



SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES AS PART OF CHINESE
SOFT POWER: THE CASE OF INSTITUTO
CONFUCIO DA UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA

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Abstracts

Through the analysis of the specific case study of the Confucius Institute of Lisbon University (ICUL), this dissertation aims to examine if Confucius Institutes are effective tools to enhance Chinese soft power and, if so, how they are integrated into Chinese soft power strategy. After having clarified the concepts of soft and hard power, the investigation goes through Chinese recent foreign policy history; Chinese foreign policy was initially focused on hard power while soft power has slowly started to emerge since China's opening to the west. China's rapid economic growth and its increasing importance in international relations have led China to mainly focus on soft power strategy, to give the world a positive image of itself. The establishment of Confucius Institutes is an attempt to spread Chinese culture in soft power's purposes, such as building mutual trust and cooperation with foreign countries. Despite the controversial reactions they had all around the world, plenty of institutes are now spread in many different countries. Through the examination of two surveys combined with interviews to ICUL students and the general Director, the analysis of Confucius Institute of Lisbon University (ICUL) reveals that the existence of the Institute itself is not a fundamental condition for influencing the local community's perception of China, but rather it is an important piece of a huge strategy; sharing Chinese culture and un understand local community's culture is essential to build mutual trust. This is what is meant by Confucius Institutes' mission and by China's soft power's objectives.

Keywords: China, Soft Power, International Relations, Confucius Institute, Chinese culture

Através do estudo do caso específico do Instituto Confúcio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL), esta dissertação tem como objetivo examinar se os Institutos Confúcio são ferramentas eficazes para melhorar o soft power chinês e como eles estão integrados na estratégia chinesa de soft power. Uma vez esclarecidos os conceitos de soft e hard power, a investigação passa por a história da política externa chinesa; esta foi inicialmente focada no hard power, enquanto o soft power começou a emergir desde a abertura da China para o ocidente. O rápido crescimento econômico da China e a sua importância nas relações internacionais levaram a China a se concentrar na estratégia de soft power, para dar ao mundo uma imagem positiva de si mesmo. A criação dos Institutos Confúcio é uma tentativa de espalhar a cultura chinesa nos objetivos de soft power, como a construção de confiança mútua e cooperação com países estrangeiros. Apesar das reações controversas que os Confucios tiveram em todo o mundo, muitos institutos estão agora espalhados em países diferentes. Através do estudo de dois inquéritos combinados com entrevistas a estudantes do ICUL e ao Diretor, a análise do ICUL revela que a existência do Instituto não é uma condição fundamental para influenciar a percepção da China da comunidade local, mas uma peça importante de uma estratégia gigantesca; compartilhar a cultura chinesa e entender a cultura da comunidade local é essencial para construir uma mútua confiança. Isto é a missão dos Institutos Confúcio e pelos objetivos do soft power da China.

Palavras-chave: China, Soft Power, Relações Internacionais, Instituto Confúcio, cultura chinês

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Introduction

This dissertation is the result of the idea of combining China's soft power topic with Confucius Institutes, specifically focusing on the Confucius Institute in Lisbon, namely Instituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL). Indeed, the author has lived the institute from inside, being an ICUL's student and thus having the possibility to directly contact people of references and to be facilitated in collecting data. China's rapid economic growth and its increasing influence in the global framework is almost a cliché; as a matter of fact, Beijing's capability of using both soft and hard power has already been analyzed by several authors and experts of international relations, as well as Confucius Institutes integrated into Chinese strategy. However, it is still unexplored the examination in depth of several Confucius Institutes in Europe and their efficacy concerning Chinese soft power objectives. In this regard, some questions may arise: what is the role of specific Confucius Institutes in Chinese soft power strategy? Or, what is the impact of specific Confucius Institutes in local communities? Are they effective tools to enhance Chinese soft power? What does this mean?

Those unexplored questions are the central focuses of this dissertation, questions that will be answered and analyzed through a cohesive and coherent path.

Hence, the investigation aims to study Confucius Institutes as tools to increase Chinese soft power, taking ICUL as a sample case study. The argument will be studied in two main parts: the first part will be concentrated on a general introduction to the concepts of "Soft Power", "Hard Power" and "Smart Power", followed by the historical framework of Chinese foreign policy from the mid-XX century till nowadays, ending with soft power concept meant in Chinese version and its growing importance and evolution in China's foreign policy strategies. The second part will focus on a brief introduction to Confucius Institutes' history and the controversial reactions towards them all around the world, followed by the analysis in depth of the ICUL case. Finally, the thesis will end with the explanation of the achievements and failures of ICUL based on the collected data, followed by a final deduction of the compatibility of the institute with the initial Chinese soft power objectives.

In order to make this analysis possible and valuable, the author has resorted to the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods; the quantitative method consists in the examination of the results of two surveys, one specifically addressed to ICUL students and the other to external people inside the local community. The qualitative method consists of

interviews with ICUL students and with the General Director of ICUL, in addition to the consultation of a great number of documents and papers.

This thesis will explain the effective role of ICUL in the general Chinese policy purpose, as part of soft power strategy, and it will also try to measure its impact in the local community and to give possible future implications. ICUL case is not mentioned to be extended to a larger scale, rather it serves as a sample to reflect upon Confucius Institutes' role and mission.

First part

Hard Power and Soft Power, China's perspective

The general definition of Soft Power and Hard Power, and the new concept of “Smart Power”

In the face of its rapid and extraordinary economic growth in the past few years, China has irreversibly changed the international framework, moving the world balance to the Eastside. Aware of this, the so-called “Middle Land” (中国) has been shaping its strategies according to the different historical moments; this resulted in well-projected foreign policies that have kept on China's interests and objectives, as well as a great amount of influence on other countries. “Officially adopted at the 17th Communist Party Congress in 2007, China's soft-power strategy combines an intense and extremely active promotion of China, in both diplomatic and cultural aspects, and marks the affirmation of China's global power” (Courmont December 2013).

The academic Joseph Nye was the first who introduced the concept of “soft power”, distinguishing it from “hard power”. In order to profoundly comprehend China's concept of Soft Power, it is fundamental to well clarify the traditional notions of hard power and soft power. Nye maintains that power in a new era “should not be merely focused on military strength and domination; technology, education and economic development are all important aspects of power”. (Joseph, *The Changing Nature of World Power* s.d.) He explains that “hard power refers to the direct command power over tangible resources while soft power refers to the indirect or co-optive power to influence others” (Joseph 1990c); in other words, hard power forces others to stay at one state's willpower through the use of rewards, threats or even military strength (Tsai 2014), while soft power persuades others to “voluntarily pursue the wishes of the powerful through the use of attraction” (K. R. Nye 1998). In brief, hard power and soft power are differentiated by the nature of the behaviors and resources applied (Tsai 2014). Table 1 below explains well the meaning of power: “Command power refers to the ability to change other's behavior through threat or inducement. Co-optive power refers to the ability to shape other's expectations through the attraction of culture and values or the ability to influence political agenda” (Tsai 2014).

Further deepening the issue of power, Nye classified power into three categories: military, economic and soft power (Table 2) (Tsai 2014); he affirms that the power of assimilating

derives from culture, ideology, and international institutions. It is notable that a great number of researchers considers economic relations as a measure of soft power (Tsai 2014).

	Hard		Soft	
Spectrum of behaviors	Coercion	Inducement	Agenda setting	Attraction
Most likely resources	Force sanctions	Payment bribes	Institutions	Values, culture, policies

Command ←————→ Co-opt

Figure 1: The meaning of power - Source: (Joseph, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* 2004)

As will be explained in detail later, the usage of soft power has become a fundamental aspect of China’s foreign strategy. Not only did soft power help Beijing to scatter the global anxiety over the China threat theory but also it helped to spread the image of Beijing as “a guardian of international peace”. However, China’s enlarged influence through the use of soft power has gone together with the country’s growing military and economic capability.

	Behaviors	Primary Currencies	Government Policies
Military Power	Coercion Deterrence Protection	Threats Force	Coercive Diplomacy War Alliance
Economic Power	Inducement Coercion	Payments Sanctions	Aid, Bribes, Sanctions
Soft Power	Attraction Agenda Setting	Values, Culture Policies, Institutions	Public Diplomacy Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomacy

Figure 2: Three aspects of power – Source: (Joseph, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* 2004)

It is quite evident from this framework that the sole use of one of these two strategies (hard power as well as soft power) would be an extreme risk in terms of foreign policy, which could provoke unstable and imbalanced relations among countries. Talking about this topic, in 2004 Nye introduced the new concept of “smart power”, which consists in a hybrid approach containing the right combination of soft and hard power resources for a state to achieve its objectives and results into the global arena (Pitsuwan 2014). Therefore, smart power could be described as the ability of combining military and economic powers using a successful and efficient foreign policy. In this regard, Nye identified five basic questions that an effective smart power strategy needs to answer to (Joseph, *The future of power* 2011a); first, *what goals or*

outcomes are preferred? This means that a successful smart power strategy needs to define focused objectives and achievements. Second, *what resources are available and in which contexts?* A complete inventory of hard and soft power resources is needed in order to understand the power strategy's limits as well as to enhance its stronger points. Third, *what are the positions and preferences of the targets of influence?* Comprehending the targets of influence (the countries included into one's sphere of influence) is a fundamental stage to facilitate the persuading process. Fourth, *what forms of power behavior are most likely to succeed?* The capability to evaluate the most suitable power strategy considering several criteria is quite essential in order to achieve the strategy's objectives. Last but not least, *what is the probability of success?* It is also important to well analyze the success' probability and to comprehend whenever the strategy is worthy or not (Pitsuwan 2014). It needs to be noticed that other important and challenging parts should be included into an efficacious smart power strategy.

It is almost a cliché to remind that China's international role has grown enormously over the past few decades, Beijing's attitude on the world stage has increased in economic, political, and military terms. (Sciorati 2020). From 1990 up to now, the US-China economic gap has been drastically reduced; in the 90s US economy was almost 16 times larger than China's, against now, which is just 1.5 larger. Although its rapid growth, China's hard power still remains behind, "with a current defense budget that is about one-third of the US's" (Sciorati 2020). Indeed, Beijing's dedication to soft power strategy, hidden by the so-called "China's peaceful rise" narrative under Hu Jintao (2004 – 2012), resulted in an extraordinary but quiet economic progress. It was only with Xi Jinping that this moderate foreign policy started to slowly assume a different temper, implying a definitely more assertive stance, both on the regional and international areas (Sciorati 2020). Great projects as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank launched few years ago, certainly require a firm and strong stance into the international arena.

After this brief introductory definition of those three keywords, the first part's argument of this dissertation will continue exploring in detail China's foreign policy, examining hard and soft power strategies from the Mao era till nowadays and finally focusing on the value of soft power in China's policy today.

The rise of China: foreign policy and strategies from the second half of the XX century till nowadays

Modern international relations concepts are challenging when discussing the place of China in Greater East Asia (H.T. 2009). The first issue that comes to mind when dealing with this great superpower regards its nature or essence (Feigenblatt 2013). When and how did it happen the transition from the classical empire to the nowadays People's Republic of China (PRC)? Is this transition still a work in progress? (Feigenblatt 2013).

Before delving into the roots of this issue and its possible answers, it is fundamental to evaluate China's importance in terms of regional and international scale. Despite its currently slow down, as already mentioned before, "The People's Republic of China is an economic powerhouse affecting global prices through a voracious demand for raw materials and energy as well as feeding the world's demand for cheap manufactured products" (Ge 2013). The Republic of China (Taiwan) is considered a high-tech hub, while Hong Kong and Macau are significant tourism, trade, and financial centers, linking China's mainland with the global system. Beijing's increasingly important role inside international relations is making China a great global influencer in terms of politics, economy and culture.

Particularly with the opening-up in the post-Mao years and greater exposure to the international system, China's foreign policy has come under larger scrutiny (Nikolas 2005). This issue has been controversially debated over the past few years, focusing on three major lines of argument: the first line held that "China's foreign diplomacy changed constantly and often radically" (Yilmaz 8 July 2015). On the contrary, other scholars argue that China's foreign policy has basically remained unchanged ever since the Second World War. A third perspective of the argument, which is in generally considered the more realistic and plausible one, maintains that "while certain aspects of foreign policy such as its basic organizing principles, its general goals, and its style remained constant, issue-specific policies and relationships with specific countries underwent changes" (Harry 1983). According to this last point of view, the fixed normative constitution has been helping Beijing government to shape its foreign policy's strategies in the most suitable and convenient way, depending on the historical period and the radius of action.

According to Yilmaz (Yilmaz 8 July 2015), Chinese international relations' policy could be examined following two main historical categories, the Cold War era and Post-Cold War: during the first period, China adopted "a two-fronts strategy of anti-imperialism and anti-

revisionism” (Cheng 2004). Once the bipolar global system was collapsed, China’s foreign policy took on a more pragmatic instead of ideological attitude, gradually focusing on the idea of a multipolar international system where state actors strictly respect national sovereignty and non-interference principle. (Yilmaz 8 July 2015). Trying to avoid the widespread injustice caused by hegemonism, China’s conceptualization of global politics has remained “strongly influenced by its values, culture and self-image of its role in world politics” (Hu 2000).

By contrast, Dr. Otto F. von Feigenblatt (Feigenblatt 2013) observed China’s modern foreign policy considering two different broad historical periods, namely the Maoist period and the post-Mao era. During the early Maoist period, Chinese Foreign policy “was centered on a strong alliance with the Soviet Union and the Communist International” (Fenby 2008). Thus, China was concentrated on strengthening its benefits in the mainland, circumventing external conflicts. However, this initial focus on internal matters was soon replaced by an active strategy: the crack with Moscow took consequently China to a hard-international stance, giving Mao the possibility to extend China’s version of communism to the rest of the world. Actually, China’s limited resources and the pressure from internal concerns prevented a real spread of Chinese communism but rather rhetorical and moderate support to revolutionary and anti-imperialism movements abroad. (Feigenblatt 2013).

After its hard secession from the Soviet Union not only didn’t China line up with the US, but it also tried to disrupt the bipolar system, emerging as a different power from the two major ones. Therefore, PRC’s painful and long road to power could not avoid a significant intervention on the world stage; Beijing siege mentality was fostered by the Korean conflict and worsen by the “General McArthur’s open hatred for communism” (Feigenblatt 2013). United States intrusion into Korea was perceived by China’s government as an extreme threat and resulted in Beijing’s direct involvement in the conflict (Feigenblatt 2013). The support for North Korea was clearly ideological: the North Korean regime was the perfect filo-communist country operating as a buffer state between South Korea and the mainland (Hahm 2006) (Weitz 2011). The diplomatic isolation of China in that period combined with the role of the United Nations and the United States in warfare contributed to influence the foreign policy approaches of an entire generation of Beijing leaders (Sutter 2012) (Zhu 2011).

Even more aggravating China’s siege mentality was Washington’s military and diplomatic support for the Nationalist government in Taiwan, as demonstrated “by the Republic of China’s continued occupation of a seat in the United Nations Security Council after the end of the

Chinese civil war” (Cordoba 2005) (Fenby 2008). Furthermore, the Republic of China’s straits crisis in 1955, when Taiwan occupied several islands, provoked the hard reaction of the mainland, which threatened an invasion. The crisis led to the US threatening a nuclear attack on the mainland, fueling PRC’s perception of Washington as an existential threat. The US nuclear threat in addition to Beijing’s diplomatic isolation forced the PRC to have a strong reaction: China decided to advance its own nuclear capability as a deterrent and a way to guarantee regime survival (Fenby 2008).

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Beijing was focused on internal and border issues; particularly critical was the Tibetan question, which put PRC in a bad light on the international stage. First, the invasion of Tibet from China in 1950 was considered a violation of national sovereignty and, therefore, a violation of the international law; secondly, China’s hard repression of Tibetans’ unrest upset the United States and the rest of the world. The continued hatred between the US and China ended in the first PRC’s nuclear test in 1963 (Fenby 2008). China’s hard position in foreign policy was also demonstrated over the Vietnam War, when “PRC mobilizes troops near the Vietnam border as a preemptive measure to defend the regime” (Feigenblatt 2013). Since the relationship between the Soviet Union and PRC worsened, Beijing’s major concern has not been the survival of North Vietnam while rather the regional stability and the preservation of a buffer state between the US and itself (Feigenblatt 2013).

In the meanwhile, continued pressure across the Taiwan straits led to constant American support for the RC and, consequently, impeding the mainland’s projects of reunification. Moreover, American support to Taiwan in both military and economic terms as well as the refueling of provisions for the Vietnam War further embittered relations between the US and China. In addition to the plethora of challenges faced by China’s leadership in that period, the border antagonism with India and the Soviet Union was a growing threat to the stability of the PRC (Fenby 2008).

The 1960s and 1970s were characterized by the great internal turmoil caused by the Cultural Revolution, followed by Mao’s repression and purges; the accentuated focus on ideological purity and continuous uprisings hindered Beijing regime’s capacity to pursue a coherent and efficient foreign policy, condensing China’s international relations to a solely “one-dimensional ideological struggle” (Feigenblatt 2013). China’s almost total detachment from the bipolar system let the country become a fundamental exporter of ideology to the third world revolutionary movements as well as a member of the non-aligned countries union. In brief,

Beijing was not only interested in spreading Mao's ideology, but also in opposing the USA-URSS bipolar block, in favor of complete sovereignty and respect for self-determination (Fenby 2008).

Nevertheless, the aforementioned crack with URSS necessarily resulted in an attempt of reconciliation of Beijing towards Washington; the Ping-Pong diplomacy was *de facto* the first point of contact between the two great nations. The US ping-pong team was invited to send their team to China to play ping-pong, a suitable opportunity to develop soft diplomacy and, thus, to mitigate the initial friction between the two powers. As the famous secret trip to China by the U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1971 demonstrates, this approach was crucial for PRC because it led to a stabilization of the relationship with the US as well as to the achievement of a seat in the Security Council of the United Nations. In this way, PRC obtained a fundamental triumph over Taiwan by "becoming not only the *de facto* government of mainland China but most importantly by being recognized as the *de jure* ruler of the nation" (Feigenblatt 2013).

However, the PRC's victory over Taiwan in the United Nations was only the beginning of a long struggle towards the unanimous international recognition; indeed, many small countries and conservative regimes continued to recognize the Republic of China even after the admission of PRC in the Security Council, fostering the pressure on PRC to develop both hard and soft power to defeat Taiwan's remained allies (Cordoba 2005). China's international image had particularly grown thanks to a quite extended foreign aid program for states supporters of the RC that wanted to switch recognition to Beijing. "It should be noted that this foreign aid component of the PRC's diplomacy was mostly aimed at dealing with an important security issue, the RC, however it was perceived by developing countries as a sign of constructive engagement and support from one developing country to another without the traditional "strings" attached to aid by Western Powers" (Feigenblatt 2013).

It was only with the President of the United States Jimmy Carter that PRC was officially and diplomatically recognized, approving the "one-china" policy; this was the outburst for incrementing trade and cultural links among PRC, the US and their allies. However, this fact did not prevent the US to fulfill the Taiwan Relations Act and to continue to send aid to the island.

"The 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre marked a turning point in PRC's history" (Feigenblatt 2013). Peaceful protests by pro-democracy students and workers were banned with extreme

violence by the ruling PRC in an attempt to hold off dissent before it got out of control (Fenby 2008). The regime's troops, the People's Liberation Army, were sent to the scene provided of tanks and weapons in front of unarmed students. This event was a clear sign of the limits of the reform and the new Chinese approach of the "opening to the west" in terms of governance while at the same time showed the PRC's concern of maintaining the centrality of power. Therefore, regime survival became the major issue of the China Communist Party (Sutter 2012).

The harsh international response to the incident and the consequent damage to Beijing reputation discredited without doubts its diplomacy, which was aggravated by the successful democratization process in ROC (Cordoba 2005). While the Soviet Union was in its final process of opening and democratization and the USA was becoming the hegemon international superpower, China suffered from widespread economic sanctions in addition to the international censure. The process of democratization in Taiwan and independent movements were important threats for the mainland; those concerns became even more concrete with the election of the pro-independence Chen Chu Bian as President of the Republic of China, a fact that triggered the immediate reaction of Beijing that mobilized its troops in the straits and threatened a flash invasion in case of a unilateral declaration of independence. In this tumultuous scenario, the US did not stand by, sending aircraft to the straits in order to defend Taiwan in case of an attack.

The crisis was solved when Chen Chu Bian decided to temporarily suspend the issue of independence and to postpone it to a later date, upholding *de facto* the "one-China" policy (at least momentarily). "The question of reunification was delayed once again in favor of the *status quo*" (Feigenblatt 2013). In its place China started to become more assertive with other territorial claims in the South China sea; one example is the secular dispute for Senkaku Islands, extremely rich in natural resources; the islands had been controlled by the USA from the end of the Second World War till 1972, when Japan, China and Taiwan started to claim their sovereignty over them. The resolution of the delicate question came from the UN Security Council which left the control of Senkaku to the Japanese. Nevertheless, neither China nor Taiwan surrendered to the decision of the United Nations, dragging the issue up till nowadays. Other disputes regarded Vietnam and other ASEAN members (S. 1997).

The economic crisis in 1997 – 1998 was a great opportunity for Taiwan to seek stronger economic bonds with Hong Kong and the mainland. Increasing trade and foreign direct investments between PRC and RC resulted in an increased economic interdependence and, thus,

in a way to disperse tension across the Taiwan straits as well as to enhance its influence on the island. On the other hand, Taiwan did not give up on asking for international recognition and “in particular for the right to participate in the United Nations and related organs” (Feigenblatt 2013). The election of Ma Ying-jeou and the return of the Kuomintang to power in 2008 in the RC signed an important step of improving China-Taiwan relation; as a matter of fact, PRC accepted the participation of Taiwan in the World Health Organization as an observer with the main purpose of not to struggle each other’s allies. The continuous dialogue between the Kuomintang and the Communist party contributed to improving PRC-RC relations, keeping in mind the reunification of China as a common goal. Furthermore, the long economic recession of Taiwan saw Ma Ying-jeou forced to reduce spending in defense thus diminished the possibility of a unilateral declaration of independence (Feigenblatt 2013).

Another secular thorny issue is China’s relationship with Japan, which became particularly sour during the late 1990s and the early 21st century. Japan perceived China’s growing economic and military clout in the region as a direct challenge to its interests (M. 2011); China’s more assertive attitude regarding its territorial claims over the Senkaku Islands controlled by Japan contributed to embitter the already unstable situation. In addition to China’s suspicious enhanced military spending, Japan’s long economic recession incremented domestic pressure to cut foreign aid to China to restructure the internal economy and support national interests. Japanese decision of reducing aid was meant by China as an unfriendly signal, which was confirmed by the Prime Minister’s Koizumi’s visits to the Yasukuni shrine (Morton 2005) (Peng-Er 2006): “Several Class A World War II criminals are interned in the shrine and thus the visits by the Prime Minister were interpreted as a rejection of guilt for the many atrocities committed by the Japanese army in China during World War II” (Lind 2009). This apparent rejection of guilt over World War II war crimes on the part of Japan was used by China as the perfect excuse to reinforce its relationship with South Korea while at the same time growing its influence over North Korea (Weitz 2011). Another related issue of saliency to the Chinese is the government’s agreement of history textbooks which gloss over Japan’s military crimes during World War II. Due to its internal pressure, China was forced to take a strong position on this issue with Japan even to the detriment of trade and security relations (Feigenblatt 2013).

China’s recent foreign policy shows a complex array of apparently paradoxical behaviors joining strong rhetoric over Taiwan with a strong devotion to cooperation on economic and development issues (Feigenblatt 2013). The logic of those apparent contradictions is actually part of a solid strategy based on a regional model of international relations and takes its roots

into deep historical reasons; the core objective of Chinese foreign policy has traditionally been the achievement of harmony (Lin 2009). Ideally, according to traditional Qing and earlier dynasties' concept of foreign policy, the achievement of harmony is defined as a combination of stability and prosperity; "stability, in particular in China's periphery was considered to be an important goal for Chinese civilization to prosper" (Feigenblatt 2013). The emphasis on stability was disturbed by the enthusiasm of Leninism and Maoism on fostering international revolution and constant renewal (Feigenblatt 2013). However, "the previously mentioned emphasis on change can be viewed as a foreign idea which is ultimately incompatible with Chinese interests and most importantly with Chinese culture" (Feigenblatt 2013). Indeed, looking back at the Chinese ancient tributary system, China's major concern was spreading soft power along its borders and developing peaceful and stable relationships with its neighbors. A similar approach has been taken by president Hu Jintao during his mandate; for instance, the relation between China and the US at the beginning of the last decade was pragmatic and founded on both economic competition and cooperation in terms of Central Asia security, as well as terrorism prevention. The main objective of the two superpowers' smart strategy was a continuous interaction through a combination of dialogue, discussion and negotiation. An analogous approach can be seen in PRC's international relations with other powers; before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia was China's most significant security threat (Fenby 2008). Later China started to keep active relations with Russia in a vast array of policy issues, in addition to be one of Russia's largest weapons buyers. Borders quarrels between the two superpowers have been managed through dialogue and gradual force reductions (Feigenblatt 2013). China also established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2003 including Russia and several former Soviet Central Republics, as a further step to reinforce engagement with its former enemy.

Another controversial example of Chinese managing foreign policy is its relationship with the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). During the Cold War, many countries in the Southeast Asian region were at the forefront of containing the spread of communism (Lockard 2009) (Neher 2002). After the end of the Cold War China made great efforts to improve relations with those countries using a more balanced foreign policy and respect for their sovereignty; for instance, the negotiation of a free trade agreement with ASEAN shows the huge care of China in keeping good relations with ASEAN at that time, which was one of China's foreign policy high priorities. Thus, "China shows that it can both compete and cooperate with the region" (Feigenblatt 2013).

However, there are still important challenges in the relationship between China and the region; the huge Chinese Dragon continues to be assertive in its territorial claims, while cooperates in other areas. It should be noted that China has a strong incentive to seek stability and development in Southeast Asia not only because it is located in its vicinity but also because its economy is increasingly interconnected to that of Southeast Asia (Feigenblatt 2013).

Hu Jintao soft power strategy could also be seen in the China-South Korea relationship; in those years China made an effort in seeking to maintain the Korean peninsula *status quo* “by having a good relationship with North Korea while at the same time fostering better relations with South Korea” (Sutter 2012). Thus, China increased trade with South Korea and expanded cooperation in terms of diplomacy, education (promoting student exchanges) and coping with regional health challenges. China’s major interest is in regional stability and wealth rather than in regime change, the reason for which China tried to alleviate North Korea's aggressive tendencies and to moderate its propensity for forceful reunification of the peninsula.

Also, the relationship with Mongolia has been preserved stable and friendly besides its good relations with Russia and its strengthened ties to the West; Mongolia has made a conscious effort to restore confidence to China by maintaining balanced relations with Russia and with other regional powers and has increased cooperation with China on a vast range of issues beyond traditional security (Feigenblatt 2013).

China’s influence in Latin America and Africa was the subject of large debates and media attention (Brant 2013). More than the interest in natural resources, China sees the two regions as important marketplaces for its manufactured products and participates in the competition for Foreign Direct Investment against other developing countries in both areas. Furthermore, China’s historical affinity with the two regions (due to similar experiences of colonial interventions as well as challenges during the Cold War) and its interest in maintaining a high reputation in the eyes of the United Nations at the expense of Taiwan in terms of diplomatic recognition were all shreds of evidence of vast articulated and sophisticated goals aligned with complex foreign policy strategies. Nevertheless, at that time China had continuous interaction and communication with local governments in respect of countries’ sovereignty, transparency and mutual benefits. The PRC has also established embassies and Confucius Institutes in most countries and engages in a variety of high-level visits (Feigenblatt 2013).

China’s relations with the European Union during the first decade of the XXI century were strongly linked with the China-US relation. After the heavy sanctions imposed by both the US

and European Union, there was a rapprochement between the EU and China in favor of replacing trade and diplomatic partnerships, believing in the promotion of transparency, mutual trust and human rights. Nevertheless, “the PRC’s relationship with the European Union is multifaceted and complex” (Feigenblatt 2013). First of all, European Union nature itself makes diplomatic and economic relationships multifaceted; as soon as “the European Union is not a monolithic block but rather a cooperative arrangement between a diverse set of actors with individual interests” (McCormick 2005), China has focused on dealing with individual member countries for security issues while dealing with the EU for trade and aid. Furthermore, the EU has been focused on delicate issues like human rights and environmental protection, issues that were also included in China’s policy goals; those arguments could be reasons of both cooperating and competing: competing, for instance, in developing solutions for climate change and cooperating in terms of increasing trade and fostering pacific resolutions to international conflicts. Negotiation and continuous dialogue between the two parties have strengthened mutual trust, benefit and understanding.

Hu Jintao’s successor policy took a completely different line; Xi Jinping became the CPC’s leader in 2012 and immediately later he was nominated the head of the state. Chinese President Xi Jinping has highlighted China’s great power position and promoted “big power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” in order to use China’s growing power and influence to advance the “China Dream of Grand National Rejuvenation”. In contrast to his predecessors, who never totally endorse this concept, preferring a softer approach, President Xi is no longer diffident to refer to China as a big power, which needs to have a bigger foreign policy and a stronger international stance (Weixing 2016). China’s attitude to big power diplomacy has emphasized PRC’s interests but, on the other hand, it provoked alarm in the United States and among China’s neighbors. As a result, this penalized China’s relations with the US and other major powers, which have become increasingly competitive and tense (Sciorati 2020). Thus, China passed from keeping a soft approach, seeking a harmonious society, maintaining balanced external relations and silently growing while hiding its military objectives, to showing hard power strategy and openly declaring its interest in becoming the world’s power leader. Nevertheless, soft power will continue to matter in China’s big power diplomacy, as it will be better explained in the next chapter.

President Xi’s Big Power diplomacy is an instrument to achieve his China Dream, which he presented to the Chinese people after becoming the head of the CCP in November 2012 (Sciorati 2020). The main idea behind the China Dream project is the Chinese renaissance

which would see a return to the glory of ancient China's global centrality when "the Chinese empire unified and incorporated vast areas into its territories" (Sciorati 2020). Xi's China Dream has obtained global relevance with the so-called "two centenary goals". To achieve its 2021 goal, China would have to become the world's largest economy or even outdo the US. This newborn economic supremacy would help to shape new strategic power distribution and global geopolitics. The achievement of the 2049 goal would restore China to a position of regional predominance and eventually place China at the center of the world (Sciorati 2020). In brief, China's Dream project consists of increasing China's influence in international relations and impacting geopolitics and security at the global stage. As President Xi stated at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, while China emerged under Mao Zedong and became rich or moderately prosperous under Deng Xiaoping, China's objective for its New Era is to become powerful (Sciorati 2020). It was the first time that China has been close to global leadership; China has never been so involved in international affairs like in the last decade. Xi's great project also comprehends a strong military dimension. As a matter of fact, one month after taking the helm of the CCP in November 2012, Xi boarded a guided-missile destroyer patrolling disputed waters in the South China Sea and told the sailors that the China dream "is the dream of a strong nation. And for the military, it is a dream of a strong military. To achieve the great revival of the Chinese nation, we must ensure there is unison between a prosperous country and strong military" (Jinping 2013). Xi's great project was well-matched with strong military key players like Colonel Liu Mingfu, the author of the 2010 book, *China Dream*. Liu indeed maintained that China's rise cannot be limited to the economic sphere, but rather, as a rich nation, it needs a strong military force in order to survive (Sciorati 2020). Highlighting Liu's words "Only by becoming a military power can China effectively maintain its security. China's military strength must be more powerful than any rivals' so that no nation can contain China's rise" (Mingfu 2015). Thus, Chinese leaders have strongminded to seek both prosperity and power, explicitly refusing the Japanese model that focuses primarily on prosperity (Sciorati 2020).

Big power diplomacy needed to be aligned with as much gorgeous foreign policy agenda; Burying the low-profile policy, the Xi leadership has advanced more proactive diplomacy which resembled Chinese expectations of its self-assertation as a great power. Thus, Xi started to actively participate in international affairs, outstanding its strong international stance. Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his opening press conference at the first session of the 12th National People's Congress in March 2014 used the term "pro-active striking" to characterize

the new leadership's diplomatic approach to let the world hear of "the Chinese solutions and Chinese voices" (Yi 2014). Even Premier Li Keqiang's, the major expert official in the economic area, underlined China's ambitions to become a "strong maritime power" with the goal of "protecting China's maritime rights" (Keqiang 2014). Xi's speech at the "4th Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference" in November 2014 called to "develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role as a major power (Sciorati 2020). The core purpose of the conference was indeed establishing "the guidelines, basic principles, strategic goals and major missions of China's diplomacy in the new era". Furthermore, Xi explicitly put emphasis on advancing and protecting China's "legitimate rights and interests" as the main issue of its diplomacy; he also emphasized its nationalism spirit defining and shaping Chinese diplomacy with Chinese features. Although China has been continuing to be firstly focused on protecting its national interests, China still claims to purport to do a "peaceful development" as the essential principle of Chinese foreign policy. This means that Beijing's promises to peaceful development "would not prevent China from taking forceful action to protect its core interests" (Sciorati 2020).

Big power diplomacy sets the stage for a potentially dangerous tussle with the US and other big powers, as well as for tensions with its neighbors (Sciorati 2020). One fundamental building block of Xi's big power diplomacy is a "New Model of Big Power Relations". Apart from the relationship with traditional and emerging powers, the new model is primarily focused on the Sino-US relationship. "Only the US and China, as the two largest economies in the world, qualify in China's view as big powers that must work together to build the new model to manage their bilateral relationship and resolve global issues" (Suisheng 2015). President Xi described three essential features in the new model: no conflict or confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation. It is clear that Xi's above mentioned three pillars mean that "China and the US can coexist peacefully only if they respect each other's core interests and make their strategic aspirations compatible" (Suisheng 2015). The new model initially resonated with the long-standing US effort to peacefully integrate China into the US-led international system under the Obama administration. However, the same US administration soon realized that it could not accept China's core national interests as a pre-condition for building the new model and became reluctant after 2015 to officially endorse the concept without having agreed with its concrete contents and finding solutions on the specific and controversial issues first (Suisheng 2017). Sino-US relations turned gradually competitive and have even getting worsen since President Trump came to office in 2017. In contrast to the US-China block, President Xi

has differentiated “developing big powers” or “newly emerging powers” from other developing countries and prioritized advancing relations with them (noticeably the BRICS countries of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and the emerging non-Western states of the G-20 such as Argentina, Mexico, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Thailand) (Sciorati 2020). In order to develop relations with these emerging powers, Beijing has concluded bilateral “strategic partnership” agreements with all of them as well as engaged them through participating in multilateral forums such as the BRICS summit and multilateral institutions such as the BRICS bank (Sciorati 2020).

Moreover, President Xi has developed a new concept of the “greater periphery”, which reflected once again Beijing’s growing power and influence; it consists in the construction of China-inspired networks of non-Western countries in order to draw developing nations into Beijing’s grip. The greater periphery goes beyond the geographic belt around China; it includes “West Asia, the South Pacific, and Eurasia, reflecting China’s expanding interests as its transition from a regional to a global power” (Sciorati 2020). His most significant platform, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013, reflected China’s aspirations in the greater periphery project. The initiative once again reminds us of the glory of the ancient empire, being inspired by the Silk Road tracks. “Through cooperation agreements with 125 countries and 29 international organizations, China has spent billions of dollars on the construction of infrastructure projects in partner countries to strengthen connectivity across a large part of the world” (Sciorati 2020). BRI is supported by a Silk Road Fund and the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which focuses on financing infrastructure projects in the Asia-Pacific region. This has become the symbol of Xi’s big power diplomacy to expand China’s political influence and pursue China’s security interests in the greater periphery. Beijing’s accent on the greater periphery reflects the importance of China in the region as well as safeguarding the area from the US threat of a potential regional predominance. Thus, China aims to reduce as much as possible US influence in Asia, to achieve regional supremacy. The American-Asian network of alliances and partnerships are founded on the guaranty of the US protection; it should be noticed that, according to the natural rules of the international relation system, making alliances with superpowers should be a clear measure of national security’s strategies for smaller powers. Weakening these relationships is the easiest way to reduce US regional power and consequently enhance China’s power (Suisheng 2015). In various occasions President Xi demonstrated his clear intensions to drive the US out of the region; one example was at the Shanghai summit of the Conference of Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia (CICA) (Sciorati 2020), where

he broadcasted the three points of a New Asian Security Concept: “Asian issues should be taken care of by Asians, Asian problems should be handled by Asians, and Asian security should be maintained by Asians”. In brief, Asia is strong and wise enough to take care of its own security without a US presence (Jiangwei 2019). The summit has been debated for years, as President Xi explicitly excluded the US and most US partners from the conference (Suisheng 2015).

Moreover, Xi’s big power diplomacy has complicated China relations with its neighbors due to its strong and increasing assertive and aggressive approach in territorial disputes with Japan and several Southeast Asian countries (Sciorati 2020). The culmination of the tension between Japan and China, competing for the already mentioned Senkaku Islands, was reached when China launched its first foray in 2010 by sending fishing boats to the territorial waters claimed by Japan (Sciorati 2020). This evolved into a diplomatic crisis after Japanese coast guard vessels intercepted a Chinese fishing boat on 7 September 2010 (Sciorati 2020). Through the use of coercive and hard power China initially forced the Japanese government to come to Beijing’s terms of resolution. After Japan’s decision to nationalize three of the five Diaoyu/Senkaku islets on 10 September 2012, China began regular patrol activities around Japan’s claimed territorial waters meaning to challenge Japan’s control of the islands (Sciorati 2020). China’s increasingly assertive stance was also demonstrated by Beijing’s decision to establish “the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that covered the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as well as the greater part of the East China Sea, including the Socotra Rock (also known as Ieodo or Parangdo) controlled by South Korea but claimed by China as the Suyan Rock” (Sciorati 2020).

In contrast with the above described very clear and exposed strategy, China had for a long time adopted a “delaying strategy characterized by strategic ambiguity” (Sciorati 2020), avoiding the explicit legal basis of its territorial claims. In this way, China went unnoticed to other superpowers while it kept other claimants quiet. However, “China switched from strategic ambiguity to clarity in 2012 when Beijing started to forcefully expand its maritime law enforcement operations by sending patrol ships regularly to escort fishing fleets, clashing with the ships of Vietnam and the Philippines” (Sciorati 2020). The real turning point started in 2013 when President Xi decided to build military facilities on and around the disputed islands (including ports that could accommodate combat ships, runways and aircraft hangars and radar for military use, in addition to constructing much larger islands at a much faster pace, turning small islets into artificial islands with military facilities deployed in contested waters). The facilities have strengthened China’s position in asserting its territorial claims and have

overwhelmed the military equipment of any other South China Sea claimants. In order to desperately stop China's increasing assertive power, the Philippines filed a Notification and Statement of Claim at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) in January 2013, to seek determination if certain features in the disputed waters were entitled to the legal definition of islands and 200 nautical miles EEZ to the fish and mineral resources (Gomez 2013). Although the international tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines, the Chinese government completely ignored the ruling is an indication demonstrating that China is rising and exercising big power privilege (Suisheng 2018).

Using A. Berkofsky's words, the whole huge scenario means that "China's changing approach to the regional context might transform the China Dream into a nightmare in disguise for many Asia-Pacific countries" (Berkofsky 2016). The assertive and increasingly aggressive China's both regional and international stance is resulting in "a pervasive level of insecurity among China's neighbors and made many in the US and East Asian countries nervous, undermining Beijing's peaceful development and good neighbor policy mantra" (Sciorati 2020). This is completely confirmed also by the very recent breakdown of China-US relationships and the enhancing exacerbation of economic war between the two blocks. Besides the main focus of China on hard strategies, China has also been able to carry on Soft power strategies, using them as perfect "restraints" arms to mask its real intentions; the following sub-chapter will describe in detail the growing importance of Soft Power strategy during the last century.

The growing importance of Soft Power in Chinese foreign policy

Officially launched during the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, the strategy of soft power has been slow in setting up and took a major dimension after President Hu Jintao took the power in 2002 (Cabestan 2009). As already well mentioned in the first sub-chapter, in the late 1980s the American neoliberal political scientist Joseph Nye put forward the idea that the transformations the international system generated during the bipolarity have accelerated and amplified the emergence of a new form of power, which he described as *soft power* (Joseph 1990c). Nye was the first to consider that the so-called traditional features of power (military capabilities, but also demographic, geographic, and strategic resources, all labeled as *hard power*) saw during the Cold War a slow and significant decrease of their importance in favor of immaterial attributes such as culture, values, diplomacy but also economy and technology (Courmont 2013). It should be noticed that to be considered as real

sources of soft power, these elements should be seen as legitimate, credible and attractive by other political actors; thus, they potentially grow one state's ability to influence (Courmont 2013). When the Soviet Union collapsed (in the early 1990s) the concept of soft power drew the attention of some intellectual circles in China. Yet, the first book of the American expert making mention of soft power (J. S. Nye 1988) was translated by He Xiaodong as early as in 1992 and published by the very official China's Military Translation Press (Courmont December 2013). But it is in an article by Wang Huning in 1993 that for the first time the issue of soft power was clearly introduced in China (Courmont 2013). The article in and of itself referred to soft power as a potential strategy to enhance China's influence and power. This article could be seen as a consequent reaction to the events of Tiananmen Square and to the isolation, in which China was suffering from a major deficit of image for demonstrating a too brutal use of its hard power (Courmont December 2013). Even if the conservative wing of the Communist Party has often been reluctant to experience strategies from the Western world since the early 2000s interest in soft power has progressively increased among politicians and the media. Throughout this process, and since Nye's ideas have created significant interest in China, soft power has been gradually redefined by the experts and the Chinese leaders, so much so that it is possible to mention a "Chinese soft power," with different features than the concept originally developed by Nye (Li 2008).

It should be noticed that several schools of thought have also been developed; not all the Chinese scholars are theorizing Chinese soft power in the same way, but have proposed very different definitions of it. Among these numerous schools of thought, it should be mentioned the "cultural school," also known as the "Shanghai School," which rapidly became the dominant school on the subject. "To improve the attractiveness of China on the world stage, this school, therefore, advocates the promotion of Chinese culture abroad" (Courmont December 2013). It was in 2007, at the 17th National Congress, that the soft power was formally adopted as a political strategy (Pang, On China's Soft Power 2006). Without mentioning economic and military power during the Congress, China seeks to play a more significant role in maintaining peace, to a level that has been interpreted in China as a "national renaissance" (Quan 2009).

The official line from the first half of the 2000s has been the use of soft power for two different but complementary objectives. First, using soft power to increase the attributes of a full power to turn China into a great power: soft power and hard power strategies need to be combined and to operate in a complementary manner to achieve an efficient and smart strategy. Secondly,

using soft power as a tool for the maintenance of a stable and peaceful environment both regionally and internationally, a cooperative environment based on equality and mutual benefits (Li 2008). After the adoption of reforms first in 2002 and later in 2007, many initiatives were launched, such as the opening of Confucius Institutes, exchanges with academics and artists, the organization of a “year of China” in different countries, and of course the hosting of major international events, such as the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 or the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 (Pang 2008). It should be noticed that instead of defining right from the beginning a clear strategy, the purpose of the Chinese leaders seems to have slowly evolved (Courmont December 2013). In recent years soft power has also become a tool to improve China’s reputation and to gain international recognition; for this reason, China launched huge investments, especially in developing countries, sometimes apparently without requiring any compensation.

“In practice, Chinese soft power is aimed to be global, as suggested in the world map of Confucius Institutes, now numbered as hundreds and located in dozens of countries on every continent” (Courmont December 2013). Notably, soft power strategies are particularly active and efficient in developing countries (such as Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America), as they increasingly benefit from Chinese important investments. It is exactly in Southeast Asia that China started to develop and test the effectiveness of its soft power strategy; “It may therefore even be considered the laboratory of the introduction of Chinese soft power in developing countries. This trend is confirmed by the free trade agreements with six members of ASEAN that came into force in January 2011” (Courmont 2013).

The cooperation agreements with Africa are fundamentally based on a “win-win compromise” and mutual benefits; in order to supply the important needs of its economic expansion, China needs energy resources that Africa can provide, while Africa desperately needs the Chinese aid for its development (Courmont December 2013).

China’s relationship with the Middle East started with trade exchanges, which have enormously increased in recent years. The “New Silk Road,” that regenerated trade exchanges and investments between the Persian Gulf and Asia, has achieved new levels with the increase of capital movements; under these exchanges lies China’s energy need, but also a certain “need of China” which has emerged in the countries of the region, regardless of the nature of their regime and their relations with other global powers. The establishment of a regional strategy is also a sign of China’s soft power emergence: for instance, Beijing has increased the presence of the

Confucius Institutes and has even launched in Cairo an Arabic edition of the magazine China Today (Courmont 2013).

Latin America's important energy and mineral reserves, as well as agricultural products, have attracted Beijing's attention. But the most impressive fact is China's increasing presence in the US zone of influence, which "reflects the ability of China to be a substitute for the US power, especially where it has seen its influence decline significantly over the past few years" (Courmont 2013).

Among Chinese experts that have analyzed the issue of soft power, Li Mingjiang believed that China's leaders have assigned multiple objectives to soft power; these strategies are implemented to:

1. Fight against misperceptions and misunderstanding of China (portrayed among others by foreign media).
2. Improve the international image of the regime.
3. Challenge the excessive influence of foreign cultures (especially the ideologies and beliefs that undermine the legitimacy of the party).
4. Refute the theory of China as a threat.
5. Maintain a stable and peaceful periphery (Li 2008).

All Chinese foreign strategies are based on two foundations' principle, the so-called "peaceful development" (heping fazhan), or "Peaceful Rise" (héping juéqǐ 和平崛起), and "harmonious world" (hexie shijie), or "Harmonious Society" (héxié shèhuì 和谐社会), concepts that could be realized only in a cooperative and multipolar international environment. Globalization is, therefore, an opportunity for China to develop its soft power strategies and derive benefits from them. "Cooperative multipolarity is the basic characteristic of the first half of the 21st century and the precondition for turning this desire into reality will depend on the relationship between the great powers" (Yang 2008). It is clear that Beijing aims to play a leading role in this implied game (Courmont 2013).

In order to achieve the abovementioned goals, Hart maintains that working on one state's image through a correct foreign policy has been fundamental for China to shape its image into a "positive and attractive one"; "there are two other aspects beyond shaping an image: building good relations with others in the long term, which can relate to the Chinese concept of guānxi (关系) or network of relations, whilst managing short-term crises by providing explanations

and mending a given situation created by a foreign policy decision” (Hart 2013). In this regard, a correct foreign policy which includes strategic communications (such as the Shanghai Expo 2010) and cultural diplomacy (such as student exchanges) contributes to one country's positive image. One great example of effective cultural diplomacy was the ping pong diplomacy, during which diplomatic exchanges between China and the US have been renewed.

The great economic and infrastructure project launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013 namely “One Belt One Road”, represents a double face strategy of the same coin; through the combination of hard power and soft power aspects in a such a great blend, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, as it has started to be called from 2015) represents the perfect smart power strategy. Although the PRC has been managing strategic geopolitical sites and constructing harbors and infrastructure that could be used for military purpose, establishing economic agreements with countries of its interest, China never imposed to other countries to sign the agreements; on the contrary, China has persuaded countries through the correct use of diplomacy and the observance of a certain grade of transparency (Frankopan 2018). BRI itself is founded on economic cooperation, diplomacy but also culture and image, being inspired by the roots of the ancient Silk Road, which became in 2014 a UNESCO World Heritage site (Dugué-Nevers 2017).

The success of the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates that wielding soft power implies working on a country's reputation, image, credibility, and trust. Using Dugué-Nevers words, “A nation needs trust to build political cooperation and economic partnerships, participate in or lead negotiations and facilitate cultural exchanges” (Dugué-Nevers 2017).

Chinese Soft Power nowadays: does it still matter?

Soft power strategy has also several limitations due to its nature and the nature of the Chinese regime itself; first, soft power itself is a limited strategy, as it cannot be considered a complete full power policy, but, on the contrary, it requires hard power resources in order to be effective. Second, the numerous issues involving human rights (Courmont 2013), corruption, and the treatment of the opponents are a constant reminder of the true nature of China's regime, issues that hinder the efficacy of soft power and the achievement of the “harmonious world” and “peaceful development”.

However, “by using the major resources at its disposal, mostly financial, the Chinese central government provides to its strategy of soft power what is needed to meet with brilliant successes,

particularly in developing countries where Chinese investment and the image of China have changed dramatically in less than a decade” (Courmont 2013).

Therefore, it spontaneously arises wondering: does China’s soft power still matter? In order to give a deep and complete explanation, it is necessary to analyze two aspects:

First of all, the *diplomatic* aspect; China’s slow integration into international organizations contributed to raising Beijing's influence among international relations dynamics. It was especially China’s incorporation to the United Nations in 1971 as one of the five members of the United Nations Security Council, possessing the right to veto a resolution, that embodies the PRC global influence (Dugué-Nevers 2017). Beijing combined strong diplomatic and security stance with a strong economic presence: it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, after having consolidated its regional dominance in Asia. Due to its rapid and great economic growth, China has been considered a prominent threat, often associated with its hard power resources; anyway, Beijing's inclusion in international organs demonstrated China’s opening and willingness to dialogue and cooperation.

Second, the *cultural* aspect; “the idea that political power derives from cultural and moral authority has been present in China’s diplomacy and governance since its early beginnings; (...) the emperor was seen as the embodiment of moral and cultural values, while the gentry saw themselves as entitled to rule because of their literacy, education, and morality” (KLIMEŠ 2017). President Xi has particularly focused on “domestic cultural security” as an important component of national security; in fact, “China’s leaders argue that in the contemporary world, influencing people’s ideational values is a more effective way of destroying a country than using military or economic power” (Dugué-Nevers 2017). As already mentioned before, Chinese leaders have also struggled against China’s image and reputation, peacefully promoting Chinese culture all around the world. It is evident that “the Chinese government used cultural diplomacy as a tool to improve its image and others’ perception of China. In this sense, cultural diplomacy would thereby raise knowledge about China abroad, which contributes to lowering tensions and creating a more favorable environment for China’s international insertion” (Filho 2019). The rapid spread of Confucius Institutes all over the world is the major example of Chinese cultural international policy; specifically, Confucius Institutes will be the focus of this dissertation, which will analyze whether those cultural institutes are effective tools or not to enhance Chinese soft power.

It should be noticed that the very recent pandemic disaster of Covid-19 united with the exacerbation of the China-US economic war, seem to cloud all the China's efforts to pursue a harmonious world and peaceful development; soft power resources are needed now more than ever to defeat the virus and not to fall in dramatic global conflict.

Second part

The creation and the spread of Confucius Institutes: a successful tool to enhance Chinese Soft Power?

The history of Confucius Institutes and their initial design project

As already explained above, culture and its promotion abroad are considered by China “key resources for state power” (Glaser 2009). For this purpose, China’s government decided to establish and promote Confucius Institutes, non-profit public organizations affiliated with the Ministry of Education and the Office of Chinese Language Council International (Hanban), also known as the Confucius Institute Headquarters, which is responsible for the coordination of Confucius Institutes and their program’s administration. Although each institute has its own and unique personality, all are dedicated to the mission of “promoting Chinese language and culture and supporting local Chinese [language] teaching” (International s.d.). However, Confucius Institute’s project is not seen by several academics as a mere tool to “increase Chinese language learning and appreciation of Chinese culture” (Paradise 2009), but rather as part of soft power strategy in which China is seeking to spread its positive influence and image, and to cloud the quite extended perception of “China threat”. In this regard and among multiple questions, it is interesting to understand what are the Confucius Institutes doing? How do they fit into China’s soft power strategy, and are they successfully promoting it? What impact, if any, are they having on China’s image in the world? (Paradise 2009).

The Confucius Institute Division is one part of Hanban which also includes an Examinations Division focused on Chinese proficiency tests, a Teaching Quality and Evaluation Division, which concerns itself with Chinese language teaching materials, and a Communication Division, which handles international cooperation and exchange activities (website s.d.).

Confucius Institute project has three main objectives: teaching Chinese, promoting cultural exchange, and facilitating the business activity. Other activities include sending teachers from China to Confucius Institutes that need them and preparing and supplying Chinese language teaching materials. Cultural events include performances by Chinese art troupes, Chinese song competitions, and celebrations of Chinese holidays, such as the Spring Festival (director 2007). A Confucius Institute is typically created through the agreement between two academic institutions, one Chinese and one foreign (sometimes more than two institutions can be involved

in the partnership). Hanban provides the start-up money for the institutes, which are normally located inside the university campus (Paradise 2009). In some cases, the CI can include a partner other than a university (Paradise 2009). The greatest part of the work on the Chinese side is done by Chinese universities themselves, they go on field trips abroad and negotiate autonomously with foreign partners; then Hanban approves the applications for the establishment of a new CI (Hartig 2011). By non-Chinese universities' side, strengthen contacts and partnerships with foreign universities means internationalizing themselves and guaranteeing more possibilities of exchanges. Moreover, both sides gain prestige and a positive reputation in the world ranking if they offer the students more possibilities for exchanges. CIs are normally managed by Chinese universities and local partners, while Hanban gives them the guidelines. "The local partner mostly provides local personnel and the rooms and facilities, while the Chinese university normally sends a co-director and teachers and Hanban provides books and further financial support" (Hartig 2011).

Even though all CIs have certain commonalities, including being submitted to the general principles laid down by Hanban, there are important variations among them. For instance, some are focused on the Chinese economy and Business Chinese, others on health and Chinese medicine, and still others are oriented on research. Nevertheless, the principal CIs' activity remains language teaching, which is the main CI's business.

The first Confucius Institute was opened on 21st November 2004, in Seoul (South Korea), then another was opened in 2007 in Japan at Waseda University. Today there are around 500 Confucius Institutes in more than 134 countries all around the world. The great and rapid spread of CIs demonstrates the enormous storage of resources that China has invested in the CI project. CIs are also examined and evaluated from Hanban which uses parameters like "quality of instruction, management performance, and impact on society. Specific evaluation standards are being dealt with by a new department created at the head office, whose board was planning to set up a special project committee to deal with evaluation issues. People involved in Confucius Institute activities around the world were to be invited to join" (Paradise 2009). Moreover, Hanban has been caring much for the development of the institutes, launching guidelines and training programs to boost the quality of management and teaching (Paradise 2009). Gradually communication among CIs around the world has been increasing; periodically representatives (or directors) of CIs from all around the world have started to meet (one example was the Confucius Institute Conference in December 2007, located in Beijing).

Hanban has also been involved in more broad-based activities, including international teacher training courses, the organization of summer camps, and the provision of scholarships for students from around the world. It also administers the Chinese Proficiency Test, commonly known as HSK for its Chinese name Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (website s.d.).

The world controversial reaction to Confucius Institutes' establishment

“The promotion of Chinese language and culture is coming at a time when China’s rise is prompting concern or alarm in some countries and regions, particularly the U.S. and Europe”, wrote Paradise already in his time (Paradise 2009). The great part of the alarm derives from concerns about the building up of China’s hard power, including both military and economic domains. According to several scholars, China’s establishment of Confucius Institutes is part of its “grand strategy” which aims to “mute perceptions of a ‘China threat,’ to build China’s reputation as a responsible actor, and to convince others of the benefits of engagement with China” (Paradise 2009). At least there are three lines of criticism that can be identified:

The first one, as already abovementioned, maintains that CIs are tools of “Chinese political propaganda” to spread Chinese soft power and influence, whereas they directly depending on the government offices.

Another concern is that “Confucius Institutes may influence the teaching activities at their host universities” (Hartig 2011); Matas even claims that: “informally [Confucius Institutes] become a vehicle that the Chinese government uses to basically intimidate the academic institutions to run according to their guise and also as a vehicle for infiltration and spying into campuses to find out what’s going on hostile to their interests” (Steffenhagen 2008).

Other academics maintain that China has established CIs all around the world to spread communist propaganda and that through language courses Beijing means to “brainwash students overseas” (Yuan 2009).

Apart from those ideological criticisms, there are also debates on the intrinsic value of the Institutes; for instance, in 2007 University in Oslo refused to open a Confucius Institute because it was not considered the best way to establish good academic relations to Chinese institutions and lecturers (Hartig 2011). Also, another German University with its respective department of Sinology categorically refused to open a CI, mostly because of practical issues.

On the contrary, other German universities that engaged a Confucius Institute asserted that Hanban is only an administrative body that has almost no control over the institutes. Although people in charge of CIs in Germany are very aware of the several issues and contradictions in which China is involved (topics like Taiwan, Tibet, United States, Human Rights are not very welcomed by Hanban), the majority refused the idea of CI as a tool for communist propaganda because of the great amount of independence they have.

It is clear that “the establishment of Confucius Institutes has both positive and negative impact. On one hand, China wants to build a positive image at the international level. On the other hand, the international community remains suspicious of China’s motives” (CROS 2014). Particularly negative was the reaction of the US; the recent exacerbation of relations between the two super-powers has deteriorated not only the economic sphere but also cultural and diplomatic domains. Since 2018 several American Universities have withdrawn from cooperation with their partnerships with Confucius Institutes, mentioning several reasons such as the accusation to CI of spreading political propaganda, and also inconsistencies with university missions, laws, and curriculums.

Particularly positive was instead the impact of some CIs in Australia; according to the study conducted by Leung Chi-Cheung and Hilary Du Cros, “the Confucius Institutes promote the learning of Chinese language and culture, a task that would not have been done without them” (CROS 2014). Also, the study conducted by the undersigned on Confucius Institute of Lisbon University, which will be the focus of this dissertation analysis, revealed a positive impact both among students of the institute and the local community. On the other hand, other CIs in Australia have raised concerns that “CIs are threats to academic freedom and may be used for Chinese government propaganda” (CROS 2014), even though those hypotheses seem to have no foundations; those concerns could derive from the lack of transparency in operation and communication that has created a sort of “mystery” on what is going on inside CIs and, consequently, generated suspicious among the public opinion.

Given this situation, using the words of Leung Chi-Cheung and Hilary Du Cros, the installment of the Confucius Institutes is “only the beginning of a long journey in China’s effort to build trust within the international community. It is only a small part of the many soft power tactics that China is using to exert its public diplomacy” (CROS 2014). The multiplicity of contradictions among the different reactions to the spread of CIs revealed misunderstandings and incomprehension about the real sense and goal of the Confucius Institute; thus, CIs’ impact

must be continuously monitored and evaluated in order to understand how to improve CIs' mission. To receive a mutual benefit and positive feedbacks from both sides, the cooperation between Confucius Institutes and partner universities requests mutual adaptation and trust-building otherwise it might damage both the image of China and the partner's local community governance (CROS 2014). Using the appropriate words of Leung Chi-Cheung and Hilary Du Cros' study, "the civilization being free, active and creative will gain its deserved influences at the end" (CROS 2014).

General achieves and failures of Confucius Institutes' mission

Although the complexity and divergence of different communities about the creation of CIs, an increasing number of people are interested in Chinese culture, food, art, medicine, etc; even more people want to study Chinese, "if not because of an intrinsic interest in the language, because of its usefulness for doing business" (Paradise 2009). In this sense, Confucius Institutes are continuing to be the major vehicle for promoting Chinese language and culture, providing for the growing demand of Chinese knowledge.

Apart from the partly ideological debates on the true essence and higher purpose of the launching of CI, Confucius Institutes face several "practical" issues. The main problems are related to the teaching quality and the consequent difficulties in communication inside CIs, as well as the availability of material resources.

For instance, the majority of CIs' teachers is not able to speak the language of the host country, thus making hard the communication between teacher and students. Moreover, for some institutes, it is more difficult to find enough students than for others, especially in small communities.

Also, the limited quantity and quality of the material resources provided by Hanban (especially books) forces some institutes to rely on their own expenses to enlarge libraries and other materials' availability (Hartig 2011).

Despite their weaknesses, Confucius Institutes have been playing an important role in helping China to do business with other countries and open its exclusive market; indeed, CIs have helped China's economy and trade to provide "competitive advantages through language and cultural support and assistance. In this context, the Chinese culture is understood as a pathfinder for Chinese economy abroad" (Hartig 2011). As a matter of fact, business and culture are two

strictly related elements in China: dealing with China in terms of business means being aware of the far-East cultural diversities from Western countries, knowing Chinese traditions and interpreting correctly China's way of communication. CIs could become key elements if they act as efficient "cultural mediators".

China, as a superpower, cannot avoid spreading its culture all over the world, as a direct consequence of its increasing influence; CIs are indeed important tiles in China's soft power strategy and, if improved, they will continue to contribute to promoting China's greatest cultural values. In fact, CIs have been devoting themselves to construct a harmonious world (Institutes s.d.), a concept that implies "multilateralism to realize common security, mutual beneficial cooperation to achieve common prosperity, inclusiveness where all civilizations coexist harmoniously" (Xinhua 2005).

It should be noticed that CIs also represent important diplomacy's bodies; as already abovementioned, "the promotion of culture in the international area also happens for concrete foreign-policy reasons" (Hartig 2011). Even organizations like the Goethe Institute or British Council are to a certain degree working for their countries' foreign policy goals. This highlights that "culture is an intrinsic aspect of foreign policy" (Mitchell 1986) and it is strategically fundamental to enhance friendship and mutual understanding among countries. However, the great difference between CIs and other cultural institutes lays in the "authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system" (Hartig 2011); thus, it is obvious that CIs are not supposed to deal with delicate topics from the Chinese point of view. For this reason, it is safe to say that concerns regarding CIs "are not completely unfounded, but may not be totally warranted" (Siow 2011).

Even though they are central elements in China's soft power strategy and have been contributing to improving China's reputation, CIs cannot cancel the huge legal issues concerning China. Anyway, CIs have reached important achievements in many countries, demonstrating to truly spread its devotement to the construction of a harmonious world. On the contrary, in some other states such as the US, CIs are still being criticized and accused as a direct consequence of the exacerbation of the rivalry between the two superpowers in both the economic and diplomatic sphere.

Particularly interesting is the case examined by this dissertation project; through an empirical analysis of the impact on the local community of the "Instituto Confucio da Universidade de

Lisboa (ICUL)”, the undersigned will measure the institute’s success as a tool to promote Chinese soft power and its contribution to create a positive image of China.

The case of Instituto Confúcio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL)

The idea behind the creation of Instituto Confúcio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL) and its purpose

The Instituto Confúcio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL) was founded in 2008 (Director 2019). ICUL opening was considered a decisive step to deepen the dialogue and cooperation between Portugal and China (Instituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL) s.d.). ICUL is considered a bridge between the two countries: through the Chinese government’s support, it helps to develop agreements and partnerships with Portugal in the field of education, culture, science, and technology (Instituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL) s.d.). Specifically, the aims of ICUL, aligned with the general purposes of all CIs, consist of:

- Promoting and fostering the teaching of Chinese language in Portugal
- Developing academics skills and public awareness about Chinese culture
- Facilitating contacts between Portugal and Portuguese academic institutions with their Chinese counterparts in the domains of linguistics, education, culture and business to advance teaching and research activities that strengthen links between these two countries (Instituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL) s.d.).

In this framework ICUL is working for improving exchanges between Portugal and China, the teaching of Chinese language and culture, the ties between the Portuguese entrepreneurial community and their counterparts in China, the promotion of scholarships with China, the creation of a solid network with other universities in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Instituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL) s.d.).

Since its foundation, ICUL has received around 800/1000 students per year, offering courses at the headquarter, located inside the Faculty of Literature of the University of Lisbon, and at the “São Tomás” school, which are specifically dedicated to high school students. Since this academic year, ICUL has extended its classrooms also at Polytechnic Institute in Sétubal (Director 2019). Besides Chinese language courses, the institute also offers other activities such as workshops on traditional Chinese culture (Chinese calligraphy, Chinese tea ceremony, paper

cutting, etc.); “we are trying to share Chinese knowledge among our students in order to help them to understand better China and Chinese culture” (Director 2019).

As already abovementioned, the promotion of Chinese language and culture is a fundamental path that China needs to travel in order to build mutual understanding and mutual trust with countries; ICUL, as the other CIs, is not excluded from this grand soft power strategy: according to the General Director of ICUL “teaching Chinese language plays a fundamental role” (Director 2019).

Apart from promoting Chinese language and culture, ICUL is particularly integrated into the partner university, as well as collaborating with local government in the field of education; for instance, ICUL helps Portugal ministry of education to develop Chinese language programs for public schools. “I think we are aligned with local government aims” (Director 2019) has declared the institute’s General Director.

ICUL, as every CIs around the world, has an impact on the local community and generates different feedbacks among people. The next chapters’ aim is analyzing this impact and comprehending the different ideas of people that are familiar with ICUL and people that are not involved in the institute. In this context, the entire analysis will seek to answer to original huge questions: is ICUL a successful tool to enhance Chinese soft power? Is it aligned with the Chinese government’s directives? Is it pursuing its mission? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What are ICUL’s future goals?

The impact of ICUL on the local community: people perceptions and reactions about China based on the analysis of the results of collected data

As already presented in the introduction, the analysis conducted by the author of this dissertation, which aims to study the impact of ICUL on the local community, relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods; the former technique combines one specific survey dedicated to ICUL students (that will be called ICUL Survey) with a general survey (that will be called General Survey) dedicated to people not involved into ICUL’s environment. The qualitative method consists of five interviews, four addressed to ICUL students in addition to a specific interview with the General Director. The results of those two surveys have been first analyzed separately, and then they have been compared using several graphics. The examination of the collected data will continue here below. It should be particularly noted that

the surveys have been spread during the extraordinary period of pandemic emergency caused by Covid-19; therefore, the answers could have been influenced by this epochal disaster.

Demographic Data:

The total answers of ICUL Survey are 11: 6 are completed, while 5 are partially completed, (54,5% tax of responses); 71% of people are Portuguese, 14% Chinese and 14% German/Portuguese. 71% of respondents are between 18 and 30 years old, 14% are between 30 and 50 years old and also 14% are over 50 years old. The data also show that 28,5% of respondents have completed a Master's degree, 14% a Bachelor's degree while 57% have only the High School diploma. Regarding the job field, 40% of respondents are Students, 20% work in call centers, 20% work in the education area, 20% are retired.

28,5% affirm to have been to China at least one time for studying (33%), working (33%) or/and holidays (33%), while 71,4% of respondents have never been to China. However, 80% of fulfillers would like to go to China for already mentioned reasons (40% for studying, 20% for working, 40% for holidays). It should be noticed that 60% of fulfillers have been studying at ICUL for six months to one year and 20% of them for less than one year, while only 20% of them for more than five years. The majority of respondents (80%) affirms to have discovered ICUL through the University of Lisbon. Only a very little percentage of respondents says to have participated in some ICUL events (18%), however, all of them have enjoyed them.

The General Survey has received 205 answers, 123 of which completed (60% tax of responses). 89% of respondents are Italian, 4% are Portuguese, and 1% are Brazilian, Hungarian, Slovenian, Jordanian, Finnish, German, Croatian and Polish. 88% of respondents are between 18 and 30 years old, 5% are between 30 and 50, 3% are over 50 while a few respondents are under 18 (4%). The majority of people have completed a Bachelor's degree (39%) or have a High School diploma (36%), while the rest have completed a Master's degree (25%). Concerning the job field, the major category of respondents is "Student" (35%), followed by "Sales area" (10%) and "Employee" (7%); other categories include marketing area (6%), education area (4%), medicine area (5%), HO.RE.CA area (4%), security area (2%), agriculture and wine area (2%), etc.

Only 13% have affirmed to have been to China (40% for studying, 32% for holidays, 28% for working), while as much as 71% of fulfillers would like to go to China for the same reasons (84% for holidays, 8% for working and 8% for studying). It is also important to underline that

22% of fulfillers have heard about ICUL or know it; 59% have discovered it from a friend, 21% through the internet, 17% from university, and 3% from advertisements.

Relevant Data

Firstly (1), it is relevant the feedback of the questions “*Would you like to continue to study Chinese?*” in the ICUL Survey, and “*Would you like to study Chinese?*” in the General Survey and their correlated reasons; in the former case, 63,6% want to continue to study Chinese while 36% have not answered. The analysis reveals that the major reason why students of ICUL want to continue to study Chinese is its usefulness, especially in business (28%), followed by the possibility of using Chinese for a future job (22%) and the interest in Chinese culture (22%); 17% also like China itself. It is interesting to notice that only 5,5% think that Chinese will be the language of the future. Chinese is the second most spoken language in the world and certainly “China’s power influences the entire world, so that studying Chinese will be a very important skill” (1 2019), affirms one interviewee; however, according to the results of the ICUL Survey this seems to be not sufficient to substitute the role of English as a “lingua franca”.

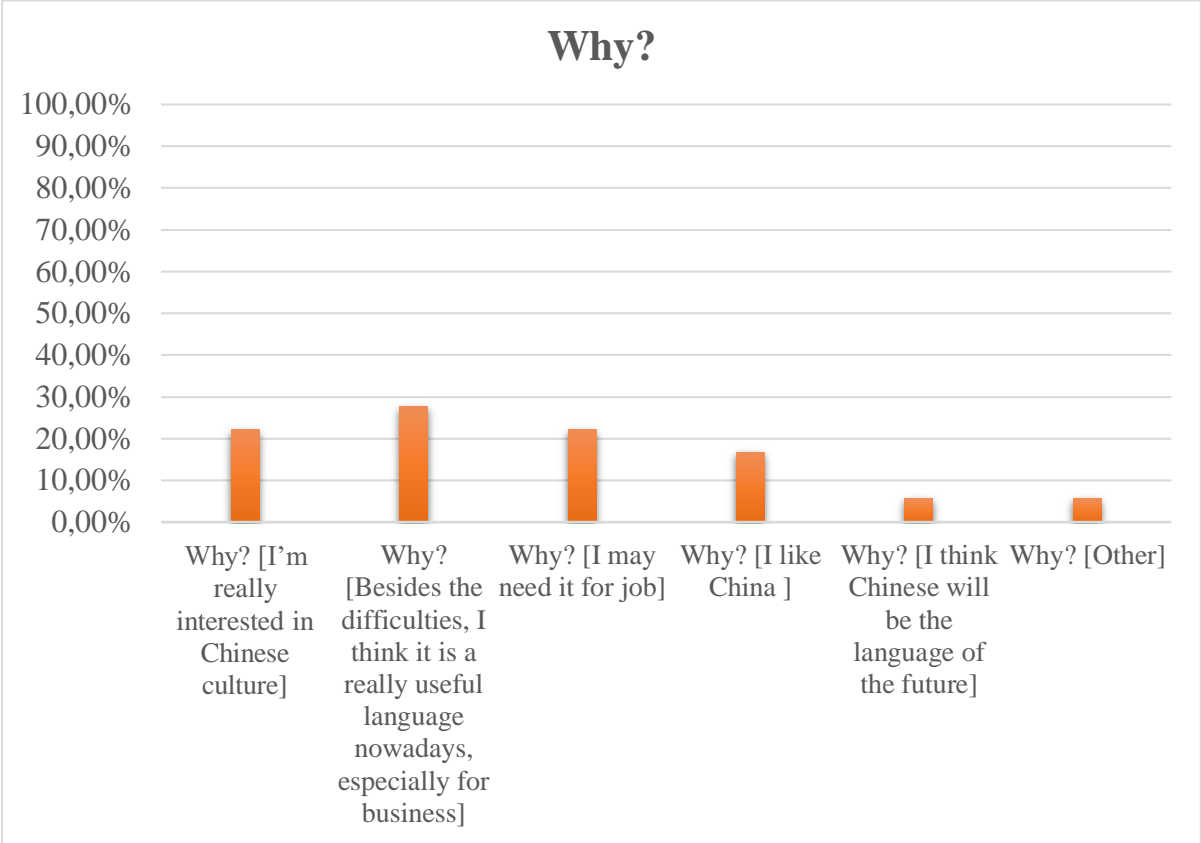


Figure 3: “*Why would you like to continue to study Chinese?*”, Analysis of data, ICUL Survey

In the latter case (General Survey), 35% of fulfillers want to study Chinese against 65% that are not interested in the Chinese language. Among people that don’t want to study Chinese, 26%

think that it is a too difficult language, 24% are not interested at all and 23% are too busy to study such a difficult language; according to 19% of fulfillers Chinese is not useful for them and only 8% maintain that they don't like China. Regarding people that want to study Chinese, 26% think that Chinese is a very useful language especially for business, 24% are interested in Chinese culture and as much as 23% think that Chinese will be the language of the future; 15% may need Chinese for a future job while 9% like China.

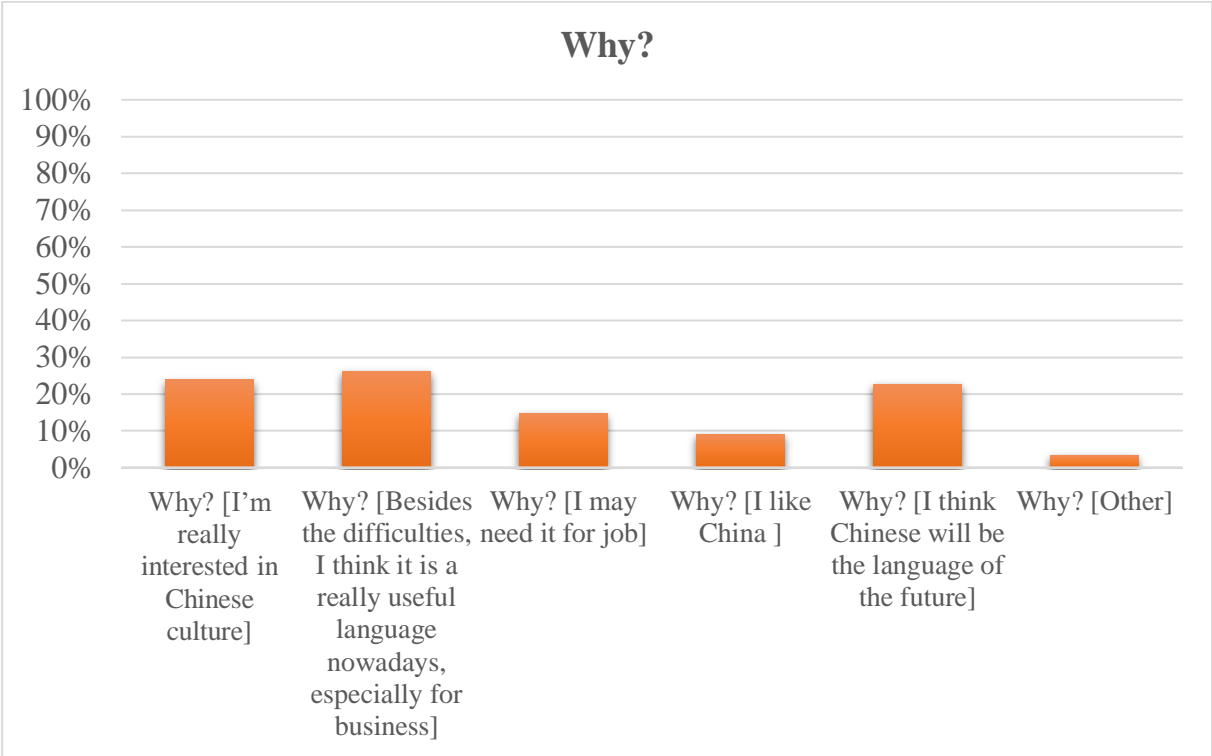


Figure 4: “Why would you like to study Chinese?”, Analysis of data, General Survey

Curiously, only a small percentage of ICUL students think that Chinese will be the language of the future, against a much bigger percentage of external people (that probably don't study Chinese) that confirm this statement. Anyway, in both surveys, the major reasons for the interest in Chinese language are its usefulness, mostly in business, and the curiosity for Chinese culture.

Secondly (2), in both surveys it is significant the feedback of the question “How does Chinese culture influence your lifestyle?”; in ICUL Survey 25% of the students affirm that they like to go to Chinese restaurants, 21% watch Chinese movies and 21% also listen to Chinese music; only 8% practice Chinese martial arts (tai chi, king fu, etc.), follow Chinese events such as the Spring festival or are interest in Chinese astrology. 4%, instead, join Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism, and have Chinese family and friends. It should be noticed that almost nobody is interested in Chinese Traditional Medicine (CTM), even though it is one important aspect of

Chinese culture. An interviewed student also affirms to use Chinese app and Chinese social media (mostly We Chat) (2 2019).

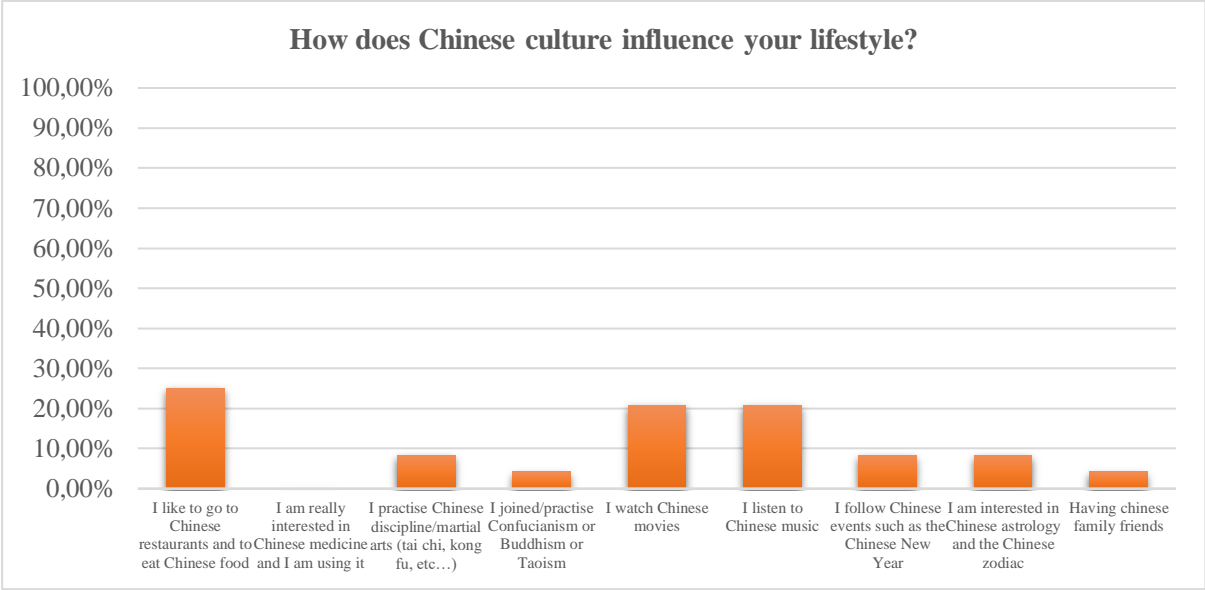


Figure 5: “How does Chinese culture influence your lifestyle?”, Analysis of data, ICUL Survey

In the General Survey, 55% of fulfillers like to go to Chinese restaurants, 14% are interested in Chinese astrology and 10% follow Chinese festivities. Considering the minority, 6% practice Chinese martial arts, 5% watch Chinese movies, 4% are interested in CTM, 3% join Confucianism or Taoism or Buddhism, 3% listen to Chinese music, 2% are influenced by Chinese technology.

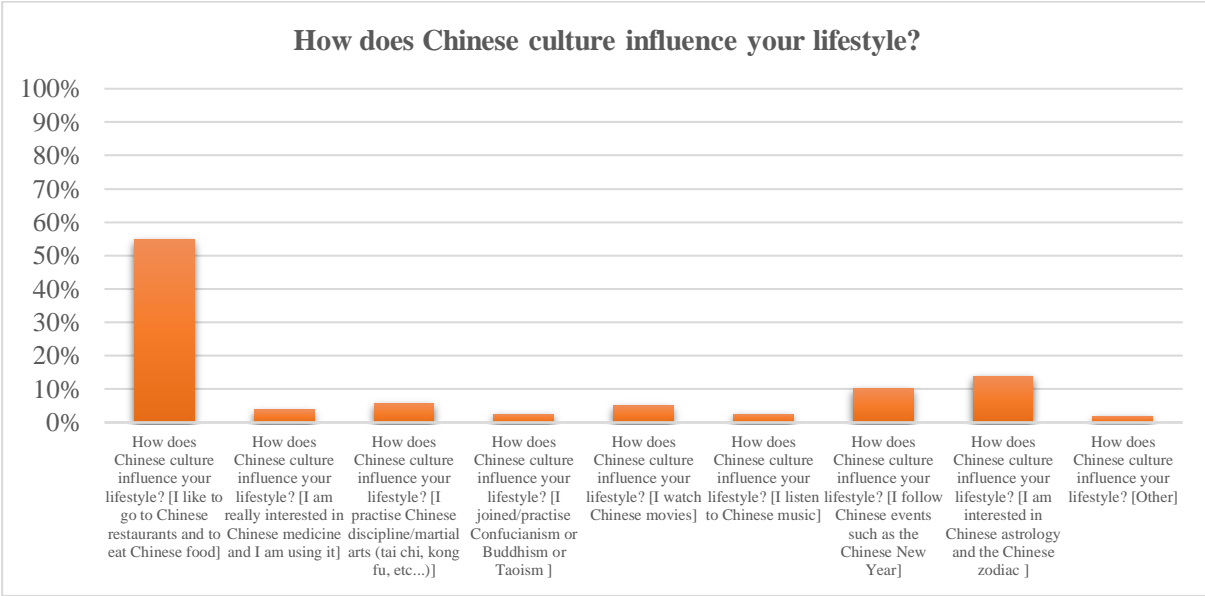


Figure 6: “How does Chinese culture influence your lifestyle?”, Analysis of data, General Survey

Both surveys reveal that Chinese food is the factor that most influences both ICUL students and the outside community.

Third (3), one of the fundamental questions in both surveys is “*How do you perceive China?*”; as the question’s structure is based on scores (from 1 to 5 or from “Totally disagree” to “Totally agree”), it is important to deeply analyze and comprehend different nuances of the answers. ICUL survey’s data show that 67% of students agree on considering China a superpower or the new leader in the international framework, 17% totally agree and 17% partially agree with this statement. Also, 17% of people agree on perceiving China as a threat to the Western world, 33% partially agree, 17% partially disagree and 33% totally disagree with this affirmation. In this regard, 17% of people that agree with this idea of China are the youngest (18 – 30 y/o), while people in the middle age (30 -50 y/o) totally disagree with this affirmation. There is a certain amount of incongruity among the answers’ scores. It is relevant that 25% totally agree on considering China the great enemy of the US, 50% partially agree and 25% partially disagree with this affirmation. It should be noticed that 25% of people that totally agree with this statement are the oldest (over 50 y/o) while 50% that partially agree and 25% that partially disagree are the youngest. It follows 25% of fulfillers which totally agree with considering China a great economic example, 50% agree and 25% partially disagree with this statement. People who totally agree with this idea are all over 50 years old, but they also have the highest grade of education (Master's degree). Also, the perception of China as a communist and dictatorship state shows very heterogeneous and divergent feedback: no one totally disagrees while 25% has answered from partially disagree to totally agree, both younger and older people. Besides, 60% of ICUL students partially agree on thinking about China as culturally incomprehensible and too far from western mentality while 20% partially disagree and only 20% totally disagree. 20% of fulfillers who are most in contrast with this idea are the youngest (18 – 30 y/o). However, people unanimously agree with seeing China culturally fascinating, 60% totally agree and 40% agree. The analysis of the answers reveals a very controversial framework; although there is a high percentage of people that perceive China as a threat to the Western world, there is a likewise high percentage of students that are attracted by Chinese culture and would like to go to China. This could be the sign that China is still not fully comprehended by ICUL students, even though students have surely a broader idea of China; one interviewed student explains “Now, after starting to study Chinese I have a more precise and clear idea than before, I understand more Chinese people way of thinking. Nevertheless, I still don’t have a full comprehension of China” (1 2019). It also should be noticed that students who have been

to China, especially the oldest, are more aware of China’s evolution throughout the last decade and know more about China. One student specifies “China has been changing a lot since I went there for the first time; when I first went there, China was really an underdeveloped country, the gap between cities and countries was so big, business way also changed a lot (...) Now China is one of the most developed and powerful countries” (2 2019). Another student also adds “My idea of China has been updated, especially after participating in 2015 at the Summer Camp organized by ICUL, it was the first time after a long period (more or less 30 years) that I saw China again, in all its impressive modernity (...) Now I think Chinese people are more open to western culture and more open-minded, compared to 30 years ago” (3 2019).

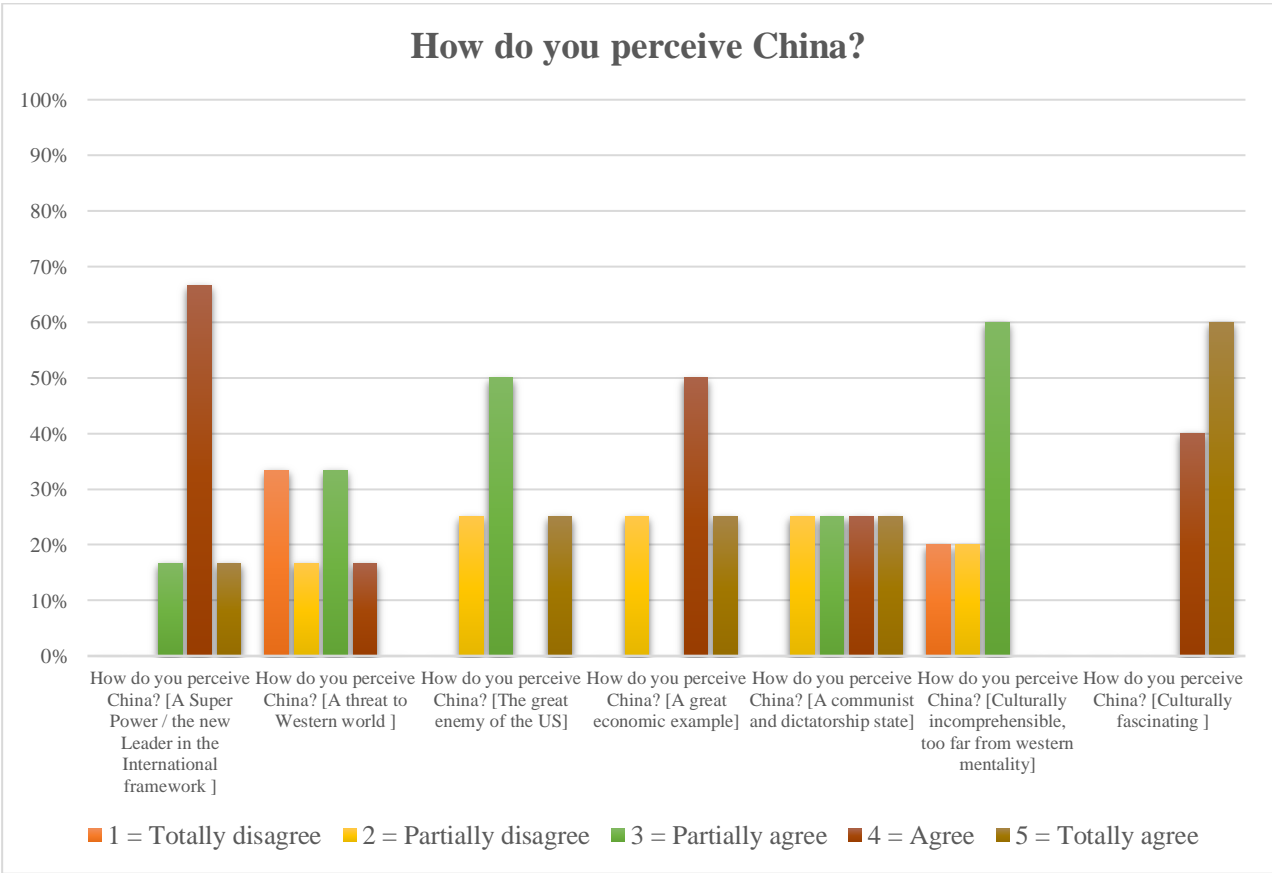


Figure 7: “How do you perceive China?”, Analysis of data, ICUL Survey

The General Survey’s data show that 22% of fulfillers totally agree on considering China as a superpower or the new international leader, 49% agree and 20% partially agree with this idea; the leftover 6% partially disagree and 3% totally disagree with this. The perceptions of China as a threat to the Western World are very discrepant: 22% of fulfillers totally disagree, 24% partially disagree, 30% partially agree, 22% agree while only 3% totally agree. Also, 12% totally agree with considering China the great enemy of the US, 24% agree, 34% partially agree, 17% partially disagree and 12% totally disagree. Although the majority partially agree with this

statement, the percentages' distribution reveals controversial ideas upon this issue. More homogenous are the scores conferred to the idea of China as a great economic example: 7% totally agree, 35% agree, 39% partially agree, 14% partially disagree and only 4% totally disagree. However, 32% totally agree and the same percentage of respondents agree with considering China a communist and dictatorship state, while 20% partially agree, 12% partially disagree and 5% totally disagree with this statement. It is also relevant that 10% totally agree with thinking China culturally incomprehensible and too far from western mentality, 13% agree while 37% partially agree, 29% partially disagree and 12% totally disagree. Quite numerous people, even if they are not involved in ICUL, see China understandable from western people; this can mean that the cultural gap is getting more and more thinner. Another important result is the percentages' distribution of China's perception as culturally fascinating: 31% totally agree, 37% agree, 18% partially agree, while only 9% partially disagree and 4% totally disagree.

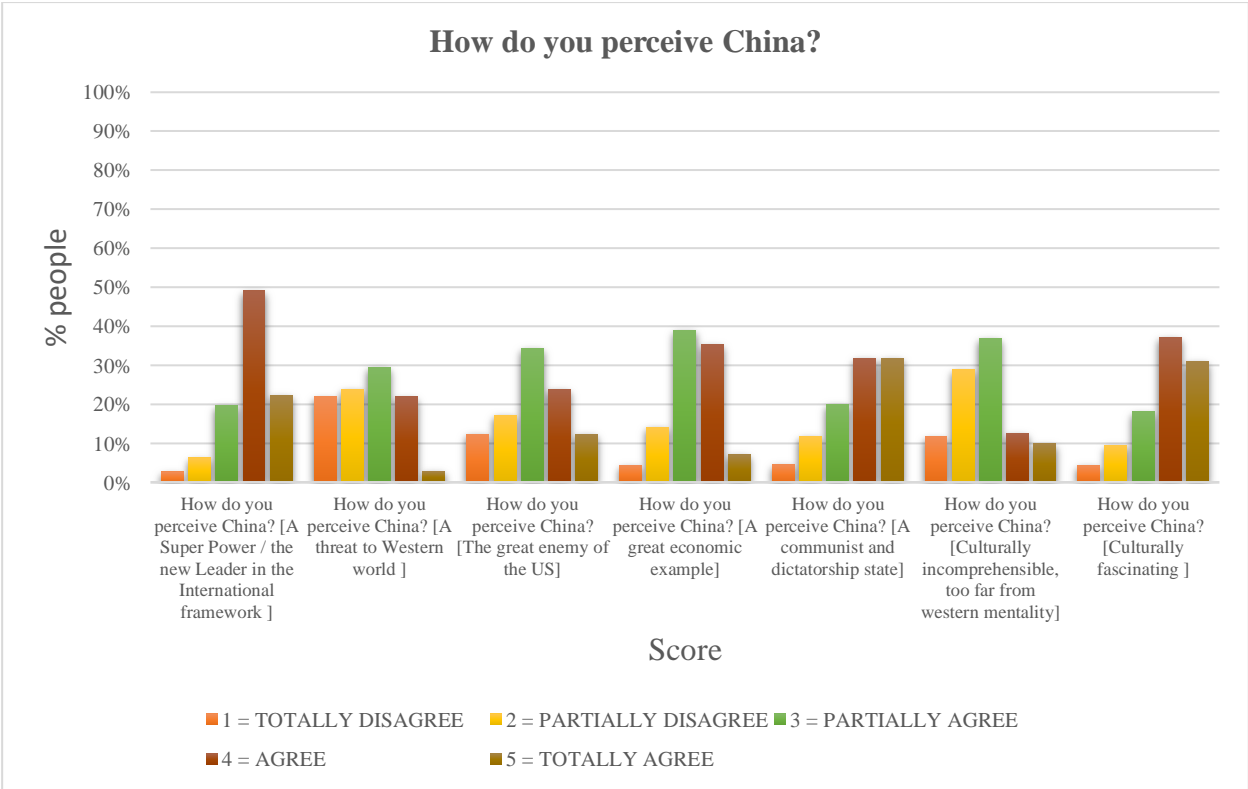


Figure 8: "How do you perceive China?", Analysis of data, General Survey

Fourth (4), it is particularly relevant in both surveys the framework of preferences regarding China. In ICUL Survey, 20% love Chinese food, 60% of people like it, and 20% partially like it. 40% like Chinese people and 20% partially like them; 40% love Chinese culture and as much as 60% like Chinese culture. Also, 60% of fulfillers love Chinese landscape, 20% like it and 20% partially like it. 75% like Chinese cities while 25% affirm to love them. 20% also esteem

Chinese international power and 40% like or partially like it. It is also relevant that only 40% esteem Chinese business and economy efficiency, 20% like and 40% partially like this aspect. Another important data regards fulfillers' preference about the Chinese government: 75% partially like Chinese regime and 25% Partially dislike it, while no one totally dislikes it. It follows 75% like Chinese martial arts and 25% totally dislike them. Finally, 20% esteem Chinese quality of life, 60% like and 20% partially like this aspect.

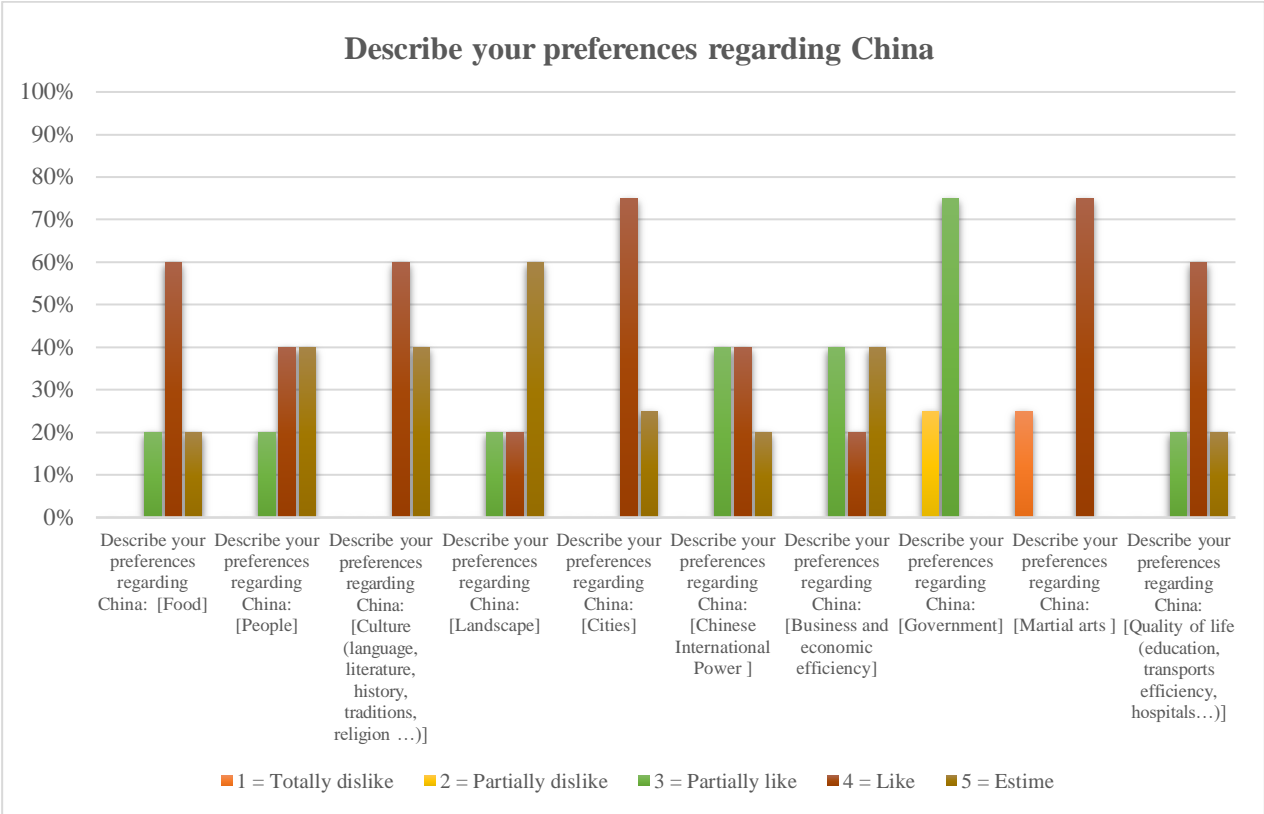


Figure 9: “Describe your preferences regarding China”, Analysis of data, ICUL Survey

The General Survey shows that 16% of fulfillers love Chinese food, 25% like it and 29% partially like it; 16% and 15% of respondents respectively partially dislike and totally dislike Chinese food. Also, 5% love Chinese people, 20% and 48% respectively like and partially like Chinese people; 15% and 11%, instead, partially and totally dislike them. 23% esteem Chinese culture, 43% like it and 22% partially like this aspect; only 6% and 7% respectively partially dislike and totally dislike Chinese culture. It is of particular significance the respondents' perceptions of Chinese landscape; 37% esteem Chinese nature and landscape, 34% and 21% respectively like and partially like it. Only 5% and 3% partially and totally dislike this aspect. Regarding cities, 14% esteem Chinese cities, 31% and 35% like and partially like them; 24% and 6% respectively partially dislike and totally dislike them. Particularly important is also fulfillers' perceptions of Chinese power and business: 14% esteem Chinese international power,

44% and 27% like and partially like Chinese power. 26% esteem Chinese business and economic efficiency, 46% like it and 21% partially like it; 4% and 3% partially dislike and totally dislike the Chinese economy. It is also relevant that only 2% and 12% esteem and like Chinese government while 35% partially like it, 29% partially dislike it and 22% totally dislike it. 27% also affirm to esteem Chinese martial arts, 29% and 27% like and partially like them while 7% and 10% partially and totally dislike this aspect. Finally, 11% of fulfillers esteem Chinese quality of life, 24% like and 38% partially like it. 19% and 7% partially and totally dislike this aspect.

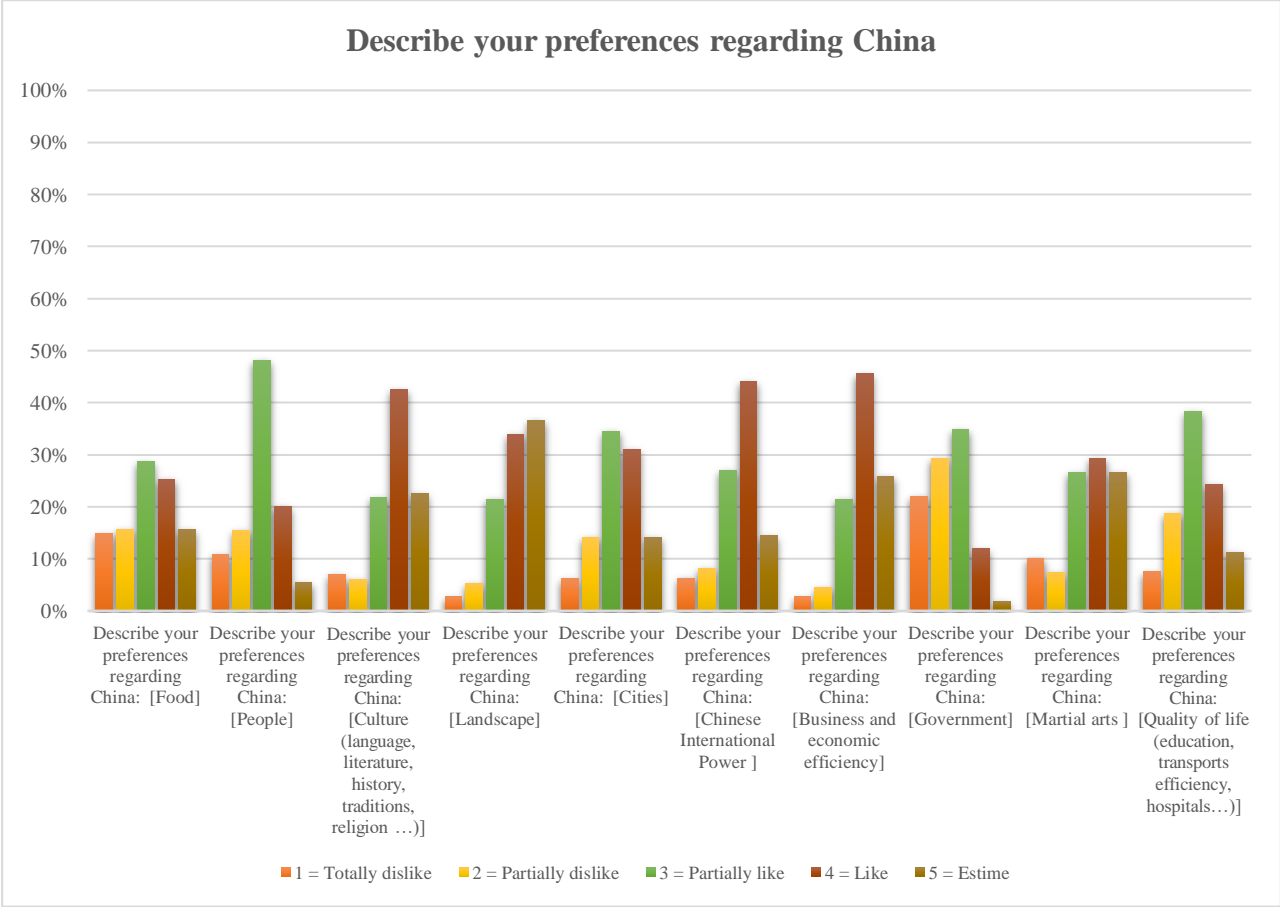


Figure 10: "Describe your preferences regarding China", Analysis of data, General Survey

Comparison of the relevant data

Both surveys have revealed some interesting data; first of all (1), comparing the reasons why people want to study Chinese (or continue to study Chinese) in the two surveys, it resulted that the questionnaires have a quite similar percentage distribution, especially in terms of interesting in Chinese culture and in doing business with China. There is a bigger gap in the usefulness of studying Chinese for a personal job career where the ICUL survey has the major percentage (22% against 15%), and in the appreciation of China itself (17% in ICUL survey against 9% in the General Survey). As already abovementioned, it is particularly surprising the percentage

gap in considering Chinese the language of the future: 23% of General Survey’s fulfillers against only 6% of ICUL Survey’s fulfillers think that Chinese will be the “new English”, and they consider this a valid reason for studying such a difficult language. Although this result may sound like a contradiction, especially in ICUL Survey, it can be read as a lack of information or an impossibility to forecast if Chinese will be the next “lingua franca”. Even if China’s rapid economic spread and demographic growth might have fueled the idea that Chinese could become the language of the future, this is still a speculative hypothesis. Therefore, ICUL Students have chosen to study Chinese mainly because of its concrete utility in business in the present and the attractiveness of Chinese culture; if it will substitute English or not is not perceived by them as a relevant reason, but rather as a possible consequence of China’s expansion.

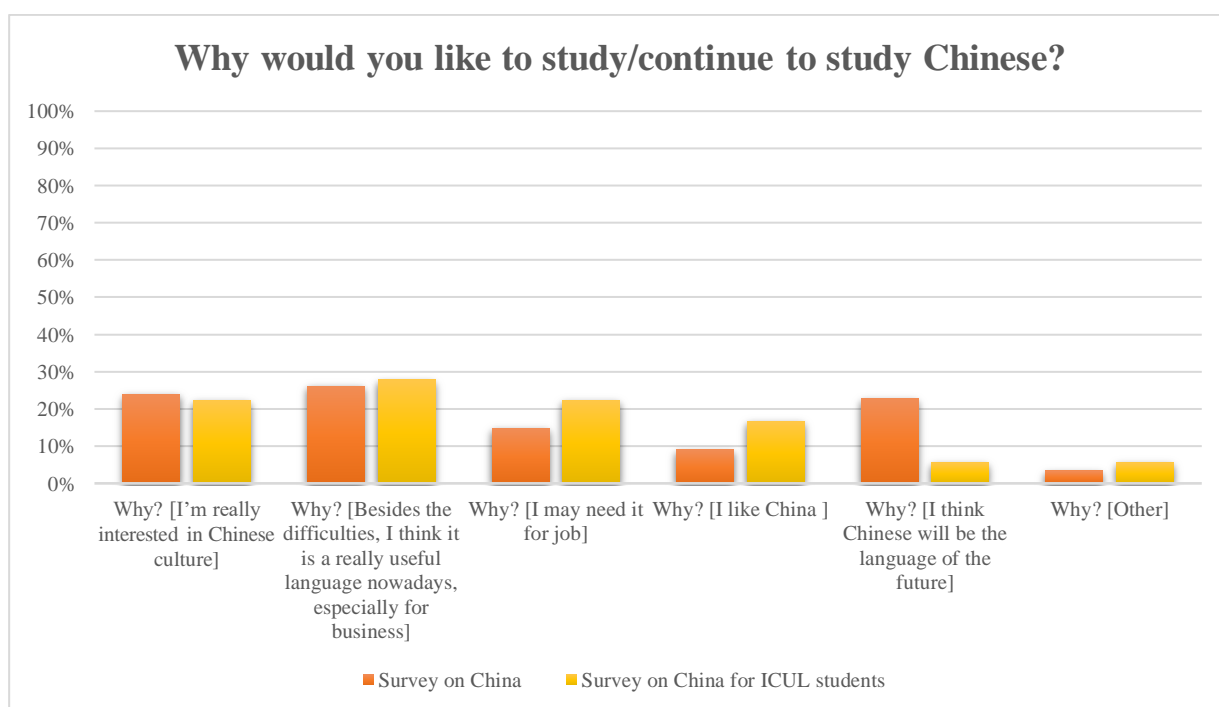


Figure 11: “Why would you like to study/continue to study Chinese?”, Analysis of data, Comparison between ICUL and General Survey

Secondly (2), it is interesting to compare the surveys’ results of Chinese culture’s influence on the fulfillers’ lifestyle; both surveys reveal that going to Chinese restaurants and eating Chinese food is the most spread Chinese culture’s aspect among the respondents. 21% of ICUL students against respectively 3% and 5% of General Survey’s fulfillers also like to listen to Chinese music and watch Chinese movies. Another fascinating result is the percentage of the interest in Chinese astrology and zodiac, which is higher in the General Survey (14% against 8%).

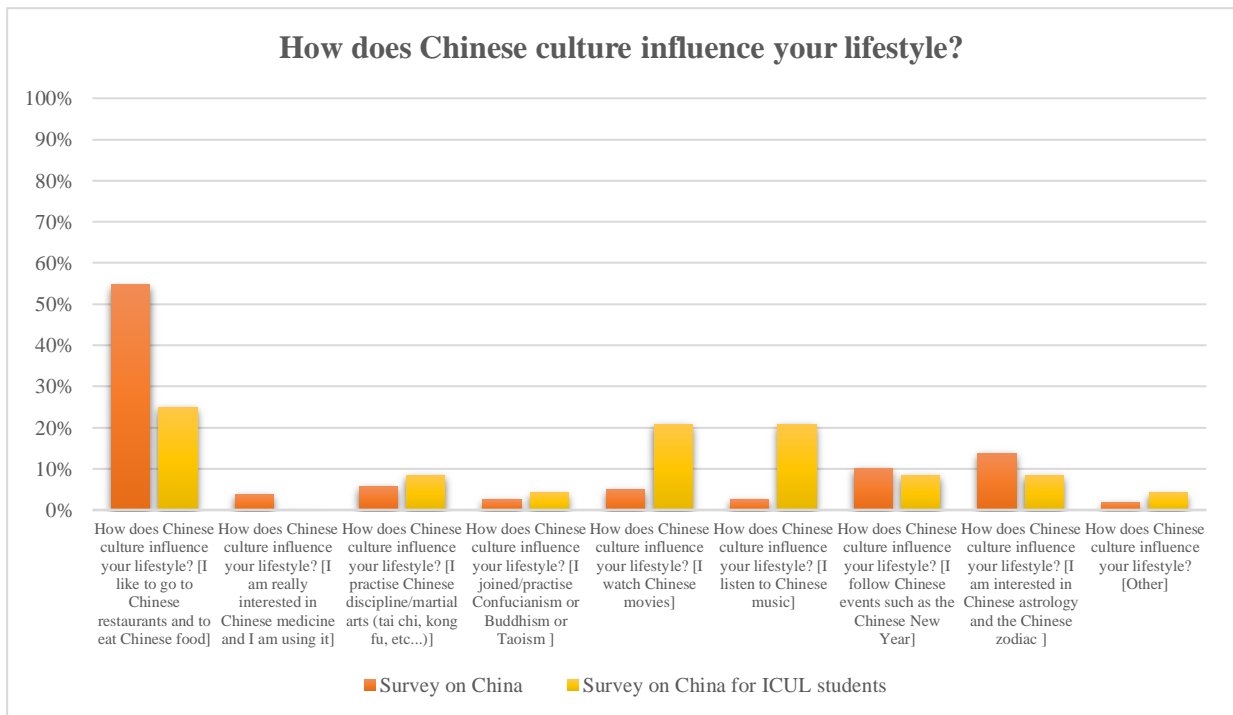


Figure 12: "How does Chinese culture influence your lifestyle?", Analysis of data, Comparison between ICUL and General Survey

Third (3), particularly relevant is also the comparison of China’s perception in both surveys; the majority of fulfillers in both surveys agree in considering China a great Superpower and the new International leader in the international framework. This means that this idea is already independently assumed by people, whether the presence of ICUL or not. The scores resulting from the perception of China as a threat to the western world are highly contradictory: in both surveys, the majority of fulfillers partially agree with this affirmation, even though there is a consistent wing that totally disagrees with this statement. In ICUL Survey no one totally agrees while in the General Survey a little part totally agrees in considering China a danger to the western world. This disparity among the answers reveal different perspectives towards China, even inside a Confucius Institute; as already deeply explained before, the establishment of Confucius Institutes has generated different and opposed reactions in several countries, partially because of a lack of transparency regarding the real institutes’ scopes. Related to this, there is also the perception of China as the great enemy of the US; in both surveys, the majority partially agree with this statement but also a consistent part totally agree with this idea, and in the ICUL Survey nobody totally disagrees. ICUL General Director has declared “Confucius Institute needs to increase communication with people and being always open and transparent to the community”, although he has also affirmed “until now I haven’t had any experience of hostility here (...) We feel that local people are very interested in cooperating with us and are very interested in Chinese culture (...) I really believe in a strong and good relationship between

Portugal and China, especially because this relation founds its roots in the hundred centuries of history; so, when I started to work here, I was pretty sure that I would be welcomed from the local people” (Director 2019). In general, people inside ICUL, since its opening, have always had a positive attitude towards it.

Despite the results of the precedent perceptions, the majority of fulfillers in ICUL Survey agree on considering China a great economic example, while the majority of General Survey’s fulfillers partially agree with this idea. It should be noticed that in ICUL Survey no one totally disagrees. Considering the interest of some in doing business with China or in using Chinese for a future career, ICUL students may be more attracted by the Chinese economic model and its recent rapid progress. While the most of General Survey’s fulfillers totally agree or agree in seeing China as a communist and dictatorship state, ICUL Survey has a very heterogeneous distribution of answers, showing contradictory and divergent results. This could be explained by the silent attitude of ICUL and in general of CIs about Chinese politics issues, which is an argument that is not supposed to be faced, but rather carefully avoided.

It is also relevant in both surveys that the highest percentages of fulfillers partially agree with the idea that China is culturally incomprehensible and too far from western mentality, but at the same time in both cases, they totally agree or agree on the fact that China is culturally fascinating. China’s appeal seems to be present among people whether the presence of ICUL or not; China is at the same time attractive but too distant and different to be fully understood from western people.

Fourth (4), it is of particular importance the comparison of China’s preferences in both surveys; a high percentage of both surveys’ fulfillers affirms to like Chinese culture, as well as China’s landscape and Chinese cities. A quite high percentage of fulfillers (in both surveys) also affirms to like or partially like Chinese food and people, as well as martial arts and the quality of life in terms of education, transport efficiency and health care. In both questionnaires, it is also very appreciated Chinese business and economic efficiency; although there is not a unanimous agreement on considering China “a great economic example”, Chinese economic efficiency and strength in the last two decades are evident and clear to all the other countries. Chinese government is the most abhorred element in the General Survey, even though a notable wing of respondents partially like it. More surprising is ICUL Survey’s result: 75% partially like the Chinese government, while only 25% partially dislike it. This outcome could be in contrast with the abovementioned results about the idea of China as a “communist and dictatorship state”,

which have revealed very heterogeneous and contradictory answers; this could be explained by the vagueness of ICUL in clarifying Chinese political choices (a topic which is absolutely avoided as already explained). Therefore, students' idea about Chinese government is also vague and uncertain.

The comparison of the two surveys shows some similarities, especially in terms of Chinese culture attractiveness; however, other aspects like policy, foreign policy and economy in both surveys are very conflicting and contradictory. For this reason, communication and transparency are fundamental inside a Confucius Institute, in order not to jeopardize all the efforts done to establish good relationships with a country. In this purpose CIs undertake the role of mediators between China and the rest of the world, becoming essential "cultural bridges". Taking into account their extremely important role in local communities, are ICUL and other CIs really able to be successful tools to enhance Chinese soft power? The next chapter will discuss the role of CIs, in particular of ICUL, in Chinese soft power.

ICUL achieves and failures related to initial China's objectives

Although the rapid expansion of CIs all over the world could be considered itself a sign of Confucius Institutes' success in spreading Chinese soft power, the study conducted throughout this dissertation reveals both achievements and failures inside CIs as well as in the Instituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa. Over the course of this analysis, it is possible to identify both internal and external strengths and weaknesses; in terms of internal matters, ICUL has been continuing to be a positive and a good mediator between China and Portugal, as demonstrated by ICUL Survey, spreading Chinese language and culture. Students interviewed have changed their idea of China before and after studying Chinese at ICUL, they have a larger comprehension of it especially students that have already been in China. An interviewee has affirmed "after studying at ICUL, my perception of China is much broader. The teachers do a wonderful job of explaining to us what modern China is like and also what traditional Chinese culture was like. I think it is important to study both the past and present" (4 2019). According to another interviewee, "before studying Chinese I had a very vague and unprecise idea about China, which derives mostly from news, media and internet. Now, after starting to study Chinese I have a clearer idea than before, I understand more Chinese people's way of thinking" (1 2019). Despite the great effort done by ICUL in order to make students understand China, they are still far from full comprehension of it. Spreading and promoting Chinese language and culture in the case of ICUL has certainly been welcomed positively by the community, but still

not enough to completely comprehend and trust the Middle-land because of three main reasons: firstly, the lack of debates and lessons upon purposely avoided topics like politics, foreign policy and China's position in international relations, impede China's wholly comprehension and knowledge (as demonstrated by the multilateral and divergent answers). Secondly, as soon as studying Chinese language is complicated and requires time and perseverance, classes are mainly focused on the language rather than history, literature and other aspects of Chinese culture; every year there are just several workshops, extra-activities, or events which present and explain different aspects of Chinese culture. According to some students, this is not enough because Chinese language and linguistic are only tiny fragments of Chinese culture: "here (in ICUL) I learned something about Chinese culture during extra activity, not during classes which are more focused on the language" (1 2019). Another student has stated "here classes are focused on the Chinese language, sometimes teachers speak about linguistic things, some history, but not enough. I know more about Chinese culture, literature, art and history because I studied them by myself" (3 2019). Another interviewee has also added "I learned a little bit of Chinese history when I was in China last time, especially about the Mao era, but from ICUL no, not enough. Here in ICUL, they are mainly focused on the language, they don't offer courses on Chinese culture. This is one of their lack in my opinion; I know that in other Confucius institutes in Portugal they do more courses and workshops focused on Chinese medicine and culture" (2 2019).

Thirdly, according to the General Director of ICUL, the quality of teaching needs to be improved: teachers are not often highly qualified and the majority of them don't speak English or the local language very well, a fact that is a barrier for efficient communication and interaction with locals. Moreover, "another weakness is the culture gap; most of the Chinese teachers have never taught or they have never had an experience in a foreign country before. They don't have any notion about western culture (...) In my opinion, we still need more qualified teachers that possibly have already been abroad, as local people understand China through the teachers here at ICUL (...) We have to be good enough in order to represent China" (Director 2019). He has also added "teachers need also to modify their methods in order to meet the students' needs; for instance, western students are more active than Chinese students and they like to ask questions, which is a challenge for the teachers" (Director 2019).

In terms of external matters, three main threats could undermine ICUL's image and reputation. The first one is public opinion in the local community; ICUL needs to take care of its reputation, to build trust, and if necessary to work against possible fake news or public negative image.

The second one regards Hanban restrictions; the limited resources, as well as several strict directives, could bound ICUL and also other Confucius Institutes' potentiality and creativity. In fact, materials and the majority of funds come directly from Beijing that distributes materials and capitals to CIs over the world according to the government availability of resources. In other words, this means limited books and materials, and sometimes limited scholarships that give the possibility to study in China. According to the General Director, “we can bring more external resources and invite experts from China in our workshops in order to increase cultural promotion; we can also do more events and shows. Also, in the future we need to teach more contemporary China: how does business and negotiation work in China, Chinese media and social networks, Chinese high-technologies, telecommunications, transports... Until now, we were focused on traditional Chinese culture, not enough on contemporary China. People will be more curious to go to China if we give them the real picture of the Middle-land (中国). However, the most effective thing is giving the students the possibility to go to China, so one way will be also offering more opportunities (scholarships, funding...) for the students who want to study Chinese there” (Director 2019). Also, specific directives from Hanban (especially regarding the attention to delicate topics like politics or foreign policy which should be carefully avoided) are certainly considerable limitations. The third possible external threat that might mine at the ICUL serenity life in Lisbon is the US-China hostility's pressure; despite the General Director's declarations underlining that apparently there are no minatory factors which it makes sense to be worried for, the institute should be always in alert and ready to react to possible signs of disapproval. The exacerbation of the US-China economic war, as well as political choices and even the recent pandemic disaster of Covid-19 started in China for debated reasons, are all factors that cannot be separated and ignored by Confucius Institutes, as Chinese government representations.

The compatibility of the ICUL case with general Chinese policy purposes for promoting Soft Power

All the discourse above has shown both achievements and failures about ICUL through an objective analysis of the institute's situation. Notably, ICUL is conducting an outstanding job in perceiving the general mission of CIs and it has already achieved significant goals in terms of building trust in the local community, promoting a harmonic and peaceful coexistence inside Lisbon University and also in terms of strengthening partnership with Portugal. Nevertheless, the analysis of data collected through the questionnaires and the interviews has shown in some

cases very similar data, especially about the respondents' perception of China and their cultural preferences; this result suggests that ICUL itself has not such a substantial influence able to influence the idea of China of the community and ICUL students themselves. Without any doubts, ICUL students have much more knowledge of the Huge Dragon (especially who has already been to China) and they are in general more aware of the Chinese world in all its contradictions; on the other hand, ICUL students and externals have more or less a very similar vision about China in terms of international relations and foreign policy. It seems that ICUL's existence is not a crucial element able to influence people's idea of China, even though it is an important component to keep friendship and build mutual trust between Portugal and China. Moreover, the incongruence and heterogeneity of percentages' distribution in considering China as "a threat to the western world" or "the great enemy of the US" in both surveys demonstrates once again the limit and uncertainty that concern the local community about those hot topics, which ICUL is trying to completely avoid. Both surveys' fulfillers, instead, almost unanimously agree on the idea of China as "a Superpower/the new leader in the international framework" which seems to be once again a global awareness that does not depend on the existence of ICUL. Also, the cultural aspect in both surveys is particularly interesting: the majority agree with considering China "culturally fascinating" but also a large part of both questionnaires partially agree on considering China "culturally incomprehensible and too far from western mentality". This confirms that China's charm and attractiveness are prevailing in the community and reflect people interesting in such a different world, as even demonstrated by the great amount of Chinese cultural influence in people's lifestyle. People love to go to Chinese restaurants, they like Chinese events and some also follow Chinese astrology, while a great number of people is interested in doing business in and with China.

Even so, people are far from fully comprehend China, included ICUL students; China needs to make a greater effort in order to make people understand itself. As already abovementioned, ICUL still needs to work on cultural promotion to reduce the culture gap, but this does not mean changing public opinion or people's ideas of China concerning about critical issues. ICUL and in general Confucius Institutes' mission is not trying to represent China as a perfect country, but rather to present the best part of it, communicating its cultural values. In this sense, Confucius Institutes could be considered as part of Beijing's great smart strategy, which includes soft power combined with other complex foreign policy choices. However, the study conducted in this dissertation shows that CIs themselves as singulars seem not to be key elements for enhancing Chinese soft power.

Therefore, how is it possible to measure Confucius Institutes' efficacy in terms of soft power strategy? Perhaps it is not entirely achievable, as only objective data such as the number of students per year or students' satisfaction with CIs can be analyzed. As demonstrated by this dissertation, people's subjective perception or idea of China has too many, and sometimes paradoxical, nuances. Thus, CIs and particularly ICUL as the case study of this thesis can be considered cultural landmarks and cultural mediators that will continue to spread Chinese centenary cultural values as better as possible, improving quality teaching and offering the possibility to students to do experiences in China. In the meanwhile, they also need to understand the country in which they are located and meet the local community's requirements. This attitude is the base to achieve stronger cooperation, mutual understanding and mutual trust, which is nothing more than CIs mission.

Conclusions

The investigation conducted through this dissertation was intended to study Confucius Institutes as elements to enhance Chinese soft power. First, the dissertation has introduced the general definitions of “Soft Power”, “Hard Power” and “Smart Power” strategies; then it has examined the history of China’s foreign policy and the use of both hard and soft Power strategies from the mid of XX century till nowadays, with particular attention to the growing importance of soft power in China and how Chinese vision of soft power has evolved during decades. The second part has been focused on Confucius Institutes, examining their history and the controversial reactions towards them all over the world. In particular, it has been examined one specific Confucius Institute as the case of study, namely “Istituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa (ICUL)” located inside Lisbon University’s Faculty of Literature. Through the data analysis of two surveys (one specifically addressed to ICUL students and the other much broader to the local community) and their comparison, the study has provided a general framework of the fulfillers’ idea of China as well as how much Chinese culture influences their lifestyle. The deep examination of results and their evaluation have suggested that ICUL cannot be seen alone as a key element able to expand Chinese soft power, rather as a diplomatic institution and an important tile of a huger strategy. Indeed, ICUL and other CIs operate as cultural mediators, landmarks and bridges, in order to increase cooperation, mutual understanding and mutual trust between China and the country in which they are located. CIs with all their imperfections do not represent China as a perfect country, but rather they try to offer the best part of China: its cultural values. In this sense, both ICUL and in general CIs perceive “harmony and peaceful society” which are the pillars of Chinese soft power, transmitting Chinese centenary principles and trying to meet local communities’ needs. Undoubtedly, CIs job needs to be improved in order to establish stronger cooperation with local government, build mutual understanding and mutual trust, especially in countries with complicated situations or countries in which there is a certain grade of hostility towards China.

The study conducted using the example of ICUL cannot be translated to a general scale but as a little example or a sample to reflect upon CIs role and to better understand a Confucius Institute’s job and its function inside great Beijing soft power strategy, or better, as a tool of Chinese soft power.

Glossary

Soft power: the use of a country's cultural and economic influence to persuade other countries to do something, rather than the use of military power

Hard power: the use of a country's military power to persuade other countries to do something, rather than the use of cultural or economic influence

Smart power: the combination of soft and hard power abilities in one country's foreign policy to persuade other countries

De jure: Latin expression which indicates to have a right or existence as stated by law, in contrast with *de facto*, which means existing in fact, although perhaps not intended, legal, or accepted.

Status quo: the present situation

CI: abbreviation for "Confucius Institute"

ICUL: abbreviation for "Istituto Confucio da Universidade de Lisboa"

CTM: abbreviation for Chinese Traditional Medicine

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