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### Chinese Cultural Diplomacy towards Africa

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## Chinese Cultural Diplomacy towards Africa<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Within the international system, states focus on the realization of their national interests, evaluating their diplomacy, and regularly their cultural diplomacy. For instance, China exercises its cultural diplomacy, in order to promote its foreign policy's goals. The present paper initially attempts to define the complex notion of cultural diplomacy, which is a multifactor way of promoting intercultural dialogue and augmenting states' soft power. In particular, China's cultural diplomacy was the most suitable case study since the Chinese state, following the Beijing's Olympic Games, has been reintroduced in the international audience. Its reintroduction was achieved by practicing its cultural diplomacy successfully, mostly with Confucius Institutes' function, while being dominant in the international financial system. In the case of China's foreign policy towards Africa, Chinese cultural diplomacy was accompanied by financial diplomacy and led to a Sino-African rapprochement and to the creation of the Forum on China-Africa cooperation. It is vital though to consider if Chinese foreign policy towards the African continent is successful.

**Keywords:** soft power; intercultural dialogue; cultural diplomacy; financial diplomacy; Chinese cultural diplomacy; Chinese foreign policy; Sino-African rapprochement; Confucius Institutes; Beijing Olympic Games; Forum on China-Africa cooperation

### Introduction

Cultural diplomacy as an instrument of a state's foreign policy that can take many forms and at the same time used to different audiences. These ideal cultural diplomacy's characteristics make it hard to define this kind of diplomacy. However, a successful exercise of cultural diplomacy could augment a state's soft power and reinforce its foreign policy. China is a notable case of a state which exercises its cultural diplomacy multilaterally, having in the past few decades successfully attempted to reintroduce itself to the international audience. Specifically, the Chinese state achieved to be one of the dominant states in the international system by evaluating its notable cultural past as well as its financial development. At the peripheral level, the Sino-African rapprochement the past few decades is based on Chinese financial external policy. Adding to the financial sector, the Chinese state has orchestrated a promotion of its national culture and values and a Sino-African intercultural connection. Consequently, Chinese presence in Africa could broadly be characterized as successful since its foreign policy's acts are accompanied by a multilateral exercise of state's cultural diplomacy.

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## Cultural Diplomacy concept

One of the major international relations' theories, constructivism, highlights the importance of the "narrative". Forming a narrative could probably influence the international actors' notions and resolutions. Accordingly, a narrative could be shaped by a certain state for itself and determine its bilateral relations and its role within the international system. Therefore, if the narrative created for itself improves the state's image to the international audience, its foreign policy would be extensively supported. This condition can be described as a successful exercise of the state's soft power. Nye was among the firsts to analyze soft power and its contribution to the achievement of international policy's goals. Particularly, soft power is described as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than international coercion or payment." (Nye, 2004: 10). Certainly, hard power has a vital role in international relations, however soft power may also have a considerable role. This is because soft power would strengthen a state's negotiating place, while the majority of international public opinion would support its external policy's choices. Hence, in case of combining them, a state would be successful in its foreign policy. Parallely, a state's soft power could be enhanced through its public diplomacy. This kind of diplomacy as defined by Pasmatzoglou (2016) indicates, to international public opinion in order to gain support for a state's foreign policy.

Public diplomacy's section is cultural diplomacy (Pasmatzoglou, 2016; Simon, 2009). However, there is not a widely accepted definition of "Cultural Diplomacy". Certainly, a wide range of notions connects this type of diplomacy with any kind of cultural exchange aiming to a certain purpose (Ang et al., 2015). As Cummings (2003) extensively described, this kind of diplomacy,, consists of cultural exchange, including exchange of art or ideas among states' peoples aiming to foster mutual understanding. "But "cultural diplomacy" can also be more of a one-way street than a two-way exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or "telling its story" to the rest of the world." (Cummings, 2003: 1). Taking the second aspect into consideration, we can mention that cultural diplomacy, as part of public diplomacy, aims to attract foreign audience while presenting the uniqueness of a nation's cultural heritage, modern art or its cultural values and beliefs.

According to Arndt (2006: 18) and it's more inclusive definition "cultural diplomacy takes place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try to shape and channel this natural flow to advance national interests. In general, states could evaluate their cultural characteristics, in order to promote their national interests. Each state forms a coherent policy in order to acquaint its culture abroad. For example, there are states' public institutions abroad, promoting the national language or making

foreign people aware of the state's history and its modern culture. In addition, many states finance private initiatives aiming to the same cause. Concurrently, cultural diplomacy could be also exercised by non-state actors and addressed to a wide range of audiences (Clarke, 2020). Zamorano (2015) highlights also the role of globalization. Undoubtedly, we cannot put aside globalization which facilitates international communication, and as a result, of intercultural dialogue.

A state's exercise of cultural diplomacy is often supplementary to its foreign policy. For instance, China has had vital financial cooperation with many African states for the last decades. This development has been accompanied by Chinese state's foreign policy leading to a broader connection with African states.

### **China's cultural reintroduction to the world**

China has a long running cultural history, its past was characterized by notable dynasties and great discoveries such as gunpowder and printing. It was also the country that took the lead on the silk road during ancient times. Following the second world war, China's communistic leader Mao Zedong's subversive reforms regarded mostly institutions of social life. These reforms were promoted during the decade of 1960 and led to cultural revolution. As a result, the cultural background of Chinese was forced to change, neglecting their connection with the past, although honor of the past is vital for Chinese culture overtime (Furtado, 2019). Simultaneously, any kind of western influence was forcibly diminished. In this way, the modern Chinese cultural identity was formed. In the past few decades, following political developments and its surprisingly financial growth, China has broadened its intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation. Notably, China's thriving economy frequently seems to threaten the United States' financial supremacy, while attempts to reintroduce its national culture to international public opinion. As Lioumpas (2005) described, within the Chinese ministry of culture a plan for cultural reformation and development was set about two decades ago.

In general, Chinese cultural diplomacy is organized mostly by the state itself. For instance, the "Chinese People's Association for friendship with foreign countries", is the most important state factor promoting cultural exchange (D'hooghe, 2007). Additionally, the function of thousands of Confucius Institutes, and teaching of Chinese in many educational institutions outside China aim to promote Chinese language and Chinese cultural beliefs and values. The Chinese press in English could also introduce foreign audiences to Chinese everyday life and get to know its mentality. Furthermore, the international broadcasting of China Radio International and Chinese state television's broadcast in several countries (Zhang, 2014) emphasize on the fact that China has a considerable role in the international system's developments, hence the Chinese view on them has to

be mentioned. In the same field, D' Hooghe noted that (2007) the foundation of the International Press Center by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contributed to the state's communication with international public opinion. Moreover, as Caruso (2019) mentions, a certain plan aiming to the expansion of media's cultural content abroad has been approved by the National People's Congress. At the same time, intercultural dialogue deriving from interpersonal communication is also important for Chinese cultural diplomacy's exercise. For instance, think tanks' significant contribution in cultural diplomacy is noted by Caruso (2019). That is to say, Chinese scientists who operate abroad and interact with foreign scientists could promote Chinese culture abroad. Also, Chinese communities abroad, whose population is estimated by D' Hooghe (2007) to be 40 million in 130 different countries, could contribute to the foreign peoples' familiarization with the unique Chinese cultural characteristics.

While Chinese foreign policy was transforming, cultural diplomacy and communication with international audiences were significant for the achievement of national interests. The Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 offered China an opportunity to present its cultural identity to the world. Actually, the Olympic Games' opening ceremony depicted the Chinese glorious past and its symbols such as Confucius and the Great Wall, accompanied with a musical synthesis referring to traditional music. In this way, China's culture was once again set up to the world and as Hurn (2016) observed, its image towards the world was improved. However, Nye (2011) mentioned that social issues in China such as the free access in the Internet, were observable by foreign broadcasters and China's image abroad was damaged.

As for Chinese cultural diplomacy's narrative, the present state wishes to promote a concordant world, while supporting equal prosperity (D' Hooghe, 2007) Consequently, Bates and Yanzhong (2006), considered that this section of its cultural diplomacy address developing states, aiming to attract them with its successful financial model. The opinion mentioned before is in accordance with the notion: "Asian confirmation". With this notion, Huntington (1996) characterized the East Asian state's intention to promote the global application of their successful financial model.

### **Chinese cultural diplomacy towards Africa**

Contrarily, Sino-African relations were formed prior to the application of the successful Chinese financial model, as Yunhee (2018) extensively describes. As for financial issues, China has strengthened its financial presence in the African continent certainly during the decade of 1990 and the declaration of five-point proposal, during Jiang Zemin's presidency. This declaration led to the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation aiming for extensive cooperation in many fields.

Particularly, many Chinese investments in oil as well as in infrastructure fields have been made, contributing to Africa's development. Meanwhile, there is a significant amount of trade exchanges (Fijalkowski, 2011; Taylor 2006; Yunhee, 2018). Adding to this cooperation, China frequently offers financial assistance to the continent's states by offering loans or by relieving their debts. The most notable example is the loan's cancellation which was declared by the Chinese state during the first Sino-Africa Forum summit (Chaponnière, 2009). The lending is also remarkable, as Fijalkowski highlighted 80% of loans offered by state's Exim Ban were offered to African states (Fijalkowski, 2011). In accordance with Fijalkowski, Caruso (2019) notes that these loans are estimated at 130 billion dollars since 2000.

The Chinese presence in Africa is certainly enforced by cultural diplomacy policy. For example, Confucius institutes add to the Sino-African connection, by offering locals a chance to learn the Chinese language and by promoting Chinese culture. Another state's initiative is the thematic years' festivals, each one of them dedicated to a foreign state. In 2004, the festival was dedicated to the African continent and took place in many states, enhancing intercultural dialogue (Haifaing, 2008). In accordance, the institution of sister cities among China and several African countries has been established. As for the diachronic Sino-African communication, in circumstances where western media are few, as Zhang examined (2014), Chinese media have an intense presence in the African continent. The "China Daily Africa Weekly" and the China Radio International's broadcast in Nairobi, are remarkable cases of Chinese media's presence in Africa. In these conditions, "passage to Africa", a documentary depicting Africa, introduced the continent to Chinese, resulted in the augmentation of tourism in the region in 2006 (Haifaing 2008; Yunhee 2018). In interpersonal level, a year previous to the first conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, pieces of art coming from the African continent were part of an exhibition in the Chinese National Art Gallery. This initiative was considerable for Sino-African connection since, as Grincheva (2010) mentions, art is considered as national heritage. More recently, Caruso (2019) notes that during the COVID- 19 pandemic Chinese state has offered to the continent a great number of medical equipment.

Sino-African financial partnership is beneficial for Africa which as a region has to deal historically with financial problems. Certainly, this partnership also benefits Chinese politics, since China augments its foreign investments, and at the same could import the necessary natural resources and especially increase its oil storage (Taylor, 2006; Yunhee, 2018). Moreover, it has to be mentioned that by creating these diplomatic relations with African states, China's place within the United Nations is enforced. In particular, as Alden notices, African states' votes during the UN's General Assembly, could support Chinese foreign policy (Alden, 2005). Notably, African states tend to share



similar votes, and as a result, their votes are crucial. Typical examples of votes in the United Nations that favored Chinese policy are African states' support in the matter of Taiwan (Bodomo, 2009) and as Wenping (2009) noted, these states also supported China in the matter of violation of human rights. As a result, it is estimated that Chinese cultural diplomacy's narrative aiming to equal prosperity has proven real. Finally, the evaluation of Chinese cultural diplomacy was really useful for this rapprochement. This is because African and Chinese societies are really different, and a successful cultural diplomacy would bridge these differences and led to a productive cooperation.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, it seems that Schneider's (2006) unique article's title: "Cultural Diplomacy: hard to define but you'd know it when you saw it", was credible. Certainly, international public opinion could be attracted by a state's or an institution's choices, even if these choices are not defined as part of the state's strategy for cultural diplomacy. In any case, cultural diplomacy affects international relations intensely, even more in present-day when interconnectivity between state and non-state actors is wide-ranging. In these conditions, China the past few decades has been successful in augmenting its soft power while conquering global financial achievements. Accordingly, the Chinese state managed to shape stable diplomatic relations with the African continent and accomplish its national goals. The last two decades enforced the exercise of its foreign policy, making it successful. At a more general level, since the exercise of cultural diplomacy enhanced Chinese foreign policy, all states should evaluate their cultural characteristics and exercise their cultural diplomacy in order to achieve their national interests.

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