Soft Power of PRC, and what Beijing Has To Offer the World

In the present-day world, where the economy constitutes a single market and different political systems are constantly being unified, indirect methods of influencing the opponent – cultural-ideological and world-view instruments of influence – are becoming increasingly important. It is a battle for minds and waging wars to change and transform identity, which does not require a seizure of territory because people voluntarily take up the banner of another civilization. The main such instrument is soft power as a form of political influence, which makes it possible to accomplish the desired goals through voluntary participation, sympathy and appeal. The author of this concept, American political scientist Joseph Nye, emphasises that a country’s language and culture are its soft power, which plays a key role in international relations through affecting, directly or indirectly, world politics. It is obvious that a state seeking to play the role of the global leader or at least of one of the world’s poles is bound to be a subject and not an object of the use of soft power.

While transforming its economic gains into greater political weight, the Celestial Empire began giving attention to such foreign policy instruments as soft power. The 4th Plenum of the 16th CPC Central Committee, which was held in September 2004, set a task of spreading Chinese culture outwards in order to strengthen the overall power of China, promote Chinese culture and increase its international influence. One of the elements of the practical implementation of this programme was setting up worldwide centres called the Confucius Institutes to promote the Chinese language and culture, as well as holding the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. However, despite the country’s obvious economic successes and its victories in international politics, which are more controversial, the PRC’s position remains rather weak when it comes to promoting its culture and vision of the world order.

The problem is that, at this stage, China’s ideological arsenal does not contain so-called ‘universal values’ that it could offer the world. Without questioning the ancientness, distinctiveness and richness of Chinese culture, it should be noted that, historically, the Chinese philosophical thought has always been directed inwards, at the Chinese themselves, and not outwards. For this reason, a universal, generally accepted world-view system could not emerge, but it is very difficult to talk of global dominance when such an important component is missing. When the Chinese announced building socialism with Chinese specific characteristics, they even managed to confine to their country such international ideas as communism and socialism, which could have potentially promoted the PRC’s interests in other countries.

Many of those who disagree with the policy of the United States as the main voice expressing Western values are trying to find an alternative to them, and, as an option, they often propose China, with its “five principles of peaceful coexistence” and “Beijing Consensus”. But, interestingly, all neighbouring nations, who have first-hand knowledge of the Chinese and Chinese values, do not particularly like them and, therefore, display rather a hostile attitude to Beijing’s foreign policy in the region. And the PRC’s increasing power makes this hostility grow. Of great importance here is the fact that for centuries the Chinese have viewed their state as the centre of the world and the neighbouring countries – as vassals and, as a result, the uncompromising and rather aggressive foreign policy.
Joseph Nye claims that China's soft power is in the Chinese dream, prominent Singaporean scholar Simon Tay argues: “No one in Asia wants to live in a Chinese-dominated world. There is no Chinese dream to which people aspire.”

Chinese culture is virtually non-adaptive for other peoples. It can be adopted only by the assimilated Chinese like it happened in the case of the Manchu and the Vietnamese, 60% of whose vocabulary today account for Chinese words. Some cultural influence and borrowing of certain elements, such as the writing system, can be observed, for example, among the Japanese and the Koreans despite their deep-rooted mutual hostility. But this is probably due to the unique ability of these peoples, like the Chinese as well, to adopt everything advanced and embed it into their own culture in a harmonious manner, without being afraid to lose their own cultural identity. Besides, the Japanese and the Koreans had no alternative anyway since their communication with the outside world had always been through the Celestial Empire and experienced a Chinese impact. This was the case, for example, with Japanese Zen Buddhism, which stems from Chinese Ch'an Buddhism formed under the influence of Taoist life philosophy.

But as for the peoples of South-Eastern Asia, there was an alternative available to them and they used it willingly. The Thais, the Khmer and the Malays have always experienced the cultural influence of India despite their close relationship with China. In the countries of South-Eastern Asia, the ethnic Chinese often account for nearly a quarter of the population, for example like in the case of Malaysia, so they often have full control over the economy of these countries and play a significant role in it. At the same time, Chinese culture has no effect on the indigenous population at all and remains the domain only of the Chinese themselves, who are in this sense a pretty closed community. In Indonesia, for example, the ethnic Chinese virtually live in a parallel world, which is very different in terms of living standards. They have their own schools and universities which enrol only those who come from Chinese families. The ethnic Chinese have their own shops and entertainment centres where you won't see many Indonesians. There are mosques which were built specifically for Chinese Muslims. And all of the above does not prevent them from having control over the entire business in the country, from small shops to large companies.

It is obvious that in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia China should use its soft power most effectively because here the influence of Chinese culture is the highest. Besides, these regions have the largest proportion of Chinese Huaqiao immigrants – carriers of original culture. However, the PRC cannot use these advantages to influence the neighbouring states’ policies. It is rather the other way round: all of this plays against the Chinese leading to the rejection of both culture and policies pursued by Beijing.

The problems of the image in Asia can be justified by the historic imperial ambitions of the Celestial Empire and the neighbouring peoples’ fear to be conquered and assimilated by the Chinese, which cannot be said about Africa, where China arrived quite recently, at the beginning of the 21st century, at the height of its popularity.

Interested, in the first place, in African resources and the sales market for its products, the PRC made investments in mining and infrastructure projects and did not impose political conditions on local governments, unlike the Americans and the Europeans. The Chinese focused on cultural ties by allowing the Africans to study in the Celestial Empire on a number of training programmes at the expense of the PRC government. Besides, the Chinese opened educational institutions to train specialists, mainly in technical fields, in Africa itself. All of this was, obviously, received very positively by the governments of the “black” continent. But soon it became clear that, in the pursuit of resources, China has reduced Africa to a raw material appendage and is no different in this respect from the West, whilst the influx of cheap Chinese imports does not allow these countries to develop their own industry. Chinese investments are not coming through the local governments. They are allocated directly to the Chinese companies operating in Africa. It is being done this way supposedly to combat corruption in the field, but in fact China simply lends to its own companies. Considerable damage is caused to the PRC’s image by the influx of Chinese migrants, including illegal immigrants. The Africans are not happy that a large number of specialists are brought in from the Celestial Empire, whilst local sellers are being squeezed out by Chinese street vendors. The situation is exacerbated by the traditional desire of the Chinese to live in isolation, without maintaining close contact with the indigenous population.

Thus, having failed to offer the African states anything new and having just played the role of yet another neocoloniser, China’s popularity in Africa is dropping, and its capabilities to influence the global processes are reducing as well. Of course, no one is going to stop cooperation with Beijing, even more so because China’s terms are often more attractive than those of Europe or the US, but in the eyes of the Africans the Celestial Empire ceases to be an alternative to the West and is gradually becoming just another partner. Given the shortage of soft power, China increasingly resorts to the use of hard power to protect its interests in Africa. So far it has been done under the guise of peacekeeping missions, Beijing’s participation in which has increased substantially in recent years.
The prospects for the PRC’s use of its soft power in other regions of the world seem to be even more obscure. There is an interest in China as an investor and a trading partner in different parts of the world, but there are not many of those who are willing to emulate it, change their own identity or align their foreign policy with Beijing. In Russia, the US and Europe, they obviously know how to “separate the wheat from the chaff”, hence while developing cultural, economic and political cooperation with China, at the same time they successfully compete with it in all fields. Thus, the Celestial Empire’s cultural influence on such subjects of international relations is not really noteworthy.

Another serious obstacle to the cultural expansion and strengthening of China as a world leader is the Chinese language itself. It is unlikely that it will be able to become a language of international communication, like European languages. For example, the Chinese language is quite rarely used at regional and international conferences despite the fact that it is one of the six official languages of the UN. The presence of four tones as well as a whole range of sounds which most foreigners would find difficult to tell apart hinders learning spoken Chinese. In turn, the Chinese writing system requires of you to memorise a few thousand hieroglyphs, and that takes a lot of time. Moreover, unlike the alphabet, hieroglyphs can be soon forgotten, which has been confirmed by the Chinese themselves. All of this turns mastering Chinese into a long and laborious process. Opening the Confucius Institutes around the world and attracting international students to learn the language in China will undoubtedly increase the number of translators and sinologists but will hardly change the situation fundamentally. Today’s fascination with the Chinese language is largely a fashionable trend which is going to diminish in the future, particularly taking into consideration the pace of learning English by the Chinese themselves. In other words, the world community will not start speaking Chinese even in a remote perspective.

Of course, there is no point in denying the fact that in recent years the interest in China, its culture and language has increased around the world, including the West, but this should not be classed as an achievement of Beijing's cultural policy. This popularity is more likely due to the PRC’s economic success, the desire to attract Chinese investors, as well as due to the hopes placed in it by many of those who got disappointed in the West and are looking for ways out of the current crisis. However, the Celestial Empire hardly has anything to offer. Because of its complex language and peculiar culture, that can be carried only by the Chinese themselves and that is rejected by other peoples, China is restricted in the use of soft power, in its socio-cultural aspect, and therefore it virtually loses a very important mechanism for influencing international policies, which greatly undermines its claims to world leadership.

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