



THE POPULARIZATION OF THE CHINESE LANGUAGE IN CENTRAL ASIA AS A TOOL OF "SOFT POWER"

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This article examines the processes of popularizing the Chinese language in Central Asia as a tool of "soft power," with the primary role attributed to Confucius Institutes. The purpose of the article is to analyze the directions and actions taken to promote the Chinese language in Central Asia as a means of "soft power."

Methods: Using the case study method, China's activities to popularize the Chinese language in each Central Asian state (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) are analyzed.

Results: The case studies demonstrate that China has been attempting to popularize the Chinese language in Central Asia since 2005, marked by the establishment of Confucius Institutes in the region.

Conclusion: This has led to a growing number of young people from the region learning the Chinese language and pursuing education in Chinese universities. Proficiency in Chinese enhances the professional development and employment prospects for people from the region. However, China is still far from achieving high influence in the region.

Keywords: Soft power; Central Asia; China; Confucius Institute; Chinese language

INTRODUCTION

China's strategic goal today is to achieve dominance in the global economy by becoming the largest producer of technologically advanced products and gaining control over global supply chains (Sargsyan, 2015). The "soft power" method aims to achieve these objectives through a phased approach, targeting increasingly specific groups of foreign recipients. Each phase targets a distinct audience, for whom an appropriate action platform is adapted (Suisheng, 2011).

The spread of a positive narrative about China is directed at the following groups:

- Broad public opinion worldwide through mass media channels, including print, digital, and radio broadcasting;





- Individuals learning the Chinese language through projects like Confucius Institutes;
- The academic community via scholarly exchanges between universities, research institutions, and think tanks;
- Consumers of culture through cultural exchanges and an integrated cultural trade system;
- Media professionals through mutually beneficial collaboration offers;
- Politicians, provided with opportunities ranging from covert funding of political parties to paid influence agencies;
- Financial and business communities through economic lobbying (Hartig, 2016).

China's current "soft power" activities demonstrate:

- A comprehensive approach confirming the creation of a holistic concept;
- Full utilization of cultural resources through the activities of Confucius Institutes and an extensive cultural offering, including both high and mass culture;
- The use of additional soft power resources alongside cultural ones, such as the Chinese model of economic development;
- Engagement at all levels, from central government to local authorities and organizations, down to personal contacts (Ding, 2015).

Nevertheless, China faces many challenges in promoting its "soft power" in Central Asia. The "New Silk Road" initiative aims to enhance cooperation between China and Central Asian countries in the domain of "soft power" (Voon & Xu, 2020). This initiative includes intensifying cultural exchanges, fostering scientific collaborations, facilitating student exchanges, funding scholarships, and collaborating with media organizations (Zhao, 2019).

In Central Asian countries, interest in China has been growing at the local level, independent of Beijing's direct actions. This includes an increasing focus on learning the Chinese language and culture. Language proficiency is perceived as an avenue for social advancement in both the public and private sectors. Prominent universities in Central Asian countries offer Chinese language courses. This trend has been observed since the latter half of the first decade of the 21st century (Dessein, 2014; Laruelle, Peyrouse, 2012). Universities in Russia, Iran, and Turkey are also competing to attract students from Central Asia. However, in recent years, China has emerged as a preferred alternative for students from the region (Wu, 2018).





LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature on this topic, two key concepts dominate, both of which differentiate soft power activities based on their temporal scope. According to Joseph Nye, soft power operates on three levels:

- **Everyday communication**, aimed at presenting current events in a specific light, simplifying them for the widest audience possible.
- **Strategic communication**, involving carefully crafted narratives targeted at a narrower group of recipients in politics and business.
- **Public diplomacy**, understood as establishing direct relationships with decision-makers in key areas or with individuals of high authority within a community (Nye, 2008).

E. Wilson identifies three domains—military-political, economic, and sociocultural—each encompassing three dimensions of public diplomacy:

- **Everyday communication**, reacting to current events in the short term (days, weeks, months).
- **Strategic communication**, focusing on creating, promoting, and reinforcing narratives over at least a year.
- **Long-term communication**, aimed at building lasting relationships with individuals who hold significant roles (Wilson, 2008).

Joseph Nye (2008) defines soft power as **co-optive power**, or the ability to influence other actors through the broad cultural, political, and economic appeal of a given country, allowing for influence without coercion. Researchers liken soft power to attraction and persuasion in interpersonal relationships (Michalski, 2005). According to (d'Hooghe, 2011), states should not compel other actors to adopt their viewpoint through arguments but rather attract and seduce them through their appeal.

Political appeal primarily involves a state's positive image (both internationally and domestically) (Wang, 2008), the legitimacy of its government and activities, and the personality of its leader (Paulo et al., 2022), which researchers term **intangible sources of power** (Rawnsley, 2009).

Economic appeal lies in other states emulating countries whose economic systems enable dynamic development, thus drawing them closer and enhancing their economic strength (Carminati, 2022).





When discussing **cultural appeal**, Chinese researchers emphasize that its primary beneficiary is the state, although the government often has relatively limited influence over its creation (Shambaugh, 2007). However, cultural appeal is, paradoxically, the least universal of all forms (Ding, 2010). Moreover, this type of appeal primarily targets the societies of other countries, not decision-makers (Zhongying, 2009). While political or economic appeal equally influences societies (to their advantage) and elites (who are more inclined to cooperate with reputable, successful countries or recognized leaders), culture predominantly affects societies (Ding, Saunders, 2006). Thus, Chinese scholars argue that soft power is not a short-term action aimed at immediate benefits but a long-term strategy to win the favor of other countries or societies, with the expectation of achieving positive outcomes when needed (Cho, Jeong, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to analyze the directions and actions taken to popularize the Chinese language in Central Asia as a tool of "soft power."

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

To achieve the research objective, a mixed approach was employed, combining source analysis and the case study method. The study was conducted in 2024 in several stages.

Stage 1. At this stage, the authors selected information sources (monographs, journal articles, and conference materials) necessary to achieve the research goal. The search was conducted using English keywords: "soft power," "Chinese soft power," "Chinese language," "Chinese public diplomacy," and "Central Asia."

Stage 2. The primary research method was the case study method, aimed at examining the features and complexities of a specific case. The resulting multiple-case study, titled "The Popularization of the Chinese Language in Central Asia as a Tool of 'Soft Power,'" comprised components (case parts) dedicated to analyzing China's efforts to popularize the Chinese language in each Central Asian country.

RESULTS



Analysis of open sources suggests that the main tool for promoting the Chinese language in Central Asian countries is the activity of Confucius Institutes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Confucius Institutes and Classes in Central Asia

Country	Confucius Institutes
Kazakhstan	Confucius Institute at Eurasian University (Astana, 2007) Confucius Institute at Kazakh National University (Almaty, 2009) Confucius Institute at K. Zhubanov State University (Aktobe, 2011) Confucius Institute at Karaganda National Technical University (2012) Confucius Institute at Kazakhstan University of International Relations (Astana, 2017)
Kyrgyzstan	Confucius Institute at Bishkek Humanities University (2007) Confucius Institute at Kyrgyz National University (Bishkek, 2008) Confucius Institute at Osh State University (2013) Confucius Institute at Jalal-Abad State University (2016)
Tajikistan	Confucius Institute at Tajik National University (Dushanbe, 2009) Confucius Institute at Tajik Mining and Metallurgical Institute (Dushanbe, 2015)
Uzbekistan	Confucius Institute in Tashkent (2005) Confucius Institute at Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages (2014)
Turkmenistan	-

Source: Original research

Case Study 1: China-Kazakhstan

Currently, there are five Confucius Institutes operating in Kazakhstan. The first was established in December 2007 in Astana at the Eurasian University. In 2009, another Confucius Institute was opened at Kazakh National University in Almaty. With growing interest from Kazakh students in learning Chinese, a third Confucius Institute was established in Aktobe in June 2011 at K. Zhubanov State University in the western part of the country. In November 2012, a fourth Confucius Institute was launched in Karaganda at the National Technical University. The fifth Confucius Institute in the country was opened in 2017 at the Kazakhstan University of International Relations in Astana.

In addition, a Chinese Language Learning Center was established in 2013 at the Eurasian University's Faculty of Chinese Language to train Chinese language



instructors. China also uses other institutions and organizations to promote Chinese culture. For example, the Chinese oil company CNPC engages in cultural activities in Kazakhstan.

China encourages Kazakh youth to study the Chinese language. Each year, the Chinese government awards approximately 2,000 scholarships to Kazakh youth studying Chinese language and culture. It is noteworthy that Chinese universities are becoming increasingly popular and often outcompete Russian institutions. Student exchanges between Central Asian countries and China frequently include benefits such as reduced tuition fees for Central Asian students.

Since the announcement of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" initiative, the number of Kazakhs learning Chinese at the Eurasian University's Confucius Institute has sharply increased. School No. 67 in Astana was the first to introduce Chinese language teaching in response to the demand for Chinese speakers. Furthermore, an increasing number of schools across Kazakhstan are offering Chinese language courses. In western Kazakhstan, where Canadian oil companies once operated, Chinese companies now predominate. Consequently, knowledge of the Chinese language has become an asset for securing employment within Kazakhstan itself.

China also leverages media to promote its language and culture. In Kazakhstan, the Xinhua News Agency, international versions of *People's Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), *Guangming Daily*, and China Radio International are actively operating.

Case Study 2: China-Kyrgyzstan

In 2007, China opened the first Confucius Institute in Kyrgyzstan at Bishkek Humanities University, followed by another at Kyrgyz National University in 2008. In 2013, a Confucius Institute was established at Osh State University, becoming the first in the world to offer undergraduate programs taught in Chinese, which are highly popular in Kyrgyzstan. Over 250 people registered for research programs. In December 2016, a fourth Confucius Institute was opened at Jalal-Abad State University.

Currently, Kyrgyzstan hosts four Confucius Institutes and 21 Confucius classrooms, along with around 40 institutions offering Chinese language instruction. Beijing funds two educational programs for talented Kyrgyz students studying Chinese, which include annual stays in China. These educational opportunities are implemented





under the auspices of the President's Office of Kyrgyzstan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Chinese is now taught not only in academic centers but also in provincial cities like Jalal-Abad and Karakol. As a result, China's cultural and economic influence in Kyrgyzstan is expected to grow in the coming years.

Case Study 3: China-Tajikistan

In Tajikistan, the Chinese language is also gaining popularity among the youth, and the number of Tajik students studying at Chinese universities is increasing. There is significant activity in education and cultural exchanges. For many years, the Confucius Center at the Tajik Medical University and the Confucius Institute at Tajik National University were the main institutions promoting Chinese language learning in the country.

Tajikistan also organizes Chinese language competitions called "Chinese Bridge," where participants not only speak Chinese but also perform traditional Chinese dances and songs and demonstrate their calligraphy skills.

In 2015, a second Confucius Institute was established at the Tajik Mining and Metallurgical Institute in Chkalovsk, near Khujand. This institute trains specialists for the mining and oil industries, where knowledge of Chinese will be a significant advantage, especially when working with Chinese companies.

Over the past two decades, there has been a notable increase in the number of students attending Chinese language courses at the Russian-Tajik (Slavonic) University, considered one of the best universities in the country. However, Chinese is not taught in primary or secondary schools in Tajikistan. Meanwhile, the Confucius Institute at the National University in Dushanbe, founded in 2009 and partially funded by the Chinese government, offers Chinese language education to children as young as nine years old.

Case Study 4: China-Uzbekistan

In 2005, the first Confucius Institute in Uzbekistan was opened in Tashkent, also making it the first such institute in Central Asia. The two countries are developing cooperation in education, culture, technology, sports, and tourism. An increasing number of Uzbek citizens, especially young people, are learning Chinese and





familiarizing themselves with Chinese culture, with the Confucius Institute in Tashkent playing a significant role. Each year, China offers 120 scholarships to Uzbek students studying the Chinese language.

The promotion of Chinese among international students is also supported by the Chinese language competition "Chinese Bridge," which has become an important platform for participants to showcase their Chinese language skills.

In 2014, a second Confucius Institute was opened in Samarkand. At the same time, many Chinese universities began offering Uzbek language courses and established research centers focused on Uzbekistan. Both governments have prepared scholarship programs for students to enhance educational collaboration.

Case Study 5: China-Turkmenistan

Currently, Turkmenistan is the only Central Asian country without a Confucius Institute. However, students at the State Institute of Economics and Management already study Chinese as part of programs such as World Economy, Global Financial Markets, and International Information Business. Moreover, given the growing collaboration with Chinese oil and gas companies, Turkmenistan plans to introduce Chinese language studies at the International University of Oil and Gas. These studies will cover areas such as:

- Technology of chemical processing of oil and gas,
- Environmental protection and sustainable use of natural resources,
- Design, construction, and operation of oil and gas pipelines,
- Development of oil and natural gas fields.

To ensure a qualified teaching staff for Chinese language education, the Chinese Center for Language Education and Cooperation signed agreements in January 2024 with three higher education institutions in Turkmenistan: the International University for Humanities and Development, Makhtumkuli Turkmen State University, and D. Azadi Turkmen National Institute of World Languages. These agreements focus on training Chinese language instructors within Turkmenistan.

Additionally, CNPC (Turkmenistan) conducts six-month Chinese language courses for Turkmen employees at the International Training Center of the China University of Petroleum in Beijing. During their studies, Turkmen employees also explore ancient Chinese poetry, learn to sing Chinese songs, and perform comedic plays in Chinese.





DISCUSSION

The analysis of the case studies reveals that China has been actively promoting its language and culture in Central Asia since 2005. Researchers argue that Beijing aims to educate the elites of Central Asian countries following the Chinese model.

Since 2005, Confucius Institutes have been established across the Central Asian region, except in Turkmenistan. These institutes often have branches in various cities within Central Asian countries. Confucius Institutes interpret the official discourse of the Chinese government and contribute to building a positive image of China (Zhang et al., 2025; Zhenzhen, Ain, 2024).

Initially, teaching materials for learning Chinese relied predominantly on Russian-language textbooks due to the widespread use of Russian in the region. However, over time, the Chinese Ministry of Education's Language Development Office developed teaching materials in local languages, including Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Tajik.

According to researchers, China currently lacks an official doctrine or strategy specifically aimed at strengthening its "soft power" influence in Central Asia. However, they suggest that an official document regulating the use of Chinese "soft power" in the region may soon emerge. This prediction is supported by Beijing's successes in cultural activities, such as in Kazakhstan. Experts note that China's current soft power policy in the region employs tools such as educational programs (scholarships, Confucius Institutes), media activities, Chinese public foundations and organizations, and various economic projects, including exhibitions in Eurasia.

Since 2006, China's CCTV has been broadcasting programs primarily in Russian to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with additional programming in Kazakh and Kyrgyz.

In 2016, Bishkek hosted the first conference of Confucius Institutes from Central Asia and the South Caucasus, organized by the Office for the Promotion of Chinese Language under China's Ministry of Education (Hanban) and the Confucius Institute at Bishkek Humanities University. The conference focused on the role of Confucius Institutes in implementing the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, analyzing new development trends, sharing experiences, and discussing long-term goals. Three key points were highlighted:





1. Confucius Institutes are among the main drivers of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative.
2. They will intensify efforts to adapt to local conditions.
3. They will continue to support partner institutions collaborating with Confucius Institutes.

Cultural Cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Cultural collaboration between China and Central Asian countries also occurs within the framework of the SCO. In 2004, member states expressed interest in deepening cultural ties. At the 2007 SCO summit in Bishkek, leaders signed an agreement to develop cultural cooperation, identifying four main areas: supporting artistic activities, exchanging personnel and information, conducting art research, and combating cultural crimes. Cultural exchange became a priority of the SCO's humanitarian agenda. Two institutional mechanisms were established to support this cooperation:

1. Meetings of SCO ministers of culture.
2. SCO cultural and arts festivals (Wilson, 2008).

The first SCO ministerial meeting on culture took place in 2002, shortly after the organization's founding, followed by another in 2005. Currently, these meetings are typically held annually. Since 2006, SCO member states have also convened annual meetings of education ministers.

In addition to multilateral cooperation within the SCO, Beijing engages in bilateral cultural cooperation with each Central Asian country (Wilson, 2008).

CONCLUSION

China continues to make efforts to create a positive image in the region, with strengthening direct interpersonal ties between China and Central Asian countries listed as one of the five official goals of Chinese foreign policy. Cultural independence remains a priority for the foreign policy of all Central Asian states.

However, while promoting direct engagement with the people of Central Asia, China faces several challenges, including resistance from some Central Asian governments (anti-China sentiments) and difficulties in learning the Chinese language.

Since 2005, China has been advancing Chinese language promotion in Central Asia, establishing Confucius Institutes and classrooms. Currently, there are 13





Confucius Institutes operating in Central Asia, except for Turkmenistan, where Chinese is now taught in some universities and small-town centers.

In addition to offering educational and cultural programs, China seeks to foster a positive media image. CCTV broadcasts programs about China in several Central Asian countries, complemented by the work of the official Chinese news agency Xinhua.

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