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The "Construction" of Chinese culture in a globalized world and its importance for Beijing's smart power: Notes and concepts on a narrative shift

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IN-EAST

INSTITUTE OF
EAST ASIAN STUDIES

ALESSANDRA CAPPELLETTI

The “Construction” of Chinese Culture
in a Globalized World and Its Importance
for Beijing’s Smart Power.

Notes and concepts on a narrative shift

NO. 115

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ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES**

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ALESSANDRA CAPPELLETTI

The “Construction” of Chinese Culture in a Globalized World and Its Importance for Beijing’s Smart Power

Notes and Concepts on a Narrative Shift

WORKING PAPERS ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES, NO. 115, DUISBURG 2017

Abstract

The aim of this paper¹ is to unveil the main cultural patterns adopted by the Chinese leadership to project smart power abroad, and to provide a new perspective on the claims by Chinese scholars and politicians who argue that a new paradigm in international relations is being promoted by Beijing. Principles as “inclusiveness”, “win-win cooperation”, “peaceful rise”, “harmonious world” – often raised in relation with China’s vision for a new global order and its flagship policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)² – are part of a new narrative which cannot replace, for instance, fundamental issues as a clear regulatory framework needed for enterprises willing to participate in BRI-related infrastructural and energy projects. The lack of a clear legal framework is at the moment one of the most important problem hindering foreign firms’ ability to invest and grow within the China-led initiative.³ The importance of this study rests on the necessity to find new interpretative insights to understand the main driving forces behind China’s foreign policy (often not complying with Western-set rules and practices) by assessing the role of Chinese classical culture in the projection of China’s smart power. The main cultural patterns and perspectives guiding Chinese policies abroad; the possibility that the Chinese government is introducing a narrative shift in global policy practices; the surfacing of a possible new way for international relations consistently based on an effort to improve international relations and enhance the state of world affairs, or maybe simply of a strategic scheme meant to avoid creating a clearer framework which could guarantee access to the initiative to all interested parts, at the same time limiting Beijing’s power to arbitrarily choose partners and directions, will all be objects of reflection.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, soft power, smart power, Chinese politics, knowledge construction, cultural narratives, identity

1 I would like to thank the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre of Global Cooperation Research and the Institute of East Asian Studies IN EAST at the University of Duisburg-Essen for supporting and funding my research project. I further want to express my gratitude to Liu Tao, Flemming Christiansen, Beate Löffler, Martin Wolf, Rainer Baumann, Gerardo Bracho, for their advice and suggestions on the paper, as well as to the KHK/GCR21 Research Colloquium participants for their comments on an early version of the paper.

2 The original name of the initiative was One Belt One Road (OBOR), as translation of the Chinese *yidaiyilu* 一带一路. Because of the excessive emphasis on the word “one” and of the risk for partnering countries to infer that there is only one maritime route and a single land belt, the Central Translation and Compilation Bureau of the People’s Republic of China recently set the official English translation of *yidaiyilu* as Belt and Road Initiative. The word “initiative” has been admitted into the official acronym – instead of “strategy” – in order to stress the openness of the major plan, and to avoid criticisms over “China-centred institution building” which have been recently appearing in different media and analysis.

3 During the round-table “China’s Belt & Road Initiative and EU-China Relations” held on the 20th October 2016 at European Parliament in Brussels (organised by the EU-China Research Centre and the Baillet Latour Chair of EU-China Relations), it was underlined the difficulty of European enterprises to participate in the BRI projects due to a lack of transparency in the legal framework regulating the participation of firms into the initiative.

1 INTRODUCTION

Chinese scholars and politicians argue that Beijing's foreign policy is conducted following principles which are substantially different from those adopted by Western countries. Concepts such as "inclusiveness", "harmonious world", "win-win cooperation", "peaceful rise" are often included in the methodological and philosophical principles of China's foreign policy, in this way outlining a consistently paradigmatic difference from the Western normative stance based on democratic values, human rights and the power of civil society. This possible diversion from what we know as world policy narratives is, according to Chinese scholars, embodied in the BRI, the major foreign policy scheme launched by the Chinese government in 2013 and meant to affirm China as an inclusive superpower in the global arena. In the words of Chinese scholars and analysts, the BRI is not a project, but a method, an initiative, allegedly offering a distinctly Chinese way of looking at global governance and cooperation. In the words of the CASS⁴ scholar Zhang Yunling: "it is not only about routes drawn on a map, but also about suggesting a direction and covering neighboring regions." – "The version of globalization led by the East and the West are different," said Ren Jingjing, another expert at CASS – "The West tends to be more aggressive, while the East emphasizes inclusiveness. That makes homogeneity one of the key factors in cooperation, but we are trying to show that heterogeneity does not necessarily get in the way of cooperation."⁵

The rationale for this study lies on the assumption that China's smart power is currently, together with economic might, a major factor of the rise of China and is increasingly telling in terms of China's understanding of foreign policy dynamics in a global perspective. In other words,

the analysis of China's smart power is one of the keys we can use to better understand the rise of China in the international arena and the way adopted by China to present itself to the world. The main principles it rests on are developed from Chinese classical thought.

The rise of China as an economic power in modern history has a background of slightly more than three decades. Within this relatively short time period, from 1981 to the year 2000, out of nearly one billion people taken out of extreme poverty in the world, 680 million were in China.⁶ Per capita incomes increased fivefold between 1990 and 2000, from 200 to 1000 USD. Between 2000 and 2010, they raised by the same rate from 1000 to 5000 USD⁷, entitling China to enter the ranks of middle-income countries. "Between 1990 and 2005, China's progress accounted for more than three-quarters of global poverty reduction – I quote from *The Guardian*⁸ – and is the reason why the world reached the UN millennium development goal of halving extreme poverty. This incredible success was delivered by a combination of a rapidly expanding labour market, driven by a protracted period of economic growth, and a series of government transfers such as urban subsidies, as well as the introduction of a rural pension." At the end of February 2017 the Federal Statistics Office in Berlin announced that in 2016 China became, for the first time, Germany's most important trading partner, replacing the United States, which fell back to the third place behind France.⁹ These successes are only partially matched by the status and image that China currently enjoys on a global level: while the size and performance of China's econ-

4 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

5 *People's Daily Online* (April 12, 2017).

6 *The Economist* (1st June, 2013).

7 Elisabeth Stuart, *The Guardian* (19th August, 2015).

8 *ibidem*.

9 Catharine Paddock, *Market Business News* (4th March, 2017).

omy make Beijing a respected partner in terms of trade and business – both at the institutional and corporate level – and also entitles the Middle Kingdom¹⁰ to be an important member of transnational and multilateral institutions¹¹ with full rights, distrust and cautiousness still characterise the attitude of many governments, institutions and other actors towards the Chinese political system as well as the “Chinese characteristics” often referred to by the Chinese leadership.¹²

The very meaning of “Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese* 中国特色) is often perceived, outside of China, as an excuse not to abide by well-rooted principles and well-accepted standards regulating the interactions among powers, as well as in terms of domestic governance. From the Chinese perspective¹³, China is special and represents an exception. As an example, we can consider the cautiousness of Chinese leaders in being named as the next global leaders, due to the easy association of the concept of “global leadership” to the “US leadership”.¹⁴ Official statements often repeat and overemphasise the concept of “non-interference” in other

countries’ affairs, Prof. Xue Qingguo’s statement being an example: “China does not have historical burdens of aggression, colonialism or interference in Arab countries as several other Western powers have. (...) The gross interference in regional affairs, and imposing Western style of democracy by force, has been proved to be a failure in the Middle East.”¹⁵

The argument of China’s specificity and uniqueness, as well as of an allegedly alternative path introduced in international relations, is indeed highly controversial and still needs to be better elaborated and proved by the Chinese leadership.¹⁶ Up to now, we have seen Beijing adopting an ambiguous attitude towards the US approach, underlining its negative outcomes but at the same time emulating it from time to time.¹⁷ In the 90’s the authors of a bestseller popular in China titled *Zhongguo keyi shuo bu* 中国可以说“不” (1996), meaning “China can say No”, argued that China should and could say “no” to a general Western path, but the whole issue is still object of speculations and debates. The Chinese leadership is in search of new tools to be convincing, to reshape its image and the “brand” of the country in front of the international audience, to better explicate – via new narratives – principles and practices allegedly represent-

10 Other name for China, in Chinese *Zhongguo* 中国, the “country lying in the middle”.

11 Among the others, WTO (World Trade Organisation), SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), all the UN agencies, BRICS, East Asia Summit (EAS), Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Wide Fund (WWF), World Health Organisation (WHO), World Bank (WB), Group of Twenty (G20).

12 Concepts as “socialism with Chinese characteristics” are often included in public statements made by the Chinese leaders.

13 With Chinese perspective here I mean points of view which emerge from Chinese works, interviews and talks with Chinese intellectuals and scholars.

14 The Chinese leadership intends to present and establish itself according to principles and policies which differ substantially from those of the US, considered normatively wrong and operationally unsuccessful. Interview with Prof. Si Fuzhen from Beijing Language and Culture University, February 24th, 2017, Prague.

15 These sentences, pronounced during the conference on Chinese cultural diplomacy held in Prague on the 23rd and 24th of February 2017 by Prof. Xue Qingguo, Director of the Shaikh Zayed Centre for Arabic and Islamic Studies at the School of Arabic Studies of Beijing Foreign Studies University, explicate the different approach adopted by China in the Middle East. A “silk logic” instead of the “iron and fire” logic is allegedly being adopted by Beijing. The “silk logic” has a clear connection to the major foreign policy initiative of the Chinese government BRI, also called New Silk Road initiative.

16 The strong stance in demarcating a difference might be a way to accept the relevance of the other position in question. I thank you Beate Löffler for drawing my attention in this direction.

17 For an exhaustive work on China-US relations from the XIX century to the 1990s see Hsu (1999).

ing an alternative way of development and international cooperation. They need and want to be “reliable”¹⁸.

Chinese leaders, officials and bureaucrats, as well as other actors in China and abroad, are well aware of the challenges the country has to face within the international community. Image problems related to human rights issues (including freedom of speech and press freedom), an authoritarian political system, the perception of an unfair competition from China in terms of trade and economic dynamics¹⁹, and the environmental crisis, together with fundamental misunderstandings due to scarce or biased knowledge about China in the West, all are problems Beijing needs to tackle with. Important efforts are being made and substantial budgets allocated in the direction of reaching the difficult objectives of transforming the country's economic system as well as the appropriate international standing that China thinks it now deserves.

What is important to recognize is that Chinese power projection abroad is not conducted anymore by Party bureaucrats with no knowledge of the foreign languages and contexts they work in, nor by ideologically-driven old-fashioned officials, but by a multiple and increasingly diverse network of actors projecting more and more sophisticated messages and new sets of Chinese cultural principles, partnering with new actors, adopting new communication channels and continuously adjusting to local contexts. This approach is highly pragmatic. It does not mean that the state downsizes its role and that we shall think about a more relevant position of NGOs and non-state actors. My assumption is that the state redefines its role and reshapes its participation in activities of cultural projection abroad by re-scaling its involvement and communicating in a subtler, or smarter, way.

2 SMART AND GENEROUS: PATTERNS OF CHINA'S POWER PROJECTION

In a context where hard and soft power need to be combined,²⁰ and “power increasingly rests on a nation's capacity to create and manipulate knowledge and information”,²¹ I would remind

the definition of smart power expressed by the former US Secretary of State Clinton in 2009 during her confirmation hearings:

“America cannot solve the most pressing problems on our own, and the world cannot solve them without America ... We must use what has been called ‘smart power’, the full range of tools at our disposal.”²²

Patterns of Chinese smart power emerge from power projection policies and activities implemented by Chinese actors, from the related literature and interviews with Chinese diplomats and scholars. Here some of its main pillars:

18 On the concept of “reliability” in international relations, see Gary Rawnsley (2016). From a Western perspective, the issues of human rights and individual freedoms are main factors of non-reliability.

19 Mainly due to overcapacity and the highly subsidised Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), and to various kinds of fiscal facilitations accorded to Chinese companies by the Chinese government. One of the most controversial issue is the granting of the Market Economy Status (MES) to China, which is currently debated in the EU institutions. Shawn Donnan, Lucy Hornby, Arthur Beesley, *Financial Times* (December 12th, 2016).

20 Nye (2009 and 2013).

21 Wilson (2008): 111–112.

22 Quoted in Nye (2009): 160.

- 1 lack of normative stance in foreign policy in favour of a strategic vision;
- 2 possible employment of hard power, if needed;
- 3 focus on the projection of selected cultural discourses and patterns aimed at enjoying and amazing the audiences, not necessarily for emulation;
- 4 adoption of new communication channels;
- 5 networking and relying on multiple platforms of actors;
- 6 leaving a certain autonomy to local actors to work with an independent network both in local contexts and within China itself, for the sake of the success of power projection policies;
- 7 partnering with local media outlets, not necessarily ideologically aligned;
- 8 openness, from the side of Chinese governmental officials, to proposals and new initiatives;²³
- 9 moderate personal exposure of Chinese diplomats and government officials in charge of reshaping China’s image abroad, among local communities, via multiple channels;
- 10 in some occasions, focus on the strong points of the Chinese socio-political and economic system, and problematization of the weak points. Multiple and sensitive aspects of Chinese society and politics are not anymore hidden;
- 11 involvement of academics, intellectuals, artists and other outstanding and authoritative individuals in the target countries, in conferences, events and activities organised and sponsored by Chinese actors;
- 12 adoption of an interactive digital diplomacy;
- 13 providing funding and sponsorships for cultural activities, making them not directly ascribable to the Chinese government;
- 14 dealing with international partners without pointing at or mentioning their weaknesses, but focusing on their strengths and comparative advantages;
- 15 accurate choice of concepts in foreign policy narratives: overemphasising of “harmonious rise”, “peaceful rise”, “win-win cooperation”, “collaboration”, “comparative advantage”, “mutual benefit”;
- 16 Chinese economists tend to associate China’s smart power to the “innovation-driven development” and to the “Made in China 2025” strategy;
- 17 investing and providing aid not on the basis of an ideological take, but as an answer to local peoples’ needs and in a win-win perspective.

Zhao Qijin (2015) argues that the concept has always been expressed in Chinese classical thought, especially in the book *The Art of War* – considered a masterpiece of strategic thinking – by the V century b.C. classical Chinese philosopher Sunzi²⁴. Johnston (1998) holds the same argument, claiming – on the basis of an erudite and in-depth textual analysis – that the image of the Chinese empire as a benevolent and peaceful one is more a myth than a reality, this being confirmed by the strategic culture adopted

23 This point is masterfully explained in the short comment by Brown (2017).

24 At the time China was a patchwork of small realms at war among themselves. The unification by the king of the state of Qin, who defeated all the rivals and became the first emperor of China, occurred in 221 b.C.

across history by the imperial courts in power, which did not exclude the adoption of hard power. While *smart power* has always been important, nevertheless, there has never been a specific terminology for the definition of this concept in Chinese language.

Just to provide an example, it is interesting to look at the historical relationship between China and its Central Asian neighbours: the westernmost border region of China, today's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, during the Han dynasty²⁵ was called Xi Yu (Western regions) and regarded as a buffer zone against the attacks of nomadic tribes from beyond the Great Wall. However, the imperial government has always been interested in the control of the area for fostering trade relations with the outlying Central Asian kingdoms and today's independent states, mainly by "civilising" the turbulent nomadic tribes and extending the imperial political influence over them. Central Asian chiefs and trading delegations were encouraged to visit China and given costly presents, and even subsidies, in return for their gifts for the Chinese emperor. This was a deliberate strategy aimed at bringing the outlying border states in the ambit of "tributary relations" with imperial China. The Ming²⁶ court consistently followed this policy by setting up a separate Board of Rites to supervise the conduct of relations with the Central Asian states. The Qing court²⁷ perfected this system by establishing a full-fledged bureau of Colonial Affairs called *Lifan Yuan* to look after the affairs of the Central Asian dependencies of Xinjiang, Mongolia and Tibet.²⁸ The emergence of a powerful Dzungar Khanate in the area in the XVII century presented an immediate threat to the Chinese imperial interests in Central Asia. At that point

the Qing court considered the conquest of Xinjiang as a prerequisite for safeguarding its position in Central Asia. Both military and diplomatic means were employed to ensure the occupation of the area. Whereas all elements of resistance from the Dzungars and Muslims of Xinjiang were crushed by resorting to military means, the Qing policies were also aimed at playing up inter- and intra-ethnic discord among various groups, with the idea of preventing the formation of any united front against the Qing. As a result, the Chinese emperor Qianlong proudly listed the success of the military campaign in Xinjiang (1755–1759) as one of his "ten perfect achievements".²⁹

A balanced share of soft and hard power, together with a long-term political vision, was the key imperial strategy shaping the relationship between China and the Central Asian kingdoms in the past. While this approach and practices to handle neighbouring countries cannot be considered new in history, we can say that China institutionalised it at a very early stage.

It is at least since the years 2000s that the debate on Chinese smart power within China shifted from the field of classical studies³⁰ to that of contemporary Chinese foreign policy.³¹ The core issues discussed among Chinese scholars and analysts are mainly: the integration of soft with hard power to face challenges difficult to tackle with only with the adoption of soft or hard power, the protection of Chinese interests abroad, the meaning of the BRI in the context of China's smart power and the importance of smart power

25 First imperial dynasty (221–206 b.C.), under the first emperor Qin Shi Huangdi.

26 1368–1644 AD.

27 1644–1911 AD.

28 Schorkowitz, Ning (2016) is a new book focused on this administrative system.

29 Zhuang Jifa (1997): 99–105.

30 The efforts were mainly addressed at identifying the main standpoints of Chinese power strategy towards the neighbouring countries during the imperial times and of Chinese power projection abroad in our times by relying basically on the classical literature.

31 Chu, Huang (2016); Jia Fuqiang (2010); Xu Zhengzhong, Du Hongwei (2015); Yang Bin, Zhang Faying, Yang Xiaoyu (2013); Zhou Qian (2011); Liu Jun (2015); Sui Binbin (2012); Chu Yin, Feng Ruogu (2015); Song Haiyang (2010); Zheng Xiaojun (2009); Zhang Xiang (2012).

for the implementation of the BRI, the integration of culture in political and institutional discourses, the adoption of culture in projecting Chinese power abroad, and the conception of new forms of communication and dissemination of cultural messages. Interesting enough, in Chu, Huang (2016) the authors claim that China should learn from the experiences of other countries’ smart power in order to solve the problems which could possibly hinder the implementation of the BRI (the expression *ta shan zhi shi, keyi zhi yu* 他山之石，可以致玉 is used, meaning “stones from other hills may be useful to polish the jade of this one” – i.e. “learning from others’ faults may be useful to correct our own”). This denotes a clear awareness of the challenges possibly hindering China’s strategic plan, but at the same time a certain humbleness is expressed in willing to learn from the others’ experience.

Western authors recognize the importance of China’s smart power:

“In contrast, leaders in other countries have been more sophisticated in their use of the instruments of power. Though not without significant flaws, the leadership of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), for example, has deployed power resources strategically. The individual policy choices made by President Hu Jintao and his advisors have reflected a sophisticated analysis of the world as it is; and they have deployed a balanced, integrated array of instruments to achieve their narrow political goals as well as to advance their own national purposes. Hu’s decisions to develop and consistently pursue a doctrine of ‘China’s Peaceful Rise’ is a clear counterpoint to President George W. Bush’s approach, which has focused largely on the need to maintain military superiority. Yet both approaches constitute clear examples of policy calculations made by a powerful country’s leadership that is relatively independent and not inevitably shaped by structural factors. The leadership of the PRC made conscious decisions to pursue this smarter course. It could have pursued a strategy of ‘China’s Militant

Rise’. Hu’s decisions to develop and consistently pursue a doctrine of ‘China’s Peaceful Rise’ is a clear counterpoint to President George W. Bush’s approach. It could have been diplomatically dysfunctional in its treatment of African nations and clumsy in its pursuit of oil and mineral resources; instead, it created what Josh Kurlantzick (2007) called a multifaceted ‘charm campaign’ offering African leaders foreign assistance and high-level attention. Likewise, it could have ignored Europe and relied mostly on hard power across the straits of Taiwan. While the charm offensive of the PRC has yielded mixed results, it was based on a sophisticated appreciation for the full range of instruments of national power.”³²

Significantly enough, when asked about the meaning of the word “peaceful” in the “peaceful rise” concept often adopted by the Chinese leadership – especially in the context of a rising China which will need to protect its economic interests and citizens around the globe eventually by making use of hard power³³ – Prof. Zhang Lihua³⁴ answered that a balanced use of soft and hard power will be exercised, in her words: “50 % hard power and 50 % soft power will be employed.” It is interesting to note that no attempt has been made to avoid the question or hide in some ways the possible military implications of China’s rise. The traditional reluctance from

32 Wilson (2008): 111–112.

33 The National People’s Congress announced that in 2016 there was an increase of 7.6 % in defence expenditure over the previous year, the first single digit addition since 2010, surprising analysts and China watchers, and provoking military analysts to raise their voice on the need to resume double-digit increases in defence spending, to meet the more and more frequent challenges facing the nation’s military at home and abroad.

34 Zhang Lihua, Professor at the Institute of International Relations of Qinghua University in Beijing, is well-known for being a particularly strong advocate of the Party line and an expert of Chinese Cultural Diplomacy. This is an excerpt from her speech given in February 2017, Prague.

the side of the Chinese leadership to admit that hard power would be eventually pursued can be explained with the will to make the international partners and community distinguish the US from China's approach, and to avoid any possible potential association or connection – real or perceived – between the two powers.

Chinese culture is thus projected abroad through a multi-centric infrastructure³⁵: while state actors avail themselves of a broad network of organised venues and *loci* from where messages on Chinese culture are projected, following a not casual geography but the economic and political interests of the Chinese Party-state, foreign non-state actors follow a less identifiable pattern since they are mainly located where there is either a local consolidated cultural and economic interest for China or a scholarly interest. Chinese non-state actors follow both patterns, the more strategic as well as the casual ones³⁶. Foreign non-state actors related to Chinese culture are located instead in those places where there is a cultural or business interest towards China, but not necessarily where China has interests. To be synthetic we can say that this geography of actors is mainly distributed along economic, political and cultural lines following a multi-centric pattern, and at a first sight the idea could be that what is at the centre is reproduced abroad. The expression "multi-centric" fits well into the context of the polycentric mode of governance as it is explained by Scholte (2008). Moreover, it has a connection with the history of China and the tributary system.³⁷ The main idea and vision

the Chinese imperial dynasties was to project abroad what was at the centre, an ancient concept that from a Western perspective has been called Sinocentrism, in order to gain respect and influence in foreign lands. There are of course major changes in the current vision of the Chinese leadership, the main one being the idea of projecting what can be attractive abroad by re-scaling the role of the State³⁸ and granting flexibility in those multiple locations.

This cultural construction is indeed flexible because Chinese state actors follow the main guidelines from Beijing but at the same time conceive and adjust their policies according to the local context, culture and expectations. For instance in Muslim countries in Central Asia there are often events of Chinese culture which show Uyghur culture³⁹, in order to emphasise the similarities between China and the local contexts. This has up to now been assessed in Iran and Pakistan⁴⁰. At the same time, a well-planned activity of networking is pursued in order to receive suggestions and hints from local actors and better conceive the cultural policies to implement at the local level. This approach makes the projection of Chinese culture abroad a flexible and always re-negotiated process, which changes responding to the expectations of the officials in charge as well as of the local population. This flexible approach is less evident with Chinese non-state actors, which do not need to conduct an action of image reshaping, since they are not directly associated to the Chinese government, they do not need to be aligned and follow their own agenda. The same can be said for foreign actors.

35 An article on this specific topic will be published by the author in the coming months.

36 We can find schools of Chinese language or martial arts in locations where there is not any economic interest towards China and from the side of China, but simply where local schools or families want to include Chinese language in the curriculum or where martial arts are particularly popular.

37 Hevia (1995) on the Macartney embassy and the tributary system.

38 See the related following paragraph.

39 A Turkic Muslim national minority of 11 million people in China, living predominantly in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

40 Xinhua (24th August 2016), in the case of Pakistan, pictures of related events are available online in the websites of the Chinese Embassy and of the various "China-Pakistan" friendship associations.

Data and figures show an increase of foreign students who enroll in Chinese universities and of foreign tourists in China; interest in Chinese culture and language is growing all over the world; looking for job opportunities in China is

not anymore common only among China experts. Increased international attention is being paid to what China does, but empirical research is needed when we come to the point of assessing the impact, or effect, of China’s smart power.

3 THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE CULTURE BETWEEN PARTY-STATE LINE AND FOREIGN RECOGNITION

Chinese notions of culture vary substantially according to the historical period, the socio-political context and the area taken into consideration. Moreover, culture in China – in Chinese *wenhua* 文化, literally “the process of civilization”, with a very dynamic connotation⁴¹ – has a particular political valence, since it is conceived and meant to reflect the vision of the leadership in power. Every change of leadership entails a correspondent renegotiation and redefinition of the national cultural patterns among the involved actors. Culture plays an important role in power relations, both at the domestic and global level, and Chinese cultural policies abroad have always been tools of power projection for the imperial dynasties (from 211 b.C. to 1911 AD).⁴² Currently the Chinese leadership is committed to define a proper strategy to conceive and propose a shared cultural corpus, with the intention of doing justice to the current status of China in the international arena. What it could be a coherent and established concept of Chinese “culture” is still matter of debate and controversies in China, and it is connected to issues as “nationality”, “identity” and “self-identification”, “ethnic minorities” and “Party ideology”, some of them loaded with a still-not-defined and sensitive meaning, thus not easy to be debated outside

academic circles.⁴³ Something which we need to consider when exploring Chinese culture is the Cultural Revolution⁴⁴, a movement which questioned and in some cases violently attacked the Chinese classical traditions, taken as an emblem of conservative ideas and feudalism. Entire fields of study were cancelled from the curricula, such as sociology and classical Chinese culture, up to the point that it is still difficult in today’s China to find a scholar, for example, of the classical thinker Zhuangzi. The Cultural Revolution is still a trauma at a collective and individual level for Chinese people, and it conveys even much more meaning to the dimension of “construction” of Chinese culture today. While many concepts are still buried beyond public awareness⁴⁵, at least

41 For an overall discussion of the multiple meanings of the concept of “Chinese culture” across history, see Huang, Rösen (2015).

42 An outstanding book on Chinese strategic culture is Johnston A.I. (1998).

43 The Chinese leadership has always defined China as a “multinational country” (*duo minzu guojia* 多民族国家), but problems still remain in finding a correct translation into English of the concept of *minzu*, up to now rendered as “nation”. The debate is not yet public in China but lively in academic circles: this concept and the advisability to define China not anymore as a “multinational country” but as a “national country” with a “national identity” (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) are still questions related to historical interpretations and ideology. An historical overview and the main points at stake in this ongoing debate can be read in Zhang Haiyang (1996) and Tønnesson and Antlöv (1996).

44 1966–1976, sociopolitical movement launched by Mao Zedong with the declared aim to subvert the status quo based on conservative cultural concepts in order to prepare the emergence of new ideas and to create a new society.

45 For instance, the Taoist principles of individual expression and freedom of choice.

since the years 2000's a process of collective recovery of Chinese cultural patterns is ongoing.

The expression "Chinese culture" can be considered as an umbrella covering and collecting under itself the multiple expressions and manifestations of the Chinese civilization: practices, expressions, articulations and assertions of the Chinese cultural sphere, they "reveal" or "represent" or "make the individuals and public catch" its multiplicity of aspects. At the same time, the "representations" conveyed by Chinese actors (state and non-state) – outcome of a selection (mediation, purification and classification) process – provide us with the interpretation of Chinese cultural practices and expressions and with the accepted concept of "Chinese culture". Due to the current globalised context, the diffusion of technological devices and digital communication, as well as of global mobility, recovering a "Chinese culture" in national terms is increasingly difficult.

The definition of Chinese culture has always been among the priorities of the Chinese leaderships (together with political organization and economic modernization), not as a merely doctrinal orthodoxy, but mainly for the necessity of a "national reconstruction" which could eventually lead China to become a "rich and strong" country (*fuyang guojia* 富强国家)⁴⁶. This notwithstanding, it is the current government of President Xi Jinping, known for its centralization efforts, that cultural projection abroad jumped at the top of the Chinese leadership political agenda, proba-

bly riding the wave of the increasing global unpopularity of the US.

The process of construction of a Chinese cultural corpus to be projected abroad is now ongoing, but who's culture is it going to be? Who are the actors entrusted with the authority and the legitimacy of selecting, conceiving and communicating those cultural patterns for foreign audiences' consumption? Which Chinese cultural assets will represent the very basis of this construction and which criteria will be followed for the selection?

The "Suggestions"

On the 25th of January 2017 the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council General Office published the document "Suggestions on the implementation of a process of dissemination and development of the outstanding traditional Chinese culture" (*Guanyu shishi Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua chuancheng fazhan gongcheng de yijian* 关于实施中华优秀传统文化传承发展工程的意见, from now on: "Suggestions"). The overall concept behind this document is the definition of Chinese culture and of the channels for its promotion abroad. A top-down process of selection of those cultural values and patterns which are considered as outstanding, attractive and politically viable by the Chinese leadership for the dissemination abroad is envisioned. The "Suggestions" have an important political meaning since they set the agenda for the projection of Chinese culture abroad, something which is not merely a formal and useless government document, but a pragmatic roadmap that all the related departments and actors will need to follow with a various degree of adherence. The "basket" from which the concepts are selected is Chinese traditional culture, which includes classical, modern and pop culture, folklore, gastronomy as well as political culture. The guidelines are then transmitted to those Chinese officials and actors located in the target countries, who will be themselves engaged into re-selecting – through a mediation and purification process – a set of cultural patterns out of those proposed

46 Especially since the end of the XIX century Chinese philosophers and intellectuals emphasised the need to win underdevelopment, to delete the traces of the foreign dominations, to bring China into the ranks of the world great economic powers, and to eventually achieve the unavoidable social development. It has always been a practice since the Late Qing Reform (1901–1911) for all the new Chinese leaderships – political colour or faction notwithstanding – to endorse the predecessors' socio-political and cultural programs and try with every means possible to succeed where the others had failed.

from the top, according both to their personal and collective understanding and to the foreign local context, conditions and characteristics. The Chinese culture foreign audiences will be exposed to is thus a set of cultural concepts and patterns emerging from three levels: a team of Party cadres, bureaucrats and intellectuals in Beijing carry on the first selection (issuing guidelines), while the second is conducted by another team of Chinese officials in the target country⁴⁷. The first selection process by state actors occurs at the tops ranks of the leadership on the basis of: 1) Party directives and ideology; 2) education; 3) personal interests and history; 4) international situation and foreign policy goals. The second process is mainly occurring locally on the same lines, the only difference being the local socio-political context as a factor able to shape the concepts via different channels. There is also a third selection which is performed by local actors on the basis of their: 1) perception of Chinese culture; 2) education and personal interests; 3) personal history; 4) social influences; 5) political ideology.

In the case of non-state actors, the Chinese ones still attach a certain importance to State ideology, depending on personal histories⁴⁸, while the local actors follow their perception of Chinese culture and politics, education and local social conditions. The final taxonomy of cultural patterns plays indeed a big role in the general understanding of a certain cultural sphere.

Both the Beijing and local team collectively recognise and accept those contents as politically viable and attractive, definitely suitable to be spread among a foreign audience. Thirdly, the foreign audience members rely on their own individual dimensions, mediating and selecting the cultural information received, to frame them

into an individual understanding. The tension between the collectively defined and accepted values and the individually understood patterns is always present at every stage of the process, and it contributes to the construction of the accepted body of Chinese cultural concepts disseminated at the local level, as well as to the collective understanding of what is perceived as Chinese culture by foreign audiences.

These different but interconnected stages and levels of mediations and selections produce an essentialised, standardised and politically correct concept of Chinese culture, which is at the end collectively accepted, canonised and disseminated.

The importance of Chinese culture for the Chinese power projection abroad is underlined since the first sentences of the “Suggestions”:

“Culture constitutes the blood vessels of the people; it is the very homeland of their spirit.⁴⁹ Cultural self-confidence is a fundamental strength, deep-rooted and particularly long-standing. Chinese culture entails unique and sophisticated concepts, adding self-confidence and proudness to the spiritual inner depths of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation. In the direction of building a *powerful country with a socialist culture*, of enhancing the *cultural soft power* of the nation, as well as carrying on the great revival of the Chinese nation and of the Chinese dream, we need to act with timeliness by following these guidelines, in order to develop and disseminate the *outstanding Chinese traditional culture*.”⁵⁰

Statements about Chinese culture have always been careful and thoughtful, since the comparison with the technologically-advanced West

47 Assessed during interviews with Chinese diplomats on Chinese cultural policies abroad, January 2017.

48 It can be a history of opposition, compliance or either indifference, depending on the identity of the actors.

49 A very similar statement to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s “Cultural Diplomacy reveals the soul of the nation”.

50 Emphasis is mine.

and the lack of a systematization of cultural patterns have always been considered problematic. This turn in government discourse needs to be seen in the context of China's new international standing. The concept of "Chinese traditional culture" occurs repeatedly, connected to the very "spirit" of the Chinese nation and also to the socialist culture, and it specifically includes Confucian and Taoist principles. I quote here part of a speech by Prof. Zhang Lihua on the topic of Chinese cultural diplomacy:

"The 11th of October, 2005, in occasion of the summit for the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations, former President Hu Jintao came out with the thought of building a world of harmony. In June 2015, the Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the "Construction of a community of human beings with shared destiny" and the "realization of peace and harmony in the world". These ideas come from the Confucian classic "Book of Rites", where we read: "The future world will be open and in universal harmony" (天下为公，世界大同). The ideal society of the "harmony thought" is a harmonious society and a harmonious world in the future. In order to realize this ideal, the values of harmony entail that all the countries should respect each other, cooperate for mutual benefits and exist and prosper together. "One World One Dream" was the central theme of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games; it represented a common desire for human beings to pursue peace and friendship. In 2010, the theme of Shanghai World Expo was "Better City, Better Life". In 2016, the theme of the G20 summit in Hangzhou was "Towards an innovative, invigorated, interconnected and inclusive world economy" (构建创新、活力、联动、包容的世界经济). All these themes express the desire of "building a world of harmony" and a "community of human beings with shared destiny".

Zhang Lihua, all over her speech, stressed the inclusion of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist concepts in Chinese cultural diplomacy, concepts that contain a strong symbolic meaning in Chi-

na and also abroad, a blending that shall not be read as contradictory since the Aristotelian logic does not apply in the Chinese context.⁵¹

"Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping claimed and claim" – continues Zhang Lihua – "to believe in Marxism, but they all live or lived in the Chinese cultural humus and are or were deeply affected by Chinese traditional cultural values and ways of thinking. Chinese cultural diplomacy is thus deeply affected by Chinese traditional cultural values. Since the 21st century, cultural diplomacy has become one of the three pillars of China's diplomacy, it is as important as economic diplomacy and political diplomacy in China's foreign relations, and has become an important part of China's soft power. What cultural values reach out to the world through China's cultural diplomacy? Harmony, peace, mutual benefit, cooperation and win-win, these cultural values from Chinese traditional cultural values – harmony, benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, wisdom, faithfulness, with harmony as the core."

In the "Suggestions", the symbolic dimension of cultural concepts is stressed, while the Chinese nation is depicted as a "culturally fertile land in which socialism with Chinese characteristics established its basis", where an extraordinary development could take place at a fast pace, and where Chinese traditional culture flourished as a source of unique knowledge and wisdom. The fast economic development of contemporary China is framed into an historical context of continuity and development of the Chinese civilization, whose role in the progress of human civilization is eventually fully recognized. The only actor, entitled, legitimated and responsible to transmit and promote the *Chinese outstanding traditional culture* is identified as the Chinese Communist Party, identified as the one

51 Yuan (2000) provides an in-depth overview on the reception of Aristotelian Logic in Chinese thinking.

who “builds” (*jianshe zhe* 建设者) it. The expression of “building a culture” fits perfectly into the explained process of mediation, selection and purification/classification. In the “Suggestions” Xi Jinping, who is named with the term “comrade” (*tongzhi* 同志), emerges as the one who encourages every Party committee and government department “to take the initiative to promote the transmission and development of the *outstanding traditional Chinese culture* even more consciously and spontaneously than before, launching a series of initiatives characterised by innovation and efficiency, in the direction of powerfully strengthening the *cohesion, influence and creativity of the outstanding Chinese culture*”. This narrative is in line with Chinese historical tradition according to which every new dynasty which came into power used to argue that all the good and efficient policies started at the very moment of the leadership change.

The external factor generating the necessity to speed up the process of creation and transmission of a cultural corpus is mentioned when the “profound transformations in the economy and society of China, the increasing openness towards the outside world, as well as the rapid development of internet technology and new media” are put into focus. There is thus the need to make the world know Chinese culture at a deeper level, at the same time strengthening the self-awareness and self-confidence about Chinese culture domestically. Another urgent need mentioned is digging deeply “into the meaningful contents of the *Chinese outstanding traditional culture*”, to have more political support and to put all the efforts in the realization (*goujian* 构建) of a system of development and transmission of the Chinese cultural traditions. Interesting enough is the use of the term *goujian*, meaning the construction of something abstract, in relation with the need of a system of development and transmission of cultural messages.⁵²

52 The “construction” paradigm helps us understanding what is the idea of China on digital diplomacy, see the related paragraph in this text.

The connection between the cultural messages meant to be spread abroad and the domestic political situation is drawn when the development and dissemination of Chinese culture is linked to the strategic task (*zhanlue renwu* 战略任务) of building a strong country with a socialist culture. The new concept of “protecting the country’s cultural security” (*weihu guojia wenhua anquan* 维护国家文化安全) is introduced, while “strengthening the national cultural soft power” (*zengqiang guojia wenhua ruanshili* 增强国家文化软实力) is set as a goal. Culture is also connected to questions as “national governance” (*guojia zhili* 国家治理) and “modernization of governance capabilities” (*zhili nengli xiandaihua* 治理能力现代化).

Concepts like “to create the new splendour of Chinese culture” (*chuangzao Zhonghua wenhua xin huihuang* 创造中华文化新辉煌), strengthen the influence of the *Chinese outstanding traditional culture*, “to broadcast the value of China” (*chuanbo Zhongguo jiazhi* 传播中国价值), “to promote the Chinese spirit” (*hongyang Zhongguo jingshen* 弘扬中国精神), “to absorb the Chinese wisdom” (*jiyu Zhongguo zhihui* 汲取中国智慧) are listed in Section 2 of the “Suggestions”, titled “Guiding thoughts, together with the saying “do not forget what is original, absorb what comes from outside, and face the future” (*bu wang benlai, xishou wailai, mianxiang weilai* 不忘本来、吸收外来、面向未来).

In Section 4.14 there is a paragraph specifically devoted to “promoting mutual cultural exchange with foreign countries in the framework of the BRI initiative”. The important actors named for promoting Chinese culture abroad are the Confucius Institutes, while other cultural and museal events and cooperation are mentioned, from education to tourism, from cooperation in archaeology and book fairs. What is mentioned as elements of Chinese culture worth disseminating is Chinese traditional medicine, cuisine, martial arts, cultural relics, gardens, opera, music, calligraphy, painting and traditional festivities. The exposition to these cultural aspects should “make the foreign audiences enjoy an aesthetic

experience, being fascinated and having an experience of delight" (*rang guowai minzhong zai shenmei guocheng zhong huode yuyue ganshou meili* 让国外民众在审美过程中获得愉悦、感受魅力). In the context of strengthening cultural cooperation with countries which are partners in the the BRI initiative, business culture is also mentioned, while a particular emphasis is put on the encouragement of the development of cultural businesses abroad to face the challenge of international cultural competition; exchanges of scholars and cooperation between think tanks; support the Chinese publishing press companies to gain international recognition and increase the number of and translated Chinese works.

Buddhism is also being integrated into the main narrative of the "China goes out" (*zouquchu* 走出去) strategy and cultural corpus to be projected abroad, and, domestically, there is the recovery of Maoist culture through Red Schools. Works as Ge (1998), Zhuo (2013), Xu and Zou (2014) are collections of essays presented in conferences and workshops organised by Chinese think tanks, which means that there is the intention to start with the process of selection for integrating part of China's religious tradition – namely some Buddhist schools – into the current narratives adopted for projecting Chinese culture abroad.

The reception and degree of acceptance and appreciation of Chinese cultural patterns among foreign audiences vary consistently on the basis of the individual perceptions and knowledge about China, as well as of collective understandings and social categories. During the Nineteenth century, American and European writers did not describe Chinese music simply in racist terms but generated a number of signifiers to denote what they perceived to be un-musical about it. Sometimes, Chinese music was devoid of anything related to humanity – such as sounds from animals. Most implicit, however, were issues faced later and mainly by composers about whether Chinese music was similar to particular moments in Western history, related to musical traditions from Europe's margins, or existed as

a culturally and racially unique phenomenon. These attitudes again played on conceptions of Western sophistication and refinement, but they also had deeper implications that would develop by the end of the Nineteenth century. While the socio-political and cultural context in the Western countries is today very different, there is still a difficulty in appreciating Chinese cultural expressions and a sense of "cultural superiority" still emerges from our media, speeches and works about China.

Chinese new cultural patterns are organised around networks of actors whose identities are multiple and differentiated, and the "Suggestions" entail this kind of geography (quote):

"It is important to explore *new patterns of international dissemination and communication of Chinese culture*, combining different modes: dissemination through the broader audience, local communities and interpersonal relations, realization of a *pattern of dissemination* of Chinese culture which is poly-centric, multi-level and interdisciplinary. (...) Through overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals, celebrities in the field of culture and sport, and any person who goes abroad for whatever purpose, as well as relying on Chinese diplomatic missions, companies and on those organisations which friendly cooperate with China and the broad network of Chinese restaurants scattered around the world, we should tell the *good stories* about China, disseminate the *good sounds* of China, explain the *good Chinese characteristics*, revealing a *good image* of China."

The verb *chuanbo* 传播 is used for the concept of "disseminating", and it means also "propagate" and "broadcasting", marking a shift from the traditional use of *xuanchuan* 宣传, a problematic term from a Western perspective since it is rendered in English as "propaganda". *Goujian* 构建 is adopted for "building" and it refers to the construction of something abstract (for instance: *qiaoshili goujian* 巧实力构建, "the construction of smart power"), bringing the "construction"

concept to a highly theoretical dimension. *Quan fangmian* 全方位 is used for “poly-centric” and *duo chenci* 多层次 and *kuan lingyu* 宽领域 for “multi-level” and “multidisciplinary” respectively, highlighting a complex cultural infrastructure. *Zhonghua wenhua chuanbo geju* 中华文化传播格局 is used for “pattern of dissemination of Chinese culture”, while the adjective *hao* 好 is used

with a particular emphasis. It means “good”, while *xingxiang* 形象 is employed for “image”, in sentences dealing with China’s image abroad. If we compare this text with previous ones on the same topics, we can notice an adjustment in the semantics and terminology, probably signalling an effort to match the “taste” of a foreign audience.

4 CONCLUSIVE NOTES

The interesting phenomenon we are faced with is an increasingly powerful way of communicating, by Chinese actors, what China is and which are the policies it is pursuing abroad. A recovery of cultural traditions and classical thought is ongoing, while cultural patterns and concepts are being carefully selected to be included in the official and accepted cultural corpus to be projected abroad. While some analysts discard the whole operation as propaganda, I assume that a more substantial narrative shift is taking place, and it is possibly going to move from the communication and dissemination level to the operational sphere. If a paradigm shift introducing a new way to conduct international relations is being promoted, this remains to be seen. Narratives and rhetoric stratagems by Chinese actors are

changing, while it is still too early to say if something is also changing in foreign policy practices, and to assess the nature of the new concepts China is allegedly proposing for global governance.

Classical Chinese culture is an important asset for Beijing, both for the deep thoughts it offers and for the methodological directions it suggests. In a brave move – considering the historical trauma – the Chinese leadership is recovering what it has being lost mainly during the Cultural Revolution, going back to what the V century thinkers proposed, from the holistic vision of the Zhuangzi to the more hierarchical perspective to manage the State proposed by Confucius. This change is ongoing, it is thus worth keeping monitoring it and following the new research hints.

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