentleness and persistent kindness. These qualities constitute a philosophy of survival. Waymond's soft acts enable

Evelyn to replace aggression with empathy, listening, and recognition. Her climactic battles play out through compassion rather than violence, allowing her to reach Joy not as an enemy but as a daughter longing to be understood.

This transformation brings us to the central claim of this paper: the film presents softness as an effective and multidimensional form of power within contemporary cultural and political contexts. It redefines softness as a viable alternative to traditional notions of strength. To demonstrate the scope of this redefinition and to reflect the film's own formality, this essay adopts an intentionally tripartite structure, organized into two interwoven sets of threes: How/Why/What Softness and Micro/Meso/Macro. Using a multi-scaler framework, it traces how softness operates across different levels of social life, from intimate family dynamics to gendered and cultural norms and to geopolitical logics. In an era marked by rapid technological change and growing uncertainty, the film proposes a different language of power, one rooted not in domination but in connection, adaptability, and the courage to understand. Also mirroring the title's progression from the specific to the infinite, the paper's form becomes its argument. It suggests that in a universe of "Everything" and "Everywhere," the only way to survive is to develop a language and a logic that can process the complexity of it all, quite literally, "All at Once."

HOW Softness Works: Relational Power

Softness becomes most visible when understood as a form of relational power, a way of influencing others not through domination, but by shaping the emotional and social space between people. This idea aligns closely with Michel Foucault's rethinking of power as something that circulates through relationships rather than descending from any single authority. Writing in the context of a mid-twentieth-century shift away from viewing power in terms of rulers or force, Foucault's studies on prisons, hospitals, psychiatry, and sexuality illustrated that power is embedded in the minute, everyday interactions that organize social life. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1976), he argues that modern power is productive. It shapes behavior, forms of expression, emotional expectations, and patterns of interaction. When he writes that "power must be understood [...] as the multiplicity of force relations, not

the existence of a central point” (Foucault 92), he emphasizes that power is not rooted in any single person or institution. Instead, it appears through interaction, wherever people communicate, negotiate, resist, interpret, or respond to one another. Power is fundamentally decentralized and located in the spaces between individuals. His claim that power “is exercised from innumerable points in the interplay of relations” (94) further reframes it as an activity performed through expressions such as posture, tone, or even the withholding of a reaction. This understanding broadens what power can look like: a small gesture, a moment of patience, humor, or an act of kindness can redirect a situation as effectively as a command. And when Foucault adds that power “comes from everywhere” (93), he pushes this idea further. Power is diffused across the entire social field and can emerge from those who appear marginal or overlooked.

This last suggestion opens the possibility of influence that does not resemble traditional authority at all. Foucault later clarifies this point, saying, “Power is relations; power is not a thing, it is a relationship between two individuals [...] such that one can direct the behaviour of another” (“*What Our Present Is*” 410). Crucially, this direction occurs when behavior becomes voluntarily aligned with shared objectives. Effective power shifts the emotional and interpersonal environment, making cooperation possible. Through this lens, softness becomes not the absence of power but a skilled practice of guiding, redirecting, and transforming relationships from within. This is precisely where Waymond’s softness works as power in the film. Under a Foucauldian framework, his gentle actions function as interventions in the relational field, changing the emotional dynamics through which behavior is shaped.

This becomes clear in the early laundromat and IRS scenes. Evelyn dismisses his tenderness with frustration to her daughter Joy, describing Deirdre, the IRS auditor as “a terrible person [...] targeting Chinese in the community” and recounting that after two years of tension, Deirdre “puts a lien on our laundromat, and you know what your father does? He brings her cookies. Crazy person!” (Kwan and Scheinert 00:07:21-00:07:41). For Evelyn, power means making decisions and enforcing order even in the face of danger. Within this worldview, Waymond’s softness appears irrational or ineffective. However, from a Foucauldian standpoint, she fundamentally misrecognizes where power resides. The film

illustrates that when Waymond enters the interaction, Deirdre's hostility eases, her shoulders relax, and against all expectations, she grants the family another week. This reversal occurs because Waymond reconfigures the emotional atmosphere, making cooperation possible. The moment exemplifies Foucault's claim that power arises from the "interplay of relations," not from domination. Evelyn's stunned reaction, "How? That's impossible" (Kwan and Scheinert 01:43:52-01:43:55), and Waymond's quiet reply, "I don't know, I just talked to her" (Kwan and Scheinert 01:44:08-01:44:11) capture the heart of relational power. "Just talked" is not passive or accidental, it is the practice of influence through micro-techniques: adjusting tone, offering acknowledgement, refusing aggression, and engaging not as an adversary. These gestures reshape the relational field in ways that produce behavioral change more effectively than confrontation could.



Deirdre eating Waymond's homemade cookie and speaking with him in the laundromat

WHY Softness Survives: Resilient Power

While relational power emphasizes interpersonal influence, resilient power expands softness into a larger ability for endurance, adaptation, and long-term transformation. Hannah Arendt's distinction between power and violence in *On Violence* helps clarify this. Writing in the wake of global upheaval, Arendt argues that "power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent" (56). Power, in her view, is fundamentally relational, it arises when people act willingly together toward shared goals. Violence, by contrast, depends on tools and coercion; its use signals not the presence of

power but its loss. As she insists, “Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it” (55). This framework provides a precise way for interpreting Evelyn’s early behavior. Her reliance on kung fu combat and multiverse fighting techniques is not evidence of strength but a sign that she has lost the capacity for shared action and trust. She fights because she cannot rely on others. In Arendt’s terms, Evelyn’s “hardness” marks the collapse of power, not an expression of authority. Waymond’s softness, by contrast, enacts the opposite dynamic. His action embodies what Arendt calls true power.

Daoist philosophy deepens this insight. Daoism, developed during the political chaos of the Warring States period, responded to the exhaustion with rigid, militarized governance. In this cultural context, the *Dao De Jing* reframes power by privileging softness, adaptability, and humility over domination or conquest. Its well-known line, “under heaven nothing is softer and weaker than water, yet nothing surpasses it in overcoming the hard and strong” (Laozi 78), captures the essence of Daoist strength. Water looks yielding and compliant. It bends and flows around obstacles, but it possesses a unique form of long-term force. It nourishes rather than shatters, and through ceaseless persistence, it gradually erodes the hardest stones and shapes mountains. In classical Daoist thought, this is the meaning of softness: rou (柔) is not the absence of strength but the presence of a durable, permeating, and transformative power. True softness does not crumble under pressure, it outlasts pressure. As the *Shuowen Jiezi*, which explains the formation of Chinese characters, describes, rou (柔) is the property of wood that can bend without breaking, flexibility as structural resilience. This understanding reframes softness as a long-term influence, one that works gradually. This capacity for sustained, quiet transformation fits directly with Arendt’s view that genuine power is collective, lasting, and based on relational strength rather than in violence that acts explosively and destructively. Daoist softness grows cumulatively and creatively. Hardness in the short term eventually collapses.

This Daoist understanding of softness also appears in modern martial arts philosophy. Bruce Lee famously summarized this idea with the phrase “Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless, like water [...] Now water can flow, or it can crash! Be water, my friend” (3). Lee explained that water adapts to any shape, flowing gently when possible yet crashing with immense force when necessary. Its strength lies in

its flexibility rather than its rigidity. This philosophy of adaptive movement appears repeatedly throughout the film's fight sequences. Waymond embodies this resilient form throughout the film. His repeated gestures of patience, emotional presence, and quiet commitment represent the Daoist version of power, a resilient, adaptive force that survives chaos, reshapes environments, and ultimately transforms Evelyn's worldview. This dynamic reaches its emotional peak in the IRS atrium. When Waymond pleads, "Please, no more fighting," and Evelyn exhausted answers, "It's too late, Waymond" (Kwan and Scheinert 01:46:58-01:47:03), the film cuts to the Movie-Star Universe confession: "In another life, I would have really liked just doing laundry and taxes with you" (Kwan and Scheinert 01:47:50-01:48:06). A fast montage follows—flashes of Waymond ecstatic, crying, laughing, cheering, overwhelmed. For the first time, Evelyn finally sees the emotional labor beneath his softness: the steady commitment of someone who chooses to stay.

Through this recognition, Evelyn discovers a new form of power. Her shift from a clenched fist to an open palm becomes the film's central metaphor. Softness is not the opposite of fighting; it is a different mode of fighting. It is a resilient, adaptive, relational power that stabilizes disorder, rebuilds connection, and makes the impossible task of saving her daughter possible. This realization becomes action. In combat, everything changes: knives turn into cookies, bullets become googly eyes, and hostility becomes healing. Evelyn disarms her opponents through care, turning violence into meaningful acts of connection. Softness becomes her strategy. Just as she turns to Waymond and says, "I'm learning to fight like you" (Kwan and Scheinert 01:54:53-01:54:56).



Evelyn's clenched fist softens into an open palm after viewing Waymond's montage

WHAT Softness Means: Ethical Power

Beyond interpersonal influence and adaptive resilience, softness in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* also operates as an ethical form of power. This conscious stance rejects domination and refuses the cycle of violence. This ethical side becomes clearer when placed within the conversation with contemporary vulnerability studies. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, American cultural institutions often celebrated self-protection, productivity, and stoic toughness as signs of competence and maturity. Brené Brown identifies this mindset as a “culture of armor,” where defensiveness is mistaken for strength and emotional openness is treated as a liability. It was within this climate that Brown’s work intervened by challenging the assumption that vulnerability is synonymous with weakness. In *Daring Greatly*, she writes, “Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection” (Brown 34). Brown reframes vulnerability as a cultural and psychological necessity for trust, creativity, and moral courage. Under this idea, softness becomes an ethical choice. It is a decision to prioritize honesty and a willingness to remain open, rather than to retreat into defensiveness.

Waymond exemplifies this ethical choice throughout the film. In a world where most characters respond to fear with aggression or withdrawal, Waymond chooses what Brown calls “engaged vulnerability,” remaining emotionally open even when such openness exposes him to disappointment or pain. His gentleness is not naïve; it is intentional. His voiceover expresses this philosophy: “When I choose to see the good side of things, I’m not being naïve. It is strategic and necessary. It’s how I’ve learned to survive through everything” (Kwan and Scheinert 01:45:43-01:45:54). Softness here becomes a conscious survival method, a form of ethical attention that resists cultural expectations to toughen or close off. By contrast, Evelyn’s habitual hardness is shaped by her position as a working-class immigrant woman, she navigates language barriers, economic stress, and patriarchal family demands. Her sharpness are not simply personal flaws. For many first-generation immigrants, everyday life involves constant negotiation with unfamiliar institutions and financial instability, often accompanied by subtle or explicit discrimination. In such conditions, toughness becomes a form of armor. Discipline is often necessary for survival. This dynamic can also be understood through the concept of emotional labor, originally introduced by sociologist Arlie Hochschild. As she writes, “this labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild 7). In immigrant families, this labor often takes on an additional dimension: parents must regulate their emotions while simultaneously protecting the family from external pressures. Evelyn’s hardness can therefore be interpreted as a form of emotional labor performed under structural constraint. Within this context, softness may appear almost like a luxury. When survival feels uncertain, gentleness can seem impractical or even dangerous. Against this backdrop, Waymond’s character challenges this assumption and takes on a very different ethical meaning, it reaches its clearest expression in Waymond’s second voiceover: “I know you go through life with your fists held tight. You see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight” (Kwan and Scheinert 01:46:21-01:46:31). With this declaration, the film reframes softness as a mode of agency and moral responsibility. Waymond “fights” not by overpowering others but by refusing to escalate conflict, by choosing repair over rupture, and by meeting violence without reproducing it. His softness is a disciplined, ethical practice of remaining open

in a world that constantly encourages shutting down. His refusal to harden himself is an act of deliberate challenge to the system: capitalist, patriarchal, and immigrant labor violence that Evelyn had internalized as the condition of survival. Softness, in this sense, is not innocence but a choice. It becomes revolutionary precisely because it refuses to comply with the moral economy of hardness. It is not submission, but an ethical resistance. The film ultimately frames Waymond's approach as a fully developed moral logic, softness becomes a way of fighting, grounded in compassion and a commitment to sustain connection. In this view, softness is a deeper, more durable form of power and offers a radically different model of what it means to act ethically in a chaotic world.



Both voiceovers comes from the movie-star universe, spoken by an alternate version of Waymond

Micro-Level: Softness in Intimacy and Family Dynamics

Softness in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* emerges most vividly within the family, where power is most intimate, inherited, and deeply felt. Evelyn begins the film relying on hard power. She commands and corrects those around her, acting from a belief that control is a form of care. Emotional restraint becomes discipline, and hierarchy is treated as protection. But her hardness produces the opposite of safety. It pushes Joy away, damages her marriage to Waymond, and turns their home into a place governed by tension rather than affection. This emotional pattern feels familiar. In many East Asian families, including my own, care often comes out crooked. It appears indirectly. When Evelyn avoids introducing Becky and instead tells Joy she's "getting fat," it reflects a common deflection, criticism

standing in for affection because vulnerability feels too risky. Growing up, love was rarely spoken aloud, food became its language. My mom never asked, “How are you?” She asked, “Did you eat yet?” Nourishment became our softest gesture within a hard emotional system. This is consistent with research on Asian American families, which finds that “Intergenerational acculturation gaps and family conflicts are associated with increased mental health risks, while parental warmth/support and family cohesion serve as protective factors” (Yu et al.). Hardness fractures relationships, softness helps repair them. Waymond embodies this repairing softness. He stabilizes the family not by avoiding conflict but by absorbing and redirecting it. Being a parent is not only about pushing a child to grow, but also about knowing when to let go.



Waymond's googly eye, the yin-yang Taiji diagram, and Jobu's nihilistic black bagel

The googly eyes Waymond puts around the laundromat, taped onto furniture, capture his worldview. Evelyn first sees them as childish. But the film positions them in symbolic conversation, standing opposite to Jobu's Black Bagel: two circles reflecting the relational balance of yin (black) and yang (white). In the Taiji diagram, yin contains a spark of yang and yang contains a spark of yin, no force is ever absolute, and neither is superior. The Bagel appears purely destructive, but its center contains Joy's simple request, “I just wanted you to see me.” Her nihilism is not evil but emotional pain produced by intersecting pressures she faces as a queer Asian American daughter navigating conflicting cultural frameworks. A yin force lacking the balancing counterforce of recognition, warmth, and connection. The Googly Eye, by contrast, represents hopefulness and playfulness, yet its dark center acknowledges

uncertainty without being consumed by it. Each symbol contains the other, indicating that psychological stability comes from balance, not purity. This symbolism becomes literal when Evelyn places a Googly Eye on her forehead in the final battle. It functions as a third eye, enabling her to perceive relational patterns beneath the multiverse chaos. Her philosophical shift becomes physical when Evelyn abandons the linear, aggressive movements of kung fu and adopts the circular, receptive movements of Taiji. In Taiji, force is not met with force, it is received, redirected, and dissolved. This contrast between linear aggression and circular redirection reflects a shift in how power operates, from domination through force to transformation through balance and responsiveness.

The fight scene continues into her confrontation with her father. Holding back tears, Evelyn finally names the wound she has carried since childhood. In doing so she breaks the generational cycle: “I’ve spent all these years seeing through your eyes. Now I’m finding the courage to see things through my own. It’s okay if you can’t be proud, because I finally am” (Kwan and Scheinert 01:59:42-01:59:51). Softness becomes an ethical stance, the refusal to reproduce inherited domination. This clarity allows her to grasp Joy’s wrist just before she disappears into the Bagel. Evelyn adds, “You may see in her all of your greatest fears squeezed into one person. She’s stubborn, aimless, a mess just like her mother. And that’s okay. Because the universe gave her someone kind, patient, and forgiving to make up for all she lacks” (Kwan and Scheinert 01:59:56-02:00:53). That “someone” is, of course, Waymond. On the domestic level, softness enables trust and repair. On the philosophical level, it restores the yin–yang circulation.

Meso-Level: Softness in Gender and Masculinity

At the meso level, softness in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* becomes a cultural question, tied to broader narratives about gender and identity. For much of the twentieth century, Western media promoted a narrow version of masculinity, the “alpha male”, defined by emotional restraint and physical control. Across genres from action to crime, even romantic comedies repeated this ideal so often that hardness became equal to manhood. To be a man was expected to be tough and invulnerable, while softness was coded as weakness or failure. The film makes this tension visible through two versions of the

same character. Alpha-Universe Waymond is confident, skilled, and fits the classic masculine archetype. Main-Universe Waymond, however, is introduced as Evelyn's problem, too polite and overly cheerful. Her frustration mirrors society's belief that a good man should be strong and assertive. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain the persistence of this model. Her work was important in feminism and cultural studies, especially at a time when scholars were questioning biological determinism and exploring how identity is socially constructed. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* (1988), Butler argues that gender "is in no way a stable identity [...] It is an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (519). Masculinity holds power not because it reflects biological truth, but because it is performed again and again, in posture, tone, media images, and expectations that teach us what a "real man" should be. The alpha male remains dominant because society continues to rehearse it.



Alpha-Waymond appears as a sharp, kung-fu-trained version of Waymond

However, Butler's theory also opens space for transformation. If gender is constructed through repetition, then new repetitions can generate new masculinities. This aligns with a growing cultural rejection of dominance-based masculinity and an interest in alternative male figures who show emotional openness and relational intelligence, the so-called "beta male." The pop-culture essay *The Rise of the Beta Male* identifies this as a societal pivot: "With the increased focus on feminism and the growing impetus laid on equality [...] the alpha became a symbol of everything contemporary society detested: homophobia, intolerance, violence, sexism." In a post-industrial, service-based society, where teamwork and emotional communication matter more than brute force, alternative masculinities have become not

only plausible but desirable. The film shows this shift clearly: the Alpha-Waymond Evleyn, once admired, is later shown to be impatient and aggressive. He abandons her as soon as she fails to meet his expectations. Contemporary media reflects this change. Films like *Her* (2013) present emotional transparency as a form of humanity in a technologically advanced world. Sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) reframed intelligence and awkwardness as attractive rather than socially marginal. As these stories multiply, they expand the meaning of masculinity. Butler would describe this as a rewriting of the script through new patterns of performance.

This shift is also significant for racialized masculinities. For decades, Asian men in Western media were constrained by stereotypes of emasculation, passivity, or comedic roles, rarely afforded depth or narrative centrality. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* directly challenges this history. As critic Chris Karnadi writes, Waymond Wang represents “a rare depiction of an Asian male lead that not only rejects and deconstructs Hollywood’s stereotypes of them but also serves as a necessary evolution for Asian representation in cinema” (Slate).



Ke Huy Quan in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), directed by Steven Spielberg

Ke Huy Quan, who portrays Waymond, has spoken openly about the lack of representation he experienced growing up. He recalls: “Growing up in the States, Bruce Lee and James Hong were the only Asian faces you saw. After *The Goonies*, nobody else put an Asian kid in a blockbuster movie” (Deadline). He also describes how meaningful it is to witness change today: “They always thank me and say, ‘I was able to see myself because you were up there on the screen.’ [...] It proves how important it is

for all groups to be represented, because until you see yourself, you still can't believe it could be you" (Deadline). Quan's success also marks a major cultural moment. In 2023, he became the first Asian man to win the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Supporting Actor and later won the Academy Award. His recognition signals a new model of Asian masculinity, one rooted in tenderness and humility. These qualities resonate with the East Asian values I grew up with, shaped by Daoist and Confucian ethics that emphasize filial piety and relational harmony.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism helps explain why Waymond's character is so groundbreaking. He argues that Western portrayals of the East are not neutral descriptions but tools of cultural imperialism. Orientalism creates an imagined version of Asia based on Western film, literature, and media. Through repeated stereotypes and limited storylines, Hollywood uses a symbolic form of hard power that establishes a hierarchy between the West and an "other" East that needs to be explained, controlled, or consumed. Even well-intentioned "representation" still becomes another form of domination when Hollywood decides which stories matter, which faces are desirable, and which emotions are understandable. This continues to reinforce a colonial way of thinking about both gender and race. These portrayals do more than reflect Western power, they actively help create and protect it. Making global inequality seems natural by allowing the West to maintain intellectual authority over Asia. In this way, it shows that the empire does not depend only on armies or direct force, just as significant as economic or military domination. This framework provides a foundation for the following section, which examines how softness operates at the macro level. In this context, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* reimagining of masculinity rejects dominance as the only masculine posture, expands the emotional tools available to men, and restores humanity to marginalized masculinities. Within this meso-level framework, softness becomes a transformative cultural force. As the Pop Culture Detective video essay notes about Waymond's character, "What's remarkable is that the filmmakers managed to turn him into a hero without giving him his own character arc. [...] He is essentially the same character at the end of the movie that he was at the very beginning" (McIntosh 00:03:00-00:03:31). Rather than transforming Waymond, the film transforms the viewer, offering a new understanding and definition of what masculinity can be.

Macro-Level: Softness in Geopolitical Influence

At the macro level, Joseph Nye's theory of soft power provides a strong way to understand softness as a form of political influence. Nye, an American political scientist, emerged as a central thinker in international relations during the early post-Cold War period. During the 1970s and 1980s, economic interdependence increased and global media expanded. At the same time, the emergence of new international institutions and the U.S.-Soviet détente exposed the limits of relying only on military power to explain world events. By the early 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and with the end of the Cold War, Nye noticed that American influence increasingly derived not from force but from culture. In response, he introduced the concept of "soft power", which he defines as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye). Meaning that power need not rely on force, threats, or money. Instead, soft power works by shaping what others find desirable. Nye emphasizes that people and nations are often persuaded not by force but by ideas and values. As he writes, "People influence others by ideas and attraction that set the agenda for others or get them to want what you want" (Nye). Waymond Wang's behavior reflects this logic of soft power. He redirects relationships toward recognition and connection. Just as Nye explains that nations attract by living their values authentically. Soft power has grown increasingly important in the twenty-first century because hard power, military force, coercive diplomacy, and economic pressure have shown clear limits. For example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the escalating U.S.-China tensions both reveal how coercive competition and the use of violence fuel greater insecurity and instability. As Nye notes, hard power may impose obedience, but it cannot generate trust, cooperation, or long-term alignment. This is where the earlier concepts of relational and ethical power intersect with global politics. Relational power functions like diplomacy, built on negotiation, while ethical power aligns with the moral credibility that strengthens a nation's reputation. Together, they show that softness, defined by trust and legitimacy, can serve as a strategic form of geopolitical influence.

Taiwan is, in many ways, one of the clearest real-world illustrations of why softness can become a strategic necessity. Taiwan lives under a constant shadow across the strait. China's political pressure and attempts to isolate Taiwan internationally have all picked up in the past few years. In this context, Taiwan's identity, like the multiverse in the film, navigates overlapping, fluid forms of identity shaped by historical colonization and ongoing geopolitical pressure. It's uncertain and always shifting. A recent report highlights this tension clearly: "Taiwan unveils \$40bn budget for defence spending to counter China [...] President Lai previously laid out plans to boost annual defence spending to more than 3 percent of gross domestic product next year and 5 percent by 2030" (Wu). However, more weapons don't necessarily mean more safety, they often just make the anxiety feel heavier. Joseph Nye himself made this point during his 1990 visit to Taipei, pointing out that Taiwan should "emphasize democracy more and talk about sovereignty less." Democracy, he explained, is a form of soft power that attracts international support. For Nye, soft power is the key for Taiwan to open narrow diplomatic doors and imagine a viable future.

A 2017 research report by Nissim Otmazgin of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, written during his Taiwan Fellowship residency, backs this perspective. He argues that Taiwan's cultural diplomacy has been relatively passive compared to that of neighboring East Asian states. Structural constraints, geopolitical isolation, exclusion from organizations like the World Health Organization and the United Nations, and the requirement to compete internationally under the name "Chinese Taipei", which already undermines visibility. Institutionally, Taiwan's Ministry of Culture receives only about one percent of the national budget. As of this January, "The Legislative Yuan approved the MOC budget, implementing NTD \$1.1 billion in cuts and NTD \$3.4 billion in budget freezes, resulting in an overall 15% reduction to the Ministry's funding" (Wu and Lee). With such restricted resources, the Ministry focused primarily on domestic affairs rather than global cultural outreach. Japan and South Korea offer strong contrasts. Japan has developed a deliberate and strategic soft-power policy, partly in response to its imperial past. Through campaigns such as "Cool Japan," which gathers everything from anime to ramen,

matcha, and classical performing arts, it has successfully crafted external influence. Meanwhile, South Korea, with agencies such as the Korea Creative Content Agency and the Korea Foundation for International Cultural Exchange, links government policy to private industry. The result, Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, has produced a globally recognizable cultural presence. This included the worldwide popularity of K-pop and K-dramas, alongside strong corporations such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai.

Seen from this regional perspective, Taiwan's soft power might appear underdeveloped, yet my experience growing up in Taiwan tells a different story. The island's democratic system, transparent institutions, and its status as the first in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, along with its commitment to human rights, all contribute to an international image of reliability. Taiwan's cultural presence, global icons such as boba and Din Tai Fung, and the works of Ang Lee and Edward Yang build an emotional connection slowly but with remarkable staying power. Its technological leadership adds another layer to this influence. Companies like TSMC, which manufactures 90% of the world's advanced semiconductors, make Taiwan indispensable to AI, smartphones, and electronics. In this way, Taiwan's geopolitical position therefore mirrors Waymond's philosophical position: softness becomes a strategic necessity, not a naïve idealism.



Director Daniel Kwan (right) dedicated his award-winning film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* to his Taiwanese mother

Conclusion

In an era defined by fragmentation and accelerating uncertainty, many of us are experiencing our own multiverse, an endless cascade of choices, notifications, and information. We feel overwhelmed, pulled in ten directions at once, judged by competing expectations, and stretched thin by responsibilities. Within moments, we can move between emotional extremes, joy to grief, from hope to frustration, while confronting an ever-expanding range of possibilities. Evelyn's chaos reflects this world where we are always multitasking, always performing, always trying to be "enough." Within this landscape, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* offers a radical proposition that the very softness we have been taught to dismiss might be the power we need most. Across the film's multiverse, softness emerges as a force with cross-cultural, cross-emotional, and cross-generational capacity to create understanding. What appears as "softness" becomes adaptability, what is labeled as "indecisiveness" becomes the capacity for deep listening and genuine communication, what seems like excessive emotional sensitivity becomes sincerity, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to those one loves. In this sense, softness is not the absence of power, but its reconfiguration, a form of strength capable of sustaining connection in a world defined by fragmentation. Together, these frameworks reveal softness as a multilayered vocabulary of power, one suited to a century in which survival depends less on domination.



The Wang family stands together in the final scene

All of these ideas converge in the film's quiet final moments. As the Wang family walks through the IRS building, still imperfect, chaotic, yet finally aligned, the multiverse steadies. Their world holds because they hold one another. The film reframes what it means to act powerfully. To fight, it suggests, is not always to strike. Sometimes it is to listen. Sometimes it is to stay. Sometimes it is to soften. And in that softness, a different future becomes possible. It becomes a new language of power for the twenty-first century, one capable of sustaining humanity in a world that feels perpetually on the edge of undoing. And with that, we can face everything, everywhere, all at once.

Bibliography (MLA 8th edition)

- Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970.
- Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. Skillsoft, 2023.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, Dec. 1988, pp. 519–31. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>
- Chen, Zhong, and Laozi. *Dao De Jing*. 2nd ed., Jilin Wenshi Chubanshe, 2006.
- "Cool Japan." *Cabinet Office, Government of Japan*, https://www.cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/index-e.html. Accessed 7 Dec. 2025.
- D'Alessandro, Anthony. "Ke Huy Quan on Returning to Acting and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*." *Deadline*, 12 Dec. 2022, <https://deadline.com/2022/12/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-ke-huy-quan-interview-123518150/>
- Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, A24, 2022.
- Foucault, Michel. *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961–1984*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer, translated by Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston, Semiotext(e), 1996.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. 1st ed., Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.
- Gao, Xijun 高希均. "提升『軟實力』, 才是小國的生存之道 | 《打造台灣軟實力之島》." *Bookzone*, <https://bookzone.cwgv.com.tw/article/30131>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2025.
- Her*. Directed by Spike Jonze, Annapurna Pictures, 2013.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press, 1983.
- Huang, J. H. *The Dao De Jing: Laozi's Book of Life: A New Translation from the Ancient Chinese*. HarperCollins, 2022.

Karnadi, Chris. "Asian Men Needed a Movie Like *Everything Everywhere All at Once*." *Slate*, 8 Apr. 2022,

<https://slate.com/culture/2022/04/everything-everywhere-all-once-waymond-ke-huy-quan.html>

Kim, Rosalie. "The Hallyu Origin Story." *Victoria and Albert Museum*,

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-hallyu-origin-story>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2025.

Lee, Shannon. *Be Water, My Friend: The Teachings of Bruce Lee*. Flatiron Books, 2021.

McIntosh, Jonathan. "Everyone Everywhere Needs Waymond." *The Pop Culture Detective Agency*, 2022,

<https://popculturedetective.agency/2022/everyone-everywhere-needs-waymond-wang>

Momoko, Kawakami. "Taiwan's TSMC as a Focal Point of US–China Conflict." *Semantic Scholar*,

<https://www.semanticscholar.org>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2025.

Nast, Condé. "Ke Huy Quan Is Everywhere All at Once." *GQ*, 2022,

<https://gq.com/story/ke-huy-quan-everything-everywhere-all-at-once>

Nye, Joseph. "Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept." *Humanities & Social*

Sciences Communications, vol. 3, no. 1, Feb. 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.8>

Ohnesorge, Hendrik W. *Soft Power: The Forces of Attraction in International Relations*. Springer

International Publishing, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29922-4>

Otmazgin, Nissim. "A Taiwanese Soft Power? Contesting Visions of Democracy and Culture."

International Journal of Taiwan Studies, vol. 6, no. 2, July 2023, pp. 241–60.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/24688800-20221285>

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1980.

The Big Bang Theory. Created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, CBS, 2007–2019.

"The Rise of the Beta Male in Pop Culture." *The Ideas Lab*,

<https://theideaslab.com/rise-of-the-beta-male-in-pop-culture/>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2025.

Wang, Robin R. "Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained ('Taijitu Shuo'): A

Construction of the Confucian Metaphysics." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 66, no. 3, July

2005, pp. 307–23. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2005.0047>

- Wu, Adrienne, and Lee Yuchen. "Taiwan's Budget Cuts Limit Taiwanese Cultural Industries and Its International Voice." *Taiwan Insight*, 28 Mar. 2025, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2025/03/28/taiwans-budget-cuts-limit-taiwanese-cultural-industries-and-its-international-voice/>
- Wu, Taijing, and Wu Huizhong. "Taiwan Unveils \$40 Billion Budget for Defence Spending to Counter China." *The Washington Post*, 25 Nov. 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>
- Yu, Toni, et al. "Asian American Parenting and Youth Mental Health Outcomes: A Literature Review." *Mental Health Science*, vol. 3, no. 1, Mar. 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mhs2.101>