

SPECIFIC FEATURES OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND PRACTICE

*It is better to attack the enemy's mind than
to attack his fortified cities
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Abstract

The article is devoted to peculiarities of the Chinese «soft power» used in the countries of Central Asia. Special attention is paid to the concept of Joseph Nye that the achievement of certain results in the policy is possible on the basis of samples of economic models, aimed at the development of cultural values. The rising geopolitical influence of China on Central Asian countries, the author explains through specific examples, showing how China using «soft power» in the economy, spirituality, science and education, through the project «silk way» introduces the Confucian values.

Keywords: *China, Central Asia, the «soft power».*

Аңдатпа

Мақала Орталық Азия елдерінде қолданылатын қытайлық «жұмсақ күштердің» ерекшеліктеріне арналған. Автор Джозеф Найдың саясатта белгілі бір нәтижеге қол жеткізу үшін мәдени құндылықтарды дамытуға бағытталған экономикалық модельдің үлгілері негізінде жүзеге асыруға болады деген концепциясына баса назар аударады. Қытайдың Орталық Азия елдеріндегі геосаяси әсерінің өсе түсуін автор нақты мысалдар арқылы көрсете келіп, Аспанасты елінің экономикада, руханиятта, ғылымда, білім беруде жұмсақ күштерді қолдана отырып, Жібек жолы мегажобалары арқылы конфуциандық дәстүрлерді енгізіп жатқанын ашып көрсетеді.

Тірек сөздер: *Қытай, Орталық Азия, «жұмсақ күш».*

Аннотация

Статья посвящена особенностям китайской «мягкой силы», используемой в странах Центральной Азии. Особое внимание автор уделяет концепции Джозефа Ная о том, что достижение определенных результатов в политике возможно на основе образцов экономической модели, направленной на развитие культурных ценностей. Рост геополитического влияния Китая на страны Центральной Азии автор объясняет через конкретные примеры, показывая, как Поднебесная, используя «мягкую силу» в экономике, духовности, науке и образовании, через мегапроект «Шелковый путь» внедряет конфуцианские ценности.

Ключевые слова: *Китай, Центральная Азия, «мягкая сила».*

Introduction

Recently, China has experienced ongoing economic growth, which also led to rise of its economic and political global power.

Since initiating market reforms in 1978, China has shifted from a centrally planned to a market based economy and experienced rapid economic and social development. GDP growth averaging about 10 % a year has lifted more than 500 million people out of poverty.¹ China became the second largest economy and is increasingly playing an important and influential role in the global economy.

Some commentators argued that with its spectacular growth rate, after overtaking Germany as the third-largest economy in the world, China is expected to surpass the United States as the largest economy in 25 to 30 years, if it maintains the current rate of economic growth.² Economic problems that China facing today might slightly postpone this scenario, but no one doubts that Beijing exerts enormous global economic power today.

China's impact on world affairs is increasing rapidly as well. As result attention of global media and public opinion became more focused on Chinese activities around the world and its impact on other countries. Today the issue of China's global and regional image became one of the hottest issues under the discussion. As one of the fastest growing economies in the world, many wonder what kind of international behavior an increasingly powerful China will demonstrate in the future.

Central Asia region is not an exemption. The image of China is also turned into the frequently discussed issue here. China's increasing economic engagement with Central Asia has been growing by staggering numbers. For example, according to IMF trade statistics, in 2000 China's overall trade with the Central Asian region was estimated at about \$1bn. By the end of the decade, this figure had increased by thirty times and in 2013 trade volumes surpassed \$50bn.³

In addition, China has built critical new infrastructure, including two important new energy pipelines (the Atyrau-Alashankou oil pipeline across Kazakhstan and the China-Central Asia gas pipeline), new highways and rail networks, and emerged as the region's leading source of developmental finance.

The Central Asian states are at once desirous of the growing Chinese presence, wanting to take advantage of its economic dynamism, became occupied of its potential demographic and cultural clout. The so-called "Chinese question" has become the hottest topic among expert community in the region. Discourses on the "Chinese expansion" into Central Asia have become frequent in the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik Mass medianewspapers. The problem is exaggerated by the presence of old Soviet Clichés and collective memories of local population that tend to view China as a threat.⁴

As a result, many experts believe that in an attempt to improve its image Chinese leadership has embarked on a new huge project – promotion of soft power on a global stage. Despite the popularity of the topic, there is a lack of academic literature on specifics of chinese soft power in Central Asia region.

The purpose of this paper is to understand chinese Soft Power in the Central Asia from a comparative perspective. Drawing on comprehensive literature review and by taking a multidimensional approach of conceptualizing power, it aims to help readers understand the features of China's Soft Power in the region both from theory and practice.

What is a power?

Before touching up specifics of China's soft power in the Central Asia, it would be helpful to clarify main concepts and theoretical framework relevant to this topic.

Before we examine soft power, we first look at the concept of power.

According to classical definition of power by Dahl, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."⁵ Alternative opinion gives another perspective, it suggests that power can be exercised covertly. "Power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practice that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences."⁶

When it comes to international theory, there are three traditional approaches (attribute power, relational power and structural power) in the conceptualization of power.

According to first, *Attribute Power Approach* power is determined by the properties attributed to the state. This is central to the idea of the balance of power between states and alliances. One of the prominent advocates of this approach, Hans Morgenthau believed that power was not only an immediate aim but also a means to the nation's end. He argued that international relations are the struggle for continuous power and all nations strive to realize their goals by means of attaining the ultimate power. What is important for our research question is that Morgenthau also distinguished two elements of power: relatively stable elements and those subject to constant change in determining the power of nations. The first concept of relatively stable factors includes geography and natural resources (food and raw material). The second idea of constant change includes industrial capacity, military preparedness (technology, leadership, and quality of armed forces), population, national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy and the quality of government.⁷

The second, *relational power approach*, power derives from the relations between actors. The concepts of 'global power', 'superpower', 'regional power' or 'rising powers' all assume an element of comparison with other states, and therefore power is determined in relation to other states.

This approach adopts the view that power is not limited to the properties that inhere in the state actors but include resources that emerge from all kinds of exchanges between actors. The relational power approach focuses on attraction and co-option rather than coercion by physical force in international politics. Advocates of these theories employ an analytic framework of interdependence and dependency to explain how power operates in international politics.⁸

The third approach which is called *the structural power approach*, suggests that power emanates from the structures of the international system. This approach views power as residing in the unequal distribution of various resources in the international system. Today it is seen in concepts like the North/South or formations like the G8 or the G77+China, in the governance structures of the IMF and World Bank or the P5 in the UN Security Council.⁹

Recognizing the advantages of each approach, it should be noted that each of them gives only one-sided view. Thus, we will combine all of approaches discussed above to understand power from different perspectives. It is safe to say that power of the state is derived from multiple factors like the attributes of the state, or the relations among states, or the structure of the international system.

The soft power

Although the traditional idea of power includes both material and non-material factors in international politics, Joseph Nye first coined the term “soft power”. Some scholars believe that the development of this concept can be traced to the works of many other social scientists and international relations theorists.

According Nye, soft power is the *ability of a state to influence the actions of another through persuasion or attraction, rather than coercion*. Nye argues that power can be exerted in three ways: threat of force (stick), inducement of payments (carrot) or shaping the preferences of others. Soft power approach is different from the traditional foreign policy implementing “carrot and stick”, relying instead on the attractiveness of a nation’s institutions, culture, politics and foreign policy, to shape the preferences of others.¹⁰

Predicting growing relevance and importance of soft power as a foreign policy tool on the international arena Nye argued:

“If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change. If it can support institutions that make other states wish to channel or limit their activities in ways that the dominant state prefers, it may be spared the costly exercise of coercive or hard power.”¹¹

The basic premise of Nye’s concepts is changing nature of international relations, where hard power recourse like military power became less relevant. He believed that globalization and the development of the information society changed the distribution of power in the modern world by increasing interdependence between states. Nye uses metaphor of 3-d chessboard to explain distribution of power in the contemporary international system: the Top chessboard, is characterized by military power in a unipolar system, dominated by a supreme United States. The Middle chessboard: is characterized by economic power, and has been multipolar for more than a decade, with US, Europe, Japan and China as the major actors, and others gaining in importance.

The Bottom chessboard is a realm of transnational relations that cross borders outside of government control. It includes non-state actors and transnational challenges. Power at this board is widely diffused¹².

Nye argues that hard power resources can be effective only in the military and economic sphere, whereas soft power works at the transnational level. According to him, soft power is based on three primary resources:

- (1) culture, in places where it is attractive to others;
- (2) political values, where it lives up to them at home and abroad;
- (3) foreign policies, when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.

Elaborating on his concept Nye draws clear line between resource of hard and soft power. First is generally associated with tangible resources, such as money. On the contrary, soft power rests

on intangible factors such as institutions, ideas, values, culture and the perceived legitimacy of policies¹³.

When it comes to China, Nye argues that China's successful economic performance has produced both hard power, in terms of sanctions and restricted market access, as well as soft power in terms of attraction and emulation of success.

One of the most important aspects of Nye's concept relevant to our paper is that soft power depended 'more than hard power on the existence of willing interpreters and receivers'. Nye believed that the concentration of power amongst a few could lead to soft power being less effective. Soft power worked best in certain circumstances but it could not do some of the hard tasks that are necessary. Therefore, soft power of governments could not surpass the soft power of private business, organizations and individuals. This is an important observation in Chinese context, given the traditional dominating role of the state in foreign policy of China.¹⁴

Soft Power in China: form theory to practice

According to research conducted by David Shambaugh, references to soft power in influential academic journals in China increased dramatically from 2003 and 2009, reaching their peak at nearly 600 references in 2008. This number clearly demonstrates that soft power has become a noticeable part of expert discourse on foreign policy and international politics in China.¹⁵

The origins of academic discourse on soft power in China can be traced back to Wang Huning. In 1993 Huning, a professor from Fudan University and a member of the CCP Central Committee Secretariat argued that *culture was the main source of a state's soft power*.¹⁶

According to Chinese scholars, Chinese way of definition of power concept has a remarkable difference from the Western tradition. Traditional Chinese thinking about power is that power comes from morality and morality comes from nature. This way of thinking laid fundament for traditional Chinese tributary system that integrated power and morality. In Chinese traditional thinking, there is no concept of nation, nation-state, sovereignty, or international system but the idea of "All under Heaven". Defined in this way, the concept of power in Chinese traditions originally has "soft" nature as it was always related to morality. Chinese scholars believe that the traditional principles of Confucius as "*Do not impose upon others what you do not desire yourself*" or Lao Tzu's "govern by doing nothing that is against nature" laid philosophical foundation for definition of power in Chinese way.¹⁷

So, naturally, most of the Chinese scholars seem to focus on traditional Chinese culture, in particular, as the most valuable source of Chinese soft power arguing that it rests on an uninterrupted long history, a wide range of traditions, symbols and textual records. Moreover Chinese scholars argue that the traditional Chinese cultural values with "harmony" at the core are the basis of Chinese cultural appeal in an era of cultural diversification and globalization.¹⁸

However, the discourse on soft power within China demonstrates variety of different opinions. For example, Yu Keping, prominent political analyst and former advisor to Hu Jintao argues that apart from superior culture the other sources of soft power are education, the psychological and physical condition of the people, technological advancement, human resources and strategy, social cohesion and unity, and the sustainability of socio-economic development. Other interesting opinion is that soft power embedded in the government's ability to (1) expand its outreach and capacity through proposing, building, and persuading others to join a new set of international institutions and regimes, (2) influence smaller, neighboring states to defer to and recognize China's leadership and authority as the dominant actor and accept the hierarchical relationship, and (3) attract neighboring states to assimilate and adapt to its cultural values, ideology, and political system.¹⁹

As early as 2002 main tenets of soft power concept has emerged in official lexicon of Chinese senior leadership. In his political report released in 2002 at the 16th Congress of the China Communist Party Jiang Jiemin, former PRC president stated that "in today's world, culture intertwines with economics and politics, demonstrating a more prominent position and role in the competition for comprehensive national power."²⁰

In 2004, the work of Central Committee of China Communist Party focused on how to develop China's philosophy and social science. Two months later it published a document

titled "Suggestions of the CCP Center on further Developing and Boosting Philosophy and Social Science". Chinese commentators assessed this document as leadership's will to accelerate the growth of China's soft power to a strategic level. Consequently, this was manifested by concrete actions of leadership. In the same year first Confucius Institutes were established abroad, reflecting Beijing's effort to promote Chinese culture and language following experience of British, French, and German cultural and language centers. According to Confucius Institutes Headquarter, Hanban, currently there are about 500 Confucius Institutes worldwide; by 2020 the number of Institutes is planned to reach 1000.²¹

In 2007, at the 17th Congress of the China Communist Party, former President Hu Jintao in his speech emphasized that culture is an important part of national cohesion and overall national power. He stressed that party should "enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests"²².

In 2010, the Central Committee of the China communist party issued a Five-Year Plan, from 2011 to 2015. Article 9 of this document included the actions to develop national soft power through incorporating traditional Chinese culture, domestic innovation, export of cultural products and external media initiatives.²³

At the 18th China communist party Congress in November 2012, President Hu, in his final report, summarized that the country's cultural soft power should be improved significantly, that core socialist values should take roots among people, laying a solid foundation for developing a strong socialist China. He also emphasized that the cultural sector should become a "pillar" of the economy.²⁴

The concept of soft power has been integrated in political lexicon of fifth generation of China's leadership. The soft power is tightly intertwined with Xi's national idea of "Chinese dream" that is considered to be his personal contribution to ideology of communist party. In 2014 in his speech 'Elevate Soft Power, Realize the Chinese Dream' Xi Jinping stated that *"to strengthen China's soft power, the country needs to build its capacity in international communication, construct a communication system, better use the new media and increase the creativity, appeal and credibility of China's publicity. The stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained."*²⁵

To sum up, the mainstream Chinese understanding of soft power has largely followed the conceptual framework proposed by Nye. The vast majority of Chinese analysts mainly stick to Nye's definition of soft power, that is, "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments". More importantly, they have largely followed the parameters identified by Nye: culture, political values and foreign policy.

China's evolving soft power in Central Asia

The China's soft power strategy in Central Asia cannot be examined without consideration of historical context of its regional policy. Regional policy of China has passed several stages of development, each of which has its own specific features. It has been constantly changing according to geopolitical context and emerging circumstances in the region. According to K. Syroezhkin, development of the strategy of China toward countries of Central Asia can be divided into 4 stages:²⁶

The first stage is related to disintegration of the USSR and emergence of the new independent states on its fragments. This stage embraces a period of 1992-1995 years. Its basic features consist in the Chinese attempt to solve some important foreign policy questions in the region by "using favorable circumstances", and also, getting access into a region, to use its material resources in order to speed up economic development.

The second stage mainly includes 1996 and the first half of 2000. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, Beijing took into consideration possibility of domination in the region, but by the end of 90s this idea replaced by economic calculations and pragmatic geopolitical interests.

The third stage can be conditionally limited to the period between the second half of 2000 and the first half of 2005. In this period regional policy underwent some changes owing to the shift of regional agenda towards security matters. Chinese policy at this period was marked by further attempts to penetrate into the region economically. This was done by creating companies with Chinese capital, assistance in realization of infrastructural projects (bilaterally and within Shanghai

Cooperation Organization) and finally, by granting preferential loans to stimulate trade with regional countries.

The fourth stage embraces a period from the second half 2005 to a present time. Main characteristics of the given period are: firstly, promotion of the Kazakhstani-Chinese relations on new quality level - relations of strategic partnership. Secondly, region gradually becomes a raw material appendage of Chinese economy. Thirdly, active involvement of China into the competition for Central Asian oil resources. Fourthly, active policy of granting credits and loans to states of Central Asia. Fifthly, participation of Chinese companies into realization of infrastructural and other large scale projects in the Central Asia.

So, the fourth stage that began in 2005 marks dramatic expansion of economic and political clout in Central Asia. It is worth to mention that China's active push of its soft power on global arena had coincided with this stage. Following the growing influence of China in the region, anti-Chinese feelings or Sino-phobia became more pressing issues for Beijing.

The main areas of concerns for the local residents are: fears of migration, economic and environmental concerns. Additionally, despite the fact that Central Asian states are benefiting from economic dynamism, yet there is still a fear of it can be transformed into potential demographic and cultural clout of China.

The case of Kazakhstan, the biggest trading partner of China is quite illustrative. According to Konstantin Syroezhkin, all of the phobias about China in Kazakhstani Media and even in some cases in Kazakhstani Academia can be grouped around following factors that considered as threats to national interests of Kazakhstan.²⁷

Beijing has launched a well-funded program of "soft power" instruments to promote a more positive view of China and acceptance of the inevitable increase in its power in the region. In order to analyze the strategies that China employs in Central Asia to deal with perceived threat, I apply the theoretical framework of soft power, which detailed above.

Applying Nye's theoretical framework, I will analyze Chinese soft power in Central Asia from three primary resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies.

Culture

The program for the creation of a global network of Confucius Institutes serves as a cornerstone for global promotion of China's culture. Rather than targeting the elite, the Confucius Institutes promote and engage in education at a popular level. The institutes operate under the auspices of the Office of Chinese Language Council International—Hanban—in Beijing, and serve unreservedly the purpose of public diplomacy. These structures serve as a cultural platform for China to interact with the world and promote Chinese language.

Confucius Institutes have received rapid development in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In 2013, the Confucius Institutes in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus were trained a total of 24 thousand people, on average, 1.2 thousand people were trained in each institution, which is 33.3% more than in 2012. At the same time, these institutions trained a total of 300 local Chinese language teachers, organized 480 cultural events, which were attended by 180 thousand people, which was two times more than in 2012. There are already 4 Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan, every Central Asian country.²⁸

Promoting education exchanges is other important tool to promote soft power of China in the region. It is an effective way to transmit cultural and political values to international students. While living in the host country, international students will have good opportunities learn local languages and culture, observe local life activities, communicate with local people, and what is more important, establish social networks in host country.

Today, China became prominent education hub for foreign students. In 2014 the number of foreign students studying in China reached 377 054. Kazakhstan with its 17 million population holds 9 places in terms of student number in China (11 764 students), leaving behind countries like Germany, France and Vietnam. More than 3000 students from Kyrgyzstan currently study in China.²⁹

The number of Central Asian students in China will grow in coming years. In 2013 China pledged to provide about 30000 fully funded scholarships to the Central Asian countries in the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Chinese soft power in Central Asian is gradually increasing, not only through educational and cultural exchanges but also through Chinese mass media availability. The two most famous newspapers Xinhua and Jenmin Jibao represented in Kazakhstan. Also, Xinhua Radio International and CCTV are broadcasting on the regular basis in Central Asia in Russian language. Moreover, Chinese government is strengthening cooperation between Chinese and Central Asian media. For example, Chinese government host annual media forum for the countries located along Silk Way, where media representatives from Central Asian states take an active participation.³⁰

Moreover, China is using wide range public policy instruments to promote its soft power in the region. This includes hosting a large scale cultural activities like hosting cultural year of China in countries of region, development of tourist ties, people-to-people communications and non-governmental exchanges etc. For example, only in 2015 China organized visits of several delegations from Kazakhstan that included: representative of religious community and national minorities, youth organizations and young leaders, bloggers etc.

Political values and foreign policy

Being well aware about the perceived threat about China in its neighborhood Chinese leadership paid enormous attention on elaborating better regional diplomacy that will incorporate common set of values for China and its neighboring countries. Specific concepts of peripheral diplomacy were formulated and applied in order to promote positive image of China in the region.

Early stage of peripheral diplomacy development related to Hu Jintao. Periphery diplomacy was seen as part of the very positive notion of developing a “harmonious world” and building “good neighborhood” which was distinguished from more complex and potentially contentious relations with great powers.³¹ In September 2013 when Xi Jinping pays a visit to four Central Asian countries and delivers an important speech at Nazarbaev’s University in Kazakhstan the peripheral diplomacy of China underwent major changes.

The speech that Xi Jinping delivered at Nazarbaev’s University was titled as “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future.” This keynote speech is important for shaping of China’s soft power in the Central Asia. The first reason is that it introduced initiative of “One Road One Belt” that has laid conceptual foundation for regional policy of China. Second reason is that Xi Jinping stated that China wants to achieve a friendly environment in the region through increasing people-to-people contacts and through public and cultural diplomacy.

In his keynote speech Xi said:

«The over two-thousand years history of exchanges between Central Asia and China under the Ancient Silk Road demonstrates that on the basis of solidarity, mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness, mutual learning and win-win cooperation, countries of different races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are fully capable of sharing peace and development.»³²

As we can see, using such key words as win-win situation, peaceful co-existence despite of differences was done with the purpose to send China’s message to Central Asians that China is a friendly actor and that the relationship with China is beneficial to both sides. Appealing to the common historical and cultural values Xi was trying to establish ideological bond between China and Central Asian countries:

“More than 2,100 years ago, the Chinese Han Dynasty envoy named Zhang Qian twice traveled to Central Asia with a mission of peace and friendship. This trip marked the beginning of friendly exchanges between China and Central Asian countries and opened the Silk Road from East to West, from Asia to Europe.”³³

In order to promote its appeal for Central Asian states, Chinese leadership relates its concepts to internal development programs of regional states. This is quite evident in case of Kazakhstan. For example, Chinese leadership has been actively drawing parallels between Xi’s concept of “Chinese dream” and N. Nazarbaev’s strategic vision of “Kazakhstan-2050”. Other example is synchronization of “One Road One Belt” initiative with Kazakhstan’s infrastructure development program “Nurly Zhol”. By doing so, Chinese leadership is trying to work out common discourse or political lexicon that both China and Central Asian states can relate to. This move is aimed to provide legitimacy, and as a result attractiveness, for Chinese economic and political initiatives in the region.

To sum up, the rise of China in the international trade and economy, and as a consequence on a global political arena, more attention is given to its foreign policy behavior, especially in neighboring countries. Central Asia is not an exception. Burgeoning trade and investment, huge difference in the comprehensive state power stirred up traditional phobias of Central Asia nations toward China. To Counter these challenges chinese leadership has turned to charm offensive to “win the hearts” of the local people.

As a review of relevant literature demonstrated, soft power in China is closely related to culture and political values, heavily drawing on Nye's primary concept of soft power. As the result, among many resources to cultivate soft power, Beijing has mostly relied on its cultural diplomacy.

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