

# **THE SOURCES OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA: CULTURAL DIPLOMACY.**

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## Abstract

With the collapse of the Soviet Union China's involvement in Central Asia has increased. The level of Chinese engagement in Central Asia covers many spheres of interactions: from multilateral cooperation in regional security issues under the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization to bilateral and economic cooperation in energy and trade. However, while Central Asian leaders and many western experts credit China for economic benefits that it brings to the region, local experts and residents remain skeptical about the benefits that this close relationship with Beijing might bring. As the result, there is a perceived threat about the growing Chinese influence in Central Asia. In order to address the local fears, China has increased its soft power in the region. This thesis adopts Janice Mattern's understanding of soft power, as an inter-subjective experience. By examining China's concept of soft power and empirical data, the thesis highlights that China's understanding of soft power is subjectively based. Therefore, I argue that despite the fact that China consistently aims to enhance its soft power to combat its perceived threat perception in Central Asia, its attempts are limited because China has a subjective understating of soft power that ignores the Central Asian side.

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## Introduction

During the Soviet Union, Central Asia was traditionally considered as Russia's sphere of influence. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union has led to the creation of five newly independent Central Asian Republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Though the independence was imposed on those states, it was for the first time that they got to exercise a full control over their national resources and economic enterprises.<sup>1</sup> However, the initial years were problematic for the newly independent Republics because the leaders of the countries lacked expertise in guiding foreign affairs and the economy separately from the Moscow.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as the part of the Soviet legacy the economies of those states intertwined with each other and with Russia. Due to the fact that the regional infrastructure was tied to Russia, it allowed Moscow to exert certain level of leverage over their economies and foreign policies in general.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, other big neighbors such as China, Iran, India and Turkey reaffirmed their interest in Central Asia. Additionally, due to the domestic problems that Russia was experiencing after the collapse of the USSR, it was mostly preoccupied with its economic crisis and its political instability, which led to Moscow's *involuntary disengagement* from the region.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, this new setup has allowed the newly independent Central Asian states to exploit the presence of external actors and by this, gain agency where they became important actors in balancing among great powers and advancing their own national interests.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of good neighborly

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence," *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 108, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20045233>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Roy Allison and Lena Jonson, *Central Asian Security: The New International Context* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001), 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

and trade relations with new external actors has served as a way for Central Asian states to gain recognition and autonomy in the foreign affairs.

Currently there are many external actors engaged in the region, however China is considered to be the most active actor. China was one of the first states to recognize five newly independent Republics and establish diplomatic and trade relations with them.<sup>6</sup> The main factors that defined China's interest in the region until 2000 were related to the security concerns.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the western border that China shares with three Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan was not still defined. One of the first priorities for Beijing was the regulation of its frontiers and borders.<sup>8</sup> Thus, under the Shanghai Five Group<sup>9</sup> China managed to sign most of the documents on defining the border line with its neighbors: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

Moreover, apart from the border delimitation concerns, Beijing was also interested in solving a question of its western province, Xinjiang. Xinjiang is home to ten million Muslim Uighurs that are closer in their culture, language and religion to Turkic<sup>10</sup> speaking Central Asians. It is also a province, where the separatist sentiments are very strong. Due to the fact that after the collapse of the USSR Central Asian states were politically unstable, economically weak and preoccupied with state-building practices Beijing thought that under the growing nationalism those states could provide a supper to their Muslim brothers in their attempts to separate from China.<sup>11</sup> Thus, China made sure that newly independent Republics recognize the fact that Xinjiang is an integral part of China and that Central Asian leaders

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<sup>6</sup> Marlène Laruelle, *China and India in Central Asia: A New "Great Game"?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 26.

<sup>7</sup> Azad Garibov and Rovshan Ibrahimov, "Geopolitical Competition in Central Asia: The Dynamics of Relations with Azerbaijan," *Center for Strategic Studies* 9, (August 2013): 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Shanghai Five Group was created in 1996 with the aim to solve border questions between China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five was renamed and Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established.

<sup>10</sup> Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country, where the spoken language is Persian.

<sup>11</sup> Garibov and Ibrahimov, "Geopolitical Competition in Central Asia," 20.

will not give their support for Uighur separatist movements.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, China's engagement in Central Asia until 2000 demonstrates that in the initial years of independence and until the late 1990s a priority for China was the security issue related to the reduction of tensions with its neighbors over borders as well as the question of separatism in Xinjiang.<sup>13</sup>

However, when most of the border issue was resolved, the policies of Beijing underwent a shift from "maintaining a military readiness and deterrence to expanding trade and cooperation"<sup>14</sup>. Establishing close bilateral and economic ties with the region is guided by the general Chinese approach of opening up and the concepts of *non-interference*<sup>15</sup> and *peaceful rise*<sup>16</sup>. China views economic development and trade relations with the neighboring states as vital in solving its problem in Xinjiang. In other words, the logic follows as such: the more inter-connected and developed Xinjiang is with its Central Asian neighbors, the more secure it will be.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, by 2000 China managed to establish trade relations with five Central Asian states, solve major border problems and establish bilateral ties, which assured Beijing that Central Asian leaders will provide their support to China on the question of Xinjiang.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, in 2001 a Shanghai Five Group was renamed as Shanghai Cooperation Organization<sup>19</sup> (SCO) that currently serves as a multilateral framework under which China along with its Central Asian neighbors and Russia cooperate on the regional security issues. SCO aims at combating three evils: separatism, terrorism, and extremism.

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<sup>12</sup> Laruelle, *China and India in Central Asia*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Burles, "Chinese Policy toward Russia and Central Asian Republics," *Rand* (2007): 1, accessed March 15, 2015, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2007/MR1045.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2007/MR1045.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Non-interference concept implies that China recognizes the sovereignty of the states and will not intertwine in their internal affairs.

<sup>16</sup> Peaceful rise – the concept evolved as the result of the "*China's Threat Theory*" and highlights that China is a peaceful power that will not pose any security threats to the international system during the course of its rise.

<sup>17</sup> Laruelle, *China and India in Central Asia*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Garibov and Ibrahimov, "Geopolitical Competition in Central Asia," 20.

<sup>19</sup> SCO is a political, military and economic organization found in 2001, when Uzbekistan joined the Organization. Currently, SCO has 6 members: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and five observing countries.

Furthermore, in the mid-2000s with the growing Chinese domestic demand for energy and instability in the Middle East<sup>20</sup>, Central Asia with its vast possession of the hydrocarbons became a strategically important region for China. The region's resources opened up an alternative way for Beijing to achieve its energy security. Therefore, if prior to mid-2000s there were no energy pipelines crisscrossing the region, this has changed with the new decade.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in 2006 a new pipeline *Atasu-Alashankou* started running, which transferred Kazakh oil to China. Likewise, in 2009 a *Central-Asia Gas Pipeline* was inaugurated, which transferred Kazakh but most importantly Turkmen gas to Xinjiang in PRC. With the region becoming more important for China, Beijing started a massive investment in region's infrastructure such as: building pipelines, construction of roads, railroads, highways. These types of relations are not only beneficial for China, but also advantageous for Central Asian states because massive energy contracts and loans from China allowed Central Asian states to diversify their export routes, and thus, reduce their dependence on Moscow.

While in official accounts the relations with China seem to be beneficial, there is also another perspective generating from local experts and local residents. Due to the fact that China got more involved in the region and the Chinese people started to appear often in everyday lives of Central Asians, a perceived threat about China has increased.

Therefore, this thesis aims to unravel the following research question: Given that there is a perceived threat about China in Central Asia what does China do to diminish it? To address the research question I look at China's soft power in Central Asia. The definition of soft power as an inter-subjective experience outlined by Janice Mattern is adopted in this thesis. Thus, I argue that despite the fact that China's soft power has increased in light of

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<sup>20</sup> Gulf countries were traditional energy suppliers for China; however, with the Arab Spring and instability in the Middle East, China seeks alternative suppliers.

<sup>21</sup> Roman Mogilevskii, "Trends and Patterns in Foreign Trade of Central Asian Countries," *University of Central Asia*, no. 1 (2012): 10, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.ucentralasia.org/downloads/UCA-Trends&PatternsForeignTradeCA-Eng-May2012.pdf>.



local perceived threats, yet those attempts are limited because China has a subjective understanding of soft power that ignores the Central Asian side.

Consequently, I am going to look at Chinese concept of soft power and show that it is subjectively based. To support my argument the thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the locally perceived threats about China to show that there are local fears and suspicion generating in Central Asia with regard to China. Chapter 2 conceptualizes China's subjective view on soft power, which is based on Nye's conceptualization, and outlines a critique provided by Mattern, who takes soft power as inter-subjective practice. Chapter 3 looks at how China uses soft power in Central Asia through its cultural diplomacy and based on the empirical evidence I argue that Chinese view of soft power is mainly subjective and this is a reason why Central Asians are not convinced by it. In Chapter 4 I conclude that due to the fact that China did not take into account inter-subjectivity, its soft power is limited. Therefore, China's attempts to diminish a perceived threat through soft power might not eliminate it.

## Chapter1: Local Concerns about the Growing Chinese Involvement in Central Asia

Most of the studies conducted on China in Central Asia stress the positive impact that Chinese involvement has brought to Central Asia. Marlene Lauruelle in the book *China and India in Central Asia: a New Great Game* wrote that the relationship with China is beneficial for energy rich Central Asian states as China opens alternative markets for Central Asian goods and allows hydrocarbon rich states to diversify energy export routes. Additionally, Chinese investment into the region's infrastructure such as: construction of railroads, roads and pipelines is seen to contribute to a general development of the region.

Currently, China is considered to be a biggest trading partner for four Central Asian Republics, except Uzbekistan, and its role in Central Asian economies has increased dramatically.<sup>22</sup> Energy is considered to be a constituting part of the growing bilateral trade between China and Central Asia, which rose from \$460 million in 1992 to 46\$billion in 2012.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese presence in the region is set to increase even more. The last visit of Chinese Leader Xi Jinping in September, 2013 to four Central Asian states is an evidence of that.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that Central Asian leaders publically praise Beijing for its diplomacy and good neighbor measures, the local experts as well as local residents are not that optimistic about the increased Chinese involvement and question the real objectives of China.<sup>24</sup> Chinese business practices are seen to generate a negative image in Central Asia,

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<sup>22</sup> "China in Central Asia: Rising China, Sinking Russia," *The Economist*, September 14, 2013, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21586304-vast-region-chinas-economic-clout-more-match-russias-rising-china-sinking>.

<sup>23</sup> Fakhmiddin Fazilov and Xiangming Chen, "China's Energy Security Strategy in Central Asia," [www.chinaincentralasia.com](http://www.chinaincentralasia.com), November 27, 2014, accessed April 02, 2015, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2014/11/27/chinas-energy-security-strategy-in-central-asia/>.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Bedeski and Niklas Swanstrom, *Eurasia's Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or Partnership for China, Russia and Central Asia?* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 93.

“where suspicions of China and nationalist sentiments- are already high”<sup>25</sup>. The main areas of concerns for the local residents are: fears of Chinese migration, territorial issues, economic<sup>26</sup> and environmental concerns. Additionally, scholars such as Sebastien Peyrouse state that despite the fact that Central Asian states are benefiting from Chinese economic dynamism, yet a research conducted with the local think tanks reveals that there is also a fear of its “potential demographic and cultural clout”.<sup>27</sup> Some Central Asian historians argue that China’s presence in Central Asian has always been that of conquer and the one who seeks expansion and thus, Uzbek Sinologist, Ablat Khodzhayev raises doubts about Beijing’s good neighbor intentions.<sup>28</sup> His thesis has been supported by another Kazakh political scholar Andrei Chebotarev, who has added that the corruption in the region will further allow China to expand and thus, China will use this opportunity.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Kazakh analyst wrote an article for the local new agency, where he explained the fears of locals about rapid China’s rise. According to Ruslan Izimov, Central Asians, in particular Kazakhs fear having a strong neighbor as China near their borders.<sup>30</sup>

The International Crisis Group conducted numerous studies on local perceptions of China in Central Asia, which highlight a growing amount of anti-Chinese sentiments. Most of the problems are seen to be caused by the fact that Chinese companies and workers failed to build a connection with local populations.<sup>31</sup> Various anti-Chinese protests have taken place in three Central Asian states that share a border with China: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

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<sup>25</sup> “China’s Central Asia Problem,” *International Crisis Group: Asia Report*, no. 244, February 27, 2013, i, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/files/asia/north-east-asia/244-chinas-central-asia-problem.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Since many Central Asians are involved in the bazar economy, they fear that Chinese workers will take up their share in the already scarce market.

<sup>27</sup> Bedeski and Swanstrom, *Eurasia’s Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics*, 93.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>29</sup> Lyazat Taikina, “Kitaiskiy Gost: Pochemu Emu Ne Vse Rady?” *Raditochka*, August 22, 2013, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://radiotochka.kz/339-.html>.

<sup>30</sup> “Ruslan Izimov: Myagkaya Sila Kitaya- Na Pricele Sentralnaya Aziya,” *Regnum*, January 28, 2014, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1759411.html>.

<sup>31</sup> “China’s Central Asia Problem,” *International Crisis Group*, 14.

For instance, in June 2008 the protests against the central government ceding territory to China escalated in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, Tajikistan. The protests escalated due to the fact that the central government ceded one per cent of its territory to China under the border demarcation agreement, but the government failed to get a consent from the regional parliament in Khorog (under the article 82 of Tajik Constitutions the consent was mandatory).<sup>32</sup> Similarly, a year earlier a violent incident escalated between Chinese workers and locals in the southern city of Kulyob, in which locals showed a concern about incoming Chinese employers.<sup>33</sup> Chinese migration and territorial issues are seen as crucial elements that contribute to the fear of local Tajiks about China.

Meanwhile, anti-Chinese sentiments are even stronger in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Most of the protests that took place in Kyrgyzstan are related with the persistent public distrust for the mining sector. Even though locals are similarly skeptical of Western and Russian involvement into the mining sector, still most of the protests are related to the Chinese-owned mining sectors.<sup>34</sup> Chinese companies are accused of “growing of environmental depredation by Chinese mines, bad working conditions in Chinese plants, and Chinese businessmen squeezing out competitors with liberal bribes to officials.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, on August 26, 2011 around 300 workers gathered outside of Chinese owned gold mine, Solton Sory accusing China of ignoring environmental standards and treating Kyrgyz workers poorly.<sup>36</sup> Three Chinese nationals were attacked during those protests.<sup>37</sup>

Likewise, Kyrgyzstan is a state, in which bazaar economy plays a crucial role in country’s functioning and in business circles it has been observed that locals are sensitive to Chinese presence due to some commercial considerations. “Chinese migrants are seen as

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<sup>32</sup> “China’s Central Asia Problem,” *International Crisis Group*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Chris Rickleton, “Kyrgyzstan: Bishkek Missing Out on Gold Bonanza,” *EurasiaNet.org*, September 12, 2011, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/print/64161>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

competitors: hardworking, entrepreneurial and able to live and work in poor conditions.”<sup>38</sup>

The locals fear that Chinese workers will gain more share in the already scarce labor market and even advance in gaining control over important sectors of the state economy.<sup>39</sup>

Kazakhstan is considered to be another country in which anti-Chinese sentiments are very high. In 2010, a similar anti-Chinese protest took place in Almaty, in which nationalist political groups gained support from locals and accused government of reselling Kazakh lands.<sup>40</sup> Protesters screamed that handing Kazakh lands over to foreigners [meaning China] should be forbidden.<sup>41</sup> Hence, Kazakh historians explain that this attitude towards China is rooted in Kazaks who historically fought wars against China.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Kazakh citizens expressed a concern regarding the environmental problems that China causes by polluting the Kara Irtysh and Karamay rivers that it shares with Kazakhstan.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, currently China is present in Aktobe, oil-rich town in Kazakhstan, and residents that were interviewed there provided a list of negative factors that Chinese presence brings and among them were the accusations of Chinese in taking local jobs and providing poor working conditions for locals, which result in problems with health issues.<sup>44</sup>

Chinese migration adds to China’s unpopularity in Central Asia. A demonstration took place in September 2013 when Kazakh locals protested against the new policy on visa regulations for Chinese tourists traveling in groups.<sup>45</sup> According to the demonstrators, the new policy will make the visa process easier for Chinese tourists that will be traveling to

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<sup>38</sup> Bedeski and Swanstrom, *Eurasia’s Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics*, 99.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Kazakhs Protest against China’s Growing Influence,” *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*, January 20, 2010, accessed April 15, 2015, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Kazakhs\\_Protest\\_Against\\_Chinas\\_Growing\\_Influence/1944085.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Kazakhs_Protest_Against_Chinas_Growing_Influence/1944085.html).

<sup>41</sup> “Kazakhs Protest against China’s Growing Influence,” *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty*.

<sup>42</sup> Bedeski and Swanstrom, *Eurasia’s Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>44</sup> “China’s Central Asia Problem,” *International Crisis Group*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Taikina, “Chinese Guest: Why Not Everyone is Happy about Him?”

Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan will be hosting EXPO 2017<sup>46</sup>, where five millions of Chinese people are expected to visit.<sup>47</sup> As the result, locals gathered to protest about the visa regulations, claiming that if such loose visa policies would be adopted, then the Chinese people would want to stay longer in Kazakhstan.<sup>48</sup>

To sum up, various reasons account for the local unease about the presence of China in Central Asia. The alarming concerns are highlighted by the experts as well as local residents, who list a failure of Chinese companies to connect with local Central Asians, suspicions about Chinese expansionism, economic, cultural and environmental concerns as the defining factors of China's unpopularity in the region.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, local populations in countries that share border with China are skeptical about Chinese migration because official data is outdated and does not provide numbers about illegal migrants.<sup>50</sup> Thus, having a lack of accurate information about Chinese migrant workers contribute to anxiety towards China.<sup>51</sup>

### 1.1 Research Question

Therefore, given this perceived threat about China in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, what does China do to diminish this perception?

Chinese leadership is well aware of a growing Sino phobia in the region.<sup>52</sup> Apart from the fact that Beijing's envoy often reacts with the criticism of the Central Asian government for failing to provide a favorable investment climate, China has incorporated soft power in its foreign policy. Soft power concept was first proposed by Joseph Nye and implies an ability of

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<sup>46</sup> EXPO is an annual International Exposition that Kazakhstan will be hosting in 2017. For more information see the link, <https://expo2017astana.com/en/>.

<sup>47</sup> Taikina, "Chinese Guest: Why Not Everyone is Happy about Him?"

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> "China's Central Asia Problem," *International Crisis Group*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bedeski and Swanstrom, *Eurasia's Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics*, 94.

<sup>52</sup> Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, "China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies," *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, (2009): 24, accessed April 25, 2015, [http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/2009\\_BOOK\\_Laruelle-Peyrouse\\_China-Central-Asia.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/2009_BOOK_Laruelle-Peyrouse_China-Central-Asia.pdf).

a state to attract and co-opt in comparison to coercion. In recent years, China has been focusing more on its soft power, institutionalizing its priority in government departments and by funding projects abroad, such as Confucian Institutes.

However, in the following chapters I will argue that despite the fact that China consistently aims to enhance its soft power to diminish a perceived threat in Central Asia, its attempts are limited because China has a subjective understanding of soft power that ignores the Central Asian side.

## 1.2 Methodology

In order to address the research question a qualitative analysis will be employed. Primary sources will include the speeches of Chinese officials such as: Hu Jintao's Report at 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Xi Jinping's speech at Nazarbaev's University and various public speeches of Chinese officials. Through a closer examination of those primary documents I aim to identify what soft power means for Chinese leadership and how it views it. Since the political system in China is highly centralized and hierarchical<sup>53</sup> before moving to the theoretical part of this thesis; I uncover what soft power means for Chinese elite, and what importance they assign to it.

The empirical section will look at how China applies its soft power in the region, in other words, what Beijing actually does to enhance its soft power in Central Asia. The data would be gathered from the websites of the Chinese Embassies in Central Asia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Confucius Institutes, local Universities, and newspapers. I look at Chinese cultural activities, educational exchanges, Confucius Institutes and publications because in Chinese sources public diplomacy is a part of cultural diplomacy, and thus, those are the sources that Chinese themselves outline as soft power.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 89.

<sup>54</sup> In Chinese sources public diplomacy is a form of cultural diplomacy because in China many of the aspects that public diplomacy covers such as: TV, radio, cultural exchanges, and publications are classified as culture.

I also look at secondary data, in particular the website on China in Central Asia because it contains the useful interviews of Chinese officials as well as provides a valuable statistical data.

Structurally the thesis is divided into four chapters and sub chapters, whereas the first chapter outlined the negative local perceptions about China, the following Chapters look at subjective side of Chinese soft power because China views it as such, and through empirical evidence show that China is fixated on the subjective understanding of soft power, which does not take into account the local perspective and thus, it's attempts to eliminate a perceived threat might not be successful.

The cases studied in this research will be limited to three Central Asian States where there is a growing anti-Chinese feeling: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Those three countries share a border with China and the literature review shows that Sino phobia is higher in those states in comparison to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. While those three states had to negotiate border treaties with China and fear a transfer of their territory to their neighbor, the other two don't perceive Beijing as a power that can undermine their territorial and national integrity.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, these three states experience private enterprise trade and daily migration flows, while in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan agreements are mostly made with bigger companies and involve no back and forth migratory flows of traders and less private trade exchanges.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in particular there is a direct contact with Chinese businessmen in terms of small retail trade, while in Uzbekistan (with exception of tension between locals and Chinese traders at Karassuu bazar) and Turkmenistan it is limited to a lesser extent.<sup>57</sup> In everyday life of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan China appears not often because most of the business is limited to the interaction of the bigger companies and state owned local companies. However, the main reason why those three

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<sup>55</sup> Bedeski and Swanstrom, *Eurasia's Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics*, 99.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 98.



states were chosen for this thesis is the availability of the information. In countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan the access to the information is somewhat limited.

Therefore, while most works published on China's involvement in the region prioritize the benefit of the close relationship with Beijing, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature in revealing the other aspect of Chinese involvement.

## Chapter 2: Soft Power Concept in China

Soft power as a strategy to achieve a desired outcome has been widely practiced in the West, in particular the United States. Yet, in many Asian countries it has also gained popularity. China has been paying more attention to the development of its soft power tools. However, before moving to the theoretical section on soft power conceptualization, I believe it is important to trace what soft power means in China.

There are various reasons that can account for the Chinese interest in soft power. Among them, the major one is China's rapid economic development and military advancement, which resulted in some negative perceptions about Beijing internationally. China being very sensitive to its image abroad is aware about the increased threat perception about its rise.<sup>58</sup> In particular, the perceived threat about China's rise has developed in China's neighborhood.<sup>59</sup> Many of the East Asian states are feeling geopolitically uncomfortable having a strong China (both militarily and economically) in the region and thus, engage in counter-balancing practices.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, acknowledging this fact Chinese leadership as well as academia started emphasizing different strategies among which, a development of soft power is seen as a useful strategy in diminishing the perceived threat.

In order to diminish a perceived threat, a new foreign policy discourse was introduced in Beijing. While in late 1990s the official discourse described China as *responsible power*, in 2000 the concept of *peaceful rise* was introduced, and in late 2000s another concept has been developed, which explained China's rise as *harmonious*, implying that China will try to avoid any military conflicts with its neighbors.<sup>61</sup> This very particular discourse was developed with the aim to persuade China's neighbors of the peaceful nature of China's rise and that China will respect international law and not participate in military conflicts in the course of its

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<sup>58</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse, "China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies," 24.

<sup>59</sup> Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu, *China's Soft Power and International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 14.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

rise.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, apart from the foreign policy official discourse, *good neighbor policy* has been initiated between China and its East and Central Asian neighbors in order to assure them of Beijing's friendly and cooperative intentions. This policy is guided by the maintenance of harmonious relations with the neighbors as is a Chinese attempt towards a closer regional integration.<sup>63</sup>

Since the soft power concept was first introduced by Joseph Nye, soft power discourse started emerging among Chinese academia. For example, the number of scholarly publications and speeches with regard to Chinese soft power has increased from 11 in late 1990s to 518 in the year of 2007.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, in May 2004 during the thirteenth group session of Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, the two articles were published, whereas the former defined soft power as an international appeal and attraction of nation's development model, culture, values, the latter stressed the fact that China needs to cultivate its soft power.<sup>65</sup> The aim behind the soft power strategy was seen to gain international recognition.<sup>66</sup> Since the concept was introduced in China in 1993, a Chinese Professor, Wang Huning "suggested that culture could be a major source of Chinese soft power"<sup>67</sup>. As the result, more and more works are produced to point out the goodness of Chinese culture, which stresses the benevolent government, peace and harmony and respect for differences.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, many Chinese scholars see culture as a tool that could be used by China to cultivate its soft power. Additionally, many Chinese scholars emphasized *Chinese Model of development*, which could also be helpful in cultivation of attraction.

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<sup>62</sup> Lai and Lu, *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Tsai Tung-Chieh, Hung Ming-Te and Tai-Ting Liu, "China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia: Harmonious worldview and its impact on good neighbor diplomacy," *Journal of Contemporary Eastern Asia* 10, no. 1 (2011): 25-42.

<sup>64</sup> Mingjiang Li, *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* (Lanham: Lexington, 2009), 24.

<sup>65</sup> Lai and Lu, *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, 11.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Li, *Soft Power*, 25.

Meanwhile, the political system in China is highly centralized<sup>69</sup> and despite the fact that academia has made its contribution publicizing soft power strategy, yet most of the direct initiatives come from the Party. In order to understand what soft power means in China it is vital to identify what it means to the Chinese leadership and what role do they assign to it. One of the first Chinese leaders to ascribe the importance to soft power was President Hu Jintao. In his keynote speech to the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party Hu outlined the importance of soft power strategy in achieving a comprehensive national power.<sup>70</sup> Chinese leadership recognized the view that formulated among academic circles that culture could be the major tool of the Chinese soft power strategy. As the result, in his keynote speech to the Party Congress Hu stressed:

Culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and creativity and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, Hu has recognized the need “to enhance Chinese culture as the country’s soft power to better guarantee the people’s rights and interests”<sup>72</sup>. This view was also supported by Chinese Premier, Wen Jibao, who argued that soft power in China could be cultivated through the emphasis on harmony, which is highlighted in a traditional Chinese culture.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, in 2010 during the 22<sup>nd</sup> group study session of Politburo, Hu Jintao urged the party to make reforms of cultural institutions in order to develop culture, and thus, enhance soft power.<sup>74</sup> As the result, all attempts to cultivate soft power included government spending on cultural and educational exchange programs, internationalizing Chinese press and radio,

<sup>69</sup> Jan Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*, 89.

<sup>70</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser and Melissa E. Murphy, “Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: the ongoing debate,” in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States: Competition and Cooperation in Developing World: a Report of the CSIS Smart Power Initiative*, ed. Carola McGiffert (Washington D. C.: CSIS, 2009), 16.

<sup>71</sup> “Hu Jintao calls for enhancing ‘soft power’ of Chinese culture,” *Special Report: 17<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress*, October 15, 2007, accessed May 09, 2015, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/228142.htm>.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Lai and Lu, *China’s Soft Power and International Relations*, 11.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

establishment of Confusions Institutes with the goal to make promote a good image of China and make Chinese culture and language more familiar to the world.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, Public Diplomacy Association was established in December 2012, which comprises of scholars, experts working in the field of public diplomacy. The Association aims:

to enhance mutual understanding and friendship between China and the rest of the world, project to the world a positive image of China ... and create an international environment conducive to China's peaceful development.<sup>76</sup>

To sum up, in China most of the attempts to promote Chinese soft power are leadership driven and soft power is seen to be closely connected to Chinese culture. Chinese soft power relies mostly on sources of public diplomacy, which is a form of cultural diplomacy because in China many of the aspects that public diplomacy covers such as: TV, radio, cultural and educational exchanges, scholarly and newspaper publications are classified as culture.<sup>77</sup> Thus, it is evident that through utilization of Chinese culture, the leadership in Beijing hopes to address the negative international perceptions that China faces with the course of its rise. Meanwhile, the role of civil society in promoting soft power remains limited.

However, this approach of Beijing is criticized. For example, Mingjiang Li in his book *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* has argued that the link between China's soft power in its pursuit of a comprehensive national power remains weak because it is mostly seen as a defensive tool, which is aimed at changing misperceptions about China and thus, creating a better image for the country.<sup>78</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>75</sup> Shaun Breslin, "The Soft Notion of China's Soft Power," *Asia Program Paper: ASP PP*, (London: Chatham House, 2011), 7.

<sup>76</sup> "Introduction," *China's Public Diplomacy Association*, April 14, 2014, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.chinapda.org.cn/eng/xhgz/xhjj/>.

<sup>77</sup> Lai and Lu, *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, 13.

<sup>78</sup> Li, *Soft Power*, 22.

Chinese attempts to project its soft power were criticized by Joseph Nye. Nye has criticized Beijing efforts that aim to acquire soft power through centralized ways. In the article “China’s Soft Power Deficit” that Nye wrote for *Wall Street Journal*, he outlined that in fact all governmental efforts to enhance China’s smart power strategy find limited success and there is still a limited return on its investment.<sup>79</sup> Likewise, in the *Foreign Affairs Journal* Nye published another article “What China and Russia don’t get about soft power” where he indicated that in fact Russian and Chinese leaders are not right about the way they choose to accomplish soft power. Nye wrote that China is wrong thinking that “the government is the main instrument of soft power”<sup>80</sup> because soft power initiatives should come from civil society, individuals and public sector.<sup>81</sup> As the result, Nye advised Beijing not to look at the development of soft power from zero-cum logic, and insisted to be self-critical and try to match words and deeds, as well as allow its civil society to flourish.<sup>82</sup> The following section will discuss the theoretical framework that the thesis is taking.

## 2.1 Theoretical framework

In order to answer the question posed in this thesis, I will be applying a conceptual framework of soft power. The thesis aims to look at the concept of power from nontraditional perspective, which differs from the traditional exercise of force through coercion. It is equally important to look at strategies that states employ such as cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy in order to diminish a perceived threat. Therefore, in order to analyze the strategies that China employs in Central Asia to deal with perceived threat, I look at concepts of soft power and public diplomacy, which in Chinese sources is a form of cultural diplomacy.

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<sup>79</sup> Jr, Joseph S. Nye, “China’s Soft Power Deficit,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2012, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842>.

<sup>80</sup> Joseph Nye, “What China and Russia Don’t Get About Soft Power,” *Foreign Affairs Journal*, April 29, 2013, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

First, it is important to define power and what it means. Robert Dahl defined power as a capability of one actor to change or influence a behavior of the other one.<sup>83</sup> In other words, it is the ability of A to get B do what the B wouldn't otherwise do.<sup>84</sup> However, there are different strategies how states achieve those aims which vary from hard, soft and smart power strategies.<sup>85</sup> Joseph Nye was the first political scientist to introduce soft power, which he believes is a new take on power that is more useful in the current world order. Nye believes that the nature of power has changed and more and more states tend to employ smart and soft power strategies to achieve their aims. In his book *Bound to Lead* Nye drew a distinction between the hard and soft power, whereas a former is "evident in practices of threat, coercion, sanction, payment, inducements"<sup>86</sup> and allows the actor to get others do what it wants them to do through coercion, the latter signifies the ability of the state to get what it wants through non coercive means, such as: attraction, appeal, persuasion, and co-optation.<sup>87</sup> In other words, soft power according to Nye is the ability of actors to shape preferences of the other actors through alternative strategies that differ from carrot and stick model that relies on coercion.<sup>88</sup> In comparison to hard power, soft power "rises from attractiveness of culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and foreign policies (which are seen as legitimate and having a moral authority)"<sup>89</sup>. On those three resources Nye believes that the soft power of states rests.<sup>90</sup>

While Nye should be credited for acknowledging the significance of non-coercive means in achieving the desirable outcome, nonetheless his conceptual framework has some flaws. Mingjiang Li in his book *Soft power: China's Emerging Strategy in International*

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<sup>83</sup> Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957: July), 202.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 203. Yet, I am aware that there are other definitions of power, but for this thesis Robert Dahl's concept of power is more suitable because Chinese often speak of power in this way.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 6-7.

<sup>86</sup> Li, *Soft Power*, 3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 5.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

*Relations* questions Nye's approach for failing to draw an exact boundary between hard and soft power and thus, the question an author raises is "how do we know when exactly soft or hard power is at play"<sup>91</sup>. In fact the relationship between hard and soft power is way more complex than Nye has outlined. While Nye specified three resources upon which the soft power rests, it is questionable why those resources are the sources of soft power. Is it because they are "inherently attractive, persuasive and appealing in nature?"<sup>92</sup> In fact, same values such as: culture can also result in a conflict if used in a different social circumstances. For example, hard power can also produce attraction when military resources are used for peacekeeping operations.<sup>93</sup> In this case, this would mean that the hard power resources can also be considered as soft. Therefore, it is not necessarily so that those resources inherently produce attraction; as a result, hard and soft power should not be treated as such based on the resources.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, Janice Bially Mattern also problematizes Nye's take on soft power and the attractive nature of particular resources. Mattern is uncomfortable when Nye "describes the allegedly universally attractive values of cosmopolitanism, democracy, and peace"<sup>95</sup>. On contrary to Nye; Mattern sees attraction as a subjective experience<sup>96</sup> because the same thing can be appealing to some, but not the others. Given that attraction is a subjectively constructed what Nye implies about culture is problematic. On contrary to Nye's understanding of culture and countries' attractiveness as natural, culture and attractiveness are in fact constructed in a specific social context. Thus, Nye's conceptualization of soft power needs to be revised because the understanding of soft power and what is attractive and

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<sup>91</sup> Li, *Soft Power*, 3-4.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>95</sup> Janice B. Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium- Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3, (2005: June), 591.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 584.



what is not changes when social circumstances change. Instead, attraction could be better understood if looked at the specific context and not if generalized. Consequently, Mattern proposes her understanding of attraction as a “relationship that is constructed through representational force – a nonphysical but nevertheless coercive form of power that is exercised through language”<sup>97</sup>.

To produce attraction a communicative exchange is very important because it allows the actors to transform their subjectively held views about the words in public.<sup>98</sup> However, Mattern warns that not all subjectively held opinions become regarded as facts or truth. Here, a defining factor on whether some ideas will prevail over the other to become perceived as reality is considered to be a communicative strategy that the speaker chooses.<sup>99</sup> For Mattern, “realities of attraction are inter-subjectively constructed matrices of beliefs through which a population signifies things, people, and ideas”<sup>100</sup>. Inter-subjectivity implies that for soft power to be perceived as soft both sides have to view it as such. Therefore, considering all pitfalls of Nye’s conceptualization of soft power, Mattern proposes her model of understanding attraction, where she sees attraction as a relationship that is being “constructed through *representational force*- a nonphysical but nevertheless coercive form of power that is exercised through language.”<sup>101</sup> Since attraction is “socio-linguistically constructed through representational force”<sup>102</sup>, which tends to be “suffused with coercion”<sup>103</sup>, then soft power should be seen as a continuation of hard but by different means.<sup>104</sup>

Thus, taking into consideration the core pitfalls of Nye’s view of soft power and his focus on essentialist attractive nature of particular resources, this thesis takes Mattern’s

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<sup>97</sup> Mattern, “Why ‘Soft Power’ Isn’t So Soft,” 583.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 597.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 598.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 596.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 583.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

understanding of attraction as inter-subjective experience, which implies that for the soft power to be regarded as such and to generate attraction both sides have to view it this way. A close analysis of China's view on soft power outlined in the first part of this chapter highlights that China's view on soft power is similar to the one of Joseph Nye in the way that it is mostly focuses on certain resources and is subjectively based. The concept of subjectivity implies that for the soft power to be regarded as soft at least one side should regard it as such. Yet, it is different to Nye in that it stressed foreign policy goals that the soft power can help to achieve, while China also focuses on domestic objectives.<sup>105</sup>

The next Chapter looks at Chinese attempts to enhance the soft power in Central Asia and shows that China in its soft power conduct often disregards the other side. Thus, because the concept of inter-subjectivity is not taken into account, China's attempts are limited in the way that it will not necessarily diminish the level of perceived threat.

For the development of soft power, China has paid much attention to its public diplomacy, which is often seen as a form of its cultural diplomacy. Meanwhile, public diplomacy should be distinguished from diplomacy, whereas the former is about relationship with the publics in foreign societies mostly with individuals, non-official groups and organizations, the latter is about the relationship among representatives of states and other international actors.<sup>106</sup> It aims at communication with the public, engaging with them in order to bring them understanding about nation's ideas, its culture, national goals and policies.<sup>107</sup> Paul Sharp describes public diplomacy as a "direct relations in which, people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Li, *Soft*, 22.

<sup>106</sup> Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*, 5.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

According to Nye public diplomacy helps to build long lasting relationships that would create an preferable environment for the governmental policies.<sup>109</sup> Nye distinguishes three dimensions of public diplomacy: “daily communication (which will explain domestic and foreign decisions), strategic communication (where the central themes are developed) and development of lasting relationship with key individuals (by having exchange programs, training, organizing conferences).”<sup>110</sup>

Additionally, Jan Melissen in his book *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft power in International Relations* wrote that public diplomacy is one of the soft power’s key tools because the moods and opinions that are formulated among public are also important.<sup>111</sup> If anti-Chinese sentiments originate internationally in foreign communities, China sees it as essential for itself to engage in public diplomacy in order to transform privately held anti-Chinese views. Public diplomacy it is often equated with propaganda and nation branding.<sup>112</sup> Yet, it is similar to propaganda in that it persuades foreigners in their beliefs, but it is different in that you also listen what others have to say.<sup>113</sup>

Therefore, in this thesis I examine only part of China’s interaction in Central Asia, in particular how China uses public diplomacy to deal with the perceived threat. However, as it was outlined earlier in China public diplomacy is closely related to cultural diplomacy, which became one of the major instruments for Beijing to project its soft power. Cultural diplomacy is “the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding.”<sup>114</sup> Despite the fact that I look at the concept of subjectivity in the next chapter, yet an understating of public diplomacy as a two way dialogue is important and I get back to inter-subjectivity in the concluding chapter.

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<sup>109</sup> Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*, 11.

<sup>110</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*, 108-109.

<sup>111</sup> Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*, 4.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

To sum up, the theoretical framework that will be applied in this thesis rejects the essentialist attractive nature of soft power resources, and instead it looks at soft power and attraction as an inter-subjective experience. In the following chapter, I will be looking at the concept of subjectivity, and I will be looking at practices that China applies in Central Asia to deal with perceived threat because it regards those practices as soft.

### Chapter 3: The Sources of China's Soft Power in Central Asia

China's interaction in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is very complex and covers many areas: from bilateral ties strengthened by strategic partnerships to regional security concerns under the multilateral framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, in this empirical section I look at one aspect of Chinese interaction in those countries and that is China's soft power. Moreover, China's cultural diplomacy will be given a greater detail.

While for a long time, there have not been a clear picture on China's foreign policy with regard to Central Asian region; this has changed when Xi Jinping proposed a creation of a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). China sees Central Asia as an important region in realization of its SREB Initiative, which will connect Asian and European markets. SREB will be "the longest economic corridor in the world, which will continue to promote the spirit of the ancient route [Ancient Silk Road], will cover 4.4 billion people, accounting for 63% of the world population"<sup>115</sup>. The ultimate goal for Beijing is to reconnect its western province Xinjiang to the world trade.<sup>116</sup> Yet, the analysts working on the region warn that the biggest problem for the realization of SREB could become a growing Sino-phobia among Central Asians.<sup>117</sup> Given the importance of the SREB for China and current obstacles to its realization, such as negative perceptions of locals about China that has been aforementioned, China under Xi Jinping's administration believes incorporating soft power into its foreign policy is vital to counter this threat perception.

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<sup>115</sup> "New Silk Road: One Belt and One Road," *Confucius Institute Magazine*, accessed May 20, 2015, [http://confuciusmag.com/features/special\\_focus/new-silk-road](http://confuciusmag.com/features/special_focus/new-silk-road).

<sup>116</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, "China Re-Wires Its West," *China in Central Asia*, October 6, 2013, accessed May 17, 2015, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2013/10/06/china-re-wires-its-west/>.

<sup>117</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, "Looking West: China and Central Asia," *China in Central Asia*, April 16, 2015, accessed May 18, 2015, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2015/04/16/looking-west-china-and-central-asia/>.

### 3.1 Important attempts- Peripheral Diplomacy

Chinese leadership is well aware about the perceived threat about China in its neighborhood and thus, Xi's administration recognized the need for a better neighborhood diplomacy that will incorporate soft power. As the result, in 2013 Xi Jinping makes a very important speech at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference, where he points out that peripheral diplomacy is vital because it will allow China "to achieve the Two Centuries objectives and realize great rejuvenation of Chinese nation"<sup>118</sup>. Apart from modifying closer political and economic relationships, one of the aspects of this peripheral diplomacy includes increasing cultural exchanges between China and its neighbors because China sees it as a way to deal with the perceived threat as well as the way to reach its Two Centuries objective to the full extent.<sup>119</sup> As the result, Xi highlighted the need to strengthen publicity, enhance cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges, which all will allow China to establish a long term friendly relationship with its neighbors.<sup>120</sup> Xi acknowledged that China "should accurately introduce China's domestic and foreign policies, and well speak China's story and propagate China's sounds"<sup>121</sup>. Thus, Xi's speech is the evidence that Beijing sees a public and cultural diplomacy as a tool that will allow it to change perceptions of its neighbors.

However, prior to Xi's official visit to four Central Asian states<sup>122</sup> where he outlined China's foreign policy priority (SREB realization), Chinese soft power in Central Asia was very limited. In 2007 Niklas Swanström, a program director of the Central Asia- Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program published an article where he indicates that Beijing's

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<sup>118</sup> "Important Speech of Xi Jinping at Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference," *China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development*, October 30, 2013, accessed May 18, 2015, [http://www.cciced.net/encciced/newscenter/latestnews/201310/t20131030\\_262608.html](http://www.cciced.net/encciced/newscenter/latestnews/201310/t20131030_262608.html).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Xi Jinping paid an official visit to four central Asian states in 2013 before the SCO summit in Bishkek. This visit is regarded as an important step in China's soft power increase in the region.

cultural involvement in Central Asia is much lower in comparison to East-Asian region.<sup>123</sup>

However, this changes in September 2013 when Xi Jinping pays a visit to four Central Asian countries and delivers an important speech at Nazarbaev's University in Kazakhstan. The speech that Xi Jinping delivered at Nazarbaev's University was titled as "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future." This keynote speech is important for this empirical chapter for the two main reasons. The first reason is that it clearly highlights China's foreign policy in Central Asia, in which Xi introduces the SREB Initiative. Second reason is that Xi Jinping lays out China's vision how to achieve a friendly environment in the neighborhood, which will be done through increasing people-to-people contacts and through public and cultural diplomacy. In his keynote speech Xi said:

The over two-thousand years history of exchanges [between Central Asia and China under the Ancient Silk Road] demonstrates that on the basis of solidarity, mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness, mutual learning and win-win cooperation, countries of different races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are fully capable of sharing peace and development.<sup>124</sup>

Consequently, using such key words as win-win situation, peaceful co-existence despite of differences was done with the purpose to send China's message to Central Asians that China is a friendly actor and that the relationship with China is beneficial to both sides. In the final part of his speech Xi indicated that China aims to engage more actively in its public and cultural diplomacy. He said:

China will in the coming ten years, provide 30,000 government scholarships to SCO member states and invite 10,000 teachers and students from Confucius Institutes in these countries to China for study tours. I also wish to invite 200 faculty members and

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<sup>123</sup> Niklas Swanström, "China's Role in Central Asia: Soft and Hard Power," *Centre for World Dialogue* 9, no. 1 (2007), <http://www.worlddialogue.org/print.php?id=402>.

<sup>124</sup> "Promoting Friendship between China and Eurasian Countries," *www.cntv.cn*, September 07, 2013, accessed May 18, 2015, <http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20130907/102421.shtml>.

students from Nazarbaev's University to go to China next year and attend summer camp activities.<sup>125</sup>

Besides, during the SCO meeting in September 2013, Xi proposed a four point proposal that will help SCO members to promote development and carry forward the Shanghai Spirit. The fourth aspect of the proposal outlines the need that China sees in strengthening "people-to-people communications and non-governmental exchanges, laying solid public opinion and social foundations for the development of SCO"<sup>126</sup>. Thus, all attempts highlighted above indicate that soft power will be the major tool to project China's good image in Central Asia. In particular, cultural diplomacy is considered to be one of the core pillars of China's foreign policy in Central Asia that will allow Beijing to convince its neighbors of peaceful and harmonious China and enhance a better understanding of China. The further sections look at sources that China uses to enhance its soft power.

### 3.2 Confucius Institutes

Confucius Institute (CI) is the cornerstone of China's cultural diplomacy. Starting from 2004 CIs are operating all over the world with the first Institute opened in Seoul, South Korea.<sup>127</sup> CI is a public institution that is affiliated with the China's Ministry of Education and is dedicated to teaching Chinese language and culture to individuals in foreign countries.<sup>128</sup> They are partially sponsored by the China's National Office for Teaching Chinese as the Foreign Language as well as managed by the Chinese Universities that it is affiliated with.<sup>129</sup> On the official website of the Institute it says that the main objective of the Institute is to teach Chinese language and culture internationally, which will contribute "to

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<sup>125</sup> "Promoting Friendship between China and Eurasian Countries."

<sup>126</sup> "Xi Jinping Delivers Speech at SCO Summit, and Raises Four-Point Proposal," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, September 13, 2013, accessed May 19, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh\\_665686/t1077762.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1077762.shtml).

<sup>127</sup> "The Future of China's Confucius Institutes," *The Diplomat*, September 30, 2014, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/the-future-of-chinas-confucius-institutes/>.

<sup>128</sup> "About us", [www.hanban.org](http://www.hanban.org), accessed May 18, 2015, [http://english.hanban.org/node\\_7719.htm](http://english.hanban.org/node_7719.htm).

<sup>129</sup> Lai and Lu, *China's Soft Power and International Relations*, 13.



the development of multiculturalism and building of a harmonious world.”<sup>130</sup> The Institute relies on Confucian teachings and his core principles that stress humanity, education and harmony. Those principles are seen to have a virtuous appeal and thus, generate a feeling of attraction in foreign individuals.<sup>131</sup> Thus, a strategic objective behind CI initiative is “emphasizing a globally benign image of China”<sup>132</sup>.

CI serves as a cultural platform for China to interact with the world. The activities of the Institute include: teaching Mandarin Chinese to foreigners, conducting language competitions, organizing Cultural weeks and festivals, but most importantly assisting the young individuals in the application process to the summer camps to spend two weeks in China where students practice Chinese language and experience culture.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, since the Institute is partially managed by the Universities in China, the qualified students (those that pass Chinese Proficiency Test) are eligible to go one year academic exchange to study in China. However, while the policy to open CI worldwide has been adopted in 2004, in Central Asia such Institutes appeared just recently.

Currently, there are only eight CIs opened in three countries that I have chosen for the case study. The biggest number of Institutes and Confucius Classrooms are opened in Kyrgyzstan. China and Kyrgyzstan have very close trade relations. For instance, in 2010 61% of Kyrgyz exports came from China.<sup>134</sup> Currently, there are three CIs and 12 Confucius Classrooms in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>135</sup> Chris Rickleton, a Central Asian politics analyst wrote in 2011

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<sup>130</sup> “About us”, [www.hanban.org](http://www.hanban.org).

<sup>131</sup> Parama Sinha Pali, “China’s Cultural Diplomacy: Historical Origin, Modern Methods and Strategic Outcomes,” *China Research Center* 12, no. 2 (2013), accessed May 19, 2015, [http://www.chinacenter.net/2014/china\\_currents/12-2/chinas-cultural-diplomacy-historical-origin-modern-methods-and-strategic-outcomes/](http://www.chinacenter.net/2014/china_currents/12-2/chinas-cultural-diplomacy-historical-origin-modern-methods-and-strategic-outcomes/).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, Alexandros Petersen, “China is the Power of the Future in Central Asia,” [www.chinaincentralasia.com](http://www.chinaincentralasia.com), November 23, 2011, accessed May 19, 2015, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2011/11/23/china-is-the-power-o-the-future-in-central-asia/>.

<sup>135</sup> Confucius Institute Online, accessed May 18, 2015, [http://www.chinesecio.com/m/cio\\_wci](http://www.chinesecio.com/m/cio_wci).

that over 3000 locals attend CIs in Bishkek.<sup>136</sup> Similarly, a President of the Humanities University commented that every year about 100 graduates from his university go to China, as well as every year about 50 young Mandarin speakers are funded by Beijing through SCO travel grants and Kyrgyz President's office to go for one year exchange to China.<sup>137</sup> Likewise, there is an opportunity to go for one year exchange for students who do not speak Mandarin Chinese. Those opportunities are for the students coming from wealthy Kyrgyz families and thus, are required to pay \$9000.<sup>138</sup>

However, the number of visitors of CIs is set to increase with another Institute opened in the south of Kyrgyzstan, in the city of Osh. The recent CI at Osh State University was inaugurated prior to Xi Jinping's visit to Kyrgyzstan in 2013.<sup>139</sup> An interesting correlation could be observed in that CIs are very active in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad, which China considers as important trading cities located in the south of Kyrgyzstan. Apart from the large Dordoi Market located in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, there is another big market that imports Chinese goods to Kyrgyzstan called Kara-Suu. Many anti-Chinese sentiments generate among workers of those markets usually due to the fact that Chinese people are blamed to take over the jobs of locals. As the result, CIs are very active in the south of Kyrgyzstan and reach out not only to the cities they are assigned to, but also to rural areas. For example, a CI located at the Humanities University in Bishkek organized a ten day Chinese Culture Week at Jalal-Abad.<sup>140</sup> During this cultural week, visitors were exposed to Chinese culture and article posted on the website of CI says that visitors took an active part in all activities and were

<sup>136</sup> Chris Rickleton, "Kyrgyzstan: China Expanding Influence, One Student at a Time," [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org), January 4, 2012, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64788>.

<sup>137</sup> Rickleton, "Kyrgyzstan: China Expanding Influence, One Student at a Time."

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> "China and Kyrgyzstan," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, accessed May 20, 2015, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zzjg\\_663340/dozys\\_664276/gjlb\\_664280/3185\\_664332/](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/dozys_664276/gjlb_664280/3185_664332/).

<sup>140</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Episode of Series Report on Chinese Culture Week Held by the Confucius Institute at Bishkek Humanities University in Jalalabad," *Hanban News*, April 30, 2012, accessed May 19, 2015, [http://english.hanban.org/article/2012-03/30/content\\_425791.htm](http://english.hanban.org/article/2012-03/30/content_425791.htm).

fascinated by charm of Chinese culture.<sup>141</sup> Beijing believes that such practices are beneficial for changing perceptions of locals about China. In other words, China believes that the better and deeper the understanding of China, the more chance there is for Beijing to decrease the level of distrust among Kyrgyz.

However, while it is much easier to open an Institute in Kyrgyzstan due to its political environment, China is also very active in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is important for China due to the vast natural resources that the country possesses. Currently, there are four Confucius Institutes running in Kazakhstan. The largest and the most recent one was opened at Aktobe State Pedagogical Institute. Aktobe is an oil rich city of Kazakhstan, where Chinese presence felt the most as well as local anti-Chinese sentiments are the strongest.<sup>142</sup> Due to the possession of the vast oil reserves among all foreign companies China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is considered to be the biggest player in the city. Kazakh people that are hired by the company often complain and protest about terrible working conditions and low salaries that the Chinese company provides for its employers.<sup>143</sup>

As the result, Beijing inaugurated a CI at Aktobe, and conducted many cultural activities that involve students and workers. For example, out of 38 students from Regional State University that applied for the grants to study in China, 35 were selected for the academic year of 2014-2015.<sup>144</sup> In 2014 21 students and teachers from Universities of Aktobe and Atyrau were selected to go for the summer camps to Urumqi.<sup>145</sup> However, not only are students sponsored to go on exchange programs but also employers working for

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<sup>141</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Episode of Series Report on Chinese Culture Week Held by the Confucius Institute at Bishkek Humanities University in Jalalabad."

<sup>142</sup> Aktobe is not only an economically important city for China, but also as it been outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, it is the city where locally perceived threat about China is the strongest. In the past two years there have been many anti-Chinese demonstrations and the locals complained that Chinese taking local jobs and providing poor working conditions, which might result in environmental pollution and health issues.

<sup>143</sup> David Greene, "As China Invests, Many Kazakhs Say: Not Too Fast," *www.npr.org*, June 07, 2011, accessed May 19, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/07/136822829/as-china-invests-many-kazakhs-say-not-too-fast>.

<sup>144</sup> "Scholarships of the Confucius Institute," *www.arsu.kz*, June 19, 2014, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://arsu.kz/en/content/scholarships-confucius-institute>.

<sup>145</sup> "Summer Camp in China," *www.arsu.kz*, June 19, 2014, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://arsu.kz/en/content/summer-camp-china>.

Chinese companies.<sup>146</sup> Scholarships are available for potential workers, who are first assigned to finish language courses at the CI and then have a chance to go to China for an exchange. Upon their return, the workers are often hired by the Chinese Companies such as: “Aktobe Branch of CNPC, Sinopec Intentional oil Project, China-Kazakhstan Greatwall Drilling Co., Ltd, CNPC Xibu Drilling Dongfang Petroleum Technology Service Co., Ltd”<sup>147</sup>. Those companies hire about forty local students each year.<sup>148</sup> According the Kazakh Ministry of Education there are currently 7,500 Kazakh students studying in China.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, this indicates that many Central Asian young individuals find China as an attractive destination to get an education, which in turn signifies partial success of the Beijing’s public diplomacy. Moreover, the data outlined above indicates that in the cities that Beijing views as important for its development, it is very active addressing the problem of perceived threat among locals through educational and cultural exchanges.

Meanwhile, Tajikistan is the country with the lowest number of CIs. There is only one CI opened at Tajik National University, and the website of the Institute is empty.<sup>150</sup> The Institute is poorly managed and lacks supporting teaching materials. For example, there is only one Tajik-Chinese Dictionary available and the rest of the materials are in English, Russian, and Chinese, which complicates a studying process for Tajiks.<sup>151</sup> The statistical data offered by the Chinese center says that in 2011 over 2000 Tajiks were registered interested in learning Mandarin.<sup>152</sup> However, many scholars working in the region state that CI is not popular among Tajiks and does not have a high number of visitors. In fact, the study that was done by Tajik analyst, Umedjon Mahibi where he compares Indian and Chinese cultural

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<sup>146</sup> “Scholarships of the Confucius Institute,” [www.arsu.kz](http://www.arsu.kz).

<sup>147</sup> “The Confucius Institutes Awards 2013,” [www.chinesecio.com](http://www.chinesecio.com), November 2013, accessed May 19, 2015, [http://www.chinesecio.com/conference/article/2013-11/26/content\\_516611\\_2.htm](http://www.chinesecio.com/conference/article/2013-11/26/content_516611_2.htm).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> “Ruslan Izimov: Myagkaya Sila Kitaya- Na Pricele Sentralnaya Aziya.”

<sup>150</sup> See the link <http://tjkzxy.tj.chinesecio.com/ru>.

<sup>151</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, Alexandros Petersen, “Beijing Lays the Groundwork in Tajikistan: A View from the Ground,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, May 25, 2012,

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=39424#.VV4Yjfmqqkq](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39424#.VV4Yjfmqqkq).

<sup>152</sup> Pali, “China’s Cultural Diplomacy: Historical Origin, Modern Methods and Strategic Outcomes.”

centers reveals that in comparison to Indian cultural centers, Chinese centers are less popular among Tajiks. Umedjon writes that many Tajiks look at China with suspicion, in particular China's long term ambitions.<sup>153</sup> The sense of negativity developed among locals due to land disputes that were mentioned in the first chapter.

Tajik people believe that Chinese people are intentionally alienating from locals. For example, locals complain that in Chinese restaurants, medical centers no one speaks local languages, which makes them only available for the Chinese people.<sup>154</sup> At the public level China is less visible in Tajikistan in comparison to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as on the cultural level the activities of China are also limited to one CI.<sup>155</sup> Chinese Embassy website writes that throughout the year only 6 cultural actives are held in Tajikistan. Despite of the perceived threat, China's cultural engagement in resource-poor countries like Tajikistan is limited. This brings to the conclusion that due to the fact that Tajikistan is less important for Beijing in terms of investment and the flow of Chinese goods (like the case was in the two previous countries), the Chinese cultural diplomacy is limited in addressing local concerns.

Therefore, the data gathered in this section indicates that Confucius Institutes target mostly young Central Asians, which implies that Beijing participates in the formation of future elite of the region that would be familiarized with China in the way that is most favorable for Beijing.<sup>156</sup> But most importantly, this section shows that Chinese cultural diplomacy in the region is not a two way dialogue, when in fact locals still have a negative view about China.

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<sup>153</sup> Umedjon Majidi, "Tajik Views of the Dragon and the Elephant in Dushanbe," [www.chinaincentralasia.com](http://www.chinaincentralasia.com), October 13, 2014, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2014/10/13/tajik-views-of-the-dragon-and-the-elephant-in-dushanbe/>.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Bart Dessein, *Interpreting China as a Regional and Global Power: Nationalism and Historical Consciousness in World Politics*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 235.

### 3.3 Other soft power attempts

Apart from educational exchanges and cultural events organized by CIs that are seen as one of the major cornerstone of China's cultural diplomacy in the region, there are also other attempts that Beijing undertook to increase its soft power in the region. China lacks the information about the region but yet acknowledges that Sino-phobia requires to be better understood. Thus, to understand the nature of local anti-Chinese sentiments better and how they can be contained China has funded many researchers in Kazakhstan and other countries.<sup>157</sup> Additionally, in 2013 five separate research centers were opened in Xinjiang, where the scholars will be producing knowledge about the region and each Central Asian state separately.<sup>158</sup> Likewise, at the political level Chinese leadership has initiated parliamentary exchanged between Chinese and Central Asian bureaucrats. In particular the exchanges are organized among representatives from Xinjiang branch of CCP, who host Central Asian delegations as well as travel to the Central Asian capitals to observe and learn more about their procedural practices.<sup>159</sup> Thus, China wants to portray the view that it is not just seeking to educate others about its political system, but also learn more about its neighbors, however those two-way dialogue attempts are minor and do not include most of civil society initiatives.

Another attempt of China to increase its soft power is done through the increase of Chinese mass media availability for local Central Asians. For example, Ruslan Izimov a Kazakh analyst published an article on Chinese soft power, where he shared that Chinese soft power in Central Asian is gradually increasing, not only through educational and cultural exchanges but also through Chinese mass media availability.<sup>160</sup> The two most famous newspapers *Xinhua* and *Jenmin Jibao* have publishing houses in Kazakhstan and since 2013

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<sup>157</sup> Pantucci, "Looking West: China and Central Asia."

<sup>158</sup> Tatyana Kaukenova, "Dlya Chego Kitai Organizoval v XUAR Centry Po Izucheniyu Kazakhstana I Srednei Azii" *Radiotochka*, December 24, 2013, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://radiotochka.kz/1391-.html>.

<sup>159</sup> Swanström, "China's Role in Central Asia: Soft and Hard Power."

<sup>160</sup> "Ruslan Izimov: Myagkaya Sila Kitaya- Na Pricele Sentralnaya Aziya."

the number of news articles has increased. Also, Xinhua Radio International and CCTV are broadcasting on the regular basis in Central Asia, in particular in recent years the number of programs has increased, many of which are “directed towards winning the hearts and the minds of the Kazakh population”<sup>161</sup>.

Besides, in 2009 Kyrgyz government agreed to Chinese offer to receive 20.000 television receivers for the people living in the Batken region.<sup>162</sup> Since the region is isolated by mountains from the center, local population was using their old TV receivers to connect to Uzbek television, which often criticized current government of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>163</sup> During the interview conducted by analysts working on the region Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, a senior Kyrgyz foreign ministry employer shared that the part of the deal with receivers was to allow Chinese Central Television in Russian “to broadcast directly into the country”<sup>164</sup>. Also, in 2013 many residents that were interviewed in the city of Osh have said that they were “able to receive Xinjiang Television on their receivers without cable packages on Kyrgyz language.”<sup>165</sup> Therefore, mass media has played one of the important roles in spreading of information about China and its culture.

However, another attempt to cultivate attraction is done through the financial assistance that China provides to Central Asian states. The loans that China provides to developing Central Asian states are often termed as *soft*, and could be distinguished from hard loans (need to be paid back within the certain period, usually in currency borrowed) in their flexible terms of payment and low interest rates.<sup>166</sup> During Xi visit to four Central

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<sup>161</sup> Swanström, “China’s Role in Central Asia: Soft and Hard Power.”

<sup>162</sup> Pantucci and Petersen, “Beijing Lays the Groundwork in Tajikistan.”

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Loro Horta, “Central Asia’s New Silk Road, Paved by China,” *East Asia Forum*, October 26, 2013, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/10/26/central-asias-new-silk-road-paved-by-china/>.

Asians states, Kyrgyzstan has received \$3 billion soft loan for the development of its infrastructure.<sup>167</sup>

Moreover, in particular after the SREB initiative has been outlined, China has started enhancing its cultural diplomacy in the region in order to address the local concerns. One of the most key initiatives included an opening of the *First Annual Silk Road International Cultural Forum in 2014*, which was held on December 9 in Astana. The aim of the Forum is to turn to “a platform for different countries along the ancient Eurasian trade route to exchange ideas to better promote cooperation and coordination in culture and explore a long-term multilateral mechanism in the field”<sup>168</sup>. The Cultural forum will provide an opportunity for politicians, analysts, entrepreneurs and artists from different states to exchange their views.<sup>169</sup> All three Central Asians states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are participating countries together with Russia and China. The inauguration of this Annual Forum is the evidence that culture became a very important pillar of Chinese diplomacy and the tool that China will use to increase the perceptions of it as a trustworthy, peaceful partner that deals with neighbors in an equal manner and respects the differences.

Likewise, Chinese journalists cast movies about the New Silk Road, about corridors and the participating cities and countries. Therefore, just recently a group of Chinese journalists travelled to Taraz (town in Kazakhstan) to cast a movie about SREB.<sup>170</sup>

To sum up, as China gets more oriented in its foreign policy priorities, its policy towards the Central Asia is expanding to many areas of interaction. Since SREB is considered to be the major foreign policy priority for China and one of the potential obstacles

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<sup>167</sup> Horta, “Central Asia’s New Silk Road, Paved by China.”

<sup>168</sup> Wang Kaihao and Liy Fang, “Silk Road International Cultural Forum Held in Kazakhstan,” [www.chinaculture.org](http://www.chinaculture.org), 11 December, 2014, accessed May 25, 2015, [http://www1.chinaculture.org/info/2014-12/11/content\\_584962.htm](http://www1.chinaculture.org/info/2014-12/11/content_584962.htm).

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Li Dehua, “Otnosheniya Mezhdru Kazakhstanom i Kitaem Razvivayutsa v Rusle Dobrososedstva ,” *Radiotochka*, July 9, 2014, accessed May 20, 2015, <http://radiotochka.kz/3178-.html>.



to its realization could be a growing Sino phobia, Xi's administration has paid a close attention to this problem. As the result, China invests in educational and cultural exchanges for students and employers, sponsors cultural events, opens up Cultural Forums and makes Chinese mass media available for Central Asians. In Chinese sources mentioned earlier, those attempts are viewed as soft and Beijing believes would contribute to the diminishment of the perceived threat about China.

## Chapter 4: The Limitations of China's Soft Power

While the chapter above outlined the sources China uses to enhance its soft power in the region because it perceives them as soft, this chapter outlines the limits of China's soft power. Most of the policies that Beijing undertakes to cultivate attraction and project a positive image of the country most of the times contradict to its actions at home. One of the prominent cases is the problems China experiences in its western province Xinjiang and the measures the government takes to deal with the problem. For instance, the massive Uighur crackdown was launched by the Chinese police in July 2009 that left 200 people dead after the Urumqi riots.<sup>171</sup> Moreover, in the recent incident in 2013 when the jeep veered into the crowd on Tiananmen Square, Uighurs were blamed the next day without any detailed investigations.<sup>172</sup> Additionally, in comparison to Han Chinese Uighurs are in a subordinate position in China. Thus, many Central Asians that have largest Uighur Diasporas (in particular in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) are sensitive to such actions of Beijing with regard to Uighurs. Therefore, when actions contradict words, it makes it difficult for Beijing to sell its image of a harmonious and peaceful neighbor that respects the differences.

Furthermore, the major Chinese cultural ambassadors, Confucius Institutes, are not easily accessible for Central Asian students, scholars producing research about China's cultural diplomacy in the region. First of all, the official websites of the Institutes that are provided on official page of Confucius Institutes worldwide are empty and only a limited data can be found on the web pages of the Central Asian Universities in which the Institutes are running. Second, the contact person for each Institute indicated in the official website is not accessible. For this research most of the Institutes were contacted via phone however, most of

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<sup>171</sup> "Urumqi Car and Bomb Attack Kills Dozens," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2014, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/22/china-urumqi-car-bomb-attack-xinjiang>.

<sup>172</sup> Adam Withnall, "China: Police Hunt for Uighur Suspects after Jeep Ploughs into Crowd in Tiananmen Square, Killing and Injuring 38," *The Independent*, October 28, 2013, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-police-hunt-for-uighur-suspects-after-jeep-ploughs-into-crowd-in-tiananmen-square-killing-five-and-injuring-38-8908465.html>.

the phones were switched off or did not answer, yet, one of the staff answered the phone but yet, did not speak any Russian or local languages, which made communication difficult.

Third, in order to receive a statistical data on how many students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan attend the Institutes; all eight Institutes were contacted via e-mail, however, none of the responders replied. When the additional contact information was research independently, two Universities (Humanities University in Bishkek, National University in Kazakhstan) were contacted via phone and the data was requested about the number of students that attend the Institute. However, the Central Asian staff working for those two institutes rejected the request indicating that such information is only available to the staff working for the University (National University of Kazakhstan) and that requested information will only be revealed if contacted in person with a proper document or letter that specifies the field of research(Humanities University in Bishkek). Thus, the access to the websites, phones, and emails for data gathering for Central Asians interested in conducting a research about China and its cultural diplomacy is limited. Therefore, the credibility of the Chinese diplomacy in the way that it does not operate as a two way dialogue should be questioned.

Last but not the least, one of the most important aspects of public diplomacy is the major actors that are involved are civil society groups. The research conducted in this study discloses that most of the Chinese soft power is produced by the Chinese leadership. A political scientist, Hocking states that due to the fact that the political system in China is highly centralized and public diplomacy is under control of the government, the model could be termed as *state-centered, hierarchical diplomacy*.<sup>173</sup> The party does not allow other actors to take part in its foreign policy independently.<sup>174</sup> Therefore, if still developing civil society

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<sup>173</sup> Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*, 89.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

groups in China will be given more space and independence, the attempts of China to cultivate its soft power might meet some success.

To sum up, this chapter outlined the limitations of China's soft power strategy and highlighted that in fact China's soft power in Central Asia is limited because it is often fixated on the concept of subjectivity and often disregards the other side. Therefore, if the diplomacy is not based as a two way dialogue, the attempts made by China might not guarantee that the perceived threat will be eliminated.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the more Beijing gets oriented in its foreign policy, the more its involvement in the region increases. Currently, Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative is seen as a major foreign policy priority for China, which makes Central Asian region as strategically important area for the economic corridor realization that will connect Asian markets to European. Additionally, China's interests in the region are driven by the regional security concerns, stability in its western province, Xinjiang and a growing Chinese demand for energy. Beijing invests heavily into region's infrastructure, major energy projects and strengthens bilateral ties and trade links with each Central Asian state. When Central Asian and Chinese officials see this close relationship as mutually benefiting, the study conducted in the first chapter illustrates that local experts and residents are less positive about the expanding Chinese involvement.

Among five Central Asian Republics, anti-Chinese sentiments can mostly be observed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The main reasons behind the local anxieties are: fears of Chinese migration, territorial and environmental concerns, as well as mistrust about long term ambitions of China. To address a problem of the perceived threats China has enhanced its soft power in the region. This thesis looked at how China conceptualizes soft power and how it applies it Central Asia.

Soft power in China is closely related to culture. As the result, among many resources to cultivate soft power, Beijing has mostly relied on its cultural diplomacy. Consequently, to address a problem of perceived threat in Central Asia Beijing opened Confucius Institutes, increased mass media availability in local languages, funded Cultural Exchange Forums and assisted Central Asian states with soft loans. In Chinese sources those attempts are perceived as soft. However, the research conducted in my empirical section reveals that this view of

China on soft power is subjectively based and often Beijing does not take into account the other side.

According to Janice Mattern soft power is an inter-subjective concept, which implies that for soft power to be regarded as soft both sides have to view it this way. Yet, the data analysis highlights that in fact not all Central Asians are convinced by such attempts and perceive Chinese actions as soft. Some of those initiatives Central Asian residents might not regard as soft, and instead look at those practices as the steps Beijing takes to increase its regional hegemony in making the region more dependent. For a certain policy to be successful the other side needs to look at the issue similarly.

Moreover, China's soft power in Central Asia has its limits. The biggest limitation for China's soft power strategy is that most of the policies that Beijing undertakes to cultivate attraction and project a positive image of the country often contradict to its actions at home. In particular, in two Central Asian states Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that have a large number of Uighur minorities, residents are very sensitive to the actions that Chinese government undertakes with regard to Uighurs living in Xinjiang. Thus, when the Uighurs are mistreated by the Chinese government, many Central Asians question the image that Beijing tries to sell of itself as a harmonious and peaceful neighbor that respects the differences. Furthermore, the major Chinese cultural ambassadors, Confucius Institutes, are not easily accessible for Central Asian students that independently seek to conduct research on China. For example, the websites available online are most of the times empty or not operating. When a person of contact was contacted via phone he did not speak any of the local languages, which made communication difficult.

Besides, a study conducted on Tajik perceptions about China reveals that many Tajik believe that Chinese people are intentionally alienating from locals as none of the people working in Chinese medical centers and restaurants speak local language, which makes them

only accessible for Chinese. Finally, most of the efforts to enhance China's soft power in Central Asia are government driven, which was termed by Hocking as a *state centered diplomacy* and thus, lack civil society initiatives.<sup>175</sup> All instances outlined above highlight that China is focused on certain resources that it thinks produce attraction, while soft power can meet success when the cultural diplomacy or public diplomacy is conducted as a two way dialogue. Therefore, my findings reveal that China is fixated on the subjective understanding of soft power, which does not take into account the local perspective and thus, it might not eliminate the perceived threat.

The future research can examine the perspective of Central Asians. However, this will require going to the region and speaking to local residents. Since the Central Asian perspective was not measured in detail in this thesis, Chinese practices in Central Asia cannot be regarded as successful in that they generate the attraction. Also, the defining feature of the public diplomacy is in that it listens what the other side has to say. To what extent Chinese public diplomacy is credible and listens what Central Asians have to say need to be further studied.

To conclude, as China becomes an important player in the international arena, the more active and assertive Beijing becomes about the perceptions about its rise internationally as well as regionally. Additionally, as Central Asia becomes more important for Beijing in particular with SREB realization, China's attempts to diminish the perceived threat will increase. Certainly, it should be acknowledged that China managed to achieve partial success in its public diplomacy as more young people are looking up to it and seek educational opportunities in China. Additionally, other attempts that Beijing has made to enhance its soft power such as inauguration of the research centers to produce knowledge on each Central Asian states and opening of the Annual Silk Road Cultural Exchange Forum should be

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<sup>175</sup> Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*, 89.

recognized as the vital steps. However, as the data analysis demonstrates, China is fixated on the subjective understanding of soft power, which does not take into account inter-subjectivity. As the result, some of China's attempts might not find success in eliminating the problem of perceived threat.



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