

SOFT POWER AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE CHINESE STYLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the implications of soft power and intercultural communication in education, taking China's Confucius Institutes (CIs) as a subject of discussion. It regards intercultural communication in China, Romania, Poland, and England where educational institutions presented as the place to 'practice' soft power and shape a narrative about a country. For this purpose, the authors present their first-hand observations and integrate the principles of globalization along with the findings of scholarly research to explain how people can engage in multicultural communication and use the principles of soft power. To achieve the goal of the paper, which is to increase the awareness of the influence exerted by soft power on the intercultural discursive framework in academia, the study employs methodological approaches, such as case and comparative analysis and data analysis.

Keywords: *soft power; intercultural communication; China; Confucius Institutes; Romania.*

Intercultural Communication

In 1992, Linda Beamer, Professor Emeritus at California State University, defined Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) as the ability to encode and decode meanings that correspond to the meaning held in another communicator's mind. Developing ICC involves moving through five stages: acknowledging diversity, organizing information according to stereotypes, posing questions to challenge the stereotypes, analyzing communication episodes, and generating "other culture" messages (Beamer, 1992).

A key aspect of ICC is understanding how individualist versus collectivist value orientations impact communication. Individualistic cultures like the United States value directness, specificity, and separating the person from the issue. In contrast, collectivist cultures favor indirect, ambiguous communication and inseparable personal/professional spheres.

Other cultural variables that affect communication include power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and long-term orientation. For example, high power distance cultures have greater inequality between superiors and subordinates.

Beamer recommends cross-cultural training focused on real-world business cases and communication analysis rather than just learning cultural trivia. Ultimately, ICC develops through mindful attention to the communication process over time. As professor Beamer (1992) proposes, ICC, like any other form of communication competence, necessitates changing cognitive habits. With practice, businesspeople can bridge cultural divides and communicate effectively across borders (Beamer, 1992).

Soft Power: Definitions, Manifestations and Related Concepts

Soft power represents one of the relevant topics not only in this paper, but it also weighs a great importance when discussing political influence, international relations and diplomacy. Seen as a tool in obtaining one's objectives, soft power can be described as the opposite of hard power, or the use of coercion in the sake of gaining an advantage and proposes the attraction of a targeted entity in order to change its behavior. The behavioral change is the main reason why power exists and is sought by people, states and organizations, meaning that power is used for shifting the valence of interactions between those entities (Chitty, Ji,

Rawnsley & Hayden, 2017).

In defining soft power, it is important to highlight the way it can be manifested, especially in the field of political relations between states. Passive soft power implies that a population or group is attracted to core values, positive examples and a cultural image, without a great deal of persuasive discourses being directed to the group. On the other hand, active soft power is described as the persuasive approach that is directed through diplomacy, media and education onto the targeted group. In this case, perceptions are deliberately influenced as a way of creating a positive image of a particular entity (Nye, 2011).

In order to succeed in its persuasive initiative, a state can use a conglomerate of instruments and strategies that belong to both categories identified: diplomatic relations represent a must, in a hyper-globalized world, while the culture of a country can play a strategic role in shaping a positive outlook for foreigners. But a country needs to either have a strong cultural heritage and history, or be considered a civilization, a pole of influence in the geopolitical sphere, in the interest of successfully using passive soft power. Moreover, culture represents the core of applying soft power tools, when regarded as a form of power in itself, in the present context, of a multi-polarized global scene.

Culture can be defined as a set of characteristics and knowledge of a group that has collective features, such as one language, one ethnicity, religion, shared history, national identity or customs (CED, n.d.). Culture serves political interests, operating as an instrument that gives a unique perspective into dealing with conflicts, adopting a different communication technique in negotiations or in the way a country is governed (Carbó-Catalan & Roig-Sanz, 2022).

Oftentimes, culture and its use as a soft power tool is stronger than politics, meaning that diplomatic endeavors can have the expected outcome if a strong cultural base exists, even though the political system comes in opposition with the other one. For example, bilateral relations continue to be maintained between countries with a democratic governance and authoritarian states, if their national culture attracts the other party. In addition, a historical civilization can draw support no matter its present political system (Chitty, Ji, Rawnsley, & Hayden, 2017).

In this way, the promotion of culture, history and language poses a significant role in shaping our perspective regarding a country and furthermore, this appeal can transcend into biased opinions. We are prone to push aside negative or problematic elements of one country's political system, such as the adherence to

human rights, if we are attracted to the national culture. Soft power acts as the main driving force in diplomacy and intercultural relations, forming bonds between different nations and creating positive images that generate collaboration. By implementing educational and academic projects, having a powerful social media presence or a prominent film industry, sustaining bilateral and multilateral relations with other states and cooperating in the economic domain, a country can win its place in the international scene. All of this effort can be considered a soft power strategy, and its success can be achieved without any military threats regarding sovereignty, or embargoes imposed on another state.

Case Study: China's Confucius Institutes as a Soft Power Tool

The People's Republic of China is regarded as a civilizational center of the East, with a consistent culture and long history, spanning over thousands of years and multiple dynasties. Especially after the 1949 establishment of the People's Republic by Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the country developed a variety of soft power tools, starting with economic collaboration with African and South American states, such as Zimbabwe, Ghana or Venezuela. But, in regards to the capacity of influencing and drawing attraction, China can be considered a master of using education and the academic sphere as a soft power instrument.

In this part, the focus will be oriented towards the Confucius Institutes (CIs) and a study case will be presented, in order to shed light on their importance in obtaining a positive image in the world. China remains a country that draws supporters, by using educational programs. In terms of innovation, methodology and academic research, the present chapter represents a case study, encompassing both an academic input, but also the personal experience.

Firstly, the Confucius Institutes are an educational non-profit worldwide organization, established in 2004, funded by the Chinese government, with the purpose of promoting Chinese culture, serving as a facilitator for the learning of Mandarin and running cultural exchanges for foreign and Chinese students. These institutes are present in the majority of European countries, including Romania, and on the other continents of the world, in dozens of countries. Their establishment comes as a result of cooperation between them and universities from the guest countries, and the CIs manage the process of

certification of Mandarin knowledge, using the HSK standardized test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi or the Chinese Proficiency Test). In addition, research is an important part of the Confucius Institutes, regarding topics of relevance for China, such as economy, development and culture. Mutual benefits, respect and friendly collaboration are stated as the core values for the functioning of this entity affiliated with the Hanban, the Office of Chinese Language International Council.

When observing how China develops its soft power strategies, the majority of Chinese scholars claim that, at the heart of the Chinese model of implementing soft power, culture occupies this crucial place. Therefore, the Chinese cultural school (文化派; wenhua pai) has its main focus in forming diplomacy and communication skills, aimed at promoting this culture into the present geopolitical context. Even more, the cultural aspect of this Asian country can be considered so embedded into their research interests and academic scene, because of the development of cultural soft power (文化软实力; wenhua ruanshili). As a result, the educational agenda and intercultural interactions within the Confucius Institutes have a strong cultural aspect, promoting not only the acquiring of language proficiency, but also traditional culture and Chinese moral values (Repnikova, 2022).

In order to demonstrate the attraction that emerges within the Confucius Institutes, there are a few factors to take into consideration. The first factor that demonstrates the success of educational programs as soft power instruments is the need for uniqueness. In this particular case regarding the acquisition of Chinese culture and language knowledge, students worldwide can be attracted to study Chinese as a way of creating a unique and exotic self that differentiates from another people's identity. They are not Chinese, but knowing even a few phrases makes them look different, cool, like they just stepped out of a martial arts movie (Hubbert, 2019).

China benefits from this need of an exotic identity because it can not only attract students into the Institute and offer them lessons, summer camps and scholarships at Chinese universities, but project its core values and shape a positive image as a civilization, not just an ordinary state with demographic and economic developments. From this aspect results an internalization of the traditional moral values, for example, perseverance (毅; yi), a sense of shame, in order to prevent flaws and immoral behavior (耻; chi) or integrity (廉; lian).

On the other hand, another factor that stimulates the rate of success of the CIs is represented by the opportunities that emerge from studying Chinese language and culture. Students are inclined to search for

extra-curricular programs that have a positive impact on their resume, while still being enjoyable. Chinese classes from the Confucius Institutes offer the HSK proficiency certification, and through the organization, some diligent students can even access fully-paid scholarships in China, with the prospect of living and working in cities like Beijing or the cosmopolitan Shanghai. There are cultural contests organized by the CIs that offer participation diplomas and other awards, which can be useful for a student that needs to find that special opportunity in life (Hubbert, 2019).

In regard to the personal experience and a direct form of observing how soft power works in practice, three years of Chinese language and culture courses were filled with cultural, historical concepts and events that highlighted mainly the Sino-Romanian bilateral relations. In Romania, there are five institutes, integrated in the University of Bucharest, Transylvania University in Braşov, Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj, Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu and in the University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Grigore T. Popa” in Iaşi. In addition, the institutes have subsidiaries in smaller Romanian towns. In terms of funding, there are joint partnerships that deliver funds from the Chinese International Education Foundation¹ and the universities mentioned above. The Chinese courses are held by native speakers, providing a high level of understanding of the linguistic aspects and the administration staff is formed by Romanian citizens. As a former student, in 2019, there were surely advantages and opportunities available, consisting of summer camps, scholarships, cultural events and competitions. First of all, the Confucius Institutes in Romania attract students from all over the country with the prospect of participation in summer camps. In two weeks, the students visited China, and in 2019, the main cities that were included in the trip were Shanghai, Beijing and Zhujiyajiao, an ancient town connected by water canals and declared as a cultural heritage element by UNESCO. The necessary visas were obtained with an invitation from Hanban and Peking University, and regarding the costs, domestic transport, accommodation, food and the tickets for museum entries were all covered by the Chinese government. By showing a positive image of the ancient civilization, rich heritage and general welfare, the CIs was able to shape the students’ opinions related to the economic power of China, its safety and identity, because there was a focus on providing the idea of a satisfied nation, with a high rate of technological development and low rate of poverty. At the end of the summer camp, the students were awarded with a certificate.

Moreover, the students that obtained a B2 level of Chinese proficiency (level 4 in the HSK test), were presented with the opportunity of studying with a full scholarship at the Peking University from Beijing. The paperwork could be completed with the support of the administrative staff and after graduation, there were jobs available in Romania and in China. If a student chose not to apply to this type of scholarship, the teachers encouraged the student to apply to the Chinese language bachelor’s degree program from the University of Bucharest. The majority of peers encountered in the three years of participating in the Chinese classes attended this degree and some students are now studying in Beijing. The students that remained in Romania were offered an internship in the summer of 2023, at the Sino-Russian Studies Center, in Bucharest. In this way, the Confucius Institute promotes an active academic environment, persuading students to complete not only linguistic studies, but also cultural ones.

Additionally, high school students could participate in a variety of cultural events, with the occasion of the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year and the National Day of the People’s Republic of China (on October 1st). In the context of every event attended by one of the authors, the Sino-Romanian diplomatic relations and the countries’ friendly interactions were promoted and represented a highlight of those events. A special case is represented by an informal event from February 2020, when teachers and students gathered at one student’s home to learn how to cook *bao zi*, traditional Chinese dumplings. At the end, the group photo consisted of the attendees holding “Get Well, China” banners, as a way of showing support to the population affected initially by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the occasion of the Spring Festival, there were celebrations where local officials could learn from student’s Chinese calligraphy and traditional poems and dances were presented to the audience.

What is relevant in those cases was the discourse, oriented towards maintaining benevolent relations, presenting the economic power of China, the historical continuum of the nation and its promotion of healthy mindsets and customs. In lieu of conclusions for this study case, it can be argued that culture plays a crucial role in delivering soft power instruments for shaping perceptions regarding China, and education represents one of those tools, having the advantage of its role of forming opinions.

Promoting Cultural Exchange and Understanding

The Confucius Institutes (CIs) have emerged as a significant tool for promoting cultural exchange and understanding between China and the host countries. As Hartig (2012) notes, CIs obey and operate by the local laws of their host and respect local cultural exchanges. This approach allows the CIs to serve as a bridge for cross-cultural communication and friendship, fostering a deeper understanding of Chinese language, culture, and society among the host communities.

The main task of the CIs is to offer educational services and materials, such as Chinese language and culture, which can be accessed by everyone. As Whittaker (2013) points out, the CIs "are undoubtedly soft power initiatives directed by the Chinese government, but their primary activities are educational rather than political" (p. 106). Through the efforts of "cultural insights" to provide language instruction, cultural programs, CIs provides a deeper understanding of China, its nationals and the diversity of heritage. This educational focus is central in fostering the trustworthy and friendly relationship between the host institutions and communities.

Furthermore, the CIs can accomplish their mission of encouraging cultural exchange by adapting themselves to the local environment and needs of the host communities. As Liang (2020) argues, the CIs should "combine the teaching activities of the practice link and the production and operation activities of the enterprise, let the university teachers, the enterprise personnel and the related students participate in the related topic research" (p. 232). Working together with local businesses and organizations as well as the representatives of the community is what will significantly enhance the relevance and effect of the CIs' programs and make them a perfect response to the current needs and urges of the homeland community.

Besides, the educational center could help to spread the culture and contribute to its exploration by creating partnerships with the local schools and culture organizations. Chang Li, Mirmirani, and Ilacqua (2009) state that the CIs can serve as a platform for distributed leadership and knowledge sharing in a worldwide network. By working closely with local partners, the CIs can develop joint programs, events, and initiatives that bring together Chinese and local perspectives, fostering mutual learning and understanding.

Consequently, cultural intelligence of the CIs in ensuring the cultural exchange and mutual understanding

depends on trust building, effective engagement, adaptability, and fostering collaboration. Through observance of local habits, delivery of learning programs, and interaction with a transparent manner, CIs can act as a communication pass-through and a friendship across the world to China.

Language Education as a Bridge for Intercultural Communication

Language education serves as a bridge for intercultural communication, and the Confucius Institutes (CIs) play a significant role in this regard. Established with the aim of promoting Chinese language and culture worldwide, CIs "devote themselves to satisfying the demands of people from different countries and regions in the world who learn the Chinese language, to enhancing understanding of the Chinese language and culture by these peoples" (Hanban, 2019, as cited in Liu, 2019, p. 258). By providing a platform for language learning and cultural exchange, CIs strive to "strengthen educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other countries" and "promote the development of multiculturalism" (Hanban, 2019, as cited in Liu, 2019, p. 258).

The CIs model is unique in its approach to language education, as it involves "a cross-cultural collaboration" between Chinese and foreign partner institutions (Liu, 2019). This collaborative approach allows CIs to function as "cultural scouts that woo people around the world" (Zhou & Luk, 2016, p. 635), creating opportunities for people-to-people interactions and cultural understanding. The language courses, cultural events and academic exchanges provided by CIs tend to be part of the coming up of intercultural competences among learners and participants.

Confucius Institutes are bridges across cultures by means of language teaching, cultural activities, and a variety of events that help people in different countries learn about each other. The call for learning Chinese as a foreign language is experiencing substantial annual growth, and CIs have played an indispensable part in meeting this demand (Liu, 2019). Offering individual Chinese language education and cultural amenities to the CIs users makes global community development possible for Chinese language enthusiasts and learners.

Consequently, these institutes have the power to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and tolerance. Language education and cultural exchange are the means through which diplomats can contribute to the reduction

¹ In 2020, China decided the restructuring of Hanban and the foundation of a non-governmental organization - the Chinese International Education Foundation (consisting of universities, companies, and other social organizations), which took on the role of coordinator of the Institutes.

of stereotypes, promotion of cultural dialogue and development of an inclusive comprehension of people about Chinese culture and society. Dr. Sunny Xin Liu argues that CIs are capable of subtle promotion of the mutual understanding by giving chances for people to people contacts as well as cultural learning (Liu, 2019).

Collaborative Partnerships and Local Adaptations

Collaboration with other stakeholders and local adaptation are two core elements that must be an integral part of the well-being and success of the Confucius Institutes (CIs) from an intercultural angle. In terms of the operating model, CIs is distinctive, as it involves a tripartite collaboration between a university in China, an overseas host university and Hanban (the HQ of the CIs) (Liu, 2019). This collective way of operation enhances the participation by partners in all aspects of the start-up and running of the CIs, as well as a division of roles between the partners in the steering of the CI's decisions and activities. Thus, the host university becomes a partaker in the CIs venture showing the sustainable nature and the wider audience of the communication aspects (Zaharna, 2014).

The CIs approach brings local communities one of the greatest advantages which is the adaptability to their own settings. In contrast to the Western counterparts such as the British Council and the Alliance Française which mostly apply the standardized model throughout the participating countries, the CIs is free to adapt its activities and focus areas to be in line with the specific requirements and priorities of the home institution and the community (Liu, 2019). The ability of the institute to adapt enables it to have an increased targeting and being more effective in campaigning for Chinese language and culture, as it considers the specifications that apply to the local community.

As an instance, some CIs are committed to constructing their activities on the strengths and specializations of their partnered-institutions. The case of the CIs at the London School of Economics and Political Science comes to mind here (Hartig, 2015), where areas of cooperation were business. This approach is premised on getting the best out of the host university to provide pertinent and powerful activities. Similarly, in the CIs at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, the importance is given to traditional Chinese medicine in line with the medical focus of the host institution (Kragelund, 2014). It will be proper for CIs to align their activities with the prevailing local setting. That is when the CIs will be able to get their

intended audience and develop enduring attachments.

In particular, the interaction and mutual exchange of knowledge and resources in the CIs mode of operation makes the two universities open to each other. This exchange does not just enrich the cultural knowledge of both parties but it also creates an atmosphere for numerous academic research projects, academic exchanges, and other cooperative ventures to be undertaken (Li, 2018). The exchange and collaboration programs, on one hand, help to develop cultural relations between China and the host country, leading to increased cultural expressions and appreciation of the existing cultures.

Comparative Analysis: China versus Romania

Comparative analysis of intercultural communication in the academic sphere offers the opportunity for deepening the understanding of the process through which students interact, even when they originate from different national backgrounds. In this section of the paper, we will present a comparison between Romanian, Chinese, Polish and English academic beneficiaries, such as students involved in Erasmus programs and enrolled in the Confucius Institutes from China.

When observing behaviors and perceptions of Romanian and Chinese students, there are key points that represent both complementary elements and differences. In terms of associated aspects, both Chinese and Romanian students present strong educational values. The Confucius Institutes in Romania rely on the diligence of Romanian students eager to learn about a completely different culture and language, on their behavioral characteristics like memorizing. In this way, there is a high rate of success in learning Chinese characters and grammatical structures. The CIs observed, for their benefit, the desire of expanding one's personal experiences, thus the continuous promotion of summer camps. Competitiveness plays an essential role in the Romanian educational system, and this is one of the reasons why the CIs implemented the *Chinese Language Bridge*, a competition that tests the linguistic and literary knowledge of students. Even more, there is a strong desire of Romanian students to gather opportunities when it comes to higher education, this being the reason why fully-paid scholarships in China represent an attractive way of persuading students to enroll in Chinese classes.

On the other hand, there is still a dose of reluctance on the Romanian part of pursuing a Chinese course, mainly because of its alien culture, that does

not resemble anything familiar for Romanian students. Another difference refers to consistency, meaning that Romanian students are not appealed by the prospect of investing six years for obtaining the maximum level

of proficiency, and the sense of shame that teachers promote, as a way of motivating young people generates an opposite effect, because of the familiarity to the traditional education system.

Comparative Analysis: England versus Poland

In what follows, we will provide a comparative analysis between England and Poland, focusing on some key aspects of the Confucius Institutes like language learning, cultural exchange, cultural adaptation, academic freedom, transparency, and perception:

Aspect	England	Poland
Language Learning	Accessible Chinese language courses for students and the public	Chinese language courses offered to students and the public
Cultural Exchange	Organization of cultural events, such as Chinese New Year celebrations and art exhibitions	Events celebrating Chinese festivals alongside Polish cultural traditions
Cultural Adaptation	Events showcasing Chinese cuisine alongside traditional English afternoon tea	Efforts to blend Chinese and Polish cultural elements in events and activities
Academic Freedom	Concerns raised about the potential for Confucius Institutes to influence academic discourse and limit discussions on sensitive topics related to China	Concerns expressed about the potential for Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese government interests and influence Polish academia
Transparency	Lack of transparency regarding funding and operation	Questions raised about financial arrangements between Confucius Institutes and host universities, and potential compromise of autonomy
Perception	Mixed reception, with some praising the institutes for promoting language learning and cultural exchange, while others criticize their lack of transparency and potential to undermine academic freedom	Mixed reception, with some praising the institutes' efforts in promoting Chinese language and culture, while others raise concerns about their potential to spread Chinese government propaganda and influence Polish academia

Conclusion

To sum up, the People's Republic of China developed a soft power strategy centered around the educational field, and the Confucius Institutes represent the best example in order to prove this point. By using intercultural communication skills oriented towards maintaining bilateral exchanges with the host countries, the CIs can project a positive perception of China to its students.

In terms of communication, the ICC has shown its importance even in Confucius Institutes. Starting with promoting cultural exchange and understanding, followed by language education as a bridge for intercultural communication and ending with collaborative partnerships and local adaptations, this concept revealed insights into how CIs adapt their perspective to the intercultural domain. In addition, it is worth mentioning that Confucius Institutes adapt their intercultural perspective in concordance to their host country.

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