



The Economic and Political Attractiveness of China Grow Together

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Abstract

This paper proposes that, in the next decades, Chinese culture, values and even political system will be expanded as a result of its successful economic performance. This expansion will not only be the consequence of a deliberate plan, but mainly the effect of non-intentional dynamics linked to the appeal that those who economically succeed awake on others. In order to test this hypothesis, four interrelated points will be addressed along the paper. First, a short analysis of the projection of China in the world over the last decades will be made. Second, the sociological notion of the “appeal of the successful” will be examined. Third, the Chinese strategy of soft power to deliberately widen its hegemony will be studied, and finally, some conditions that favour the growth of Chinese appeal will be highlighted.

Keywords: China; Soft Power; Geopolitics; Hegemony; Economy and Culture

Chinese Projection

The projection of China in the world over the next decade has different dimensions in terms of its economic position, its effort to contribute to the development goals or its movement of population.

To begin with, according to *Foreign Affairs* (March-April, 2021), the communist party is confident to become the first world economy by 2030. Currently, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of China is 12.809.322M. Dollars in contrast with the 18.330.065M. Of the United States. However, looking at the evolution of Chinese and American economy since 2000, and their growth rate, the Communist Party’s forecast seems sound: Chinese GDP was about 1.000.000 M. whereas the American one was 10.000.000M¹. In line with

the economic success, China is—and it is expected to keep so—the first world producer of goods and the second of goods and services. The news broke in 2011 into the public, through a piece published by *Financial Times* that revealed a report of a United States based economics consultancy, IHS Global Insight. Furthermore, the *Credit Suisse* global wealth report of October 2019 highlighted the fact that half of the world middle class was living in China: about 800 million people.

Another projection related to China is related to Chinese diaspora and to Chinese students abroad. About 50 million Chinese lived overseas in 2019. Overall, the think tank *China Power* points out that China became in 2016 the first world sending country and the third recipient of international

1 *Expansion:* <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/paises/comparar/china/usa>. Other sources confirm the trend: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/CHN/china/gdp-growth-rate>; <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/CHN>

1 These data come from the specialized Spanish Newspaper *Ex-*

students. This mass of Chinese people indirectly strengthens the influence of China across the world. On another note, the project known as the “New Silk Road”-One Belt, One Road-is the largest foreign investment since the North American Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after the Second World War. This project, which will be explored further in the third section of this chapter, aims to create infrastructure to connect goods, people and culture between China and at least 60 countries [1]. China proposes that this project is, ultimately, a strategy to foster world peace through deepening trade and cultivating trust.

Another layer of Chinese projection has to do with the number of loans given to African countries. China is the first world bilateral lender of African countries: it has transferred nearly \$150bn to governments and state-owned companies. This dependence is a matter of concern for the World Bank officials dealing with the poorest countries’ depth as the loans do not seem to be very transparent and the interest rates sometimes are high. In any case, the growing influence of China over the region as a result of these loans is of

paramount importance. China’s role in international forums has been another area that unveils this country’s projection in the world. Especially during Trump’s mandate and-North American withdrawal from multilateral spaces, China became an active participant in many global spaces and international organisms. For instance, despite the ambivalent behaviour of China during the first stages of the pandemics, it may confidently be asserted that China is leading the World Health Organization’s struggle to create a common vaccine for Covid-19 [2] and is empowering the United Nations to coordinate the fight against the pandemics.

Following this last point, the economic recovery of China in the last trimestre of 2020 is astonishing. Whereas the rest of the world was in a clear recession-according to the United Nations’ department for economic analysis, the world output shrank by 4.3 per cent, over three times more than during the global financial crisis of 2009 [3]. China grew, according to the International Monetary Fund, to 6,5% during that period. In addition, it was the only powerful economy of the world with positive results during 2020 (Figure 1).



To end up with this first section, two last points are worth mentioning in relation to China’s projection. Firstly, China’s ideology is under scrutiny. The notion of “market” communism does not capture the changes that seem to be operating within China at this level. A huge country like China with a population of over 1.4 billion people needs a shared strong worldview that keeps social cohesion. This is the reason why the Communist Party turned to

Confucianism, in a search for identity, despite the fact that Mao forbade this religion [4]. The second and last refers to what might be considered the greatest success of China over the last decades. According to a report of the World Bank (2017), since 1981 China was able to assist over 850 million people to leave extreme poverty. In other words, 90% of Chinese population was in extreme poverty in 1981, whereas currently only 1% of the population is under that

line. Therefore, most of the victories attained in relation to the Global Development Goals were due to China.

The Appeal of the Successful

There is a sociological and anthropological notion that may be relevant to explain why it is reasonable to expect that Chinese values, culture and even its political system will become fashionable within the next decades. People unconsciously, intuitively and automatically assume that those whose economic performance is higher are cultural, politically and even morally higher [5]. This logic is shared by both capitalism and postmodern thinking. The former's materialistic perspective subordinates everything else to the economy and money, whereas the latter, apart from renouncing any possibility to objectively get closer to reality, underlines the fact that those who are in privileged positions impose by overt and subtle means truth claims. Thus, given that China's economic performance is admirable, that China is likely to become the first world economy by 2030, that China is responding better than the rest of the world to the pandemics, that its foreign investments do not have paragon and that its efforts to overcome poverty are the main drive of progress in the global endeavours to eradicate that lacra, it can be soundly expected that Chinese culture, values and ideology will also be the object of international admiration. In sum, the assumption can be framed this way: its economic performance is so good because its values, culture and politics must be very good too.

In the case of China, this phenomenon is linked to various social processes. From a very basic view, most people of the world are aware that China produces the majority of the world goods, as the brand "made in China" is everywhere: shoes, computers, masks, and smart phones. From another angle, a growing number of international companies have the seat or the main manufacturing industry in China. The rationalization behind globalization drove companies to China for two factors: production was cheap and hand work was good qualified. As a result of these arrangements, the heads of these international companies have to visit China. China is both a producer center and a growing market. This people visiting China, as a result of a factor of influence is associated with the fact that China's economy has become strong in technological innovation. Some decades ago, China was a producer of goods designed by others. However, innovation in China is in the forefront now [6]. The expansion of technologies is linked to the dissemination of the values embedded into the design and production process of the specific device. Cultural settings inform the sort of technologies that are engendered. Therefore, as China generates home ground technologies inspired in its culture and values, they-culture and values-will be diffused through the consumer countries: those who buy and use that

technology will be affected by those values [7].

Closely linked to technology, arts and media are also important vehicles to convey ideology, culture and values. The Chinese cultural and artistic industry-movies, songs, literature... is constantly growing so, the bigger it gets and the wider the audience becomes, the appeal of China will be enhanced. In this context, Chinese food, as part of Chinese culture and heritage, has become popular all over the world, in every continent. In addition, China grew to the top of scientific production measured in the number of published papers. Estimates vary but it seems that about 36% of world papers come from China or Chinese people [8].

China has also become a magnet for international tourism. In consequence, Chinese tourism industry has exploded. A McKinsey's consultancy research on Chinese tourism changes within China underlined the fact that "As many as 3.4 million rooms were built from 2011 to 2016, which is equivalent to the entire Japanese hotel market" [9]. This has entailed the creation of an environment that improves visitors' experience, as the lack of appropriate and comfortable hotels was one of the reasons why tourists visiting China were not so happy in the past.

Just in terms of numbers, according to the platform for macro data analysis, datosmacro.com, China was in 2019 among the top ten tourist receptor countries. The following chart, coming from the aforementioned platform, also shows the impressive growth of international tourism in China (Figure 2).

Apart from the growing number of international tourists, China also receives both expats to work and international students, as it was mentioned in the section about Chinese projection in the world. Those visitors usually leave China with a sense of satisfaction. A survey conducted by Beijing Municipal Commission of the China Communist Youth League in 2015 [10] with 900 expats aged between 18 and 35 from 86 countries is an indicator of the experience of those visiting China². The most attractive things about Beijing to them were the cultural atmosphere (34 percent), job opportunity (21.7 percent) and friendliness of people (20.2 percent).

Finally, even a cursory exploration of the reasons behind Chinese appeal cannot overlook the importance that China has given over the last decade to fashion and beauty pageant. Concerning the former, the China Fashion Week is well established in the world and twice a year Beijing becomes the attraction of the world fashion elite. In relation to the

2 All of the respondents had lived in Beijing for over six months, and the largest nationalities were South Korea (18.6 percent), the US (12.0 percent), Japan (6.4) and Canada (6.1).

latter, China is currently part of the international major beauty contests and tries to receive world attention for its

aesthetics. The meaning of this fact is better captured when Mao's prohibition of beauty contests is remembered [11].



The Resource to Soft Power

Soft power is a concept used in political science to describe the strategies used by States to expand their dominion and influence over other States, but without turning to force and coercion. In contrast with hard power, soft power tries, on the one hand, to enhance the appealingness of values, ideologies and National culture and, on the other, to expand values and even interests by subtle means. It is an attempt to dominate but convincing the rest that the behaviour which facilitates their dominance is what is best for them [12,13]. Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony is linked to the concept of soft power. Although the notion was initially developed to explain social change and to prescribe a path for political transformation within the State, his ideas on how changing the cultural dynamics is crucial to modify social structure and eradicate privileges seem relevant to enlighten Chinese efforts to reshape power balance and adjust global geopolitical architecture.

In a set of broadcasted interviews made by the Spanish Consejo Superior de Investigación Científica [14] in 2020, world experts such as Nye J [15] the creator of the concept of soft power, Liz Economy the Director for Asia Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and David Shambaugh Professor of Political Science and International Relations at George Washington University agreed upon the idea that China was not interested in soft power strategies until the beginning of the 21st Century [14].

The speech of the former President Hu Jintao in 2007 at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party

represented a turning point: The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture... We must enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country... We will further publicize the fine traditions of Chinese culture and strengthen international cultural exchanges to enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide (Wilson Center). In 2014 at the 18th National Congress remarked, on the same note, that "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world."

Before those milestones that entailed the take-off of Chinese soft power strategies, China was not very interested in soft power. Its conception was that through the economy and military power, hegemony and leadership might be achieved. This may be the reason why, initially, Nye's ideas on soft power did not fit much into the Chinese political regime: they were considered Western constructs. However, over time, people like the two last presidents of China came to the conclusion that soft power suits Confucius' ideal of leadership by moral elites [16].

This tension within Chinese elites about hard and soft power left an imprint on what can be named as Chinese strategy of soft power. Despite the fact that soft power is usually divided into

- Culture
- Foreign policy
- Political values [15]

China's strategy has revolved around the notion of economic diplomacy [17]. This means that Chinese soft power mainly relies on its story of economic success. The government, instead of civil society, internationally promotes an image of China as a humanitarian and committed actor: through loans, investments and promotion of international cooperation. Its international behaviour during the pandemics is another example, since China has tried to show that it is very concerned with global health and has provided masks, supported the project to generate a universal vaccine and has been very involved in the World Health Organization's endeavours. The next paragraphs will try to capture some of the main strategies of Chinese soft power that may be framed under this category of economic diplomacy.

To begin with, China was the seat for the Summer Olympic Games in 2008, just a year after the China Communist Party's National Congress that signalled the launch of its soft power strategy. In addition, China will host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Needless to say that sports in general and Olympics in particular are the opportunity to show the world the grandeur of a country. Millions of people come to visit, the event is globally broadcasted over weeks and everyone speaks about the competition, on the one hand, and the country that hosts it, on the other. These efforts are better described as National-branding campaigns aimed at increasing the "Brand China" [18].

Closely connected to the Olympics, over the last 15 years, China has been the seat of many international events and exhibitions, such as the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in 2014, the Natural Health and Nutrition Expo in 2020 or its biannual Miss World Pageant. Like the Olympics, but with less impact, these events brought the attention of millions of people who either came to China or watched what was happening there through the media [16].

Another initiative that has been amply examined and both praised and criticized is the Chinese Government's creation of over 500 Confucius Institutes (CI) abroad. Since 2004, when the first IC was founded after a pilot project, these Institutes have been the main vehicle to promote Chinese culture and language internationally [17]. Beyond its courses, the CIs offer grants to study in China. Recently, some programs, especially in North America, were shut down, under the accusation of being "proxies for Chinese propaganda" and infringing "on academic freedom" [19].

Another deliberate strategy of China to become "sexy" and subtly promote its values, culture and ideology is the use of media for cultural promotion. This is not new. Countries use media and arts to expand their value: take the cases of the United States of America through Hollywood production

or South Korea and Japan through pop music and culture [17]. In the particular case of China, two lines of action seem illustrative of this point. The first one is the co-productions that China has fostered with Hollywood [20]. Co-productions, especially between partners coming from very different countries and languages, are taught. However, Hollywood has seen this partnership as a business opportunity-investment, new market-and China both as a business opportunity-mainly to feed its inner market-and a strategy to promote its culture internationally. The second line of action has been the effort to internationalize Chinese television broadcasting and to translate Chinese main printed media into other languages [21].

Finally, the *One Belt, One Road* (OBOR) project needs some attention. This initiative, which is popularly known as the New Silk Road, aims to build a global infrastructure network. Considered as the greatest foreign investment endeavour since the Marshall Plan-about 8 billion dollars in contrast with the 13 billion of Marshall Plan, it aims to build a global infrastructure network [22]. Beyond this specific aim, the project seeks to present China as an international actor concerned with interconnectedness and committed to peace through the deepening of interdependence and commercial exchange. The project also revolves around the notion of approaching cultures for mutual understanding. If the expectations came true, we will have a kind of international community articulated through a commercial route that involves over 60 countries, 55% of the world GDP, 70% of world population and 75% of global energy sources [1,23].

After this rapid examination of the different strategies followed by the Chinese government to make its soft power grow, it might be said that the description of the experts pointed out at the outset of this section seems to be confirmed: all of these dimensions are money dependent and come from the Government. Therefore, the notion of "economic diplomacy" used to capture the Chinese approach of soft power appears quite precise.

Conditions that Favour the International Appeal of China

The world is experiencing important changes and the uncertainty reining many social spheres is paramount. This juncture, however, has generated certain conditions that favour the expansion of Chinese appeal. This section will address four of them: the USA's reitrait from international forum, the changing attitudes of youth towards democracy, the response of China to the pandemics and the affective polarization hitting liberal democracies.

In relation to the first point, Trump's mandate entailed a move from multilateralism to unilateralism in the United

States' foreign policy. He decided to strategically avoid certain international spaces, whether the World Health Organization or UNICEF, whether NATO or the World Trade Organization. Although President Biden has promised fundamental changes in this attitude, the vacuum left by the United States of America was filled by China. The symbol of this dynamic was the declarations made by Trump and Xi Ping during the Asia Pacific Summit of 2017. Whereas President Xi Ping emphasized the bounties of international cooperation for progress, President Trump asserted that the USA will not tolerate the abuses imposed upon it as a result of global trade norms anymore [24].

The second condition that favours Chinese culture appeal is the attitude of youth towards democracy. Youth in Western democracies, in contrast with their parents, do not seem to appreciate democracy as an end, a final value, but as a means to solve their problems. If democracy deals effectively with their problems, it is reasonable to support it as the best political system; however, if it does not, another system should replace it [25]. Surveys conducted in different countries confirm this trend; however, it must be said that sociologists of religion anticipated this phenomenon and associated it with secularization. Joas H [26-28] in particular, addressed this problem in several of his important works. What is important to highlight is the fact that within a social context where democracy is just a means, other political systems and values, like the Chinese, can be more attractive, overall when they are presented as higher in their problem-solving capacity.

Another factor that makes the expansion of Chinese politics easier is related to the coronavirus pandemics and the response of China. Despite the initial narrative of the lack of transparency and clear norms to control animal and natural exploitation in China, its effectiveness to reduce the contagious curve and to economically recover, its scientific effort to unveil the DNA code of the virus and the generosity of make it public for free, its support to the WHO and its diverse lines of cooperation to provide the world with sanitarian equipment, have generated an image of China as a reliable, capable and caring international actor. It is early to determine the image that China will have at the end of the pandemics, but there are hints to provisionally forecast a good end.

The last factor that seems to favour Chinese soft expansion is the growing affective polarization affecting Western liberal democracies. This polarization has become structural and is clearly recorded in different National contexts [29-31]. This pattern, in addition, does not seem to correspond to specific policies but to ideologies and identities. What is most relevant here is not polarization *per se* but the problems that it generates to articulate collective action and to address

complex social problems that require cooperation. During the pandemics, countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Spain or Holland have experienced higher levels of polarization than China [29], and this has reduced their capacity to respond to the sanitarian crisis more effectively. China is not free from polarization either [32], however, it has tried to avoid it deliberately to follow its own ideological path. In this last respect, there is no clear solution within China yet, as Marxism, Economic Pragmatism and Chinese traditional values are three sorts of ideologies or worldviews informing politics that are in tension, but the agreement to maintain an order that avoids conflict and polarization is promoting an image of China as an effective political actor [33,34]. This is manifestly in contrast with the image projected by many Western liberal democracies assailed by conflict and polarization in the midst of a unique crisis.

Conclusion

The Chinese political system will receive greater attention within the next decade. This attention will probably go beyond the simplistic perspectives that describe China as an authoritarian regime destined to fail as a result of the economic liberalization. This prediction does not seem to have occurred and, although it is difficult to anticipate the future, the evolution of Chinese political system will probably advance in a more sophisticated fashion than just a fall and an adoption of a liberal democracy. Apart from the political system of China, Chinese values and culture will continue to expand throughout the world and will become the object of admiration. The intensity of this expansion will probably be higher due to four interrelated factors analysed in this paper. The main reason for the admiration of China is its economic performance. People tend to associate economic success with moral, cultural and even political superiority. Although there is nothing to confirm that connection, it seems to operate in the collective imaginary.

The second reason is the Chinese apparent capacity to respond more effectively and in a less polarized manner to complex and interconnected problems that require cooperation and communitarian approaches. Both its response to the coronavirus pandemics and its mechanisms to overcome the resulting economic crisis are an indicator of this capacity. Most relevant current problems facing humanity, such climate change, poverty, movements of populations or international terrorism and crime demand collective, cooperative solutions. The third reason has to do with long term historical processes examined after the introduction-projections-that seem to indicate a short term projection of Chinese influence: it might become the first global economy by 2030; it is the main world producer, one of the main tourism industries, scientific producer, student exporter...

The fourth and last reason for this provisional prediction is the Chinese soft power strategy. Despite the fact that currently, Chinese soft power is led by the Government and is grounded on economic diplomacy, as China gains experience and becomes more familiar with soft power mechanisms, it will probably refine and make this strategy more sophisticated and effective, even involving civil society in it. For all these reasons, it seems reasonable to expect that the cultural and political influence of China in the world will significantly grow over the next decades, thus making an important imprint on the configuration of the world order already in transformation. A last point to bear in mind. When you see the Silk Road transporting goods, remember: there are powerful, invisible goods being transported too, namely, Chinese culture, values and politics.

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