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## CHINA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE XXI CENTURY: CONCEPTS, CHALLENGES AND INTERNATIONAL IMAGE

### *Abstract*

The article is devoted to the study of cultural diplomacy of the People's Republic of China as one of the strategic mechanisms underpinning soft power application in the transformation of the global international order. The relevance of the topic is determined by the growing importance of culture in the formation of a positive international image and strengthening the influence of the state in the foreign policy arena. The aim of the study is to analyse the PRC's strategic approaches to cultural diplomacy, to identify the specifics of its functioning, and to assess its effectiveness in terms of both China's official discourse and international perception. The scientific novelty of the paper lies in the attempt to comprehensively understand cultural diplomacy as a synthesis of ideological, institutional and communicative mechanisms. Methodologically, the paper relies on an interdisciplinary approach, including discourse analysis, systemic method and comparative approach. The paper concludes that while China's model of cultural diplomacy is large-scale and institutionalised, its effectiveness is limited by the contradictions between its stated values and the country's actual domestic policy. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the specifics of Chinese soft power and represents a contribution to the development of academic discourse in the field of international relations, foreign policy and public diplomacy. practical significance of the results lies in the possibility of their application in shaping foreign policy strategies and analysing China's international image.

**Keywords:** China, soft power, cultural diplomacy, international image, strategic influence, international relations.

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## XXI ҒАСЫРДАҒЫ ҚХР МӘДЕНИ ДИПЛОМАТИЯСЫ: ТҰЖЫРЫМДАМАЛАР, СЫН-ҚАТЕРЛЕР ЖӘНЕ ХАЛЫҚАРАЛЫҚ ИМИДЖ

### *Аңдатпа*

Бұл мақала Қытай Халық Республикасының мәдени дипломатиясын жаһандық халықаралық тәртіптің трансформациясы жағдайында «жұмсақ күш» стратегиясын жүзеге асырудың негізгі құралдарының бірі ретінде зерттеуге арналған. Тақырыптың өзектілігі халықаралық аренада мемлекеттің ықпалын нығайту мен оң имиджін қалыптастырудағы мәдениеттің артып келе жатқан рөлімен анықталады. Зерттеудің мақсаты – ҚХР-дың мәдени дипломатияға қатысты стратегиялық тәсілдерін талдау, оның жұмыс істеу ерекшеліктерін анықтау және бұл бағыттың тиімділігін Қытайдың ресми дискурсы мен халықаралық қабылдауы тұрғысынан бағалау. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы мәдени дипломатияны идеологиялық, институционалдық және коммуникациялық механизмдердің синтезі ретінде кешенді түсіндіруге ұмтылуында. Мақалада қолданылған әдістемелік негіз ретінде дискурстық талдау, жүйелік және салыстырмалы тәсілдерді қамтитын пәнаралық көзқарас қолданылды. Зерттеу нәтижесі бойынша, Қытайдың мәдени дипломатиясының ауқымдылығы мен институциаланғанына қарамастан, оның тиімділігі жарияланған құндылықтар мен ел ішіндегі нақты саяси тәжірибе арасындағы қайшылықтармен шектеледі

деген тұжырым жасалды. Бұл зерттеу Қытайдың жұмсақ күшінің ерекшелігін тереңірек түсінуге ықпал етіп, халықаралық қатынастар, сыртқы саясат және қоғамдық дипломатия салаларындағы ғылыми дискурстың дамуына үлес қосады. Зерттеу нәтижелерінің практикалық маңызы – оларды сыртқы саяси стратегияларды қалыптастыру мен Қытайдың халықаралық имиджін талдау кезінде қолдануға болады.

**Түйін сөздер:** Қытай, жұмсақ күш, мәдени дипломатия, халықаралық имидж, стратегиялық ықпал, халықаралық қатынастар.

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## **КУЛЬТУРНАЯ ДИПЛОМАТИЯ КНР В XXI ВЕКЕ: КОНЦЕПТЫ, ВЫЗОВЫ И МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ ИМИДЖ**

### *Аннотация*

Настоящая статья посвящена исследованию культурной дипломатии Китайской Народной Республики как одного из ключевых инструментов реализации стратегии «мягкой силы» в условиях трансформации глобального международного порядка. Актуальность темы определяется растущим значением культуры в формировании позитивного международного имиджа и укреплении влияния государства на внешнеполитической арене. Целью исследования является анализ стратегических подходов КНР к культурной дипломатии, выявление особенностей её функционирования, а также оценка эффективности с точки зрения как официального дискурса Китая, так и международного восприятия. Научная новизна работы заключается в попытке комплексного осмысления культурной дипломатии как синтеза идеологических, институциональных и коммуникативных механизмов. В методологическом плане статья опирается на междисциплинарный подход, включая дискурсивный анализ, системный метод и сравнительный подход. В работе делается вывод, что при всей масштабности и институционализированности китайской модели культурной дипломатии, её эффективность ограничивается противоречиями между заявляемыми ценностями и реальной внутренней политикой страны. Проведённое исследование способствует более глубокому пониманию специфики китайской мягкой силы и представляет собой вклад в развитие научного дискурса в области международных отношений, внешней политики и публичной дипломатии. Практическое значение результатов заключается в возможности их применения при формировании внешнеполитических стратегий и анализе международного имиджа Китая.

**Ключевые слова:** Китай, мягкая сила, культурная дипломатия, международный имидж, стратегическое влияние, международные отношения.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Cultural diplomacy of the PRC is seen as one of the central instruments in putting soft power into practice in the conditions of transformation of the global order and increasing international competition. The increasing importance of culture in world politics makes the topic particularly significant within the framework of international relations. The article examines and analyses such concepts as ‘soft power’, public and cultural diplomacy, national image, Confucian revival, Chinese specificity and their correlation with real political practice.

China has been found to emphasise the spread of traditional culture and formalised mechanisms of influence, including initiatives by the state and the ruling party. China has developed a large-scale model of cultural diplomacy aimed at building a positive international image. However, the implementation of this strategy faces limitations due to the mismatch between official discourse and domestic political practice.

A peculiarity of the Chinese approach is its state nature and emphasis on traditional culture, in contrast to Western models that rely on civil society. “The One Belt, One Road” initiative serves not only as an economic project, but also as a cultural and diplomatic project.

It was found that despite quantitative successes – such as the expansion of cultural centers and increased media activity – the effectiveness of China’s soft power is constrained by several internal contradictions, including human rights issues, the situations in Taiwan and Xinjiang, and the international community’s perception of Chinese soft power as a form of instrumentalized propaganda.

This paper contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon of Chinese ‘soft power’ within the framework of global discourse, highlights the distinctive features of its development in the Chinese context, and can serve as a useful resource for analyzing foreign policy strategies in Asia and international communication practices.

In recent decades, culture has evolved from being solely a sociological subject to becoming a pivotal element within political dialogue. As part of this shift, it has been increasingly utilized as a tool of cultural diplomacy, designed to support national strategic objectives through non-coercive influence. In the context of a rapidly globalizing and multipolar international environment, this form of diplomacy plays a critical role in shaping international engagement and perception. It serves as a vital tool for promoting national interests, shaping a positive image of the state, and implementing foreign policy strategies on the global stage. The term “soft power” in the Chinese context is closely related to topics such as cultural leadership and national identity. It is mainly realized through public diplomacy, which is seen as a form of cultural diplomacy. The tools of cultural diplomacy include television, radio, cultural and educational exchanges, academic cooperation and media activities. All of these are considered part of the cultural approach [1, p.104]. Over the past decades, the focus of China's foreign policy discussions has shifted from the economic aspect to soft power strategy. Culture has become a key way for China to influence the world stage, and cultural diplomacy has become an important tool for building a positive image, developing diplomatic ties, and expanding the country's global presence. This growing interest in cultural diplomacy reflects China's realization of its importance in the face of intensifying international competition and the rapid development of communication technologies. Examining China's approach to cultural diplomacy provides valuable insights into how the country builds and projects its soft power both regionally and globally.

In recent years, China has put a stronger emphasis on cultural diplomacy as a central part of its soft power strategy. The goal is to present itself as a stable, secure, and constructive player on the global stage. This strategy helps China solidify its role not just regionally but also as a key global actor. Consequently, discussions about China’s foreign policy are increasingly focused on soft power, with its impact especially noticeable in Asia and particularly important in Central Asia. In this regard, the article aims to examine cultural diplomacy as a key and innovative instrument of the People’s Republic of China’s foreign policy in the context of the evolving global order. Special attention is given to its interconnection with China’s broader international integration strategy in the 21st century, which is directed toward shaping and promoting a favourable national image on the global stage.

To achieve this aim, the research outlines the following key tasks:

- To provide an in-depth examination of China’s cultural diplomacy, viewing it as a core component of the country’s foreign policy framework and a means of advancing its strategic positioning on the global stage;
- To explore the distinctive features and underlying principles shaping the development of China’s cultural diplomacy strategy, particularly through the lens of the “soft power” concept;
- To determine the primary focus areas and strategic objectives of the PRC’s cultural diplomacy, especially in relation to enhancing its national image and fostering stronger international engagement;

- To assess the principal obstacles and constraints that influence the impact and reception of China's cultural diplomacy across diverse regional and sociopolitical environments.

#### *Literature review*

Many political scientists conceptualise power as the capacity of one actor to influence or direct the behaviour of another. Within this framework, states employ various strategies to achieve their objectives in the international arena, including hard power, soft power, and smart power. American political scientist Joseph Nye was among the first to articulate a revised understanding of power, particularly in light of the evolving dynamics of the global order [2]. Nye articulated the idea of "soft power" as an alternative to coercive strategies, embedding it in academic thought. The term has since permeated international relations discourse and catalyzed a shift toward influence based on appeal rather than dominance.

Since cultural diplomacy is regarded as one of the key diplomatic tools for expanding state influence through the mechanisms of "soft power", the study of its peculiarities as a phenomenon of modernity is of particular relevance. An assessment of the relevant academic literature reveals a primary focus on the discursive construction of soft power, the strategic role of cultural diplomacy in China's foreign relations, and the instruments leveraged by Beijing to project its cultural identity globally. While numerous studies have examined China's soft power initiatives in regions such as Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia [3-7], or analysed its strategy within the broader global context, comprehensive research specifically focused on the manifestations of China's cultural diplomacy and the evaluation of its effectiveness remains limited.

A number of studies have sought to conceptualise and critically assess the development of China's soft power strategy in recent decades. Notably, Chinese analysts H. Lai and Y. Lu (2012) in their collective work offer both theoretical and empirical analyses of Chinese soft power, focusing on its peculiarities, differences from the Western model and the PRC's pursuit of peaceful rise through cultural diplomacy [8]. This perspective is particularly valuable in understanding the ideological and practical dimensions of China's foreign policy discourse.

Expanding on this perspective, M. Barr's article «Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: Old Wine in New Bottles?» (2015) explores the evolution of China's cultural diplomacy from its traditional foundations to contemporary strategies shaped by the shifting global order [9]. By examining historical trajectories and drawing comparisons with Western approaches, the author argues that China's modern cultural diplomacy possesses distinctive characteristics. These reflect not only changes in the international balance of power, but also China's strategic aspiration to enhance its soft power and reshape its global image.

The launch of the «Soft Power 30» index in 2015 by the Center for Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California, in partnership with leading analysts, marked a significant step in quantifying countries' soft power capabilities on the world stage. According to the annual reports, China demonstrated notable progress, rising from 30th place in 2015 to 25th in 2017 – a development that signaled positive momentum and the growing effectiveness of its soft power strategies. However, by 2019, China's position declined to 27th place, reflecting a drop in global trust and confidence in the country's international image [10].

D.P. Sterling (2018), in his work, examines China's use of cultural diplomacy as a means to promote "The One Belt, One Road" initiative across Asian countries [1]. He argues that effective cultural diplomacy facilitates not only the dissemination of Chinese culture but also contributes to the positive perception of China's broader economic and political agenda in the region.

Building upon this regional perspective, Xin Liu's monograph «China's Cultural Diplomacy: A Great Leap Outward?» (2019) shifts the focus toward a global analytical framework [11]. The author offers an alternative approach that moves beyond traditional Western interpretations of soft power, drawing on the concepts of Orientalism, cultural hegemony, and nationalism. Through comparative analysis of Confucius Institutes and other state and non-state initiatives, Liu explores how Chinese cultural diplomacy is perceived across different regions, highlighting the complexities of its reception and implementation.

Complementing this external perspective, Chinese scholars Qin Lijie and Guo Genshan provide an in-depth theoretical analysis of the foundations of the Chinese Communist Party's cultural diplomacy [12]. Their study identifies three core dimensions: philosophical and ideological reflection, historical and cultural heritage, and practical adaptation, that together constitute the unique model of China's cultural diplomacy. By drawing upon the foundational concepts of harmony and respect for diversity, this framework is articulated as a deliberate strategic tool in navigating global ideological tensions and is becoming ever more influential in directing China's external policy priorities.

While academic discourse increasingly addresses the concept of China's soft power, there is still a notable lack of comprehensive studies that examine cultural diplomacy as a structured and intentional foreign policy instrument, particularly in terms of its regional applications, strategic objectives, and operational constraints.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology aims to identify discrepancies between the stated goals and perceptions of Chinese cultural diplomacy, which allows us to critically assess its effectiveness and identify factors that limit the attractiveness of Chinese soft power in Asian countries.

The methodological framework of this study is grounded in a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach, enabling an in-depth analysis of China's cultural diplomacy as a soft power instrument within the context of contemporary international relations. The research critically engages with key conceptual categories, including soft power and public diplomacy, examining their relevance to the Chinese case. The study focuses on the differences between Western theoretical approaches and the Chinese understanding of cultural diplomacy, in which it is viewed as a mechanism for strengthening international influence and promoting the concept of a "peaceful rise." Since cultural diplomacy encompasses both ideological and institutional elements, the research employs discourse analysis, comparative methods, as well as institutional and content analysis.

Discourse analysis is used to study official speeches of the Chinese leadership, state strategies, programme documents and publications that shape China's foreign policy and cultural narrative.

The institutional approach allowed us to study the structure and functions of key institutions of China's cultural diplomacy, as well as to analyse the mechanisms of state support for cultural exports.

The study also uses a qualitative content analysis method to identify key concepts, tools and challenges of China's cultural diplomacy in the 21st century. The analysis covers about 30 sources for the period 2015-2024, including official speeches of Chinese leaders, strategic documents and media materials. The content analysis was conducted manually and based on an inductive coding approach, with a focus on identifying recurring narratives, terminological patterns, reflecting the projection of soft power and China's international image formation.

The methodological tools outlined above provided a comprehensive examination of the topic under study, making it possible to identify not only the peculiarities of the Chinese model of cultural diplomacy, but also its strengths and weaknesses in the context of global competition for influence.

It is important to note that this study is accompanied by a number of limitations that may affect the completeness of the analysis. The main sources of information are official statements and strategic documents of the People's Republic of China, access to which is limited and often accompanied by one-sided interpretation. The ideological orientation of Chinese sources reduces their objectivity and complicates independent content analysis. In addition, the open source materials poorly reflect the regional specifics of perception of China's cultural diplomacy at the local level. A significant part of the materials used are academic articles, news publications and official speeches, which may contain elements of political bias, which was taken into account when interpreting the data.

## RESULTS

The analysis has shown that China's cultural diplomacy in the 21st century is institutionalized and has become an integral component of its soft power strategy. The key stages of the formation and implementation of China's cultural diplomacy were identified, ranging from the concept of the "harmonious society" and the rehabilitation of Confucianism to the large-scale expansion of Confucius Institutes and projects within the framework of "The One Belt, One Road" initiative. The Confucian tradition, emphasis on national cultural identity, and centralized cultural policy have become defining characteristics of the Chinese model.

China's rapid economic development and the growth of its military potential at the beginning of the 21st century led to the formation of a wary attitude towards Beijing on the part of the international community. The perception of the "Chinese threat" was particularly acute in the countries directly bordering China. Recognising the high degree of sensitivity to its own international image, the Chinese leadership came to understand the need to build a foreign policy strategy aimed at mitigating external concerns. Within this framework, China introduced a renewed foreign policy narrative centered on fostering mutual understanding, positioning it as a crucial element in persuading the global community of the non-threatening and cooperative intentions behind its ascent on the world stage. In 2000, the concept of "peaceful rise" was introduced, which was subsequently complemented by the concept of "harmonious development", emphasising the neighbourhood policy. This policy was focused on maintaining harmonious relations with neighbouring states and reflected China's desire to deepen regional integration [8, p.14]. The concepts of 'soft power' and cultural diplomacy have firmly entered the political discourse of the Chinese leadership.

The concept of "soft power" formulated by the American political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990 was an explanation of the transformation of mechanisms of influence in the international system - from direct coercion to attraction and persuasion. J. Nye identifies culture, political ideals, and the conduct of foreign policy as the core pillars of a nation's soft power as elements that contribute to shaping a favorable international image and fostering goodwill among foreign publics. [13, p.2]. Describing "soft power" as the ability to influence others without coercion, but through attraction, Nye contends that in the realm of global politics, "soft power" is gaining prominence over "hard power," the latter often proving too expensive and unsustainable for many nations. A central instrument in advancing soft power, as he notes, is public diplomacy – a practice that plays a vital role in cultivating international relationships and shaping a supportive external climate for achieving national policy goals [13, p.3]. Involving interaction with the general public, including individuals and non-governmental organisations, public diplomacy is aimed at conveying a country's ideas, cultural characteristics, national interests and foreign policy goals to foreign audiences. In this context, public diplomacy is often seen as a form of national branding or even as a kind of propaganda aimed at forming a positive image of the state abroad. The concept of "cultural diplomacy", in its turn, is also closely related to the concept of soft power. Although scholars have yet to reach a consensus on a single definition, this research draws on the perspective introduced by Milton Cummings, who characterizes cultural diplomacy as «the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs and other aspects of culture in order to enhance mutual understanding between peoples» [14, p.1]. China, in an effort to mitigate the perception of the "China threat" and change anti-Chinese sentiments, has begun to purposefully use the tools of public, cultural diplomacy and soft power in combination - as a single strategic mechanism of foreign policy influence.

After the introduction of the concept of soft power by J.Nye, this discourse began to actively penetrate the Chinese academic environment as well. growing number of Chinese scholars began to regard culture as a critical resource capable of serving as an instrument for the expansion of China's soft power. Within this framework, cultural diplomacy started to be conceptualized both as a form of soft power and as a distinct tool of public diplomacy. In the Chinese context, the primary objective of the soft power strategy was to achieve international recognition and to enhance the country's positive image on the global stage. During this period, Chinese scholars increasingly

engaged in discussions about the so-called “Chinese model” of development as a means of attracting global attention. Notably, in 1993, Chinese political theorist Wang Huning emphasized that «if a country possesses a culture and ideological system worthy of admiration, other nations will naturally seek to emulate it... thus obviating the need to rely on hard power, which is both costly and ineffective» [15]. Many Chinese intellectuals have embraced this idea, arguing that China's traditional values based on virtue, benevolence and moral authority have high appeal in the face of globalisation and growing cultural diversity. In this context, cultural diplomacy is recognized as a valuable strategic asset with diverse advantages. Cultural diplomacy plays a vital role in establishing positive international relations and promoting long-term harmony among diverse ethnic and cultural communities. Through cultural exchanges, it creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding between peoples. The trust established between countries becomes a foundation for deepening political cooperation and expanding opportunities for economic collaboration. Moreover, this trust supports the development of security coordination mechanisms, which is of key importance for China as it pursues its long-term strategic goals.

In May 2006, leading Chinese newspapers such as People's Daily and China Daily published editorials titled «China promotes its culture abroad to dispel perceptions of its threat» and «Fear of ‘China threat’ is levelled by culture». These publications illustrate both the domestic and international dimensions of China's cultural diplomacy. Domestically, there is a focus on constructing a national identity aligned with society's evolving perceptions of China's role in the international system. Externally, China aims to promote the Confucian principle of “harmony in diversity” and to position itself as a major cultural and political actor amid the processes of globalization, political multipolarity, and increasing cultural diversity [9, p. 185]. Nevertheless, although academia has significantly contributed to shaping the discourse on soft power, the majority of concrete initiatives in this sphere have continued to originate from the Party leadership.

The significance of soft power in China is determined by the Chinese leadership and its assessment of the role of this strategy in foreign policy discourse. Hu Jintao was one of the first Chinese leaders to initiate a movement towards the active use of cultural diplomacy and the strengthening of China's soft power potential. Hu Jintao associated the great renaissance of the Chinese nation with the prosperity of national culture, which emphasises the important role that the Chinese leadership assigns to culture as a strategic resource for building a positive international image through soft power mechanisms. Developing this line, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao emphasised the need to focus on harmony as a key principle of traditional Chinese culture [9, p.187]. The first large-scale projects to promote the image and demonstrate the cultural aspect of China were the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and the Shanghai Expo in 2010.

By the mid-2000s, the Chinese Communist Party had reached the conclusion that soft power constituted a critical component of the country's foreign policy strategy. Strengthening cultural influence and promoting the concept of the harmonious coexistence of nations were identified as key means of constructing a positive international image. One of the principal objectives was to counter the “China threat” theory, which, according to the Chinese leadership, stemmed from a lack of understanding and the predominance of Western media narratives within the global information space. In this context, Chinese leadership has sought to “better explain” the unique characteristics of the PRC's domestic and foreign policies by promoting the image of a peace-loving, responsible, and developing global power. Enhancing China's international image has also been viewed as an instrument of domestic political regulation, aimed at strengthening the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and mitigating the influence of Western ideologies within the country. In 2010, Hu Jintao introduced a sweeping reform agenda targeting the cultural sector, aiming to modernize the governance of cultural affairs and enhance China's soft power on the world stage. This led to the rollout of multiple initiatives designed to elevate Chinese cultural presence abroad. These included expanded cultural and academic exchange programs, the global outreach of Chinese media, and the widespread establishment of Confucius Institutes across numerous countries [8, p. 17]. Additionally, in 2012, the China Public Diplomacy Association was founded, bringing together leading scholars and experts in the field.

## **DISCUSSION**

The discussion of the results leads to the conclusion that China's cultural diplomacy strategy constitutes a hybrid model that integrates ideological, cultural, and foreign policy instruments aimed at constructing a positive international image of China and mitigating global apprehension regarding its rise. However, a comparative analysis reveals significant differences between Western and Chinese approaches to the implementation of soft power strategies. Unlike Western models, which primarily emphasize the cultivation of an external image, the Chinese interpretation of soft power includes a crucial inward-looking aspect: many Chinese academics emphasize that revitalizing national culture is essential to the country's soft power strategy. Zuo Xuejin of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, for instance, argues that for a developing nation like China, soft power plays a dual role: serving not only as a diplomatic tool abroad but also as a driver of domestic progress and a means of reinforcing cultural identity [9, p.191]. The idea underlying the concept of “soft power” in the Chinese context suggests that the promotion of Han culture helps to increase its attractiveness among national minorities, which, in turn, facilitates their integration and acceptance of Han Chinese as part of the general community. Beyond the goal of fostering national unity, China's soft power agenda is increasingly framed within domestic policy debates. It is viewed as a means to promote social equity, elevate ethical norms, combat corruption, and advance the social sciences and humanities. Together, these efforts aim to enhance the nation's overall competitiveness on the global stage [16, p.26]. As Barr points out in his study, another distinctive feature of the Chinese model of soft power implementation is the emphasis on traditional rather than modern culture as the main tool of cultural diplomacy [9, p.194]. This choice is of analytical interest because it emphasises the specific approach of the Chinese leadership. From the point of view of the Chinese authorities, reliance on China's many thousands of years of cultural history allows them to demonstrate the continuity and stability of Chinese civilisation, which existed long before the formation of modern Western states. This approach reinforces the narrative of China's cultural identity and historical depth as an important element of its international image.

In order to promote a positive international image and gain recognition through the dissemination of its own culture, China has been actively investing in the establishment and development of cultural diplomacy institutions in recent decades. The Ministry of Education plays a key role in China's cultural diplomacy system by coordinating international educational cooperation and academic exchanges. It develops and implements programmes for Chinese students studying abroad and for foreign students in China, including joint educational initiatives with foreign universities. Confucius Institutes serve as key platforms for disseminating Chinese language and cultural heritage internationally. Their primary aim is to foster mutual understanding and build positive perceptions of China, thereby strengthening its cultural ties and diplomatic relationships with other nations. Their activities are aimed mainly at the general public without in-depth knowledge of China and include language courses, exhibitions, film screenings and cultural lectures [17].

Alongside the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture plays a key role in advancing cultural diplomacy. It oversees major international cultural programs, such as the Chinese Cultural Years, which feature a diverse array of activities including art exhibitions, concerts, fashion showcases, and sports events. The Ministry also oversees the activities of more than 20 Chinese cultural centres abroad. These institutions serve both educational and informational purposes, facilitating the spread of Chinese language and culture while fostering global cultural connections. This network includes Confucius Institutes, Chinese language centers, museums, exhibitions, and Chinese Cultural Centers. Considerable attention is also paid to supporting Chinese studies to disseminate knowledge of China abroad.

Despite the achieved growth in global awareness of Chinese culture, the strategy being implemented has failed to fully achieve one of its key objectives - to reduce the perception of China as a potential threat in the international arena. This is due to the perception of the concept of soft power and cultural diplomacy in the country's leadership circles and the level of state involvement in soft campaigns. In China, efforts to enhance soft power are primarily guided by top leadership,



with the unique characteristics of the Communist Party's governance shaping how the concept is understood and applied. Chinese soft power largely relies on public diplomacy, which is closely linked to cultural diplomacy, since many elements of public diplomacy in China are framed within the realm of culture. China interprets cultural diplomacy not as an autonomous cultural phenomenon but as an integral part of state ideological strategy. Recognising the key role of cultural diplomacy in realising its own soft power, the Chinese side actively uses the term “cultural soft power” [18, p.7]. In this context, Marxist-socialist ideas with Chinese characteristics are regarded as an integral component of the nation's cultural values. In contrast to the Western approach, particularly J. Nye's model, the People's Republic of China does not draw a strict distinction between culture and politics, but rather views them as interrelated elements within a unified state strategy. This integration results in the active and systematic use of cultural diplomacy as one of the principal instruments of China's broader diplomatic efforts. In one of his works, J. Nye criticized the Chinese approach to soft power implementation, noting that in China, the primary sources of soft power are the state and the Communist Party, rather than civil society [19]. Such centralised management reduces the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy, since a genuine exchange of cultural values should come from the initiative of the civil sector and not be implemented solely in a top-down format. Despite the Chinese Communist Party's stated goal of making China a dominant cultural power, their interpretation of culture is distinct within Party ideology. They see culture as a resource that must be carefully managed, controlled, and intentionally developed. This perspective highlights the Party's institutionalized approach, treating culture not merely as a form of self-expression but as a strategic instrument for strengthening internal unity and extending influence abroad [9].

The Confucian revival can serve as a prime example of how Chinese leaders seek to manage culture both at home and abroad. Criticism of the sage as well as his rehabilitation in Chinese history has always been accompanied by a fair amount of official scrutiny. For instance, in 2006, the China Confucius Foundation released a standardized image of Confucius to establish a consistent and easily identifiable representation of him globally. Working on the advice of Confucian scholars and even the philosopher's descendants, art historians, with the support of the government, developed a portrait that would set standard criteria for the image of the sage [9]. In addition to the image of the sage, Confucian philosophy also began to spread widely among the masses. The reasons for the revival of interest in Confucius in contemporary China can be explained by the socio-economic context: with the rapid growth of inequality, Confucian ideas about social hierarchy, respect for authority, and the importance of education as a means of harmonising relations between rich and poor become particularly attractive to the political leadership. The Confucian tradition can partially fill both the ideological and spiritual vacuum that has emerged in the face of large-scale transformations. Chinese leaders have successfully integrated elements of Confucian philosophy into contemporary political discourse, emphasising its values of collectivism, social order and moral stability as opposed to growing individualism and materialism. In this way, China is turning to the past as a tool to comprehend and correct the challenges of the present.

The promotion and institutionalization of cultural soft power gained particular prominence during the administration of Xi Jinping, when this dimension was elevated to the status of one of the central instruments of China's foreign policy strategy. Emphasizing the priority of soft power deployment, Chairman Xi stressed as early as 2014 the necessity of strengthening China's cultural presence. He highlighted the importance of shaping a favorable international narrative and engaging in meaningful dialogue with global audiences [20]. Within this framework, China has actively employed specific soft power instruments to consolidate its image as a reliable and predictable regional leader capable of promoting sustainable development across the Asian region. A key mechanism for advancing this strategy is the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, announced by Xi Jinping in 2013, which functions not only as an economic undertaking, but also as a cultural and ideological project aimed at deepening humanitarian ties and strengthening China's international standing. Scholar Winter (2016) argues that culture and economics help to reduce suspicion and

promote shared prosperity, and therefore it should be recognised that it is culture that forms the basis of Chinese economic initiatives, strengthening regional ties and cultural ownership, thereby creating conditions for mutual trust, loyalty and positive perceptions of China in Asian countries [21]. All this together stimulates the country's economic growth.

In May 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that, having overcome historical challenges such as famine and external interference, China should no longer serve as a target for international reproach. In this context, he underscored the necessity of developing a new rhetorical system aimed at fostering mutual understanding between China and the outside world, thereby enhancing the influence of Chinese soft power on the global stage [18]. Considerable efforts have been undertaken by China in pursuit of this objective.

China's economy and its soft power initiatives, particularly in Asia, have grown significantly over time. It is important to recognize the changing perception of China in the region, where it is seen not only as a leading lender and investor, but also as a state increasingly open to dialogue and attentive to the interests of other countries. This transformation has helped create, strengthen and expand broad economic partnerships while promoting cultural diplomacy through various soft power tools. Such efforts have helped improve communication, promote cultural exchanges, and enhance China's reputation in Asia. Currently, "The Belt and Road" Initiative serves as a major platform for deepening the internationalization of Chinese culture, not only through the acceleration of economic integration, but also through the expansion of interpersonal exchanges, infrastructure development, and other initiatives. Through the strategic application of cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool, China has significantly fostered cultural awareness and generated growing interest in its development model and cultural heritage.

However, as Barr notes, the deployment of soft power resources cannot be equated with the actual attainment of soft power outcomes [9]. Despite China's active promotion of the soft power concept and its efforts to cultivate an attractive international image, a number of domestic issues significantly undermine confidence in its foreign policy narratives. The dissonance between the official discourse portraying China as a "harmonious and peace-loving neighbor" and internal realities, such as the Uyghur and Tibetan issues, human rights violations, the existence of so-called "re-education camps," and the unresolved status of Taiwan, raises serious doubts about the sincerity and coherence of Chinese diplomacy. When declared values and actual practices diverge, external audiences increasingly perceive the PRC's public diplomacy not as a genuine manifestation of cultural dialogue, but rather as a form of propaganda. This gap creates major challenges for enhancing China's favorable global reputation and reduces the impact of its cultural and public diplomacy efforts. As J. Mattern points out, soft power is fundamentally relational: its success relies not only on a country's goals but also on how these are received and interpreted by foreign audiences [9]. In other words, for a force to be recognized as "soft", both the initiator and the recipient must acknowledge it as such. In the context of China, there exists a noticeable imbalance between Beijing's subjective perception of its strategy and the actual international reception of its efforts. Although China actively promotes a narrative centered on peaceful development, cultural exchange, and good neighborliness, it often neglects to adequately account for the reactions and expectations of external audiences – particularly against the backdrop of acute domestic political issues. This divergence between proclaimed values and the external perception of Beijing's actions undermines confidence in China as a responsible and respectful international actor, thereby diminishing the credibility and overall effectiveness of its soft power strategy on the global stage.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the beginning of the policy of reform and openness, peace and development became the main trends for China, which actualized the need for cultural exchange and integration. Against this background, the role of cultural diplomacy has intensified, especially in the context of deepening globalization. The expansion of cultural exchanges with different nations is reshaping international cultural relations, making the role of "soft power" increasingly significant within China's foreign

policy framework. Building friendships and fostering mutual understanding among peoples are viewed as key elements in safeguarding national security and upholding the principle of peaceful coexistence, which forms the foundation of China's diplomatic approach. Importantly, the long-term success of Chinese soft power depends on its ability to articulate a positive vision. However, various challenges make it difficult to promote the Chinese concept of cultural diplomacy based on the principle of harmony, and are exacerbated by the lack of a mature theoretical base within the PRC itself.

In response to these challenges, the Chinese side must strengthen cultural diplomacy on the basis of openness, mutual benefit and respect for civilizational diversity. It is necessary to adapt the promotion of "The Belt and Road" Initiative to the cultural and historical characteristics of partner countries, as well as promote Chinese culture as a platform for intercivilization dialogue.

Thus, the analysis of the strategies and mechanisms for the implementation of China's cultural diplomacy as an instrument of "soft power" demonstrates the steady desire of the PRC to form a positive image on the world stage and strengthen its influence in the context of global competition. The peculiarity of the Chinese approach lies in the close relationship between politics and culture, as well as in the institutionalized model of managing cultural initiatives, where the state plays a key role. Despite large-scale efforts, challenges related to internal contradictions and international criticism continue to limit the effectiveness of Chinese "soft power". By consistently advocating the principles of collectivism, harmony, and mutual respect, alongside enhancing transparency and accountability, China's cultural diplomacy strategy holds the potential to evolve into a vital component of enduring foreign policy influence in the 21st century.

Future research may concentrate on the comparative effectiveness of Chinese cultural diplomacy across diverse regions and the transformative role of digital technologies in shaping soft power instruments. Particular attention to non-state actors could also yield new insights into the evolution of China's international image.

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